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POLK COUNTY: ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S BLACK SOUTH AND THE QUEST FOR A "REAL NEGRO THEATER"

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the ways in which the African American author Zora Neale Hurston draws a texturally rich image of the black South that is shaped by tensions between minstrel stereotypes of black American communities and what she perceives to be authentic Negro folklore. The analysis focuses on Hurston's play *Polk County* (1944) because of its setting and its concern with the performance of southern black vernacular—an element Hurston believes to be characteristic of "Negro expression."

KEYWORDS

Zora Neale Hurston; Richard Wright; *Polk County*; southern writers; Harlem Renaissance; African American literature; minstrelsy; vernacular; authenticity

Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright are two of the most celebrated black southern writers of their times, but their views on what African American literature should achieve differ greatly. In his review of Hurston's 1937 landmark novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Wright accuses Hurston of perpetuating minstrel stereotypes and satisfying a white readership's needs and expectations.¹ A year later, Hurston writes about Wright's short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children*: "This is a book about hatreds. . . . Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work . . . all the characters in this book are elemental and brutish."² Both writers agree that white readerships and audiences in America lack insight into the true thoughts, feelings, and motivations of African Americans, but they hold different views on how to amend this situation. Wright demands that African American literature be aware and avoid characterizations, plot elements, and stylistic devices that might be understood as supporting minstrel stereotypes and thus counteract the African American struggle for political and social equality.³ Hurston, on the other hand, wishes to evoke "understanding and sympathy" by focusing on realistic characterization.

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1. Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *New Masses*, October 5, 1937: 22–23.
 2. Zora Neale Hurston, "Stories of Conflict," review of *Uncle Tom's Children*, by Richard Wright, *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 2, 1938: 32.
 3. The fact that Wright's review was written for the Marxist magazine *New Masses* supports this interpretation.

Hurston's and Wright's opposing views are symptomatic of a general problem African American writers face. In creating black characters, they have to negotiate between displaying them as individual and unique, while at the same time knowing that they will be read by white and black audiences and readerships alike as representatives of their racial group. In addition, they have to be aware of the fact that American readers still frequently consider their characters against the backdrop of the traditions established by blackface minstrelsy.⁴ The minstrel show, which was established in the 1830s and declined after the American Civil War, was the most widespread form of popular entertainment of its time. The shows featured mostly white performers emulating and ridiculing blacks by using blackface and presenting in pseudo-vernacular⁵ language a "hopped repartee and comic confrontations interspersed with songs, locomotive imitations, and crop-festival dances."⁶ As the minstrel show was one of the earliest entertainments that depicted African Americans and held a wide appeal, it had a profound impact on how African Americans were represented not only by white authors but also by African American authors of the post-Civil War period. Especially in the first half of the 20th century, authors who wrote about African American characters had to consider that American readers would largely be familiar with the stereotypes established by blackface minstrelsy and would possibly draw comparisons.

Richard Wright tries to avoid this association as much as possible by avoiding textual features that might be considered minstrelsy⁷ and focusing instead on the political and social aspects of African American life. Zora Neale Hurston, as I stated above, attempts to reclaim those elements of minstrel performances she considers African American in origin. In order to do so she aims to un-distort that which was appropriated and consciously misread by pre-Civil War popular culture and continued well into the 20th century.⁸ By making ample use of "authentic" African American vernacular

4. On the lasting effects of the minstrel show on contemporary popular culture, see W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

5. According to Sieglinde Lemke, the term "vernacular" lacks precise meaning, as it has been applied to various objects in various contexts. In an attempt to formulate a working definition, I will argue with Lemke that the vernacular should "be understood as presenting an insider's view of a group that lacks cultural prestige. . . . When used in relation to 'race,' it often refers to ethnically marginalized groups." Sieglinde Lemke, *The Vernacular Matters of American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

6. Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 32.

7. James Baldwin, however, charges Wright with creating a character (Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*) that conforms to preconceived notions as well: "Bigger's tragedy is . . . that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human." James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 2004), 1704.

8. An extensive discussion of the strategies used to create minstrel stereotypes and the minstrel show's effects on audiences can be found in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

expressions (such as dialect, behavioral patterns, music, mythology, and religious practice) she wishes to reassign their perceived original meaning to them and replace the one previously connected to them in white mainstream culture.⁹ Hurston defines the real and authentic in terms of cultural heritage and folklore, a focus she shares with Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Consequently, Hurston, even though somewhat confined, considered the folk culture of the rural South, in which a large majority of African Americans of her time lived, the most genuine source of racial authenticity.¹⁰

With her reliance on folk traditions, Hurston approaches her goal of simulating authentic blackness and reassigning its meaning anthropologically. Her vernacular is based on the research on African American folklore¹¹ which she conducted in several locations in the American South. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., celebrates Hurston's literary voice as one of the most authentic¹² black vernacular voices in American literature,¹³ and even those who review her work unfavorably usually credit her with being able to write vernacular language credibly, even when they perceive the apolitical African American society she depicts as being largely unrealistic. In this essay, I will discuss Hurston's use of vernacular expression as an attempt to create a sense of authentic "Negro life"¹⁴ in connection with the debate concerning the literary and cultural value of Hurston's work that revolves around the question of minstrelsy vs. authenticity.¹⁵ I will focus on her 1944 play *Polk County*, which is set in a Florida lumber camp and in which the setting and characters are loosely based on places Hurston visited and people she encountered during her anthropological research. The play was co-authored with Dorothy Waring, the wife of a theatrical producer who hoped to produce the play on Broadway. According to Robert

9. On the problems of reconstructing such original meaning, see Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

10. J. Martin Favor points out the problems of "the centrality of folk" that result in a confined view of authentic African Americans as "southern, rural, and poor." See J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 12–13.

11. See, for example, Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935).

12. For an overview on attempts to define authenticity and the authentic in connection with folklore, see Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

13. For example, in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "A Tragedy of Negro Life," in *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, ed. George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 5–24.

14. Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 355.

15. Despite the fact that Hurston sets out to depict African American vernacular language realistically, her works are literary products and thus carefully composed mimicry of a perceived authentic original. I therefore argue that despite the fact that her plays are written to be performed and thus oralized, Paul Goetsch's term "simulated orality" (fingierte Mündlichkeit)—coined in reference to narrative texts—applies. See Paul Goetsch, "Fingierte Mündlichkeit in der Erzählkunst entwickelter Schriftkulturen," *Poetica* 17 (1985): 202–18.

Hemenway, Hurston disagreed with Waring, who encouraged her to give *Polk County* a “Gershwin-esque feeling,”¹⁶ no doubt in hopes of repeating the success of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935), which had been accused of painting a distorted image of the black South. Little else is known about Hurston’s collaborator or the extent of her contribution to the play. Since the vernacular elements in *Polk County* were almost certainly exclusively written by Hurston herself, I will refer to Hurston as the playwright in the following discussion.

In her essay “The Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Hurston draws a clear distinction between white and “Negro” ways of thinking when she writes: “The white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.”¹⁷ According to Hurston, African Americans think in images instead of abstract linguistic concepts, a fact, she goes on to explain, that hints at a more “primitive,” but not inferior, way of thinking. Consequently, Hurston’s “Negro expression” is full of imagery. Thoughts and ideas are often expressed in metaphors and similes, and abstract terms are combined with more concrete ones to make up what she calls “double descriptives,” for instance expressions such as “sitting-chair.”¹⁸ To aid the tangibility of these expressions, not only forms of artistic expression, but, in fact, all forms of conversation are not merely uttered verbally, but acted out and performed, combining elements of thought and language with race-specific rhythms of speech and movement. The literary form of the drama, with its focus on oral speech and performance, might therefore probably be considered a more suitable way to convey a sense of “real” African American life than prose forms. Hurston adds several other characteristics she perceives to be typically African American to her general observations on language and performance, among them a penchant for mimicry, the tradition of incorporating current events and public figures into their folk tales, and a natural inclination toward openness and communality. Because *Polk County*, like “Characteristics of Negro Expressions,” draws heavily on Hurston’s anthropological research, many of these elements can be found in the play.

The scholarly work that has been done on *Polk County* usually focuses on the autobiographical elements of the play. And indeed, many elements, such as names and character traits, verbal expressions and mannerisms, the characters’ roles in the closed community of the lumber camp and their interactions with each other, mirror Hurston’s account of the time she spent doing anthropological research in the real Polk County. When Leafy Lee, a young mulatto woman from New York, arrives at the lumber camp in search of the blues, she is befriended by the camp’s informal leader, a woman named Big Sweet. Soon the men of the lumber camp develop an interest in the light-skinned girl, a fact that causes a darker-skinned woman named Dicey to

16. Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 298.

17. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 355.

18. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 356.

develop a jealous hatred of her. When the man with whom Dicey is in love begins courting Leafy Lee and eventually asks her to marry him, Dicey enlists the help of a voodoo priestess to prevent the wedding and kill Leafy Lee and her husband-to-be. The plan is foiled, Dicey and her accomplices are arrested, and the wedding ceremony is performed, inspiring the men and women of the lumber camp to seek more “civilized” ways (such as legalizing their common-law marriages).

The focus of the play, however, is not its straightforward plot, but the various forms of “Negro” vernacular expression used to make tangible the characters and the inner workings of their community. As there are no recordings of performances of *Polk County* available, and as the text only hints at the body language of the characters or the sound of the accompanying music, considerations concerning the rhythms of movement or the type of musical score the play might have must remain speculative. There are, however, elements of what Hurston perceives to be anthropologically correct African American vernacular expression that can be traced in the dramatic text itself. First of all, *Polk County*’s tight-knit community conforms to Hurston’s concept of the typical African American community in which nothing remains private and relationships are performed publicly. This stress on community defies the individualist notions prevalent in many modernist works of literature, while it reaffirms the Harlem Renaissance’s striving for a distinct “Negro Art.”¹⁹ In addition, Hurston’s focus on a largely independent black community which does not allow the white “Quarter Boss” to interfere with its inner structure may have a critical function. The fact that members of the community use vernacular terms and phrases that require insider knowledge to be understood suggests that the play was not written for the white audiences that would attend primitivist Broadway plays or minstrel shows.

The community is defined by a vernacular code which, in addition to specific terms and phrases, includes distinct oral behavioral and speech patterns, as well as elements of folk mythology, religion, and cultural production. The men of the lumber camp, for instance, rarely use standard forms of verbal communication, nor do they employ a style that is artificially poetic. Nevertheless, their dialog is a dramatic performance on the character level, as they frequently resort to posturing and insults to address each other and brag about what they perceive to be commendable qualities in the rough environment in which they live, revealing a colorful repertoire of image-driven language. When one of them wakes the others in the morning, he calls them “rowdy mule-skinners” (274). Shortly after that, two of the men can be observed boasting to one another, which is, according to Henry Louis Gates,

19. See Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 112–18. See also Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 2004), 1311–14.

Jr., a form elemental to African American literature and the culturally specific technique of “Signifying.”²⁰

Do-Dirty: . . . I’m liable to make me a graveyard all by myself. I’m so mean till I’ll kill a baby just born this morning.

Few Clothes: Me too. Man, I’m mean! I have to tote a pistol with me when I go to the well, to keep from gitting in a fight with my own self. I got Indian blood in me. Reckon that’s how come I’m so mean. (*They all admit to Indian blood and meanness.*) (276)

Big Sweet, the informal leader of the camp, displays similar vernacular behavioral attributes. While fulfilling her duties as the camp’s unofficial law enforcer, she boastingly threatens a man who cheated another in a card game: “I’ll beat you till you slack like lime! Gimme that six dollars you beat Lonnie out of! . . . (*Trying for another good place to kick*) You didn’t die! You multiplied cockroach. . . . I’ll teach you to die next time I hit you!” (281).

The dialog of the camp inhabitants is characterized by African American vernacular dialect as Hurston understands it and transcribes its oral form into written words.²¹ The peculiarities of it occur on the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic level. The phonetic alterations of standard written English are comparatively moderate and not applied systematically throughout the text. Most frequent are contractions and elision, such as *gimme*, *ain’t*, *’em* (them), and *’round* (around). Syntactically, the language of the inhabitants of the lumber camp is characterized by double negations (“I ain’t going to give you nothing!” [281]), double participles (“Ain’t I done told you about your meanness?” [283]), non-standard subject-verb agreement (“Some folks thinks they is a lord-god. . .” [284]), and elliptical expressions that usually miss either the subject or the auxiliary (“Who you personating, Dicey?” [284]; “Taint a man in Tennessee can make a shoe to fit your foot!” [275]).²² The semantic peculiarities are the most profound in that, unlike most phonetic changes and syntactic vernacular patterns, they are almost impossible to understand without an insider’s knowledge. For instance, if Dicey, the darker-skinned woman, is said to have the “black-ass” (284), only her behavior throughout the play will help an unknowing audience understand that this term refers to her jealousy of lighter-skinned women. Similar metonymic and metaphoric expressions such as “I’ll make me a graveyard of my own” (290, meaning: I will kill many people), “pick his box” (306, meaning: to play the guitar), or “bottle-neck it off” (308, meaning: to accompany someone on the guitar) appear throughout the play. To mirror the obscurity of the vernacular language to uninducted audiences, the inhabitants of the lumber camp have trouble understanding Leafy Lee’s white urban speech.

Leafy: . . . He even went and asked Papa for my hand.

Big Sweet: Your *hand*? What did he want with that? (300)

20. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

21. She thus creates Goetsch’s “simulated orality.”

22. Another “double descriptive.”

In addition, speech rhythms, rhymes, anaphoras, and parallelisms play a large role in *Polk County*. Examples include the phrase “I come for a reason, not for a season” (311), “Hit the grit” (284), and “I done called you once! I done called you twice” (275). Others are plentiful and often connected to the aforementioned habit of posturing. The use of vernacular language in *Polk County* not only defines the community, it is community-building. When Leafy Lee arrives, she speaks in a refined, non-vernacular way. On entering the community, however, she falls into the vernacular pattern with ease. In fact, even the white Quarter Boss’s language is infused with black vernacular expressions, probably an illustration of Hurston’s theory that African American vernacular language has influenced and, indeed, enriched the language of the American South as a whole.²³

In addition to vernacular mannerisms and language, Hurston attempts to create a sense of authenticity by referencing elements of the folk culture she researched in the American South. A children’s game she observed (as described in her *Mules and Men*) plays a role (293–94), a voodoo ceremony is observed (354–59), and the legend of John the Conqueror, an African American trickster figure, is referred to repeatedly (278–79). Blues and work songs are not merely mentioned, but meant to be performed on stage and accompanied by guitar and piano playing. Dancing occurs, and although the secondary text contains little information about the exact realization of the dances it can be assumed that they should be performed in accordance with Hurston’s impression of African American dance as “dynamic suggestion”—a kind of dance in which the dancer suggests, but never expresses fully, leaving the audience to complete the image on its own.²⁴

Polk County is an attempt at, as well as a refinement of, Hurston’s “real Negro theater,” a concept she explained to Langston Hughes, who co-authored her *Mule Bone*, as follows: “Did I tell you about the new, *real* Negro theater I plan? Well, I shall, or rather we shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naiveté of the primitive ’bama Nigger. . . .”²⁵ This original idea of a primitive acting out of folk tales is refined by *Polk County*’s introspective characters, who show signs of wisdom and philosophical insight that go beyond the simplicity of the folk tale. They offer glimpses into the inner lives of the play’s black characters that, according to Hurston, white Americans do not expect behind the amiable façade African Americans put on to evade interrogation and that publishers are not interested in.²⁶ Big Sweet, for example, likens herself and the other inhabitants of the lumber camp to “[d]ust

23. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 356.

24. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 358.

25. Quoted in Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 115.

26. In her 1950 essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” Hurston laments that white publishers and readers are only interested in African American literature that concerns itself with race tensions, which allegedly distorts the reality of African American life. She writes: “[F]or the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are very human and internally, according to natural

from God's big saw" (337) when she realizes that they belong to the lowest stratum of American society and that without their community in the camp they would be left to spend their lives as social outcasts. Elsewhere, she reflects on her life prior to the lumber camp, explaining how circumstances made it difficult for her, but not denying her own poor choices (301). Her laments are uttered without any activist call for political and social changes, as Hurston avoids conforming to the white publishers' demands for engaged African American literature. Big Sweet's self-reflexivity and consistent moral code also defy minstrel stereotypes, as minstrel characters are usually portrayed as superficial and fickle. Thomas Dartmouth Rice's character Jim Crow, for instance, displays an inconsistent attitude towards divorce:

I'm for union to a gal,
 An dis is a stubborn fact,
 But if I marry an don't like it,
 I'll nullify the act.
 . . .
 Its berry common 'mong the white
 To marry and get divorced
 But dat I'll nebber do
 Unless I'm really forced.²⁷

The two stanzas are only separated by one other concerning the happiness marriage surely must bring. However, the speaker's attitude towards resolving the marriage bond changes twice in the course of just three stanzas, from a definite readiness to a determined refusal and back to an—albeit hesitant—willingness to separate from his future wife. In comparison, the moral attitudes of the camp inhabitants in *Polk County*, even though they leave room for improvement, are usually firm, and changes need to be triggered by incisive events, such as the wedding and its circumstances at the end of the play.

The elements in *Polk County* that aim at folkloristic authenticity, such as vernacular language and non-verbal expressions, provide an easier target for criticism than the personalities of its characters. Most opponents of African American vernacular literature in the first half of the 20th century have argued that the vernacular technique was primitivist and thus white in origin and aimed at preserving the status quo of race relations. In their search for the primal roots of human existence, both white and black primitivist artists and writers turned to cultures they believed to be largely untainted by modern, urban civilization. In the case of African American culture, however, they failed not only to recognize the diversity of African American expression, but also the impact of the mainstream culture on it. Many also did not

endowment, just like everybody else." Quoted in M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 223.

27. T. D. Rice, "The Original Jim Crow," in *Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays*, ed. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 8–9.

distinguish between African American art and white art made out to be African American, such as the minstrel show.²⁸ The most vocal critics of black primitivism, such as Alain Locke and Richard Wright, were concerned with its political implications. They argued that the dominant white culture had appropriated elements of African American cultural expression and reinterpreted them pejoratively,²⁹ thus turning African American vernacular into a signifier for the oppression of blacks in America. Richard Wright's review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* attests to that view: "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh."³⁰

And indeed, elements of minstrel performances may be attributed to Hurston's work. In fact, parallels between her writings and minstrel performances should be expected if one considers that minstrel writers and performers did borrow means of expressions from African Americans they encountered—albeit mostly in the North. In addition, as a writer attempting to simulate African American life in as realistic a manner as possible, Hurston might at least have drawn unconsciously on the literary traditions in which African Americans were depicted in the American literature of the time, and which had been influenced by the immensely popular minstrel show. Like, for instance, the minstrel stock characters Jim Crow and Zip Coon, who tend to deliver grotesquely exaggerated accounts of their own achievements, Hurston's characters are prone to posturing. But while the dialog situation in *Polk County* provides a credible context for this performance of masculinity, minstrel boasting often seems disconnected and autotelic.

Hurston's southern African American dialect equally shows similarities to the language of the blackface minstrels. Like *Polk County*, T. D. Rice's play *Virginia Mummy*³¹ contains shortened words ("spect" [52], "til" [54]), double negations ("If you isn't sent nobody else" [49]), non-standard subject-verb agreement ("I ar one of dem!" [48]), and elliptical expressions ("I wonder

28. Even African American thinkers trying to define the essence of being African American failed to clearly distinguish between minstrel features and authentic African American expressions. Both W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson were convinced that minstrel tunes had originated on the plantations of the South. See Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). On the characteristics of primitivist modernism, see also Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

29. Eric Lott argues that this comical reinterpretation of black vernacular culture was spurred by white Americans' need to deal with their ambiguous feelings of fascination and unease toward black culture and the male black body. See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 3–4.

30. Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," 22–23. Wright's italics.

31. T. D. Rice, *Virginia Mummy: A Farce in One Act*, in *Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays*, ed. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 48–70.

what he gwan [going] to do . . .” [54]). But many of the grammatical and spelling peculiarities regularly found in minstrel texts, among them those which contribute most to the unintelligibility of black minstrel characters, are missing from Hurston’s text. For instance, she does not apply Rice’s technique of replacing fricative consonants with stops (*dem, dat, nebber*). Equally, she avoids his burlesque mispronunciation of high register or even common words such as “gemmen” (gentlemen, 54), “sartain” (Satan, 65) or “jubious” (dubious, 69).

Finally, Hurston’s drama, like the minstrel show, includes actual music and dance. Like all writers who wish to convey a sense of authentic black culture by utilizing music and dance, Hurston must imply musical pieces and a dancing style that will only be fully realized on stage. As the playwright’s influence on the production is usually limited, the production will always be potentially in danger of invoking those parallels with blackface minstrelsy that the writer has meticulously tried to avoid. But if the performance of the dances in *Polk County* is in concordance with Hurston’s observation that African American dance is “dynamic suggestion” (see above), it will differ greatly from the grotesque or slapstick dance numbers on the minstrel stage. And while Rice’s characters can regularly be found singing satirical songs and playing the banjo or the fiddle, Hurston’s characters perform blues and work songs accompanied by the guitar and the piano. It should be concluded, therefore, that Hurston’s play differs significantly from actual blackface minstrelsy when the two of them are put side by side.³²

Hurston thus tries to cut the link between African American expression and minstrel stereotypes. She wishes to undo the linguistic and interpretative distortions which black vernacular expression suffered in white cultural production and to reintroduce what she perceives to be its original contents and connotations. By paying close attention to portraying African American language and expression as authentically as possible, she attempts to deconstruct false and reassign proper meanings. Instead of reproducing the pseudo-vernacular language of minstrel writers, she uses a dialect she herself researched in the American South. In addition, she infuses the speech of her characters with elements that suggest worldly wisdom and creativity. Her rhymes and parallelisms are designed to imitate the natural speech rhythms of African American dialect, as opposed to the deliberately failing mimicry of conventional white poetry that Rice uses for comic purposes in his Jim Crow songs. Hurston’s dance performances and, especially, her musical score suggest a connection to acclaimed popular African American music instead of referencing the musical satire of the minstrel show. Her characters are three-dimensional, multi-faceted people, most of whom manage to keep a credible balance between character flaws and redeeming qualities. They are

32. This would not, however, keep the play from alienating audiences, as they are not likely to draw a direct comparison and the stereotypical expressions of the minstrel show are, as mentioned before, still very present in audiences’ minds.

thus opposed to the stock characters of blackface minstrelsy, but also to the functional characters that can be found in much African American *art engagé*.

