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**Making Sense of Mess.
Marginal Lives, Impossible Spaces**

Edited by Vincenzo Bavaro and Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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Making Sense of Mess. Marginal Lives, Impossible Spaces

‘Queering’ and ‘messing up’ are activities and actions as much as ‘queer’ and ‘mess’ can be about states/status, positions, identities, and orientations. These various formulations of queer and mess are not independent of each other and are relevant to my discussion below. While people may balk at the idea of mess as ‘constituting’ queer, it is precisely the discomfort elicited and provoked by the idea and realities of mess that is at the heart of my formulation and provocation.

(Martin Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archive”)¹

¹ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 120 (Fall 2014), 94-107, 97.

Mess and the Sense It Makes

Making sense of mess, coming to terms with it, making it understandable. This is what many of us probably feel we do on a daily base: in our social interactions, in the professional sphere(s) we operate, in our affective life. More often than we would like to admit it, it seems that ‘mess’ is all around us: it challenges, or effectively resists, our ability to generate order, to systematize the world, to organize, name and number the ‘stuff’ that surrounds us. However, *making sense of* something evokes primarily a capacity of the mind, of our own interpretative power, rather than our agency to intervene in the world in order to transform it physically. Therefore, to the editors of this issue, to make sense of mess does not mean to erase it, to exorcise it, but rather to assess its function, its value, maybe its beauty, and despite our apparent compulsion to deny its tenacious grip on our lives, its resilience to our drive to transform it and erase it.

In a 2014 essay published in *Radical History Review*, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archive. Mess, Migration and Queer Lives,” Martin F. Manalansan IV explores the issue of “mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements” as a way into a queering of the archive. The scholar’s focus is on one particular apartment in Jackson Height, Queens, New York City, and its tenants, six queer undocumented immigrants. Borrowing from both affect theory and material culture studies, and moving from an understanding of the archive as a quotidian site for dwelling, Manalansan’s aim is to account for, and give flesh to, those marginalized queer lives that dwell in disorder and chaos. Whereas Manalansan’s main interest is towards a radical revisioning of the notion of archive as much as in a critical intervention into queer studies, it is more precisely his interest in affect and material culture, together with a fascination for ‘discomfort’ and ‘provocation’, which inspired our guest-edited issue of *Anglistica AION*.

In this issue of *Anglistica AION*, we have welcomed contributions that

investigate the idea of ‘mess’, at once physically tangible and intellectually slippery, in national, global, and transnational cultural productions and social practices. Thus, we envision ‘mess’ as piles of seemingly unorganized materials, unsanitized spaces, dirty interstices that refuse to be cleaned and systematized. Like most of the scholars who contributed to this issue, we are particularly fascinated by its potential impact on the study of what J. E. Muñoz broadly defined as ‘minoritarian subjects’: in fact, resistance to ‘normalcy’ and the challenge to sanctioned symbolic ‘order’ have been at the heart of late 20th century queer, ethnic, gendered, indigenous, and other identitarian studies. In addition, the notion of mess, messing-up, mash-ups, and morphing, both as theme and as cultural practice, may signal a productive gesture that rejects hierarchical organizing and linear/causal relations of value, thriving instead on simultaneity and precariousness, in overlapping and contested spaces and conflictual, even irreconcilable, dis/identifications.

Far from advocating for a romanticized approach to ‘mess’, or for a flattening of the concept onto a negative, pathologizing view that sees it merely as a *lack* of clarity, order, or organization, we have encouraged investigations that explore both the aesthetics and the politics of mess, in a critical attempt to make sense of it.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Mess

Mess is foremost an opinion. A judgment loaded with negative connotations. It refers to something the speaker does not appreciate, whose function, objectives, or whose appearance s/he does not understand nor often agree with. But mess may also refer lovingly to my niece’s attempt of drawing an elephant, or hopelessly to Trump’s foreign (or domestic, or environmental, or...) policy, to a series of street riots following a political scandal, to a hoarder’s den, or even to a painting by Basquiat: arguably, these can all be seen as ‘mess’. Despite its generally clear physical connotation (e.g. expressions like “this room/ street is a mess” evoke a rather clear referent), its intellectual import is always slippery; as the Basquiat example above reveals, quite often the definition of mess marks a limitation in the viewer’s ability to ‘make sense’ of it.

In the following few paragraphs I sketch some of the main concepts that animate our understanding of ‘mess’, as a way of attempting to outline a tradition of thinkers that were fascinated by lack of formal order, by chaos or filth; I hope then to draw a constellation of keywords which help us clarify the connotations of the term we intend to use as a guiding idea running throughout this issue.

In its comparative understanding, as the opposite or ‘lack’ of order, balance, and clarity, mess reminds us of the canonical Dionysian/Apollonian dialectic as famously articulated by Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Inspired by the figures of the two gods from Greek mythology, and their consolidated cultural representations, the German philosopher argued that the Apollonian signals rational thinking, analytic distinction and individuations, order and purity, whereas

the Dionysian, often associated with drunkenness, ecstasy, and madness, is instead the marker of chaos, instincts and irrationality. Some aspects of the Dionysian resonate with Kant's idea of *sublime*, especially in the latter's overwhelming, disruptive effects, in the powerful erasure of 'individuation', and certainly in its antithetical positionality towards 'beauty'. Unlike the sublime, however, the Dionysian is all-encompassing, embedding the viewer (and in fact the participants) in the experience without allowing for any critical, sublimating 'viewing' distance.

Nietzsche was interested in analyzing the fragile balance between these two opposites, their necessary interplay, in Greek tragedy. In Nietzsche's critique, the dialectic between these two extremes is indispensable and must never be 'resolved'. His investigation into the Dionysian impulse in Greek tragedy clearly points to some powerful, resilient thread running through Euro-American culture, which surfaces recurrently in our present understanding and appreciation of mess, as represented and analyzed in this special issue.

Fast-forwarding to more recent times, it is noticeable that postmodern culture is certainly deeply fascinated by mess, by simultaneity and overlapping, by directionless hyperactivity and the overcrowded physical scenarios of mass society and conspicuous consumption. Since Jean-François Lyotard's groundbreaking *La Condition Postmoderne* was published in 1979, the author's critique pointing out the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives and *Grands Récits*, the end of the master narratives which provided an order, a coherent method or frame to understand the world, has by now become common knowledge among those who work in the humanities. Our ability to contain, systematize, and order Knowledge into a single powerful and coherent discourse has apparently been seriously compromised, and as a result, replacing Grand Theories with more modest, specific, contingent, and fragmented analysis has emerged as a quintessential postmodern practice.

A notion that seems to illustrate this postmodern skepticism towards clean closure, control, and effectiveness is 'entropy', which is both the title of a widely anthologized and taught short story by postmodern iconic writer Thomas Pynchon, and also a concept that is often circulated in discussions about postmodernism and its cultural traits.² The notion of entropy of any given system, as Rudolf Clausius (1822-1888) observed, is the measure of the unavailability of its thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work. In other words, a certain amount of functional energy is always lost to dissipation or friction, a phenomenon that relates to the second law of thermodynamics, which states that energy systems have a tendency to increase their entropy. The theory of the heat-death proves that as entropy increases, a system tends to deteriorate and lose its distinctiveness, to fall from a state of organization and differentiation to one of chaos and sameness. The deterioration and the loss of distinctiveness remind us of a crucial feature of Nietzsche's investigation into the Dionysian. For postmodern thinkers, however, the theory of entropy offers rather a fascinating metaphor for consumerist society,

²Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy", *Kenyon Review*, 22.2 (Spring 1960), 27-92.

and for the loss of that guiding frame, those master narratives that helped ‘explain’ the world, which now leaves the postmodern subject on a stage where efforts are wasteful, where directions are unknown, where stuff piles on itself uselessly before we can start envisioning an effective way to organize or understand it.

The notion of entropy sheds light on those aspects of mess and chaos that have to do with loss of functioning and purpose, energy waste, but also on the complex interplay between a system and its parts that fail to remain distinct and discrete and instead meld into a deteriorated and useless sameness.

One of the most intellectually exciting challenges that some postmodernists take on is precisely the attempt to make sense of an entropic world, where things fall apart and human determination to force order onto chaos and senselessness proves inadequate. Postmodern cultural producers seem to have a higher tolerance, or a straightforward preference, for ambiguity and contradiction, for lack of closure and coherence, and finally for the fascination of inclusivity of incommensurable elements, as displayed in pastiche, collage, and various forms of visual and textual juxtaposition. Architecture has been traditionally at the forefront of early discussions on postmodernism and the postmodern aesthetics. Celebrated architect and theorist Robert Venturi, who in his own career navigated away from modernism into postmodernism, is the author of the ironic slogan “Less is Bore”, which mocks the iconic line “Less is More” by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, powerfully exemplified in modernist aesthetics (in architecture, but not exclusively) concerning the economy of the lines and structures. In his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*,³ Venturi elaborates his idea of the ‘difficult whole’, the attempt of imagining unity and wholeness in a postmodern era:

³ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

Inherent in an architecture of opposites is the inclusive whole. The unity ... is achieved not through suppression or exclusion but through the dramatic inclusion of contradictory or circumstantial parts. Aalto’s architecture acknowledges the difficult and subtle conditions of program, while ‘serene’ architecture, on the other hand, works simplifications.

However, the obligation toward the whole in an architecture of complexity and contradiction does not preclude the building which is unresolved. Poets and playwrights acknowledge dilemmas without solutions. The validity of the questions and vividness of the meaning are what make their works art more than philosophy. A goal of poetry can be unity of expression over resolution of content. Contemporary sculpture is often fragmentary, and today we appreciate Michelangelo’s unfinished Pietas more than his early work, because their content is suggested, their expression more immediate, and their forms are completed beyond themselves. A building can also be more or less incomplete in the expression of its program and its form.⁴

⁴ Ibid., 99.

Inclusivity, skepticism toward resolution, and suspicion for completeness, these are some of the features praised by Venturi in his ‘difficult whole’. His objective is a unity that refuses ‘serenity’ and simplification and instead thrives on contrapuntal

relationships, in inflected fragments and acknowledged dualities, a unity, and here Venturi quotes from August Heckscher, that “maintains, but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives ... force”.⁵

⁵ August Heckscher, *The Public Happiness* (New York, Athenaeum Publishers, 1962), 289, quoted in Venturi, 99.

Venturi’s embracing of complexity and contradiction in architecture, his flirtatious attitude toward chaos and mess, and his being unpersuaded by serenity and order, clearly resonate with many of the ideas evoked so far in this introduction. We have briefly traced the fascination for ‘mess’ back to the classic dialectic between Dionysian and Apollonian, again to some features inherent in Kantian sublime and the Romantic fondness of it, through postmodern celebrations of entropy after the end of the Grand Narratives. But we began from a queer inspiration, Manalansan’s desire to expand our understanding of the archive by focusing on a queer household in Queens, and the clutter, physical as much as affective, within it. The Asian American anthropologist’s wish to depathologize mess succeeds in showing that mess “is not always about misery, complete desolation and abandonment but can also gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness.”⁶ With these various fragments and suggestions in mind, I hope it will be more rewarding, and hopefully more fun, to navigate the diverse collection of essays that follows.

⁶ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff of Archive’”, 100.

This Issue: A Fabulous Mess

We have deliberately preferred an inclusive understanding of mess, therefore the articles contained in this issue are exquisitely diverse, in their topics, in the disciplinary approach of the scholars that authored them, and finally in these scholars’ own grasp of the issue of mess, and the sense it makes.

In the following pages, mess as a favorite topic, or theme, of the cultural product under scrutiny is often coupled with mess and messing-up as a cultural practice; most of the contributors highlight the fact that we may understand this slippery notion better if we see it relationally, in the shifting dynamics between chaos and order, for example, or as an intentional strategy to contaminate the ostensible purity of the body of the nation (Schrader, Sookkasikon, Moitra), or again as an Indigenous/Native challenge to Euro-American ideals and norms of coherence and structure (Sookkasikon). In fact, the mess of history is equally at the center of some of the following contributions, both the messiness inherent in history-making as well as historical memory: we read about war trauma and post-apocalyptic landscapes (Di Gennaro, Alison), but also about postmodern messy re-visioning of the tradition (Moitra, Schrader, Sarnelli) or again we will witness the material accumulation of waste, debris, discarded objects, filthy and/or unintelligible ‘stuff’, crowding themselves into sites that evoke or embody impossible spaces (Fusco, Schrader, Sookkasikon, Alison).

The issue opens with six poems by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ironic as much as

concerned meditations on displacement in a disquieting and confusing political climate. It follows with an essay by Timo Schrader on the multimedia performance project *El Spirit Republic*, in which a collective of Puerto Rican artists and activists in New York reimagined the borders and the rules of affiliation to an imaginary nation state, in a visionary attempt to celebrate cultural citizenship and decolonize the imaginary. In the following essay, Serena Fusco investigates the series *Breaking Bad* in a theoretically rich analysis that questions the very paradigmatic core of contemporary neoliberalism while describing the series protagonist's parable into a corrupted world, and his attempt at remaining unsoiled.

Irene Alison provides a critical overview of disturbing messes in war photography, by focusing on the photobook *War Porn* (2014) by Christoph Bangert, a photographic exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* at the Tate Gallery in London (which opened in 2014), and finally *They Fight with Cameras* (2015), a photobook collecting the work of Walter Rosenblum. Paola di Gennaro's ambitious article focuses on selected writings by Uranian Poets, and from the First and the Second World War exploring both war trauma through its literary expression, and the discourse of male homosexuality that these writers articulated, by activating analogous rhetorical strategies for coping with the unspeakable.

At the heart of Fulvia Sarnelli's essay there is an articulate analysis of the documentary *Halving the Bones* by acclaimed Japanese American writer Ruth Ozeki, which recounts the stories of three women across three generations. Ozeki's documentary, Sarnelli contends, claims a position within the tradition of Asian American family documentary while simultaneously 'messing up' its very foundation of truth, insofar as the work seems to be thriving on multiple layers of uncertainty and programmatically acknowledging the inventive nature of memory.

Pahole Sookkasikon insightfully investigates selected short stories from two collections, *Sightseeing* (2005), the acclaimed debut by Thai American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap, and *This is Paradise* (2013) by Native Hawaiian writer Kristiana Kahakauwila. Sookkasikon argues that heteronormative waste and destruction, legacy of a complex militouristic apparatus in both Thailand and Hawaii, have led to a violent suppression of local and Native brown bodies. These writers, the scholar powerfully contends, rewrite their communities back into the sanitized landscape of paradise, messing up its fantastic construction, and exceeding the imperial gaze upon them.

Finally, the issue concludes with Tehezeeb Moitra's reading of Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), a 21 parts tableaux based on the Indian comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, created in the Sixties and still running, which is composed for children, and serves as an educational instrument to instruct younger generations about Hindu myths. Moitra highlights Ganesh's rewriting of the classic representation of gender through an emphasis on the *Jungalee* female body and its sexual agency, thus serving simultaneously both to articulate cultural nostalgia and to mock representational conventions. The figure of the defiant, improper female

character effectively reveals and explodes assumptions about cultural and national identity.

“Making Sense of Mess”, and the essays it hosts, is aimed not only at disentangling ‘mess’ from its pejorative semantic universe. It also contributes, I believe, to questioning the rationale behind a value system that prioritizes order and rational organization of space, objects, and people. In refraining from erasing mess and its inherent value, from containing it or framing it, the contributors to this issue dared to gesture towards alternative narratives that exceed clear-cut dichotomies, hierarchization, or teleologies, opening up the possibility for a newer, stronger ‘sense’ that may emerge precisely out of the filthy interstices, the confusing overlaps of time and space, which are often the stuff that life is made of.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Six Poems

Otherness

is all around us, at us: unremembered
familiar. Entering the woods each day,
leaves, thorns and boles remain unnamed.
Outside, demanding ears, the highway's

eight-wheeled trailers, motor-homes utterly
other to our destination. Americans
at home in their Americanness, struck by
immigrants, like Earth comet-stricken,

other to the universe outside, like we
are other in ourselves, our bodies growing
estranged kin, other kinds dangerous
to selves, this other common family,
Death, and even before, to be walking
someday and seeing only otherness:

Where am I? Where the way home? Who am I?

How To Find Your Things

Put everything in its place. A place
for each thing. This box for keys--
automatic garage doors, repurposed

rooms, front house entry in another state.
This drawer for napkins, unmatched, threes,
nines. Cable wires, coiled serpents in baskets

nestle, unpowered. Places proliferate
like tumors, each thing falling out of place.
The more places the more hiding spaces. Yet

you remain a pair of hands, two cranky
knees, one crumbling spine. A box to save
boxes in. Bin for cloth, canvas, plasticky

bags printed with wise sayings, bearing years
(twenty ten, nineteen eighty six),
sights (Paris, Seoul, Berlin, Syria).

Everything in its place—extinguished
time, urgent papers, name cards--faces mixed,
fleeting, blurry, unrecognized. Vanquished

spaces not for repurposing—pleather
buttoned-up pocket purses, water-proof-lined
for sea crossings (documents unzipped

push open port gates across borders),
tissues for when the crying begins,
bread rolls from the last breakfast cover,

in case lunch and dinner will not appear,
the road you will be walking
holds closed doors of homes--there, here--

that want nothing to do with you, a thing
without its place in a world settling
and selling a place for everything.

The Hat

Rabbit jumps out of his hat:
a hard pea in a soft breast.
She sweats on her Princess mattress.
Horsemen of the Apocalypse
gallop twenty-four seven
when Rabbit jumps out of his hat.

Rabbit is sprung from his hat:
mushrooms glow on the roof of the world.
Who knows where the kingdom's keys are kept?
The kleptomaniac gives
versions for hares to chase
as Rabbit is sprung from his hat.

Rabbit escapes from his hat.
Claws unclipped for millennia
dig through clay floors and skitter
on marble. Pandora sleeps
now her box is empty and
Rabbit escaped from his hat.

New Old News

The card I needed to address and sign
and post was under the book I needed to read
for the footnote I needed to complete
for the paper I needed to submit,
the book that was under the Ipad I needed
to update for the apps needed to find
for the travel I needed to view
for the flight to Canada under the clippings
I needed to toss along with the news
they covered, old news of an old American
Western Civilization I'd swept under the carpet
of myth and history, that now covers
the card, the book, the Ipad, the clippings,
today's new old news there's no overtopping.

Daylight Saving

I've lost an Hour. Has anyone seen it? It seems to have slipped away, a runaway child. I call Amber Alert but the handler laughs at my urgent request. Then he says politely, keeping his chuckle down, *Your Hour left of her own accord. Can't make her stay home if she doesn't want to. Besides, the whole country's lost an Hour.* The whole country? I thought it was only hard ups had lost their rights, couldn't pay for a hole-in-one. The last I listened to cable, a minority had lost hold of their right to rights. A larger party of us in fact found more rights stashed in the right wing of our house. *You see, ma'am*, the handler says, *your Hour is small potatoes. Count yourself lucky your health is good. Emergency just lost many more hours, you understand me?* His voice gets low, a whisper, a growl. *If you know what's good for you, you'd stop calling the Amber Alert people. See what I mean? Missus Constitution has been found and is now in the hospital. Don't call again for her, OK? We're all taking good care of her. Twenty-four-hour police by her bedside, so no one's gonna take her. She's under protective custody. Homeland Security's in on the matter. She'll be going through surgery, see, and when she comes out, no one's gonna recognize her, because she won't be looking like a two hundred and forty year old crone. She'd be so botoxed you'd think she was an under-aged minor. And she won't need those robes to hide her weight. They can do amazing things with silicone gel. So she's not lost, ma'am, just a small alteration, you know, now she's being fixed up real good. So, yeah, suck up your lost whatever, and don't call us again.*

The Hoarder's Dream

Hoarding's what I do like Nature weather:
bric-a-brac particulars, kitchen ware.
Nothing's waste. As in dreams, all things matter,

even what breaks. Keeping has its pleasure.
Why toss when I can mend again to wear?
Hoarding's what I do like Nature weather.

Women before fleeing hide scant treasure
from ruinous men, bodies left to bear
the nothing that's waste, when few things matter.

Lost lovers' letters as tarnished silver
undiscarded: stuffed closets declare
hoarding's what I do, like Nature weather.

Is saving trivia like turning chatter
to pure drama? Alchemically, where
nothing's waste, dreams (but which?) matter.

Mindful hands, as detectors that hover
in fields, pile on piles that are spilling there.
Hoarding's what I do, like Nature weather.
Nothing's waste if things in dreams matter.

That Special, Inevitable Mess. El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico and the Decolonization of the Imaginary

Abstract: Recent scholars such as Yasmin Ramírez, Urayoán Noel, and Wilson Valentín-Escobar have argued for the importance of art in subverting U.S. narratives of citizenship and national identity with regards to the status of Puerto Rico – at times occupied land, a colony, or a U.S. state stripped of its democratic power. This article traces how Puerto Rican artists in New York created an imaginary nation whose members hold an imaginary citizenship that protects how Puerto Ricans identify their nationality beyond the century-old political battle over Puerto Rico's status as a commonwealth territory. I argue that through the lens of the multi-media, performance project El Embassy, artists and supporters actively promoted a claim to cultural citizenship through a process of decolonizing the imaginary. This surrealist project existed both in the shared, and individual, imaginaries of people and in the physical world they inhabited. This altogether messy approach to activism, the quest to decolonize the imaginary and claim cultural citizenship, deserves attention not only for its unique re-imagining of Puerto Rican citizenship, but also for its broader ideas about citizenship, identity, and nationhood.

Keywords: *citizenship, decolonization, national identity, New York City, Puerto Rican art, Puerto Rican identity*

I'm still in Puerto Rico
Only my body came
My strong spirit remains
Everything's still de same
(I truly believe
You can leave and still be
Where Mami met Papi)

(Pedro Pietri, "El Spanglish National Anthem")¹

Will we have the capacity to decolonize our imaginary, to take leave of the
colonial fog ... without relinquishing that special 'mess' that identifies us?

(Arcadio Díaz-Quinones, "La política del olvido")²

¹ Pedro Pietri, "El Spanglish National Anthem", 1993, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 71, Folder 1, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

² Arcadio Díaz-Quinones, "La política del olvido", in *La memoria rota: Ensayos sobre cultura y política* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1993), 57.

At the dawn of the new millennium in 2001, the famous Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York's Lower East Side (or Loisaida as its Puerto Rican residents christened it in the 1970s) hosted a strange event. The main hub for Puerto Rican and Latino culture – now the slam poetry headquarters of New York – hosted a benefit event for Dylcia Noemi Pagan, a member of the former paramilitary organization *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* or *FALN*. This Marxist-Leninist group, which used direct action to advocate for Puerto Rican independence, was responsible for over 120 bombings in the U.S. from 1974 to 1983.³ Pagan was sentenced to federal

³ Ronald Fernández, *Prisoners of Colonialism: The Struggle for Justice in Puerto Rico* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1994), 205.

⁴ John M. Broder, “12 Imprisoned Puerto Ricans Accept Clemency Conditions”, *New York Times*, September 8, 1999.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. Giuliani was notoriously tough on terrorism both before and after the attacks on September 11, 2001.

⁸ Vagabond Beaumont, “From the Other Side of Between Two Worlds,” *nothingtobegainedhere*, March 2, 2015.
<https://nothingtobegainedhere.wordpress.com/2015/03/02/from-the-other-side-of-between-two-worlds/>, accessed 12 December 2016.

⁹ “Dylcia Pagan Benefit”, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 70, Folder 8, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

¹⁰ Carmen T. Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora: An Introduction”, in Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández, eds., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple U. P., 2005), 13.

¹¹ Adál Maldonado, Pedro Pietri, and Gloria Rodríguez to Raul Julia, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 70, Folder 8, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

prison in 1981 on a 55-year charge, but she was released early on September 10, 1999 as part of a clemency offer by President Bill Clinton.⁴ According to the *New York Times*, “Mr. Clinton demanded as one of the conditions of their release that the jailed Puerto Ricans renounce the use of terrorism to achieve their aim of independence for the Caribbean commonwealth”.⁵ President Clinton’s decision did not go over very well with New York law enforcement, New York Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, or with his own wife, First Lady Hillary R. Clinton.⁶ Mayor Giuliani declared, “You can emotionally be on one side of the other of this issue ... but to say that it doesn’t raise some very serious and legitimate questions and now to see his own political allies and close associates abandoning him like a sinking ship, you wonder what’s going on here”.⁷ At the benefit event, former executive director of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe Carmen M. Pietri-Diaz, sister of poet Pedro Pietri and friend of Pagan, welcomed Pagan to a new cultural movement that would allow her to continue her fight for Puerto Rican independence via slightly different means.

To celebrate her release a couple of years earlier, Pagan was baptized with a poem by none other than Pedro Pietri, who wrote his famous poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” in Pagan’s apartment in the 1970s.⁸ Afterwards, Pagan was “issued her Baptism Certificate and Puerto Rican Passport [and] All others who wish to be baptized [were] asked to step forward and Rev. Pedro [said] a few words and [threw] some water on them”.⁹ Of course, there is no such thing as a Puerto Rican passport as Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship with the Jones-Shafroth Act in 1917. However, Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the U.S. have contested Puerto Rico’s limbo status as a commonwealth ever since the U.S. invaded the former Spanish colony in 1898 and seized control. As Carmen T. Whalen points out, the Jones Act provided *de jure* citizenship, but *de facto*, “Puerto Rico’s political status was not changed. Puerto Ricans were now U.S. citizens living in an ‘unincorporated territory’”.¹⁰ Like the strange passport Pagan received, the baptism certificate was issued by La Santa Church de La Madre of Los Tomates with its supposed spiritual leader Reverend Pedro Pietri. Still more curious, the event was co-organized by El Puerto Rican Embassy when there is no such entity as a Puerto Rican embassy. If the handing out of baptism certificates by the Holy Church of the Mother of Tomatoes and the issuing of Puerto Rican passports by a non-existent Puerto Rican embassy sound somewhat surreal, this is because it was designed this way.

El Embassy was a multi-media, interactive, performance, and art project created mainly by visual artist Adál Maldonado and poet Pedro Pietri in 1994 to form “a new Puerto Rican Art and Cultural movement”.¹¹ This article traces how El Embassy envisioned an imaginary nation whose members hold an imaginary citizenship that protects how Puerto Ricans identify their nationality beyond the century-old political battle over Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth territory. I argue that through the lens of El Embassy, which is based on the earlier concept El

Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico by former Young Lords member Eduardo ‘Eddie’ Figueroa, artists and supporters actively promoted a claim to cultural citizenship through a process of decolonizing the imaginary. This surrealist project existed both in the shared, and individual, imaginary of people and in the physical world they inhabit. This altogether messy approach to activism, the quest to decolonize the imaginary and claim cultural citizenship, deserves attention not only for its unique re-imagining of Puerto Rican citizenship, but also for its broader ideas about citizenship, identity, and nationhood. The guiding question of this article was articulated by Maldonado himself: “Is it possible to assume a national identity which has no citizenship privileges, as the country (El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico) has no territories other than conceptual ones?”¹² As this article demonstrates, these artists needed to mess up the concept of citizenship and national identity because that was the only way to capture and confront the paradox that Pietri so eloquently captured in El Spanglish National Anthem, which was performed at many El Embassy events in the 1990s and 2000s: “I’m still in Puerto Rico/Only my body came/My strong spirit remains”.¹³

¹² Adál Maldonado, “El Passport”, *El Puerto Rican Embassy*, <http://www.visiondoble.net/losblueprintsforanation/el-passport>, accessed 19 December 2016.

¹³ Pietri, “El Spanglish National Anthem”.

Rather than being an isolated art project at the end of the 20th century, El Embassy promoted this claim to cultural citizenship as a culmination of decades-long community activism by Puerto Rican organizations in Loisaida. As opposed to the earliest Puerto Rican settlement in New York, El Barrio in Harlem, this particular neighborhood only became predominantly Puerto Rican in the wake of the post-World War II migration that attracted many Puerto Rican workers to the U.S. mainland in search for jobs. However, deindustrialization and white flight turned many urban neighborhoods into poor and neglected areas devastated by housing abandonment, gangs, and drug crime. Loisaida was no exception and its residents, largely Puerto Rican by the end of the 1960s, started to organize and deal with these issues head-on. It began with social service and anti-gang campaigns in the 1960s through groups such as the Real Great Society, but the spread of organized resistance through community institutions quickly spread through the neighborhood. Members of the Real Great Society founded Charas at the beginning of the 1970s to find alternative means of housing by working with architect Richard Buckminster Fuller. Another housing group, Adopt-a-Building, renovated and repaired the existing, largely abandoned, housing stock at the same time. Circumstances changed again in the 1980s when Reagan’s advancement of privatization in cities cut community funding initiatives and attracted private developers. As gentrification became a concern for Loisaida, community groups had to change tactics again and increasingly look to cultural projects and events as a way to fight the commercialization of Puerto Rican heritage and roots in their neighborhood and beyond. Throughout the decades, community groups have heavily relied upon occupying physical space to meet, strategize, or hold events. However, few groups managed to maintain the costs for buildings, made even more difficult in the 1980s era of advancing gentrification. Most groups either

¹⁴ Eddie Figueroa, cit. in Ed Morales, “Eddie Figueroa’s Spirit Republic Alternative to the Young Lords”, *EdMorales.net*, July 25, 2015.

¹⁵ Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, “Saving the Parcela: A Short History of Boston’s Puerto Rican Community,” in Carmen Teresa Whalen and Victor Vázquez-Hernández, eds., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple U. P., 2005), 200-201.

¹⁶ “Don’t Waste Waste,” *Quality of Life in Loisaída*, June-July 1978, 6.

¹⁷ *Viva Loisaída*, directed by Marlis Momber (New York City, NY: Gruppe Dokumentation, 1978).

¹⁸ Carlos García, cit. in Josie Rolon, “Doing More with Less”, *WIN Magazine*, December 20, 1979, 13.

moved or simply disbanded. El Republic was different. Figueroa thought of El Republic as “a concept, it’s an idea, it’s not a physical location”.¹⁴ On a very pragmatic level, imagining El Republic as a non-physical space was a creative way to ensure its existence beyond the fragility of physical community institutions, which “have seen some of their most significant accomplishments undermined by federal and local government policies”, according to Félix V. Matos Rodríguez.¹⁵

Of course El Republic’s focus on decolonizing the imaginary had always been at the heart of earlier and more traditional community groups. In one example, a community recycling center that Charas helped built was praised as a place “where not only our garbage, but our spirit is recycled”.¹⁶ As part of a documentary on Loisaída, a resident said that a “dirty, unclean community is not only a physical condition, but it is a mental condition also because anything physical has to start first as a thought”.¹⁷ Decades-long community leader Carlos ‘Chino’ García put it most succinctly when he wrote that he “learned to be an artist – for the arts flourish here like a flower growing in between fence wire – beauty amongst the beast. It’s become a way of life – to be an artist is the ultimate goal, for in the back of our minds we know what it means. It’s an attempt to love, communicate, feel the spirit of the movement”.¹⁸ Whether they worked with gangs to provide them with a way to channel their work for the good of the community, painted murals across Loisaída walls to activate apathetic residents to participate, or created gardens out of dirty lots, Puerto Rican activist had always had their eyes set on decolonizing people’s spirits in all their efforts. In essence, El Republic was the next step in what was already a three-decades-long process of claiming cultural citizenship in this neighborhood – this stretches back to the first wave of Puerto Ricans who settled in El Barrio at the beginning of the 20th century and struggled to claim their rights as citizens.

The Path to Cultural Citizenship

In his seminal work *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson advanced our understanding of nationhood and nationalism by arguing that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined”.¹⁹ Anderson speaks of an “imagined political community” within the framework of nationhood, but as Renato Rosaldo and William V. Flores have pointed out, Anderson “makes national communities appear static and independent from relations of inequality within the society in question. Second, he conceives of the national community as if there were a universal consensus among all citizens. He does not recognize the contestation and conflicts that animate a hegemonic process”.²⁰ Jorge Duany also complicates Anderson’s argument by pointing out that “the subjective sense of a separate nationality can thrive without the formal recognition of citizenship”.²¹ This applies to Puerto Ricans too, despite the *de jure* recognition of citizenship – especially for those living on the U.S.

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

²⁰ Renato Rosaldo and William V. Flores, “Identity, Conflict, and Evolving Latino Communities: Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California,” in William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 93.

²¹ Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 37.

mainland. The task of analyzing, nuancing, and conceptualizing Puerto Rican citizenship and national identity has been at the forefront of scholarship in Puerto Rican studies for decades.

Duany reminds us that “none of the traditional criteria for nationhood – a shared territory, language, economy, citizenship, or sovereignty – are fixed and immutable in Puerto Rico and its diaspora but are subject to constant fluctuation and intense debate”.²² Instead, he postulates the nation “as a translocal community based on a collective consciousness of a shared history, language, and culture”.²³ This translocality allows Duany to complicate questions of “citizenship, migration, and identity [which] acquire a sense of urgency seldom found in well-established nation-states that do not have to justify their existence or fight for their survival”.²⁴ As the 2005 case of Gregorio Igartúa-de la Rosa, et al. v. United States of America confirmed, Puerto Ricans are not able to vote in U.S. national elections, and the Puerto Rico Federal Relations Act of 1950, while enabling local government on the island, disqualified Puerto Rico’s representation in the U.S. Congress.²⁵ Clearly, citizenship status for Puerto Ricans is limited, which is why the island’s population voted in a referendum in 2012 on the question of their future political status. Two thirds of those who voted in the referendum favored full statehood within the U.S., while the rest favored sovereign free association.²⁶ For Juan Flores, the question of Puerto Rico’s political status is less about the specific form (sovereignty, statehood, increased autonomy), but rather about the overarching goal that all possible programs have in common: “decolonization – that is, the recognition of an ongoing condition of subordination and external tutelage and the need to put an end to it”.²⁷ Whether or not the U.S. will finally grant full statehood in the wake of the referendum results remains to be seen. Yet it is unlikely to radically change how Puerto Ricans, especially those with permanent residence on the mainland, will continue to challenge and complicate neatly-defined notions of citizenship and belonging that have been ascribed upon them from outside forces including academia, the media, and the government.

In the first half of the 20th century, “U.S. citizenship facilitated a migration freed from immigration barriers, which sparked both labor recruitment and social networks,” however the usefulness of U.S. citizenship, second-class or not, declined dramatically in the second half of the century.²⁸ Against the displacing forces of deindustrialization, gentrification, and neoliberalism, Puerto Ricans could no longer rely on labor from the largely industrial sector that had employed them earlier. This lack of economic opportunity shifted Puerto Ricans’ claims to citizenship increasingly towards the cultural and social arenas of community life, namely, social practices and artistic expression. As Rina Benmayor, Rosa M. Torruellas, and Ana L. Juarbe point out:

Historically, culture has been the site of strongest resistance and the indelible mark of nationhood. Cultural commitments become even stronger in the

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ United States Court of Appeals, First Circuit, Gregorio Igartúa, et al., Plaintiffs, Appellants, v. United States of America, et al., Defendants, Appellees, 417 F.3d 145 (en banc), No. 09-2186.

²⁶ Abby Ohlheiser, “Is Puerto Rico on Its Way to Becoming the 51st State? Possibly,” *Slate*, November 7, 2012. http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2012/11/07/puerto_rico_statehood_referendum_2012_majority_support_of_status_change.html, accessed 12 December 2016.

²⁷ Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2000), 35.

²⁸ Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora”, 13.

context of a migration that has been disenfranchising and has imposed de-facto second-class status on a colonial people. Thus, the claim to cultural citizenship is an affirmation of a historical identity, a claim for social dignity, and a challenge to the exclusionary practices upon which legal and political citizenship have so long been based.²⁹

²⁹ Rina Benmayor, Rosa M. Torruellas, and Ana L. Juarbe, "Claiming Cultural Citizenship in East Harlem: 'Si Esto Puede Ayudar a la Comunidad Mía ...'", in William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

³⁰ This article focuses on activism in the cultural arena rather than political activities by groups such as the Young Lords.

³¹ William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, "Constructing Cultural Citizenship", in William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 6.

³² IUP Cultural Studies Working Group, "Draft Concept Paper on Cultural Citizenship", unpublished working concept paper no. 2 (Stanford, CA: Center for Chicano Research, 1988), cit. in William Flores and Rina Benmayor, "Constructing Cultural Citizenship," 12.

³³ Rosaldo and William Flores, "Identity, Conflict, and Evolving Latino Communities", 57.

³⁴ Whalen, "Colonialism, Citizenship, and the Making", 41-42.

³⁵ Rosaldo and William Flores, "Identity, Conflict, and Evolving Latino Communities," 61.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation*, 32.