Hurston's choice to set her play (and most of her other works) in a closed-off community in the rural South, where she perceives American culture to be richest and most authentic, goes hand in hand with her decision to depict African American lives as comparatively unaffected by the political and economic struggles many African Americans were engaged in at the time, not only in the segregated South but also in the urban centers of the North, which features very little in Hurston's conception of authentic black culture. With this focus on black life relatively free of the confinements of victimization and revolutionary zest, she goes against the demands of many African American protest writers of her time. Richard Wright, following W. E. B. Du Bois's notion that "All art is propaganda and ever must be,"³³ for instance demands:

Every short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the *oppression* of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world.³⁴

Although Wright acknowledges the importance of folklore to African American national identification, he avoids black vernacular expression and denies his characters wholeness in order to point at political and social wrongs. Like Du Bois, he has his eyes firmly set on a new and better future. Wright spent most of his adult life in the North of the United States and later in Europe. His works are set in the Northern urban centers and are infused with the leftist notions of a future worth fighting for he shared with many African American writers who, like him, lived mostly in the North. Hurston's work, on the other hand, remained bound to the rural South. Despite her perception that African American culture was highly adaptive and inclusive of present-day occurrences, her focus remained on matters of tradition and heritage, and thus mostly rooted in the past. Hurston's critique of Wright's characters as being "elemental and brutish" is a critique of characters stripped of their humanity, reduced to being victims or revolutionaries, destroyed or future-bound, but in any case unaware of their own essential identity. Wright's critique of Hurston voluntarily continuing the traditions of minstrelsy is a critique of characters clinging to the past, perpetuating the wrongs of tradition instead of throwing off every aspect of past oppression and fighting for a complete political and cultural renewal. Wright, however, does not allow for a cultural renewal that is inclusive of the past and thus a heritage that many African Americans consider an integral part of their identity.

33. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1000.

34. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Literature," in *Amistad 2: Writings on Black History and Culture*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (New York: Vintage, 1970), 10.

Both Hurston and Wright try to establish a new and distinct African American literature. Both of them define this literature in terms of opposition. Wright contests primitivist claims of black authenticity in favor of a cultural future that is yet to be established. Hurston defines her writing in opposition to activist literature and its emphasis on victimization by adopting a pre-modern focus. The popularity of primitivism in modern art and literature and the lingering effects of the immensely popular and ideologically influential minstrel show made it difficult for the critics, readers, and audiences of her time to evaluate Hurston's work without relating it to either minstrelsy or primitivism. During the 1950s and 1960s, her work faded into obscurity. Only in 1975, more than thirty years after *Polk County* was completed, did Alice Walker renew public interest in Hurston's work.³⁵ Walker praised her ability to create characters that are "complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings,"³⁶ pointing out those elements of Hurston's literature that are valid and valuable beyond the cultural currents of her time.

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35. Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," republished as "Looking for Zora," in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 93–116.

36. Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 85. Walker's italics.

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THE QUEST FOR ROOTS AND BELONGING IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This essay deals with a fairly recent development in American literature and culture, which plays a part in the ongoing debate around a possible apology for slavery: the emergence of autobiographical narratives dealing with the attempt to find one's roots and, possibly, those family members who have not usually been acknowledged by the family because of their existence on the other, opposite side of the "color line." After a brief introduction to the importance of biracial heritage in contemporary America, the article focuses on factors that may have contributed to the emergence of these biographies before providing a short comparison of the narratives through the common motif of the family secret. In the conclusion, it outlines the importance of these narratives in the context of passing on American history to the younger generations.

KEYWORDS

American literature; American autobiography; slavery; family; race; color line; DNA testing; Shirlee Taylor Hazlip; Neil Henry; Thulani Davis; Edward Ball; Henry Wiencek

INTRODUCTION

The black/white heritage emerging out of slavery and the "Old South" has long been absent from both individual family trees and public discourse in the United States. In American post-slavery history, this has long been possible because of institutions such as the "color line" and the "one drop rule," marking everyone with just one drop of "black" blood as "black," while denying this person's "white" lineage. Intimate relationships between people of African heritage and people with European roots were not desired or openly addressed well into the 20th century. Instead, they were commonly referred to as "miscegenation," a neologism coined in 1863 and deriving from the Latin roots *miscere*, "to mix," and *genus*, "kind," in this case "race." Even though the term could technically stand for the "mixing" of any two "races," it was mostly used to refer to relationships between "black" and "white" people.¹ The word itself, along with its usage, clearly indicates that people of African heritage and Caucasians were considered to be two different "kinds" or "races," placing the emphasis on the difference instead of the equality

1. See David A. Hollinger, "Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (Dec 2003): 1363–90.

of people with different roots. While Congress never passed a general law banning interracial relationships in all of the United States, and despite the apparent difficulties courts came across when attempting to construct laws prohibiting “miscegenation,”² even more than one hundred years after the coinage of the word several states still criminalized interracial dating and interracial marriage. This was especially the case in the former slaveholding states south of the Mason-Dixon line. This kind of legal arrangement was unique to the “New World,”³ and was finally declared unconstitutional in *Loving vs. Commonwealth of Virginia* in 1967 after a legal debate lasting many years.⁴

NEW FASCINATION

While the open acknowledgement of one’s own biracial heritage or biracial relationships in one’s family was hardly possible in the past, today we are witnessing a different, almost opposite development: the emergence of a new type of family narrative. This new narrative clearly acknowledges relationships or sexual intercourse between African Americans and Americans defined as “white.” While these relationships are typically located in the past, often reaching back into the days of slavery, their impact on the present is obvious. Accounts such as Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* (1994), Neil Henry’s *Pearl’s Secret: A Black Man’s Search for His White Family* (2001), and Thulani Davis’ *My Confederate Kinfolk: A Twenty-First Century Freedwoman Discovers Her Roots* (2006) are just a few of the better-known texts of this kind. As observed by Paul Spickard, there has been a “Boom in Biracial Biography”⁵ since the early 1990s. While many Americans are aware that their heritage is “mixed” in one way or another, these books paying a tribute to multiracial heritage “are by and about people who mix Black and White ancestry, not other combinations,”⁶ talking about “their White ancestors as well as their Black ancestors, and about their mixed selves.”⁷ At the same time, we see the descendants of slaveholders willing to put great effort into piecing together their family history and looking at interracial relationships in order to “complete the legacy.”⁸ The most famous work in this context is by Edward Ball and consists of two narratives, the award-winning *Slaves in the Family* (1998), tracing the descendants of the people his ancestors enslaved, and the follow-up, entitled *The Sweet Hell*

2. For a detailed overview of court cases and legal issues concerning intermarriage see Werner Sollors, ed., *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3. See Sollors, introduction to *Interracialism*, 8.

4. See Hollinger, “Amalgamation and Hypodescent,” 1365.

5. Paul Spickard, “The Subject Is Mixed Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography,” in *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race,’* ed. David Parker and Miri Song (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 76.

6. Spickard, “The Subject Is Mixed Race,” 77.

7. Spickard, “The Subject Is Mixed Race,” 77.

8. Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (London: Penguin, 1998), 14.

Inside: A Family History (2001), in which he attempts to retell the family history of the black Harleston family he is related to. Another text of this kind is Henry Wiencek's *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (2000). Even though Wiencek is not related to the Hairston family by blood but rather comes across them while on assignment as a journalist in North Carolina, he still puts great effort into tracing the connections between the black and white Hairston families. The most discomfiting question in this context is contested even decades after the end of slavery: did the ancestors, at one point, enslave their own family members because of their skin color?⁹

While all accounts address heritage and the quest for one's origin or roots, they also, and most importantly, call into question the established notions of "blackness" and "whiteness."¹⁰ This "boom" of narratives dealing with America's slavery past and its long-term consequences does not only take place in the form of autobiographical accounts published as books, though. 1997 saw the screening of *Family Name*, a TV documentary investigating the connections between the "white" and the "black" Alston families of North Carolina on PBS. In 2005, *The Crisis* devoted an article named "Bound by Slavery" to both the topic of kinship between Americans living on opposite sides of the "color line" as a result of the common heritage of slavery, and the phenomenon of investigating and tracing one's roots. The article follows an African American woman from Detroit to Kentucky, where her ancestors were slaves and where she traveled in order to be united with the descendants of those who used to own her family.¹¹

The American public, which has in the past looked at what was termed "miscegenation" with horror, now seems to be focusing on the topic with a new fascination. Finally, the acceptance of people's roots and of biracial heritage as a consequence of interracial relationships during the times of slavery and afterwards may be growing. This is also indicated in the current changes in the American census statistics: in 2000, it was possible for the first time to mark one's multiracial background by checking more than one racial category. This development hints at the fact that a multiracial movement is on its way across the United States.¹² Along with this trend, hardly any textbook on race and ethnicity in the American context today is written without paying tribute to America's multiracial heritage;¹³ discussions like the one on the Confederate Flag waving on top of the South Carolina State

9. This question is directly addressed and discussed in Henry Wiencek, *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), 301. It might very well be that this question is easier to address from Wiencek's point of view, as he is not related to the Hairston family.

10. See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 147.

11. See Lori S. Robinson, "Bound by Slavery," *Crisis* 112, no. 1 (2005): 30–35.

12. See Spickard, "The Subject Is Mixed Race," 76.

13. See Spickard, "The Subject Is Mixed Race," 76.

House in Columbia, SC,¹⁴ show that the debate around collective memory in America is currently in a state of flux. This emphasis on diversity is probably going to increase even further over the next couple of years because of the Barack Obama presidency and Obama's specific family history, which also includes multiracial relationships.

BLOOD TIES

The shift toward more openness about biracial relationships might also be due to a new and different way of looking at kinship and blood ties which has only recently become possible on a larger scale, namely through DNA testing. The emergence of a "DNA testing industry" with companies bearing names such as "African Ancestry Inc." or "DNA Solutions" makes DNA testing available to the general public. On their websites, these companies promise what Alex Haley may, or, as many claim, may not have done in his *Roots* epic in the 1970s:¹⁵ to find the one African tribe one's family is descended from, and to show which other elements or ethnicities contributed to one's heritage. Ever since the publication of *Roots*, Americans, and especially African Americans, have been extremely interested in their family backgrounds, as evidenced by the presence of "find-your-heritage" kits and guides to finding one's roots.¹⁶ But the increasing availability of DNA testing has shed entirely new light on this interest and turned it into a profitable business.

With the help of DNA testing the proof becomes available for what has long been claimed by and rumored in African American families, that is, the rape of slave women. It was not a rare thing—it was indeed so common that it was not talked about. The problem of openly addressing this aspect of American history in front of other family members and asking questions about biracial heritage in one's own family is also mentioned by the narrators in the accounts. While Edward Ball is told by his relatives that they "don't know of any Ball folklore about the men sleeping with their slaves,"¹⁷ Thulani Davis says in *My Confederate Kinfolk* that it was a common saying that someone had "a nigger in the woodpile," but the fact that thousands of African Americans have, as she ironically states, "a redneck in the woodpile"¹⁸ was not addressed: "[W]e all knew there was a Mississippi plantation, and a Master-housekeeper, race mixing-inheritance-squabble story."¹⁹ This was not

14. For a lengthier explanation of the debate around the flag on top of the South Carolina State House see, for example, Hastings Wyman, "Furl that Banner," *American Spectator* 33, no. 6 (2000): 66–67.

15. Alex Haley, *Roots. The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Dell 1976); see also Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture through a Transatlantic Lens* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 73–75.

16. See also Taylor, *Circling Dixie*, 65; and Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 15.

17. Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 49.

18. Thulani Davis, *My Confederate Kinfolk: A Twenty-First Century Freedwoman Confronts Her Roots* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 9.

19. Davis, *My Confederate Kinfolk*, 6.

discussed in the family since it was so common that it was not considered worth mentioning.²⁰ This is surely one very possible reason why biracial heritage is not often openly addressed in African American families. Another reason, I would claim, is the shame and confusion related to the rape itself. It is, along with slavery, a strong marker of powerlessness and defeat. Moreover, the laws at the time allowed slaveholders to literally treat their “property” as they wanted to and thus they made use of the option of treating these children as “step-aside” children, meaning not only not considering them “kin,” but also rendering the rape or the relationship that might have stood behind the conception of the child a literal “non-event.”²¹

The past few years have seen many interesting discoveries concerning the family secrets of slavery and have shed new light upon the life of several well-known American families. The best-known case is probably the one concerning Thomas Jefferson and the revelation that he had a relationship with a slave woman. Even though he never acknowledged the daughter who sprang from this union, he still supported her financially. While her descendants had claimed for decades that they were descendants of Thomas Jefferson,²² it took scientific facts for the oral tradition to be verified and for a feeling of kinship to be established between family members on the opposite sides of the “color line.”

COMING TO TERMS WITH SLAVERY

So far, the trauma of slavery has not been openly confronted by the United States as a whole in terms of a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, unlike other historical traumas that originated in Germany or other countries confronted with a difficult past. Instead, it has been repressed in cultural memory. Along the same lines, the ongoing effects of the creation of “race” in America,²³ such as the existence of so-called “aggrieved communities” (George Lipsitz’s term)²⁴ and phenomena like “white flight” have been known for a considerable amount of time, but have not been addressed critically outside of the scholarly community. Nevertheless, there is a lot of evidence proving that coming to terms with a difficult past can have healing effects, as it enables people to distinguish between the past, in which something traumatic happened to them or their people, and the present. Active engagement with a traumatizing

20. See Davis, *My Confederate Kinfolk*, 9.

21. Cf. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 142–43; see also 151 for a direct comment on Ball’s concern about “step-aside” children in his own family.

22. See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 166–67, or, for a more comprehensive overview, see also Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

23. See Thomas McCarthy, “Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the USA: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 5 (2002): 634–36.

24. See also Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 133, and McCarthy, “Vergangenheitsbewältigung,” 640–43, for a lengthier discussion of the ongoing consequences of “race” and racialism for American everyday life.

experience can thus lead to the recognition that the past, while related to the present, is not identical with it.²⁵

According to the German cultural studies expert Aleida Assmann, we are currently observing a worldwide shift in terms of collective memory. As a consequence, the victims' memories have moved from the margin to the center of the discussion around cultural memory. Those who were denied a voice in the past are invited to take a stand. This shift is a result or rather a consequence of coming to terms with both the Holocaust and colonialism and its defeat, and represents an important step on the way towards looking at the past from a moral, rather than from a political stance.²⁶ Along with that, it also puts the dominant narratives, the histories written by the "winners," into question and confronts different groups in society with the fact that their respective groups were affected by history in different ways.²⁷ The repression of slavery and its aftermath and consequences until today may thus stem not so much from a lack of empathy with the victims, but rather from fear of the recognition that people are not always in control of their own fate.²⁸

The inclusion of painful or problematic memories, such as the memory of slavery, is not easy, and may take a long time. These events cannot be told in terms of heroism and go against the very grain of what regional and national identities or other "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson's term) are usually founded upon²⁹ and thus, there may not be an adequate language to express them.

Since the 1990s, interest in America's heritage of slavery and openness about it has grown considerably. Today, slavery has "assumed unusual prominence in American popular and political culture."³⁰ The past decades have seen the publication of books like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and movies such as *Amistad* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1997) and *Sankofa* (dir. Haile Gerima, 1993), all of which focus on the topic of slavery and pay attention to the trauma associated with it.³¹ The prominent presence of slavery in the public imagination may also account for another prominent development: in virtually all former slaveholding states, from Massachusetts to Missouri,

25. See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 66.

26. See Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C. H. Beck, 2006), 77–81.

27. See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 44–45.

28. See Susan J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 48–54.

29. See Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 68–71; see also Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 17–18. For a detailed account of the concept of "imagined communities" and its connections to the formation of collective identities consult Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 2006).

30. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 131.

31. See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 131–33.

discussions about reparations or apologies for slavery have emerged and captured public debates, with Virginia being the first state to pass a bill, in February 2007.³² These developments, taken together with the emergence of the multiracial movement and the newly-found opportunities provided by DNA testing, may very well be held accountable for the increased openness about finally coming to terms with the consequences of slavery into our days.

FAMILY SECRET

All the recently published narratives share a common pattern of a family secret,³³ its investigation in archives, marriage records, photo files, old newspaper articles and microfilms, and, finally, its revelation: the establishment of contact with the family members who were previously missing in the family tree, and, along with that, knowledge of one's heritage and roots. This new knowledge is not always comforting, though: many times, the stories uncovered in the process bring to light painful memories which had been repressed in the previous decades.

Family secrets as described in these accounts are in no way unique to former slaveholding families or families formerly bonded in slavery, of course. In this case, the family secrets center on family members who are long deceased, and thus have to be called a transgenerational phenomenon: "[T]hey originate in previous ancestral traumas but haunt those in the present who make up the remembering generations."³⁴ The primary function of a family secret is to guard the self-worth and respectability of the family; traditionally, families would rather look back to a glorious past than to one of shame;³⁵ a pattern which is, of course, also true for African Americans. While, theoretically, family secrets can concern literally every walk of life, from one's sexual orientation to a mental illness someone in the family might have had, in practice "the important thing about family secrets in African American life is that they are the result of one historical American institution, slavery, and the ongoing social institution it created, race."³⁶ This is self-evident, as slavery and its aftermath caused a trauma, which has, as I pointed out earlier, not been significantly dealt with as yet. The trauma continues to hinder open conversation, as talking about the problems openly would lead

32. See Suzanne Goldenberg, "After 400 Years, Virginia Issues Official Apology for Slavery," *Guardian*, February 26, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,,2021382,00.html>; see also Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 131, and, for more examples of new resolutions passed in the context of reparations, Thomas McCarthy, "Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II: On the Morality and Politics of Reparations for Slavery," *Political Theory* 32, no. 6 (2004): 750–51.

33. Rushdy has made this observation for Ball and Alston; for a longer explanation see Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 147.

34. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 21.

35. See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 17.

36. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 22.

to the emergence of painful memories, which have been repressed by the individuals, but also in cultural memory as a whole.

As Rushdy has rightly pointed out, family secrets about slavery are secrets in every way imaginable: they are “a secret within a family, a secret about family, and a secret denying the possibility of family;”³⁷ they are not to leave the selected circle of family members who know about the secret and concern the members’ involvement in the institution. They deny the possibility of family as they deny membership in the family to a certain part of the family,³⁸ according to the “one drop rule.” From a psychological standpoint, they also deny the intimacy and trust an individual should experience within the supposedly safe haven of the family. The fact that a marriage could be rendered “null” by skin color and that children could be pushed aside as “illegitimate” if conceived by an interracial couple “created a central paradox in American society, idealizing the concept of family while destroying certain families,”³⁹ namely those which did not conform to the traditional family ideal because of their interracial heritage. It looks as if the recently published narratives make a serious attempt to counteract this tendency and to encourage people to try to unite with the family members who have not previously been considered part of the family circle.

They enter the debate around America’s history and its implications for national and regional identities that have to be constantly re-negotiated. They deal with the topic of black/white relationships and biracial heritage, which could not, and in many ways still cannot, be mentioned in the family, or, to use Neil Henry’s words: “I often felt in my research as if I were peeling back the pulpy layers of some forbidden fruit—inexorably, almost involuntarily—and I was deeply troubled about the truths I might find at the core.”⁴⁰ Throughout their explorations, the narrators meet open resistance and hostility, ranging from simple unwillingness to talk about the issue to the accusation that further investigation would insult the dignity of the ancestors and thus should not be undertaken. They encounter rumors and stories in the early stages of their research, but no explanations are given. “You know how things were” and similar statements often have to be accepted as answers to inquiries such as Edward Ball’s question as to whether “there was, somewhere, a black clan with a bloodline that led to a Ball bedroom.”⁴¹ Family members may very well call the rumors about their existence “folklore.” “Undoubtedly, the miscegenation happened sometimes. It happened less in South Carolina than it did in Virginia. In Virginia, the Negroes were well adulterated,”⁴² Edward

37. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 29.

38. See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 29.

39. Sollors, introduction to *Interracialism*, 3.

40. Neil Henry, *Pearl’s Secret. A Black Man’s Search for His White Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 49.

41. Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 49.

42. Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 57.

Ball is told by a distant relative at a family reunion taking place in South Carolina, the state of the former “Ball Empire”; and that is the end of that conversation. This clearly shows that his family, especially the older family members, whom he has to involve in his investigations in order to approach the secret, does not want to be addressed when it comes to the topic of possible interracial relationships within one’s closer environment. By pointing to a different state instead, the problematic issue is located outside of the family and outside of the family’s immediate surroundings. This attempt to keep Ball silent, though, is not successful, as the publication of his narrative shows.

In many ways, as Thulani Davis states, the current generation does not really know “how things were,”⁴³ because they are not told by their family or their teachers, who should know but actually do not know either. Thus, an investigation is needed, often involving the study of documents in archives or libraries, marriage records, lists with the names of slaves a family kept, or, as a final step, a DNA test. The narrators expose the truth about their *American* families: all of them include biracial family trees, and, in addition to making relatedness and family membership across different skin colors open to the public, provide visible proof of the South’s biracial heritage. Each narrative features a photo section showing people of different complexions. The family genealogy thus fulfills a new and rather non-traditional function in these narratives: it is used to address questions of color and race, instead of keeping them out of the discussion. The issues and elements which have previously been absent from genealogy are placed in front of a mass audience in these narratives.⁴⁴ This focus, which started with Alex Haley’s *Roots*, emphasizes the idea that “genealogy is no longer a mechanism to be solely employed or deployed to reinforce the primacy of a select group of white Americans.”⁴⁵ I would even go as far as to state that it is used in order to emphasize and underline America’s biracial heritage in these narratives.

HISTORY YET UNTOLD

Since the narratives very openly admit that the families had one or several cases of interracial unions resulting in children who were often not acknowledged by the “white” members of the families, they question “whiteness” and the privileges emerging from being defined as “white.” In many ways, the authors engage in telling a part of history so far untold in the American context, and enter into the ongoing dialogue about the legacy of slavery until today, about whether today’s generations can be held accountable for wrongs committed long before they were born, and about whether an apology or some form of reconciliation is appropriate. This also brings up important ethical concerns: how should one mourn one’s losses as a

43. Davis, *My Confederate Kinfolk*, 45.

44. See Eric Gardner, “Black and White: American Genealogy, Race, and Popular Response,” *Midwest Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2003): 149.

45. Gardner, “Black and White,” 152.

descendant of slaveholders while still acknowledging the losses of the victims? How should one talk to the descendants of the people who enslaved and raped one's ancestors, and profited—in one way or other—from decades of unpaid labor and oppression? There is no way to balance these accounts, and all this attempt is going to result in is more questions, and possibly even more shame and guilt.

What is being found out through DNA analysis today, as well as the results of the confrontations of family members with events that happened in the past and that might or might not be documented in archives, may very well change the way we look at history and especially at questions of family, kinship, race, and ethnicity, first of all with a view to the present. It may show not only the elite of American families or American politicians, but also the ancestors of generations of Americans, from a different point of view, and, in addition, also put the slaveholding South, which is, despite intense criticism from scholars, still being romanticized by many parts of the public, into a different light. Some stories which have always been part of a family's oral tradition and could not be proven may well turn out to be true; on the other hand, investigation and DNA testing may also bring some uncomfortable truths to light, for example, when they show that one is not related to people one always considered close family.

CONCLUSION

"Family" is and will probably remain a highly debated issue in the American context.⁴⁶ The newly emerging family narratives are, in many ways, an open attempt to alter the debate about family from an exclusive concept to one that focuses more on kinship, as defined through blood ties: "It may take a recognition that some of the unnamed actors of American history, from traditional heroes shot by the British in the Revolution to nameless lynch victims, are our kinfolk—the relatives of black and white Americans—for all of us to act when black votes are not counted. . . . Where compassion has failed, maybe history can help."⁴⁷ At the same time, they also express the opinion that social connections are more important than these very blood ties.⁴⁸ Neil Henry, for example, ends his account in stating that "it would be a stretch to say we considered both sides of our tree one 'family.' Our lives continued much as before, separately, quietly, distinctly white and black."⁴⁹

The narratives question power relationships, and, along with that, issues such as interracial relationships, heritage, family, responsibility, accountability, and the interconnectedness of the above in the contemporary United States. The narratives are thus to be considered a criticism of the way history, and especially the history of slavery and the Civil War, is taught or

46. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 32.