This is not to say that community life and cultural celebrations had been unimportant before, quite the opposite. Still, as unemployment began to rise on both the mainland and the island, Puerto Ricans turned to cultural activism to resist their on-going status as lesser citizens.³⁰ Rosaldo coined the term 'cultural citizenship' to recognize how "Culture interprets and constructs citizenship, just as the activity of being citizens, in the broad sense of claiming membership in the society, affects how we view ourselves, even in communities that have been branded as second-class or 'illegal'".³¹ Going beyond legal questions of citizenship status, cultural citizenship describes an empowerment process "of constructing, establishing, and asserting human, social and cultural rights".³²

What seems quite broad simply refers to the basic right "to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong," as Rosaldo and William Flores write.³³ This right to belong, to be different, is played out chiefly in the daily life of isolated and dispersed communities and neighborhoods across the U.S., such as the Lower East Side in New York. Wherever Puerto Ricans settled, they have tried to adjust to their new surroundings as well as attempted to adjust their environments to their own needs.³⁴ This has historically been the catalyst for the involvement and creation of various community organizations to improve the lives of themselves and others. However, Puerto Rican communities "increasingly fail to fit the 'barrio' model of a bounded ethnically homogeneous space ... broken up by freeways, and dispersed in pockets throughout the city or even among cities".³⁵ So while communities are "essential foci for solidarity and for the struggle to claim and expand existing rights," the very definition of "community becomes a central research problem as one explores the networks of social relations that connect a series of dispersed points".³⁶ In this light, it is understandable why activists, residents, and artists needed to find alternative ways of building communities that support the ongoing fight for the right to be different, to belong. El Embassy, just as more traditional efforts to build a community by Puerto Ricans, was focused on "creatively blending cultural icons and symbolic repertoires of various origins".³⁷ However, by blending the material with the spiritual, the real and the imaginary, El Embassy strove for something more lasting than the fragility of community groups – to varying degrees of success.

El Embassy's Mission to Decolonize the Imaginary

On June 10, 1994, just a short walk from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, the art gallery space Kenkeleba House – appropriately named for a West African plant that is believed to possess spiritual powers – issued a press release for an upcoming exhibition entitled “El Puerto Rican Embassy Show”.³⁸ This was the inaugural exhibition for Maldonado’s and Pietri’s amalgam of ideas and projects that would re-introduce the concept of El Republic and El Embassy after former Young Lords member Figueroa first conceptualized this “counterinstitutional and counterpolitical space ... a translocal and non-juridical utopian space that cut across the upheavals of colonialism and diaspora”.³⁹ From June 26 to July 30, thirty-one Puerto Rican artists, including Papo Colo, Marcos Dimas, Maria Dominguez, Pepón Osorio, and Juan Sánchez, exhibited their work at this Lower East Side location. Apart from the work of these artists, El Embassy appointed so-called “Ambassadors of the Arts”: Miguel Algarín (poetry), Miriam Colón (theatre), Willie Colón (music), Raúl Julia (film), Antonio Martorell (visual arts), Ed Morales (journalism), Marta Moreno Vega (culture), and Piri Thomas (letters).⁴⁰ Honoring those who had gone before them as artists, activists, and heroes, Maldonado and Pietri conceived of the “Hall of Fame of Deceased Diplomacy”, which was presented in honor of Julia de Burgos, Eddie Figueroa, Antonia López, José Ferrer, Miguel Piñero, and Bimbo Rivas. Of particular note are Figueroa, Piñero, and Rivas: Rivas was a Loisaida playwright and the one who coined the term ‘Loisaida’ in the 1970s; Piñero was a poet and a co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe; Figueroa was the founder of the New Rican Village (1976) and El Republic; and de Burgos was a beloved Puerto Rican poet who served as Secretary General of the Daughters of Freedom (*Hijas de la Libertad*), the women’s branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (*Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico* or PNP).⁴¹ The memorialization of these figures symbolized the philosophy of El Republic as a space that cut across the geographical distance of Loisaida and Puerto Rico. As with many future events of El Embassy, Pietri read out the manifesto while Maldonado issued his passports. This inaugural exhibition was only the first in a series of events and projects over the next decade that would re-conceptualize and expand upon El Republic as an active process of decolonizing Puerto Ricans’ imaginaries in an effort to claim cultural citizenship – a citizenship marked by a symbolic repertoire: the passport, the anthem, the baptism certificate, and the use of Spanglish as the official language of El Republic.

In Maldonado’s own words, this repertoire was “an attempt to reconstruct the memory of a lost tradition merged with elements found in a new environment”.⁴² To understand the need for this artistic approach to decolonizing one’s imaginary, it is important to first trace Maldonado’s conceptualization of the colonizing process that he and El Republic attempted to counteract:

³⁸ Kenkeleba House, “Press Release”, June 10, 1994, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 71, Folder 1, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

³⁹ Urayoán Noel, “On Out of Focus Nuyoricans, Noricuas, and Performance Identities”, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 10, 3/4 (2014), 3.

⁴⁰ Kenkeleba House, “Press Release”.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Adál Maldonado, interview with Berta Jottar, CEPA Gallery, <http://www.old.cepagallery.org/exhibitions/Unlimited2/adal.html>, accessed 21 December 2016.

The idea is that we are fixed to a particular place in physical reality due to an assemblage point located somewhere on our bodies. This point where the cosmic energy cross each other is the Assemblage Point (According to indigenous peoples of New Mexico). Very much in the same way when taking a photograph an object or subject is in focus when the rays of light that bounce off the object being photographed cross each other when these light rays pass through the camera lens. This point where the light crosses each other in the camera lens is called the Focal Point. It is believed that when the Assemblage Point is moved or shifted from its place, either accidentally or by trauma, that the person is no longer in the present. That person may experience a psychological deconstruction that may appear to make him crazy to people in the physical reality when all that's happened is that his assemblage point has been shifted and he now may be experiencing life in another mental dimension. The account continues that men of knowledge or brujos of these New Mexico tribes were able to figure out how to purposely shift the Assemblage Point for the purpose of form changing and astral projecting empowering themselves in the process.⁴³

⁴³ Adál Maldonado, e-mail message to author, 14 January 2017.

Maldonado likely learned about the idea of an assemblage point from the book *The Fire From Within* (1984) by author Carlos Castaneda, who published over 28 million copies in 17 languages on his experiences with shamanism, which critics consider to be works of fiction rather than first-hand experiences.⁴⁴ No matter the legitimacy of Castaneda's work, Maldonado used the idea of the assemblage point to relate how colonizing forces "on the island caused a great psychological and emotional trauma that caused the Puerto Rican's assemblage point to shift".⁴⁵ Like the indigenous people of New Mexico, Maldonado was keenly aware that Puerto Ricans and the Puerto Rican diaspora "embraced their (out of focus) condition, and empowered themselves through their own creative intentions".⁴⁶ This psychological and emotional trauma is essentially the colonization of the imaginary – the effects that conquest, subordination, and colonization have on Puerto Ricans. It is exactly this trauma that the imaginary nation El Republic worked to visibilize and confront. All the artefacts and events were key to enabling citizens to rethink their own identities and decolonize their minds – to untangle oneself from the authoritarian power of the United States.

The insistence on the spirit, or the spiritual, in El Embassy's rhetoric had already been present in the rhetoric of earlier activist groups and goes back to Figueroa and the founding of the New Rican Village, which an attendee described as "a different conception of who we are as beings on this planet – beings that are part of nature, that are creators, that are *spiritual*".⁴⁷ As Ed Morales, the Ambassador of Journalism, recalls in a piece on El Republic, Figueroa "found a way to spark an eternal flame of *spiritual resistance*".⁴⁸ Figueroa himself said to Morales, the spiritual refers to:

the belief in magic, the belief in a multidimensional universe, the belief in

⁴⁴ Critics include the investigative reporter Richard de Mille as well as anthropologists who studied the Yaqui Indian culture that Castaneda claims to take his guidance from. See for example pages 24 to 25 in Jane Holden Kelley's book *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1978).

⁴⁵ Maldonado, e-mail message.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interviewee, cit. in Marina Roseman, "The New Rican Village: Artists in Control of the Image-Making Machinery", *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 4, 1 (1983), 135. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Ed Morales, "Eddie Figueroa's Spirit Republic Alternative to the Young Lords", *EdMorales.net*, July 25, 2015. Emphasis added, <https://edmorales.net/2015/07/25/eddie-figueroas-spirit-republic-alternative-to-the-young-lords>, accessed 12 December 2016.

simultaneous eternal time, that what we're seeing is only part of what it is, and that this is inside of something else, and that the real mystery, the real point of all of this is the investigation, the navigation of the self, of the heart, the spirit, because that is where the truth is.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Figueroa, cit. in Morales, "Eddie Figueroa's Spirit Republic".

Figueroa was concerned with identity, "Puerto Rican spiritual identity" to be precise.⁵⁰ For Figueroa, a second-generation Puerto Rican who grew up in the States, this simply meant "learning about my mother and my father and my people [and] being born again".⁵¹ The idea of being born again is, of course, spiritual in nature and tied to encountering Puerto Rico and one's own roots – both familial and ancestral. Pietri writes about this spiritual rebirth in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* where he conceives of Puerto Rico as "an island where eternal life and reincarnation is possible and multiple personalities aren't considered mental illness but a gift from the gods who will never allow us to cease speaking in tongues to get a message across the centuries".⁵² As the imaginative poetics of Figueroa and Pietri demonstrate, spirituality for these artists was far from an easily-identifiable belief system that could be appropriated by outside forces – as was the case with physical spaces and the infiltration of the Young Lords by the FBI. On the contrary, (Puerto Rican) spirituality was conceived of as a metaphysical and messy philosophy that would allow for multiple identities, a complicating of national identity, and a lasting resistance to the dragging question of independence.

⁵⁰ Morales, "Eddie Figueroa's Spirit Republic".

⁵¹ Figueroa, cit. in Morales, "Eddie Figueroa's Spirit Republic".

⁵² Pedro Pietri, "Poem/Prologue", in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* (Hollis: Puritan Press, 2004).

Both Figueroa and Pietri were members of the Young Lords until they realized that it quickly "became impossible for the YLP to deliver on the revolutionary issues put forth on its platform".⁵³ They started channeling their revolutionary spirit through cultural activism infused with clear political messages in the forms of poetry, music, and theater. Within the experimental atmosphere of the early incarnations of the New Rican Village and the Nuyorican Poets Café, Figueroa and Pietri "would use the Embassy as a means to produce and present Pedro's plays and poetry events where they would invite the other Nuyorican poets to perform their poetry".⁵⁴ However, Figueroa passed away before they had a chance to flesh out the project. When no one assumed responsibility for continuing the work on El Republic and El Embassy, Maldonado "approached Pedro and said to him that the Embassy project was too important to drop and that as [his] work as an artist dealt with the creation of imaginary worlds and alternative realities that [he] knew how to take the Embassy to its next level".⁵⁵ While Maldonado and Pietri had previously collaborated on a musical entitled *Mondo Mambo: A Mambo Rap Sodi* (1990), this marked the beginning of their collaboration on El Republic and El Embassy. Together they set out to "create the artefacts that would define a citizen of this imaginary country and in the process bring it to the world of hard objects".⁵⁶ Early on, the connection between the imaginary and the "world of hard objects" was a clear priority for Maldonado and Pietri who, according to Maldonado, shared "a kind of Dada Rican" sensibility with Pietri being the

⁵³ Maldonado, e-mail message.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid. “Nuyorican satirist” and Maldonado the “jíbaro existentialist”.⁵⁷

Unlike Figueroa’s idea of El Republic as a purely imaginary space, Maldonado, Pietri, and other artists shaped El Republic’s vision to sporadically tap in and out of the physical world of exhibitions, events, and material objects and actively promote the importance of decolonizing one’s imaginary as a means to claim cultural citizenship (see Figure 1). Initially, though, Figueroa and later Maldonado and Pietri tried to find physical spaces to permanently house the project, according to a letter by Maldonado: “Pedro and I envisioned securing a building which would serve as our Embassy and within this structure we could house a gallery, performance space, television broadcasting facilities, offices for the Embassy and a residence for visiting artists”.⁵⁸ Maldonado wanted to revive the New Rican Village and create a fully-fledged community center such as the Charas/El Bohío Community Center, which was the main multi-functional Puerto Rican community center in Loisaida in the 1980s and 1990s. Failing to find a physical location, a paradoxical idea that arguably works against the concept of an imaginary space, Maldonado and Pietri instead built a website at *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* (1994) to serve “as a multimedia installation and archive of Maldonado and Pietri’s daring works”.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, a website requires maintenance; virtual space is not safe from being lost to obscurity when the domain rights are not continuously upheld or fees are not paid.⁶⁰ Neither the failure to find a permanent physical location nor the instability of a website undermines the core concept of El Republic as a community space that lived, lives, and hopefully continues to live in the minds of individuals who represent a collective that has been scattered geographically, yet united in a spirit of resistance. Making use of their symbolic repertoire to connect this world with El Republic was the ideal way to avoid losing the essence of El Republic through either obscure abstractedness or fragile physicality.

⁵⁸ Adál Maldonado to Alberto Cappas, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 70, Folder 8, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

⁵⁹ Noel, “On *Out of Focus*”, 3.

⁶⁰ As of January 2017, the official website at *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* is defunct and in its place the website *visiondoble.net* now hosts all the material that made up the original site.



⁶¹ Images of the exhibition entitled *Los Blueprints for a Nation* (Fig. 1 and Fig. 5) can be found at <http://www.visiondoble.net/losblueprintsforanation/los-blueprints-for-a-nation>, accessed 19 December 2016.

Fig. 1: Adál Maldonado, “Installation view of El Passport stamped on entering Colombia, Curacau, Paris and Milano,” 2000, *Los Blueprints for a Nation*, CEPA Gallery, Boston, NY. Courtesy of Adál Maldonado.⁶¹

Rather than anchoring El Embassy in a physical location, Maldonado and Pietri amassed a collection of material objects that travelled from location to location, wherever they hosted an event or exhibition. The events and exhibitions that Maldonado and Pietri organized as well as their work and the work of other artists were crucial to the expansion of El Republic from an idea into an interactive process that promoted cultural citizenship just as much as the work of the Young Lords, Charas, and Adopt-a-Building. As Urayoán Noel points out, “With its (mock) passports and anthem and blueprints, the Embassy project offers the paraphernalia of the nation-state seemingly as a parody of its hollowness, as if to underscore that it is *spirit* and not the accoutrements that vouchsafe the nation-state that animates this republic”.⁶² El Republic was brought to audiences through multi-media performance events at famous Loisaída and other New York venues such as the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, the Kenkeleba Gallery, Village Gate, Club Broadway, and El Museo del Barrio as well as excursions into galleries across the country – including the Austin Arts Center and Harvard University.⁶³ The nature and content of these events changed depending on which artists were in attendance and what Pietri and Maldonado were working on at the time because they continually re-imagined their own work within El Republic and El Embassy frameworks, which in turn re-conceptualized what El Republic meant to them. Consequently, they started with a peculiar object such as El Passport at their inaugural event and eventually exhibited Out of Focus Nuyoricans at Harvard University in 2004 and 2005.

⁶² Ibid., 6. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Some ephemera for selected events can be found in the Pedro Pietri Papers at Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

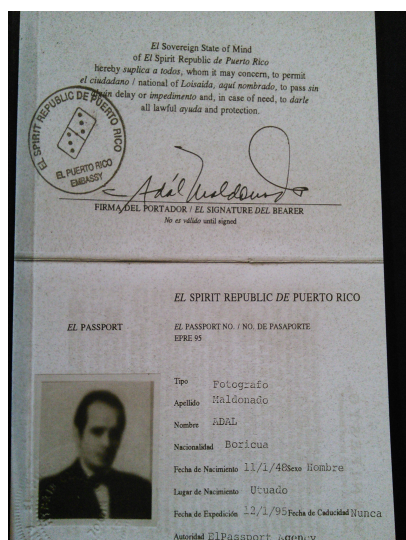


Fig. 2: Adál Maldonado, “El Passport (Adál Maldonado)”, 1995, Adál Maldonado Artist File, MoMA Queens Artist Files, New York. Courtesy of Adál Maldonado.



Fig. 3: Adál Maldonado, “El Passport (Luciana Alexandra)”, 2012, *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (online exhibition), Smithsonian American Art Museum. Courtesy of Adál Maldonado.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The *Our America* online exhibition is available at http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/our_america/reframing.cfm, accessed 12 December 2016.

⁶⁵James Estrin, “Puerto Rican Identity, In and Out of Focus”, *New York Times*, August 28, 2012. I was issued my own passport too when I contacted Maldonado in 2015.

While passports were initially issued to Puerto Rican artists and Ambassadors, over time El Republic evolved into a much more inclusive space that was “not limited to people of Puerto Rican descent. Anyone could participate. Anyone could become Nuyorican through a ‘baptism’ performed by Mr. Pietri who represented his own sect La Iglesia de la Madre de Los Tomatoes”.⁶⁵

This printed passport served multiple functions: its design resembles that of an actual passport, it is written in Spanglish, and its humorous tone parodies the legal rhetoric of a government-issued passport. However, the passport was more than just a witty and nicely-designed material object. It was created to be used, to be handed out, to be filled out. That is why it includes a section for border security stamps that daring citizens may want to fill out when they actually travel – if they could convince security officers to humor them. Finally, the personal information section allows passport holders to choose their own *nacionalidad*, including Boricua, Nuyorican, Mexijentirican, and Puertorriqueño (see Figures 2-4) – that inevitable mess of multiple identities

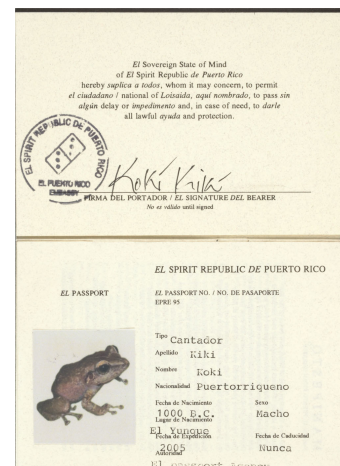


Fig. 4: Adál Maldonado, “El Passport (Koki Kiki)”, 2005, *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (online exhibition), Smithsonian American Art Museum. Courtesy of Adál Maldonado.

Beyond the materiality of the object itself – and its functionality as an object to be *actively* used – the very act of issuing the passport as part of an event or exhibition helped to spread the word about El Republic and welcome new citizens to its imaginary territory. The passport was one of many important artefacts that yanks the imaginary republic into the physical world for a moment without endangering it in any way. As Jose Luis Falconi points out in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*, a booklet based on the 2004/2005 Harvard exhibition, the galleries and events where Pietri and Maldonado exhibited their artefacts did not function as exact recreations “of the imaginary territory, but as [places] where imperfect memories

of it are gathered”.⁶⁶ The passport was ultimately a creative artefact that allowed each passport bearer to proclaim independence on their own terms; this was not a claim to political independence but rather an attempt to decolonize one’s imaginary by becoming part of what Noel calls “a new kind of affective, deterritorialized, self-created community”.⁶⁷ Pietri alludes to this in the manifesto printed in the actual passport: “the imagination has always been an independent country with a spontaneous sense of survival!”⁶⁸ Unlike the U.S. passport, this artefact bestowed a kind of cultural citizenship upon the passport holder and the loss of the artefact itself would in no way remove their status as citizens of this affective, self-proclaimed community. It is simply a representation, a material object that stands in for something much larger.

Amongst the collection of artefacts that Maldonado, Pietri, and other artists created in the 1990s and 2000s, El Anthem is best suited to explain how an imaginary space – promoting the project of a decolonized imaginary through real-life gatherings – can sustain the idea that Puerto Ricans “can be in two Islands at the same time”, as Pietri notes in the manifesto of the passport.⁶⁹ Based on and to the tune of the Puerto Rican love hymn to San Juan “En mi Viejo San Juan”, El Anthem was performed by Pietri from the very beginning of the resurrection of El Republic in 1994 to the last years leading up to Pietri’s death in 2004.⁷⁰ The first thing to note is the use of Spanglish as the choice for El Anthem. Riffing on the lack of opportunities in U.S. cities and Puerto Rico, Pietri writes in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* that “the more you walked in the opposite direction of tropical dreams and urban ambitions the more difficult it became to talk in Spanish or English. So *Spanglish* came to the rescue and we became *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* which is the same as being and not being lost”.⁷¹ Fluently moving between and merging Spanish and English, Spanglish is a “‘breaking’ (into) each other”, as Juan Flores points out.⁷² He goes on to say that “Collective memory and identity find their appropriate articulation in this lively, ‘macaronic’ sensibility, where the mixed-code vernacular voice responds in both directions to the imposition of official, standard constructs of ‘the’ national language”.⁷³ So the use of Spanglish as the official language of El Republic and El Anthem was a means to allow notions of belonging to flow in both directions simultaneously as evident in the use of terms such as ‘Nuyorican’.

In El Anthem, the difficult situation for Puerto Ricans and their struggle to keep one foot firmly rooted in Puerto Rico comes through in verses such as: “We have been in limbo/(We’re in New York City)/And so/And so And so/Almost misplaced my soul/(Somewhere in New Jersey)”.⁷⁴ Here, New York is considered a temporary station, a limbo space, where Puerto Ricans struggle economically and never really left Puerto Rico in their hearts: “If I can’t fly I’ll swim/Straight from El Barrio/Back to Puerto Rico/(Island by the sun blessed/Island I never left)”.⁷⁵ The entire anthem serves to underpin the importance of not losing one’s Puerto Rican and Borinquen roots, urging to resist assimilation so as not to lose one’s

⁶⁶ Jose Luis Falconi, “Blurriness in Focus”, in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* (Hollis: Puritan Press, 2004).

⁶⁷ Urayoán Noel, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 70.

⁶⁸ Pedro Pietri, “Notes on El Puerto Rican Embassy”, 1994, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 70, Folder 8, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

⁶⁹ Pietri, “Notes on El Puerto Rican Embassy”.

⁷⁰ Luckily, the records of the performances are not just kept on sheets of paper in institutional archives, but also collected and cut together by Maldonado in a video on his YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F82EmeLrrL4>, accessed 12 December 2016.

⁷¹ Pietri, “Poem/Prologue”.

⁷² Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 58.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Pietri, “El Spanglish National Anthem”.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

identity: “Some did assimilate/In de United States/They got rid of de accent/Tho whenever they spoke/That will always unmask them!/But de majority/Kept their identity/Never did lose their accent!/They were proud not ashamed/Of their

⁷⁶ Ibid. Boricua names”.⁷⁶ As video recordings of the performances prove, El Anthem was designed to be sung with an audience in mind. Pietri created this social performance to engage audience members who more often than not experienced the situations El Anthem describes and criticizes, such as the necessity for higher educational degrees to get jobs in a new service economy: “Many dropped out of school/Others went to college/Trying hard to get somewhere./In the land of da free/Where without a degree/You cannot collect welfare”. El Anthem drew on the experiences of Puerto Ricans in the United States – especially those living in big cities – and in doing so highlighted the importance of retaining and celebrating Puerto Rican tradition and culture off the island, including urban community gardens, the plena, and the mambo: “Las botanicas saved/Us from an early grave/All aspirin did wass kill jool/Muchas gracias Chango/La Plena y el

⁷⁷ Ibid. Mambo/For coming to the rescue!”⁷⁷ In Puerto Rico, *change* refers to someone who does nonsense, a joker. The anthem makes fun of Western medicine when the real medicine was spiritual in nature: Puerto Rican music and dance. The significance of spiritual health through social and cultural interaction with friends, family, and community is emphasized in another verse as well: “De hard time were plenty/De pockets stayed empty/But the soul nunca [never] dyyyyyy/And junto [together] we survived/And danced after we cried/Defending nuestro [our] pride”.⁷⁸ El Anthem was not simply a song that was performed for an audience; it was an important gesture in El Embassy’s symbolic repertoire. Its purpose was to solidify the use of Spanglish as a language of resistance for Puerto Ricans who speak “two languages simultaneously”.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Austin Arts Center, “El Spanglish National Anthem,” 1998, Pedro Pietri Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Centro Archives and Library, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

Conclusion

El Passport and El Anthem are just two artefacts of a much larger collection of objects, artworks, events, and exhibitions that served to manifest the imaginary space of El Republic as reality for Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and anyone else who chose to become a citizen of this nation. Scholars have dissected parts of Maldonado’s and Pietri’s contributions to El Republic and El Embassy, but the importance of the materialization of El Republic artefacts in real, physical places has been marginalized due to El Republic’s primary concept as an imaginary site of resistance.⁸⁰ However, using this symbolic repertoire, Maldonado and Pietri purposely yanked El Republic into existence for audiences across the U.S. for over a decade. This allowed them to actively push for a decolonization of the imaginary – a decolonization of the brain as one particular exhibition artwork demonstrates with terms and phrases such as “jump without moving an inch”, “create dissent”, and “make non-sense” (see Figure 5). Ultimately, El Embassy – brought to life

⁸⁰ See Noel’s piece on the *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* exhibition mentioned in this text as well as Wilson Valentin-Escobar’ *Bodega Surrealism: The Emergence of Latin@ Artists in New York City* (New York: New York U. P., forthcoming).

again by Maldonado and Pietri – was a temporary project for a collective of Puerto Rican artists, all of whom have since moved on to other ventures or passed away into the spiritual world of El Republic. Nevertheless, its physical and material representations in the form of passports and other objects ensured that a new generation would hear and learn about El Republic’s vision to “make non-sense” of Puerto Rico’s ongoing struggles.⁸¹ If “a key element of cultural citizenship is the process of ‘affirmation,’ as the community itself defines its interests, its binding solidarities, its boundaries, its own space, and its membership,” then El Republic was only able to claim this right for its citizenry by building and nurturing an affective community of resident dissidents – as Maldonado calls himself in the booklet *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*.⁸²

⁸¹ The legacy of El Republic continues to be a presence for Puerto Rican activists as evidenced by a 2015 New York exhibition on the Young Lords, which includes exhibition space for the work of Figueroa, Pietri, and Maldonado. Connie Kargbo, “Puerto Rican radical group Young Lords retake NYC in museum exhibit”, *PBS Newshour*, September 19, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/puerto-rican-radical-group-young-lords-retake-new-york-city-multi-museum-exhibit>, accessed 19 December 2016.

⁸² IUP Cultural Studies Working Group, “Draft Concept Paper”, cit. in William Flores and Benmayor, “Constructing Cultural Citizenship”, 13.

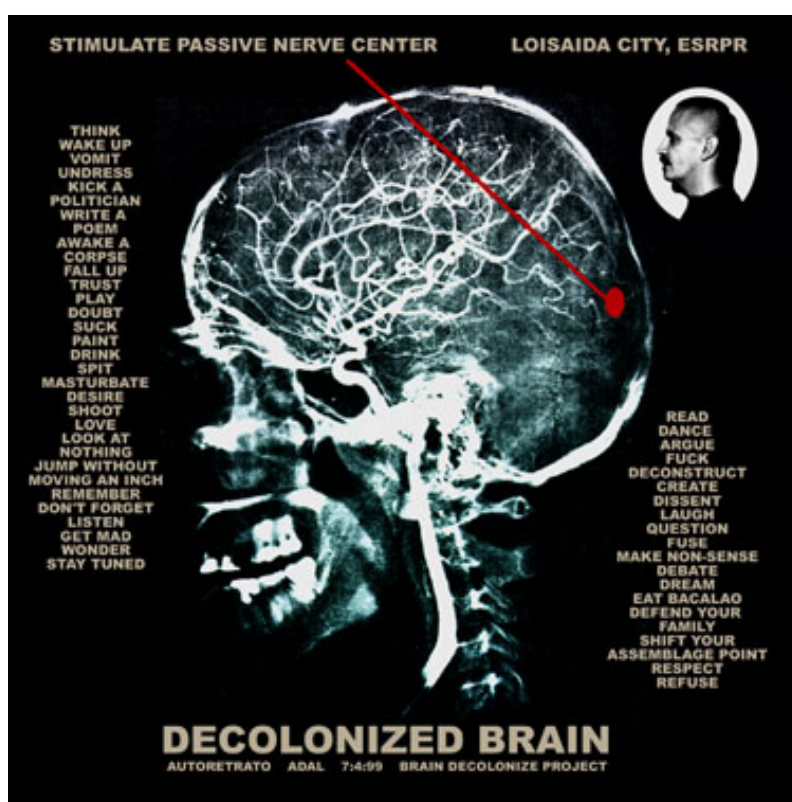


Fig. 5: Adál Maldonado, “La Decolonized Brain,” 2000, *Los Blueprints for a Nation*, CEPA Gallery, Boston, NY. Courtesy of Adál Maldonado.

This article began with Dylcia Pagan and her release from prison in September 1999 on the condition that she would renounce terrorist activities in her pursuit for Puerto Rican independence. Just a few weeks after Pagan left federal prison, Giuliani began a vicious battle with the Brooklyn Museum of Art “over an exhibition that includes a painting of the Virgin Mary on a canvas adorned with elephant dung,” according to the *New York Times*.⁸³ Playing the role of amateur art critic, Giuliani asked for offensive works to be removed and declined weekly

⁸³ David Barstow, “Giuliani Is Ordered to Halt Attacks Against Museum”, *New York Times*, November 2, 1999.

payments to the institutions when the museum refused to censor their exhibition. Within just two months, Giuliani started and lost his little battle over free expression. As Judge Nina Gershon of the United States District Court in Brooklyn declared in her decision: “There is no federal constitutional issue more grave ... than the effort by government officials to censor works of expression and to threaten the vitality of a major cultural institution as punishment for failing to abide by governmental demands for orthodoxy”.⁸⁴ This was only the beginning for Giuliani, however, as he clearly disagreed with the judge’s decision and announced

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Albor Ruiz, “Rudy on Art: It’s Theater of the Absurd”, *New York Daily News*, April 2, 2001.

a so-called “‘decency’ committee” or “art police” in 2001.⁸⁵ The committee’s mission was simple: “To follow Giuliani’s ideas on what is acceptable artwork at city-supported institutions. No more exhibitions like ‘Sensation’ or ‘Yo Mama’s Last Supper,’ both of which offended Giuliani’s sensibilities and made him rant and

⁸⁶ Ibid.

rave against the Brooklyn Museum of Art”.⁸⁶ The Pagan benefit in 2001 was partially a response to the art police, as notes on the evening’s program show: Maldonado screened his short film *Delito Cha Cha Cha* at the benefit “because it deals with the arrest of a woman for the crime of dancing the cha cha cha in a totalitarian state where any form of entertainments is forbidden”.⁸⁷ The film connected Pagan’s imprisonment for fighting her war against the imperial U.S. with Pagan’s new direction in art as her weapon of choice in the struggle for Puerto Rican independence. Giuliani’s coincidental intersections with Pagan’s causes – symbolically represented through this particular benefit – exemplify the larger story of how the U.S. has treated Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican independence movements in the past and how Puerto Ricans have continued to innovate on ways to keep resisting top-down notions of Puerto Rican (national) identity and citizenship. Maldonado asked whether it was possible to assume a national identity without citizenship privileges and, as this article has shown, a largely conceptual El Republic in conjunction with an activist El Embassy provided the ideas and tools to claim a cultural citizenship that defies and disables the legal limits of a U.S. citizenship in the minds and hearts of Puerto Ricans. Without a doubt, Puerto Ricans have no intention to relinquish “that special ‘mess’” that identifies them – historically, culturally, politically.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ “Dylcia Pagan Benefit”. The full version of *Delito Cha Cha Cha* can be found on Adál Maldonado’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sidhTjoqYvY>, accessed 12 December 2016.

⁸⁸ Díaz-Quinones, “La política del olvido”, 57.

The Crystal Ceiling and the Mess Below. Fantasy and Erosion of Privilege in *Breaking Bad*

Abstract: In this essay, I discuss how AMC's award-winning series *Breaking Bad* creates an oscillation between the thematic and symbolic poles of messiness and cleanness, playing with this polarity and ultimately blurring it. This blurring is predicated upon the series' peculiar construction of material objects – among which money – accumulated in space, as well as upon its “bending” time to create alternate realities. This has ramifications in sociohistorical and sociopolitical terms: *Breaking Bad* speaks to a number of concerns typical of contemporary neoliberalism, and carves a parallel reality, where messiness and cleanness relentlessly trade places, thanks to an investment in fantasy; this parallel reality is, however, rather than in opposition, in continuity with reality-as-we-know-it, in the sense that it constitutes only a temporary, or a partial, escape for its subject(s). In the end, I maintain, *Breaking Bad* suggests that fantasy as supplemental to reality-as-we-know-it is a mirror that both connects and separates privilege, and the right to a liveable life, from their slow but steadfast erosion in the current sociohistorical and sociopolitical situation.

Keywords: *exception, fantasy, law, neoliberalism, privilege, television*

1. Introduction: A Cruel Intentionality

In “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, Martin Manalansan IV reflects upon the lives of six queer people sharing a crammed one-bedroom apartment in Jackson Heights, Queens, NYC.¹ Among these people, whom the scholar calls “the Queer Six”, are sex workers and illegal immigrants; Manalansan employs both spatial and temporal elements in his analysis and, out of great care and respect for their lives, he manages to offer an interesting and nuanced reflection on the concept of “mess”. Spatially speaking, mess is the accumulation and visibility in space of items that, at a glance, do not add up, whose presence is at odds with the (cultural) expectations about the environment they find themselves in.² By contrast, an orderly archive of material items naturalizes culture: the collected elements appear to “naturally” fall into place. This is often accompanied by a teleological tension into posterity: a preoccupation about leaving material things behind for one's dear ones, a healthy projection into the future in the anticipation of one's death. This teleology, I would add, presupposes a will, and a powerful intentionality, behind the act of discerning and decreeing what must be kept, passed on – and, to the contrary, what must be left back and/or discarded. From a radically different perspective, a “messy” archive, Manalansan suggests, is not easily read. In temporal terms, mess does not allow for a smooth, consequential, univocal reading of the past of the objects – how did the items ever get there? What intentions, or series of random circumstances, resulted in their accumulation in a certain place? A messy archive is

¹ Martin Manalansan IV, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, *Radical History Review*, 120 (Fall 2014), 94-107.

² I provide this description of mess keeping in mind Mary Douglas's culture-based definition of dirt as “matter out of place”. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). Well aware of the cultural weight behind such expectations, in order to render the full “aliveness” (Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, 100) of the inhabitants of the apartment, Manalansan juxtaposes the lived experience of the Queer Six to the popular media representation of hoarders. The figure of the hoarder, as represented in TV shows such as *Hoarders: Buried Alive*, Manalansan argues, is “always already pathologized” (ibid., 98). This TV show is based on a “narrative of normalization” (ibid., 98): former hoarders develop a capacity to discern “which objects are valuable and need to be kept for posterity and which are trash and should be thrown away” (ibid., 98); “the movement from pathology to normality, from impossibility to tenability, from mess to order can also be portrayed in terms of the teleological routes of value” (ibid., 99).

³ A “messy” archive can actually be the result of a combination of various “intentionalities” and random events: “the Queer Six rely on contrasting moments of detachments, letting go, moving away, the pleasure of discovery, and the reality that nothing is ever really permanent in order to enable themselves to move literally and figuratively through times and spaces, beyond days and rooms” (Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives”, 102). Last but not least, the intentions, attachments, and sometimes random events that originated a messy archive cannot always be followed through. In an almost Buddhist-like fashion, despite the attachment to something – or someone, sometimes you cannot but let go. Manalansan explicitly refrains from subscribing to the pejorative implications of the concept of “mess”; at the same time, he forgoes any idealization of mess per se as a subversive and/or desirable – i.e., subversive hence desirable – quality or condition.

also problematic with regard to its relation to the future: what is the fate of such items? Will they be passed on to posterity, or left behind?³

The final two years of Walter (Walt) White (Bryan Cranston), the protagonist of the highly acclaimed AMC series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), are, at a manifest level, intensely driven by an all-powerful “master” intentionality: making money. Initially at least, this is grounded in an ethical imperative. Diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer immediately after his fiftieth birthday, he desperately wants to leave something behind for his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn), his teenage (disabled) son Walter Jr. (RJ Mitte), and the baby daughter Skyler is pregnant with. In order to provide for the financial security of his family in the limited life span he has left, he decides to maximize his chances for profit: he blackmails his former, not-too-bright student Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) into partnering with him, and he becomes a methamphetamine producer/dealer. (By Season Five of the series, the welfare of the family as a pretext disappears, and Walt appears to be propelled by the sole drive of his – by then ruthless – ambition.)

In this essay, I propose to read the series’ fluid conception of mess – i.e., the series’ peculiar intertwinement of chaos and order, purity and filth, in-placeness and out-of-placeness – as the in/visible counterpart of different chronotopes, i.e. different forms of space-time continuities, and/or discontinuities. Moreover, while, in aesthetic terms, the aforementioned intertwinements are the result of artistic creativity – namely, of narrative and visual choices on the part of the series’ creator Vince Gilligan and the rest of its developers – I also maintain that they have implications in sociohistorical terms. Reflecting on a certain intertwined configuration of space and time is made possible, it seems to me, through a reflection on items and their materiality, their relation to place, and their journey in time – a relation and a journey which often determine our perception of what is in place and what is out of place, what is orderly and what is messy/chaotic, what is clean and what is dirty, and how it came to be so. This also involves a reflection on the attachments we develop with respect to commodities (produced and diffused) in different spaces, as well as on the shifting socioeconomic dynamics that are related to such attachments.

The narrative core of *Breaking Bad*, namely, the production, selling, and consumption of methamphetamine – colloquially known as “crystal” – is by definition a “para-site”, situated on the dark side of a “normal”, apparently healthy society. In most cases, the circulation of drugs touches a number of “unsanitized” spaces that are, as underlined by the series, the often unacknowledged mirror image of the spaces wherein healthy citizens reside.⁴ In Manalansan’s discourse, a de-pathologized idea of mess accompanies an attempt at de-pathologizing (neither trashing nor idealizing) the lives of marginalized subjects such as the “Queer Six”. By contrast, the lives of disenfranchised and marginalized subjects are both central and far removed in *Breaking Bad*, to the extent that they are inescapably involved in

⁴ David Lynch’s work perfectly exemplifies such a contrast. The opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* (1985) presents a series of clean, idyllic suburban scenes, then the camera frames a lawn and slowly zooms in / pans down to the grass blades, revealing the nauseous writing and squeaking of the insect life hidden by the green. The whole TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), developed by Lynch and by Mark Frost, is centered on unveiling the dark underbelly of a seemingly friendly and decent small town in the Pacific Northwest. This Lynchian approach has branched into products as various as Sam Mendes’s Academy Award-winning *American Beauty* (1999) and ABC’s series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012).

a free-market circulation of money and commodities: they are those who consume the drugs that others produce. The series shows them only cursorily and occasionally and it centers, instead, on those who accumulate money profiting from this consumption.⁵ The latter enjoy a freedom of movement that consumers do not have; in James Bowman's terms, "the violent, frequently deadly criminal world exists alongside the more recognizable one of the show's intended audience, and its main characters live in both, moving with greater or lesser ease between them".⁶

⁵ This may be one of the reasons behind some accusations of "romanticizing" the drug world in the series.

⁶ James Bowman, "Criminal Elements", *The New Atlantis*, 38 (Winter/Spring 2013), 163-173. <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/criminal-elements>, accessed February 5, 2017.

In our present of permanent international tension, economic crises, steady erosion of various welfare systems, and resulting endemic precariousness, apparently healthy and "normal" citizens move in and out of the para-sites of the law. In *Breaking Bad*, an always impending threat of downfall is exorcized by means of a fantasy-fueled "triumph of the will" (Nazi overtones intended) that attempts to maximize mess – investing in it, getting dirty, thriving at the margins of the very space of socioeconomic precariousness that is increasingly becoming the norm, even for the apparently privileged components of the social body. "Apparently" points to a *fantasy* dimension. Jacqueline Rose maintains that "[f]antasy is not ... antagonistic to social reality; it is its precondition or psychic glue".⁷ In other words, fantasy can be as socially disruptive as it can be conservative. Fantasy provides a moment of suspension, when change may occur and/or be reabsorbed by a habituated cycle that refurbishes the status quo. This is at the origin of what Lauren Berlant names "cruel optimism":

⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3.

"Cruel optimism" names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. ... [T]he subjects might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.⁸

⁸ Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 17.3 (2006), 21.

What I wish to suggest is that, in some cases, fantasy is conservative in the sense that it enacts a separation between those who hold on to their privilege while it is eroding and those who were never privileged. Holding on to privilege while it is eroding is tantamount to deferring a loss and a ruin that, in the present historical condition, appear to be increasingly inevitable. Part of the enormous appeal of *Breaking Bad*, and a reason for its success, lie, I contend, in the fact that, at the very core of contemporary neoliberalism, Walter White's parable points to the ultimate im/possibility of an alternative existence.

2. Im/Purity, Space, and Time in *Breaking Bad*

How does *Breaking Bad* thematize/formalize mess in spatial as well as temporal

terms? The series presents two recurring motifs: mess as im/purity and mess as loss of control. With “im/purity”, I refer to the thematization, and mutual highlighting, of filth, defilement, pollution, and contamination on the one hand, and cleanness, sanitization, and purity on the other. While there are obvious reasons, with regard to the subject and the plot of the series, to insist on such motifs, their recurring presence points to symbolic overtones and a broader sphere of signification. Moreover, the presence of a repeated oscillation between the extreme poles of chaos and order fundamentally relies on the series’ investment in the discontinuities and fissures in the fabric of space-time continuum.

The implementation of a whole structure of efficient disposal, and the dangers of abandoning clues in one’s wake, are prominent in the series. Moreover, keeping mess at bay is a preoccupation that especially runs throughout Seasons One and Two. During the initial episodes – including the Pilot – in which he begins his venture in the world of meth manufacture and trade, Walt attempts to bring order into chaos: for instance, he decides to regulate the space in his young partner’s RV, which initially serves as a makeshift lab, not only supplying the appropriate chemical equipment (stolen from the chemistry lab of the school where he teaches) which the naïve Jesse lacks, but also deciding where everything belongs – for instance, declaring that only equipment fits in the workspace, and that their workstation should be clear of any other objects.

A visually flamboyant display of mess comes as early as Episode Three in Season One, “And the Bag’s in the River” (10 Feb 2008). Producing a toxic gas by means of a chemical reaction, Walt has (in strict self-defense) killed Emilio Koyama, Jesse’s former associate, and Krazy-8, Emilio’s cousin, a drug distributor whom they were trying to reach with a collaboration proposal. After imprisoning Krazy-8 (whom will eventually be killed by a hesitant and torn Walt) in the basement of Jesse’s house, they are left with the hideous task of disposing of Emilio’s corpse. Ignoring Walt’s recommendations to strictly use a plastic container for dissolving the body in acid, Jesse proceeds to use his bathtub: the acid dissolves the ceramics and eventually the floor/ceiling itself, and in a memorable black comedy moment, a red mass/mess, interspersed with barely distinguishable solid parts, cascades down in the corridor before Walt and Jesse’s horrified eyes. So much for getting rid of the body of evidence.

While not leaving clues behind may be central to any crime-related fiction, the presence of – to use Mary Douglas’s definition – “matter out of place” is also emblematic, in structural as well as visual terms, of how evil and corruption spread from within an enclosed area to the rest of the social (not to mention the human) body. From spaces charged with symbolic value, the invisible progressively seeps into the visible, despite any attempts to maintain it hidden. The basement of Jesse’s house is a paramount example:

Krazy-8’s death, the disastrous attempt to dissolve the body of Jesse’s ex-partner

Emilio, and the strong, fish-like odor given off by methylamine as it is processed fundamentally change Jesse's home, and what started in the basement has moved into the main areas of the house. This most intimate of places is corrupted, and the taint cannot be contained within the basement/unconscious.⁹

⁹ Ensley F. Guffey, "Buying the House: Place in *Breaking Bad*", in David P. Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 158.

The subject of im/purity in *Breaking Bad* is, of course, directly related to the production of methamphetamine and the related presence of chemistry. The level of purity of the meth produced by Walt – and, eventually, by Jesse – is the key to the success of the product, and the necessity of purity is emphasized continuously and consistently throughout the series. At one level, this is naturally related to Walt's mastery as a chemist, which is made clear from the very beginning: in the Pilot (20 Jan 2008), we are shown a plaque that reads "Science Research Center, Los Alamos, New Mexico, hereby recognizes Walter H. White, Crystallography Project Leader for Proton Radiography, 1985, Contributor to Research Awarded the Nobel Prize". Our awareness of Walt's ability is later reinforced from the perspective of Gale Boetticher (David Costabile), a qualified and rather nerdy chemist who temporarily becomes his assistant. Gale worships Walt; among else, in the cold open to "Box Cutter" (17 Jul 2011), he observes that the meth produced by Walt is ninety-nine percent pure, versus the ninety-six purity percentage he himself can guarantee, and that the three-percent difference, albeit apparently minor to a non-trained person, is in fact "tremendous".

The purity of the meth is repeatedly related to the cleanness, the almost anodyne quality, of the spaces wherein it is produced. A paradigmatic case, and at the same time one that brings such a relation to extreme consequences, is the much-quoted "Fly" episode (23 May 2010) in Season Three. This episode revolves around Walt's obsession about a fly that has made its way into the lab: he is convinced that it will contaminate and ruin the whole batch he and Jesse are working on, so he stubbornly insists on finding and killing it, in an absurd crescendo of failed attempts.

The "insects" motif is given another twist in the final season, when the Vamonos Pest fumigation company becomes the cover for the production of meth. Looking for a new space after the lab underneath the Lavandería Brillante (an industrial laundry facility serving as a cover) of Seasons Three and Four has gone up into flames, Walt and Jesse begin an itinerant cooking in the houses of ordinary people, while they are being fumigated by a group of professionals in the field who double as burglars. Ensley F. Guffey notes that this epitomizes the final collapse of an ideal border between "normal" spaces and "polluted" (literally, as well as in the translated sense of "corrupted") spaces:

The invasive nature of Walt and Jesse's new operation is clearly and chillingly emphasized by the noise of children playing nearby as the toxic gas from Walt and Jesse's first cook is released into the neighborhood and the gas is vented into a backyard full of children's toys and a swing set. The lab is not removed

from the everyday places of the innocent. Walt and Jesse are not cooking in the desert anymore, or even underground, but right in the middle of residential neighborhoods.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

The seeping of “rot” into (apparently) clean spaces, and the correspondence between chemical purity on the one hand, and social/moral corruption on the other, create a tension between two conceptual and imaginative poles; this problematizes the cultural importance of orderliness and cleanness as epitomized by the presence, in space, of items that teleologically arrived at their place after a journey through time. The whole series can be read as epitomizing, in many ways, the failure of Walt’s attempt at remaining unsoiled, free of dregs and residue, despite his journey to a corrupted world. At the beginning of the series, Walt makes clear to Jesse that he does not even want to know about “his end of the business”, i.e. distribution: he just wants to deal with the chemistry. In a show so preoccupied with actions and their consequences, this is tantamount to refusing to see the consequences of what he does embodied in the real lives of flesh-and-blood people. Walt’s condition for entering the business is that he is spared to witness the by-products of his actions, in a futile attempt at separating the anodyne space of the lab from the fly-ridden, bodily world outside. I will return to this in Paragraph Three.

I shall now discuss mess as loss of control, taking this in two possible directions: one medical/existential and one formalistic/narratological. Mess as loss of control over his own life is what Walt fights throughout the series. The mere escalation of his ruthless actions is presented as necessary to survive – and only those who are masters of their fate survive, because they act preventively to eliminate danger. Donatella Izzo has observed that Walt’s actions are an implementation of the doctrine – theorized by the G. W. Bush administration and enacted in the attacks on Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003 – of “preventive attack as the best strategy of defense”.¹¹ The decision to kill Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) – Walt and Jesse’s employer in Seasons Three and Four, a powerful drug lord masquerading as the irreprehensible owner of the fast food chain “Los Pollos Hermanos” – emerges from such an attitude. It may be maintained that, in the series, Walt and Gus face each other as the sovereign and the homo sacer in Giorgio Agamben’s discourse on the foundation of sovereignty. The sovereign is the detainer of absolute power who is simultaneously within and without the law; the homo sacer is the one who can be killed with impunity, because her/his life is not protected within the sphere of law. This opposition is, however, both absolute and *reversible*: the sovereign and the homo sacer both inhabit the sphere where law and violence transmute into each other and found each other.¹² (Fittingly, the title of the episode in which the showdown between the two takes place is “Face-off”.) After having succeeded in killing Gus, Walt flaunts his supposedly regained control, maintaining that the family is safe and that no one else will ever get killed

¹¹ Donatella Izzo, “Some Sort of Need for Biblical Atonement”. *Breaking Bad* e altre variazioni sul tema di Giobbe”, *Iperstoria – Testi Letterature Linguaggi*, 6 (Fall 2015), 326; my translation.

¹² See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1998).

because now he and Jesse are “in charge” – a vindication that is patently absurd, and that no one believes.

The illusion of being in full control of one’s fate is embodied in Walt’s relation to cancer. Cancer is embodied mess; it is “matter out of place” spread in one’s body. In “Hermanos” (Season Four, Episode Eight, 4 Sep 2011), Walt explains the life view he has come up with to a fellow cancer patient, a young man who expresses his sensation of both profound vulnerability and disorientation at finding out about his illness. Walt offers a merciless response:

To hell with your cancer. I’ve been living with cancer for the better part of a year. Right from the start, it’s a death sentence. That’s what they keep telling me. Well, guess what? Every life comes with a death sentence. So, every few months I come in here for my regular scan, knowing full well that one of these times – hell, maybe even today – I’m gonna hear some bad news. But until then, who’s in charge? Me. That’s how I live my life.

Several critics have explored the series’ engagement with time. According to Dustin Freeley, *Breaking Bad* is a “narrative that explores our anxieties over time and the multiple existences that thrive within the converging past, present, and future of Walter White”.¹³ When he is diagnosed with inoperable cancer and told that, best case scenario, he has a couple of years to live, Walt is suddenly faced with the inescapable reality of his own mortality: the clock is ticking. At the same time, he immediately faces the insufficiency of what Freeley calls the “clock time” of our ordinary existence, which is (at least in the cultural space that we inhabit) orderly and consequential. Accordingly, the series “bends” time – or, better, the space-time continuum – at many levels, both thematic and formal. Among else, this is one of the possible resonances of Walt’s criminal pseudonym – Heisenberg.¹⁴

How does this relate to issues of narrativity, control, authorship? The impulse to make order out of chaos has a narrative counterpart: in the series finale, the narration finally obeys a conclusive, even teleological pull, according to which all loose strands need to be pulled together. As it has been noted on several occasions, the finale makes a big effort – to some, not a fully convincing one – to close/resolve as many open issues as possible, so as not to leave fans with a sense of incompleteness or irresolution.¹⁵ Nonetheless, does this make up for the amount of uncertainty and unpredictability repeatedly evoked throughout the show, especially exemplified in the “one step forward, two steps back” pace of Seasons One and Two, and culminating in the collision of two planes in the sky over Albuquerque?

The first episode of Season Two opens with a black-and-white scene of a deserted back garden, which we soon realize to be the Whites’. We are shown a plastic eye floating on the surface of the pool and hear faint sirens in the background. The camera moves below the surface of water and a color object appears against the whiteness: a bright pink teddy bear, half singed and missing an

¹³ Dustin Freeley, “The Economy of Time and Multiple Existences in *Breaking Bad*”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 33.

¹⁴ Alberto Brodesco has discussed the applications of Werner Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” in the series in “Heisenberg: Epistemological Implications of a Criminal Pseudonym”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 53-69. The connotations accompanying the use of the name Heisenberg have also been explored by Philip Poe, “Patriarchy and the Heisenberg Principle”, in Jacob Blevins and Dafydd Wood, eds., *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character, and Ethics* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015).

¹⁵ This work of narrative “cleaning up” occurs after the series has left some “excellent” corpses in its wake and destroyed virtually all hope for some kind of reconciliation between Walt and his family, or all hope for an alternative to the protagonist’s progressive descent into a hell of his own making. Despite these “voids”, at the end of the series, blood money is allocated, the corpses will be located, and despite the torture and death of a number of (more or less) innocents, those who are worse-than-bad will have a reckoning with (supreme) justice. The puzzle must not present any missing pieces. On *Breaking Bad* and justice, see Izzo, “Some Sort of Need for Biblical Atonement”.

eye. The cold opens of episodes Four, Ten, and Thirteen add elements to this scene, showing debris little by little – and, in Episode Ten, two bodies. These items remain unreadable until the very end of the season, when we are shown – from Walt’s perspective, while he is sitting alone in the back garden after Skyler has left him – two planes colliding and exploding in the sky above, and the teddy bear plunging into the pool. Putting the pieces together we realize, at this point, that the debris we were previously shown comes from this incident.¹⁶

¹⁶ This disaster is Walt’s indirect – and to an extent disproportionate – responsibility. Walt causes, by non-intervention, the death of Jesse’s heroin-addicted girlfriend, Jane Margolis. Her father, Donald Margolis, apparently still recovering from grief and shock, goes back to his work as flight controller despite being mentally unstable and causes the collision (“ABQ”, 31 May 2009).

The show itself mirrors in aesthetic terms, before the ultimate attempt at closure, what Walt does in plot terms: it manipulates time, and plays with chaos theory, in order to create a sense of alternate storylines that may, in some parallel reality, be pursued. Freeley discusses the show’s manipulation of time, especially through the use of the “cold opens” (or teasers) that introduce each episode: “*Breaking Bad*, through the flashbacks or flash-forwards that begin each episode, ... manipulates our perception of time and injects moments that constituted the past, present, or future”.¹⁷ This is not only “play[ing] in a self-conscious way with the audience’s knowledge”¹⁸ but also “offer[ing] variations and repetitions regarding previous structures”.¹⁹ These variations take place in the folds of time, imbuing the substance of fantasy to a possibility. The series’ highly original and significant use of the cold opens creates unexpected connections not only among different moments in time, but also among alternate realities: “what is” versus “what could have been”, and how the two are related. The opening of the Third Season finale, “Full Measure” (13 Jun 2010), is a case in point. We are offered a frontal shot of a clean fireplace within an empty house; immediately afterwards, the camera pans all around the room until the frame is filled by a door, in front of which a man dressed in a suit is standing, taking notes. The door opens; a younger Skyler and a younger Walt step into the house. Skyler is visibly pregnant. Viewers begin to realize, and they are confirmed as the scene unfolds, that she is pregnant with Walter Jr. and that the house they are visiting, and considering for purchase, is the one at 308 Negra Arroyo Lane, where the family lives when the series begins. After an initial moment of intense disorientation – what fireplace is this? – the viewer can grasp the importance of this moment and its resonating with promises, linking this beginning to another one – namely, the opening of the series, the Pilot, in which Skyler is also pregnant, but with Holly. Moreover, *both* a difference *and* an analogy are established. It is immediately clear that Skyler is inclined to buy the place, while Walt is not impressed: he claims that they should have a bigger house. When Skyler points that for “[their] price range, this is as good as it gets”, Walt replies that they should aim higher: “Why be cautious? We’ve got nowhere to go but up”. At this point, viewers know that the promise of upward mobility has been realized, but only in the para-sites where the law gives way to (quoting Agamben again) the state of exception. Accordingly, the scene is both the past of an unrealized future *and* the anticipation of a future promise that has been (“divergently”) fulfilled.

¹⁷ Freeley, “The Economy of Time and Multiple Existences”, 49.

¹⁸ Rossend Sánchez-Baró, “Uncertain Beginnings: *Breaking Bad*’s Episodic Openings”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 139-153, 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

What I wish to underline here is that Walt's venture liberates an amount of "fantasy time" that he can invest in, stretch and bend, creating alternate realities before the reality of illness catches up with him. This is his chance of "really" living – of feeling, before dying, the intoxicating pull of a colourful, exciting reality, one that is better than fiction. Walt is, in this respect, a paradigmatic prey to what Slavoj Žižek calls the (post 9/11) "passion for the real": a lust for a contact with reality that is, however, revealed to be another variation on a fantasy. Facing his own mortality, Walt is also faced, as Žižek would say, with "the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it".²⁰ Walt fully is, in this respect, a man of our times. Discussing the impact of the 9/11 attacks, Žižek has noted how, when they occurred, the attacks were accompanied by an uncanny sense of déjà vu. This is both a psychic mechanism *and* a historical shift in perception: "reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode".²¹ A discourse typical of the post-9/11 world is a cycle or continuum wherein, while fiction envelops the Real (which is, in the Lacanian sense, unknowable per se), in so doing, it also contributes to reproduce material reality – i.e. reality-as-we-know-it, keeping its structures of inequality intact.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 19.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

3. Through the Mirror: Neoliberal Mess

In one of the most chilling scenes in the whole series, Gus slices his loyal henchman Victor (Jeremiah Bitsui)'s throat in front of Walt and Jesse. Of his own initiative, Victor had been cooking a batch of meth in order to prove to Walt – who believes that Gus will not kill him as long as he remains the only one who can attain a ninety-nine percent level of product purity – that the production may as well continue without him. The motives for Gus's shocking gesture are left to interpretation, but, in all likelihood, Gus both wishes to punish Victor's initiative and to make clear to Walt that he is both investing in him and keeping him under his power of life and death. The dissolution of Victor's body in a barrel of acid on the part of Walt, Jesse, and the hitman Mike (Jonathan Banks) is the first of several disposals of this kind throughout Seasons Four and Five. This "sanitized" disposal contrasts with the messy episode of Jesse's tub in Season One.²² Overall, it seems to me, *Breaking Bad* both constructs a progression from messiness to orderliness – Skyler laundering Walt's drug money; Walt and Skyler buying, to launder Walt's illicit earnings, a car wash – and underlines a paradoxical coexistence of the two, as well as of purity and filth, thus creating a standing but ultimately untenable opposition between the manufacturing, the peddling, and the consumption of meth. In what way is the aforementioned opposition standing, and in what way is it untenable? For whom, to which uses, *both* the opposition *and* its untenability assume different values – depending on *who* can traverse the frontiers of this

²² When Todd (Jesse Plemons) kills a young boy in cold blood in "Dead Freight" (Season Five, 12 Aug 2012), both the boy's body and the bike he was riding are dismembered and dissolved in acid.

Manichean, chiasmic world?

By Season Five, providing for the family as the pretext for Walt's venture in the criminal world has vanished for good. Frightened by Walt, Skyler is totally estranged from him, and has entrusted Walter Jr. and baby Holly to her sister Marie (Betsy Brandt) and her husband (and DEA agent) Hank (Dean Norris). In "Buyout" (19 Aug 2012), talking to Jesse, Walt remarks: "this business is all I have left". This leads to an escalation of the enterprise and to an accumulation of money beyond any "reasonable", foreseeable necessity. This outburst of excess and uncontrolled accumulation is visually rendered in "Gliding Over All" (2 Sep 2012), in one of the most iconic scenes in the whole series. Skyler takes Walt to a storage unit she has, unbeknownst to him, been renting for a while, where she has been amassing stacks and stacks of dollar bills, in a pile that rises up to their knees. When asked how much money is in the pile, Skyler answers that she has no idea. Walt has been bringing her more money than she could ever launder. Fluid money has become an unruly object, a big pile of dirt to be swept under the rug, since it cannot be exposed. It is *literally* "uncountable", the equivalent of a bare life held in a state of suspension: "(SKYLER) I want my kids back. I want my life back. Please tell me. How much is enough? How big does this pile have to be?"

To Alberto Brodesco, this is the evidence of a (scientific) rationality gone awry: "Faced with mountains of dollars the complete irrationality of his actions is apparently evident even to Walter. Other than being loads of money it is a symbol of excess, a manifest revelation of Walter White's ultimate hubris".²³ The series has been rightfully read according to a tragic paradigm. Within the framework of such a reading, the tragedy is Walt's, first and foremost, and the world around him is little more than a backdrop to the fateful escalation of his mad hubris. However, this – totally plausible – reading, I contend, obscures in more than one respect the sociohistorical context wherein (t)his tragedy takes place. Our historical time, in which neoliberalism appears to be the increasingly unquestioned socioeconomic status quo, has invented its own historically specific ways of dealing with its own historically produced mess. Neoliberal mess is formed by the "side effects" that accompany the acts of various subjects – individual or collective. In a world, using Christian Moraru's terms, of "cosmodernist"²⁴ interconnection, each subject's actions produce "leftovers", like waste in an ecosystem; such waste can impact a very broad environment, thus evoking the problem of scale and the proportions of one's action range, and/or range of responsibility. Representations of the impact of each subject's actions can assume very dark tones if paired with the "sudden failures" of the institution(s) of liberal democracy, i.e. with the emergence and instantiation of repeated "states of exception" (to paraphrase Agamben again) at the heart of the current political constitutions. Neoliberal precariousness is often (darkly) revealed in the establishment of a number of para-sites that interrogate the law – once again, unveiling the "state of exception" at its core.²⁵ To use Judith Butler's terms, in neoliberalism, life itself is precarious, and some lives are

²³ Brodesco, "Heisenberg", 59.

²⁴ This idea is elaborated in Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011).

²⁵ The "state of exception" which is established when the (ordinary) law is suspended – whose establishment unveils, once again, the founding relationship between law and violence – is discussed by Agamben in *Stato di eccezione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

constructed, against others, as “not worth” living.²⁶ When speaking to a fellow cancer patient, as we have seen, Walt expresses his attachment to life; it is a life, though, that has removed from itself any sense of vulnerability intended as empathy, experiencing vulnerability only as the limit to a personal range of action.

²⁶ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

Which lives are not worth living in *Breaking Bad*? In Season Two (Episode Six, “Peekaboo”, 12 Apr 2009), we are offered a foray in the world of consumers: we follow Jesse into the house of a meth-addicted couple. This house, where they live with a little boy, is messy to say the least: it looks like a dumpster. Other (few) scenes reveal the filthy spaces inhabited by drug addicts and/or those devoted to drug consumption. At the beginning of Season Three, for instance, Walt finds Jesse hidden in a “den” with a number of addicts whose bodies and appearance blatantly display their addiction. The permeable boundary between the orderly surface of things and the dirty, messy, unruly underworld is differently traversed and traversable, depending on the actors involved. There are different ways to deal with mess, and different ways and reasons for sully – or refusing to sully – one’s hands. After gruesomely slicing Victor’s throat in “Box Cutter”, Gus literally leaves his mess to be cleaned up by Walt and Jesse, with the humiliating line: “What are you waiting for? Get back to work”. In Season Four, Episode Six (“Cornered”, 21 Aug 2011), to spite Gus, Walt refuses to clean the lab without Jesse’s help, and pays instead three ladies – immigrants, probably illegal – working in the Lavandería Brillante, despite the fact that he is clearly putting them in the position of trespassing, seeing what they are not supposed to see. The unfortunate ladies are picked up by Tyrus (Ray Campbell), Gus’s new henchman, and nothing is known of them afterwards.

For Bowman, “[t]he point of inflection between Walt’s civilized and frontier selves is his glorification of autonomy”.²⁷ More than one scholar has written on *Breaking Bad* as speaking to a number of concerns typical of neoliberalism.²⁸ Walt’s body, and the relationship between his body and his psyche (and will), are the pivot of *Breaking Bad* as a neoliberal fantasy. At the beginning of the series, Walt is immediately presented as a man struggling to make the ends meet: he has a poorly paid job as a high school chemistry teacher and is forced to moonlight as the employee of a car wash in order to support his family. This strained work condition is immediately set off against the unfulfilled promises of his own potential. Against this background, Walt’s enterprise as a meth producer and, finally, as a wealthy and dangerous drug kingpin, is the late-coming fulfilment of his potential as a self-made man, a homo oeconomicus master of his own destiny.²⁹ The fact that this venture results in breaking the law is merely accidental, because legal and illegal enterprises form, so to speak, a continuum of alternate realities. In David P. Pierson’s terms:

²⁷ Bowman, “Criminal Elements”.

²⁸ See David P. Pierson, “Breaking Neoliberal? Contemporary Neoliberal Discourses and Policies in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 15-31; also see Jeffrey R. Di Leo, “Flies in the Marketplace: Nietzsche and Neoliberalism in *Breaking Bad*”, in Blevins and Wood, eds., *The Methods of Breaking Bad*.

²⁹ Patriarchy and Masculinity in *Breaking Bad* have been discussed in: Jason Landrum, “‘Say My Name’: The Fantasy of Liberated Masculinity”, in Blevins and Wood, eds., *The Methods of Breaking Bad*; and in Brian Faucette, “Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*”, in Pierson, ed., *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays*, 73-86.

Neo-liberalism seeks to construct practical subjects whose moral quality consists of their ability to rationally assess the costs and benefits of any particular action

among alternative acts. Neo-liberalism promotes individuals to conceive of themselves as entrepreneurs in every facet of their lives.... Within this scenario, crime is just another activity among many to choose from and a criminal entrepreneur can be seen as a person who invests his human capital to produce a surplus-value of capital to partake in his or her personal interests.³⁰

³⁰ Pierson, "Breaking Neoliberal?", 22.

Cancer as embodied mess also highlights another type of continuum: the vicious cycle between unaffordable health care and the spread of a vulnerability that threatens society as a whole, despite the denial of those who feel untouched by the issue. In Izzo's terms, "capitalist individualism [in *Breaking Bad*] literally presents itself as a *pharmakon* – simultaneously a poison (the impossibility of paying for treatment counting only on the family's finances) and a cure (a criminal enterprise for a solution)".³¹

³¹ Izzo, "Some Sort of Need for Biblical Atonement", 326; my translation.

I would suggest that the whole series can be read as a fantasy, whose functioning may be summed up as follows: (social) order and chaos are revealed to be a continuum, and we, the series' audience, can fantasize moving in and out of such spaces, alternate realities that are actually contiguous to each other, as Walt ends up doing. This movement makes bearable a life of eroding privilege that is increasingly perceived as suffocating. The fantasy of such a movement both questions and reconfirms not only the separation of licit and illicit spaces, but also the increasingly fluid structure of social inequality that makes such fantasy accessible to some and inaccessible to others. As noted by Bowman:

Not only Walt and Jesse but the series as a whole seems to regard with contempt the people who actually use the chemical product of their labors, casualties of a form of social breakdown increasingly common in civilized society. Walt and Jesse's meth sales thrive on account of the weaknesses of those who have dropped out of that society and become lesser criminals than themselves.³²

³² Bowman, "Criminal Elements".

In "Cruel Optimism", Lauren Berlant analyzes three (fictive) "scenes" in which characters experiencing different forms of marginalization are faced with the possibility of changing their lives, but "shifts in the affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world. They are, here, only pieces of an argument about the centrality of optimistic fantasy to reproducing and surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness".³³

³³ Berlant, "Cruel Optimism", 35.

One of the scenes described is taken from "Exchange Value", a short story by Charles R. Johnson: two young brothers, minor criminals, break into the house of a neighbor, and unexpectedly discover a hoard of various items and, stacked amongst those, a huge sum of money. The sheer discrepancy between the new, possible, future scenarios opened up by this discovery and the habitus of their unprivileged lives is untenable to the point that the two take two disastrous, psychotic courses: one spends compulsorily and unhappily, while the other becomes a paranoid, self-enclosed hoarder.³⁴ A moment of suspension on the verge of the future can be ultimately self-defeating if it is not

³⁴ Ibid., 27-31.

accompanied by a change in the socioeconomic order of things. In all likelihood, Walt's promise of privilege has been eroding for a long time when the series opens: the increasing cost of living, attacks perpetrated to the welfare, lack of funding in public education, and the inequality inherent in an insurance-based healthcare system make life less and less liveable for him and his family, trapping them on the verge of an existence deprived of tranquillity, as members of an increasingly impoverished middle class. Taking the cue from Berlant and Žižek, I would suggest that *Breaking Bad* explores a fantasy that both suspends and immediately reactivates the reproduction of reality-as-we-know-it. Such a fantasy (momentarily) exorcises the deep socioeconomic fear of becoming like the society dropouts that are, nonetheless, closer than at first sight, because they are also caught in the violent maelstrom of the market:

DECLAN: I need you to listen to me. We're not gonna give up this deal to be your errand boys, do you understand? For what? To watch a bunch of junkies get a better high?

WALT: A better high means customers pay more. A higher purity means a greater yield. That's 130 million dollars of profit that isn't being pissed away by some substandard cook ("Say My Name", Season Five, Part One, Episode Seven, 26 Aug 2012).³⁵

To sum up, fantasy is a mirror that both connects and separates privilege and its erosion: it only delays the fulfilment of the threat of sliding out of privilege – and of life – once and for all. The mirror, once traversed in reality, cannot be traversed in the opposite direction. Can one fool time and death and the inevitability of loss by the sheer drive of one's intentions? Embodied in Walt's parable, *Breaking Bad* emphatically provides "no" as an answer, but simultaneously stretches that space of suspension to its utmost possibilities, before letting go and finally, so to speak, fading to black.

³⁵ Gale's perspective is, by contrast, grounded in a belief in the ultimate responsibility of all "consenting adults [who] want what they want. And if I'm not supplying it, they'll get it from someone else. At least with me they get exactly what they pay for — no added toxins or adulterants" ("Sunset", Season Three, Episode Six, 25 Apr 2010). According to this view, meth production is merely the supply to a legitimate demand of the market, despite the tautology involved ("[they] want what they want"). Jesse is the problematic element here: as both meth cook and consumer, and as an extremely wavering character, he finds himself, alternatively, on both sides of this divide.

“Halved as I am, I was born doubled”.
Inventively Messing up Hierarchies and Categorizations in
Ruth Ozeki’s *Halving the Bones*

Abstract: In this article, focusing on the analysis of Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury’s 1995 first-person documentary *Halving the Bones: Making a Family Album?*, I discuss the role of fiction and counter-memory in resisting the hegemonic practices that have marked Asian American history with distortions, omissions, and stereotypes. I show how Ozeki employs the fictional documentary medium to question hierarchies and categorizations and to reveal them as dispositifs of dominion especially concerning gender and race.

The autobiographical project traces one hundred years of the “half-Japanese, half-American” filmmaker Ruth’s maternal family history. Ozeki’s imaginative in(ter)ventions in the personal, cultural, and historical stories of her family end up creating a proliferation of voices and possibilities. I argue that the “mess” generated by introducing elements of doubt, multiplicity, recursiveness, and invention in the narration of the Japanese and Japanese American women’s lives is a productive, meaningful way to undermine the practices of categorization, racialization, and gendering these women have been subjected to throughout history. Through the sprouting “mess” in her documentary, Ozeki on the one hand connects the filmmaker’s present to the geopolitical, economic, and gender dynamics in the past lives of Japanese migrants. On the other hand, subverting the androcentric power of image-making, Ozeki provides women with the opportunity to address each other in an engaged and creative way. Reimagining and representing the shifting condition and identity of Japanese American women in the twentieth century, Ozeki’s subjective perspective carries a critical political dimension on screen and provides a present insight on the quest for home, belonging, identity, and cultural legacy.

Keywords: *Asian American family documentary, cultural identity, fictional documentary, mother-daughter, split subjectivity*

Unable to penetrate the wall of amnesia, I constructed images from the elements of my craft – actors, spaces, and light – and projected them onto a wall, *the* wall, to hint at what it obscured. And slowly the beam of light burned peepholes through that wall, revealing some of what lurked behind it, although I sometimes suspect that the secrets were merely the motivation, while the films, themselves, the real thing revealed.
(Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*)

Asian American film and video emerged in the early 1970s largely from the desire to reclaim the community’s history, and to provide counter-historical narrations in order to re-structure the long-time gaps in the cinematic representation of Asian Americans and fight the racist stereotypes in dominant media. The institutional racism and invisibility within Hollywood and other dominant media motivated the

necessity of Asian American filmmakers to create and tell different, more authentic, and more personal stories, precisely the stories of people of Asian heritage who have shared similar experiences of immigration, discrimination, and exclusion. Increasingly, Asian American filmmakers have engaged in subverting Hollywood's representation of Asians. They have contested commercial cinema's portrayal of Asia(ns) as an emblem of Western superiority according to racial, gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies, and have been engaged in a project of signifying their presence on cinematic conventions.

Since from its very first steps Asian American cinema has been concerned with recovering Asian American history and re-articulating Asian American experience, the earliest films have been interpreted and classified as oppositional to the mainstream cinematic discourse, whether they were engaged in documenting ignored, misrepresented topics or in demystifying the stereotypes that constitute the dominant representations. It is undeniable that Asian American filmmakers, as Kent Ono suggests, "use the camera differently from the way it was used originally to fix us in the camera's eye".¹ However, as Peter X. Feng argues in his collection of essays on Asian American film and video, *Screening Asian Americans*, reading Asian American film exclusively in an antagonistic way ultimately reproduces the same old Orientalist framework: this conception "implies that Asian American filmmakers take their cues from mainstream cinema".² Feng proposes an approach which tries to avoid a sharp polarization between marginal, activist filmmakers and a monolithic Hollywood:

This collection argues against conceiving of Asian American cinematic production as merely oppositional, while at the same time acknowledging that much Asian American cinema is dialectically engaged with the problematics of dominant cinematic representations.³

³ Ibid., 5.

Feng's methodological strategy also highlights that even though there is no such thing as an authentic, organic, and autonomous "Asian American cinema" as a category, Asian American filmmakers have often shared a common political and social agenda, responded to specific historical circumstances as well as to the political, ideological, and cultural power dispositifs that have materially and symbolically determined their individual and collective lives, and built a communal tradition of activism. In fact, although Asian American films and videos have always been eclectic and diverse, representing all formats and genres, some specific mediums, narrative devices and techniques, subjects, and ways to approach the subjects can be found across the board, even in the most independent Asian American films and videos of the 1990s and early 2000s.

In such contextual dynamics, it is hardly surprising that the documentary is, as Jun Xing states, "the earliest and most vibrant Asian American film genre".⁴ If at first the documentary was primarily chosen as a means to represent Asian

¹ Kent A. Ono, "Re/membering Spectators: Meditations on Japanese American Cinema", in Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, eds., *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple U. P., 2000), 146.

² Peter X. Feng, "Introduction", in Peter Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers U. P., 2002), 4.

⁴ Jun Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity* (Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 1998), 88.