47. Davis, *My Confederate Kinfolk*, 4.

48. See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 32f.

49. Henry, *Pearl's Secret*, 287.

passed on to the people referred by Rushdy as the “remembering generations”: the importance of the men and women freed from slavery is constantly underestimated, even though they changed the course of American history in every way imaginable; as yet “there is no cultural memory of these millions.”⁵⁰ Thus, taboos being broken, along with the newly emerging perception that “[t]he plantation heritage was not ‘ours’ like a piece of family property, and not ‘theirs,’ belonging to black families, but a shared history,”⁵¹ may eventually also change race relationships and the way history is taught in the United States and around the world for the better.

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50. Davis, *My Confederate Kinfolk*, 6.

51. Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 14.

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PUTTING THE DYNAMIC PAST TO EVERYDAY USE IN THE FICTION OF SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS*

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ABSTRACT

From its beginnings American literature has displayed an ambivalent coexistence of the idealistic impulse to eradicate the past and a conservative reverence for it as a sacred guide for the present and the future. Southern writers have traditionally stood out for their love-hate relationship with their region's past. This essay traces some of the ambivalences with respect to the past in southern women writers. Both Ellen Glasgow and Bobbie Ann Mason, from different periods and backgrounds, initially made their break with the past and tradition central to their identity as writers. Glasgow came to reject modern values later in her career, whereas Mason has recently become much tamer in her rejection of the past and has come to cherish the family tradition as a source of personal renewal and as a guide for the present. Other contemporary southern women writers, like Lee Smith or Alice Walker, also see the past not as an altar on which to expiate the guilt of their region's history but as something directly related to them and as a useful source of renewal for their present lives and those of their characters.

KEYWORDS

American South; southern fiction; southern women writers; Ellen Glasgow; Bobbie Ann Mason; Lee Smith

From its very beginnings, American literature has carried within it an ambivalent coexistence of the idealistic impulse to eradicate the past and the conservative practice of revering it as a repository and guide for the present and the future. Nathaniel Hawthorne, arguably the most representative American writer of the nineteenth century, is simultaneously the romantic who in his famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* admires the spiritual freedom of Hester Prynne, when she urges her secret lover, the Puritan clergyman Dimmesdale, "Let us not look back. . . . The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now?"¹ and the conservative who condemns Hester's free thinking and disrespect for tradition and social codes as a threat to the very foundations of the social structure. Almost a century later, the same idea was expressed by William Faulkner through Gavin Stevens in *Requiem for a Nun* when Stevens tells Temple Drake, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."²

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1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, in *Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 292.
2. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), 92.

For Hawthorne, the Puritan past of both his region and his family was as inescapable as his own shadow, and his case is proof that southern writers are not alone or anomalous in their concern for history in a nation which has made a fetish out of existence in the here and now, which often sees the past as something dead and the future as something to be created afresh.

Many of the writers of the Southern Renaissance viewed change with a divided mind, maintaining a painful love-hate relationship with their region's past. A precursor of the Renaissance, Ellen Glasgow, moved from an initial denunciation of the dangers of fossilization to a more timid belief that there is a point beyond which changeability means devotion to nothing beyond the self. Hawthorne, interestingly, came to be the only American writer to secure Glasgow's complete admiration. She started out as a fierce defender of new standards, new ideas of beauty, and new rules of conduct. In her autobiography *The Woman Within* she wrote about her consuming desire for freedom from her "inescapable past,"³ and she remained convinced that the past "is not a place in which we should live and brood until we become like that ancient people whose 'strength was to sit still.'"⁴ Glasgow shocked the gentry of Richmond, the capital of the late Confederacy, when she became an outspoken feminist, demanding suffrage for women. Early in her career she made her rebellion against the formalized traditions of the Old South and the break with the past central to her identity as a writer, and she relentlessly attacked the many social and intellectual inadequacies of the South. In her first really accomplished novel, *Virginia* (1913), Glasgow strongly satirizes the characters who are unable to accept the present or to acknowledge those unpleasant realities which contradict their idealism. The protagonist's father, an Episcopalian priest who persistently closes his eyes to modernity and progress, has always "directed his energies toward the whitewashing of the actuality." Both for him and for his wife, "taking a true view of life," as they call it, "was to believe what was pleasant against what was painful in spite of evidence." In his persistent wish "to regard the period before the war in Virginia as attained perfection, and the present as falling short of that perfection only inasmuch as it had occurred since the surrender," he represents the attitude of so many of Glasgow's contemporaries who could not accept defeat in the Civil War. And "his sole hope for the future" was "not progress, but a return to the 'Ideals of our ancestors.'"⁵

Virginia traces the tragic life of this man's daughter, Virginia Pendleton, and certifies the death of the myth of the southern lady, which she embodies. She represents the "evasive idealism" of the Victorian period which the author so fiercely attacked. Virginia is tragically unable to adapt to a dynamic time and benefit from the forces of change, because she cannot admit to it; she

3. Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman Within: An Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 221.

4. Ellen Glasgow, "The Dynamic Past," *Reviewer* 1, no. 3 (March 15, 1921): 74.

5. Ellen Glasgow, *Virginia* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 26–27.

does not have the intellectual fortitude to deal with the strange and the unexpected. She clings to her high standards and noble intentions, but these have become irrelevant in the new age, and she becomes the tragic victim of the very processes of life and change.

Ellen Glasgow's firm rejection of the myth of True Womanhood and the myth of the Old South was a shock to the many people in her social circle who were still fighting the Civil War, those whose imaginations were still nourished on the illusions, myths, and legends propagated by the southern romances of the period in which she herself made her appearance as a writer. Glasgow committed herself to a fictional realism untried by previous southern writers, and refused to be the southern lady she was expected to become. The idea of a young southern lady being a serious writer was something of a scandal, a secret vice, for many in early twentieth-century Richmond. A few weeks after the publication of *Virginia*, the author received a visit "from one of the perpetual widows of the South," who asked "with patient sweetness," "Do you really think, my child, that a young girl could be inspired to do her duty by reading *Virginia*? I do not deny that there is truth in your book; but I feel that it is a mistake for Southern writers to stop writing about the War." After a pensive sigh, the widow continued, "If only I had your gifts, I should devote them to proving to the world that the Confederacy was right."⁶

Probably the main reason for Glasgow's exclusion from the modernist canon was her pronouncement against modern values later in her career. In her writings after the mid-1920s she began to show her conservative and elitist vein more and more. It is in the Richmond section of her novel *Vein of Iron* (1935) that Glasgow most blatantly reveals the reaction that she came to share with the Agrarians against the increasing urbanization and modernization of the South. Glasgow, who had initially brought to southern literature a vibrant critical spirit that had been absent for so long and that made the South forget those romances in which the Civil War was fought over and over again (and which the South always won), herself became engaged in fighting the war again when she joined forces with the Agrarians in their defense of traditional rural values. In the Richmond of *Vein of Iron*, Glasgow paints a dreadful picture of a mass society which has lost the "vein of iron," the fortitude inherited from her Scotch-Irish Presbyterian ancestors of the Valley of Virginia that, as she says in a letter to Stark Young, "has enabled human beings to endure life on the earth" and "has enabled not only families, but races, nations, strains, to survive and even to forge (or weave) some continuing tradition."⁷ As Anne Firor Scott notes, in many respects Glasgow was always "the very model of the proper southern lady. And after the First World War, the woman who had called for a southern literature of 'blood and irony' was profoundly troubled by the disappearance of

6. Ellen Glasgow, *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 83–84.

7. Ellen Glasgow to Stark Young, Probably in summer of 1935, in *Letters of Ellen Glasgow*, ed. Blair Rouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 190–91.

the very manners and behavior that she had earlier seen as emblematic of the destructive grip of tradition on Virginians.”⁸

Ellen Glasgow and Bobbie Ann Mason are from different periods and from different social backgrounds, but they share several similarities. First, both made their appearance as writers in periods of transition, Glasgow in the late nineteenth century and Mason in the late twentieth century, and both are known for their psychological insight in dramatizing the private lives of their characters against a background of social instability and accelerating change.⁹ Second, they both started out firmly convinced that tradition endangers individual development and rejected a South with no modernity or critical values, thus excluding themselves from the literary traditions that preceded them. Third, both demanded and celebrated freedom and rights for women in conservative environments. Finally, a notable diminishing of their initial radicalism developed over the course of their careers.

Ellen Glasgow started writing when the South was entering the modern age, whereas Bobbie Ann Mason made her appearance in our own strange postmodern era, by which time the atomic bombs dropped on Japan had already obliterated to a large degree the living sense of the past, which would disappear further from view as the influence of popular mass culture increased. If in the postmodern age the meaning of the individual's identity in history became more uncertain than ever before, in the early work of Bobbie Ann Mason history is wholly lost. Her characters share the postmodern condition described by Fredric Jameson, characterized by the “disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.”¹⁰ “Shiloh,” the story that made Mason's name, introduces a married couple who take a trip to the Shiloh Civil War cemetery in a desperate attempt to save their marriage, which is breaking up because of changing gender roles. Neither of them knows anything about the historical significance of Shiloh, nor do they care. Norma Jean is a new southern woman who takes advantage of all the new possibilities available for greater individual autonomy and self-realization, even if the price is displacement from history and the loss of heritage and tradition. Her husband Leroy is unable to cope with the rapid social changes that are affecting his wife and his social environment, and he realizes that “the real workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him.”¹¹

8. Anne Firor Scott, afterword to *Vein of Iron*, by Ellen Glasgow (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 405–6.

9. Many believe that the American novel of manners deals primarily with people's responses to changes, and Glasgow once wrote that her work as a whole was a “chronicle of manners, which is integrated by the major theme of social transition” (*A Certain Measure*, 66).

10. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 125.

11. Bobbie Ann Mason, “Shiloh,” in *Shiloh and Other Stories* (London: Flamingo, 1988), 16.

The most sympathetic characters in Mason's early phase prefer the open road that may lead to untried locations and new opportunities to the inertia of home and tradition. For them, place is often not home but the road. Samantha Hughes, the adolescent protagonist of Mason's novel *In Country* (1985), travels with her uncle Emmett and her paternal grandmother from rural Kentucky to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. She is thrilled by the "feeling of strangeness" of the road, which is where "[e]verything in America is going on" and feels "that everything is more real to her, now that they are on the road."¹² Another supposedly distinctive feature of the southern mind has been lost here: its comparative freedom from a belief in geographical solutions to life's problems, in contrast to the rest of the country with its restless movement, where, if things do not work out, you simply move on, or move elsewhere. *In Country* is a novel about history in the sense that the protagonist wants to unlock the secrets of her past. But that history goes back no further than the Vietnam War and it is a totally personal history because her father died in the war. None of the other characters has any interest in history. Uncle Emmett, a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, is like a southern version of the Hemingway hero who tries to maintain his sanity by forgetting the past and concentrating on trivial realistic details. He insists, "You can't learn from the past," and, "The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history is."¹³ For these people the past is no valid guide to the present, and thus it is that Samantha's mother exclaims, "But I can't live in the past. It was all such a stupid waste. There's nothing to remember."¹⁴ We are a long way from famous southern literary characters obsessed by the burden of the southern past, like Faulkner's Quentin Compson or Robert Penn Warren's appropriately named Jack Burden.

Mason's characters are people with no interest in the historical past and, as Fred Hobson says, "they have little in their world to make life meaningful beyond the here-and-now." And who can blame them? They do not have the tools, or the desire to see any deeper, "because they are products of a *society* that disregards history."¹⁵ Mason has always refused to see southern literature in a static way, characterized by the permanent "backward glance" of Allen Tate,¹⁶ with its emphasis on racial tensions, family, community, and religion. In an interview she said,

12. Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 17, 19.

13. Mason, *In Country*, 226.

14. Mason, *In Country*, 168.

15. Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 18. Hobson's italics.

16. The famous phrase is from Allen Tate's influential essay "The New Provincialism: With an Epilogue on the Southern Novel," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1945): 272: "With the war of 1914–1918, the South re-entered the world—but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present."

I'm not so sure those qualities of the Old South were all that terrific. . . . I'm not nostalgic for the past. Times change and I'm interested in writing about what's now. To me, the way the South is changing is very dynamic and full of complexity. There's a certain energy there that I don't notice in other parts of the country. It comes out of an innocent hope of possibility. My characters have more opportunities in their lives than their parents did, and even the parents are more prosperous in their old age than they ever were before.¹⁷

In another interview she said, "I don't think the people I write about are obsessed with the past. I don't think they know anything about the Civil War, and I don't think they care."¹⁸ In *Wilderness* (1961), Robert Penn Warren's historical novel of the Civil War, an elderly wise man says that "there's always a reason. That's what History is—the reason for things."¹⁹ In our individualistic age, with its emphasis on the private self, the escape from history is only a counterpart to the disappearance of community, the loss of the individual's role in the common human condition. In Mason's South, the individual has lost awareness of his interaction with society and of the importance of society as society. She considers "the chaotic life that we mostly live now" a blessing and welcomes the loss of "that baggage of the past" that restricts the individual.²⁰

Mason has not exactly turned conservative with the years, as Ellen Glasgow did, but there was a notable shift of emphasis, coinciding with her return from the Northeast to her native Kentucky in 1990. In her stories of the 1980s, such as "Residents and Transients" and "Love Life," she clearly advocated transience and the roving disposition, and she usually identified the "call of the hearth" and the "backward glance" with stasis and death, being one of the contemporary southern writers most firmly convinced that regional history or tradition are wholly ineffective as sources of identity in the fluid contemporary world. In some of the stories from her third collection, *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (2001), Mason is much more ambivalent, and this ambivalence coincides with her discovery, on returning home to Kentucky, that it is when you return that you discover and know for the first time where you came from, that the place where you belong is where you know who you are. In her memoir *Clear Springs* (1999) she wrote: "Like many Americans, I long to know the past. There's a sense of loss in America today, a feeling of disconnectedness. We're no longer quite sure who we are or how we got here. More and more of us are rummaging in the attic, trying to retrieve our history,"²¹ a passage with echoes of Mr. Compson in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, who says that "we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now

17. Albert Wilhelm, "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason," *Southern Quarterly* 26 (Winter 1988): 37.

18. Wendy Smith, "PW Interviews: Bobbie Ann Mason," *Publishers Weekly*, August 30, 1985: 425.

19. Robert Penn Warren, *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1961), 73.

20. Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason," *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 451.

21. Bobbie Ann Mason, *Clear Springs: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1999), ix.

merely initials and nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Choctaw.”²² This rummaging in the attic, trying to retrieve history, is the theme of one of her more recent stories, “The Heirs” (from the *Nancy Culpepper* collection, 2006). But for Mason’s protagonist, the autobiographical Nancy Culpepper, it is simply a question of personal history, not the deep moral meaning and the social dimension of the black shadow of slavery and racial injustice that torments Faulkner’s Quentin Compson. Nancy is not a southern literary character engaged in a frantic attempt to understand the individual’s significant relationship with the entire culture of which she is a part.

In “The Heirs,” Nancy is fifty-nine years old, and much more nostalgic and ready to appreciate the heritage of her past than in the previous stories in which she appears. She is alone in Kentucky, disposing of her parents’ farmhouse prior to its sale to make way for an industrial park. She searches eagerly through a shoebox that she finds in the attic, looking “for family secrets, for clues that illuminate her own life.”²³ Like the photographer in Michelangelo Antonioni’s movie *Blow-Up* (1966), Nancy studies the pictures in search of the larger story of two great-great-aunts who lived during the Depression. Her behavior is like that of a historian (Nancy is a history graduate) who recreates the past from the scant sources available. And she does indeed recreate the story of the lives of the two female ancestors, who, in their dream of escape from the restricted world of the farm, fell victim to a con that promised to make them heirs to a substantial tract of land in New York State in return for regular sums of money. Artemisa, who survived her sister Nova, “felt her small life enclosed by the split-rail fences of [her husband] Bealus’s sixty acres”²⁴ and “[h]er mind wound around and around, craving . . . books to read, paper for writing, a man from a newspaper to talk to her about the world, to bring her news of the world, the world that spun around and around and around.”²⁵ The story’s title acquires a new meaning in relation to Nancy, who can now consider herself the heir to the aspirations of her great-great-aunts. Better socio-economic conditions made possible for her the exploration of a world denied to her female ancestors. The well-traveled historian of the present is, then, the product and the repetition of the past. Nancy has an epiphany in the story’s brief final section, when “the weight of her heritage came rushing through her mind, as if the [hot] brick [she, as a child, slept with on cold nights], a straight aim from those two desperate women, had been thrown at her.”²⁶ Thanks to the hoarding of the farm people, who never threw things away, Nancy has access to these treasures from the

22. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, in *Novels, 1936–1940* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 83.

23. Bobbie Ann Mason, “The Heirs,” in *Nancy Culpepper: Stories* (New York: Random House, 2006), 180.

24. Mason, “The Heirs,” 200.

25. Mason, “The Heirs,” 200.

26. Mason, “The Heirs,” 201.

past, which give meaning and continuity to life: “Nancy saw herself in this group of people, lives that had passed from the earth as hers would too. She felt comforted by the thought of continuity.”²⁷ The farm has been sold, but in her memory and imagination it will always be part of her. For the rest of her life she will be the “heir” to the culture and the spirit it embodied. The self that Nancy—dissatisfied with the life on offer at home—left Kentucky in order to look for and to build was, as she has just discovered, more securely at home than she initially thought; but she would never have discovered this if she had not left, moved by the desire to keep her options open. She would never have imagined to what extent her present self was going to be enriched by her past.

The protagonist’s experience here is surprisingly similar to that of the country singer Katie Cocker in Lee Smith’s 1992 novel *The Devil’s Dream*, when she says to a BBC reporter,

*It took me a long time to understand that not a one of us lives alone, outside of our family or our time, and that who we are depends on who we were, and who our people were. There’s a lot of folks in this business that don’t believe that, of course. They think you can just make yourself up as you go along. . . . The hard part has been figuring out who I am, because I’m not like any of them [in my family], and yet they are bone of my bone.*²⁸

This observation describes Lee Smith herself, who, in her adult life returned, as a writer, to her own roots, to the isolated native place in Appalachia that she had wanted to escape from when young. She did not find her voice as a writer until she discovered in her provincial Grundy “the stuff of fiction,”²⁹ the substance and the authenticity that the writer finds in the materials available to her through her own experience.

Rather than their fiction being an altar on which to expiate the guilt of their region’s history, Mason and other contemporary southern women writers stress the idea of the restorative potential of the past. Lee Smith’s novel *On Agate Hill* (2006) deals with the postmodernist nostalgia for an irrecoverable past, for a source of regeneration in our lost and fluid world. It is composed of letters and diaries that tell the story of a woman in the years following the Civil War. They were found, together with a collection of bones and some other objects, at an old plantation house in North Carolina. Rather than becoming a source of guilt or a warning of the persistence of evil, the discovery of these documents from the past transforms the life of a woman, Tuscany Miller—Lee Smith’s alter ego³⁰—who appears in the contemporary frame of the novel. In fact, everything set in the present speaks about the renewal provoked by the discovery of this treasure from the past

27. Mason, “The Heirs,” 202.

28. Lee Smith, *The Devil’s Dream* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1992), 14. Smith’s italics.

29. Nancy C. Parrish, *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 173.

30. Lee Smith said that “Tuscany is always with me, sort of an alter ego, I guess.” Lee Smith, “Conversation with the Author,” in *On Agate Hill* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2006), 380.

“in a secret room.” The “run-down plantation out in the country” is being renovated, turned into “a very fancy bed and breakfast.”³¹ This is a new venture, embarked on by Tuscany’s father and his lover Michael. In fact, Tuscany’s father has become a woman to marry Michael and has changed his name to Ava “because Michael loves Ava Gardner.”³² Tuscany’s life is being “renovated” as well: she has recently gotten out of a disastrous marriage, has a better relationship with her father than ever before, and is eager to return to graduate school and write her thesis on her findings. Tuscany says that “I GET it now, about history” and that “my horizons have been expanded by the contents of this box.”³³ Looking into the past of those who lived in her father’s new house has helped her look into her own past, and that “backward glance” provides a new understanding of life, human relationships, and new motivations that will help her in the future. Writing this historical novel was also therapeutic for Lee Smith, who at the time was suffering from depression and writer’s block caused by the death of her son Joshua.³⁴ Through their respective autobiographical characters, Nancy Culpepper and Tuscany Miller, Bobbie Ann Mason and Lee Smith express their awareness that the past is necessary to inspire our hearts and minds with its rhythm, when we learn to apply its lessons to the ever changing conditions of our world.

There are other contemporary southern women writers for whom the past is not an oppressive burden or a permanent source of guilt but rather a source of new life and spiritual nourishment. Alice Walker has repeatedly turned to her native South in search of “wholeness,”³⁵ and has invited her fellow African Americans to think of the South as their home. Her most famous character, Celie from *The Color Purple* (1982), becomes self-determining in Memphis, not in a northern big city like New York or Chicago. In her story “Everyday Use,” Walker advocates an art which should be put to “everyday use,” rather than hung on the wall of a museum or a living room, an art which should retain its connection to both the dead and the living individuals that together constitute the family and the history that it springs from. The quilts in Walker’s story, made of patches from different periods of the family history, and sewn together by different family members, are evocative of Uncle Venner’s patched clothes in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*. This “man of patches” who is “patched together, . . . of different epochs; an epitome of times and fashions,”³⁶ is set up by Hawthorne as the counterbalance to Holgrave, the radical reformer who mistakenly thinks that

31. Lee Smith, *On Agate Hill*, 3.

32. Lee Smith, *On Agate Hill*, 2.

33. Lee Smith, *On Agate Hill*, 362, 363.

34. Lee Smith talks about this in her “A Short Note from the Author,” in *On Agate Hill*, 371–74. Originally published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, September 17, 2006.

35. Alice Walker, “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 48.

36. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, in *Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 405.

the present “is destined to see the tattered garments of Antiquity exchanged for a new suit, instead of gradually renewing themselves by patchwork.”³⁷ The metaphor of patchwork, so dear to women writers and feminist critics in the late twentieth century, also appears in Lee Smith’s novel *Family Linen* (1985), in which the presence of the past is a central theme, including a house in which a corpse is buried somewhere, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*. But the present and the future triumph over a past of secret crime, corruption, and guilt which does not trouble the present generation very much. The past is made useful when the deceased matriarch’s family mansion itself is renovated, becoming a comfortable modern home, and the old well that concealed a corpse is converted into a wonderful swimming pool. The matriarch’s granddaughter, meanwhile, makes her wedding dress out of one of the grandmother’s old lace tablecloths, to suggest that family tradition is neither rejected outright nor allowed to imprison or suffocate; rather, it is renewed, and Karen makes a beautiful wedding dress out of the family linen.