American lives with authenticity from an inside point of view and to gain authority for the filmmaker, shortly thereafter it became the privileged medium to explore and express a number of more personal concerns, to tell family stories, and, through them, reflect on and give shape to individual identities. Again, it is not surprising that the majority of Asian American documentaries belong to the category of diary films or family histories (and to a smaller extent to the biographical histories and social issue films). But, Feng notes:

These films and videos do not attempt to plug gaps in memory and history by reconstructing what is missing, for such a strategy denies the historical process that produced those gaps: these films and videos create imagery that fills the gap while constantly speaking its own inadequate referentiality....

In the act of examining historical trauma, of theorizing why certain things are forgotten, these movies seek identity in the interplay between memory and history; in so doing, they further theorize the relation between family stories and the histories of ethnicity.⁵

⁵ Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham and London: Duke U. P., 2002), 16-17.

Thus, Feng foregrounds some of the main features of Asian American documentaries that focus on the filmmaker's personal and family stories: the presence of a trauma that has to be screened in both senses of the term – *conceal from view* and *project into cinematic images* – the complex dynamics between remembering and forgetting that such trauma generates, a reflection about the role of an individual in history and of history in the individual identity, and the intersection of multiple discourses on the Asian American body, especially the Asian American woman's body. Elizabeth Weis calls the documentaries about families, in which the filmmaker's public and private dimension intersect, "family portraits", and states that "the urge behind these films comes from the filmmakers' desire to understand themselves through their origins-genetic and ethnic".⁶ Adopting a genealogical approach, the documentary becomes an exploration of identity within a discontinuous history that is deeply embedded in global politics and the racial configurations of the neocolonial U.S. context. To recount this biography, the documentary builds a dialogue between family memory and the archive, both official/historical and private, with their photographs, interviews, films, documents, and mementos, and shows the discrepancies between them. Through its disparate materials and textual elements – oral stories, interviews, newsreel, photographs, home videos, personal diaries, paintings, official documents, maps, recipes, snapshots, artifacts, letters – that combine into a narrative or a tale, independent video constitutes a field of cultural memory, one that intervenes into official history.

⁶ Elizabeth Weis, "Family Portraits", *American Film*, 1.2 (November 1975), 54.

This essay discusses *Halving the Bones*, the 70-minute biographical documentary written, produced, and directed by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury in 1995. Ozeki's documentary traces her mother's Japanese roots and constructs a portrait, partly factual and partly speculative, of her maternal grandparents. The filmmaker revisits

her grandparents' arrival to Hawaii, their lives there, the internment experience during World War II, and their return to Japan. I will show how Ozeki explores the Japanese American family documentary tradition in order to undermine the traditional documentary function as the realistic visual record of true events or stories, and its method of truth telling based on Western visual and cultural codes, which has marked Asian American history with distortions, omissions, mistranslations, and caricatures. The substantial number of documentaries on the removal and relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II makes this a genre almost unto itself. This practice of using documentary as a vehicle for reclaiming cultural heritage and personal identity is very common among Sansei (third generation) women filmmakers. Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering* (1988), Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), Janice Tanaka's *Memory from the Department of Amnesia* (1990) and *Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* (1992) are always recalled and analyzed as belonging to the family portraits category because they attempt to understand the legacy of the internment experience through the effects of the internment on the filmmakers' families and, by synecdoche, on a whole generation of Japanese Americans. Focusing on the impact of the historical events on the individuals more than on the events themselves, the filmmaker explores how the historical process affects her personal life. Her own sense of incompleteness and the lack of memory in her family members are usually the spark that triggers a search that eventually enables the filmmaker to coexist with the ghosts from her past. The journey through the elusive memory is a different and sometimes very complex mediation between on one hand one's identity in the present, and on the other, the past signified through cryptic, amorphous, ever-changing images. The experimental style of these Japanese American documentaries in regards to the image production, along with a personal voice that manifests the presence of the filmmaker as the one who actually participates in the historical experience presented, subverts the seductive power of realism, the foundation of any traditional documentary. Rejecting the linear narrative and validating a traveling aesthetics based on memory, these documentaries turn to oral histories as sources of historical information: the stories told by interpreters of different moments of the filmmaker's family history, as scattered and contradictory as they often come out of the direct interviews, represent the most effective source for both private and public events. As a result, the film is presented as a multi-layered quest, one whose development is shown and whose evidence is interrogated in front of the viewer.

The search attempts to recover people's dispersed biographies into history, but, as Marita Sturken notes, "this memory is not about retrieval as much as it is about retelling and reconstruction. It is about acknowledging the impossibility of knowing what really happened, and a search for a means of telling".⁷ By reconstructing personal memory in a creative way, Japanese American filmmakers, such as Yasui, Tajiri, and Tanaka, hint that memory can be made up, fictionalized,

⁷ Marita Sturken, "The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions", in Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 184.

since it is drawn from all the stories and images collected and recollected. This strategy generates a disrupted, fabricated counter-memory that shares boundaries with invention, fiction, and dreams, and creates an autonomous cultural space outside hegemonic narratives. I argue that Ozeki brings the fictional elements in her autobiographical documentary one step forward: playing with the instability of the relationship between fact and fiction, she uses the fictional documentary medium to generate a new multi-layered context of signification. All categories and distinctions – fiction and history, memory and desire, sounds and images, mother and daughter – end up being productively messed up. The sprouting “mess” in Ozeki’s documentary is a constructive, meaningful way to undermine the political control that hierarchies and categorizations impose. With and within her documentary, Ozeki resists the racialized history and questions its authority, so that history is no longer a puzzle to be recomposed, but an assemblage of relative truths that speak for the filmmaker’s present. Simultaneously, subverting the androcentric power of image-making, Ozeki provides women with the opportunity to address each other in a dialogical, engaged, and creative way.

Halving the Bones shares most of the constitutive elements of the Japanese American family documentary. A Sansei herself, Ozeki films an autobiographical documentary in which the filmmaker, in a first-person voice-over, tells the stories of her mother and grandmother in an effort to find meanings that could stand for her split self: half Japanese, half American. Like the most famous Japanese American documentaries, *Halving the Bones* focuses on the interplay between history and memory, truth and accumulated, contradictory memories and images. In dealing with the lost, destroyed, left-behind fragments from her family’s past, whose absence can be marked only by the remaining or re-invented pieces, Ozeki adopts very different strategies in regard to subject positions and textual development: she relies on both conventional and unconventional sources – memoir, photographs, amateur video footage, pictures, calligraphy, traditional Japanese paintings, passports, artifacts, music. All these distinctive narrative features fill the documentary not only with Asian images, but with the visual texture of Japanese American culture. Here oral histories, through both direct interviews and reported talks, assemble the stories again in a subjective mode. Ozeki’s first-person singular voice speaks with emotion and feeling, slow and soft. It is a voice that does not so much explain the images, as create ambiguity, interrupting the harmonic synthesis between images and sounds, and opening up narrative possibilities. In the most classic ethnic tradition, *Halving the Bones* remains an exploration of identity, of what it means to be “half” and to never fully belong anywhere, but Ozeki’s difficult journey is an act simultaneously of discovery and invention.

A strikingly original feature of *Halving the Bones* is that though the documentary explicitly references all the narrative strategies and themes of the Japanese American family video, and though it stakes out a position for itself within that

tradition, it nonetheless remains somewhat aloof from that cinema. I believe that the reason why *Halving the Bones* is never mentioned in academic discussions about the biographical cinema dealing with the Japanese American family resides in the dialectic between tradition and invention played out within Ozeki's documentary. *Halving the Bones*, in fact, shares the same channel of distribution with Tajiri's *History and Memory*: the non-profit feminist media arts organization based in New York City, *Women Make Movies*. Also, it has been screened in the same film festivals, such as the Sundance Film Festival and the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival. However, at a first glance, Ozeki's documentary appears more traditional: it recounts the simple story of her family narrated by the filmmaker without recurring to the clashing of strong images, collages, pastiche or other postmodern techniques that abound in the more frequently discussed documentaries. Ozeki actually plays with the previous tradition of both classic documentary and Japanese American independent video, jumping in and out of each in a playful, fictional, subtler but no less political way. It is no coincidence that the only academic mention of Ozeki's documentary I could find is in a book called *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*. One of the editors, Alexandra Juhasz, defines the fictional documentary as follows:

A fake documentary engages disingenuousness, humor, and other formal devices to create critical or comic distance between itself and documentary's sobriety, truth, and rationality....

Fake documentaries do and undo the documentary form, the film's subject (theme, topic, storyline, characters), and the moral and social orders. They are formally rich as well as uniquely situated to reveal the certainties, as well as the lies, about history, identity, and truth that have sustained both documentary and the world it records.⁸

⁸ Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, eds., *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1-2.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

Fictional films that we receive as documentary, that is, fake documentaries speak about the links between and among objectivity, knowledge, and power (usually the hidden trinominal of classic documentaries), thus challenging the status of visual evidence within the hi/story they document. At the same time, though, "the mere act of documenting something endows a presence, authority, and permanence that transforms the lie into something awfully close to truth".⁹ In one of the essays collected in the volume, Eve Oishi describes how in *Halving the Bones* Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury adopts as true the racist stereotypes in the Western portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans, and shows how those stereotypes have determined her private memories and influenced her sense of her own identity. But, through the use of the fake documentary, Ozeki subverts the stereotypical images calling into question "the reliability of all images ... to tell another story".¹⁰

¹⁰ Eve Oishi, "Screen Memories: Fakeness in Asian American Media Practice", in Juhasz and Lerner, eds., *F Is for Phony*, 197.

A Journey through Identity and Meaning Acquisition: Multiple Incipits, Different Narrators, Overlapping Images and Sounds

In realist texts, including classic documentaries, the incipit is traditionally a place of high semantic concentration and a fundamental locus where the moves and intentions of the text are introduced. *Halving the Bones* is composed of several different, a little puzzling, incipits as the documentary focuses on three main characters and their interrelated stories. Thus, the documentary presents a recursive return to the idea of “the beginning”, an origin which is always recalled and never reached. As I begin to show here and continue to discuss throughout this article, playing with the traditional conception of the incipit, Ozeki problematizes it, destabilizing its role and outcome – both the meaning acquisition and the accessibility of the origin – through multiplicity, recursiveness, and translation. On the diegetic level, the story Ozeki offers in her fake documentary begins with the bones of Ruth’s grandmother, which she keeps in an old tea can in a closet in her apartment in New York. When her grandmother died, five years before, Ruth went to Tokyo where the Japanese relatives performed the “hone wake” ceremony, “the dividing of the bones”. After the grandmother’s cremation (or reduction to the bones), they made a careful selection “with a pair of wooden chopsticks”, choosing “a bit of rib, a fragment of skull and another piece, too”, in order for Ruth to bring the bones back to her mother in Connecticut as a consolation for her loss. Her mother had not gone to the funeral in Japan because “it was bad timing”. Five years later, after three moves and a divorce, Ruth still has the bones. While her mother has never asked about them, Ruth decides that something must be done about the bones: “the idea of her grandmother, fragmented and ignored, has begun to bother her”. This is the beginning of Ruth’s journey through her grandmother’s documents and the personal belongings included in the box she had also taken with her from Japan: a journey through her family legacy and memory, as well as an actual journey to finally see her mother in Connecticut. “It was like having the bones was a catalyst, and suddenly I found myself thinking more and more about Mom, and I started to remember all these stories about her family”. The bones provide the pretext for the journey, not an uncommon trope for a documentary, to understand the roots of the filmmaker’s crisis. From here, the documentary offers a rich exploration of what it means to *be half*: seeking her roots and confronting the different possibilities in her family’s story become an experience that enables Ruth to sketch an identity based now on memories, now on cultural references, and finally on the encounter with both her mother and grandmother, which re-signifies all the previous elements. I would argue that at the end of her journeys, both geographical (to Japan, Connecticut, Hawaii) and metaphorical (into memory, heritage, the past, the parts of the self), Ruth does not join the dots of her maternal family line, but nevertheless her sense of her own place in life, which is another way of saying her identity, has changed. Finding a means of telling her own story in

her own way creates a partial healing for her split self, while memory is no longer sealed and untouchable, but functions as an echo informing the filmmaker's present.

On a textual level, the story begins with Hawaiian music played over color-painted images of the blue sea, palm trees, and sunsets, followed by a photograph of a Japanese child in a cardboard box that says "dole", and then the words that compose the subtitle appear on screen as typed on the spot: "making a family album?". While the camera focuses on Ruth sitting at a desk in her apartment typing at a computer, over the clicking of the keys we can still hear the faint Hawaiian guitar and then the first speaking voice begins to talk. The voice introduces Ruth with a sentence pronounced in Japanese and then repeated in a heavily Japanese-accented English. As Ruth looks through the content of the cardboard box from Japan, digging out photographs from the 1920s – a young Japanese man, dressed in a suit and a hat, standing next to a stalk of sugarcane, and an old "Imperial Japanese Government Passport", showing the pictures of two young Japanese children and of a young Japanese woman in a kimono – the Japanese-accented voice tells us about Ruth's halved condition, about her sense of incompleteness, and her dilemma about what to do with her grandmother's bones. Next, the music turns into a traditional Japanese song and we hear another female voice, speaking in an unaccented American English. The voice introduces herself as Ruth over a black-and-white image of a Japanese infant's face, upside down. Blaming her Japanese mother for the choice of her name, the voice explains why she does not like it: in Japanese Ruth becomes "Rusu" meaning "not at home" or "absent".¹¹ Ruth's name speaks to her feeling of being split between her father's Americanness and her mother's Japaneseness: "wherever I am", she says, "I am always different". Finally, over the same Japanese music, an old video, still in black-and-white, shows her mother walking toward the camera and entering in the family's house in Connecticut. Now Ruth introduces her mother through the American stereotype of Japanese women as "delicate flowers, or reeds bending in the wind, or clinging vines", a stereotype that her mother contradicts, as revealed both by Ruth's words, which describe her as "strong and pragmatic", "never shy about bodily functions", and never "modest about life", and the film's images, which show her in her striped, man-style pajama, brushing her teeth, combing her hair, and blowing her nose.

Within the first seven minutes of the documentary, we have been offered several overlapping images and their counter-images, sounds and their echoes. Ozeki demonstrates how powerful a sound can be in changing the meaning of an image. The two combinations, Hawaiian soundtrack-Japanese voice-over and Japanese music-American unaccented voice, create a distortion in the visual-aural perception of the movie: does the music fail to match the voice that speaks, or maybe not? Similarly, the first narrator, whose accent suggests a non-native speaker and who later reveals herself to be Matsuye, Ruth's grandmother, tells us not just

¹¹ In her most recent novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), which is also a sort of fictional autobiography, Ozeki goes back to the problematics of her name and its meaning in both English and Japanese.

who Ruth is, but her deep thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, the second narrator, who speaks in the first person for Ruth, narrates about her mother and her identity, before starting to read the story of her grandmother from the latter's memoir. In *Halving the Bones*, therefore, meaning acquisition is a complex process: not only are sounds and images put in a problematic relationship, while the narrator is split in two or three voices, shaking our faith in the authority of the textual figure, but also writing and reading are converging activities. The documentary requires an understanding of a bilingual, bicultural context. Ozeki alerts the viewer that the sound in this documentary, both music and narration, can shift easily between English and Japanese, and that access to the linguistic code can generate meaning or its opposite, confusion and misunderstanding. At the same time, challenging the notion of a singular and fixed meaning that can be found in language, in words, in images, or in all of their combinations, Ozeki opens up to multiple and multi-directional translations. The alteration and manipulation of images and sounds emphasize translation as a process of reading and re-reading (and of writing and re-writing) performed by the filmmaker and her "characters", who extend the responsibility to the viewer as well. Translation here involves also translating English into English, as the grandmother's voice translates herself from Japanese, and Ruth retranslates her accented words into American English. But translation is necessarily foregrounded as a political issue, since translation is the primary struggle in a journey of whatever kind.

As Eve Oishi notes, even the title and subtitle of Ozeki's documentary evoke the multi-layered nature of any meaning. The subtitle – making a family album? – highlights that each story, included those based on images and documents, is in fact a construction, invention, and intervention produced by someone who *makes* the stories. If the question mark leaves us with the idea that the film is going to raise more questions than it will answer, the title itself contains a pun:

The pun in the title, "*Halving the Bones*," splits the visual and the aural reception of the title; it means different things if one is reading it or hearing it. This split between "halve" (to divide), and "have" (to own) echoes Ruth's own dilemma with what to do with the bones, but the troubling duality of the word also serves as the inaugural problem and force of her film the splitting ("halving") of meaning performed by the film, and implied by the very medium of representation, becomes the key to understanding ("having"), even in a contingent way, Lounsbury's elusive family and their stories.¹²

¹² Eve Oishi, "Screen Memories", 203-4.

Thus, the first few minutes of *Halving the Bones* make it clear that no text, image, or meaning is ever presented as pure representation of the profilmic and each one envisages the creative intervention of the filmmaker. Moreover, the first few scenes present and fix on the screen the three main characters of the documentary, Ruth, her grandmother, and her mother, metaphorically connected by their bones which are "tissue, they grow and change, and die with the body", still remaining, after the

Japanese funeral, within the family. What follows is their stories.

Coloring Geopolitical and Gender Images: The Gaps in the Story of Ruth's Grandparents

Even though the first story introduced in the documentary is the story of Ruth's mother's birth, misdiagnosed as a cancer, Ruth comments "the story really starts with my grandmother. My grandmother's name was Matsuye and before she died she wrote an account of her life". While it seems clear that Ruth is reading from her grandmother's memoir, the story is told again in accented English by Matsuye herself, who explains that she was born in 1982 in Tokyo, "capital of Empire of Japan", and at 17 she traveled to Hilo, Hawaii, as a picture bride. The decision of her heartbreaking departure was taken by her father who, being "fond of geography and deeply impressed with the vast size of the world", believed that "the destiny of Japan was beyond its borders and it was the duty of Japanese people to disseminate throughout the world". In Hawaii, she married a young man "of artistic and scientific disposition", who was a botanic student that sought his fortune in Hawaii and made his living by taking photographs of the many species of plants he could find on the island. Since "he needed a wife to assist him in his labor, this was described in his application for matrimony"; Matsuye becomes a photographer's assistant, whose task is to put color in her husband's photographs. During this explanation we see on the screen the same palm trees and landscape pictures we have seen at the opening of the documentary, but this time they show a stormy environment in black-and-white. While we hear a no more reassuring music, we understand that the initial pictures of a very appealing Hawaiian landscape are the ones tinted by Matsuye. Moreover, as Matsuye talks about her predetermined destiny, creepy images of women's head masks hanging on the wall alternate on the screen with old family pictures and images of classified natural items (dried plants, feathers, a framed butterfly), both in sepia color. The troubling combination of music and images casts doubt on Matsuye's claim that once she arrived on the island "it was love at first sight". As the color and the much happier Hawaiian music return, the camera focuses again on Ruth in her apartment, working on some photographs, repeating in her unaccented English her grandmother's last words about love, but revealing that it was a lie and that relatives told her differently.

If Matsuye's life is determined by the communion of interests between her father and her husband, both fond of science and foreign places, while she, obedient to both, does not seem to have a choice of her own, Ozeki complicates this simple association between the two men. Matsuye's father embodies the Japanese imperialistic and patriarchal ideology according to which Japanese people have the duty to colonize the world, but his first son is kept in Japan as his heir, while his daughter is sent abroad. Her husband's story, on the other hand, locates

him in a different geopolitical context: he emigrated to Hilo, “when Hawaii was still a monarchy”, to work on the sugarcane plantations as an indentured servant. It is only because he was talented and “a strange man” with almost magical abilities (such as being able to stick skewers through his body or walk over sharp swords without bleeding), that he succeeded in becoming a photographer, a poet, and a collector: “he catalogued exotica and was drawn by twisted forms in nature. He was a young man, he had a camera and a brand new wife. People say I am like him”. At this point, Ruth shows us a few home videos, titled in French, that her grandfather made in Hawaii. Commented by Ruth and then by Matsuye, the videos show Matsuye walking, always alone, around their house: the camera frames her body always from a far distance and we mostly see the woman’s back or her profile. The two women’s narrations once again tell different stories: on the one hand, Ruth comments the scenes saying that her grandmother was “a young bride recently imported from Tokyo”, and that she hated Hilo since “there was nothing, no civilization, no entertainment, no culture, yabanna kuni, a ‘country of savages’ she called it. Savages, palm trees, and a husband she married through a photograph”. Ruth adds that through these movies she had tried to imagine what must have been Matsuye’s life when she was young: “I have watched these movies over and over again trying to find a clue in her face or in her posture”, she explains, even though the video never shows Matsuye’s face and her body is mostly hidden by plants, but “the account she wrote of her life is a little help, she spent her life tinting photographs and she applied the same technique to her autobiography”. On the other hand, already questioned by Ruth, Matsuye’s narrative recounts, over a lively, Japanese pop song, that she began to love the island with its wild natural beauty and that, being still a child, “the island was full of magic for me and I found my freedom there”.

This section ends with the camera focused on two bird cages while Matsuye tells us the story of how she sadly embarked on a ship to go back to Tokyo in order to have her stomach cancer removed. One more time here, Ruth questions the accuracy of her grandmother’s memoir: “Here again she appears to stray from the truth”, she says, revealing how once on board, Matsuye realized that she was four months pregnant with her daughter Masako. Ruth confesses her own suspects that her grandmother made up the whole cancer story to escape from Hawaii, and reluctantly returned to Hilo several years later because “it was her duty and she had no choice”. If Ruth’s grandfather is forced by economic necessity to become a Hawaiian, he also makes the deliberate choice to redefine his role as a worker in that economy. Although claiming an artistic identity along with her grandfather, Ruth has put a personal as well as historical distance between Matsuye’s father and husband, Ozeki does not erase the gender dynamics in her grandparents’ relationship and in their respective opportunities for agency: he finds his place in the American Dream, accumulating wealth through his hard work and personal talent; Ruth’s grandmother did not choose to go to Hilo, nor did she choose her

husband or her profession. However, Matsuye is never portrayed as the performer of domestic tasks or the bearer of Asian traditions and rituals, as in the most classic representation of the picture bride. On the contrary, she finds a way to go back to Tokyo and then to return to the United States where, during the war, when her husband is interned, she is able to support herself by coloring photographs and makes enough money to send some to her husband in the camp. While the video shows again images of a young Matsuye in a light dress walking on the beach, Ruth explains:

she was tough and pragmatic, like most Japanese women, and she did her best to live where she had to live and love what was available. And it's to her credit that she succeeded and chose to remember her life this way. Perhaps her memories weren't altogether accurate, but when she died at the age of 95 in an old people's home in a bleak suburb of Tokyo, Hawaii was still the paradise she painted it to be. Those are the facts but the problem remains: what are you supposed to do with a can of bones?

Whether it is the grandmother's unreliable memory, her imagination, or the granddaughter's reconstructions and approximations, Ruth's conclusive words in this section of the documentary relaunch the idea of invention and coloring as a further, most important means of agency. Ruth also connects her grandmother's story back to both the narrative of her mother's birth with which the grandmother's story had started, and her own journey to bring the bones to her mother.

The second story, in fact, is a return to the beginning. Once again, we are told the story of the cancer, but this time it is Masako herself who discusses it in an interview conducted by her daughter. Looking straight into the camera on a medium close-up (the camera focuses on her head and shoulders), Masako talks about the inventive nature of memory, which can never be accurate because unconsciously people "want to color it, and make it more interesting". While she is still musing on memory, the documentary shows Ruth packing her car and starting her trip to Connecticut. Before getting to her mother, Ruth tries to explain her intentions to the viewers, but ends up introducing another level of uncertainty. She acknowledges:

up until now I haven't been a hundred per cent accurate, there are a couple of things that I made up, like my grandmother's autobiography for example. She never really wrote one, so I made it up from the real family stories I heard from her and also from my other relatives. I did sort of the same thing with these home movies. I have seen a photo of my grandfather holding a movie camera, so I know he really did make movies but his camera and films were all confiscated after Pearl Harbor. I made up these things because I never really knew my grandparents, and now they are dead and I didn't have very much to go on. I thought I would understand them better if I just pretended to be them.

Anyway I just want to set the record straight, even though I made up the way I represented them, the facts of their life are all true, and I did have my grandmother's bones in my closet for the last five years and now they are in the car and I am going home to deliver them to Mom.

Ruth's fictional representations attempt to account for her memories of events she never witnessed and the impossibility of getting to know those events through the people that did witness them. Also, Ruth's in(ter)ventions are dictated by a more personal necessity on her side to connect herself with her origins and to expose intimacies of experience with her family. Finally, her fictional work seeks to fill in the historical gaps in a way that does not merely cover the gaps, as if Japanese American history represented only an omission from a straighter historical account. Ruth has to fabricate memories exactly because "the facts of their life are all true": her grandfather's movies were confiscated when he was interned, and there are no letters exchanged between him and his wife and daughter to help her understand who her grandparents were, because all the family members were classified as enemy aliens and were not allowed to keep their correspondence. Therefore, Ruth's in(ter)ventions bring histories and meaning into being, specifically as they integrate and problematize the historical gaps. As Oishi explains, by inventing her grandparents' lives, Ozeki "makes visible the historical circumstances that prevented the evidence from being made or from surviving".¹³ ¹³ Ibid., 206. Moreover, I argue that the grandmother's story, which is presented as the starting point for the family history, is revealed here to be a fictional one, a fabricated, desired but unretrievable, origin. Thus, Ruth's in(ter)vention serves both to disclose the historical geopolitical, economic, and gender dynamics in the past lives of Japanese migrants and to connect those lives to the reality of Japanese American people in the present, specifically, as I am going to discuss in the next paragraph, to the reality of the other two women in the documentary and to their relationship.

Stereotypes, Intimacies, Personal Wishes: Masako's Gaze at Her Own Story

After Ruth has "set the record straight" and admitted that she feels nervous about meeting her mother because they have been avoiding each other for years, the story goes back to Masako. Posing again as in a classic interview, Masako begins one more time to mention the story of her birth as a tumor, and explains how her daughter Ruth believed in that story and how the tumor story affected her whole life. In fact, the tumor determined her birth in Japan, otherwise she would have been an American citizen, and she declares: "the fact that I was born in Japan made all the difference in my life". The materiality of the Japanese woman's life, which was never evoked for Matsuye, now invests Masako: we watch a black-and-white movie of Masako in her kitchen attentively intent to stuffing a turkey for Thanksgiving or alternatively taking care of a baby, while Ruth's voice-over narrates

Masako's life explaining that she gave up her career to become a wife and a mother. The images we see, then, tell us of a passive and servile Japanese woman, reinstating the American racist and gendered representation. Meanwhile, over some black-and-white cartoons (about a rooster that becomes a vulture with the Japanese rising Sun in the background, and a boat that explodes leaving the screen to a sign that says "regrettable incident please"), Ruth lists the other American stereotypes about Japanese people: "the Yellow Peril, the malignant Japanese that had to be excised, the inscrutable Japanese that couldn't be trusted. I have seen these images all my life and I believed them". However, Ruth has already undermined twice the stereotypes behind the Western image of the Japanese woman, precisely by introducing her mother as "tough and pragmatic" and recalling her characterization when she narrates about her grandmother's personal life choices. But here the portrayal of her mother is enriched with more details: after Masako graduated from high school in Hawaii, she could not get a job like the American girls, so she went back to school first in Japan and then in the United States, where she obtained a Ph.D. from Yale. Similarly to her mother Matsuye, Masako did not surrender to the historical, cultural, and political circumstances of her life: she built up a career for herself before becoming a mother at the age of 42, and if Ruth doubts that the trade off made her happy, nothing allows us to suppose that it was not Masako's own choice.

Throughout the whole interview Masako, the Japanese woman who contradicts the stereotypes, looks straight into the camera. The second story in *Halving the Bones* consists of relatively conventional interviews with Ozeki's real mother: she speaks to an off-screen interviewer in fluent, though accented English, and we never hear Ruth interject a question, but these interviews are intercut with Ruth's own thoughts and with footage of her mother at work inside the house. Ozeki frames her mother in the private space of her house, and this intimate location allows the viewer an entrance into the inner life of both mother and daughter. Thus, Masako's look into the camera is as direct and critical as her gaze at her own political existence. Ruth's own perspectives and her mother's stories of the past come to occupy the same space at one and the same time. Far from the journalistic style or the detached approach of the classic documentary tradition, this emotional approach to her mother's narration creates intimacy among the characters and between the characters and the viewer, while at the same time questioning the stereotype of Asians as emotionless, inscrutable people. What follows is, in fact, a more dialogical sequence in which Ruth has finally arrived at her mother's house and the two of them go through all the items included in the cardboard box that belonged to Matsuye, the third absent woman. They dig out and discuss Matsuye's old jacket, parts of a handwritten letter, Matsuye's passport, some pictures of Matsuye, Masako and her brother, the chronological chart of Masako's father's relatives, along with some other documents that reveal how his first arrival in Honolulu took place on the fourth of July, 1896, at the age of 16. Finally, Masako

and Ruth read his journal, where he used to write poems about his experience in the concentration camp in Houston in 1942. While mother and daughter look at these memories from the past, try to read Japanese characters, decode them, and learn hidden details of their family's past, their relationship consolidates again. In the end, Ruth is able to collect a few pieces of information about the family: her grandfather was released from internment camp in April, 1946, after four years of imprisonment; disenchanted with Hawaii and the United States, in 1960 he decided to move his family back to Japan, where he died a few years later. Similarly, watching the video Ruth made of herself performing a ceremony over her grandparents' grave in Tokyo, Masako is able to see for the first time the place where her parents are resting, and Ruth comments: "I thought the cemetery went quite well, as we actually visited it there together, it had a proper solemn atmosphere, Mom seemed to get the feeling of it even though she doesn't like very much graveyards". Three incongruous images and sounds once again emerge in this sequence: Masako's reactions at the sight of the memories from her parents' past along with Ruth's happiness at her mother's unexpected joy, the two women's lighthearted and giggling conversations, and the personal tragedies behind the box of stuff from Japan.

In the third part of the documentary, Ruth finally gives her mother the bones, performing the cathartic act that initiated her journey and her quest. Masako utters lively exclamations over the beauty of the tea can that preserves the bones and the coloration of the bones that look as if painted. Over Masako's laughs and affectionate gaze, Ruth tells her about a memory she has of visiting her grandmother in Japan before she died. Ruth *believes* that on that occasion Matsuye told her that she did not want to be buried in Japan, but she wanted her bones to be brought back to Hawaii and thrown into the ocean. Earlier Ruth had already told us about her visits to her grandmother in Japan in the final years of her life and about her posthumous wish. But then she had confessed: "my Japanese wasn't that good at the time, and I might have been completely mistaken about what she'd said". Again, the linguistic code fails to produce stable meanings and translation appears to be a fundamental step in the process of understanding. At the same time, the endless instability of meaning opens up to different possibilities. Ruth ends up asking her mother what she wants to be done with the bones. Masako's specific instructions occupy the section of the film called "Mom's wishes (a projection)". Here, the Hawaiian music returns and we see images of shores, falls, and the coastline, followed by images of Ruth traveling in Hawaii and meeting her mother's old friends. The snapshots are intercut with Masako's conversation with her daughter in her apartment, where she expresses the desire to keep her mother's bones with her until she herself dies, after which she would like to have her ashes or bones mixed with her mother's. Only at that point Ruth should bring them both to Hilo and throw them both into the ocean. As her mother talks, we see Ruth performing her wish on the spot: standing on a cliff, she throws ashes from a bag

into the ocean. Her mother's wish has been projected immediately onto the screen, making us think that her mother died and Ozeki is editing past and present visual materials in her posthumous documentary. However, as the scene of Ruth throwing the ashes into the ocean fades, it leaves place to a quick black-and-white snapshot of Matsuye putting her feet into the water from one of the fake grandfather's home videos, and then the film moves to images of Ruth walking on the same shore in the present. Matsuye's voice comes back one last time to cast doubt on Ruth's command of Japanese and their mutual ability to understand each other: "I have no idea if she understands me at all. I wonder, will she remember me after I am gone?". Closing her role with a question, Matsuye connects this final part to the beginning of the documentary, when Ruth's quest is established through both the possibility of making a family album, as suggested by the subtitle, and the dilemma about what to do with the bones. Herself questioning the authenticity of her granddaughter's performance, Matsuye's last words reveal, as Peter Feng maintains, that cinema is "a technology not of reality but of fantasy: rather than depict the way things are, it shows us the way things could be".¹⁴

¹⁴ Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 2.

"Family relationships are like family stories": A Documentary to Re/produce the Messiness of History, Genealogy, and Identity in Ruth's Present

In the final part of this article, I am going to focus on some thematic and textual devices and techniques that Ozeki implements in her documentary in order to mess up the preexisting cultural categories and the documentary tradition. Throughout her film, Ozeki's creative act consists of documenting history and memories, cultural stereotypes, past and present family stories, the characters' ideas and feelings. Textually structured through repetition, doubling, and the continuous circling back to an origin which is impossible to grasp once and for all, the documentary brings up a process of generative messing up that reflects on the ongoing system of racism, the double bind behind gender dynamics, as well as on the need for home and a meaningful mother-daughter relationship. Finally, the documentary reaches back to itself, reflecting on the artistic process. The fictional nature of both the cinematic medium and Ozeki's specific story continues, in fact, to unravel through the credits. Over another Hawaiian song, as we watch a moving picture of Ruth as a little child, we read the actors' names and learn the role they played in the documentary. Among the actors that played all the family members – "baby Ruth", "young Mom", "young grandma", "young dad", and "Masako Lounsbury (mom)" – we get the confirmation that Masako has appeared on screen "as herself", but find out that "young grandma" was actually impersonated by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury. Therefore, not only has Ruth's voice spoken for herself and it has been reading/fabricating Matsuye's thoughts throughout the documentary, but Ozeki has been the actor playing both herself and Matsuye. Linda Peckham writes that "if an actress playing the character of a real person in

the style of documentary then appears in a documentary as herself, the question ‘who is speaking?’ becomes a much more radical question of identity itself, or at least a questioning of the demarcation of (a) subjectivity with respect to history”.¹⁵ The “fake” subject points to the absence of the “real” speaker, an absence that holds in itself the connotations of internment, censorship, and death, but also the determination of the filmmaker to *make* a witness of herself, translating human experience into a text, into record, and into history. Ozeki does not have full access to authentic, private and public, historical materials, therefore she makes her own images and keeps them in a productive tension with her own video, as the result of her own re-constructions. Thus, her autobiographical documentary is an act of *responsibility*: Ozeki assumes responsibility for her family’s story, answering or deferring the questions it generates through her own imagination and her own body, with no surrogates, and of course, in so doing, she confesses her limitations.

¹⁵ Linda Peckham, “Surname Viet Given Name Nam: Spreading Rumors and Ex/Changing Histories”, in Peter Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 240.

On a more personal level, it is evident now that Ruth has been the stand-in for her grandmother in her grandfather’s fake movies, the ones Ruth first declares to have watched over and over again in an effort to understand her grandmother’s life, and then admits to having actually made them herself: “I thought I would understand them better if I just pretended to be them”. Ruth decides to inhabit her grandmother’s reality in order to claim Matsuye’s experience as if it were her own. By shooting her grandmother’s life many years later, Ozeki forces the viewer to ask her/himself what has really changed other than the specific historical policies. Obviously Ruth still feels embedded in the racist discourse she has inherited from her mother’s side of the family. On several occasions, Ruth explains how different she had felt growing up, and how she had always blamed her mother for these feelings. She even confesses that “on some levels I really did think of Mom as manifesting certain characteristics of a cancer. The metaphor contained something that I recognized, a deeply rooted conflation of sickness and race”. Later Ruth adds that she felt as if she shared those characteristics:

Cancer invades the body, mine was different from everyone else’s in Connecticut and it was obviously because of Mom, her genes in my body had prevailed. So, you see, it was this Eurocentric and primitive understanding of history and genetics that left me susceptible to a metaphoric confusion about my mother’s origins, she started life as a tumor, and cancerous she’d spread. I was her offspring and hardly benign.

While we can understand the film as a “fake”, a copy of someone else’s life located in the past, nonetheless, each scene resonates in Ruth’s present. Ozeki extensively uses the technique of repetition not only to undermine one of the documentary’s main features, the incipit, and its capacity to convey meanings, as I discussed previously, but also to create a back-and-forth structure between two time periods, two nations, as well as between the multiple parts that compose *Halving the Bones*. On numerous occasions, the documentary circles back to topical

events in the family. If on the one hand this strategy illustrates that personal memory is malleable and any personal interpretation of the events is necessarily subjective, on the other hand the compulsion to repeat signals both Ruth's desire for an intimate connection with her family and her generational need to claim historical moments she might have not physically experienced, but of which she is somehow a product. Even though Ruth has no material access to the events that have shaped her grandparents' and her mother's life, yet their meanings have created her. Questioning who and what deserves historical preservation and narration is what provoked the repetitive strategies of her documentarian project.

After the credits, the documentary ends with Ozeki's dedication to her parents: "this film is dedicated to my Mom and Dad, who are alive & well and living in Connecticut..." The already suspected scene of Ruth throwing the ashes into the ocean is thus revealed as a fake one, but, as Eve Oishi notes:

no more and no less than any of the previous evidence that has been found, borrowed, or created. As the title suggests, the endless 'halving' and separating of the meat of myth from the bone of truth becomes a way of owning it, of creating a connection between people and the past. This process reveals and articulates the reasons why those connections are both irretrievably lost and always being imagined anew.¹⁶

¹⁶ Eve Oishi, "Screen Memories", 208.

Being a paradoxical and fluid space, far from homogeneous, family stories enter circulation as family memories through oral telling and retelling. Therefore, they are always fragmentary, associative, abridged, disorderly, and often attach themselves to photographs and home movies. *Halving the Bones* overlaps Ruth's own imagined narratives on the uncertain images from the past. In the impossibility of bringing order to the past as well as to the present through recovering and remembering, Ozeki adopts the creative *messiness* of the endless layers of new narratives and new meanings as the only strategy to make sense of her history and to feel kinship and belonging with her family. Thus, documenting, as much as remembering, is a generative, creative, fictionalizing act. In her own documentary, Ozeki can tell a story that she needs to know, one that is at once true and fake, and therefore beyond, but also linked to, reality and all that the real facts authorize and disguise. Ozeki suggests that identity and history, events and their representations, become most authentic and empowering when mediated through imagination and fictional narrations.

Talking about the distant relationship with her mother, Ruth reflects: "I think family relationships are like family stories, you have to practice them to keep them alive". In *Halving the Bones* the theme of home, roots, and motherhood is prevalent and is significantly linked to Ozeki's overall literary and cultural project. In the documentary, Ozeki builds on this theme by using the same narrator to tell about Ruth's personal thoughts, and her mother's and grandmother's personal history,

playing with the idea of doublings and triplings, playing with the conflation of identity and signification. The documentary mostly speaks from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker, who eventually acknowledges her subjective position. But, the stories are narrated starting from a series of photographs which evoke the lives of the maternal side of her family. The stories are also narrated through the three women's recollections, reconstructions, and inventions related to both Japan and Hawaii, and to a Japanese American identity that Ruth never wanted (or was never able) to assume as her own. At the same time, Ruth cannot help feeling implicated in her mother's and grandmother's stories as both *others'* and *her own*. As this feeling simultaneously of departure and belonging mirrors Ruth's split self, her being "half", and her meaningful name, *Halving the Bones* initiates a more extensive reflection on motherhood. While Ruth feels disconnected from her own mother to the point of losing contact with her for years, in an interview Masako laments how obstructed was the relationship between her and her mother, Matsuye, who always refused to tell her daughter about her troublesome past, while she opened up much more with Ruth. Just before this interview, as Ruth's voice wonders why her mother has never asked her about Matsuye's, her own mother's, bones, we see a few snapshots from an old black-and-white home movie, representing Ruth and Masako together in the kitchen but each on one side of the room, so that their backs are against each other and mother and daughter do not exchange a look. After Masako's interview, we hear again Ruth's comments and she says: "Maybe it's just too much to expect that your mother would suddenly open up to you after so little contact all these years. I guess this is all about just paying attention to your habits with people". *Halving the Bones* is precisely Ozeki's effort to remedy the distance. The documentary, thus, participates in a process of healing, allowing a kind of communion through the act of recreating and reimagining. Yet, Ozeki makes it clear that this is a partial healing, an attempt at mother-daughter reconciliation. Ruth continues her reflections on mother-daughter relationships:

The more I thought about it, the harder it was for me to accept that Mom wouldn't go to her own mother's funeral just because she couldn't bend her leg. It sounded so pragmatic but I guess it made sense, she has been separated from her parents for most of her life, first by the tumor and then by the war. Over the years, she forgot what it is like to be a daughter, I wanted to make sure it didn't happen to me, that's why I was giving her the bones.

Unfolding, the documentary shows that the three women have much in common. Throughout the film, Ruth is engaged in describing herself as similar to her grandfather in all possible ways, thus distancing herself from her female ancestors. However, in the end, we learn not only that Ruth has embodied her grandmother all along, but Matsuye's voice, which as we now know belongs to Ruth, claims that Ruth "is a big girl and seems to take after her father. She does not visit me often, which is perhaps due to the name she has been called. In the

English language, it may be a very fine name, but in Japanese ‘Rusu’ means ‘absent’ or ‘not at home’. She takes after her mother and me in this way”. It is only by gathering together multiple images and voices of women in the documentary that a dialogue can be established between them; only by including the silent interstices, the contradictions in the way women see themselves and one another, can a history be traced. The film is part of a process of reconciliation through the discovery of the fact that despite their differences, their potential for unity lies in what they share in their mother-daughter relationships. Even though at the end of her journey to meet her mother, Ruth notices the discrepancies in their personalities, she is able to say:

Mom lives entirely in the present and I have to respect that. Still, I was satisfied with what she and I had done. Unpacking grandma’s things and taking care of her remains gave us something that we could do together. It made our relationship important again, and we found a closeness that we never lost. Mom lives in the present but I don’t, I spend a lot of time poking around in the past or imagining the future.

Going through the signs of Matsuye’s past, of fixity and dispersion, Ruth and her mother create postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch intends the term:

Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation It characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.¹⁷

¹⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1997), 22.

Thus, *Halving the Bones*, composed of all the photographs, documents, home videos, letters, books, objects that belonged to their family and that witness to its history, presents a narrative which is already written into Ruth’s and her mother’s gaze through memory, recognition, repetition, ritual, and imagination. The photographs and videos infiltrate their present, making them laugh, get nostalgic, recount fragments of the story outside the frame, finally allowing them to recover their *affiliative look*.¹⁸

The Name’s Issue: The Epilogue

Halving the Bones ends with one last section called “epilogue (a Lounsbury)”, introduced by the same picture of a Japanese child in a cardboard box that says “dole” that we had seen at the very beginning of the documentary. Ruth’s voice narrates that before leaving Hawaii, she paid a visit to Pearl Harbor, which surprisingly is one of Honolulu’s major attractions especially for Japanese tourists

¹⁸ Hirsch describes the affiliative look saying: “recognising an image as *familial* elicits ... a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an *affiliative* look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative ... it is idiosyncratic, untheorisable: it is what moves us because of our memories and our histories, and because of the ways in which we structure our own sense of particularity”. Ibid., 93.

with a camera. We see Ruth visiting the place and hear her describing it: over there, there is a gift shop where you can buy souvenirs of the war, and a tour that starts with a black-and-white movie about the bombing and proceeds with a boat trip to the memorial built to keep the record of the *U.S.S. Arizona*, which was sunk by the Japanese, killing over a thousand men on board. As Ruth reflects on the men's bodies "sealed in a watery grave" at the bottom of the Ocean, she visits the shrine room at the far end of the memorial. Here, she notices that the marble tablet, on which are inscribed all the names of the men whose bodies are interred, memorializes also a "T. W. Lounsbury". Wondering if that is a relative of her father's, Ruth realizes: "This was a disturbing discovery. In my search to come to terms with my mother and her past, I neglected my father's side of the family entirely". The very final scenes bring Ruth back to her past, showing another home movie. This time the movie is about Ruth as a little child, playing with a baseball glove together with her father. Ruth's voice lingers one more time on the troubling issue of her name. She says:

First of all, this business about being named Ruth, I know I sort of blamed my Mom for it, but it really wasn't her fault at all. My Dad's family came from upstate New York, so naturally he was a big Yankee's fan, and the truth of the matter is that when I was born the big consolation for me not being a boy was that he got to name me Ruth, you know, after the Babe. He wanted me to be an all American kid.

This final overturning of meaning is especially relevant since it changes the meaning of Ruth's identity as she herself has intended it and presented it to us up to this point. This move subverts the idea that it was because of her mother's Japanese genes that Ruth has felt condemned to be different and unsettled, reassessing the responsibilities between her parents in generating her as "half". Moreover, saying that her father wanted her to be a boy and an all American one, Ruth repositions the gendered and racial perspective in the gaze of her American white father. By challenging a fixed, essentialized Japanese American identity, *Halving the Bones* attempts to redefine personal and cultural identity not as a matter of simple inheritance, but as an active cultural construct. The making of Asian American cultural identity is, as Lisa Lowe writes, "a much 'messier' process than unmediated vertical transmission from one generation to another".¹⁹

¹⁹ Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences", *Diaspora*, 1.1 (Spring 1991), 27.

Pussy, Paradise, and Elephants. Reading the Specter of Western Tourism and Leisure through Thai and Hawaiian Literature

Abstract: “Exoticized” lands of leisure – specifically Thailand and Hawai’i – are sexualized and commodified as heteronormative destinations for Western and “First World” consumption. In this essay, I am particularly interested in the ways that local communities culturally reimagine these “porno-tropical” locations as sites to perform marginally local voices and identities while contesting perverse visions of “paradise” created by Western desires. To do so, I will contextualize and focus on two fictional pieces – *Sightseeing* (2005) by Rattawut Lapcharoensap and *This Is Paradise* (2013) by Kristiana Kahakauwila – that undertake the overlapping discourses of leisure, romance, militourism, and ideas of “paradise” as emerging sites of waste and destruction in the wake of Western tourism and consumption. Drawing upon the political nature of mess and a particular chapter from each one of these book, I aim to think about how “exoticized” lands (particularly Hawai’i and the tropical beach landscapes of Thailand) are archived by locals as vantage points for promoting social justice and ethnic responsibility. Using pieces from the fictional accounts of Lapcharoensap and Kahakauwila, I seek to compare the ways that writers queer the heteronormative approaches to lands and peoples that are gendered and sexually-racialized by the West – especially by the recreational and imperial forces of U.S. militourism. My goal is to foreground how these authors rewrite their communities back into the seemingly post-apocalyptic landscapes of paradise, confronting the ways that the “native” and local identities are superficially erased from the foreigners’ touristic view. Through such a discussion, my analysis hopes to uncover how contemporary authors use literature and culture to both navigate their identities as well as dismiss, or “mess-up”, the fantasies of paradise, tranquillity, and leisure created by Western desires of exotification and of the tropical “other”.

Keywords: *Cultural Studies, Hawaiian Studies, Postcolonialism, Southeast Asian/American Studies, Thai Studies, Tourism*

The empire degrades through monetary exchange, leaving quaint Hawaiians dressing as ‘natives,’ ... nothing amiss in the morass of Paradise.... For the foreigner, romances of ‘Aloha,’ For Hawaiians, disposessions of empire.
(Haunani-Kay Trask, “Disposessions of Empire”)¹

¹ Haunani-Kay Trask, *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 35-36.

Trust me, it’s paradise. This is where the hungry come to feed. For mine is a generation that circles the globe and searches for something we haven’t tried before. So never refuse an invitation, never resist the unfamiliar, never fail to be polite and never outstay the welcome. Just keep your mind open and suck in the experience. And if it hurts, you know what? It’s probably worth it.
(*The Beach*, based on the book by Alex Garland, dir. by Danny Boyle)²

² *The Beach*, directed by Danny Boyle (Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2000), DVD.

In the beginning of 2017, Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, was embroiled in a dispute with Hawaiian land that he purchased, a 700-acre property in Kaua’i. He filed numerous lawsuits against hundreds of Hawaiians – some of whom are dead

and some who possibly had claim to small parcels of land on his huge estate – in order to keep locals and Native Hawaiians off his land while privatizing indigenous land. The charges, processed as “quiet title” suits, were brought about in hopes to establish Zuckerberg’s legitimate claim to his purchase, “quietly” challenging those who could potentially threaten the CEO’s rights to the land.

It was in 2014 when the co-founder of the world’s largest social network and his wife bought land on Kaua‘i because they “*fell in love* with the community and the cloudy green mountains” (italicized emphasis mine), where they wanted to “plant roots and join the community [of Kaua‘i]” themselves.³ This romanticized act of purchasing Hawaiian land affirmed the timeless value that many around the world have had with Hawai‘i; a fantasy that Hawai‘i is paradise with its scenic backdrops, lush foliage, sandy beaches, and deep blue oceans. Such a love affair symbolized Hawai‘i as readily open to capitalist enterprise and privatization, as well as mass migration to the small island chain; however, this land grab additionally prompted long histories of American conquest and acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands, dispossessing the Native Hawaiian people at the same time.

In an article written covering Zuckerberg and his lawsuit against Hawaiians, Kapua Sproat, a law professor at the University of Hawai‘i, was interviewed stating that “This is the face of neocolonialism”, speaking directly to the CEO’s actions as just another way that U.S. imperialism has negatively impacted the Islands, separating its people from the land that they hold sacred.⁴ Dispossession and the ruthless commoditization of Hawai‘i, its people, land, and culture are nothing new as they have been a part of a long lineage of western conquest of the Pacific and of places around the world. Poet and indigenous scholar Haunani-Kay Trask has even argued that “Hawaiian culture is constantly in danger of commercialization”.⁵ Yet with the purchase and privatization of Hawai‘i and scenes of “paradise” come the erasure and silencing of its people, emphasizing colonial narratives that eroticize “virgin” spaces that are always “empty” and open for territorial appropriation.⁶

Similarly, Thailand has continuously been popularized through Western fantasies of the nation as an important hub for recreational tourism for the world, promoting an escapist oriental adventure in Southeast Asia. For instance, *Lonely Planet*, the world’s leading travel guide and publishing group, has written to thousands of its followers that “Tropical Thailand offers the gentlest introduction to the Orient, combining images of the exotic – sparking temple spires, sarong-clad farmers bending over rice shoots – with high standards of hygiene ... and most of the comforts of home”.⁷ In this sense, tourists from around the world can vacation in Thailand and seek out its seemingly anachronistic and “oriental” nature, but, simultaneously, enjoy the modern luxuries of the West as provided by years of development and economic alignment with global capitalism and trends. This sentiment is further echoed in the epigraph that I have laid out above where Hollywood’s constructions of Thailand, like *The Beach* (2000), emphasizes Thailand’s paradisaical and foreign landscape. The monologue spoken by the main

³ Jon Letman and Julia Carrie Wong, “Hawaiians call Mark Zuckerberg ‘the face of neocolonialism’ over land lawsuits”, *The Guardian*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jan/23/mark-zuckerberg-hawaii-land-lawsuits-kauai-estate>, accessed January 24 2017.

⁴ Letman and Wong, “Hawaiians call Mark Zuckerberg ‘the face of neocolonialism’ over land lawsuits”.

⁵ Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1993), 90.

⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 30.

⁷ Lonely Planet, *Thailand’s Islands & Beaches* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 1998), 9.

character erases Thai bodies and culture in the wake of Western desire to travel and feast upon the ostensibly foreign; a hunger that creates an uneven relationship between the West and the brown bodies meant to serve those who travel. The rhetoric used also implicates Thailand as a feminized and submissive counterpart to the West, linking Thailand with “sexuality” and unimaginable cravings.⁸ To enjoy Thailand or the Hawaiian Islands is to quench the thirsts of travelers who want something beyond their accustomed “normal”; a paradise that is seemingly uninhabited and there for the taking, even at the expense of brown bodies and their legitimate claims over the lands.

⁸ Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

I opened with references to both Mark Zuckerberg and Thailand because of the ways in which both Thailand and Hawai‘i have come to be racialized, sexualized and territorially reimagined by the West as “anachronistic spaces”: a term which, as Anne McClintock writes, refers to colonized, brown bodies and the lands that they inhabit as “archaic ‘primitive[s]’” stationed in relation to modernized metropolises and Western states.⁹ The reconstruction of Hawai‘i and Thailand for imperial desires is meant to appease colonial powers at the expense of brown bodies and their legitimate claims over the lands. In other words, individuals, like Zuckerberg or characters in Hollywood’s *The Beach*, want tranquil and exotified paradise without the nuisances of confronting brown, Native or local bodies on their own land. Such claims are further entangled with the erotics of empire, particularly when thinking about the histories of militourism in both places as well as the impact that visual culture has had in creating these sites in the Western imaginary.

⁹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 30.

In her book, *Aloha America*, Adria L. Imada writes that the erotics of empire, particularly executed by an imperial West, genders a land and its people as “a space disposed to political, military, and tourist penetration”.¹⁰ From orientalized and hypersexualized images conceived by popular culture and mass tourism, notions of both Hawai‘i and Thailand – both as geopolitical places – have constantly been tied to the intimate, fulfilling sensual and paradisaal dreams of an erotic and exoticized brown “Other” – a land, people, and culture written off as primitive and immoral, but simultaneously desirable to vacation to. For one, Hawai‘i has continuously been a romance destination. The Islands have been aestheticized by tropical landscapes and the rapturous beauty of the seemingly available Hawaiian “paradise”, promising the marketed gestures of “aloha” to those who visit while further invoking “an idea of passivity and penetrability” maintained by imperialist interests.¹¹ Similarly, Thailand has been depicted in popular imagination as a hedonistic and sexual playground for “First World” nations, producing skewed and licentious imaginings of the kingdom and its people. Such imagery further result in fictionalized and widespread “bad impressions of Thailand” and its citizens to the outside world.¹² These pleasures and the thrill of the unknown are both censored and perversely created in order to appease western and continental fantasies of the Islands and this Southeast Asian nation-state as a desolate and uninhabited escape.

¹⁰ Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2012), 6.

¹¹ Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai‘i and the Philippines* (Durham: Duke U. P., 2013), 7.

¹² Kritinee Nuttavuthisit, “Branding Thailand: Correcting the Negative Image of Sex Tourism”, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3.1 (2007), 23.

In this sense, “porno-tropical” perceptions – a key concept from McClintock that discusses the highly sexualized depictions of non-European lands and peoples, emphasizing “a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” – of each place have been globally disseminated and solidified by foreign views and perceptions that are unlike the experiences and attitudes of the “local” or Native; the latter being seemingly erased from the landscape.¹³ As such, my project aims to re-center the narrative of brown bodies that have been categorized as a part of the background to the erotics of empire.

¹³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 22.

Drawing upon this violent suppression of local and “Native” brown bodies, my work aims to examine through comparing the fictional pieces from Thai and Hawaiian authors the ways that particular communities unravel their expected silences in the wake of post-apocalyptic landscapes, forcing tourists to bear witness to their brown labor. I argue that the post-apocalyptic, in this sense, is a concept that can be defined as a site, a state of being, or a method, interrogating the ways that empire and global capitalism have been wreaking havoc in both Hawai‘i and Thailand. As such, my attempts to investigate particular works – *Sightseeing* (2005) by Rattawut Lapcharoensap, a Thai/American author, and *This Is Paradise* (2013) by Kristiana Kahakauwila, a native Hawaiian – enables a reimagination and critique of places designated for personal consumption, enlightenment and desire for the Western world and Global North. I read the works of both Lapcharoensap and Kahakauwila as an engagement of local voices that contend with and against the overlapping discourses of leisure, romance, militourism, and ideas of “paradise” as emerging sites of heteronormative waste and destruction; places left in disarray in the wake of Western tourism and consumption. These writers’ *local* re/inscriptions are a *queering* of the imperial construction of paradise as a space, a time, a place, and an imaginative anachronism. With a strong focus on a chapter from each book, I aim to think about how “exoticized” lands (particularly Hawai‘i and the tropical beach landscapes of Thailand) are archived by locals as vantage points for promoting defiance and ethnic responsibility. I seek to compare the ways that these writers queer the heteronormative approaches to lands and peoples, gendered and sexually-racialized by the West. My goal is to foreground how these authors rewrite their communities back into the seemingly post-apocalyptic landscapes of paradise, confronting the ways that the “native” and local identities are superficially erased from the foreigners’ touristic view. Through such a discussion, my analysis hopes to uncover how contemporary authors use literature and culture to both navigate their identities as well as dismiss, or “mess-up”, the fantasies of paradise, tranquility, and leisure created by Western desires of exotification and of the tropical “Other”.

Gendering Tourism and the Nation-State: Thailand and Hawai‘i

The “modern” Thai nation was constructed to ensure its national autonomy and participation in the global sphere; however, a key part of this national project was dependent on the gendered and sexualized ways in which this modernization played out. As the labor market began to expand in the more industrialized capital of Bangkok, many rural Thais, particularly women, migrated to the city to find both cultural and economic opportunities not afforded to them in the provinces. Since many of these women were young, poor, and uneducated, they were vulnerable to poor working conditions and subject to different kinds of gendered exploitation. From Bangkok retail, urban nightlife, to the Go-Go bars, Thai (female) sexuality became fundamental to the ways that global market systems shaped intimate identities and their relationships to the nation-state and the world. Attempts to modernize in the global economy thus drastically drew upon the “intimate realms of daily life”, producing a feminized view of Thainess and its gendered association within modern capitalism.¹⁴

To understand the impact of tourism on Thailand is to undertake the origins of Thailand’s hospitality and tourism industry which stemmed from the nation’s support for U.S. policy in South Viet Nam, providing bases for U.S. armed forces. During this time, a number of major air bases were constructed in the beginning of 1961, and the inflow of U.S. military spending was equivalent to 4% of gross national product (GNP) or around 26% of exports in 1965–72.¹⁵ As the U.S. military utilized Thailand for tactical reasons during the War, feminized and gendered views of Thainess became simultaneously exacerbated in 1967 when the Thai government struck a deal with the United States to provide rest and recreation (R&R) services to American servicemen during the Viet Nam War. The “R&R Treaty” codified an alliance between Thailand and the U.S. ensuring American servicemen were given access to sexual services during the Viet Nam War by the endorsement of U.S. sex colonialism in Thailand.¹⁶ Entangled with the treaty was a problematic promotion that many Thai women were employed to serve as temporary “breaks” from the daily psychological and physical struggles of war to which, as some scholars have pointed out, generated sex work as a kind of diplomatic relationship between two countries.¹⁷ When the Viet Nam War ended, civilian sex tourist replaced American soldiers, cementing sex work as a key part of Thai livelihood. With encouragement from the World Bank, 1970s tourism in Thailand capitalized on the already existing “entertainment”¹⁸ and service sectors, including sex tourism became one of Thailand’s booming industries.¹⁹ Today sex and prostitution are seen as part of the cultural fabric of Thailand as well as the ways that the Thai nation-state and its people have become feminized in the shadow of Western patriarchy.²⁰ This sexualization further paved the way for Thailand to become gendered and commodified as “paradise” or the “promised land” for foreigners, expatriates, and travelers worldwide.²¹

Equally, the image of Hawai‘i and its people has been cultivated as intimately “soft” and “kind”.²² Haunani-Kay Trask writes that “Above all, Hawai‘i is ‘she,’ the

¹⁴ Ara Wilson, *Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Aron Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁵ Porphant Ouyyanont, “The Vietnam War and Tourism in Bangkok’s Development, 1960–70”, *Southeast Asian Studies*, 39.2 (September 2001), 157–187.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Rho-Ng, “The Conscription of Asian Sex Slaves: Causes and Effects of U.S. Military Sex Colonialism in Thailand and the Call to Expand U.S. Asylum Law”, *Asian Law Journal, Inc.*, 7 (2000), 109.

¹⁷ See Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia U. P., 1997); and Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁸ When discussing sexualized forms of entertainment in Thailand, an interesting fact to note, as author Scot Barmé notes in his book *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, is that one of the “sex show” – a kind of erotic entertainment often assumed to have developed in relation to the Viet Nam War and R&R – emerged as a staple in Bangkok nightlife in the early 1920s.

¹⁹ Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, “Sex Tourism and Inequalities”, in Stroma Cole and Nigel Morgan, eds., *Tourism and Inequality: Problems and Prospects* (Wallingford: CABI, 2010), 49.

²⁰ Nuttavuthisit, “Branding Thailand”, 24.

²¹ Chris Pirazzi and Vitida Vasant, *Thailand Fever: A Road Map for Thai-Western Relationships* (Bangkok: Paiboon Poomsan Publishing, 2004), 220–22.

²² Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 137.

Western image of the Native ‘female’ in her magical allure.... This fictional Hawai‘i comes out of the depths of Western sexual sickness that demands a dark, sin-free Native for instant gratification between imperialist wars.... Tourists flock to my Native land for escape, but they are escaping into a state of mind while participating in the destruction of a host people in a Native place”.²³ These sensual images have been conjured up by American and Western imperialism as well as the ongoing dominance of corporate tourism in Hawai‘i as the lands, the culture, and the people have been unabashedly marketed as an island destination for escape, fantasy, and intimacy.

²³ Ibid.

Much of the hypersexual and gendered nature associated with the Hawaiian people, their culture and lands have been produced by ongoing histories of Western depictions of the indigenous community as sensual, uncontained, and licentious. Many stereotypes were associated with women as they and, by association, their culture were seen as excessively sexual and unrestrained, seemingly established by misinterpreted views of hula performances, polyamorous relationships, and a disregard of the rigid constructions of domesticity.²⁴ Backward depictions of the Islands of Hawai‘i and its people would be further propelled in popular literature when American writers, such as Mark Twain, relegated Hawaiians and their lands to “the sphere of the erotic and the dying past”.²⁵ Twain’s opinions of the Hawaiian Islands would be joined by other writers and propelled as performance pieces at the World’s Fair when hula and young Hawaiian women served as analogues to the Islands as well as serving the interests of eroticism of empire.²⁶ Such savage and primordial portrayals of Hawai‘i would be long lasting as American imperialism and capitalist interests in the form of commercialized tourism would exploit the Native people as “artifacts to the First World”.²⁷

Today’s Hawai‘i is a territorially incorporated and militarized extension of the United States where, as Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez pointedly emphasizes, *the imperial encounter* between both places was and continues to be an inevitable meeting of civilized people with the apparent savages of the world; a meeting that destroyed and altered the land, its people, and cultures by Western powers, further cultivating tourism while adhering to the interests of global capitalism.²⁸ Consequently, mass and commercial tourism in Hawai‘i have become a bedrock in the fiftieth state where it is a multibillion-dollar industry, being the largest contributor to the state’s gross domestic product and representing 21 percent of its entire economy.²⁹ The historically constructed fantasy of the Islands as a feminized and tender “Other” still exists as cultural markers, bodies, and terminologies, like “aloha”, have been employed in a constant peddling of all things Hawaiian; an economic transaction that distorts its very meaning.³⁰ This illusion of “paradise” is thus continually sold to the foreign traveler as an excuse to visit the archipelago, promoting a corporatized and imperial concoction of market capitalism. Furthermore, though statistics show that commercial tourism benefits the Islands in many ways, the reality is also that it is destructive, displacing many poor individuals, including

²⁴ Amy Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire: In the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. P., 2002), 67.

²⁵ Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire*, 68.

²⁶ Imada, *Aloha America*, 67.

²⁷ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 17.

²⁸ Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise*, 12.

²⁹ Reid Wilson, “Hawaii’s \$14 billion tourism industry back to pre-recession levels”, *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2013. Web https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2013/09/27/hawaii-14-billion-tourism-industry-back-to-pre-recession-levels/?utm_term=.633e6c61a266.

³⁰ Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise*, 38.

oppressed Native Hawaiian people. Mass tourism to Hawai‘i serves the state’s population unequally and, moreover, its promotion and development worldwide has been controlled and directed by the wealth and power of those aiming to make money.³¹

³¹ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 246.

As a marketed paradisaic landscape, Hawai‘i has been a temporary escape for millions around the world; yet, due to global capitalism’s impact on the Islands as well as international investments, numerous Native Hawaiian and indigenous communities living there are faced with tense socioeconomic, political, and cultural troubles. Trask writes that “tourism is a new form of exploitation.... Native Hawaiian people suffer the most; their culture has been increasingly threatened; their beaches and even their sacred sites have been taken over or intruded upon in order to build tourists resorts and related developments”.³² Additionally, and increasingly in recent years, homelessness and housing issues in Hawai‘i have further become heartbreakingly real issue for the Islands. As new hotels are constructed and luxury condominiums and high-rises proliferate amidst the tropical landscape, thousands of individuals remain homeless and housing prices are far out of reach for many local families; so much so, that in 2015, governor David Y. Ige called for the state’s homelessness issue a “state of emergency”.³³ As such, the picturesque landscape of a Hawaiian paradise is fraught with social, economic, political, and cultural disparities that benefit a few, and are off the backs of the most exposed and vulnerable.

³² Ibid.

³³ Adam Nagourney, “Aloha and Welcome to Paradise. Unless You’re Homeless”, *The New York Times*, June 3, 2016. Web https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/04/us/hawaii-homeless-criminal-law-sitting-ban.html?_r=0, accessed January 4 2017.

Messy Archives: Uncovering the Burdens of Things and Brown Lives

As I have tried to illustrate above, Hawai‘i and Thailand have been archived as uncontrollable, “porno-tropical” lands and cultures for heteronormatively Western desires and play; however, if we were to examine fictional works as counter-narratives to such portrayals, we can see the ways that particular voices lend hand to reconceptualizing histories of these spaces as racialized and sexually charged. In this sense, I draw upon Martin Manalansan’s concept of the “mess” as a way to ultimately queer heteronormative structures of power and leisure within both sites, reorienting the ways in which we see particular spaces, cultures, and peoples as imagined by imperial forces of Western – but, in particular, American – colonization.³⁴ The use of Manalansan’s idea of “messaging up” the archive redeploys culture and memory, refocusing our attentions to “the mundane, banal, and ordinariness of ... experience and its mercurial often intractable qualities”.³⁵ In this sense, the fictional works of Lapcharoensap and Kahakauwila offer the readers a glimpse into the everyday lives of locals and “Natives” whose racialized labor is used to clean up the disorder of the post-apocalyptic landscapes left by foreign and Western tourism in Hawai‘i and Thailand.

³⁴ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives”, in Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici, eds., *Queering Archives: Historical Unwavelings* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2014), 94.

³⁵ Ibid., 98.

I am interested in the ways in which some works of literature penned by both

Hawaiian and Thai authors engage the queer act of “messing up” heteronormative, Western desires and fantasies. Drawing upon this, this essay comparatively looks at two chapters that speak to themes emphasizing the quotidian, intimate and sometimes ephemeral spaces of brown labor and brown bodies, honoring the everyday work of locals and those clearly erased from the tourists’ view. These moments disrupt the fantasy and calm spectacle of paradise that the Western world and white touristic gaze prefers to see. These messy moments, thus, refocus the complexities of racialized work by focusing on brown labor, agency, and autonomous desire.

Writing Dangerously: Kahakauwila’s *This Is Paradise* and Lapcharoensap’s *Sightseeing*

Kristiana Kahakauwila’s *This Is Paradise* is a rich collection of Hawaiian short stories that speak to grand narratives – class and labor, sex, love, loneliness, as well as family and belonging – in the context of the Native Hawaiian, indigenous, and diasporic experience. For example, her title chapter, “This is Paradise”, follows the lives of women across the Pacific who are employed as housekeepers for various hotels in Waikiki and their experiences with tourists from around the world who come to search for an exotic getaway. Their collective narrative is both intimate and voyeuristic as they confide in one another as well as the reader of their experiences working in the service industry in addition to their relationships to travelers vacationing on the Islands. These women speak of the ways that Hawai‘i is evolving to meet the needs of global and market capitalism, referring to the ongoing impacts of development and militourism on the Islands. They speak of their dreams of their children, the hopes that they have for the future, their camaraderie, as well as enjoyment of each other’s company – especially in a scene at a bar. The story is highly conversational as it is personal in terms of the ways that these women speak of their relationships to one another, to the guests of the hotel, as mothers, and as diasporic subjects of the Pacific.

Particularly worthy of critical attention, in Kahakauwila’s opening chapter, are the highly intimate moments that she captures in relation to the women, their labor, and others around them. For example, one instance is shown when the laboring women discuss the daily chores of working in the hotel industry and the kinds of things left behind by tourists. One character internally ponders,

We, the women of Housekeeping, get left other things, too, but by accident. The Japanese leave behind useful items: tubes of sunscreen, beach floaties, snorkel gear, unopened boxes of cereal, half-filled bottles of American whiskey, brand-new packets of travel tissues decorated with Choco-Cat and Hello Kitty, which our youngest girls love....

What mainland Americans leave behind makes us blush: used condoms under the bed, a turquoise bra with thick cups like soup bowls, pornographic

magazines. We find a single blue sandal, a hairbrush tangled with yellow hair, a vibrating toothbrush, a stuffed bear with a missing arm and glass eyes. Such intimate pieces to forget.³⁶

³⁶ Kristiana Kahakawila, *This is Paradise: Stories* (New York: Hogarth, 2013), 11.

This moment emphasizes the imperial memorabilia left behind in the wake of tourism and recreational travel. Though objects such as travel tissues, floaties, sunscreen, unused alcohol, used condoms, and other miscellaneous items are written off as mundane and unimportant, there is something to be noted about the wasteful remnants of imperial pleasure left behind in the wake of leisurely travel. In other words, important about this moment in relation to the discarded items are the kinds of intimately imperial marks that tourists, as extensions of Western empire, leave behind in a land that is never theirs to inhabit. Though spoken of in different contexts, such discarded objects eerily remind us of what Isabelle Pelaud spoke of as “‘transnational debris’ – the discarded, disconnected, and dysfunctional ‘unchosens’ – that emerge from the brutal dislocations produced by war, colonization, and globalization and that inhabit life’s social margins”.³⁷ The objects left behind remind workers of the presence of imperial subjects and those who superficially hold an air of privilege and affluence in terms of their ability to travel and vacation. How is it possible to look at such mundane ephemera as colonial waste, reminding communities who are left to “clean up” of the ways that recreational tourism promotes colonial leisure and a disregard of the destination? The ways in which communities, like the women of Housekeeping, collect and muddle through the discarded belongings of travelers and those ambivalent to brown labor are the ways in which said bodies confront the recreational legacy and carelessness brought upon by global capitalism and travel as well as the desires to stake claims in the world through tourism.

³⁷ Yen Lê Espiritu, “Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over”, *Amerasia Journal*, 31.2 (2005), xviii.

Similarly, Rattawut Lapcharoensap’s *Sightseeing*, like Kahakawila’s book, envisions Thainess and the Thai nation-state in the wake of European, American, and foreign visions of Thai “porno-tropicality”. For example, “Farangs”, Lapcharoensap’s prizewinning opening chapter in a collection of short stories, revolves around a Thai teenager who, throughout the entire story, pines for the affections of an American girl already attached to a highly boisterous boyfriend; however, some of the more interesting moments of the chapter involve conversations with the main character and his jaded Thai mother, the owner of a motel in Thailand. For instance, the chapter begins with the teenager and his mother discussing the different kinds of clientele that come to their beach resort during the various seasons. He notes:

Ma says, ‘Pussy and elephants. That’s all these people want.’ She always says this in August, at the season’s peak, when she’s tired of farangs running all over the Island, tired of finding used condoms in the motel’s rooms, tired of guest complaining to her in five languages. She turns to me and says, ‘You give them history, temples, pagodas, traditional dance, floating markets, seafood curry,

tapioca desserts, silk-weaving cooperatives, but all they really want is to ride some hulking gray beast like a bunch of wildmen and to pant over girls and to lie there half-dead getting skin cancer on the beach during the time in between.³⁸

³⁸ Rattawut Lapcharoensap, *Sightseeing: Stories* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 2.

Like Kahakauwila's "This is Paradise", "Farangs" opens by discussing the intimate point of collision where tourists, the local Thai labor force, and orientalized fantasies of what Thailand offers or represents intersect. From imperial waste and memorabilia to images of Thailand that are easily consumed through tour book definitions, the mother's poignant remark, stating that what all tourists want from Thailand are "Pussy and elephants", is a direct critique of the ways that the Thai kingdom has come to exemplify a hedonistic playground or a "sexual Disneyland to the world"³⁹ to predominantly Western and "First World" countries, portraying a seemingly "lush" and wild landscape as promoted by nationally-sanctioned projects – like the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT).⁴⁰ So it is of no surprise that Thailand has become and continues to be a beacon for global tourism where the industry is one of the nation's "major revenue earners".⁴¹

³⁹ Elizabeth Rho-Ng, "The Conscripted of Asian Sex Slaves", 103.

⁴⁰ ASEANUP, "Promoting Tourism in Amazing Thailand", <https://aseanup.com/promoting-tourism-amazing-thailand/>, accessed 10 June 2017.

⁴¹ Lonely Planet, *Thailand's Islands & Beaches*, "Tourism & the Environment", 20.