In Mason’s story “The Funeral Side,” from the collection *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail*, the female protagonist, who has always “valued change” and stayed away from small-town Kentucky for many years, returns home to help her widowed father recover from a stroke. Back home she comes to a new appreciation of her native place and her past when she sees her great-great-grandfather’s furniture that her father has “restored” and “refurbished” for her, and she is delighted by “the modern simplicity of the furniture,” which “resembled something in a Sundance catalog.”³⁸

These contemporary southern women writers would no doubt concur with Ellen Glasgow, who, in her essay “The Dynamic Past,” wrote that “we preserve the past more perfectly when its rhythm in our hearts and minds inspires us to action, not when we stand and gaze backward.”³⁹ What is needed is the clairvoyance to perceive the difference between the heritage that is toxic and unusable, and the one that is valid if it is adequately renovated. The simplistic dichotomy between tradition and innovation is inadequate, and the most reasonable stance toward tradition is perhaps what Piotr Sztompka calls the “tradition of critical traditionalism.” It is a dialogical strategy that avoids on the one hand “the fallacy of blind traditionalism, the uncritical following of tradition informed by the mistaken equivalence of past with good,” and on the other “the opposite fallacy of dogmatic antitraditionalism,” which ignores “the beneficial role that tradition as such, and some traditions in particular may play in human society.”⁴⁰ Not only is the coexistence of tradition and modernity possible but modernization itself may strengthen tradition. After all, nostalgia for those suddenly rediscovered charming

37. Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 507.

38. Bobbie Ann Mason, “The Funeral Side,” in *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (New York: Random House, 2001), 122, 137.

39. Glasgow, “The Dynamic Past,” 80.

40. Piotr Sztompka, *The Sociology of Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 68.

elements of traditional society is a recognizable feature of our modern society, and the partial fascination with the past that we have observed in the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason and Lee Smith is, paradoxically, just another feature of the modernity that they have embraced all along. In this sense they have placed themselves within the postmodernist paradigm which subverts all the binaries (home/journey, inside/outside, past/present, etc.) that seem to be necessary for analysis and explanation, and which considers all identities as paradoxically both located and mobile.

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BLACK AND WHITE IDENTITY IN TODAY'S SOUTHERN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

The essay deals with race, prejudice, and identity in two 2009 novels: Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* and Madison Smartt Bell's *Devil's Dream*. Both novelists attach importance to skin color; they make ready use of the ethnic reality in past and present lives and its presence in fiction, TV, movies, and history. The novelists' common goal is to irritate everybody with preconceived racial notions into thought.

KEYWORDS

Civil War; southern history; Hollywood and race; contemporary southern fiction; southern biography; Percival Everett; Madison Smartt Bell

The separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.

—Albert Einstein, letter to Michele Besso
(Madison Smartt Bell's epigraph for *Devil's Dream*)

If we judge by southern novels of the last twelve years, is there still a pattern of past ideas and conduct embedded in the society reflected in the new fiction? In the new novels, are there still great differences based on a past divided by race, gender, and class? Do Charles Frazier, Ron Rash, Chris Offutt, Pam Durban, Josephine Humphreys, Kaye Gibbons, Madison Jones, Steve Yarbrough, Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy, Percival Everett, Madison Smartt Bell, and others see themselves in a place defined by an unforgettable past and still consider the past a storehouse of values and guidelines for living?¹

I am interested in the attitudes and events that have not only made the South unpopular, but have permanently stained the region's reputation. The spiritual leftovers of hard-core conservatism, religious fundamentalism, celebrated agrarianism, romanticized myth, abject poverty, grotesque violence, and, above all, rampant prejudice (against: you name it) play an important part in the discrediting of the South. What has happened to southern writers as the South has been changing? Has the stain of past sins, in this post-segregation era of Dixie Resurgens, faded so much that contemporary writers can write of other issues and without reflecting the

1. More on the development of contemporary southern fiction can be found in Jan Nordby Gretlund, ed., *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today* (Columbia: University of Southern Carolina Press, 2010). In the book, the international cast of literary scholars comment on eighteen recent southern novels that, in their opinion, deserve not to be forgotten.

racist burden of the past? Here I will focus on two writers, one black and one white, who both published a novel in 2009.

In Percival Everett's most recent novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), the main character is not an Uncle Tom, nor is he a militant Bigger Thomas; he is a black American of the 21st century. However, he has trouble in being seen fully by the people he meets, black or white. In the Ralph Ellison tradition the "blindness" includes himself, as the main character also has a hard time "seeing" himself. In a sense he is also nameless, like the invisible man, because his mother named him "Not Sidney Poitier," including the "Not" as a part of his name.

His mother died early and the boy does not know his father. The vision metaphor is used throughout the novel to describe how "Not Sidney" gains insight into his position in the American racial hierarchy of today. He journeys into the heart of darkness and runs into a southern sheriff, and suffers violence, incarceration, and a wall of classic white racism in Georgia and Alabama—complete with a burning cross. In short, all the classic elements of the African American slave narrative and novel are here. But there is more—and this is what makes it a noteworthy novel of the present.

Some of that extra the novel has to offer is the remembered parallels to movies featuring Sidney Poitier, the actor. In *The Defiant Ones* (dir. Stanley Kramer, 1958) a black protagonist escapes from jail handcuffed to a white person, in *Lilies of the Field* (dir. Ralph Nelson, 1963) the sisters expect the heaven-sent stranger to help them build a church, in *A Patch of Blue* (dir. Guy Green, 1965) a blind girl finds out that a helpful man is black, in *In the Heat of the Night* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1967) a black stranger solves a murder he himself has been accused of, in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (dir. Stanley Kramer, 1967) the "liberal" family does not expect their daughter to bring a dark man to dinner, in *They Call Me Mister Tibbs* (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1970) nobody expects the black sheriff to be successful, and in *Brother John* (dir. James Goldstone, 1971) a black man returning to his hometown is regarded as a labor agitator. All these movies share a strong racial statement.

Good novels mostly become mediocre movies but Everett takes a new look at this translation from one medium to another, as he creates his fictional story of Not Sidney Poitier through scenes and plot sequences from the Sidney Poitier movies. When Not Sidney Poitier gets himself into such scenes, the distinction between him and the actor becomes blurred. Not does not have his own identity; the one he has been given is just a negation, defined by what he is: Not. His life becomes a long line of repetitions, "quotations" from Hollywood's staging of the American racial situation in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the novel has substantially expanded the dialogue between text (=script) and film, adding new elements, and if the novel is ever made into a movie, it will be crossing the border between media again: texts ⇒ films ⇒ text ⇒ film. In theory the progression could be never-ending.

“Nu’ott,” in the southern pronunciation used by a character named Ted Turner, is black and rich—“insanely rich.”² His hippie mother had saved every dime she could and invested in the Turner Communications Group in 1970. The novel shows how Not Sidney, with growing introspection, learns that it is an illusion to imagine that he could escape the social and psychological effects of his skin color. What he learns in the process is that he has to take advantage of his unique minority position as both black and rich.

Everett’s character learns what Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison knew: true value lies not really so much in belonging to various groups, brotherhoods, or fraternities as in creating an identity with a personal integrity, based on human values. This is difficult for Not Sidney Poitier, who not only carries the name but also looks remarkably like the Hollywood actor. He is beaten up by classmates in school, mainly by other blacks, did not graduate from high school, and had to buy his way into Morehouse College, a prestigious school for rich black people in Atlanta. The education of Not Sidney as outlined by Everett has as its goal to make the young man recognize his social role and responsibility. It is tempting to see the young Not Sidney as Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, finally climbing up from his underground hibernation.

In a single brilliantly crafted guess-who-is-coming-to-dinner episode, Everett reveals that he finds life sterile and barren among the black American elite. Not Sidney is brought by a young woman to the Thanksgiving dinner at her parents’ house. There Not becomes painfully aware of the importance of his skin color, his darker shade of black. In the home of Ward Larkin, one of the most successful African American lawyers in Washington, DC, Not hears Mrs. Larkin say:

“He is just so dark, Ward.”

“Well, how dark is he?” Ward Larkin asked.

“Black.”

It hadn’t occurred to me, but now it did that the Larkins were all very light in complexion. It hadn’t dawned on me that I should have noticed or cared. More fool me, I guess.

“Well, what’s his name?” Ward asked.

“That’s the other thing,” Ruby said. “His name is Not Sidney.”

“Then what is it?”

“That’s it. Not Sidney. The word *not* and Sidney.”

“Hmmp. Some kind of ghetto nonsense, no doubt.” (*SP*, 131, Everett’s italics)

Not Sidney hears Mrs. Larkin repeat: “Ward, it’s just that he’s so dark” (*SP*, 132). And Not becomes “sadly, irritatingly, horrifyingly observant of skin color” (*SP*, 138), especially his own. When he sees that Robert, his rival for the daughter of the house, is appropriately light in color, Not Sidney imagines he hears Mrs. Larkin and her friends repeating to their daughters: “Light not white, girl, light not white” (*SP*, 139).

2. Percival Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009), 6. Hereafter cited in text as *SP*.

But to his surprise Not Sidney finds that the opposition to his person also comes from the very people he tries to identify with. Violet is the cook in the Larkin household, and she declares:

“Listen, boy, Mister and Missus have worked too hard,” she said.

“Too hard for what?”

“To have a black boy like you come around Miss Maggie.”

“Listen to yourself, Violet. Mister and Missus and Miss Maggie. This is not the antebellum south and you’re not a house slave.”

“Why, you nigger,” she said.

“Violet, you and I are pretty much the same color,” I said.

“No, we’re not,” she snapped. “I’m milk chocolate and you’re dark cocoa, dark as Satan.”

I was stunned. (*SP*, 154–55)

Advised by his friends Ted Turner and his Morehouse professor, named Percival Everett, Not Sidney reacts to the racism that he has encountered in this Washington home by questioning how these upper-class lighter-colored black people have made it into the best schools, as they are now decidedly against quota systems and affirmative action in general. Not points out that his mother never wanted to be white and that the Larkins and their friends almost had him hating *them* because of the color of their skin. He cannot hate them because they are light, but he does dislike them for the way they treat their *help*, who have not been invited to sit down to enjoy any of their own Thanksgiving cooking. Maybe Not Sidney can take comfort in an unexpected late gesture of support. After he has had a big showdown with the Larkin family at the beginning of the Thanksgiving dinner, he has packed his bag and is quietly leaving. Violet is there at the door, the only one, with a paper sack with food for him.

In Hollywood, on the last page of the novel, Not receives a special award, Most Dignified Figure in American Culture, presented by Harry Belafonte and Elizabeth Taylor. Not has once again been mistaken for the actor; once again others have given him an identity. As it is not Sidney Poitier, the actor, who accepts the award, it must be Not, and it enables him to be himself for a moment in his acceptance speech. Not says, among other things: “I have learned that my name is not my name. It seems that you all know me and nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself, perhaps better than I can know myself” (*SP*, 234). He ends his speech by announcing the words he would like on his tombstone, which are also the last words of the novel: “I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY.” He cannot, as he has realized, expect to be allowed to be Not himself until he is dead.

With this statement Everett has again efficiently used fiction as a weapon in the continued rejection of racism, including that within the black establishment. The novel makes it clear that not all Not’s goals are realizable within the framework of racist and capitalist America. The stain of racism and pestering prejudice is still there and at times in places where you would least expect to see it. With *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* Percival Everett has once again created a significant black novel with a difference. The portrait of the

poor whites in the South is probably too much like Erskine Caldwell's world to rile any of today's poor white southerners. But *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is liable to irritate quite a lot of today's established black Americans.

What makes the narratives of new southern writers essentially different is the reclaiming of forgotten, or hidden, historical events, the claiming of ignored events in the present, and the acceptance and ready use of the ethnic reality of the South, or of the whole country, if you will, which is a reality of obvious, and sometimes less obvious, prejudice. Madison Smartt Bell made his name as a novelist with his Haitian trilogy, *All Souls' Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004), to which he added a biography of Toussaint-Louverture (2007), the leader in the Haitian revolution (1791–1803). With his Haiti-based historical fiction, his eleven other books of fiction, and the fact that he grew up outside Nashville and used to collect bullets from the Civil War battles, Bell has the right background to fictionalize Nathan Bedford Forrest, the most reviled or the most celebrated legendary Confederate cavalry general—depending on your regional heritage and conviction.

The Bedford Forrest of *Devil's Dream* (2009) is as uncouth, fierce, and profane as we expect him to be; his swearing is an art, but he is not simple or predictable. Bell has the idea that we must see Forrest in his pre-war domestic life, back to 1845, throughout the war, and after the war. The technique is based on the idea that a story should be told backward—even if it is only some of the time. The structure jumps around as if it were trying to imitate the old fiddler's tune that the novel is named for and the reader has to work some to keep up with Bell's narrative, for it consists of short, dated chapters that appear in what seems to be a haphazardly mixed structure, all in full agreement with Bell's opening quotation from Albert Einstein's correspondence: "The separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one." William Faulkner would have agreed. Bell's chronology is, of course, carefully mixed to convincingly flesh out a complex character and his two families, one white and one black, at a time of violent transitions.

The racial topic that is at the core of the novel cannot be seen in an orderly narrative progression, as the racism that made slavery possible is not limited to any time. As a part of the human condition, racism has not been eradicated and will not disappear, so with regard to that topic it does not make sense to distinguish between then, now, and tomorrow; this is historical fiction, but Bell's account is also the history of today and tomorrow. This is perhaps indicated through the lingering presence of Henri, originally from Haiti, who participates in many of the novel's scenes long after Chickamauga, a battle which took place on September 19–20, 1863, where the Confederates stopped the Union offensive, and where Henri might well have died.

Forrest was fundamentally a southern stoic, who did not "practice Christianity" until two years before his death in 1877. His principles include

being honest in dealing with anybody. He likes to talk with people face to face. He never learned to write well. He thinks it is important to be in full control of the senses at all times, so he does not drink and is proud of it. He claims never to have started a fight, but has never walked away from one either and acknowledges to have finished quite a few. He marries Mary Ann Montgomery, of the Tennessee upper classes; her family never lets her forget that she married beneath herself, and a slave trader at that.

“But slave-trading, really!” her mother blurted. “He might have done well enough with the horses and mules.”

“The whole country runs on slavery, Mother. Even the cloth from the Yankee mills. Slaves picked the cotton for the curtain we hang to shut out the sight of them.”

“Well!” said Mrs. Montgomery, working her fingers in her lap. “I’m sure you got those opinions from him.”³

By June 1854 Forrest is trying to get out of the slave trade altogether. He wants to be landed gentry, or “a planter anyway” (*DD*, 130). But in August 1857, Forrest is still trading slaves, and Dr. Cowan, Mary Ann’s uncle, echoes Mrs. Montgomery’s statement: “Everybody despises a slave-trader. It’s like he was a man defiled.” But then he adds “there’s nobody in this country that don’t depend on slavery—” (*DD*, 93). The discussion is continued by Ben, one of Forrest’s slaves, during the skirmish at Okolona in February 1864: “I ain’t sayen I loves that man . . . Ain’t nobody love a slave-trader. Even they own people don’t. But I seen him give his word to a black man same as he would to a white and I ain’t never seen him break it” (*DD*, 149). When Forrest bought Ben for his skills as a craftsman, Ben did not thrive among Forrest’s slaves in Coahoma. When Forrest realized that Ben had been sold away from his wife Nancy and pined for her, he promised to go and buy her and bring her to Ben, whatever the cost—and he did. This is what Ben is referring to. It was one of Forrest’s business principles not to break up families, if possible; it was simply “better business not to, he had learned” (*DD*, 290). Throughout the war there were blacks, about forty-five of them, who volunteered to fight under Forrest’s command as teamsters. He had promised to set them free at the war’s end (*DD*, 311). He was a convincing “salesman.” In May 1861, he talked to his slaves:

The war’s agin slavery, that’s what they claim. If the Yankees whup it, they’ll set ye all free. That’s right. You heard me right. They ain’t studied on what’s to be done with ye after but they aim to set the lot of y’all free.” . . .

“I’ve jined up already to fight for the South. . . . Y’all most of ye’ve known me fer quite some time. Have ye ever seen me to take a whuppen?”

Nawsuh, we ain’t. Don’t spec we will.

“Well then. If the South whups it, we’ll still have slavery in this country. And that’s the side I’m fighten fer. I’ll tell ye that straight out and no doubt about it.” . . .

“Now here’s what I come down to say to ye. War ain’t just acomen, it’s done already started. I aim to fight for the side I jest said. That’s all they is to it. But any man among

3. Madison Smartt Bell, *Devil’s Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 31. Hereafter cited in text as *DD*.

ye wants to fight alongside of me—when the war once gits over with, I will set that man free. (*DD*, 73, Bell's italics)

But Forrest has not mentioned the slave women; he has totally forgotten about them and their freedom. When questioned about this, he responds: "Now that's a right reasonable question. Here's what I say. If ye want to carry a gal free with ye, be shore ye step over the broom with her afore ye go to the fight. And not more'n one to a customer, mind" (*DD*, 73). Ben wants to go with Forrest because he figures that if he is free and his wife Nancy is free, they could earn enough to buy their children free. While Bell builds up this scene in a jocular high-spirited fashion that claims more of an identification between the master, known among the slaves as "the wust man in all deh state" (*DD*, 77), and his slaves than was generally true, the novelist uses exactly the intimacy thus created to reveal the true horrors of the system, as brought out in: "to buy their children free" (*DD*, 120). In May 1865 a Yankee officer is attacked by Forrest's blacks and by his horse and complains: "Your niggers fight for you. Your *horses* fight for you. No wonder you were so hard to whip." But Forrest stares back at him and declares, "I ain't been whupped till yet" (*DD*, 283, Bell's italics). When the war is over Forrest returns to his Coahoma, Mississippi, plantation, and some of his former slaves return from Georgia to work for him as freedmen (*DD*, 330).

When the war was over Forrest returned to his plantation in Coahoma, Mississippi, and some of his former slaves returned from Georgia to work for him as freedmen (*DD*, 330). To say that this uncompromising man is "respected" in his community might be an exaggeration; "feared" may be a better word. During what becomes Forrest's final day of gambling (Mary Ann Forrest, his wife, considers gambling not only a vice but a weakness and, as Forrest cannot accept weaknesses, even his own, he stops), his wife and his black servant try to enter the local gambling hall:

"Well, *you* can't go in there—" . . . Someone had risen to block Mary Ann's path.

"Miss, you cain't—"

"Don't you dare put that hand on me." Flaring her nostrils, she drew herself up.

The man fell away from her. "That's Forrest's wife."

"Run the nigger out, at least!" someone called, with a curse, and another man said, "That's Forrest's nigger." (*DD*, 35, Bell's italics)

Forrest creates many problems for himself. For one thing, he has two families and they live next to each other at 85 Adams St., appropriately screened with wisteria from No. 87, where the slave pens are. In December 1853, he first saw the "brown honey of her [Catharine's] eyes" and he caught a look "that went clean through him" (*DD*, 287), especially after he listened to the "warm syrup of her laughter" (*DD*, 253). As Forrest is keenly aware, Catharine, the house servant, is good at undulating around a room and showing her derriere in tight relief. Bell adds, "He knew he would risk everything, for this" (*DD*, 291) although he does not understand why he would choose this. He realizes he is no longer master of anyone, least of all himself.

At the Thanksgiving table on the Coahoma County plantation in 1857, there is an incident that highlights the situation within the Forrest household:

“Mister Forrest, white meat or dark?” From the opposite end of the table, Doctor Cowan saluted him with the carving knife.

“I like the dark,” Forrest said, with a lip-licking smile. . . .

“Yes,” Mrs. Montgomery said, with an untoward sharpness. “We *know* that you do.” With that she turned her pursed lips and pointedly raised chin toward Mary Ann.

The gravy boat sloshed a bit as Catharine set it down on the table, turned her back, and started for the kitchen. Mary Ann’s large eyes were picked out with blue flame. He could read the thought that flared in her gaze: *How dearly I’d love to whip that slut till her hips stop twitching.*” (DD, 55, Bell’s italics)

When confronted by Mary Ann, Forrest has to tell the truth, both about the “high-yaller brats . . . in the yard” and about the child Catharine is “toting in her belly”: “Her chirren and our’n are brothers and sisters. Well, you ast me” (DD, 58). The worst part for Mary Ann is that she does not know whether Forrest loves Catharine or just lusts for her and in that case has intercourse with a woman he does not love, and she cannot say which is the worse (DD, 95).

Much to his surprise, Forrest learns in April 1858 that he has a teenage “black” son, whose mother died a fancy girl in a house in New Orleans. Forrest persuades Catharine to take in the boy, called Matthew. As she says, “You looks at him once you knows where he come from,” Forrest simply replies: “That’s about the size of it” (DD, 161). A sibling rivalry, which matches that between his wife and his mistress, develops between Forrest’s son Willie, who is white, and Matthew. Both try to earn their father’s praise in battle. Matthew wants more than praise; he wants to be recognized by Forrest, who seems to ignore the young men, but always knows where they are. In August 1864, possibly during Forrest’s raid into Memphis, Matthew insists that his father “owns up” to him, but Forrest blames his wife for his reluctance: “Well, hit’s a limit. Ole Miss’ll only stand for so much. She cain’t he’p it. She’s made thataway” (DD, 237). In this respect Mary Ann Forrest comes to exemplify the whole southern order that is unable to recognize someone like Matthew and yet continues with “the peculiar institution.”

As Matthew does not give up, Forrest advises the young man to live in the now, the way he himself has been doing for the last three years. The permanent interracial ties, for better and for worse, are clear to Forrest:

“You want a free paper? . . . I’ll write ye one. Only reason I ain’t till yet is I got it in mind you’re better off, the way it is now, if folks suppose you belong to me. And—it ain’t no paper on earth as can make ye a white man. Not in this world we’re liven in now.” (DD, 238)

Ironically, Forrest’s full recognition of Matthew comes when the young man argues that Forrest has given free papers to others. For the first time during that conversation Forrest looks straight at Matthew and tells him: “That I have But them, they warnt none of my blood, don’t ye see?” (DD, 238).

Forrest knows that this is not enough to satisfy Matthew. He knows that the boy will have permanent identity problems, just like William Faulkner's Joe Christmas in *Light in August*,⁴ because deep in his soul Matthew has learned that: "White man or a nigger? A body can't be both, can they? Not both of those things jumbled together?" (*DD*, 269). Matthew is the unhappy product of slavery; he cannot just live in the moment and forget his fluid identity. Forrest is finally right when he sums it up: "Tell you one thing I know—you won't ever be free of me. No more'n I could be free of you" (*DD*, 238). This is a truth that is forever young, and it was, unfortunately, a fitting epitaph for the relations between blacks and whites for the following one hundred years of American history. "The separation between past, present, and future is an illusion"—indeed, as regards pestering prejudice and the stain of racism.

As Jim Cobb has pointed out, "the South's experience surely says that any identity—national, regional, cultural, or otherwise—that can be sustained only by demonizing or denigrating other groups exacts a terrible toll, not simply on the demonized and denigrated but ultimately on those who can find self-affirmation only by rejecting others."⁵ This is a restatement of the old truth that the enslaver ultimately enslaves himself. *Devil's Dream* will irritate a lot of readers because it gives Forrest a black family, but then it will irritate many others because the novel makes Forrest appear a warm human being. In short, Bell challenges all our preconceived notions about a man and his time.

The two novels would seem to answer my initial question. The stain of racism has not been ignored or suburbanized away in the new southern fiction. On the contrary, racism and prejudice seem forever present. "The world of our fathers resides within us,"⁶ as Cormac McCarthy put it in his novel *Cities of the Plain*. Prejudice and racism still exist and today's fiction caters to our needs and realities by accentuating the issues.

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4. Faulkner's Joe Christmas is accepted in both white society and black in Yoknapatawpha County. But like Bell's character Matthew, he cannot live at ease in either one.

5. James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 336.

6. Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 281.

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MEMORIES OF CHILD ABUSE IN JIM GRIMSLEY'S DAN CRELL TRILOGY*

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ABSTRACT

The essay explores the theme of child abuse in Jim Grimsley's early fiction, namely in the three novels sometimes known as the Dan Crell trilogy: *Winter Birds*, *My Drowning*, and *Comfort & Joy*. Four forms of abuse can be identified in the trilogy: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and abuse by neglect. Important themes of the novels include the role of memory in coping with the trauma of child abuse later in adulthood as well as the influence of past abuse on family dynamics. In the individual novels, the author uses various narrative situations and techniques in order to explore the way memory works.

KEYWORDS

Jim Grimsley; child abuse; memory; twentieth-century American literature; southern literature; gay literature; narrative technique

When Jim Grimsley received the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction for his *Winter Birds* (1994) in 1995, it certainly meant great satisfaction for him: the novel had been rejected by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill in 1985 as too dark, and the publisher took it up again only after it appeared in German, with Dutch and French translations under way. Since then, Grimsley has secured for himself a firm place among contemporary southern writers. In 1999 Lisa Howorth acknowledged Grimsley as an author who was “on the cutting edge of contemporary Southern fiction, where he [had] carved out a place for himself as literary chronicler of the Southern gay experience.”¹ Grimsley did enter the realm of gay literature with his second novel, *Dream Boy* (1995), but he is not only a chronicler of the southern gay experience but even more a chronicler of the experience of the low-class white families in the South, as three of his first four novels focus on two generations of a poor family in North Carolina. *Winter Birds* centers on the eight-year-old Danny Crell who becomes the target of severe violence from his father on a Thanksgiving Day. *My Drowning* (1997) traces the childhood experience of Danny's mother, Ellen, and the last novel of the trilogy, *Comfort & Joy* (1999), portrays Danny as an adult who lives in Atlanta but revisits his mother at Christmas with his gay partner, Ford

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1. Lisa Howorth, “Jim Grimsley: Tales of Southern Courage,” *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 1999: 39.

McKinney. Since the end of the 1990s Grimsley has moved away from North Carolina rural settings as well as from his focus on poor families: *Boulevard* (2002) traces the life of a young gay man who works in an adult bookstore in New Orleans, and *Forgiveness* (2007) explores the violent reaction of a well-to-do manager after he loses his job because of the economic crisis.²

However, it is primarily his first four novels that established Grimsley as a southern writer. The three Dan Crell novels are interconnected not only by shared characters and events, but especially by characters' memories and intertextual references, which allows readers to treat them as a sequence of novels based on one fictional world.³ Moreover, the trilogy is very close to a memoir, and the author comments at large on the autobiographical nature of his fiction in the many interviews he has given as well as in an eight-page essay "True Fiction" (1994), which was published by Algonquin as part of the promotional kit for *Winter Birds*. In this essay, Grimsley points out several significant characteristics he shares with Dan(ny) Crell,⁴ his literary alter ego, when he comments:

In the facts of his life, Danny was as much like me as I could make him. Danny has hemophilia, like me. Danny has a sharp tongue, like me. Danny has a family full of smart alecks, like me. Danny's father drank too much and drank badly, like mine; Danny's mother is strong like mine; Danny will grow up to be queer like I did.⁵

In the essay, he goes on to describe various experiences in his childhood and his family that bear a striking resemblance to the fictional world of the Dan Crell novels and narrates an episode from his childhood on which *Winter Birds* was based. By doing so, he addresses the problems of memory, which later became a major theme in all three novels:

I have said this is a true story because I remember the night, twenty-odd years ago, when these events took place. But while I have been trying to construct sentences to describe this incident, I have come face-to-face with the problems of memory and material that have colored all the writing I have tried to do. I have vivid memories of my family, of the way we lived, and my writing feels very powerful when I am working out of this material.

2. Grimsley is also a respected playwright and author of genre fiction. A selection of his plays was published as *Mr. Universe and Other Plays* (1998), and his fantasy novels include *Kirith Kirin* (2000), *The Ordinary* (2005), and *The Last Green Tree* (2006).

3. On the other hand, *Dream Boy*, through which Grimsley entered the realm of southern gay literature, is not part of the trilogy, and yet it develops the theme of child abuse further to the point of the death of the protagonist; in addition to that, as Grimsley admitted in an interview, the novel is originally based on an episode cut out of *Winter Birds*. See Richard Canning, "Jim Grimsley," interview with Jim Grimsley, in *Hear Us Out: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 120. The theme of the abused child in *Dream Boy* in the context of gay and lesbian literature is explored by Monica Michlin in her essay "The Abused Child as Subversive Theme in LGBT Fiction," in *Dissidences et Identités Plurielles*, ed. Jean-Paul Rocchi (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2008), 265–85.

4. In accordance with Grimsley, I use "Danny" to refer to the character in *Winter Birds* and "Dan" to refer to the character in *Comfort & Joy*.

5. Jim Grimsley, "True Fiction," Advertising Folder (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1994), 6.

But these memories are often very unpleasant and lead to stories that are cathartic to read, but hard to sell to publishers.⁶

The very existence of the essay “True Fictions,” which Algonquin used to promote the book, demonstrates that after a decade of rejection by American publishers, Grimsley was actually able to join the mainstream of southern autobiographical writing. But the autobiographical nature of Grimsley’s fiction has its limits: the trilogy is presented as fiction inspired by people and events from the author’s family rather than a non-fiction record of his childhood. Grimsley emphasizes it repeatedly in his non-fiction as well as his interviews: “What I have written is autobiographical but is not an autobiography”⁷ or “Even in *Winter Birds* it’s all fiction, even though it’s based on fact.”⁸ To support these seemingly oxymoronic statements, he maintains that unlike the protagonists of his novels he has never been sexually abused by his father, which is a key motif in *Winter Birds*, and half-jokingly remarks that he is obviously not a nineteen-year-old girl who grew up in the 1940s.⁹

Regardless of the question of Grimsley’s veracity and the autobiographical status of his fiction, it serves as a perfect example of what the British scholar Julia Swindells calls “the necessary connection between autobiography and the social world.”¹⁰ Grimsley has always emphasized that the setting has had a formative role on him, and this pertains not only to the geographical setting in North Carolina but even more so to his social position. Because of his low-class origin, Grimsley clearly states that he cannot understand the upper class world described by other gay writers, such as Edmund White,¹¹ but in *Comfort & Joy* he contrasts two characters on the opposite end of the social ladder. Grimsley’s early fiction is distinctly southern, which he considered helpful because southern literature gets talked about,¹² yet, as he remarks, it took him three books to appear, as a southerner, on the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*, while the “gay thing was not a problem.”¹³ Indeed, at first sight his fiction contains all the elements Fred Hobson considers “central in the most notable southern fiction of the first three-quarters of [the twentieth] century,” i.e., “place, family, community, religion, and the past.”¹⁴

The fictional world of the trilogy spans from the late 1930s to the 1990s and focuses on two generations of a family: in *My Drowning* Ellen revisits the places of her childhood and tries to cope with memories of her childhood experience.

6. Grimsley, “True Fiction,” 4.

7. Grimsley, “True Fiction,” 8.

8. Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 123.

9. See Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 122.

10. Julia Swindells, introduction to *The Uses of Autobiography*, ed. Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 2.

11. See Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 127.

12. See Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 121.

13. Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 136.

14. Fred C. Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 8.

In *Winter Birds* the focus is on her son Danny, who, as an eight-year-old boy, experiences a violent night from his father. In *Comfort & Joy*, Dan is a grown-up man who forms a gay couple with Ford McKinney, a young pediatrician at the hospital where he works as an administrator.

While the three novels in the Dan Crell trilogy cannot be called autobiographies, they do share their basic preoccupations. In his treatise on autobiographies, the American critic Paul John Eakin builds on the psychologist Ulric Neisser's identification of "five modes of self-experience"¹⁵ and finds "the primary subject of autobiographical discourse" in one of them, in "Neisser's extended self, the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing continuously across time."¹⁶ The working of memory and coping with one's past is indeed the most important theme of the Dan Crell novels.

While Grimsley chose a different narrative situation for each novel in the trilogy, in all the novels he makes use of the possibilities the individual ways of narrating offer to the authors. The most interesting case is the use of the second-person narrative in *Winter Birds*. Yet Grimsley is aware that some works, such as Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), only use *you* instead of *I*,¹⁷ while in *Winter Birds* the *you* being addressed by the narrator is Danny, the eight-year-old boy, and the narrator is the adult Danny.¹⁸ Danny (called Danny the Lesser in some scenes in the novel) is the narratee to whom the narrator (Danny the Elder) explains the meaning of events going around him. The narrator thus talks to his imaginary self of many years ago. Grimsley comments on his choice of narrative situation in the following manner:

It allows me to cheat really: to know all kinds of things that the boy doesn't know, that I can claim to have found out later from the mother, or that can be inferred to have been known later through memory or through visualizing the scene from that later point. It was a very freeing way to write.¹⁹

What seems to be a story of what an eight-year-old boy is experiencing is in fact a story of what an adult man is remembering. The other two novels are more conventional in this respect: *My Drowning* is a first-person narrative with Ellen as the narrator, and memories of her childhood are brought to her through a series of flashbacks (narrated mostly in the past tense), interlaced with comments from the adult Ellen (usually in the present tense). *Comfort & Joy* is narrated from an omniscient point of view; memories are mainly brought back to Dan when he revisits his family and the places of his childhood.

15. Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), xii.

16. Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 3.

17. See Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 127.

18. See Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 125.

19. Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 125.

What strikes readers as a fundamental feature of the fictional world of the Dan Crell trilogy is the ubiquitous presence of children suffering; all of its forms can be gathered under the umbrella term *child abuse*. While child abuse is commonly associated with sexual abuse, it is only one of its forms. The German psychiatrist Günther Deegener defines three other forms in addition to sexual abuse: physical abuse (violent actions resulting in injuries to children who are beaten, whipped, burned with hot water, etc.), neglect (considerable impact or damage to a child's development as a result of a lack of care, clothing, feeding, medical care, supervision, or protection from danger), and emotional abuse (outright rejection, intimidation, terrorization, or isolation of a child; verbal abuse on a daily basis, locking a child in a dark room, etc.). Additionally, sexual abuse does not have to include rape or direct body contact but can be "[a]ny action that is inflicted upon or must be tolerated by a child against their own will or any action about which the child cannot make a decision due to their physical, emotional, mental, or verbal inferiority. The offenders use their position of power and authority to satisfy their own needs at the expense of these children who thus suffer discrimination as sexual objects."²⁰ Needless to say, examples of all the types abound in the Dan Crell novels.

The most severe forms of abuse can be found in *My Drowning*. The structure of the novel is episodic, and its chapters focus on various events in Ellen's childhood. Ellen's father was a tenant farmer and the poverty forced the family to move around from one house to another. Ellen's mother gave birth to eleven children, one of whom was stillborn and another died shortly after being born. The children were hungry all the time, living for periods of time on biscuits and sweetened coffee; only rarely, when there was money, did they have fatback. The constant hunger amounts to abuse by neglect, but the children also suffered from a marked lack of emotional support from their parents. Ellen remembers: "Daddy had never touched me that I could recall, to hold me, only to hurt me."²¹ This emotional starvation went hand in hand with physical abuse, which came not only from the father but also from the mother who beat her children repeatedly and even slammed Ellen's head against a plaster wall when she complained.

The primary target of sexual abuse in *My Drowning* was Ellen's eldest sister Nora. The fact that Nora had been abused sexually by her own father was revealed when he asked about her boyfriend: "You let him rub your pussy? . . . So if I check it, I'll find out it's just like I left it" (*MD*, 228). Ellen suffered from paternal sexual abuse as well, but in her case it was less conspicuous. Once her father picked her up from a friend whom she was visiting and

20. See Günther Deegener, "Child Abuse," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 1672.

21. Jim Grimsley, *My Drowning* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1997), 34. Hereafter cited in text as *MD*.

decided to punish her for coming home late. The lascivious grin on his face showed he had found unusual pleasure in the punishment. Ellen reported:

“You’ll have to get a whipping,” he said. He looked at me for a long time, and I felt as if my bare skin were knotting and tightening. He licked out the tip of his tongue onto his lower lip. Then he smiled and lit the cigarette and smoked it. (*MD*, 219–20)

However, it was Uncle Cope, who lived with the family, who abused Ellen most, and on a regular basis, even though she tried to avoid any contact with him. Her mother and eldest sister repeatedly warned her against him: “Mama and Nora had said over and over not to be alone with him, so I never was” (*MD*, 5). Still, her mother’s attempt to save her from abuse by males is accompanied by physical abuse from herself: when Ellen complained that Uncle Cope had peeped at her while she was washing, she slapped her “sharp across the face” and told her “never to mess with that one-leg bastard again” (*MD*, 75).

Ellen wanted to escape from her abusive family; that is why she eloped with Bobjay Crell and married him; their new family is at the center of *Winter Birds*. Yet there is a significant shift. In *My Drowning*, which portrays Ellen’s childhood, all the four forms of abuse are present in abundance and are so accumulated and interconnected that it is sometimes difficult (and artificial) to distinguish between them. While the sources of the sexual abuse were the children’s father and uncle, the physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect came from both Ellen’s parents. On the other hand, in *Winter Birds*, Ellen, herself a victim of childhood abuse, tries to protect her children.

The events of *Winter Birds* took place some time in the 1960s, and the poverty of Ellen’s new family was not so extreme: remembering the omnipresent hunger in her childhood years described in *My Drowning*, now, as a mother, she always had some food for her family. While in *My Drowning* the family had problems getting batteries for a radio, in *Winter Birds* the family even owned a TV set.

However, Bobjay soon became abusive in ways similar to her father’s. This was aggravated even further when he lost his arm in a machinery accident, which pushed the family into deeper poverty; they were constantly moving, usually to a worse place. Moreover, two of the boys, Danny and his younger brother Grove, suffered from hemophilia, which made them extremely sensitive to any physical violence, frequently resulting in bleeding and often requiring medical attention. At one point, while being chased by his angry father, Danny tripped and bit his tongue, which required hospitalization and resulted in a huge medical bill of almost five hundred dollars.

The events of the novel mostly took place on one Thanksgiving Day when Bobjay went amok, started to threaten his family with a knife and even killed the pregnant family dog. He also cut Danny and spilled some hot water on his arm, which can put a hemophiliac into extreme danger. The violent scene culminated in the sexual abuse of both Ellen and Danny. While in *My Drowning* Ellen’s parents engaged in sex as an act of reconciliation after their quarrels, Ellen refused to yield to Bobjay after his bout of anger. Bobjay was

jealous of the love Ellen felt for her children and accused her of incestuous inclinations: "I'm not good enough for you. . . . I'm scum, I'm some kind of bitch you don't want to touch, . . . ain't nothing good enough for you except your children, . . . you love them three times as much as you love me. . . . Oh no, I'm not good enough for you, I'm not your real blood kin. . . . But you only like it with your kin. Well I can get some of that for you right now."²² After these accusations and threatening Ellen with his knife, Bobjay brought the sleepy Danny to the bedroom and placed him on Ellen's naked body, which was an experience that haunted Danny years afterwards.

However, the Dan Crell novels achieve much more than just a portrait of the various forms of violence inflicted on children and relatives; they also explore the strategies the victims used to cope with abuse while it was happening (or expected to happen soon) and, because of the temporal distance recorded in the novels, they also show the ways in which, later in their lives, they battled the trauma that originated from the abuse.

Both the young Ellen and Danny (as well as all the other child characters, at that) tried to avoid situations that made them vulnerable to abuse, but they also used a different way of coping with the abusive environment: they escaped into the realm of the imagination. When Ellen's younger sister Alma Laura died in infancy, she continued to visit Ellen as a ghost until Ellen eloped with Bobjay. Alma Laura became an imaginary friend who provided virtual support for Ellen. The unfulfilled need for communication was also reflected in how Ellen talks to Corrine, a baby sister of hers, at an age when Corrine could not possibly be an adequate discussion partner. Among other things, she advised Corrine to "close the door when she took a bath" and "to keep a towel close by" (*MD*, 96) so that she could hide if Uncle Cope decided to watch her. Of course, this talking to herself, masked as communication with an uncomprehending baby sister, became, as Corrine started to understand, a way of passing down knowledge of how to protect herself.

Like Ellen who vivified her long-dead sister, Danny invented an imaginary protector—the River Man, a friendly monster. Danny became a recluse who preferred being alone with the River Man in his thoughts to the company of members of the family. He especially liked to go to a clearing by the river, where he dreamt:

You dream the River Man again: River Man comes out of the water to your honeysuckle mattress on the bank. He is broad as an oak tree and strong as a bear, tall and brown-skinned with shaggy black hair. He lives in the water or in the forest where you have wandered. *He calls you his son.* You know no one else in the world, only him. You have no other home, only his home. You see in his eyes every minute how he cares for you. (*WB*, 10, my italics)

This dreaming is alluded to again in *Comfort & Joy* when Dan revisits the place with Ford McKinney and he remembers: "*And I used to lie in the dead*

22. Jim Grimsley, *Winter Birds* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1994), 195–96. Hereafter cited in text as *WB*.

honeysuckle and dream of a cave beneath the river, a man like you in the cave, and one day a lion in a golden field."²³ Aloud, he told Ford: "I used to dream about you at the river. . . . You lived under the water, and you took care of me. . . . I didn't know it was you at the time. But it was" (*CJ*, 123). This demonstrates that one's memories are subject to constant reinterpretation. Dreams of a protector and substitute father turn into dreams (or rather, memories of dreams) about Dan's current gay lover; the friendly monster metamorphoses into a man.

The fluid nature of memories was not lost on Ellen either; at the very beginning of *My Drowning* she declared that she had "grown old enough that a memory [became] as real as the real thing" (*MD*, 2). Indeed, challenging the reliability of memory is so important that it is built into the structure of the novel. That is why Grimsley interrupts the childhood experiences, narrated in the past tense, with Ellen's remarks in the present tense, ranging in length from a single sentence to several paragraphs:

Maybe I am adding to the real memory by looking backward at it from such a distance, but I have the picture of the neighbor woman glaring at Carl Jr., as if she knew he had been flirting with her daughter. I have the picture of Carl Jr. drifting past her, chewing a blade of dry grass. I cannot possibly remember so much. But my skepticism does not dim the picture. (MD, 31, my italics)

The greatest challenge to the reliability of memories hides behind the title of the novel itself. Ellen's older brother, Otis, once revealed to Ellen that, as her father wanted her born dead, he beat her mother in the belly. "So Mama hated you, he said, and when you were born she took you to the pond, and she tried to drown you, and she would have done it, except Nora saved you. You didn't know that, did you?" (*MD*, 247). This statement might explain the opening scene of the novel, in which Ellen had a vivid reminiscence of her mother entering water while being observed by her children, including herself. Ellen was startled by the similarities between the two versions but was also aware of the contradictions between them. As a newborn child cannot remember such an experience, this memory must have been only a dream based on a story she had heard. Indeed, this would provide a plausible answer to Ellen's sigh, "How can such a vivid memory be so imperfect?" (*MD*, 2).

In spite of the hardships in the past, both Ellen and Dan survived their abusive childhoods, though not without trauma. For example, after years of being sent to the local store to ask for credit, Ellen still felt the need to emphasize that she had escaped the extreme poverty of her youth after all:

Years later I went back to the Jarman's store in the '62 Impala I bought with my own money, earned by working in the elementary school cafeteria. My own children were with me, clean and neatly dressed, and I wore my hair freshly done from the beauty parlor. My dress was sky blue, with a wide white belt, and I wore white shoes, but instead of the white hat, I wore a white rayon scarf tied around my hair. I carried my purse into the store. (MD, 50)

23. Jim Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1999), 123. Grimsley's italics. Hereafter cited in text as *CJ*.

Her need to reconfirm her new economic status (having her own money, carrying a purse), as well as her clean and neatly dressed children, demonstrate that she still bears, and will always bear, the burden of her abusive childhood full of violence and poverty. The same theme is explored in *Comfort & Joy*, a novel originally meant as a gay romance which Grimsley wrote when he could not publish *Winter Birds* in the United States.²⁴ It is a gay romance but, besides that, also a study of the consequences later in life of child abuse.

Dan Crell is now an adult man in his early thirties who tries to build a working relationship with Ford McKinney, a scion of an old Savannah family. Both men bring the burden of their past into the relationship. Ford's family pushes their son to marry and take his expected place in the Savannah social hierarchy, while Dan, in addition to his memories of disrupted childhood, is HIV-positive from taking untested hemophilia medication at the beginning of the epidemic. When Dan visits his mother with Ford one Christmas, the full extent of his childhood traumas resurfaces.

At that time Bobjay is already dead and Ellen has remarried and lives with her second husband in their own graveyard, which is the source of their income. Dan and Ford fly over from Atlanta and they rent a car. On their journey to visit Ellen, Dan decides to make a detour to the Circle House, that is, the house that provided the setting of *Winter Birds*. Dan is overwhelmed with emotions, and even Ford is startled when he sees the place.

Yet, it is probably Ellen who is most strongly affected when she learns that Dan took Ford to the place, as she realizes the traumas of Dan's childhood that the visit to the place must have rekindled. She trusts Ford and, aware of the hardships of Dan's upbringing, asks him openly, "Are you and Danny having a hard time?" (*CJ*, 163). Indeed, Ford was confused by Dan's emotional reaction that was brought out by the visit to the house: "There's some way he's afraid of me that I don't understand. Like in that house, the one he took me to see. When I found him in that bedroom, crying. And he wouldn't say why, and I was scared to ask" (*CJ*, 164). But even Ellen remains obscure at this point: "A bad thing happened to Danny in that room. . . . Maybe he'll tell you about it one of these days" (*CJ*, 164). While she does reveal that Dan may have been harmed in his childhood, the real nature of the events described in *Winter Birds*, including the sexual abuse by his father, remains hidden from Ford.

The extent of Dan's childhood trauma is also revealed in a dialogue with his sister Amy, when both of them remark they would like to forget about the place. To her "I wish you could forget about that place," Danny simply replies, "I wish I could too" (*CJ*, 153). But this is impossible and Danny later admits: "If I could forget my family, I would have done it a long time ago" (*CJ*, 274). But, the family cannot be forgotten, and Dan has been struggling with his childhood trauma for more than twenty years.

The fact that the trauma has a lasting effect on Dan is also obvious from Ford's remark to Dan: "There's two of you sometimes" (*CJ*, 213). This admits

24. See Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 117

that, indeed, there may be Danny the Elder and Danny the Lesser, which can shed light on the narrative situation of *Winter Birds*, where Dan/Danny the Elder still tries to cope with his past by explaining its meaning to his imaginary younger self, Danny the Lesser.