I draw upon this brief moment between Lapcharoensap's main character and his mother because of what she divulges to her son: a portrait of Thais who are jaded and exhausted by the constant bombardment of tourism in the kingdom. She paints a picture that reprimands tourists for not wanting an "authentic" Thai experience, but, more so, the illusions of an Oriental spectacle promoted in the popular imaginary. The mother's main point is that tourists do not seek out Thailand for Thailand, but, for instance, the popularized display shown in contemporary media – such as Hollywood's interpretation of the Southeast Asian nation. As such, the desire for such a distilled and highly produced image of Thailand is sought and more aligned with an orientalized promise of adventure, forbidden pleasures, and sexual desires free from moral constraint. Such images relate to Hollywood's "Asia" which, as scholar Gina Marchetti explains, is a "romance with Asia [that] tends to be a flirtation with the exotic rather than an attempt at any genuine intercultural understanding".⁴²

⁴² Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

The mother's sentiment relaying that what all the tourists long for from Thailand are elephant rides, women, and beaches is equally defined by the commentary with which Rattawut Lapcharoensap opens "Farangs". He writes that the main character and his mother count down the days and note the different seasons by citing the various kinds of experiences that they have with passing tourists of all ethnicities and races. Lapcharoensap notes that in June:

the Germans come to the Island – football cleats, big T-shirts, thick tongues – speaking like spitting. July: the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans... Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. They may pretend to like pad thai [sp] or grilled prawns or the occasional curry, but twice a week they need their culinary comforts, their hamburgers and their pizzas. They're also the worst drunks. Never get too close to a drunk American. August brings the

Japanese. Stay close to them. Never underestimate the power of the yen. Everything's cheap with imperial monies in hand and they're too polite to bargain. By the end of August, when the monsoon starts to blow, they're all consorting, slapping each other's backs, slipping each other drugs, sleeping with each other, sipping their liquor under the pink lights of the Island's bars. By September they've all deserted, leaving the Island to the Aussies and the Chinese, who are so omnipresent one need not mention them at all.⁴³

⁴³ Lapcharoensap, *Sightseeing*, 1-2.

Thailand, according to the author and his characters, has further become and is cemented as a hedonistic playground for the outside world. There is a disregard to the sensitivity and authenticity of the place, a silencing of the local community and culture when the tourists come to visit. The ways in which the experiences of the global tourists are seemingly honored and their tastes, such as in food, are made accessible in a foreign land writes how local identities and cultures are muted and hybridized to structures of foreign power and capital. Silencing thus becomes a form of imperial translation and native cultures become palatable or easily indulged by foreign interests. In her discussion on the discourses of seduction and silencing, Lynn Thiesmeyer writes that the acts of silencing "takes several forms, among them censorship, distortion, displacement, disinterest, and death".⁴⁴ Though her article discusses the discourses of silencing in regards to sex work and sexploitation of the Asian female body, we can discern similarities as Thailand is gendered as female, constructed to appease the heteronormative and patriarchal desires of the West. Thus, the acts of privileging "more comfortable" wants and enjoying the local scenery in the ways that it is made easily digestible are acts of censorship, distortion, and silencing to appease the desires of the tourist in Thailand. These acts further implicate such destinations as feminized and "open for business" as seemingly patriarchal nations and, by extension, their citizens trek across oceans and time zones to partake in the degradation and superficial nature of touristic travel.

⁴⁴ Lynn Thiesmeyer, "The West's 'Comfort Women' and the Discourses of Seduction", in Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 70.

Yet, the fact that Lapcharoensap and his characters note such disregards and excess redefines the kinds of boundaries between tourists and brown labor. The Thai bodies that the author writes about thus exist beyond the packaged deal of travel and leisure purchased by those who come to vacation in exotic beach getaways. The ways that Rattawut Lapcharoensap's characters bookmark the excessive and ostensibly animalistic and uncivilized behaviors of tourists reorganize the gaze from the vacationer to the local and the working-class labor in the Global South. There is subversive agency in the ways that Lapcharoensap and his protagonists make note of what the Thai culture and landscape can offer as opposed to what travelers truly want and crave. Their notable and reprimanding perceptions of visitors who come to vacation and create an apocalyptic landscape through their participations in a fantasy paradise demonstrate the kind of mess that Manalansan describes as marshalling new techniques to "funking up and mobilizing new understandings of stories, values, objects, and space/time

⁴⁵ Manalansan, “Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives”, 99.

arrangements”.⁴⁵ The experience of the tourist or visitor is not the privileged one, but instead, and more importantly, on the foreground is the voice and the agency of those meant to retreat into the background as hired help and labor.

Another key motif that has emerged in both fictional pieces is the way that global communities, particularly the West, see both Thailand and the Hawaiian Islands as sites dedicated to accommodating foreign interests, desires, and bodies. For instance, Hawai‘i has been continuously marketed as the land of “aloha”, a term of reciprocal love and generosity, whereas the value of the term and ideology has been cheapened and misconstrued to appease mass tourism. In Kahakauwila’s book, the women of Housekeeping are described in one scene as enjoying a night out at one of the local bars in Waikīkī. They spend their moments drinking and gossiping while surveying the crowd, socializing with local folks they know. A sports game is on, but, as the women mention to themselves, such a game is “always on” as it doubles for the bar being a sexualized harvesting ground for both locals and tourists.⁴⁶

⁴⁷ Like “farang”, the Hawaiian term “haole” denotes a person who is not Native Hawaiian; a foreigner or white person.

Amidst it all, the women of Housekeeping direct their gaze to one tourist in particular: Susan, a “haole” girl from the continent.⁴⁷ The women describe Susan as barely twenty-one, wearing a tank-top with a neon orange skirt. As she bends over, the top of her pink thong shows, exposing itself to the women and all of those at the bar. The women note that Susan is in a hurry; she is in a rush to pair herself off with one of the available men at the establishment as to enjoy her night in “paradise” and its promises of escapism through physical desire.

⁴⁸ Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 22.

As Susan sizes up the room and takes in all that is in front of her, the women of Housekeeping begin to drink and the bar manager, being one of their friends, lines up shots of alcohol for the women – including one for this young woman from the “mainland”. Susan hurriedly gulps down the shot and thanks both the women and the bar manager for their hospitality. “Thanks for sharing”, she says. However, Lani, one of the women, annoyingly retorts “She not one of us, her”, loud enough for Susan to hear.⁴⁸ Rejected and possibly confused, the young girl from the continent leaves, whispering annoyingly to her brother, “*Everyone talks about aloha here, but it’s like Hawaiians are all pissed off. They live in paradise. What is there to be mad about*” (emphasis mine).⁴⁹ This young girl’s reproach stuns the women as they look at each other, the heat of anger and annoyance rising to their faces. In their minds they reply that “[their] families are barely affording a life here, the land is being eaten away by developers, the old sugar companies still control water rights. *Not only does paradise no longer belong to us, but we have to watch foreigners destroy it. We have plenty of aloha for someone who appreciates it. We have none for a girl like this*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22-23.

⁵⁰ Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 23.

This highly intimate moment is of interest as it plays up to the fantasies and misconceptions of the term “aloha” and Hawaiian culture, simultaneously engaging discussions of who owns language and culture and who is able to define it – especially in terms of indigenous and Native communities. Haunani-Kay Trask

writes, “Because of colonization, the question of *who* defines *what* is Native, and even *who* is defined as Native has been taken away from Native peoples by Western-trained scholars, government officials, and other technicians. This theft in itself testifies to the pervasive power of colonialism ... and [the] sometime vicious denials by the dominant culture”.⁵¹ Susan’s declaration that “aloha” should be a given when visiting the Hawaiian Islands is a blatant disregard of the histories of colonization and cultural theft that continues to impact the Hawaiian people, their indigenous cultures and languages. In saying that “Everyone talks about aloha here”, Susan and those who claim to know the nature of the term open up the borders of definition beyond Hawaiian ownership of the language and its meanings; language thus becomes porous and is impacted by anyone who desires to wield it. The term is cheapened and constructed by dominant discourses as a subversive act that “aloha-giving innocents” should give freely by acting out particular performative codes of conduct.⁵² If locals and Native communities do not perform said depictions of Hawaiian openness and hospitality, benevolent signs of obedience and civilization, what is left are the antiquarian images of Hawai‘i and its people as excessive, uncontrollable, and primitive.

⁵¹ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 43.

⁵² Noelani Arista and Judy Kertész, “Aloha Denied”, *The Hawaiian Independent*, February 25, 2014, Web <http://hawaiiindependent.net/story/aloha-denied>, accessed February 3, 2017.

These westernized ideas of “aloha”, images of Hawai‘i as “an eternal paradise”, in addition to the assumed savage and primitive nature of “Hawaiianess” only lend hand to the romantic ideal facilitated by years of American occupation and imperial commercialization. In this sense, the U.S. is defined as an overbearing male protectorate in relation to a feminized and all-giving Hawai‘i. Such a relationship builds upon the idea that “Hawaiianess” is ornamental to the West, providing only entertainment and leisure to neocolonial projects and interests. Susan, in denouncing the fact that she was not treated with the expected “aloha” by local brown bodies, reaffirms her role as a white woman of privilege and power, extending U.S. imperial agency and domesticity across its continental borders.

Comparatively, Rattawut Lapcharoensap’s opening chapter, “Farangs”, delicately crafts a moment where the main character attempts to woo his love interest, Lizzie, the American tourist, with a day of riding aging elephants in a Thai forest. As they approach “MR. MONGKHON’S JUNGLE SAFARI”, Lapcharoensap’s protagonist and Lizzie are confronted by the establishment’s owner, Uncle Mongkhon, who, in Thai, reprimands Lizzie for wearing only a bikini to his business. He yells to the Thai teenager, “Tell that girl to put on some clothes. You know damn well I don’t let bikinis ride. This is a respectable establishment”.⁵³ Mongkhon goes on to say,

⁵³ Lapcharoensap, *Sightseeing*, 11.

“Need I remind you, boy, that the elephant is our national symbol? Sometimes I think your stubborn farang half keeps you from understanding this. You should be ashamed of yourself. I would tell your ma if it wouldn’t break her heart....

‘What if I went to [Lizzie’s] country and rode a bald eagle in my underwear, huh?’ he continued, pointing at Lizzie. ‘How would she like it? Ask her, will

you?”⁵³

The young teen tries to pacify the owner by telling Lizzie that Uncle Mongkhon is making a big deal out of nothing, and that it really is not a problem at all. Mongkhon, as a person still attempting to sell elephant rides to tourists, interjects and directly says to Lizzie, “Not a big problem, madam. Just a small one”.⁵⁴ Lapcharoensap’s central character, in hopes to appease both Uncle and Lizzie’s mild embarrassment, removes his own shirt so that his female companion can cover herself as they continue on with the ride.

The moment and exchange are quick and seemingly trivial; however, if we carefully untether the scene, what can be clearly discussed are the ways in which tourism directs how locals and their communities adhere to foreign and touristic needs. The scene is striking as it depicts the kinds of power dynamics engaged in lands written by the West as key spots for leisure. More precisely, while Lizzie is reprimanded for wearing a bikini while attempting to ride a revered creature in Thailand, she is also somewhat pardoned by Uncle, critical of the girl’s appearance and the exposure of her body; through the slight ease on his critique, he symbolically emphasizes Thailand’s personified image of “land of the smiles” and its supposed openness towards foreigners. Despite the fact that it is a major feature for the character and, by extension, Thailand that people – whether Thai or not – are to be appropriately clothed and behaved while in the presence of a highly regarded animal, Uncle Mongkhon softens his critique when comforting Lizzie about her semi-bare body. This calls to our attention the seemingly superimposed idea and sociocultural constructed notion of Thais adhering to the concept of “saving face” and having “náam jai”, kindness or thoughtfulness, towards one another and, through nationally-sanctioned projects and projections, towards visitors. In *Thailand Fever*, a complexly problematic “how-to” book about understanding Thai and Western relationships, the co-authors write that “Thais place great value on [an] orderly society and maintaining a peaceful face to society – relatively more than Westerners do. Avoiding confrontation and maintaining face sometimes even take priority over telling the truth, which they rarely do in Western cultures”.⁵⁵ Such rhetoric emphasizes a perception of Thais’ overarching desire to be non-confrontational, avoiding any forms of tension or disrespect towards others even at the risk of sacrificing and muddling their own longings.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Pirazzi and Vasant, *Thailand Fever*, 84.

As written in *Sightseeing* and further emphasized in supplemental texts like *Thailand Fever*, the idea of saving face or “náam jai”, although traditionally useful and very real in defining Thai personhood, have thus become hegemonic strategies established by the state and society to control Thai citizens; this strategy further imparts to the world the perverse mentality that Thailand is all accommodating and hospitable. Such motions of Thai openness and willingness to make sacrifices while extending hospitality to friends and strangers only accentuate the inequality between Thais and others, further promoting that, in the end, Thais believe that all

things are acceptable. This idea is eerily similar to the evolved and perverse uses of the Hawai'i's "aloha" as something to be "demanded or commanded" by the foreigner as a spectacle of brown servitude or domestication.⁵⁶ The fact that these cultural feelings and local practices have been used to foster a fantasy of brown subjugation within the contexts of Thai and Hawaiian tourism emphasizes not necessarily a disposition to participate, but, more violently, the colonial theft and imperial misuse of local traditions and beliefs.

⁵⁶ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 141.

Additionally, Lizzie wearing a bikini is symbolically loaded in its relationship to the scene as a whole. Thailand is very open and liberal in some respects; however, in the intersections of gender and decency, nudity and exposure in the nation-state are highly frowned upon as the kingdom is still quite conservative and guided by a royalist elite and "paternal rule".⁵⁷ Although it is problematic to compare codes of conduct and modesty between nations, the fact that Uncle Mongkhon disapproves of Lizzie wearing a bikini underlines the ways that women are sexualized and even demonized, thus making reductive gender equality in Thailand. Lizzie's bikini highlights the portrayal by Thailand, in some cases, of the West as "sex mad" (*ba se k*), and Westerns in Bangkok find themselves stereotyped as libertines guided by an anachronistic 1960s philosophy of 'free sex'.⁵⁸ The conflation of Lizzie with this stereotype produces differing modes of exploitation and gender inequity in regards to how gender and sexuality are policed or believed to be performed in and for the nation-state. In *Thailand Fever*, the coauthors, an American and a Thai woman, both observe that women – especially Thai women – are held to a different standard in terms of public and private spheres. They say that "[The Thai woman] is heavily pressured in society to look and act modest and chaste. To be seen as a 'good' woman, she dresses conservatively and acts politely and deferentially".⁵⁹ While such forms of regulatory control on gender performance and identity are problematic and, at times, seen as oppressive, Lapcharoensap's deliberate interest in underlining Lizzie, her bikini, and Uncle Mongkhon's reaction speak to the kinds of gender constructions created both in Thailand as well as the differing attitudes at play within Thai gender discourse.

⁵⁷ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 235.

⁵⁸ Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook, *Genders & Sexualities in Modern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 1999), 19.

⁵⁹ Pirazzi and Vasant, *Thailand Fever*, 116.

Bearing Witness: Fiction as Writing One's Own Literary Tradition and History

The purpose of comparing these two fictional accounts is not to rehash Manichean discourses incurred in the aftermath of tourism, but, rather, to privilege the gaze of local communities in the stir of Western tourism's post-apocalyptic landscape. For mainstream tourism to work, it needs, amongst many things, the perverse gaze of the tourist to frame and continually look upon a people, their nation, and their culture under a disassociated guise. The fantasy constructed through this torrid veil is one that equally romanticizes people of color and their lands while Orientalizing them as non-Western and unable to fit into modernist views of what is deemed to be "normal". Correspondingly, this essay thus attempted to examine two specific

fictional accounts written from individuals located in particular regions and communities. Their works came out of racialized histories that critically engaged long histories of imperial tourism and participation upon the land, further investing in local and brown voices that offer counter-narratives to dominant discourse.

In privileging the fictional and diasporic works of Lapcharoensap and Kahakauwila, I return to the concept of “porno-tropicality” by thinking about its radical potentiality. I find myself contemplating upon a radical porno-tropical framework almost in a *surrealist* vein, a surrealism based on those who are most exploited and on the verge of extermination by the machinery of empire yet creatively embark upon the persistence they have to keep writing and creating against it. To this effect, Lapcharoensap and Kahakauwila’s works are urgent and necessary as they offer us a glimpse into the exaggerated ways that communities of color around the world continue to suffer at the hands of global capitalism and mass tourism, as well as racialized and sexualized forms of representation as defined by imperial powers. Their works disobey Western and global assumptions of place and history, dangerously confronting paternal, heteronormative and predominantly White structures of power and representation. As such, these authors enact a sensuous pleasure; a porno-tropicality of the local and the “Native” that exceeds the imperial gaze and the colonizer’s view. Their work subverts the gaze by reinscribing themselves into these, sometimes, fragmented spaces. Placing emphasis on literature created by diasporic brown writers offers us a nuanced look at the ways that individuals are using art and creative writing to process both their positionalities in the world as well as their ethnic communities. Creating stories to contend with dominant neocolonial discourse is thus a way of fostering a critical historiography while embarking upon a form of storytelling that, as Trinh T. Minh-ha poetically suggests, enacts a “chain of guardianship and of transmission – in other words, of creation”.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana U. P., 1989), 149.

Unruly Bodies and Untamed Voices. Re-writing the Immortal through *Tales of Amnesia*

Abstract: Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia* references *Amar Chitra Katha*, one of India's most widely read comic books. Ganesh's work interrogates the patriarchal logics perpetuated in the series by creating a separate enclave in which she disrupts the phallogocentric signifiers and normative structures of the referent, giving way instead to a rigorous engagement with the uncontainable multiplicity of the female narrative. This essay examines how through a combination of words and images, the artwork takes on a subversive texture by apparently mimicking convention only to invert the locus of the original discourse into a meditation upon the power dynamics that surround the representation of gender. Through the unrestrained performativity of a 'messy' and unrestrained body, Ganesh posits her work in dialogue with Judith Butler's seminal question about what it means being female. The arguments put forth suggest that through her rendition of a childhood comic, mired in the indigenous familiarity of collective memory, Ganesh recalls cultural nostalgia only to reposition it entirely – telling people to remember and, like the eponymous protagonist Amnesia, forget the constrained male-hegemonic power dynamics perpetuated by the purportedly *immortal* picture stories.

Keywords: *gender, hegemony, hybridity, jungle, nostalgia, performativity*

A Tale of Two *Kathas*: *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tales of Amnesia*

The comic books *Amar Chitra Katha*¹ (*ACK*), which translates into 'immortal picture stories', were founded by educationalist Anant Pai in 1967 in order "to teach Indian children about Hindu myths and the history of India"² and are still in production today with over four hundred and forty titles and a print run of more than one hundred million issues. The fundamental impact and position of *Amar Chitra Katha* within the Indian³ cultural context cannot be stressed enough and they have come to be regarded as "foundational texts for the religious and national education"⁴ helping "to define, for several generations of readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian".⁵ Interestingly, despite its highly nationalistic flavour in dealing with a subject matter that is profoundly steeped in traditional Indian culture,⁶ soon after its inception, this post-independence comic book adopted English,⁷ and was only later translated into Hindi and other Indian languages. The socio-historical background that influenced the linguistic choice of the *ACK* is significant and according to Saisha Grayson was, from the start: "simultaneously produced by and helping to produce an English-speaking, westernized urban middle-class that was actively seeking to enforce an ideal of Indian gender identities that were now indelibly shaped by colonial-era constructs of their own cultural history".⁸ Using English as the language of the series helped to expand and

¹ *Katha* is the Hindi word for "story or tale".

² Kurt Shaw, "Chitra Ganesh uses comics to convey weighty issues", available on <http://www.indianartnews.com/2011/08/artist-chitra-ganesh-uses-comics-to.html>, accessed November 19, 2016.

³ According to Saisha Grayson, *ACK* was "also equally part of the push to make Hinduism and Indianism synonymous in the post-colonial reconfiguration around independence". S. Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines: Re-Deconstruction in Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia*", http://www.academia.edu/2650672/Breathing_Between_the_Lines_Re-Deconstruction_in_Chitra_Ganeshs_Tales_of_Amnesia, accessed November 19, 2016.

⁴ <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0002.xml>, accessed November 19, 2016.

⁵ <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0002.xml>, accessed November 19, 2016.

⁶ According to Karlene McLain, professor of Religious Studies at Bucknell University: "Its first heroes were Hindu gods and goddesses including Krishna, Rama, and Durga, whose stories were drawn from classical Hindu mythology. In the 1970s, historical Indian figures were added into the mix, including medieval warrior kings such as Shivaji and Akbar and modern freedom fighters such as Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi". <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0002.xml>, accessed November 19, 2016.

⁷ "The English *ACK* titles begin from number eleven because the first ten were in Kannada", says G.K. Ananthram, the book salesman responsible for leading the production of the first *ACK* books in 1965 in Bangalore, India. It was Ananthram "who originally persuaded the owner of India Book House (which previously specialised in importing English-language novels) to publish a comic-book series for young readers, printed in *Kannada*, one of the official 'scheduled' languages of India. Buoyed by the comics' initial success, Ananthram submitted a further proposal to India Book House, suggesting the series be expanded and revamped as an English-language title featuring mythological Indian stories; the company took up his suggestion, but turned instead to Anant Pai to develop the project further". <https://phantomcomicsurvey.wordpress.com/tag/amar-chitra-katha/>, accessed November 19, 2016.

The imagery [of *Amar Chitra Katha*] was so interesting because it's so much about the women being pure or noble or maternal or supportive of their husbands, or quiet or passive. All of these conventional models of femininity but then, at the same time, they dress like *I Dream of Jennie*, very Barbie and with tits and ass. I wanted to use some of the existing imagery to insert a different perspective into how these myths are told.¹⁶

Ganesh's work explores the tensions that lie in the contradiction between the at once subservient and highly sexualized women of the *ACK* tradition who are trapped within the confined rubric of masculine structures of interpretation, from which the performativity¹⁷ of their female body emerges. As Butler argues: "Performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition".¹⁸ Through the act of continuous repetition, the *ACK* imposes a certain set of specific feminine behaviours and mannerisms – 'performances' – from which no deviation is expected, cast within a mould of a desirable but undesiring female form. The downcast eyes of the demure female characters¹⁹ portrayed in the *Amar Chitra Katha* stand in sharp contrast to the wide-eyed alluring stare of the come-hither nymphets in *Tales of Amnesia*, who are unashamed in their voice, strength and sexuality. By creating an artwork that marks such a direct parallel to the original referent forces a critical investigation of the problematics that Ganesh seeks to call attention to as she examines the disjuncture in what she calls the "don't ask, don't tell' quality of Indian culture".²⁰

The "repeated stylization" of the coy female body remains static in its representation in the *ACK* with a voice that is subdued under an immovable veil of passivity, underlining Hélène Cixous' argument that "either a woman is passive or she does not exist"²¹ and it is only through the suppression of her own desire that in turn releases her desirability. If one is to consider for instance the depiction of the female body in *Shakuntala* (*ACK* no. 12, 1970) the title character is, both on the cover page and through the comic, as though immobilized, through the control of her gestures and framed, through a voyeuristic²² consumption of her voluptuous, semi-naked body.²³ *Shakuntala* performs her smothered desire within the confines of her fixedness, existing only at the pleasure of the male gaze, in which her passivity casts her as an object of erotic desire. *Tales of Amnesia* engages with the very constructs of "why the traditional male gazes upon a naked female body and automatically invests it with pornographic content, and how to subvert that".²⁴

Ganesh challenges the active/male - passive/female dichotomy espoused by the *ACK* and completely recasts the female body by breaking the mould (set by the referent) in order "to confuse, or perhaps to refuse, traditional gender distinctions, to problematize phallogocentric seeings and readings of women's bodies".²⁵ The unconcealed nakedness and sexual appeal of Ganesh's characters hint at the pornographic and border on the titillating, and expresses the once stifled libidinal

¹⁶ Artist's Statement available at <http://velvetparkmedia.com/blogs/vp-issue-5-10-2012-1-i-dream-of-jennie>, accessed August 12, 2012. *I Dream of Jennie* is an American sitcom from the 1970's starring the curvaceous, blond Barbara Eden as the central character clad in a midriff bearing bustier and harem pants.

¹⁷ Judith Butler argues that gender is performative, not an intrinsic stable category and it is through a series of repeated actions that produce "a series of effects" from which a representation of what it means to be a man or a woman emerges.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.

¹⁹ For image please refer to <http://media.148apps.com/screenshots/341557336/us-iphone-5-krishna-and-mirabai-digest-amar-chitra-katha-comics.jpeg>.

²⁰ Artist's Statement.

²¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties. Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 64.

²² The voyeurism takes place both through Sage Kanva and a girlfriend who look on, and we as spectators who witness the passivity that underline her movements and controlled gestures.

²³ For image please refer to <http://ipad.qualityindex.com/apps/139205/shakuntala-the-classic-love-story-amar-chitra-katha-comics>.

²⁴ <http://www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/interviews/Toro%20Mag%20Louise%20Bak.pdf>, accessed September 14, 2016.

²⁵ Honi Fern Haber, "Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman", in Susan J. Hekman, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State U. P., 1996), 139.

²⁶ Ganesh says that the term is “compelling intersection of gender-based norms, as well as the legacy of colonialism”.

²⁷ Cixous, 889.

female urge that has finally rebelled from the stringent passivity that was enforced upon her. *Tales of Amnesia* vociferously challenges the condition of stasis of the female body through a parallel narrative that troubles the phallogocentric narration of the *ACK* discourse by introducing the *jungle*,²⁶ whose shape changing multiplicity reinterprets and resignifies the performativity of the traditional female depiction, giving voice to desire that for so long had “no room for her if she’s not a he”.²⁷

Restaging Tradition: The Narrative of the *Jungle* body

In *Tales of Amnesia* Ganesh apparently evokes the visual tradition of *ACK* only to subvert it completely, even framing the title of the series using the “Tales of...” appellation, which is commonly invoked by the series. In *The Front Cover* (which was also used as the front and back covers of her comic book in 2002), Ganesh shows an image of a monkey-girl, flying over a village landscape with arms outstretched reaching toward a fuchsia coloured sun. The unfurled scroll in the bottom right hand corner that reads: “How to stage the story? Her name was Amnesia, and it fit her like a brand new boxing glove. From a lineage of monkey girls”²⁸ reinforces a pedigree that links the hybrid body of the protagonist to a pointedly matriarchal ancestry (Figure 2).

²⁸ The format of the scroll at the bottom right corner is seen even in the Hanuman issue, with the text: “Hanuman was the child of Pavana, the wind god. One day he saw the raising sun and thinking it to be an apple he leapt towards it”. Thereby aligning Hanuman with a decidedly patriarchal origin.



Fig. 2

²⁹ When Hanuman was a baby he saw the sun in the sky, and thinking it was a fruit decided to fly toward it in an attempt to catch, and eat it.

³⁰ The *Hanuman* issue of the *ACK* depicts the young monkey-god in the foreground, suspended high in mid-air, and with his arms stretched out, reaching out toward the bright red sun. For image please refer to <http://media.148apps.com/screenshots/317960435/us-ipad-2-hanuman-the-monkey-god-amar-chitra-katha-comics.jpeg>.

³¹ Artist’s Statement.

The frame is a direct allusion to the Hindu myth of the famed monkey-god Hanuman taken from the classic Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*.²⁹ More specifically, the artwork mimics the layout of the *ACK* issue *Hanuman* (*ACK* no. 19, 1971)³⁰ by using the familiar style of the “original” comic but in a way that the frames sit in an *unheimlich* juxtaposition; simultaneously attracting and repelling one another in their startling similarity and utter difference. Ganesh distorts her rendition to such an extent that the conceptual gap between the referent and the thing itself creates a kind of intentional uncanniness as a way to excavate the “different perspective”³¹

that the artist wants to draw attention to. According to Karline McLain, by adapting “the splash page from the Hanuman (no. 19, 1971) *Amar Chitra Katha* issue, [she transformed] the mythical monkey-god into a half-monkey, half human *jungalee* (wild or barbaric) girl who defies social norms”.³²

³² Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2009), 210.

The splash page is designed to grab the readers attention, with a strong visual appeal that is most often used as a way of introducing the hero, or in this case, the heroine, of the story. In the act of making an intervention in the ancient myth by visually staging Amnesia as the focal and only character of the splash page, Ganesh sets out in creating a different lexicon for the original story by suggesting that it is the female *junglee*, Amnesia that is the lead of her narrative and not the famed male deity Hanuman. Will Eisner explains the importance of a splash page:

The first page of the story functions as an introduction. What, or how much, it contains depends on the number of pages that follow. It is a launching pad for the narrative, and for most stories it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader's attention and prepares his attitude for the events to follow. It sets a 'climate'.³³

³³ Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 62.

In *The Front Cover*, Amnesia's refusal to be drawn into the confines of the male dominated pantheon of the *ACK* is marked by her very presence, which is also significantly and intentionally at the cost of Hanuman's. This act of “defiance” sets the tone of the narrative in which the complete erasure of all male gods is a gesture that entirely occludes the male voice, thus utterly destabilising the Hindu mythological traditions evoked by the *Amar Chitra Katha*.

Much of Ganesh's visual vocabulary engages with “the term ‘jungalee’ (literally ‘of the jungle’, connoting wildness and impropriety), an old colonial Indian idiom (still) used to describe women perceived as defiant or transgressing convention”.³⁴ *The role of the junglee* runs like a leitmotif through the comic standing as a symbol of rebellious and alternative (to the perceived mainstream) feminine power. Through her *Tales of Amnesia* Ganesh propagates a strongly *junglee* narrative, which reflects a concept that has had a significant impact on her work. According to Ganesh:

³⁴ Artist's statement available at http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/chitra_ganesh.php accessed 15 September 15, 2012.

Junglee narratives that have influenced my work come from all walks of myth and storytelling. They tend to involve female protagonists whose bodies refuse to remain contained within the space in which they are expected to stay. So these span the gamut, from *Alice in Wonderland* to Josephine Baker, from the Rani of Jhansi to Surpanakha.³⁵

³⁵ Louise Bak interviewing Chitra Ganesh, available at <http://toromagazine.com/legacy/6dd2f3d0-dbc4-ea84-35fc-9ce2bcf84d22/index.html>, accessed September 15, 2012.

In *Tales of Amnesia* this idea of lack of *containment* is expressed through both illustration and text by the titular character who stands as a proud embodiment of the *junglee*, liberated and untethered to the established social order. Amnesia is fundamentally an elusive presence and her primate form, as seen on the cover page, is not always literally a consistent figure, and her body morphs alongside the

non-linear storyline, through the work. As Grayson notes, Amnesia “remains a mystery throughout the text, a figure that must be constructed by individual readers through their own interpretations of shifting pronouns, images and temporal and spatial locations”.³⁶ Grayson’s analysis highlights the fluidity of the protagonist as she moves without restraint within the space of her performativity in which her voice, like her body, expresses the multiplicity of the female.

³⁶ Grayson, “Breathing Between the Lines”.

³⁷ Cixous’ feminist text was, in many ways, written in response to both Freud and Lacan; particularly on the former’s discourse on the *lack*. For Freud, the phallic looking serpents writhing on Medusa’s head represented castration anxiety resulting due to a subconscious fear of female genitalia as *lacking* a phallus (a state caused due to perceived castration).

³⁸ In Greek mythology Medusa had poisonous serpents instead of hair and had the ability to turn anyone who looked at her into stone.

³⁹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in Barry Brummett, ed., *Reading Rhetorical Theory* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 890.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 883.

In her seminal work *The Laugh of the Medusa*,³⁷ Cixous reimagines the Greek myth of Medusa³⁸ and uses the “feared” gorgon as a symbol of female empowerment. Through her recontextualization, Cixous offers an alternative way to conceive of the female body and encourages women to question the world they live in, working past the masculinised discourses they have been subjected to. Specifically, Cixous questions the male interpretation of the “lack” and replaces it with a theory of *multiplicity*, symbolically represented in the countless serpent-laden tendrils crowning Medusa’s head. The multiplicity that Cixous stresses and calls the “wonder of being several”,³⁹ is seen in the myriad roles and forms that the characters (all women) assume in Ganesh’s work. Cixous elevates Medusa, charging her with female energy and freedom in all its forms: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing”.⁴⁰ Ganesh’s approach to the *jungle* embraces the contradiction of being at once enticing and at the same time very unsettling:

The *jungle*’s defiance of patriarchal authority makes her a savage. I think the idea of an “untame woman” functions as both a seductive and repellent category. I’m interested in fleshing out this word, as it invites an exploration of how our notions of beauty and the grotesque are inextricably linked, and can only coexist side by side.⁴¹

⁴¹ Bak interviewing Ganesh.

Ganesh’s *jungle*, resonant of Cixous’ Medusa, stands as a reimagined symbol of uncontained female power that breaks through established logocentric hierarchies by challenging and indeed redefining the female in terms of agency and sexuality in order “to confuse, or perhaps to refuse, traditional gender distinctions”.⁴²

⁴² Haber, “Foucault Pumped”.

Agency in “Irregularity”: Exploring the *Jungle* Body

On her interaction with the female body Ganesh says:

I suggest alternative narratives of sexuality and power in a world where untold stories keep rising to the surface. In this process the body becomes a site of transgression, both social and psychic, doubled, dismembered, and continually exceeding its limits.⁴³

⁴³ Artist’s Statement available at <http://www.chitraganesh.com/statement.html>, accessed September 24, 2016.

In *Tales of Amnesia* the unrestrained female force is expressed “within a deliberately camp, and kitsch aesthetic that draws on 19th century portraiture as

much as lesbian pulp novels”⁴⁴ and is apparent in frames such as *Ghost, Telescope*, which explicitly shows oral sex taking place between women. In fact, *all* amorous interaction in the comic takes place only amongst female characters. In every erotic gesture the *jungle* joyfully explores every crevice of her body⁴⁵ (Figure 3), on her own or in company⁴⁶ heralding Luce Irigaray’s cry: “*Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost everywhere... [T]he geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined”.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ An explicit example of this would be the frame in which the vagina-like opening, located in the underarm area of a noblewoman, is touched by one of her attendees.

⁴⁶ For image please refer to https://www.thomaserben.com/artists/Ganesh/CG_collage9.php.

⁴⁷ Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One”, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 28.



Fig. 3

The power of the *jungle* is boundless and she is not limited by sex or circumstance to define the boundaries of her performativity. For instance, much of the visual imagery in *Tales of Amnesia* features mutilated body parts, especially floating arms and decapitated bodies; remarkably however, there is no lack of agency due to the seeming *impediment* and the female body becomes a site of power rather than one of subjugation.

The frame *Godzilla* (Figure 4) depicts two young women playing with a freshly severed arm, tossing it around, back and forth as though a ball. For its part, the bloody appendage gambols playfully, soaring in the sky, as if it has a life of its own. Interestingly, the arm, like those of the women who play with it, is adorned with bangles, customarily associated in Indian culture as being an ornament worn by married women.⁴⁸ In other frames as well, there are instances of dismembered body parts that are constantly either in a state of action and movement, participating in conventionally perceived acts of female transgression like indulging in same-sex masturbation or otherwise “masculine activities” like fighting. It is almost as though the nonchalant attitude with which the activities are engaged in marks a kind of disregard toward traditions and patriarchal dominance. In frames such *Real Life Crowds* or in *Dear X & My Heart*⁴⁹ Ganesh portrays bodies that despite being decapitated are not deprived of the power of speech thereby giving the “mute female” a voice that had, since many comic books past, like Spivak’s subaltern woman, been stifled under masculine command.

⁴⁸ For further information on the significance of bangles in the Indian culture please refer to: <http://www.bollywoodshaadis.com/articles/the-true-significance-of-bangles-in-indian-culture-1665>.

⁴⁹ The headless body says: “my heart sat up, exited its cavity and began to wander across the page”. Chitra Ganesh, *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002-2007 (text from detail). For image please refer to http://www.artnet.com/artists/chitra-ganesh/dear-x-my-heart-tales-of-amnesia-uv-l3AfXJsj5M_fau96zmA2.

⁵⁰ For image please refer to <http://velvetparkmedia.com/blogs/vp-issue-5-ales-amnesia-chitra-ganesh-2003>.

⁵¹ Traditionally Durga has up to eight arms representing the eight quadrants in Hinduism. There are, however known depictions of her having up to eighteen arms.

⁵² Jessica Shaffer’s analysis that draws a parallel to western “feminist imagery as Betye Saar’s *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, or even *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969, by Valie Export, both picturing stereotyped minority women with rifles”. Jessica Shaffer, “Chitra Ganesh: Tales of Amnesia”, available at <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/pub/departments/bcurj/1573.htm> accessed September 29, 2012.

There is a particularly glorious celebration of both the female body and voice in the frame *The mystery kept howling at me*⁵⁰ where the speaking subject is a decapitated figure with multiple arms. The image enters once again into dialogue with Hindu mythology and references Lord Shiva’s consort Durga, the fierce multi-armed⁵¹ warrior goddess; even more specifically, Ganesh draws a parallel to a frame in the *ACK Tales of Durga* (no.514, 1978).⁵² As Grayson notes:

Durga first appears in her own issue only at the behest of the male gods, and then only to battle a demon that can be killed by female hands alone [fig]. This

staging demotes Durga, making her fundamentally a product of the male pantheon, created to answer a limited need.⁵³

The *ACK* rendition of the myth shows the creation process with white energy beams coming from the eyes of the *Trimurti* (Sanskrit: “three forms”) comprising of the main triumvirate of Hindu gods – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva⁵⁴ – that together create the Goddess Durga who appears in the midst of a puff of pink smoke.⁵⁵ The scene that Ganesh illustrates recalls the comic representation in a stylistic sense, however there is a complete obliteration of the figures of the male gods and rays of light emanate out of space to create “her own image of a self-generated, self-sufficient, and self-pleasuring vision of the Goddess”.⁵⁶ Ganesh’s rendition of the myth surrounding Durga’s creation depicts arms that are unbangled and free-moving with the Goddess unshackled and proud as she unabashedly pleasures herself; the severed forearm on the ground points up to her as though directing the reader’s attention and reinforcing the *jungle* presence as the true protagonist of the tale (Figure 5).