Child abuse in all its forms is a defining phenomenon in the fictional world portrayed in the Dan Crell trilogy, which may serve as an encyclopedia of child abuse in its complexity at all levels. Moreover, it demonstrates how it is reproduced in the next generation, even though the proportion of the four forms of abuse changes. The novels reveal the main strategy the children used to cope with abuse at the time it took place: they escaped into the world of the imagination, inventing imaginary friends, either as communication partners or protectors: Ellen talked to her long-dead sister till her late teens, before she escaped from the family, and Danny invented the River Man, a substitute father who took care of him until the imaginary monster took a real shape in his gay lover.

The most important theme of the novels, the role of (unreliable) memory in children's coping with abuse in childhood and the consequent traumas in adulthood, is explored in all three novels via various narrative techniques. First, various narrative situations are used to explore the role of memories and the effect of time on them, and the theme of memory and time is expressed in the non-linear structure of the novels. Second, the temporal distance makes the witnessing of children's suffering more bearable because the reader is regularly reminded that the child has survived the ongoing abuse. Last but not least, the exploration of the lasting effects of the trauma makes it clear that the character's recovery from abuse is far from complete and is virtually impossible.

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THEATER OF IDENTITY: *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*

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ABSTRACT

This essay studies the issues of subjectivity and identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the debut novel by the British Asian writer Hanif Kureishi. The categories of subjectivity and identity are analyzed as power effects of the predominant discourses of ethnicity, race, class and gender. The analysis is primarily focused on the novel's main character Karim Amir, whose life trajectory it traces and demonstrates how Karim's self-perception is shaped by forces outside the grasp of his will, yet malleable by his extraordinary skill of mimicry, which he practices consciously as a way of finding his place in the white English mainstream society, and unconsciously as a political gesture against the forces of colonialism, neocolonialism and capitalism. Theoretical standpoints from the work of Homi K. Bhabha and Judith Butler are used to reveal Karim and other members of his family as hybrid characters who challenge Cartesian notions of identity and subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

hybridity; migrancy; performance; subjectivity; identity; Hanif Kureishi; British Asian writers; postcolonialism

Many contemporary critics and theorists have taken to task the simplistic assumption that *migrancy* refers to the relocation of a person or a group of people from one socio-political environment to another, or the conditions and experience resulting from it. In the globalized world the term migrancy produces a much wider array of meanings, some of which reach as high as the ontological plane of human existence. Andrew Smith wrote in 2004 that "migrancy becomes the name for the condition of human beings as such, a name for how we exist and understand ourselves."¹ Hanif Kureishi's debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (further referred to as *The Buddha*) tackles this migrant condition of the post-colonial world in a tone of light-hearted matter-of-factness and unrestrained humor. The novel was first published in 1990 but addresses issues of British social, cultural, and political life of the 1970s. What makes the novel a particularly valuable read is the satirical edge with which Kureishi, a child of lower-middle-class Indian-Pakistani migrants, cuts into the ambivalent experience of Britain's South Asian community. On the one hand, Andrew Smith's words from the quote above are strikingly apt for a novel whose main themes are rootlessness and a lack of essence of any kind. On the other hand, it would be very hard to find a single passage in

1. Andrew Smith, "Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Literary Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 247.

The Buddha in which its characters really understand themselves. It is as if migrancy, seen as a metaphysical condition of life, obscures and dislocates the very self that is supposed to be the subject of understanding. Kureishi's debut novel thus offers surprising perspectives on the self and raises disquieting questions about identity in the post-colonial world.

The Buddha's narrator and main protagonist, Karim Amir, takes us on a riveting journey through the reality of 1970s Britain as reflected by his confused teenage mind. This reality is teeming with both comic and tragic characters, and the fact that the whole story, or rather, the multiplicity of stories that is *The Buddha*, is focalized through Karim, encourages the reader not only to identify with Karim's picaresque adventures, but also to accept his role as a mirror of the world. That this particular mirror is a "funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories,"² makes *The Buddha* an essential text for anyone with a serious interest in hybridity and its relation to the issues of identity and the self.

Karim begins to tell his story as a 17-year-old boy, bored with his life in a South London suburb, eagerly awaiting a fresh gust of wind that would bring him closer to central London and out of the deadlock of his lower-middle class family, consisting of his Indian father Haroon, English mother Margaret, and younger brother Allie. From the very beginning, Karim does not seem to be particularly interested in his own hybrid heritage, but shows a strong desire to escape the shabbiness of the suburbs, where "people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness" (*BS*, 8). Hanif Kureishi has said in an interview that his characters always try to expand their sense of self, "struggling against an original sense of class that they're trying to throw off."³ In Karim, the struggle against the constraints of his lower-middle-class existence in the dull suburb manifests itself mostly in his restlessness, which pushes him on almost to madness. Karim is always on the move through the city, which, as Stefano Manferlotti puts it, resembles "a whole body that now rests and now runs, now flourishes and now decays, smiles and bleeds."⁴ As a narrator, though, Karim occasionally succeeds in surpassing his teenage unrest and mirror-like superficiality, as in Chapter Two, where he briefly relates his father's history, adding some of his own bitter observations. Karim's father Haroon grew up in a rich upper-middle-class family in Bombay and came to Britain shortly after World War II to study law. He never fulfilled this ambition, though, partly because of the shock of seeing Britain for real, a shock he never quite recovered from. A. Robert Lee describes the Britain that Haroon and his friend Anwar arrived in as "shot through with provincialism, righteous yet out for a sex-and-drugs romp, civil yet edging into a latest racist

2. Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *BS*.

3. Bradley Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 112.

4. Stefano Manferlotti, "Writers from Elsewhere," in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), 193.

and punk violence, and above all, given to exoticising its citizenry of 'colour' even as it fears them and wishes them gone."⁵ In a much-quoted passage from *The Buddha*, Kureishi lets his young narrator state the following:

London, the Old Kent Road, was a freezing shock to both of them. It was wet and foggy; people called you 'Sunny Jim'; there was never enough to eat. . . . [R]ationing was still on. . . . Dad was amazed and heartened by the sight of the British in England, though. He'd never seen the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen. . . . [N]o one had told him that the English didn't wash regularly because the water was so cold—if they had water at all. And when Dad tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman. (*BS*, 24–25)

Salman Rushdie once said of the England that the immigrants' children were growing up in that "this isn't the England of fair play, tolerance, decency and equality—maybe that place never existed anyway, except in fairy-tales."⁶ Haroon expresses a similar sentiment in *The Buddha* when he deprecates the British for thinking that "they still . . . have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together" (*BS*, 27). Yet somehow, perhaps in compensation for his professional failure in Britain, where he ended up as an underpaid clerk instead of a distinguished lawyer, Haroon still cherishes the preposterous hope that his son Karim will become a doctor. Karim's reply to his father's ambition is an account of the daily reality of the school he attends, where violence and racism rule supreme: "What world was he living in? Every day I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury" (*BS*, 63). Banal as Karim's words may sound, they actually reflect a now well-researched social fact of life of Britain's South Asian youth, namely that "Asian parents' ambitions for their children are generally unrealistic."⁷

Yet ambition becomes one of the key concepts of *The Buddha* after the character of Eva Key, a self-reliant woman from the suburbs, enters the tale. Her powerful presence is soon felt by everyone who falls into the orbit of her influence, including Haroon, who falls in love with her. It is she who comes up with the idea of Haroon impersonating an Indian mystic and who finally manages to snatch him away from his devastated wife. Even though her original goal was to "get all of us to London" (*BS*, 30), she achieves a lot more in the novel, making it into the cream of North London society. She is also the driving force behind Karim's gradual progress from a jobless good-for-nothing to a famous actor. Karim, who never stops feeling ambivalent about Eva's seduction of Haroon and the ensuing break-up of his parents' marriage, is nevertheless very fond of Eva, and feels

5. A. Robert Lee, "Changing the Script: Sex, Lies and Videotapes in Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen and Mike Phillips," in *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction*, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 77.

6. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 134.

7. Muhammad Anwar, *Between Cultures: Continuity and Change in the Lives of Young Asians* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55.

that she is spiring him up from passivity and lethargy to action and self-empowerment. The fictional Eva appears to embody the *Zeitgeist* as her attitudes and confidence are paralleled in real life by the rising star of British politics, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. Exactly to what extent Kureishi himself is complicit with Thatcherite philosophy has been the subject of some critical attention, but given the satirical and picaresque nature of his work, a clear-cut answer is not attainable. A lot, though, can be inferred from the peculiar way the narrator enters this new era of self-reliance and initiative—by way of accepting a lucrative contract for an acting role in a TV soap opera. Though praised by his family for such a major step into fame, Karim is not entirely convinced by his younger brother Allie's admiring comment: "A soap opera, eh? That's class" (*BS*, 268). Karim cannot wholeheartedly identify with Allie's conviction that "we can't pretend we're some kind of shitted-on oppressed people. [So] let's just make the best of ourselves" (*BS*, 268), knowing this to be a very ambiguous and politically complex statement. Making the best of oneself will surely mean different things for people from different social and ethnic backgrounds. There is an ongoing debate in Britain today as to whether the years of Thatcherism helped the working and lower-middle classes realize their potential and repaint the shabby colors of their lives, or whether the political philosophy of independence and self-reliance actually condemned these people to even more misery and dullness. Nowhere has this debate been more heated than in the households of the South Asian migrants, whose position in British society has always been full of contradictions and ambiguities. One way of bettering their lot would be for them to become more visible in the mainstream society, but only on acceptable terms, e.g., by means of appearing in a TV soap opera. At the same time, their participation in the cultural forms and political life of the mainstream society would mean collaboration with a hegemonic system that constantly fails them and does nothing to remove or at least alleviate the hardships they have to face, e.g., racism, prejudice, and violence. That is why not everyone would agree with Allie's statement that "we can't pretend we're some kind of shitted-on oppressed people" (*BS*, 268). Allie feels that his self-understanding as a migrant, albeit a second-generation one, ties him down to a shabby world of inefficiency and self-pity—the main enemies of the Thatcherite political philosophy—and would prefer to become a first-class British citizen, even at the expense of his hybrid ethnic heritage. Karim is instinctively aware of the ambivalence of his brother's conviction, but chooses to ignore such doubts in the pursuit of a better life and fame. For the role in the soap opera, he will be asked to enact the most rigid clichés about Indian identity and sell them convincingly to the consumers.

Not that it would be the first time in the novel that Karim is prepared to sacrifice the complexity of issues related to identity for the sake of the clear-cut cultural stereotypes demanded and perpetrated by the culture industry. By the time we reach the ending of *The Buddha*, Karim will have been an actor impersonating the most stereotypical version of Kipling's *Mowgli*, as

well as his tragicomic relative Changez. Karim's impersonation of Changez as a rather dumb, naïve, and economically irresponsible Asian is both hilarious and cruel, as Changez has actually felt the racist violence of the South London streets. This is what Karim learns from his cousin Jamila about the racist attack on her husband Changez:

Changez had been attacked under a railway bridge. . . . It was a typical South London winter evening—silent, dark, cold, foggy, damp—when this gang jumped out on Changez and called him a Paki, not realizing he was Indian. They planted their feet all over him and started to carve the initials of the National Front into his stomach with a razor blade. . . . The police, who were getting sick of Changez, had suggested that he'd laid down under the railway bridge and inflicted the wound on himself. . . . The National Front were parading through a nearby Asian district. There would be a fascist rally in the Town Hall; Asian shops would be attacked and lives threatened. Local people were scared. We couldn't stop it: we could only march and make our voices heard. (*BS*, 224–25)

When the time comes, Karim does not turn up at the anti-fascist demonstration as instructed by Jamila, choosing his acting career and his white middle-class friends from the theater over his fellow South Asians and their concerns. Yet it does not follow that his loyalties are now firmly defined and fixed on his new, well-to-do companions. His main loyalty lies with acting, which turns out to be the central metaphor of *The Buddha*.

The key role of acting in *The Buddha* becomes apparent in those sections of the novel where Karim partly sets aside his commercial ambitions to make room for a strong experience of Indianness that would help him round up the fragments of his de-centered self into a unified whole. Just as actors put on new personalities and selves, so does Karim realize that “if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it” (*BS*, 213). At the funeral of his uncle Anwar, Karim makes a surprising emotional discovery:

I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now—the Indians—that in some way these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. (*BS*, 212)

Apparently, Karim comes to the conclusion that his sense of incompleteness, the feeling “as if half of me were missing,” is due to the denial of his Indianness. The funeral marks a turning point in Karim's life—he feels that adopting an Indian identity will result in the solidification of his sense of self. But as we read on, two contradictions come to the foreground. Firstly, Karim appropriates his newly acquired sense of Indianness only for his acting career, which basically means yet more “colluding with enemies.” As the critic Bart Moore-Gilbert puts it: “The racial ‘Other’ in Kureishi's novels is often represented as one more niche object of consumption by the liberal centre.”⁸ Karim is more than ready to prostitute himself in order to satisfy the demands of the liberal center, however humiliating that may be for audiences with an

8. Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 138.

Indian background, as is the case with Karim's father, or his cousin Jamila, who both slight him after his *Mowgli* performance: "[I]t was disgusting, the accent and the shit you had smeared over you. You were just pandering to prejudices . . . [a]nd clichés about Indians. And the accent—my God, how could you do it?" (*BS*, 157). Secondly, ethnic identity is by no means represented in *The Buddha* as an essentialist concept. Particularly for British Indians of Karim's generation, that is, of the generation already born in Britain, any essentialist account of Englishness or Indianness does not really make sense.

The question therefore arises: are Karim's *Mowgli* performance and his soap opera contract really indicative of cultural prostitution in the name of Thatcherite opportunism and profiteering? Or is Karim cunningly setting into play something far more complex and unsettling? Critics of Kureishi's work are far from unequivocal in answering these questions. Sometimes they directly contradict each other. Moore-Gilbert contends that Kureishi's novels represent the Other as an object of consumption of the center (see above). Berthold Schoene is convinced of the opposite and reads Kureishi's characters as "a radically deconstructive presence in a world obsessed with clear-cut definitions."⁹ The moral dilemma for Karim is of the same nature as the divide between the two critical voices with a defiant paradox sitting in the very center of it: to sort out his chaotic life and create a more stable sense of self, Karim must embark on an acting career that is engaged with a multiplicity of fluid, imaginary selves. Moreover, in order to succeed and attract audiences, he must impersonate and sell essentialist stereotypes of cultural and ethnic identity that he knows to be partly a construct and product of colonialist discourse, and partly performance. The ultimate problem for the reader is to decide whether *The Buddha* is complicit with colonialist discourse or whether it undermines it.

In *The Location of Culture*, the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha writes:

The subject of the discourse of cultural difference is dialogical or transferential in the style of psychoanalysis. It is constituted through the locus of the Other which suggests both that the object of identification is ambivalent, and, more significantly, that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement and projection.¹⁰

As we can see, for Bhabha, neither colonial discourse nor otherness, let alone the self that internalizes this discourse, are essentialistic, "pure and holistic" categories. Hence, Karim's depthless condition makes him the best possible agent for subversive activity in the postcolonial world, because in Bhabha's opinion, agency "requires a grounding, but it does not require a totalization of these grounds; it requires movement and maneuver but it does not require a temporality of continuity or accumulation; it requires

9. Berthold Schoene, "Herald of Hybridity: The Emancipation of Difference in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1 (April 1998): 117.

10. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 162.

direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism.”¹¹ That Karim’s subversive activity is undefined and completely unsystematic is a fact that may not be the best ground for anti-colonial politics and resistance, but is (at least according to Bhabha) fully legitimate in a postcolonial world where any kind of subversive activity must necessarily dismiss all essentials as illusions, and utilize instead its own fragmentation, ambivalence, and indeterminism. With acting being the central metaphor of *The Buddha*, it is difficult not to make use of Homi Bhabha’s theory of *mimicry* as well. Bhabha writes:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing.¹²

Bhabha is convinced that Indians imitating Englishness, whether out of the need to survive or in pursuit of profit, operate in an “area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double.”¹³ In the case of *The Buddha*, we are confronted with a character who is not only well aware of his hybrid ethnic identity (though not very keen on it), but who pushes the boundaries of mimicry one step further, to the point when a paradoxical reversal of perspectives occurs. Were we really to consider Karim as a fictional counterpart of Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, it should immediately strike us that his on-stage impersonations of the most stereotyped forms of Indianness do not mean selling himself or colluding with the enemy, but simply returning the colonial gaze by way of a complete mockery of these colonial clichés. His on-stage excesses hold up a mirror to the downright stupidity of the colonial discourse. To act out Eurocentric stereotypes on stage, as Karim does, would, on Bhabha’s reading, mean to undermine these stereotypes to the point where they simply fall apart. The question whether Karim does so consciously or whether his subversive activity is a by-product of his apparent “colluding with enemies” is irrelevant to Bhabha. When Shadwell, the director of the theatrical adaptation of *The Jungle Book*, in which Karim plays *Mowgli*, commands the reluctant Karim to put on an Indian accent, justifying this order with: “Karim, you have been cast for authenticity” (BS, 147), the reader of *The Buddha* is not surprised at Karim’s taking this authenticity way too far.

Of the same quality is the transformation—brought about by Eva Key—of Karim’s father from a secular British-Indian Muslim into a suburban mystic, lecturing on Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen to middle-class London audiences:

The room was still and silent. Dad went into a silence too, looking straight ahead of him. At first it was a little silence. But on and on it went, becoming a big silence: nothing

11. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 185.

12. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86. Bhabha’s italics.

13. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.

was followed by nothing, which was followed quite soon by more nothing as he sat there, his eyes fixed but full of care. My head started to sweat. Bubbles of laughter rose in my throat. I wondered if he were going to con them and sit there for an hour in silence . . . before putting his car coat on and tramping off back to his wife, having brought the Chislehurst bourgeoisie to an exquisite understanding of their inner emptiness. Would he dare? (*BS*, 35)

The amused tone of the passage, reflecting Karim's awareness of the deep irony of the situation in which his father, an Indian migrant of no social consequence, holds the utmost and devoted attention of London's advertising executives, speaks of exactly the same kind of conscious and coldly calculated dealing in stereotypes that would probably please the theorist Homi Bhabha. Both Karim and his father Haroon utilize different forms of Orientalist stereotypes and serve them to the British public in exchange for cash. Though perhaps primarily motivated by financial gains or visions of fame, they put into a subversive play the whole history of British colonialism, which is what the critic Graham Huggan describes in the following statement:

Minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other. Yet as Kureishi makes clear, such stagings can be seen on one level as parodies of white expectations and, on another, as demonstrations of the performative basis of all identity formation.¹⁴

In performing the most rigid conceptions of the Other to the complacent, unsuspecting audiences, Karim and Haroon reveal these conceptions as performative in nature, with the added value of holding their audiences up to politically potent ridicule.

Judith Butler's influential study *Gender Trouble* provides some interesting insights into the problems of the puzzling relationship between identity and performance. For Butler, Karim's selfless mental state throughout the novel would carry the same politically subversive potential as for Bhabha. Karim's mockery of all kinds of essentials directly anticipates Butler's conviction that "the ontology of substances . . . is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous."¹⁵ The fact that for the most part of *The Buddha* Karim has neither a coherent political program nor a stable sense of self is, on a Butlerian reading, no hindrance to the subversive efficacy of his on-stage antics:

The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed.¹⁶

A Butlerian reading of *The Buddha* would also help to give an understanding of Karim's growing sense of self as the novel evolves. Taking up Butler's

14. Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 95.

15. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 34.

16. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 194–95.

argument, we could see that Karim's new self is constructed through a variety of performances and is therefore just another performative category, alongside race and—Butler's chief concern—gender. Karim's ambiguous sexuality also turns this reading into an efficient weapon of destruction of all kinds of clear-cut categories and essentials. Certain passages of *The Buddha* concerned with Karim's sexual desires make it quite clear that Karim actually understands his sexuality as a mutable constellation of groundless performances. Karim does not hesitate to make explicit references to the superficial, free-floating world of pop culture when reflecting on his sexual preferences:

It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. I liked strong bodies and the backs of boys' necks. I liked being handled by men, their fists pulling me; and I liked objects—the ends of brushes, pens, fingers—up my arse. But I liked cunts and breasts, all of women's softness, long smooth legs and the way women dressed. I felt it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. (BS, 55)

Karim's bisexual excesses are in perfect accordance with Butler's conviction that "if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured."¹⁷ From a Butlerian scrutiny, *The Buddha* will indeed emerge as a novel stressing the performative character of gender and ethnicity—categories that we traditionally consider substantial and immutable.

Nevertheless, it is social class, a category that lies at the foundations of British society and has remained one of the firmest principles of self-identification in Britain, that complicates the reading of all the novel's categories as performative. Class awareness is one of the central issues of *The Buddha* and serves as the common ground for all those readings of the novel that appreciate its contribution to the long-standing tradition of British realist fiction. The critic Susie Thomas, for instance, compares *The Buddha* to Charles Dickens' classic *Great Expectations*, arguing that "[both are] novels of upward mobility and the aspirations of the young narrators provide a critique of social values."¹⁸ Indeed, to focus purely on the performative aspects of Kureishi's novel would be to downplay its socially critical potential. As Susie Thomas writes:

In all Kureishi's work there is an emphasis on how race can affect class and vice versa. Migrants lose status on arrival in England, like Jeeta, a princess, who is seen as just another 'Paki' in a corner shop and looked down on by white Londoners. But Kureishi also shows that upper-class Indians, like Changez, can feel little solidarity with poor immigrants from India, whom they despise for failing to speak English.¹⁹

17. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 192.

18. Susie Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 74.

19. Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi*, 74.

Other critics have noticed different nuances of the novel's treatment of class identity. Unlike Thomas, who aligns *The Buddha* with the Dickensian thread of social criticism, Bart Moore-Gilbert links the novel to post-war British working-class literature:

The Buddha owes something to writers like John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey and Keith Waterhouse who emerged in the 1950s to explore the shifting contours of class identity within a society which was being reconfigured radically in the aftermath of World War Two. . . . Like many such works, *The Buddha* celebrates the determination of protagonists from various kinds of margins to better themselves socially. Thus, Karim talks ambitiously of "going somewhere" and later celebrates his "social rise." The ambivalence which he sometimes feels, both about the world he is leaving and the one he is entering, recalls similar conflicts in characters like Joe Lampton in Braine's *Room at the Top*.²⁰

The third critical voice worth introducing in connection with *The Buddha's* treatment of class is that of Rita Felski, who has provided by far the most rigorous account of the significance of class in Kureishi's novels. Felski is convinced that class divisions are depicted by Kureishi in *The Buddha* as an undeniable fact of British social reality, but she also notices how Kureishi presents the class divisions as liable to transgressions and permutations brought into play by the cosmopolitanism of postwar British city life:

The Buddha of Suburbia is a story about the permeability of class divisions and the new possibilities of social mobility in postwar Britain. Karim eventually becomes a successful actor, escaping his suburban origins for a bohemian metropolitan world of artists and upper-middle-class intellectuals. But the novel also traces the tenacity and continuing power of class distinctions, as Kureishi's hero is constantly confronted with the differences between his background and that of his friends.²¹

It should be stressed again at this point that Karim's class origins lie in the lower-middle-class suburbs rather than in the working-class ones. Neither Karim nor Rita Felski can see the revolutionary ethos normally associated with the British working class in the unbearable dullness and boredom of the lower-middle-class environment:

Karim and his suburban friends are desperate to escape to London, lured by the fantasy of a glamorous, bohemian metropolitan world. The intellectuals and artists who inhabit that culture have their own fantasy, of an authentic, gritty, working-class existence. But the lower middle class is no one's fantasy and no one's desire; it has no exchange value in the cultural marketplace.²²

This clearly explains Karim's ambition to leave suburban London for the cosmopolitan world of posh artists and intellectuals of central London at all costs, even if it should require the prostitution of his ethnic identity.

All these different views of the problem of class in *The Buddha* point to the lack of agreement among Kureishi's critics on the real significance of

20. Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 111.

21. Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class," *PMLA* 115, no. 1 (2000): 37.

22. Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 38.

social class in his work. The Butlerian reading of Kureishi's treatment of nearly all essential categories as performative, insightful and productive as it may be, is not without problems, either, because in its defiance of any kind of self-assured, uniform reading, *The Buddha* immediately presents us with a problem following from the theory of the performative. The critic Ruvani Ranasinha has observed that Butler's theory might not, after all, be so smoothly applicable to *The Buddha*:

Butler's performative gender is not synonymous with 'performance' or 'theatre', both of which would assume an actor who initiates its gendered acts. . . . Butler's concept contrasts with Kureishi's representations of the conscious performance of ethnicity, wherein a notion of a residual sense of self behind the performance, however elusive, remains.²³

To put it bluntly, Ranasinha does not see *The Buddha*'s characters as selfless enough to fully embody Butler's theory of the performative, let alone carry out its political potential. Also, in her view, the novel's different characters display varying degrees of subjectivity:

In Kureishi's representation of Haroon's performance there remains, however imaginary and indefinable, a notion of a residual sense of self. In contrast, Karim reveals a more fraught, unstable subjectivity. His fractured, divided, and contradictory sense of self stems from the opposition between societal conceptions of his identity and his self-perception.²⁴

Karim's growing sense of self towards the end of the novel corresponds not only with his acceptance of a role in a TV soap opera (thus potentially turning himself into a pop commodity) but also with the election of Margaret Thatcher as the new Prime Minister. Although Karim's awareness of postcolonial politics is on the increase as well, the survival of his political cutting edge is in question, and Ranasinha is justified in her conclusion that "while the text emphasizes that identities are, to an extent, culturally and politically constructed by stressing the role of performance, it is sceptical of questions of identity being 'resolved' in performance and maps its limitations."²⁵

Nowhere is this point better illustrated than in the very self-centered, self-reliant, and politically committed character of Karim's cousin Jamila. A strong, stubborn woman, hers is an anti-colonial policy of open confrontation, the examples of which Karim serves us on many occasions in *The Buddha*: "Jamila had a PhD in physical retribution. Once a greaser rode past us on an old bicycle and said, as if asking the time, 'Eat shit, Pakis.' Jammie sprinted through the traffic before throwing the bastard off his bike and tugging out some of his hair, like someone weeding an overgrown garden" (*BS*, 53). It is Jamila who rebukes Karim for his *Mowgli* performance and who cannot forgive him his absence from the anti-racist demonstration, where she threw herself into the front line. As a character she is far divorced from the

23. Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), 69.

24. Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 71.

25. Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 63.

novel's concern with the performativity of all essentials, which paradoxically places her at the ethical center of the novel. With her radical politics and clearly defined enemy, her sense of self is much more grounded and coherent than Karim's. All through the novel Karim holds her in high esteem for the efficiency of her anti-racist attitudes and strategies. Yet, Jamila's stable subjectivity notwithstanding, we can clearly see that her solid sense of self is also partly constructed through a repetition of a series of (radical, anti-racist) performances. Jamila thus epitomizes the central (and insoluble) conflict of *The Buddha*—the conflict between the politics of the self and the politics of the lack of thereof. Karim Amir, for his own part, is resolved by the end of the novel “to live more deeply” (BS, 284).

The critic Stella Tillyard contends that in a larger part of *The Buddha*, Kureishi “celebrates the liberation and loss of self that he discovers in the maelstrom of a decayed physical and moral universe.”²⁶ Karim lives during the punk era, when young people are piercing their skin with corroded studs, violence in the streets is an everyday occurrence, and sexual intercourse does not require love or respect. Karim is happily free-floating on the surface of this “decayed universe,” free of all ties or responsibility. However, the ending of *The Buddha*, in which Karim is thinking “about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is” (BS, 283–84), points in a slightly different direction. Karim's epiphany at the banquet celebrating his contract with the soap opera producers reveals to him that building a more stable sense of self might be beneficial in the pursuit of personal happiness. It is also telling that the novel finishes at this very moment, as the confused, incoherent and de-centered Karim decides to finally ground himself. On the political level, the novel could also not end at a more appropriate moment, which is shortly after Karim's intimation that “[w]e had a small party, and by the end of it everyone in the place seemed to have been told I was going to be on television, and who was going to be the next Prime Minister. It was the latter which made them especially ecstatic” (BS, 282). The small party concludes the novel and launches the era of Margaret Thatcher, during which individual and personal initiative (based on a very strong notion of the self) will be hailed as the supreme value. There will be no more room for Karim's passive mirroring. As the vigorous Eva Key puts it: “We have to empower ourselves. Look at those people who live on sordid housing estates. They expect others—the Government—to do everything for them. They are only half human, because only half active” (BS, 263). Thus the novel, whose characters, according to Ruvani Ravasinha, “remain spectral and specular figures with no strong sense of self,”²⁷ must finish at the dawn of an era that will celebrate and promote a firmly grounded and clearly defined subjectivity over anything else.

26. Stella Tillyard, “A Vision of the Prophet Hanif,” *Times*, March 2, 1995: 39.

27. Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 18.

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SHOWING FAITH: CATHOLICISM IN AMERICAN TV SERIES

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ABSTRACT

According to Colleen McDannell, Catholicism stands above all other religions for the film and TV audience because it seems to be the most mystical and the most easily recognizable of all religious creeds; however, it is also the most criticized and suspicious denomination. Since Catholics star on the big screen, as well as on the flat screen in American homes, it is useful to have a close look at the different depictions of Catholicism and their criticism by institutions. Using examples from movies such as *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino* as well as TV series such as *Ally McBeal*, *Bones*, *The West Wing* and *The Simpsons*, this article discusses the fascination with Catholicism on the screen and argues that even depictions seen as negative by the Catholic League do not necessarily harm Catholicism.

KEYWORDS

Catholicism; American Catholicism; TV series; Anti-Catholicism; cinema; *Bones*; *Ally McBeal*; *The West Wing*; *The Simpsons*; Clint Eastwood

I. LEARNING BY WATCHING

“Every situation you will face in life has already been faced by the crew of the Starship Enterprise NCC 1701.”¹ With *All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek*, Dave Marinaccio added another volume to the immense collection of self-help books. Marinaccio’s whole enterprise is remarkable, because his wisdom is based on the 1960s television series *Star Trek*—by writing about learning from his heroes Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Doctor “Bones” McCoy he underlines the major impact watching TV has on society. Cinema and movies have influenced American society from the very beginning: conveying ideas, sparking people’s imagination, educating minds, and shaping culture. Moviegoers can escape from reality, find themselves in another world, and live, love, and suffer with their heroes and heroines on the big screen. Nevertheless, real life was reflected in the imagined adventures, and the imaginations left the cinema with the moviegoer and stepped boldly out into reality. Who would not want to be like one of these stars who are larger than life?

1. Dave Marinaccio, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek* (New York: Random House, 1994), 9.

If movies can shape America,² then the impact of a TV series like *Star Trek* is even stronger. The characters on screen reach out to the people in front of the screen and become like friends and family members. As they visit American living rooms on a weekly basis the audience takes part in their lives, sees them come into existence, grow up, and die, and keeps them company for years and even decades. The relationships may become so close that the fans do not want to let them go and try to take them into reality. In the case of *Star Trek* this worked: after receiving thousands of letters in 1976, NASA named its first experimental space shuttle *Enterprise*.

For Americans living in a society that expects its presidents “to discuss their personal faith on television,”³ religious topics also play a major role in the lives of their imaginary friends on the big or the flat screen. In *Catholics in the Movies*, Colleen McDannell, a professor of religious studies at the University of Utah, and her colleagues have been following the “common admission [that] ‘everything I know about religion I learned from the movies.’”⁴ McDannell emphasizes that religion in America is not “merely learned in synagogues, mosques and churches.”⁵ Movies depict all kinds of religious creeds and Christian denominations: there have been Jewish cantors (in *The Jazz Singer*, 1927, dir. Alan Crosland), murderous preachers (*Night of the Hunter*, 1955, dir. Charles Laughton) and followers of Mohammed (*The Message*, 1977, dir. Moustapha Akkad). In particular, there was a strong cultural Jewish influence in American literature and filmmaking; like Catholics, Jews had to face many difficulties in trying to become Americans and fit in with WASP culture, and one way to integrate was through the movies. However, as David Desser points out in his 1996 article,⁶ immigrant Jews almost immediately identified themselves with America itself, which made them less exotic than Catholics, with their links to Rome and the Pope.

Focusing mainly on primary sources, this essay takes a look at what is to be learned from religion in TV series and why Catholicism seems to be so popular with movie and TV producers—especially after the end of movie censorship in the mid-1960s.

II. RELIGION IS CATHOLIC

“In the world of movies, religion is Catholic,”⁷ claims McDannell in her introduction to *Catholics in the Movies*, and she has good reasons to do so. One

2. See, for example, Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1994); and John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

3. Colleen McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

4. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 8

5. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 8.

6. See David Desser, “‘Consumerist Realism’: American Jewish Life and the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Film History* 8 (1996): 261–80.

7. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 29.

of the latest proofs of this is Walt Kowalski, a seemingly narrow-minded Korean War hero. Played by Clint Eastwood in the recent movie *Gran Torino* (2008), the grumpy and guilty old man is regularly visited by his parish priest, Fr Janovich, played by Christopher Carley. Though mocked by Kowalski—Kowalski tells him: “I think you’re an over-educated, 27-year-old virgin who likes to hold the hands of old ladies who were superstitious and promise them eternity”⁸—the young priest never gives up and keeps reaching out to the cranky veteran, and Walt continues to rebuff spiritual guidance until cancer and certain death push him into the confessional.

Kowalski is not the first Catholic character Eastwood has portrayed throughout his career as an actor, producer, and director. In *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), for example, he played Frankie Dunn, also a Catholic struggling with his faith. However, looking through Eastwood biographies, one can only find comments on his Protestant upbringing. Clint Eastwood’s ancestors, dating back to colonial times, were almost entirely Protestants. Most of these ancestors were actively religious; many of them were church builders, pastors, or church leaders. His forefathers in America include Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a Christian Science practitioner (his great-grandmother). There is no hint of Catholicism; sometimes he is even called an agnostic, and Eastwood himself has often pointed out that he finds spiritual inspiration in nature.⁹ One is thus almost forced to raise the question: why are we fascinated by Catholicism?

There seem to be two obvious answers to this question. The first answer lies in the early history of American filmmaking. Until the 1950s the Legion of Decency¹⁰ had the depiction of Catholics under close control and, as McDannell explains, since “the Production Code, which set out moral standards for movie plots, behaviors and representations, [had been] composed by a Jesuit priest, Daniel Lord, with the support of Catholic layman Martin Quigley,”¹¹ Catholics were always depicted in a positive way. This positive depiction of Catholics during the early decades of Hollywood had a long-lasting effect on the movie industry and laid the foundations for the regular appearance of Catholic characters on screen today. The second answer is that Hollywood likes a good show and where would one find a bigger one than in the “smells and bells” of a Catholic mass? That goes along with McDannell’s observation that Catholicism stands above all other religions for

8. Clint Eastwood, dir., *Gran Torino* (2008; Warner Home Video, 2009), DVD.

9. For more details see Richard Schickel, *Clint Eastwood: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 5, 19–20, 27, 35–36; and Patrick McGilligan, *Clint: The Life and Legend* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 2–3, 11–22, 29.

10. The Legion had been established in 1933 by the American bishops of the Roman Catholic Church to identify and combat questionable content in films. Founded as the Catholic Legion of Decency (CLOD), it changed its name to the National Legion of Decency in April 1934, since it included Protestant and Jewish clerics as well.

11. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 17.

a movie audience because it seems to be the most mystical and the most easily recognizable of all religious creeds:

An intensely visual religion with a well-defined ritual and authority system, Catholicism lends itself to the drama and pageantry—the iconography—of film. Moviegoers watch as Catholic visionaries interact with the supernatural, priests counsel their flocks, reformers fight for social justice, and bishops wield authoritarian power.¹²

Catholicism provides the scenery, which can also be a social and ethnic background, as Carlo Rotella points out in his analysis of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). Here Catholicism becomes a symbol for the old world immigrants living in their own ethnic neighborhood and drawing strength from their shared tradition.¹³ The same is true for Sylvester Stallone's character Rocky Balboa, who, in the 2006 movie of the same name, the sixth in the series, also lives in an old immigrant ethnic urban village, as well as for Walt Kowalski from *Gran Torino*, who is the last remaining representative of Polish descent in his neighborhood.

This strong link between Catholicism and ethnicity can also be seen in *The Simpsons* episode "The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star" in which Homer and Bart are tempted to convert to Catholicism. Marge is afraid of losing part of her family to Catholicism and envisions the afterlife divided into a Protestant Heaven and a Catholic Heaven. She, of course, ends up in the Protestant Heaven, while Homer and Bart are in the Catholic Heaven, which seems to be a lot more fun. While Marge is stuck with some preppy WASP croquet players (with a very British accent), Catholic Heaven is populated by Mexican, Irish and Italian Catholics all sitting at their own tables, eating, drinking, singing, and obviously enjoying themselves just like in Hilaire Belloc's poem "The Catholic Sun": "Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, / There's always laughter and good red wine. / At least I've always found it so. / Benedicamus Domino!" The hardest blow for Marge is that Jesus himself prefers the Catholic Heaven.¹⁴

On the one hand, Catholicism provides a colorful ethnic background, setting the stage for Hollywood. On the other hand, one has to ask oneself whether a director like Eastwood did not have more in mind. Dealing with the artistic and practical constraints of a two-hour film, he understands that the Catholic context speaks volumes to the audience. In *Gran Torino*, the brief confessional scene clarifies more than ten minutes of dialogue or five minutes of narration could have explained, and it does so in a moving and interesting way. Kowalski's confession might be seen as superficial: he once kissed another woman at the Christmas party at his Ford plant while his wife, who

12. McDannell, "Why the Movies? Why Religion?" 14.

13. Carlo Rotella, "Praying for Stones Like This," in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

14. Matt Warburton, "The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star," *The Simpsons*, season 16, episode 21, directed by Michael Polcino, aired May 15, 2005 (Fox Broadcasting Company, 2005).

later died, was in another room; he once made \$600 on a motorboat and never paid taxes on it, which is “the same as stealing,” as he explains to the young priest.¹⁵ The viewer, who suspects throughout the film that Kowalski really is a good man despite his xenophobic attitude, gains affirmation through the brief confession scene. After that, the audience knows much more about him, and who he is about to become. For Eastwood the Catholic milieu becomes a shorthand explanation for the character’s motifs and inner struggle. It does this concisely, in a context familiar to moviegoers—Catholic or not. At first Walt’s confession seems to mock the young priest because Walt confesses only some venial sins, despite all of his other objectionable deeds. At the same time, however, it gives the audience the chance to see what makes the grumpy old man really tick. The lifelong anguish of Eastwood’s characters about his venial sins disappears with a few “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers.” In *Million Dollar Baby* even the final illegal mercy killing becomes acceptable because the hero has such deep faith. In everyday life fitting Vatican teachings into our daily decisions is not always so easy, and neither is Catholicism always depicted in such a positive—though simplified—manner as in *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino*.

III. CATHOLIC-BASHING: A NEW ANTI-CATHOLICISM?

According to the Catholic League For Religious and Civil Rights, among many other institutions defending Catholicism in the USA, anti-Catholicism has to be labeled “the last acceptable prejudice.”¹⁶ Philip Jenkins even entitled his 2003 book *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*. The question is: what is new? Anti-Catholicism in the U.S. is as old as the U.S. itself; it arrived together with the Puritans.

Despite the Ku Klux Klan and anti-Catholic violence, we have been clearly able to see a change since the 1940s and 1950s: Hollywood films started to portray Catholics and their clergy in a new and better light. This positive depiction, however, is no coincidence: movie censorship and the activities of the Legion of Decency made anti-Catholic movies impossible. Before the Supreme Court ruled in 1952 that movies must be covered under the freedom of speech clause of the Constitution, Irish American Catholics had been the “regulators of popular culture,”¹⁷ and the depiction of Catholicism was jealously guarded.

Television viewers of many faiths tuned in to watch Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen’s weekly TV show *Life is Worth Living* (1951–55) on DuMont and

15. Clint Eastwood, dir., *Gran Torino*.

16. See proceedings and discussions at the May 24, 2002 conference at Fordham University “Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice?” co-sponsored by the Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies and *Commonweal* magazine with funding by the Pew Charitable Trusts. One of the main speakers was the Catholic League’s president, William Donohue.

17. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 17.

later on ABC (1955–57). Sheen was one of the first Catholics on TV and is often seen as a pioneer of televangelism. *Life is Worth Living* won Sheen an Emmy award in 1952 and it is in honor of him that actor Martin Sheen adopted his stage name. Starting in the 1940s, the descendants of Catholic immigrants assimilated more and more into mainstream America. Perhaps most importantly, in spite of public questions about whether John Fitzgerald Kennedy could be a loyal American and a good Catholic at the same time, in 1960 he won the presidency, a task in which Catholic and Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith had failed thirty-two years earlier.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Jenkins claims that there is a new anti-Catholicism, which came to life after the 1960s. One of the latest things about the “new” anti-Catholicism, according to Jenkins, is the number of “anti-Catholic themes . . . present in popular culture and popular media.”¹⁹ Moreover, anti-Catholic rhetoric “that had largely been excluded from respectable discourse” is now accepted by “the social mainstream,” as a result of the innumerable anti-Catholic movies, shows, and books that have been produced since the 1970s. Now, Jenkins argues, it seems “natural to present any tale of religious deceit in a Catholic context.”²⁰ And he seems to be right.

Some examples of Catholic-bashing on TV should suffice to clarify the point. In David E. Kelley’s TV productions, especially, such as *Pickett Fences*, *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Boston Legal*, as well as other shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, Catholics and their religion are often targeted in a rather rude way. Whenever a Catholic priest appears on TV, he seems to be either a pedophile or a nerd. For example, there is a foot-fetishist priest in *Pickett Fences*, and the sexually active nun, Chrissa Long, in *Ally McBeal*, second season (the episode “World’s without Love”), who, when confronted with having had sex with a man, replies: “A priest has sex with a boy, he gets transferred! And me . . . At least my lover was of legal age, for God’s sake.” In the same episode, Ally remarks to John Cage: “Yes, a nun. Nuns are not supposed to have sex except, you know, with other nuns.”²¹ Another example taken from the same season of *Ally McBeal* can be found in episode three, “Fool’s Night Out,” in which Ally represents a minister who broke off a relationship with his choir director. The minister tells lawyer Richard Fish: “Obviously we weren’t married, and I’m the minister. The minister and somebody from the church, I mean, it doesn’t exactly make me an altar

18. For a detailed history of American Catholicism and the Catholic struggle to prove that it is possible to be a good Catholic, as well as a good American, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: Norton, 2003). See also Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

19. Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113.

20. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 156, 173.

21. David E. Kelley, “World’s without Love,” *Ally McBeal*, season 2, episode 6, directed by Arvin Brown, aired November 2, 1998 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

boy, does it?" And Fish answers: "If you were an altar boy, you'd be with a priest."²² In comparison, *The Simpsons* are rather harmless. In "Lisa Gets an 'A,'" Bart asks his mom: "Oh, I'm starving! Mom, can we go Catholic so we can get communion wafers and booze?" And Marge replies: "No, no one's going Catholic. Three children is enough, thank you."²³

Jenkins states that as far as movies are concerned this tendency increased throughout the 1990s and especially after the furore over the sexual abuse of children in 2002: "Large sections of the media assumed that most Catholic clergy were by definition child molesters, who should be viewed as guilty until proven innocent." Anti-Catholicism seemed to be on "a scale not witnessed since the 1920s."²⁴ As evidence, he provides scenes from *Primal Fear* (1996, dir. Gregory Hoblit), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999, dir. Sofia Coppola), and *Stigmata* (1999, dir. Rupert Wainwright).²⁵ His observation is right, no doubt, but hardly comes as a surprise; during the 1990s and especially since 2002 people throughout the U.S. have been deeply shocked by the child abuse scandals. Naturally, this is reflected in movies, as well as in TV shows such as *Ally McBeal*. Nevertheless, this so-called new anti-Catholicism is not new at all. One has to agree with McDannell when she says that starting in the 1980s, "fantasies about Catholicism returned to nineteenth-century themes of secrecy, darkness, murder, institutional corruption, and spiritual cynicism,"²⁶ but what she does not mention here is sex. Still, sex and sexual threats also played an important role throughout the history of anti-Catholicism. There are good reasons why the anti-Catholic literature of the early nineteenth century is often called "pornography for Puritans."²⁷

First of all, the whole concept of women living independently together in celibacy did not fit everyday Victorian American life, since women belonged under the care of a man. Nunneries were not "normal" and thus sparked the erotic fantasies of the Protestant middle class. *Ally McBeal's* comment about nuns having sex with each other is no more and no less scandalous than Mary Martha Butt Sherwood's anti-Catholic novel *The Nun* (1833), published in the United States one year after its British edition, in 1834, or Maria Monk's

22. David E. Kelley, "Fool's Night Out," *Ally McBeal*, season 2, episode 3, directed by Peter MacNicol, aired September 28, 1998 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

23. Ian Maxtone-Graham, "Lisa Gets an 'A,'" *The Simpsons*, season 10, episode 7, directed by Bob Anderson, aired November 22, 1998 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

24. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 2.

25. See Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 169–72.

26. McDannell, "Why the Movies? Why Religion?," 27.

27. Since historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in his much-debated 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style of American Politics" that "Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan," this definition of anti-Catholic literature has been widely used. See George McKenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 98, and Robert P. Lockwood, *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), 25–26.

Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery (1836). The publication of the latter was arranged by a group of New York reformers and abolitionists and, though completely fictitious, it became the best-selling American book of the nineteenth century before Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.²⁸

The second problem is confession, which has been as dubious as it is today for a long time; in literature it has been a screen for erotic fantasies at least since Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Mark Twain had the devil write the following to his fellow-archangels in the eleventh of his *Letters from the Earth*:

His priests got a share of the virgins, too. What use could priests make of virgins? The private history of the Roman Catholic confessional can answer that question for you. The confessional's chief amusement has been seduction—in all the ages of the Church. Père Hyacinth testifies that of a hundred priests confessed by him, ninety-nine had used the confessional effectively for the seduction of married women and young girls. One priest confessed that of nine hundred girls and women whom he had served as father and confessor in his time, none had escaped his lecherous embrace but the elderly and the homely. The official list of questions which the priest is required to ask will overmasteringly excite any woman who is not a paralytic.²⁹

Not only was the confessional seen as a place of seduction, but also as a dangerous place for a woman's purity—even if the priest did not try to seduce her, he could still ask her about intimate details about which pure women were not supposed to talk.