The power of the frame is rooted in its obvious hybridity and the unbridled agency that the body exhibits in spite of being deprived of a head whose absence seems almost inconsequential. Ganesh’s *jungle* speaks a language that voices the performativity of her body and is reflected in the accompanying caption that reads: “The mystery kept howling at me. I hadn’t yet considered the possibility of my body splitting in two”.⁵⁷ There is no obvious connection between the speech bubble and the image or even what exactly the “mystery” being referred to is, yet there is a sort of haunting quality that leaves the reader in the very unclear ambiguous space that Ganesh seeks to emphasise.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Breaking and Creating: The Narrative of the *Jungle* voice

The shifting multiplicity of the *jungle* is reflected in the mutability of her body and voice. However it is upon what Cixous calls the “limitless country” of the “unconscious”⁵⁸ that Ganesh ultimately chooses to set the stage. The artist’s technique calls upon a multilayered process that encompasses both a visual account and an *Other* sort of subliminal narrative that runs parallel to the *ACK* in order to reconstruct her own existential tale. The retelling forces a complete disjuncture

⁵³ Grayson, “Breathing Between the Lines”.

⁵⁴ The *Trimurti* comprises of: Brahma is the creator; Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer and represent the three main functions of God—creation, sustenance and destruction.

⁵⁵ For image please refer to <https://i2.wp.com/www.allaboutindianism.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Durga-Appears.jpg>.

⁵⁶ Grayson, “Breathing Between the Lines”.

⁵⁷ Chitra Ganesh, *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002-2007, text from detail.

⁵⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, 882.

with the referent in a manner that further highlights the conscious rejection of the possibility of a steady, “conventional” narrative scheme with a linear coherence. The dreamy manner of the artist’s writing has an almost stream of consciousness texture and draws upon a style that is cryptic and seductive, standing in sharp contrast to the regimented staccato of the *ACK*. Ganesh’s narrative structure is utterly fractured and her decentered textual vocabulary is neatly contained within separate frames with individually contained accounts that are infused with an intense level of self-reflexivity (Figure 6).⁵⁹ The apparently disjointed narratives are woven into a *jungle* tale that like the body of its protagonist is fluid and elusive; Ganesh blatantly rejects all traditional arrangements of formalized writing, which Cixous sees as representative of oppressive masculine domination: “libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy”.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For image please refer to http://outofprintmagazine.co.in/archive/march-2015-issue/chitra-ganesh_tales-of-amnesia.html.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 883.



Fig. 6

There is an unsettling dissonance between text and image and “one is confronted with mysterious sentences reminiscent of *écriture automatique*, the writing technique of the surrealists aimed at bringing subconscious images and thoughts to the surface”.⁶¹ According to *L’écriture Feminine* “women’s writing is a codification of female sexuality”⁶² where the woman’s body is written into the text “from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”.⁶³ An argument could align Ganesh’s rendition of the *ACK* as a form of mimicry as she seemingly participates “in precisely that which is mimed”,⁶⁴ however the artist successfully battles the “language of phallogocentrism”⁶⁵ and “phallogocentric signification”⁶⁶ through the *jungle*, consequently radically undermining all configurations of male logocentrism. It is as though yet again Amnesia slips through the cracks and refuses, even with her voice, to be classified – as either entirely essentialist or purely performative, rather embracing both/and as opposed to either/or. Ultimately,

⁶¹ Achim Drucks, “Chitra Ganesh: Subversive Myths”, available at <http://db-artmag.com/en/61/feature/chitra-ganesh-subversive-myths/>, accessed November 19, 2016.

⁶² http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=english_diss.

⁶³ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, 347.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Amnesia, the *jungle*, is a *body that matters*.

Writing is intertwined into the liberation of the female voice, which will “shatter the framework” and create a separate space, distinct and free from the phallogocentric system of language in which, “what is left of her is unthinkable, unthought”.⁶⁷ The universal appeal of Ganesh’s art lies in her expression of the “unthinkable” thoughts and even though her work seeks referent in the South Asian comic book she is ultimately and fundamentally, a “woman writing woman” – all women. According to Ganesh: “I am definitely making a critique on gendered representations and gendered power but just because the imagery has South Asian connotations, that doesn’t automatically mean that I am referring to a South Asian community”.⁶⁸ In *Tales of Amnesia*, Ganesh unleashes the driving force of Amnesia’s *jungle* body and she derives “pleasure from this gift of alterability”⁶⁹ writing “her body in order to discover herself. She must explore her *jouissance*, her sexual pleasure, so as to bring down phallogocentric discourse and, ultimately, change the world”.⁷⁰

Tales of Amnesia employs strategies that illustrate female figures who “function predominantly as a metaphor and repository for cultural, social and personal conflict ... in larger arenas of sexual codes and storytelling”⁷¹ and speak a language which dialogues with gender theory in a way that fleshes out the corpus of Ganesh’s investigations. The ‘messiness’ of the *jungle* body stages itself somewhere between diverse cultural narratives that are at once deeply grounded in Indian cultural idioms, especially in terms of the mythology and traditions, as well as Western performative media and theory that articulates the female voice through *écriture féminine* and the performativity of the female body. Deploying Western theory to illustrate an ethic that is so grounded in Indian culture is also to acknowledge the transnational fluidness of the diasporic identity, which Ganesh herself is intrinsically a part.

Rewriting Unalienable “Truths”: Forgetting and Remembering in *Tales of Amnesia*

Through her manner of storytelling, both what is presented in the images and implied in the text, is as though Ganesh is rewriting what Michel Foucault called the “regime of truths”,⁷² which are a set of norms particular to each society. According to Foucault:

Truth isn’t outside of power or lacking in power ... as a thing of this world, truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints and induces regular effect of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth. That is the type of discourse it accepts and makes function as true.⁷³

What Foucault is postulating is that power is exerted in a society through

⁶⁷ Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out”, 64.

⁶⁸ Artist’s Statement available at <http://db-artmag.com/en/61/feature/chitra-ganesh-subversive-myths/>, accessed August 12, 2015.

⁶⁹ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, 890.

⁷⁰ Clara Junker, “Writing (With) Cixous”, *College English*, 50.4 (April 1988), 426.

⁷¹ <http://www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/interviews/Toro%20Mag%20Louise%20Bak.pdf>, accessed September 14, 2016.

⁷² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Colin Gordon (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990), 131.

⁷³ Ibid.

certain unalienable “truths” and it is through the discourse of these “truths” that oppression, subjugation and domination are perpetuated. The *Amar Chitra Katha* stories function within the patriarchal power structure of these “truths” and through the performative actions of their characters, continue a subsequent reinforcement of them. Ganesh calls upon the *jungalee* as a medium to rewrite these ostensible “certainties” as a way to inverse the rubric and provide a space and platform for female expression that is in no way linked to, or limited by, the stringent hegemonies of traditional socio-cultural dictates propagated by the *ACK* series. Ganesh’s work subverts male logocentrism and proposes instead a kind of “feminist fantasy ... in which the female heroine begins in the realm of traditional culture” of the *Amar Chitra Katha* “and moves away from its rules and restrictions”⁷⁴ into the enigmatic space of the *Tales of Amnesia*.

Ganesh’s work premises a kind of nostalgic familiarity with the *Amar Chitra Katha* series counting on a parallel being made to the original: “Everyone our age grew up reading the comics. I use a medium that is used to educate to bring people in, to bring the viewer in. You get in there and then it becomes all wonky and surreal”.⁷⁵

In her art, Ganesh recalls the past through nostalgia but in a way that challenges “the layers of repression of subaltern histories, memories, desires, and subjectivities on which both state and diasporic nationalist ideologies depend”⁷⁶ by messing up defined boundaries and provoking established structures. Ganesh understands *Amar Chitra Katha* as a series that represents a kind of “collective memory [used] to document the traditions, rituals, and history”;⁷⁷ and as Sveltana Boym argues, “stories are the best narratives of nostalgia – not only because they suffer through nostalgia, but also because they challenge it”.⁷⁸ What Boym points out is exactly the manner of interaction Ganesh has with the comic; by interrogating culturally perpetuated nostalgia, Ganesh manages to combat the desire to return to the time-honoured myths, and consequently the norms, that are perpetuated by the *Amar Chitra Katha*. *Tales of Amnesia* uses the idea of a comic steeped in the familiarity of childhood nostalgia to create an adult deconstruction of the same by offering an education through a perpetuation of a very different kind of ‘immortal picture stories’.

⁷⁴ Nancy A. Walker, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (Jackson and London: U. P. of Mississippi, 1990), 150.

⁷⁵ Artist’s Statement in Mary Thomas, “Comic-book style brings home Word of God (ess)’ exhibition to the Warhol”, available at <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/ae/art-architecture/comic-book-style-brings-home-word-of-godess-exhibition-to-the-warhol-310634/?print=1>, accessed September 29, 2012.

⁷⁶ Gayatri Gopinath, “Chitra Ganesh’s Queer Revisions”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, XV (2009), 469.

⁷⁷ Agnew, 204.

⁷⁸ Sveltana Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, available at http://www.iasc-culture.org/eNews/2007_10/9.2CBoym.pdf, accessed November 19, 2016.

Postcards from the Apocalypse. Contemplating (or Making Sense of?) Mess in War Photography*

Abstract: Is it morally justifiable to work as a photographer in war zones and disaster areas? Why are we all so attracted to images of other people's misery? Do these images make us more aware of the horror that we are able to generate and will this knowledge be useful in order to avoid generating such chaos? Alison articulates a reflection on photography as a tool for contemplating the mess but also for making sense of it.

Keywords: *conflict, documentary, memory, photobook, photography, war*

The first time I took *War Porn* in my hands – taking it from the shelf where it was on display among the finalists for the title of Best Photobook of the Year during the 2015 edition of Paris Photo Fair – I had the same reaction many others had.

I opened it, I flipped through a few pages, I closed it abruptly.

Like everyone, or at least like a fairly large sample of viewers whose reactions I observed at the Grand Palais (where Paris Photo is held every year), I tried to come back to the book. To test my eyes and my stomach on my ability to bear images of a disaster with no escape. Of mutilated, mangled, burned, piled up bodies. Children lying in hospital beds with congealed blood and open wounds. Men from whom the war has taken not only life but also human dignity: reducing them to mere bodies in a dump, pieces of meat. A meal for dogs and vultures. Things.

German photographer Christoph Bangert,¹ arguably author of one of the most controversial photo books of all times,² put together in this 192 pages volume – with a simple cover in gray cardboard and a title, *War Porn*, printed in small typewriter font – all the horrors he has collected as a war photographer: his own apocalyptic vision of disaster, the result of the many years he spent covering conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza, and witnessing with his own eyes, in real time, the mess and the scars left by war.

Inexplicably, or perhaps all too understandably, the most brutal (or revelatory) images Bangert took during his career have been systematically rejected by magazines and newspapers. They were locked in his drawers and in his memory, weighing like an unspoken secret, a burden too heavy to bear. That's why Bangert decided to share the horror in a book, consciously defying any theoretical argument about the legitimacy of photographing the pain. That's why he labeled his images, in the collection's title *War Porn*, "pornography", a pejorative term he expected they would be pinned with. "In discussions about photography that documents wars, the argument that these pictures are dehumanizing or pornographic always comes up", he notes. But, he continues, "If you say it is

¹ [Http://www.christophbangert.com/](http://www.christophbangert.com/).

² Ed Kehr, 2014, many of the photos are available here <https://vimeo.com/111090817>.

³ morally wrong to look at them, you avoid being confronted with these events”.³

The book raises, or rather throws at the reader, a series of old (but always urgent) questions about photographing the mess, the pain, the disaster, questions partly suggested by the author himself: “Do I exploit my subjects? Is it morally justifiable to work as a photographer in war zones and disaster areas? Why are we all so attracted to images of other people’s misery?” But above all: Do these images make us more aware of the horror that we are able to generate? Will this knowledge be useful in order to avoid generating such chaos? Is photography a tool for making sense of or merely for contemplating the mess?

Photography, however, is not a language for clear and unequivocal answers. *War Porn*’s images try to pursue the readers’ consciousness and conscience with the evidence of a collective guilt; we are convicted of a responsibility and crime to which no one can truly claim to be innocent. Yet, at the very moment we open the book, our impulse is to close it again – as if trying to close Pandora’s box. Our response speaks to the need to remove immediately from our retinas and our memory what we saw in order to protest our innocence.

John Berger’s 1972 analysis on “photography of agony”, pointed out how the shock effect of disaster images depoliticizes the causes, accusing “nobody and everybody”.⁴ Similarly, Susan Sontag famously argued that the spectacle of the pain of others produces addiction: “the vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem even more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote (‘it’s only a photograph’), inevitable”.⁵

But if it’s arguable, as Sontag also stated, that no ecology of images is feasible in the society of the spectacle,⁶ it is all the more emphatic that this “ecology” is not achievable in the society of the *viral* spectacle, where each image is produced and uncontrollably shared in the endless meanderings of the web.

While Bangert’s photographs were rejected by newspapers (or, in a more subtle form of self-censorship, they have never been released by their author), this does not mean they represent something “invisible”. The Internet is full of images of the most horrendous, unwatchable, unbearable consequences of war, ready to infect the spectator with the same messy and tumultuous flow that pours out of the pages of Bangert’s book.

Opening and closing repeatedly the pages of *War Porn* to understand how much violence my eyes are able to bear, I wonder what principle of morality is at work when we judge the production or the consumption of these images as “morally wrong”. I also wonder how looking at such images without any critical context – seeing them as just a long trail of blood, a gruesome parade of corpses of people lying unnamed across the pages – can contribute to increase my/our awareness of the ontology of war. Or how such looking can change the substance of what we already know: war is mess, horror and death, and it is something we do not want to see.

⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972).

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), 21.

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

War Porn ends with the images of the photographer's grandfather, a Nazi officer and a life-long fervent supporter of Hitler. That portrait is a testimony (perhaps the most powerful in the book) as to what degree of aberration a man can reach when he refuses to open his eyes. This closing image suggests that *War Porn*, serves more as provocation than as reflection. Rather than being merely the object of our gaze, the collection's mission may be to show us what we are not willing to look at or capable of looking at; to remind us of the words written by the photographer Kenneth Jarecke (whose shocking images of the first Gulf War were rejected by almost all American newspapers) on *American Photo Magazine* in 1991: "If we're big enough to fight a war, we should be big enough to look at it".⁷

If it is not in *War Porn* pages, it is in the halls of London's Tate Modern that many of the questions on the utility and legitimacy of photography as a tool to document and interpret the disaster may find a possible answer. Among the most interesting visual paths curated by Tate's Photography and International Art curator Simon Baker, the exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* (opened in November 2014) proposed an extensive reflection on the relationship between photography, memory and the consequences of war, on the power of images to represent and narrate mess, chaos and conflict. The exhibition, a wide and meticulous meditation on the possibility of "looking back" without freezing the past, was inspired by Billy Pilgrim character's time travels in *Slaughterhouse #5*, the novel Kurt Vonnegut wrote twenty-four years after he escaped the Dresden bombing during World War II. Scrambling the chronological order of events and ranging across different visual languages, the exhibition organized the works by 38 artists – from American Civil War to Vietnam, from the launch of the atomic bomb to the Crimean War, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – in relation to the time gap between the events and the moment when their pictures were taken. So, at the beginning of the exhibition's path, in the "Moments Later" section, we can see the dense smoke cloud just lifted from a US bombing in Afghanistan depicted by photographer Luc Delahaye; we can read the terror in the eyes of a *marine* on a Vietnam battlefield, portrayed by Don McCullin in a famous shot; or we can follow the long colored trail left by the light on a six-meters photographic paper exposed to Afghani sun by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin in *The Day Nobody Died* project, a conceptual negation of the traditional imagery of war and a harsh criticism of embedded journalism.

Days, months, and years after the conflict, wounds are still open, seeds of war still bear their bitter fruits: Jo Ratcliff, in *Land Occupado*, photographed a messy and devastated Angola five years after the end of the civil war; Taryn Simon, in *A Living Man Declared Dead*, recomposed from a 16-years distance the mosaic of the families broken by the Srebrenica massacre; Stephen Shore portrayed, 67 years after the end of the Second World War, faces and memories of Holocaust survivors for his project *Ukraine*. But the most powerful expression of the exhibition's

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-war-photo-no-one-would-publish/375762/>, accessed 10 June 2017.

diachronic gaze on mess is probably revealed by the eyes of the photographers who witnessed the Hiroshima and Nagasaki disaster: from the monstrous presence of the atomic mushroom photographed by the 17-year-old student Toshio Fukada twenty minutes after the explosion, to the book *Hiroshima* by Ken Domon, a document of the long-term effects of radiation on the Japanese population 13 years after the bomb. The images from *Conflict, Time, Photography* testify to the power of photography, not only – and not primarily – to describe what happened in those places, but also to explain why those disasters continue to leave a trace many years later.

Far from the (often) dull immediacy of photojournalism, the exhibition – not only for the quality of the images on display but especially for the construction of enlightening contexts around them – opens up a space for thinking and understanding. The pictures in *Conflict, Time, Photography* are no less painful than those in *War Porn* but, with its slower pace, the exhibition is able to reveal how long it takes to clean up the mess of war and how the conflict often shows its real face, its hidden motivations and its most painful consequences from the distance of time.

⁸ Some images are available here:
<http://www.postcart.com/libri-dettaglio.php?id=131&c=>.

From the distance of time emerges also *They Fight with Camera*,⁸ a photobook (Roma: Postcart, 2015) reassembling the fragments of the work of Walter Rosenblum, American photojournalist who documented the Second World War on the Allies' side. Rosenblum (1919-2006) was present during D-day: he shot one of the iconic moments that, along with Robert Capa's images, remain in the collective memory as symbols of that day. Rosenblum was also the first Allied troops' photographer to enter Dachau's concentration camp after the liberation, so powerfully contributing to the documentation of the heinous mess of a war whose consequences continue to send echoes that reach our times. No war in history transformed the world so radically in destroying cities, modifying national boundaries, killing tens of millions of people, and extending atrocities beyond any conceivable limit. No war until then had ever been documented so widely by thousands of photographers like Walter Rosenblum. Seventy years later, the power of their images does not fade. Looking at them today, we are still stunned by the disaster they testify to, but no longer overwhelmed by the shock, we can find some clarity to better understand the wars we fight and the world we live in. "One thing I learned from photography is that we all have the same aspirations, the same needs, the same desires. These are the things I try to tell in my shots", Rosenblum wrote in the midst of the war.⁹ And after having fought with the camera around his neck, after having faced the evil at Dachau and having been present thorough the mess on a beach in Normandy, Rosenblum leaves us the legacy of these words: "to me taking a picture is like writing a love letter".

⁹ Manuela Fugenzi, *They Fight with Cameras: Walter Rosenblum in WWII from D-Day to Dachau* (Roma: Postcart, 2014), 8.

* The contribution by Irene Alison is the only one in this issue without peer-review. Due both to the notoriety

and professional reputation of the author -- an established journalist, curator, and founder of the consulting studio for documentary photography “Doll’s Eye Reflex Laboratory” -- and to her non-academic profile, and because of the nature of her brief intervention, which reads as a series of notes and critical observations rather than as a conventional scholarly essay, the text seemed to resist the stringent criteria of academic writing and its reviewing process, but was nevertheless deemed a valuable contribution, by an established non-academic professional, to the issue.

Putting War and Trauma in Order. Patterns of Mess in War and Post-War Literature

Abstract: War and trauma – be it related to war itself, or to other problematical issues such as collective or individual precariousness, struggle for gender and/or national identity, discovery of personal or historical truths – are often sublimated in literature by objective correlatives and structural features that simultaneously create an identity and enhance the idealization related to it. Of particular interest are those works in which characters build their identities through an accumulation of both material and immaterial objects, which can be either utterly messy or compulsively ordered, in both structure and content.

In Victorian and Edwardian England, Uranian poets and writers (John Galsworthy, John Addington Symonds, William Johnson Cory, Lord Alfred Douglas, Montague Summers, Frederick Rolfe, Charles Kains Jackson, E. E. Bradford, John Moray Stuart-Young, among many others) based the essence of their works on apparently ordered classical forms and paradigms to represent complex questions of sexuality and social restraint. They often referred to World War I and to trauma as well, especially when personally experienced, as in the case of Edmund Spenser and other canonical authors (see Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon), who were driven to write poetry to overcome shell shock. As Paul Fussell recognized, Uranian poetry formed the basis of World War I war poetry in terms of imagery, which drew on Greek myths and ideas to give structure to otherwise intolerable conflicts and emotions.

Responding to the virtuosistic experimentation of Modernism and Postmodernism and the new realism of some post-war fiction, some novelists of the late twentieth century either adopted similar tendencies to create order out of a chaotic reality or subverted formal order completely. The latter seems to be the case with Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), in which the precariousness of both the WWII and the post-9/11 world is spasmodically controlled by the characters' ambiguously 'rigid' search through history and by a formal coherence, in overlapping narratives and simultaneous, conflictual times and spaces, that intertwine lives in a mess of form and content.

This article aims to analyse these modulations of classical order and Uranian and/or post-war mess. Both such order and mess are arguably outcomes of disordered consciences and of attempts at using objects and myths to shape a suspect, often hostile, reality. This reading will tease out similar patterns in the representation of 'messiness' in contemporary British and American literature dealing with 'minoritarian subjects'.

Keywords: *Foer, Isherwood, mess, Uranian, war poetry*

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.
(Philip Larkin, *MCMXIV*)

Introduction

War and trauma – be it related to war itself, or to other problematical issues such as collective or individual precariousness, struggle for gender and/or national identity, or discovery of personal or historical truths – are often sublimated in literature by objective correlatives and structural features that simultaneously create an identity and enhance the idealisation related to it. Of particular interest are those works in which characters and lyrical voices fight for physical and/or emotional survival by building their identities through an accumulation and organization of elements, which can be either totally messy or compulsively ordered in both structure and content.

In Victorian and Edwardian England, Uranian poets and writers (John Galsworthy, John Addington Symonds, William Johnson Cory, Lord Alfred Douglas, Montague Summers, Frederick Rolfe, Charles Kains Jackson, E. E. Bradford, John Moray Stuart-Young, among many others) based the essence of their works on apparently ordered classical forms and paradigms to represent complex issues of sexuality and social restraint. In a later moment, they also made reference to World War I and trauma as well, especially when experienced in person, as in the case of Edmund Spenser and other canonical authors (see Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon), who were pushed to write poetry to overcome shell shock. As recognized by Paul Fussell, Uranian poetry was at the basis of war poetry in terms of imagery, which drew on Greek myths and ideas to give structure to otherwise unsustainable conflicts and emotions.

Ricocheting through the virtuosistic experimentation of both Modernism and Postmodernism and the new realism of some post-war fiction, novelists of the late twentieth century, when attempting at queering reality, either adopted similar tendencies to set it to order – see the 1953 war novel *The Charioteer* by Mary Renault – or subverted formal order more or less completely. An interesting example is Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, where the world (sexual revolution, homosexual love, nuclear war, and death) is put into order, at least apparently, thanks to the symbols of bourgeois life and to an organic view of life, or, still more recently, the experimental novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), by Jonathan Safran Foer, in which the precariousness of both WWII and the post-9/11 world is spasmodically controlled by the ambiguous 'rigid' search of the characters through history and formal coherence, in overlapping narratives and simultaneous, conflictual times and spaces, intertwined lives in a mess of form and content.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse these modulations of classical order and/or post-war mess (queer identity, and war, ethnic issues, and genocide) – both outcomes of “disordered” consciences and attempts at using traditional imagery and myths to shape a suspect, often hostile reality. The critical framework will consist mainly of the studies by Paul Fussell on culture and war (*The Great War and*

Modern Memory, 1975, and *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, 1989), which, although relatively dated, still represent some of the best interpretations to look at how war has fashioned imagination. In addition, other critical texts will be used: the few canonical critical studies on Uranian poetry, the classic one edited by Brian Reade, *Sexual Heretics* (1970), and *Love in Earnest* (1970) by Timothy d'Arch Smith, and some of the works by Michael Adams, Elizabeth Freeman, Santanu Das, Samuel Hynes, Trudy Tate and Jay Winter for issue related to war, gender, and identity.

The three movements of this article will try to describe how the twentieth century shaped its historical and existential messiness – its set of political, religious, and gender-related uncertainties, doubts, and disquietedness – in different scales of order, starting from a brief introduction of how “sexual hereticism” was controlled and made acceptable to society through recognizable forms and images. Secondly, we will focus on how war trauma made use of some of the same patterns to expose in poetry otherwise unconceivable experiences; and finally the analysis will focus on an example of how in the sixties the novel, with new trauma and fears, could settle for new literary compromises and new aesthetics. The main purpose will be the identification of possible patterns in the representation of ‘messiness’ in contemporary British and American literature that deal with ‘minoritarian subjects’.

The Path to Unsettlement: Uranian Poetry and Greek (dis)Order

Our first step is introductory not only for the purpose of this paper but also, and most importantly, for what literature had to become at the beginning of the twentieth century. Before the outbreak of World War I, there was a pre-war tradition of homoerotic literature composed by a group of intellectuals who were active in London and Oxford mainly, and who called themselves Uranians because of their Platonic inspirations. The beginning of the Uranian movement is traditionally dated as 1 April 1888, when the poem “Hyacinthus” by Lord Henry Somerset appeared in the *Artist*. Uranian poets were quite active artistically, and from the late eighties they published pamphlets, poems, pictures, and photos about boy-love: William Johnson Cory, Symonds, Carpenter, Frederick Rolfe “Baron Corvo”, Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Aleister Crowley, Leonard Green, Montague Summers, Sholto Douglas, Beverley Nichols, Gerard Hamilton (Isherwood’s “Mr. Norris”) are a few of a well-known circle of late Victorian high-society. They had their own periodicals to publish their works, such as *The Artist* and *Journal of Home Culture and The Quorum: A Magazine of Friendship*. It is difficult to know how widely their works were read outside their clique, and how much the collective imagination drew on their imagery. It is commonly known that at least the succeeding homosexual literature shared the same cultural background, as we can see from Forster’s *Maurice*. Set in Cambridge, the plot of the novel is about the experience of reading the *Symposium* by two young male characters, and is therefore utterly

modulated around Platonic explanations of otherwise unacceptable behaviour. Although the novel was published posthumously in 1971, it was written in 1914, just at the beginning of the war, and known by Forster's friends, in particular Isherwood. The novel is perhaps the outcome of the last offshoots of what this Neo-Platonic wave of literary order had been at the end of the previous century and, later on, in early twentieth-century England, thanks to the "Cambridge Apostles". This was a group of intellectuals, including figures such as Keynes and Strachey, who regarded themselves as rebels devoted to Plato, as "part of a larger agenda that is, their ideological opposition to Victorianism".¹

¹ Julie Anne Taddeo, "Plato's Apostles: Edwardian Cambridge and the 'New Style of Love'", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8.2 (October, 1997), 197.

Uranians, in their 'most innocent form', made theirs the concept of a pure form of friendship, "Greek love", grounding it on Plato's mythic conception of Eros as newly promulgated by Walter Pater: worship of young male beauty without sex. The challenge to dominant, disciplined late Victorian sexual morality went hand in hand with the acquisition of a language that made it possible to articulate love for another man. Greek myths – whose diffusion was largely due to the influence of Benjamin Jowett (1817-93), author of the first complete English translation of Plato's works – and the related imagery produced an almost 'technical', 'objective' way of making poetry, particularly 'homosexual' poetry, poetry that had to express forbidden feelings at war with Victorian society. The counter discourse of homosexual love took place by means of the infiltration of Plato's language into "the very vocabulary through which the emerging homosexual identity was defined".² In the utilitarian and bourgeois conception of sexuality – and somehow of literature too – that dominated Victorian public culture, the restoration of a more passionate, even uncontrollable, erotic drive needed a new language to overcome what were clear-cut distinctions in sexual behaviour – "conjugal, healthy, and reproductive or perverted, sordid, sinful, illegal, and degenerative":³ Aesthetic Platonism proposed an alternative to these schemas. And this revisionary attitude applied also to what Robert Graves called the "pseudo-homosexuals": advocates of sentimental friendship between older and younger boys acquainted with classical images.⁴

² Stefano Evangelista, "'Lovers and Philosophers at Once': Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian 'Fin de Siècle'", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 36.2 (2006), 234.

³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴ See Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000).

⁵ Stefano Evangelista, "'Lovers and Philosophers at Once'", 244.

Although it is true, as Stefano Evangelista says, that this emergence of codified poetics and style is "a discourse for the emancipation of male homosexuality that gestures towards a wider ideal of sexual freedom",⁵ we should add that this freedom was more in concept than in actual textual form. In fact, from the point of view of form, most Uranian poetry is the result of the most 'conventional' outcomes of Victorian poetry. It is a poetry constructed of reassuring metres and figures of speech, images and imagery. Boy-love is dealt with by well-known literary traditions – mostly Greek, or Christian – and traditional forms – sonnets, pastoral elegies – and only at a later moment, as war approached, was the verse broken, and so too were its images. Uncountable references to characters of classical texts, mostly explicit, can be found in the homosexual poetry of the time, as well as other simple reassuring images such as boy-saints and acolytes depicted as golden-haired,

angelical youths,⁶ or scenes from pastoral romances, more often than not taken from works such as *The Faerie Queene* or Virgil's Second Eclogue, as Northrop Frye recognized in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Ganymede, for instance, is one of the favourite figures mentioned in these poems, as well as Adonis and Piers Gaveston (Edward II's *minion*): classical allusions "which would at once pacify any publisher or reader and impress a Uranian mind".⁷ From a formal point of view, and also when considering the themes of distress, love pain, and forbidden love, a typical almost flawless Uranian composition is a poem by John Gray, 'Cyril', from the 1884 collection *Cyril and Lionel*:

If my desire were thine, and wert thou near,
For mine thy hand, for mine thy smile, thy cheek,
My fancy at thy law, thy heart too weak
To bear the weight of love, too strong for fear
To strive to speak.
No need for me to call thee fair, sweet, dear,
Dear, sweet, and fair, to raise my voice and seek
A louder speech for love therein to wreak
The anguished love that for thy soul to hear
I need not speak.⁸

This poem evidently echoes Lord Alfred Douglas's line, "I am the love that dare not speak its name", in his poem "Two Loves", the Shame that was to become the epithet of homosexual love at the time. Yet another common image of Uranian poetry is the Christlike figure: the one who makes sacrifices for the love of humanity, the one who is crucified and tortured (the young Saint Sebastian is evidently another recurring character and symbol) because of his love. When not Greek gods and heroes, Christian ones would then be used: both Sassoon ("The Redeemer") and Owen in his letters would draw equations between their soldiers and Christ or Saint Sebastian, putting the body and the language describing sensual aspects at the forefront⁹. Likewise, World War I was the world's first major industrial warfare that ravaged the male body.¹⁰ The fundamental concept here was the catachresis of the idea of sacrifice, in certain cases even homoeroticized in images of Christlike-soldiers and crucified heroes.¹¹ Homoerotic connotations overlap and partly empty the original images of their more spiritual features, leaving room for vague sadistic homoeroticism and/or more classical metaphorization of sufferance and sacrifice. As is predictable, tragic tones had to take their part in Uranian poetry. Classically conceived, tragedy is used to give order to chaos: an ordered plot that leads to a deserved end. From this perspective, Uranians do use tragedy in their poetry. Perhaps that is why they fundamentally indulge more frequently in classical images rather than Christian ones: they need the tragedy before Christ's death, which they will use more extensively once war starts. Christianity was, we should not forget, a religion that had rejected them at

⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2013), 299.

⁷ Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930* (London: Routledge, 1970), 31.

⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹ Santanu Das studied the importance of physical experience on the front focusing on the centrality of the sense of touch, also giving an account of the powerful language used by a few famous figures, among whom Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, Vera Brittain and Mary Borden, and lesser-known participants in the war – unknown soldiers, nurses, privates. Das explains how writers struggle with finding the verbal equivalents of the sensual, showing us the textual mimesis of physical experience, as in the opening lines of *Dulce Et Decorum Est*; interestingly enough, one of the principal images he considers fundamental in the trench experience is mud and its indistinctiveness: "The experience of trench mud", he writes, "brought the soldiers to the precipice of non-meaning in a world that was already ceasing to make sense" (37). The mud itself would be a simile for the experience of being immersed in a confusing, borderless and totally embracing: "war literature reveals a mode of thinking about mud, a way of giving linguistic shape to formless matter" (40). *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2005).

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 129.

the time. Only loved ones are compared to indulgent, lovable Christs; but it was Greek myths and imagery which were more celebrated and adopted by university educated, upper-class men in Victorian England, and also in the US and in continental Europe. Apollonian attitudes dominated this kind of Victorian poetry, before mess took possession of life – and creative power – as soon as war broke out, leaving room for Dionysus, the god of mess, and his new eruptive forms. Before that, Lord Alfred Douglas had written another poem, which in some of its parts was similar to hundreds of other elegies of dead boys that became stylish even twenty years before 1914:

Brave boy with the bright blue eyes,
Faithful and fair and strong!
Dead now – when the short day dies
Like a broken song,
And the night comes dark and long.

Friend and more than a friend,
Brother and comrade true,
We are come to the dim sad end
Of the way we knew:
I bleed in the dark for you.¹²

¹² D'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest*, 52.

An interesting example is also Edward Alexander Crowley's, alias Aleister Crowley's, poem "Bathyllus", included in the collection *The Winged Beetle* of 1910. The passion that "crowns and controls" a "mystical love" is evidently a sort of oxymoronic syntax which well represents the ambivalent perception of forbidden love in Uranian poetry; ordered verses that are designed to protect and ignite passion at the same time, a paradoxical justification of purity against lust.

Let us drink, O my Lord, let us fill us
With purple Falernian wine!
Thy lips on the lips of Bathyllus
As we lock us and link and entwine,
Eyes ever burning like coals
For the passion that crowns and controls
The mystical love of our souls.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 99.

The outbreak of the Great War would wipe out some of the most ordered rhyme schemes and metric patterns (as the quintets above) even in those works which were not labelled 'impressionistic' or 'modernist', causing a first visible change in Uranian poetry itself. This partial abandonment of a regular classical form is evident in the following 1918 poem by Edwin Emmanuel Bradford, whose rollicking verse and a more aggressive headlining propagandistic style mark an evident change in form after the beginning of the war:

Eros is up and away, away!
Eros is up and away!
The son of Urania born of the sea,
The lover of lads and liberty.
Strong, self-controlled, erect and free,
He is marching along to-day!

He is calling aloud to the men, the men!
He is calling aloud to men –
‘Turn away from the wench, with her powder and paint,
And follow the Boy, who is fair and saint’
And the heart of the lover, long fevered and faint,
Beats bravely and boldly again.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 88.

Together with other warfare vocabulary and images added in a later phase (‘marching’, ‘strength’, ‘liberty’, ‘braveness’), death was used even before the War by Uranian poets as an excuse to write of the love for a boy, a fake *in memoriam*. Even before the closer acquaintances with dead bodies and young corpses, death was used in poetry as another excuse to set life in order, to allow forbidden love only when impossible, only when safe, from a distance. According to Fussell, “long before the war the Uranians were producing poems that were at first glance indistinguishable from poems of the Great War”.¹⁵ War poetry was love poetry, it has been said.¹⁶ The similitude between certain compositions produced by both combatants and non-combatants are sometimes striking, not as much in the form but for the imagery and vocabulary that were taken up by the generation who did not have to fight against Victorian hypocrisy but on a real battlefield, against historical betrayal. In both cases, the horror – for society or for oneself – began to be too strikingly unbearable, so that the only adoptable means of expressions were the good old reassuring ones, leaving Modernisms to the confident ones, the ones far from the battlefield although often in the embattled city. In fact, avant-gardes were just one of the possibilities to give new artistic shapes to the war experience fixing it to the collective memory: “Modernism, like other writings of the period, attempts to make the war ‘readable’ and to write it into history”.¹⁷

¹⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 309.

¹⁶ Richard Fein, “Modern War Poetry”, *Southwest Review*, XLVII, no. 4 (Autumn 1962), 286. Cit. in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 303.

¹⁷ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Penrith: Manchester U. P., 1998), 13.

At the same time, as suggested by Sarah Cole, “a certain picture of modernism, which involves alienated, suffering males who both revile the past and demand that the world listen to their story of modernity, erupts out of the conflict between incompatible forms of male community”.¹⁸ It is widely recognized that the beginning of the century saw a manifest change in the experience and expression of masculinity, and war played a major role in this new attitude. Also involved in the process was a new kind of misogyny, which originated from a new unbalance in standard roles: as Sandra Gilbert points out, “many men involved in the First World War, including most combatants, resented what they perceived as women’s ability and desire to take advantage of their loss”.¹⁹ The entire conception of gender, together with that of historical order, had to be effected by the Great War,

¹⁸ Sarah Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, *ELH*, 68.2 (Summer, 2001), 471.

¹⁹ Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, *Sexchanges*, vol. 2 of *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1989).

as is manifest in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo”. Wilfred Owen’s famous poem is a deliberate and straightforward analysis of the bonds of war, where he asserts the enormity of the intimacy formed by war in the male community, in contrast with conventionalized heterosexual norms:

I have made fellowships -
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long.

The transition from romantic Uranian poetry and war poetry through the overlapping of the two is particularly striking here. Although still organic in structure, the poem sees a substitution of “the signs of war for conventional romantic imagery, as the domestic tradition of the marital bond is transformed into a virile performance of military duties”.²⁰ At the same time, the traditional shape of poetry – which was recognized as echoing Keats²¹ – imagines male intimacy not through war’s depersonalizing experiences but through a pre-war, pretraumatic harmony.

²⁰ Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, 485.

²¹ Ibid., 486.

The Great War, or History of the Battlefield

Merry it was to laugh there -
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

A crucial problem for what was to become war literature was to find a language
²² Ibid., 473. “adequate to the unfamiliarity, ineffability, and horror of the war”.²² At the same time, the unintended challenge was to find a language for a new kind of intimacy among males, forged in war’s intimacy; and the result was, once again, that the imagery adopted was the one of Uranian poetry:

The inexpressibility of war friendship thus coincides in interesting ways with the kind of double-talk that so marked much homoerotic literature in Edwardian Britain. In both cases, the impossibility of speaking about male intimacy to women, who are treated with suspicion, and to the culture at large, which is punitive and repressive, requires the writer to create a new and cryptic language, often by invoking historical and literary traditions with the cultural authority of the Greeks and the Bible. During the war, the tradition of using elevated language to characterize possibility of connections between men became increasingly providing a shared vocabulary for widely divergent texts, precise nature of male love remained blurred. Yet there are important differences.... If decadent critics of the fin de siècle had invoked both classicism and the trope of purity beyond words in order to negotiate a space within a repressive culture, war writers experienced inexpressibility less as a strategy for self-protection than

as a failure in language.²³

²³ Ibid., 473-474.

Again, self-protection from chaos triggers the embracing of traditional elements that contrasted with more disquieting and louder forms of expression. Silence was a tactic: only when it was necessary to speak (and the most canonical war poetry did use poetry, was often driven to composing poetry, in order to heal and recover from shell shock and other traumas), the favourite images were the most comfortable ones.

It is no coincidence, then, that in some of the manifestations of war literature one could retrace the highly sophisticated pastoralism mentioned by Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*:²⁴

²⁴ See "Arcadian Resources", in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 251-292.

Recourse to the pastoral is an English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them. Pastoral reference, whether to literature or to actual rural localities and objects, is a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable; at the same time, it is a comfort in itself, like rum, a deep dugout, or a woolly vest.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid., 255.

Thus the pastoral idyll was another expression of that necessity to put a distance between life's horrors and one's imagination, to find tranquillity and stability, no matter how precarious and ambivalent these may appear: "If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral".²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., 251.

According to Fussell, therefore, different strategies were deployed to defend oneself against absurdity; even rumours – clear, well defined although ambiguous narratives fleeing from field to field and country to country – served as a form of self-assurance. "These rumors resemble much of the more formal literature of the war in that their purpose is to 'make sense' of events which otherwise would seem merely accidental or calamitous".²⁷

²⁷ Ibid., 131.

If we consider myth in a Girardian perspective, it represents an exoneration from epistemological and moral burdens: thus, if Uranian classical myths served as buffers against standard morality and social impediments, so it was for the war poets, who obviously had to add more layers and more disquieting images to represent the mess of the world they wanted to depict. Fussell contests Bernard Bergonzi's conviction that "[t]he dominant movement in the literature of the Great War was... from a myth-dominated to a demythologized world";²⁸ for Fussell, almost the opposite took place: "In one sense the movement was towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, towards fiction".²⁹ The Nazis would know it only too well. World War I was born on myth and generated a new myth.³⁰ It would be the Second World War to finally demythologize society through silent shouts at a new maniacal order.

²⁸ *Hero's Twilight*, 198.

²⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 142.

³⁰ Ibid., xiv.

³¹ According to Samuel Hynes, the English avant-garde was dispersed because of the war: “the avant-garde was scattered and silenced” (Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), ebook version, chapter 3, section I.

³² For a wider perspective on recent Modernist Studies, see Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, 492.

³⁵ At the same time, however, war was seen by someone as a purge, a healthy development for society: “a wartime renewal of feelings that had surrounded the Wilde cases in the Nineties – hatred and fear of sexual deviance, and a felt need to suppress the art and ideas about art that were associated with it. Henceforth the higher morality of war would be invoked as justification for the persecution of homosexuality and the censorship of art. And Wilde would reappear as a symbol of the Condition of England before the war, of the degeneracy and decadence that man like Gosse had also perceived” (Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992). Also Michael C.C. Adams, in his *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I*, explores the beliefs and attitudes towards manhood, sex, power, maturity, boredom that defined war as a positive thing, a high expression of social behaviour.

But before the emergence of mid-century mythopoeic muteness, literary images made the expression of the horror easier. Modernism was the disruption of any formal certainty, a disruption that did not last long,³¹ and would reappear in literary history mostly in works written by the unaffected, those who were not directly involved in the battlefield, the ones that would represent a generic horror, an existential, profound, and apparently inexplicable one, often accompanied by unavoidable feelings of guilt. In fact, Modernism came as the breaking point, a momentary and only rarely regretted moment in art and literature during which apparent formal mess prevailed over the necessity of a more traditional textual order.³² History itself had somehow become disordered: Samuel Hynes talks about a disturbing, apocalyptic sense of an ending perceivable also in more or less ironic letters and writing by Henry James and Virginia Woolf:

Like James, they had believed, or had *wanted* to believe, that English society was fundamentally stable, and that it was evolving in a progressive direction. War could not occur to interrupt that process, because war was uncivilized. And now suddenly war had come, and had brought that dream of order to an end. It came not simply as an interruption of peace, but as a contradiction of the values that they had thought made Europe one civilization.³³

Joseph Conrad began impressionizing this new human experience, this new feeling of being out of civilization, wrapping it into epistemological ambiguity. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and many other works from the first decades of the twentieth century are poems that depict (to use an incisive description by Cole) “experience as a series of utterly fragmented and dissociated shards, where the flotsam and jetsam of religion, history, popular language, and human garbage intermingle to create a consciousness that exists on the boundary between dreaming and waking, death and life”.³⁴ This hallucinatory state, also retraceable in later works such as the 1947 novel by Malcolm Lowry *Under the Volcano*, originated from the erasure of every form of stability, both during and after the experience of war. Kierkegaard thought that while man loses the tragic he acquires desperation: as Uranian poets still possessed the sense of tragedy, mess then could still be dominated. War poets, the combatant ones like Owen and Sassoon, still tried to make order out of mess. We will see how it would be a different story in Isherwood, as well as in postmodernist writers representing postmodern tragic events.

Paul Fussell gives us a crucial insight into how the Great War changed life existentially: Europe lost its innocence, the benevolent hope in truth and ‘normality’.³⁵ The Great War transformed heroes into soldiers, and fight into arbitrariness; death into something imponderable. “Never such innocence again”, Philippe Larkin said, not referring to the closer Second World War but to the First. According to Fussell, “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so

melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends”.³⁶ So it is with death, because we can only talk about death when talking from life. In this respect, *A Single Man* is paradigmatic, as we will see shortly. Fussell explains that the Great war was even more ironic, as it reversed the Idea of Progress,³⁷ and because “its beginning was more innocent”:³⁸ World War II had a partial precedent in horror, while with the Great War, people experienced a real tabula rasa. And, as Fussell says, language was innocent as well:

Another index of the prevailing innocence is a curious prophylaxis of language. ... There was no *Waste Land*, with its rats’ alleys, dull canals, and dead men who have lost their bones: it would take four years of trench warfare to bring these to consciousness. There was no *Ulysses* no *Mauberry*, no *Cantos*, no Kafka, no Proust, no Waugh, no Auden, no Huxley, no Cummings, no *Women in Love* or *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. There was no “Valley of Ashes” in *The Great Gatsby*. One read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language.³⁹

³⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 8.

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

This moral language is a reassuring language. Even when related to disaster and death, the images adopted remain familiar ones. The language of war was “that which generations of readers had been accustomed to associate with the quiet action of personal control and Christian self-abnegation (‘sacrifice’), as well as with more violent actions of aggression and defence”.⁴⁰ From the Uranians, time took literary stereotypes and classical imagery; and warfare itself, its insensate violence, as Burgess described it, became new imagery. Isherwood’s memoir itself, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (1938), contains a large number of Great War clichés. Clichés, together with irony, put disorder into order, at least superficially, at least rhetorically. Another existential device was dichotomies, for example, which were emphasized by the war in clear-cut distinctions: we/they, normal/grotesque, visible/invisible:⁴¹ “One of the legacies of the war is just this habit of simple distinction, simplification, and opposition. If truth is the main casualty in war, ambiguity is another”.⁴² There is no mess in war from an epistemological point of view but only from an existential perspective. Simplification became a form of survival before silence had overcome also that most disruptive and comfortably heroic manifestation of mess in literature that was Modernism.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

⁴² Ibid., 87. Jay Winter recognizes an “effort to burn away the wartime fog of confusion, misinformation, and stylized official language”, in his own *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Croydon: Cambridge U. P., 1995), 30; it is important not to forget the actual confusion that warfare implies, and the complementary dry and aseptic language that was adopted even in the most tragic communications.

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

“Simple antithesis everywhere. That is the atmosphere in which most poems of the Great War take place, and that is the reason for the failure of most of them as durable art”:⁴³ this simplification, this organization of feelings would find new interesting possibilities after World War II, when a new kind of order would become a literary possibility – a paradoxical, neurotic narrative representing the spasms of a mind and a body, not mythically, nor universally, but singularly, and fatalistically; a paradigmatic title, symptom of post-war resignation, and silent indulgence toward death: *A Single Man*.

A Single Man, or of Post-war Silent Death

At its outset, World War I could have seemed as if it were some kind of “great outdoor fun”.⁴⁴ No one could have imagined how history was to unfold. But World War II combatants were not to share the same enthusiasm. Everything had been seen before: boredom, for a short time, was the theme, “with a sigh, not a scream, its typical sound”.⁴⁵ Soldiers knew that war was not going to be good nor fun for them; and they now had a vast antiwar literature to prove them right.⁴⁶ Awareness dominated them. As Robert E. Sherwood said, “the general disillusionment preceded the firing of the first shot”.⁴⁷ This disillusionment will rule, in one way or another, the mess in literature from that moment on. Some writers and poets understood that war was so serious that it became ridiculous; but they also realized that it could never be romantic again.⁴⁸ Forster would write to Christopher Isherwood in July 1944 about the flying bombs: “I think they are going to be important psychologically.... They will bitch the Romance of the Air – war’s last beauty-parlor”.⁴⁹ But when the war was over, men of letters became silent too. Also death became silent, as “Second World War technology made it possible to be killed in virtual silence – at least so it appeared”.⁵⁰

A young officer described the British “phlegmatic understatement” as “the art of litotes”.⁵¹

One inference might be that the more verbally confident poetry of the Great War emerged from a proud verbal culture, where language was trusted to convey and retain profound, permanent meaning, while the later world from which these laconic notations arise is one so doubtful of language that the responsible feel that only the fewest words, debased as they have been by advertising, publicity, politics, and the rhetoric of nationalism, should be hazarded.⁵²

Unspeakability will become a motif of post-war narratives.⁵³ And especially so after World War II, after concentration camps, and the Bomb. The irrelevance of traditional elegy, accustomed words and unbroken concepts become evident. Louis Simpson notes why infantry soldiers only rarely render their actual experiences in language: “To a foot-soldier, war is almost entirely physical. That is why some men, when they think about war, fall silent. Language seems to falsify physical life to betray those who have experienced it absolutely – the dead”.⁵⁴ Here we arrive at *A Single Man*, and the standpoint of its time, 1964, far from the horrific experience of war, but not too much. Here war is death, and death war. We want to listen to George, the main character, because he will tell us about death: not something that we can avoid in 60s California, but something that we all shall live. A Single Man will die alone, not heroically but comfortably, as his life had been, at least superficially, surrounded by material commodities but in hypocrisy: a single man, every man, a single act, dying. Silently.

We have seen how the unspeakable had forged itself, most often, on ordered

⁴⁴ Paul Fussell, *Wartime, Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1990 [1989]), 129. Michael Adams, in his paradigmatic volume *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I*, explains that men define themselves protracting into adulthood their adolescent loves and desires, and in particular sports and mother, but also hunting, in the quite typical stereotype of eternal Peter Pans. Interestingly enough, although this trend may be considered a typical gender issue, it seems that his focus is not on homosexuality, or the suffragette movements, but rather on asexuality.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁷ *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*. Cit. in Fussell, *Wartime*, 130.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁵¹ Ibid., 135.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 185.

⁵⁴ *The Poetry of War, 1939-1945*, ed. Ian Hamilton (London: Alan Ross, 1965), 172.

forms and comfortable patterns and imagery. Paul Fussell claims that “the drift of modern history domesticates the fantastic and normalizes the unspeakable. And the catastrophe that begins it is the Great War”.⁵⁵ Around 1916 the idea that warfare and destruction had become the normal order of things was already a conviction held by many: the feeling of “endless war as an inevitable condition of modern life would seem to have become seriously available to the imagination”.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

In literature, reactions for domestication were, as we know, the most variable. Imagination was at the same time quieted and aroused: all possible disaster could have occurred, and literature had to find new ways to put things in order. Christopher Isherwood’s mother noted in her diary that many people expected and feared a different catastrophe;⁵⁷ *A Single Man* would give up any idea of universal catastrophe, in order to symptomize it in the last days of a single man, and in his death. The fiction offers a quick, hyperrefined account of the minimal effort that a suffering man has to make in order to put an end to his existence, silently and smoothly through his comfortable life in the America of the 60s, a post-war sublimated asphyxia in apparent freedom and consumerist commodities. A moment in which history had become apparently fluid and smooth as an LA motorway, a nicely-fitting image used by George, the protagonist of the novel, to depict his pride, hypocritical and partial as it was.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

George is a middle-aged British gay man who teaches English in a Southern California university in 1962. We see him from the beginning of the story unstable and at loss after the sudden death of his partner Jim. The one-day narrative – so dry and aseptic when compared to Joyce’s mythological *Ulysses* – moves around George’s encounters with various neighbours, friends, colleagues, and students, and culminates with his sudden natural and organic death. The ending is somehow specular to Mrs Dalloway’s, as if in the latter the character’s existence was somehow affirmed, while here it becomes mere flesh, to be disposed of as any other useless product after use. Yet George seems to absorb plastically some of the beauty of existence – in his frequent observations on the surrounding world in slow motion – epiphanically but unenthusiastically. It is this mixture of quietness and sadness towards the resignation to existence that seems to me to be one of the common solutions found in literature after the Second World War, a note also evident in Philip Larkin’s poetry, for example, or in some of Anthony Burgess’s novels. The balance is found in the prose style, in the almost neurotic ordering of thoughts and events, step by step, as death enters into the character’s veins and limbs.

The narrative sees a progression of ordered procedures, ordered recognition of George’s own existence, from recognizing himself in the mirror to driving automatically along the motorway to work, from dealing with students’ notes and deadlines to managing the relationship with his depressed best friend. All of these duties are marked by a rhythmic prose, a third-person narrative speaking in the present with occasional sour flashbacks, marking contemporarily George’s anonymity and his exemplarity – again, as numerous post-war narratives do. In the

anguish of his new polysemic 'single' life, George tries his best to fit in the conformist cage of his neighbourhood, his job, his apparent 'normality'. And when all is missing, as every bourgeoisie allows, "there *were* the Greeks", once again the only possible justification to his otherwise inexplicable pain.

The novel opens with its referential incipit to a new day of the world, with a sentence that starts describing a general truth but at the same time affirming the relevance of singularity: "Waking up begins with saying *am* and *non*".⁵⁸ The whole novel could be read as an attempt by the protagonist to make sense of the mess of his existence – of his grief in particular – trying literally to figure out the beauty and the reason behind sufferance, cutting images, and thoughts and memory, and fixing them in pigeonholes in his mind. Jonathan, the main character of *Everything is Illuminated*, the 2002 novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, will do something similar but more physical, accumulating all sorts of things in small plastic bags, meeting other characters doing the same with boxes, accumulating them in the ongoing process of creating a book.

Before that – and some decades before the new horror and caesura of time that was 9/11 – George finally wakes up, and not much later, as he looks at himself in the mirror, says: "What it sees there isn't so much a face as the expression of a predicament. Here's what it has done to itself, here's the mess it has somehow managed to get itself into, during its fifty-eight years".⁵⁹ The passage enacts a daily recomposition of the remains of the character's integrity, both as a distressed fictional person and, most importantly, as a narratological function, as the narrator's purpose seems to weave a plot only in order to let the character die, after having performed a few quite irrelevant actions and less irrelevant thoughts and suppositions. The fiction traces a slow but unstoppable movement towards the ending, which is as messily but mechanically planned as that of a real life: from the beginning to the end, and a few irrelevant events and less irrelevant pains in the middle.

The entire plot is an ordered movement towards recomposition, in order to represent the final decomposition – useless as all the other dead on earth. Dead bodies have become (or are again) only something to be disposed of, as all soldiers in both World Wars were. Methodically. It is no coincidence that the ex-British consul of *Under the Volcano* (another Geoffrey), a book published right after the end of the war in 1947, is thrown dead into a ravine as a mere piece of flesh. In *A Single Man* we can find a new way of representing war – not against countries, but against one's own body, time, life, as warfare has become the normal state of humanity, however Cold it may be.

Hence George tries to set his life in order around his already decomposing mind and body. He lives – alone – in a "tightly planned little house",⁶⁰ surrounded by the accumulated objects of a consumerist society:

Life destroying life before an audience of objects – pots and pans, knives and

⁵⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (London: Vintage, 2010), 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.

forks, cans and bottles – that have no part in the kingdom of evolution. Why? Why? Is it some cosmic enemy, some arch-tyrant who tries to blind us to his very existence by setting us against our natural allies, the fellow-victims of his tyranny?⁶¹

⁶¹ Ibid., 4-5.

It is more than clear that the vocabulary is not innocent: “kingdom of evolution”, “cosmic enemy”, “arch-tyrant”, “natural allies”, “fellow-victims”, “tyranny”: a mixture of warfare and biology, intermingle in meta-existential, paralysing reflections. While Peter Conrad believed that Isherwood, just like Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley, had little to say about the war,⁶² I argue that in a book that is not about war and that was published almost twenty years after the end of the war, the atmosphere of war still lingers, permeating language and modulating characters in order to depict a world in which the very essence of war and chaos is intertwined with personal horror. “George loves the freeways because he can still cope with them; because the fact that he can cope proves his claim to be a functioning member of society. He can still *get by*”. George also knows that he is letting himself decompose, first emotionally and then physiologically. But in a typical attempt at survival, beauty becomes the goal. Beauty and order. The novel portrays the rhythm of life and this life’s attempt to create order, or to reformulate order, the sense of an ending, which is made even more incisive in Tom Ford’s adaption of the book in 2009. Such aestheticism made death a crystallization of movement and chaos. At the end of the novel the impersonal ‘it’ that indicated George at the beginning of the book and that was soon changed into ‘he’ after he takes possession again of his daily routine is what remains: “the non-entity we called George”.⁶³ We are in front of a story that is a movement from organic shapelessness to human entity and back.

⁶² Peter Conrad, “Tones of Fear”, *New Statesman* (July 28, 1978). Cit. in Paul Fussell, *Wartime*, 133.

⁶³ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, 152.

There is no tragedy here: tragedy needs guilt and despair,⁶⁴ explained Paul Fussell. I would add order also. Hamlet needs to set time in order, to put things in their joints before accomplishing his tragedy. *A Single Man* is not tragic nor comic: it is disenchanted. It is a silent, slightly queered description of existential disorder. An interesting position in queer theories is Elizabeth Freeman’s approach, which is somewhat in opposition to main trends in the field. She questions the traditional attitude that sees queerness as a pure deconstructive attitude, offering new perspectives about the issue of time. “Queer temporalities” are those hidden and happily found in the interstices of national-political life.⁶⁵ An interesting examples is retraced since Robert Graves 1915 poem “It’s a Queer Time” (in fact, wartime seems to have seen the rise of nascently gay subcultures). She is apt to retrace a discontinuous history, alternative stories, dreams of an escape from history:⁶⁶ a focus on all forms of unconsciousness, reveries, haunting, afterlives subverting the canonical chronological time order. Focusing on art in particular, Freeman denounces avant-gardism in favour of a sort of ‘looking back,’ recognizing “a series of failed revolutions in the 1960s and 1970s”;⁶⁷ the 1970s appear as a

⁶⁴ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 220-221.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke U. P., 2010.) x.

⁶⁶ Ibid., xi.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xiv.

“revolting” decade: “they glimmer forth as an embarrassment, as something that remains to be thought, as the text’s indigestible material, and/or as a point of departure for resistance but not for grand revolution”.⁶⁸ The tendency explained by Freeman is also perceivable in the works we have dealt with in this study:

This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a ‘revolution’ in the old sense of the word, as a turning back.... Artists for whom the birth of the modern homosexual identity-form was constraining rather than liberating: shame, passivity, melancholy, and recoil, to name a few, were ways of refusing the progressive logic by which becoming ever more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom. Late-nineteenth-century perverts, melancholically attached to obsolete erotic objects or fetishes they ought to have outgrown, or repeating unproductive bodily behaviors over and over, also used pastness to resist the commodity-time of speedy manufacture and planned obsolescence.⁶⁹

Obsolescence favoured as a reassuring time, constraint perceived as a liberating space: the oxymora of queerness, perhaps, of the privilege of living life and art from its interstices.

Yet, Second World War literature marks the beginning of a laconic refusal to reach out for any myth.⁷⁰ Losing all traditional significance, all creative possibilities to represent queerness – at least before what we could still call postmodernism – and resignation, myth has become useless. What matters is the daily scanning of time and duties, intermingled with existential considerations.

Momentary Conclusion, or of Post 9/11 Literature

It will take a final horror – even more disarming and chaotic – to create a new aesthetics, drawing on more ‘classic’ postmodern forms but perhaps even more lulling us into a chaotic order that tries to make sense of coincidences and illogical explanations. Anglo-American fiction is even more significant at this time to depict the change. One magnificent example of such fiction is Jonathan Safran Foer’s experimental novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), in which the precariousness of both WWII and the post-9/11 world is spasmodically controlled by the characters’ ambiguous ‘rigid’ search through history and formal coherence, and in overlapping narratives and simultaneous, conflicting times and space that intertwine lives in a mess of form and content. Here, chaotic objects lead to a journey that leads to a collection – of other objects, other knowledge, and, most of all, other memories, often related to cultural and/or historical issues (war, immigration, and genocide). The technique of the list dominates the narrative, in its paradoxical attempt at organizing things, memories, and histories while transforming them into an imponderable mess. Here, single men represent other men through different

generations, intermingling themselves throughout history, confusing truth, both personally and historically. Perhaps the novel depicts a final attempt at maintaining the relevance of individual existences, single lives lost again in more than ever inexplicable and troublesome horror, where no clear-cut dichotomy makes sense, as not even the enemy is clearly identifiable.

Before World War I, social and individual disorders were easily depictable and identifiable through well-known, reassuring images and forms, but later collective trauma and feelings of guilt are probably at the base of the creation of the whole concept of post-war world literature. A Single Man cannot be preserved, but still the life is worth being told, against the masses, against the anonymity of the unknown soldier, of the victims of World War I and II, of the Bomb. Yet, now existential mess is manifestly controlled through an exasperation of spasmodic calm in the narrative, entering neurotic minds that can at least die smoothly, as is expected in the comfort of the '60s. 9/11, the new world (dis)order and endogenous suspect, will affect post-postmodern literary forms. But this is the same old (hi)story.

Fanny Moghaddassi, Ghislain Potriquet, Anne Bandry-Scubbi, eds., *Defining and Redefining Space in the English-Speaking World: Contacts, Frictions, Clashes* (New Castle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2016), pp. ix+294. ISBN (10): 1-4438-9791-4; ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9791-4

Reviewed by **Tamara Iaccio**

A round robin is, by definition, something that ‘goes around’. Those who are involved in it take turns to play, speak or write about a given matter. Applied to literature, the term indicates a form of collaborative storytelling in which a number of authors write chapters of a novel or pieces of a story in rounds. The order in which each participant gives their contribution is rational: they follow the lead of the one who preceded them.

In this very fashion, the recent book edited by Fanny Moghaddassi, Ghislain Potriquet and Anne Bandry-Scubbi, *Defining and Redefining Space in the English-Speaking World: Contacts, Frictions, Clashes*, ends with a round table discussion on contact improvisation. Although it is not a *leitmotiv*, the round robin exercise seems particularly fitting in describing this volume, for it is indeed a result of a comprehensive dialogue among European scholars of various disciplines gathered together in 2014 at the University of Strasbourg to discuss the spatial nature of contacts. The resulting multidisciplinary exchange has been channelled into this volume of contributions that follows the thread of its subtitle, “Contacts, Frictions, Clashes”, presenting a wide range of ‘spaces’ which come together precisely via contacts, frictions and clashes that occur, not only among the topics of the contributions, but also among the languages used to discuss them. In fact, the scholars employ either English or French in their dissertations, creating a bilingual, hybrid space for this collection, in which topics and languages come into contact with one another, rub each other at times without producing any conflict but rather a pleasant change from one subject (and one language) to another. This transition from a wide variety of topics and methodological approaches has been possible thanks to the work of the editors, whose purpose, as declared in the “Foreword”, was to “study the physical proximity implied by the spatial dimension and unmediated experience of contacts, frictions and clashes in different fields of cultural history” (x), a purpose accomplished.

Divided into four parts, “Mapping Contacts, Friction, Clashes”, “Experiencing Contacts, Friction, Clashes”, “Redefining Spaces of Contacts, Friction, Clashes”, “Vying for Space and Influence: Contacts, Friction and Clashes”, the contributions thrive from the diverse topics related to space, which span from literature to

ethnography, from history to performing arts, covering a time frame that goes from the Middle Ages up to present days: Hannah Skoda, for instance, looks at the contacts and clashes “between gown and town” in medieval Oxford, while Livio Belloi and Michel Delville offer a reading of contacts and frictions in *A Humument* by Tom Phillips; Carline Blanc discusses immersion, friction and transmission in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. Space and its (re)definitions are analysed, revised and introduced not only as body perceptions: if “contacts are often experienced as cultural challenges” (ix), friction becomes “a creative process as it is sabotage” (Alice Godfroy et al., The Dégadézo Dance Company, “A Round-Robin Discussion on Contact Improvisation”, 273), whilst clashes might be “the occasion for a metamorphosis” (Anna Maria Cimitile, “Tragedy and Metatheatre, Media Archaeology and Spectatorship in Pasolini’s and The Wooster Group’s Visions of Shakespeare”, 197), for they “generate new forms of entanglement” (Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, “Conflict or Entanglement? The Case of the Modoc War on the Oregon-California Border”, 33). The volume presents new perspectives and approaches that explore the intrinsic, basic nature of contact, suggesting that “contacts are primarily not concrete events which take place in a definable physical context, but experiences of the mind” (Fanny Moghaddassi, “*In at a Roche the Levedis Rideth*: Problematic Conflict Between the Fairy and the Human Worlds in Some Middle English Breton Lays”, 58), as in the case of the Breton lays, in which contact occurs between the real and the imaginary world, “closing the gaps in space and time, very much as dreams do” (Moghaddassi, 57). Physical and mental, then, are the ‘spaces’ of reference for the observation and the analysis of every aspect of contact and its outcomes; in examining contact within them, regardless of the topic, each contribution proves to be related with the others. On the physical side for instance, within the human experience, contact shows its greatest potential for it “permet un début de médiation entre soi et autrui” (Valentine Prévot, “*The Coral Island: À La Rencontre du Cannibale, Entre Repulsion et Incorporation*”, 43), while the lack thereof – as in illness – stresses out its value, since the body “deprived of human contact” seems “isolated from any other form of life” (Mélanie Grué, “*A Passionate Eloquence of the Body: Social Clashes, Contact and the Communion of Bodies in the Works of David Wojnarowicz*”, 75). Focusing on the mind, the experience of contact comes through sight, and pictures prove once again to be powerful tools that can emphasise, on a deeper level, the implications of contact: in caricatures, for example, the clash obtained by “ou d’amalgames entre forme de chair et d’os” (Martial Guédron, “*La Perfection dans la Distorsion: La Caricature selon James Peller Malcolm [1767-1815]*”, 102) creates a distorted body with the intention of revealing another aspect of a character, another definition of its identity, while in sacred emblems, contact appears in the form of an impact, “un signe visuel mais aussi comme une sorte d’intention performative” (Emilie Jehl, “*Les Heurts Du Coeur: Représentations de la Conversion Dans Les Emblèmes sacrés Au XVII Siècle*”, 106).

In the end, every aspect of contact may very well be seen as a performance since they can convey someone else's idea, feeling, vision, just like a performance does, and the last section of the volume begins and ends with contributions about contact in different 'performing media', as with the combination of plays, marionettes and films in one performance which generates a clash, a disruption from the ordinary that redefines the space on the stage and the role of every agent involved, effectively creating a third space where the performers are "actors simulating puppets that in turn stand for characters in a play" (Cimitile, 207). While puppets are moved, directed by a puppeteer in a fashion that points "to the human condition ... as the condition of a prisoner" (Cimitile, 211), dancers can be free to choose how to move within a given space, with their body responding to movement in a seemingly endless contact of muscles, nerves and other bodies, as in the case of Contact Improvisation, where this ultimate form of "contact without touch" (The Dégradézo Dance Company, 275) practised in the space of a studio, "the gap in which [dancers] may allow certain things that wouldn't be possible out there" (The Dégradézo Dance Company, 279), gives the opportunity to "share ... experience ... perspectives and ... practice" (The Dégradézo Dance Company, 285). Dance is the field where friction – the least treated topic in the volume – is more prominent, for its trigger is movement, "the condition of a living body and its relation to physical forces ... part of the everyday life of every human being" (The Dégradézo Dance Company, 280). Contact here is discussed by the dancers, either in English or in French, in a perspective that is both physical and mental, considering every type of contact positively: "if friction happens on the skin level, the intimacy of the dance develops. If friction goes below the tissues ... or even goes deeper to the bone level, the connection deepens too" (The Dégradézo Dance Company, 274), and when the contact happens, "une fois 'touches' nous avons une conscience vécue de notre corps dans son environnement qui nous permet de nous considérer dans un plus large tableau" (The Dégradézo Dance Company, 272). Eventually, any experience of contact helps in redefining our personal idea of space.

What emerges from the variety of the topics presented in this volume is that the concept of space is still mainstream, although its definition(s) is (are) labile, susceptible to cultural changes. In spite of the title, the languages of the contributions prove that any discussion about space is not confined to the English-speaking world only.

One last consideration on the book as printed product, which would have benefited from a final revision in the process of proofreading, as typos do at times get in the way of reading. Having said that, the diversity of methodological approaches, the emergence of an aesthetic but also political quality of any engagement with the topic of space (be it in literature, the arts, or any cultural phenomena) makes this a stimulating volume for all those with an interest in space and our ways of being in and imagining it.

Notes on Contributors

Irene Alison works as an editor and a contributor for several newspapers and journals, including the daily newspaper *Il Sole24ore*, *La Lettura*, and *Pagina99*. Her features on current international issues, developed in conjunction with photographers, have been published on *Geo France*, *The Independent Magazine*, *L'Espresso*, *D – La Repubblica delle Donne*, *Il Venerdì*, *XL*, *Marie Claire* and *Riders*. She has curated exhibitions and editorial photography projects for, among others, the Fotografia International Festival, Officine Fotografiche, Open Mind Gallery, Scuola Holden and Brighton Photo Fringe. From 2009 to 2014, Irene was Editor in chief of *Rearviewmirror*, a quarterly magazine devoted to photojournalism, published by the leading Italian photobook publisher Postcart. She is the author of two books: *My Generation – Ten under 40: Talents of Italian Documentary Photography* (2012) and *IREvolution: Notes on Mobile Photography* (2015) both by Postcart. In 2014, Irene founded Doll's Eye Reflex Laboratory, a consulting studio specialized in the field of documentary photography, based in Rome.

Vincenzo Bavaro is Assistant Professor in American Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale". He holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and an M.A. in Cultural Studies from Dartmouth College, NH, USA. He has published essays on Asian American Literature, African American Studies, contemporary U.S. drama, and LGBT cultural history. He is the author of two volumes *La Città Contesa: sessualità e appropriazione dello spazio urbano a New York negli anni Settanta* (2017) and *"Una Storia Etnica?" Capitale culturale e performance etnica nella letteratura degli Stati Uniti* (2013).

Paola Di Gennaro teaches English literature at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples. She holds a Ph.D. in English and comparative literature from the University of Salerno, an M.A. in Comparative Literature from SOAS - University of London, and a BA in Comparative Studies from the University of Naples "L'Orientale". She has published studies in the field of English and comparative literature and theory, with particular reference to twentieth century European and Japanese literature, biblical rewriting, travel writing, electronic literature, thing theory and queer studies, as well as poetry and short fiction. Among her publications, *Wandering through Guilt: The Cain Archetype in the Twentieth-century Novel* (Cambridge Scholars, 2015).

Serena Fusco is Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor in Comparative Literature at University of Naples "L'Orientale". Her volume *Incorporations of Chineseness: Hybridity, Bodies, and Chinese American Literature* was published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2016. Her research is multilingual and transcultural in scope and includes Chineseness in the transnational space, Asian American literature, visual culture and photography, and the internationalization of education.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Ph.D. Brandeis University; Professor Emerita/Research Professor, University of California, Santa Barbara) served as UCSB Chair of Women's Studies and Chair Professor of English at University of Hong Kong. Recipient of Multiethnic Literatures of the United States Lifetime Achievement Award, she's published studies and numerous articles on South/East Asian, Asian American, ethnic and feminist literature, and edited/co-edited collections/journals such as *Transnational Asian American Literature* and *Journal of Transnational American Studies*. Also a creative writer, she's published 10 poetry collections; 3 short story collections; 3 novels; *The Shirley Lim Collection*; and a memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (American Book Award winner).

Tamara Iaccio is a Ph.D. candidate in English Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. Her research aims to investigate the representations of space and place in the narratives of exile in contemporary Palestinian Anglophone Literature, with a focus on multi-cultural identity, national vs. cultural identity and cultural memory. Her other research interests include displacement, representation of history, narrative theories, language and geography.

Tehezeeb Moitra currently teaches a course on creative writing and travel literature at Sant’Anna Institute-Alfred State, the State University of New York (SUNY). She holds a Ph.D. from University of Naples “L’Orientale”, an M.A. in Contemporary Art from the Sotheby’s Institute of Art & The University of Manchester and an M.A. in English from Saint Louis University. She has published essays on Gender, Postcolonial and Cultural Studies.

Fulvia Sarnelli is currently teaching as adjunct professor in Italian Studies at Bowdoin College (USA). She received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from University of Naples “L’Orientale” in May 2016. She mainly works on contemporary Asian and Asian American literature. She is also interested in cultural, political, philosophical, and psychoanalytical theories of the imagination, identity, subjectivity, race, gender, the national/transnational. She published “My big statement: Arte, esperienza politica e ricerca identitaria in *Chinese Opera* di Alex Kuo” in the online journal *Between*, and the article, “When the Transpacific Encounter Becomes a Contagious Fluke: Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*”, in the volume *Harbors: Flows and Migrations of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas: The U.S.A. in/and the World*.

Timo Schrader is a final-year Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nottingham. His dissertation examines Puerto Rican community activism in New York City. He is a Research Associate on the AHRC-funded Antislavery Usable Past project and an Associate Lecturer at the University of Lincoln. He has published an article on mural activism with the *Journal of Urban History* and has another article forthcoming with the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*. He is currently co-editing a volume on the Black Lives Matter movement with Oxford University Press. His second research project will focus on U.S. veteran activism and protest from World War I to the War on Terror.

Pahole Sookkasikon is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of American Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. He focuses on how contemporary Thai popular culture and performance queer notions of Thainess informed by the Western economies of desire and nation-state practices of respectability. He holds an M.A. in Asian American Studies from San Francisco State University, where he focused on the cultural work and lives of Thai Americans. Additionally, Pahole has published articles that range from the filmic exploitation of Thai/American women, human trafficking, and a forthcoming article in *Radical History Review* that privileges the life and legacy of famed-Thai country singer, Pumpuang Duangjan.