Monasteries, cloisters, and the confessional are still met with the same prejudices as they have been since the foundation of the United States and before. So maybe the new part in Jenkins' not-so-new anti-Catholicism is the definition of the Catholic clergy as dangerous child molesters. But even for this factor there are some old roots to be discovered: in the nineteenth century the Catholic clergy had already been depicted as a threat to American children. Although the clergy did not present a sexual threat, children were in great danger nonetheless, as Thomas Nast points out in his cartoon the "American River Ganges," published in *Harper's Weekly* on September 30, 1871. It shows Tammany politicians³⁰ dropping little children into the "American River Ganges," infested with crocodilian bishops. The American flag is flown upside down, the universal sign of distress, from the ruins of a public school. Linking Roman Catholicism to the Ganges, the sacred river of Hinduism, suggested its exotic un-Americanism and also linked it with what Americans then considered a primitive and fanatical religion. Jenkins himself mentions these continuities, quoting Mark Twain and describing

28. See Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture* 9, no. 1 (1999): 97–129; and Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 154–61.

29. Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (1962; New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

30. The New York City Democratic party was centered at Tammany Hall and had a large and influential Irish Catholic constituency.

Nast's cartoon,³¹ but fails to notice the lack of a really "new" anti-Catholicism when speaking about movies, television shows, and news stories. Only the presentation of these stereotypes in different media forms has changed; neither the plots nor the subjects of the anti-Catholic stories have. In the case of the Catholic threat to children, however, there was a change from the ideological question of the separation of church and state to the question of the sexual abuse cases and the following crisis in 2002, which was created "by bishops and priests [and] not the media," as McGreevy points out.³² Nevertheless, ever since then the media has felt free to extrapolate on the topic and reinforce anti-Catholic tropes.

Another, even more important issue that Jenkins fails to notice is that contemporary Catholics might be under attack by the media because they are the most visible group and still publicly teach Christian morality. Liberal Catholic-bashing would then become liberal Christian-/Religion-bashing. Mark Twain did not target only Catholics,³³ as the above quotation leads one to believe, but the Christian religion and beliefs as such:

Would you expect this same conscienceless God, this moral bankrupt, to become a teacher of morals; of gentleness; of meekness; of righteousness; of purity? It looks impossible, extravagant; but listen to him. These are his own words: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. *Blessed are the merciful*, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. *Blessed are the peacemakers*, for they shall be called *the children of God*. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. The mouth that uttered these immense sarcasms, these giant hypocrisies, is the very same that ordered the wholesale massacre of the Midianitish men and babies and cattle; the wholesale destruction of house and city; the wholesale banishment of the virgins into a filthy and unspeakable slavery. . . . The Beatitudes and the quoted chapters from Numbers and Deuteronomy ought always to be read from the pulpit together; then the congregation would get an all-round view of Our Father in Heaven. Yet not in a single instance have I ever known a clergyman to do this.³⁴

Maybe Catholics on both the big and the flat screen not only have to suffer from the old prejudices, but have to turn the other cheek for all Christians. As the easiest denomination to recognize, Catholics seem to be used as shorthand for Christian beliefs and morality as such.

31. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 28, 43.

32. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 290.

33. Mark Twain did distinguish between prejudices and facts and sometimes overcame his animosity towards the Catholic Church: "The pauper and the miser are as free as any in the Catholic Convents of Palestine. I have been educated to enmity toward everything that is Catholic, and sometimes, in consequence of this, I find it much easier to discover Catholic faults than Catholic merits. But there is one thing I feel no disposition to overlook, and no disposition to forget: and that is, the honest gratitude I and all pilgrims owe, to the Convent Fathers in Palestine." *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869; New York: New American Library, 1980), 448.

34. Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, 55–56.

IV. NOT AS BAD AS IT SEEMS: REINVENTING CATHOLICISM FOR TV

The widespread media coverage of child sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church in the United States from the mid- to late 1990s through 2002 might have boosted anti-Catholic depictions, but they started with the end of movie censorship in the 1960s and the consequences of the Second Vatican:

Simplifying rituals and customs so that people could focus on what was important in them may have been good for practicing Catholics, but it was not good for the movies. Many Catholics had jettisoned their Catholic “look” and were no longer interested in defending devotional traditions or theological dogmatism.³⁵

But directors and producers still needed Catholicism to be unvarying and easy to recognize. With movie censorship gone and the Catholic clergy no longer able to influence how Catholicism was depicted, they were able to do whatever they liked and started to create their own version of Catholicism—and not all of these versions are negative.

The Catholic League cries “wolf” far too often and far too easily. Yes, there is anti-Catholicism on TV, but the Catholic League also keeps criticizing TV shows that paint a rather positive picture of Catholicism. One example of this is the still-running TV series *Bones*, which deals with the cases of forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance Brennan, called Bones, and her FBI partner, Special Agent Seeley Booth. One problem the Catholic League had with *Bones* is the following scene from the episode “The He in the She”:

Booth: “She’s a pastor. Yeah. Looks like one of those grassroots community churches.”
 Bones: “Huh. She was preparing for a sermon.”
 Booth: “A pastor with augmentation and veneers.”
 Bones: “So?”
 Booth: “A spiritual leader shouldn’t be so vain.”
 Bones: “The pope sits on a throne. He wears robes worth hundreds of dollars. Isn’t that vanity?”
 Booth: “Oh, really? You’re going after the pope now?”
 Bones: “One pastor gets her teeth whitened, and the other drinks wine on Sunday mornings and tells everyone that it’s been miraculously transformed into blood. Which of those is more outlandish?”³⁶

As a response the League issued the following statement:

It does not matter that non-Catholics may not accept what happens at Mass. What matters is that they show respect. And to just throw this line in while the opening credits are running—about a minister, no less—shows how mean-spirited the writers are. If only they thought of Catholics as if they were an indigenous people, we’d be fine.³⁷

However, everybody who knows the series would agree that it shows an overall positive picture of Seeley Booth, a devout Catholic, and is therefore rather friendly towards Catholicism. It is not just Catholicism that is attacked by

35. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 26.

36. Karina Csolty, “The He in the She,” *Bones*, season 4, episode 7, directed by Craig Ross, Jr., aired October 8, 2008 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.

37. “Catholic Bashing Marks Fox’s *Bones*.” *Catholic League*, <http://www.catholicleague.org/catalyst.php?year=2008&month=November&read=2492>.

Dr. Brennan, a scientist and an atheist, but religion as such. Agent Booth's character functions as a criticism of the old upper-class attitude that there are only two religions: Catholicism, which is wrong, and all the others, which do not matter.

By focusing on the—in their perception—negative parts only, William Donohue and the Catholic League even succeeded in getting a show canceled that “depicted Catholic clergy as tough, independent fighters for justice.” The problem was that *Nothing Sacred* was far too independent for Donohue's taste. He described it as “a depressing show about a dissident priest in a dysfunctional parish.”³⁸ Others, however, perceived it differently. According to Philip Jenkins, “the clergy characters, the heroic priests and nuns, were all identified with liberal positions . . . such as the ordination of women.” Nevertheless, anti-Catholic moments in the show are difficult to find, and Jenkins sees it as “a tragically lost opportunity” because “*Nothing Sacred* offered the best pro-Catholic propaganda that had appeared in the U.S. media since the 1960s.” As a result of the League's vehement protests and their success in persuading corporate sponsors not to advertise during the show, *Nothing Sacred* was not renewed for a second year in 1998.³⁹

Also not quite to the liking of William Donohue is the way in which the Catholic Special Agent Seeley Booth is depicted in *Bones*. He shows characteristics and opinions that are not normally linked with Catholicism. For instance, he is clearly in favor of the death penalty and shows an eagerness for revenge found in the Old Testament rather than in the New Testament (episodes “A Man on Death Row” and “The Girl in the Fridge”), he is not married and has an illegitimate son, and he has an immense knowledge of the scriptures, just as is usually expected of a Protestant. Given only one keyword, he is able to quote whole passages from the Holy Bible, which he does, for example, in the episode “Judas on a Pole,” a curious trait he shares with another positive Catholic figure on TV: President Josiah Bartlet in *The West Wing*.

In this context it is important to have a closer look at the series *The West Wing*, in which Catholics play an important role: President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet is Catholic, as are his Vice President, John Hoynes, and his Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry. His presidential successor, Matt Santos, is also a Catholic. Thus Catholicism provides the ethnic background for these characters once more: Santos is Hispanic, and McGarry is described as “good old Boston Irish.” McGarry is also a recovering alcoholic and drug addict; therefore, he is a Catholic who has gone beyond a common cliché. Bartlet wanted to become a priest, but then met his wife Abby (also a Catholic), and he is a fan of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish, which often leads to friendly quarrels between him and his staff.

38. “Catholic Bashing Marks Fox's Bones.”

39. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 162–63.

One of the best examples of Bartlet's knowledge of scripture is a scene taken from the second-season episode "The Midterms" in which he confronts Dr. Jenna Jacobs, who is modeled after the conservative commentator and host of the *Dr. Laura Program*, Laura Catherine Schlessinger:

Bartlet: "I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination."

Jacobs: "I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President. The Bible does."

Bartlet: "Yes it does. Leviticus."

Jacobs: "18:22."

Bartlet: "Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I have you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff Leo McGarry insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town: touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads? Think about those questions, would you? One last thing: while you may be mistaking this for your monthly meeting of the Ignorant Tight-Ass Club, in this building, when the President stands, nobody sits."⁴⁰

Bartlet's harangue first of all links a severe Evangelical-bashing (which happens more than once in *The West Wing*) with the hint not to take the Bible literally, which fits in with the Catholic tradition, and secondly, illustrates the above-mentioned detailed knowledge of the scriptures, which is common among American TV Catholics, thus underlining the importance of the individual over the importance of the institutional church. Booth, Bartlet, and also John James McCoy in *Law and Order* do not quote the Catechism, the Pope, or even St. Thomas Aquinas—they quote from the Bible, which everybody can read and interpret for themselves. That's also one of the consequences of the Second Vatican and the change American Catholicism underwent during the 1960s: individualism started to replace the teachings of the Church and the Roman magisterium.

For President Bartlet, Catholicism provides not only the social background, but also explanations for his inner struggles, something which is dramatically shown in a scene that takes place at the end of the second season. In this scene, Bartlet has to decide whether or not to run for office a second time, has to deal with his lie to the public about suffering from multiple sclerosis, and has to deal with the fact that his secretary, Mrs. Laningham, whom he had known since his prep school days, has just been killed in an accident. Bartlet is standing alone in the National Cathedral—he had the Secret Service agents seal it—right after Mrs. Laningham's funeral service. He begins to walk slowly towards the altar and speaks to the Lord:

40. Aaron Sorkin, "The Midterms," *The West Wing*, season 2, episode 3 (25), directed by Alex Graves, aired October 18, 2000 (Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD.

You're a son of a bitch, You know that? She bought her first new car and You hit her with a drunk driver. What? Was that supposed to be funny? 'You can't conceive, nor can I, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God,' says Graham Greene. I don't know whose ass he was kissing there, 'cos I think You're just vindictive. What was Josh Lyman—a warning shot? That was my son! What did I ever do to Yours but praise His glory and praise His Name? There's a tropical storm that's gaining speed and power. They say we haven't had a storm this bad since You took out that tender ship of mine in the North Atlantic last year. Sixty-eight crew. You know what a tender ship does? Fixes the other ships! It doesn't even carry guns. It just goes around and fixes the other ships and delivers the mail. That's all it can do. *Gratias tibi ago, Domine*. Yes, I lied. It was a sin. I've committed many sins. Have I displeased You, You feckless thug? 3.8 million new jobs, that wasn't good? Bailed out Mexico. Increased foreign trade. Thirty million new acres of land for conservation. Put Mendoza on the bench. We're not fighting a war. I've raised three children. That's not enough to buy me out of the doghouse?⁴¹

After that, Bartlet lights and crushes a cigarette on the floor of the cathedral because of a discussion he had had in prep school with his now long-gone father, who was not Catholic and had problems with his son following his mother's religion. Apart from the common struggle of proving himself able to be a good Catholic as well as a good American, Bartlet also had to prove himself to be a good son as well as a good Catholic, in which he feels he failed.

It is not the only time he failed to be either a good son or a good Catholic, which explains his anger and doubt. In the first season episode "Take This Sabbath Day" he confesses on his knees in the Oval Office, after not having granted a presidential pardon to a convicted murderer who is then executed.⁴² Agent Booth in *Bones*, on the other hand, does not even show remorse when defending the death penalty. "Catholics and the death penalty" is a fairly recent topic: Catholic governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico banned the death penalty on March 18, 2009 at least partly because of pressure put on him by the clergy, although he himself supports it. He also will not pardon the two inmates currently on death row. Not only in fiction, but also in reality, there is a gap between the teachings of the Catholic Church and the opinions of its flock. As strongly as American Catholic bishops oppose the death penalty, a slight majority of white Catholics are in favor of it.

Both Bartlet and Booth prove to be good and loyal Americans, although they have to act against the teachings of their Mother Church. It seems that what Kennedy had had to prove, that he could be a loyal American and a good Catholic at the same time, still needs proof. Just as if he had never uttered the words:

because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected President, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately, in some quarters less responsible than this. So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again—not

41. Aaron Sorkin, "Two Cathedrals," *The West Wing*, season 2, episode 22 (44), directed by Thomas Schlamme, aired May 16, 2001 (Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD.

42. Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr., Paul Redford, and Aaron Sorkin, "Take This Sabbath Day," *The West Wing*, season 1, episode 14, directed by Thomas Schlamme, aired February 9, 2000 (Warner Home Video, 2002), DVD.

what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me—but what kind of America I believe in.⁴³

More than once Bartlet and Booth do not let their Catholicism get in the way as soon as they have to make decisions that would reflect badly on their being loyal Americans. Their Catholic faith is very important, for both of them, but it is an Americanized version of Catholicism, which was shaped during the 1960s. At that point it was decided that Catholicism was no longer to be influenced by Rome and the Pope, but to become the private matter of every individual. In a season 4 episode, “Process Stories,” a dialogue between Bartlet and his communications director, Toby Ziegler, underlines this idea:

Toby: “I was intimidated by your Catholicism.”

Bartlet: “Really?”

Toby: “Yeah.”

Bartlet: “It’s my Catholicism, Toby. It works for me.”⁴⁴

The same is true for Booth: he just wants Bones to believe in God, not to convert her to Catholicism.

In another episode of *The West Wing*, “In God We Trust,” the press discovers that the Republican presidential candidate Arnold “Arnie” Vinick does not go to church regularly, which becomes a problem for his campaign. When Vinick is asked by the Republican leadership to work out a deal with President Bartlet to remove the wage amendment so they can pass the debt ceiling in time, Vinick gives Bartlet more than he asked for and asks him if he can “hang around for a while as if we are really slugging it out in here.” To pass the time, the two of them go for ice cream in the kitchen, where the conversation turns to religion:

Bartlet: “I don’t know how you plan to handle this religious thing in the campaign.”

Vinick: “Yeah, well, that makes two of us.”

Bartlet: “I could find a way to let it slip that I think a candidate’s religion or how often he goes to church is not relevant to choosing a president.”

Vinick: “You going to say that on the way into church?”

Bartlet: “Are you accusing me of politicking church going?”

Vinick: “You’ve had an awful lot of photo ops on the church steps.”

Bartlet: “I went to mass every Sunday long before I went into politics.”

Vinick: “I did, too.”

Bartlet: “Why’d you stop?”

Vinick: “One Christmas my wife gave me a very old edition of the King James Bible—17th century. It was a real find for a book collector. It was a thrill just to hold it. Then I read it.”

Bartlet [chuckles]: “You can’t take it literally.”

Vinick: “Yeah, that’s what my priest friends kept telling me. But the more I read it, the less I could believe. I could not believe there was a God that said the penalty for working on the Sabbath was death. I couldn’t believe there was a God who said the penalty for adultery was death.”

43. John F. Kennedy, “Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Rice Hotel, Houston, Texas, September 12, 1960,” <http://www.jfklibrary.org>.

44. Aaron Sorkin, “Process Stories,” *The West Wing*, season 4, episode 8 (73), directed by Christopher Misiano, aired November 13, 2002 (Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.

Bartlet: "I'm more of a New Testament man, myself."

Vinick: "I couldn't believe there was a God who had no penalty for slavery. The Bible has no problem with slavery at all. Lincoln could have used a little help from the Bible."

Bartlet: "You think Lincoln was an atheist?"

Vinick: "I hope not. That would mean all his references to God were just purely political."

Bartlet: "He didn't make any until he started running for office."

Vinick: "No, and he certainly was a doubter."⁴⁵

This dialogue shows once more *The West Wing's* warning against taking the Bible literally; it also shows that Bartlet really believes in God, that he is not using Him as a campaign consultant—instead one gets the sense that this is not just stained-glass-window-dressing; and the scene furthermore emphasizes the individualism of personal prayer and shows that separating "church and politics" seems to be an unaccomplishable task in a society expecting its presidents "to discuss their personal faith on television," which is even harder for Catholics, who still have to prove that they can be good Catholics as well as good Americans.

Being a true believer in both God and the Constitution, Bartlet more than once finds himself in the hard places between personal faith and public duty. Another example can be found in *M*A*S*H*. Although it is part of his job as an army chaplain to do exactly what he says, Father Mulcahy's statement to a wounded soldier in the episode "Point of View" can be seen as a common statement for most of the "good" TV Catholics:

I see you're a Protestant. That won't be a problem. I'm familiar with the procedures of most of the major denominations—although I'm a little inhibited when it comes to the Southern Baptists, a little frenetic and forceful . . . a bit of a stretch for me, but, then again, that's my problem.⁴⁶

Just like Father Mulcahy tells the young soldier, every TV Catholic seems to tell the audience: there is no problem how ecumenical your Catholicism has become, as long as you are a loyal American.

V. SEEING AND BELIEVING?

Encountering unknown situations, people tend to describe these incidents in patterns they know and feel safe with. They might even look for guidance on TV and turn to their old friends and virtual family on the flat screen for advice—just like Dave Marinaccio turns to Kirk, Spock, and "Bones" McCoy. Today trials are countless, especially when it comes to religion: an encounter with the Bible and Christian belief can be a challenge for a modern child who believes in science and technology, as Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen pointed out in his homily in "Wasting Your Life":

45. Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr., "In God We Trust," *The West Wing*, season 6, episode 20 (130), directed by Christopher Misiano, aired March 23, 2005 (Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.

46. Ken Levine and David Isaacs, "Point of View," *M*A*S*H*, season 7, episode 10 (154), directed by Charles S. Dubin, aired November 20, 1978 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

This little boy came home from Sunday school, or catechism class, and his father said to him, "What did you learn today?" "Oh," he said, "I learned how Moses defeated the Egyptians." "How did he do it?" "Well, the Egyptians were chasing the Israelites and Moses called the airfield, and the airfield flew in some engineers and they built some pontoon-bridges over the sea, and the Jews crossed over the pontoon-bridges. Then another fleet of planes came and they bombed the pontoon-bridges as the Israelites, I mean the Egyptians were on them and they were all killed." The father said, "Is that what they told you?" "No," he said, "it isn't, but if I told you what they really said, you wouldn't believe it."⁴⁷

For the little boy, Moses calling in the Air Force seems far more logical than his dividing the Red Sea. And he presumes that the same would be true for his father. What do all the viewers in front of the flat screen get, what they expect or what they are expected to want?

The Catholics depicted on the screen are either backward, pedophiles, corrupt, or immoral—in short: a menace to American democracy—or they appear to be simplified versions of the real thing; they underwent a substantial change as a result of liberal capitalism, or they still perform the traditional rituals, but the rituals have become empty symbols of their faith. Catholicism appears just to provide a set of rules for leading a good life, and if one does follow the rules one can expect "a righteous God, a just God, a wise God" to return the favor, just as Bartlet expects of Him (in "Two Cathedrals"). If one leads a good life and shows strong faith, even the merciful killing of somebody is 'OK' for TV Catholics, just as in *Million Dollar Baby*. The true confession of Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino* does not take place in church, but in his own staircase after he has locked Thao, his Asian neighbors' kid who tried to steal Kowalski's *Gran Torino* and afterwards worked for him and became his friend, into the basement and is getting ready to leave to face the gang that has raped Thao's sister Sue; the door grating even makes the scene look as if it were taking place in a confessional. In both cases Catholicism has been transferred into something mundane. In the case of the old prejudices it is nowadays mostly "sex only," and the idea of purity does not enter the equation any longer. In the case of the "simplified Catholics," Catholicism has become shorthand for Christian morality.

Both the positive and the negative depictions of Catholics on the big and flat screen are merely symbols, molds to be filled by the spectator. Thus positive characters, especially, like Agent Booth from *Bones* and Bartlet from *The West Wing*, have the chance to shape the image of Catholicism by providing us with the opportunity to identify ourselves with them. A show like *The West Wing* has the chance to educate, as well as entertain. Institutions like the Catholic League should notice that, although Catholicism is not always realistically depicted, there is still a great curiosity about the old "smells and bells," and that not every criticism is immediately hostile. Stephen Colbert, who used to work with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, started his own satirical late-night

47. Fulton J. Sheen, "Wasting Your Life," *FultonSheen.com*, <http://www.fultonsheen.com/Fulton-Sheen-MP3s/Wasting-Your-Life.cfm?PID=148>.

television show *The Colbert Report* in October 2005 on Comedy Central. The show satirizes conservative personality-driven political pundit programs like Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*. Stephen Colbert's fictional alter ego Stephen Colbert, modeled on Bill O'Reilly, often attacks the Catholic Church and religion as such. Nevertheless, the real Stephen Colbert is Catholic and even teaches Sunday school. When asked by *Time Out* magazine how he could square his Catholicism with comedy, he answered:

I love my Church, and I'm a Catholic who was raised by intellectuals, who were very devout. I was raised to believe that you could question the Church and still be a Catholic. What is worthy of satire is the misuse of religion for destructive or political gains. That's totally different from the Word, the blood, the body and the Christ. His kingdom is not of this earth.⁴⁸

What the Catholic League does not get is the fact that even jokes or the negative depiction of Catholicism help keep the faith alive. The characters on screen are still simplified or idealized versions of reality. As mentioned before, in real life, making Vatican teachings fit into our daily decisions is not always as easy as it is for Jed Bartlet, and Catholic priests are not all prone to sexual harassment. Showing faith on TV can have astonishing effects. Stephen Colbert, who now and then even calls the Pope a Rottweiler, left his role for a few seconds when giving testimony about the situation of migrant farm workers on Capitol Hill on September 24, 2010:

I like talking about people who don't have any power, and it seems like one of the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come and do our work but don't have any rights as a result. And yet we still invite them to come here and at the same time ask them to leave. And that's an interesting contradiction to me and, um, you know, whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers. And these seem like the least of our brothers. Right now a lot of people are least brothers right now because the economy is so hard, and I don't want to take anyone's hardship away from them or diminish anything like that. But migrant workers suffer and have no rights.⁴⁹

As the *Washington Post's* E. J. Dionne puts it, nobody would have cared either about the topic, or these words, if anyone else but Colbert had said them. Catholicism on TV might not be the real thing, it might be simplistic, idealized, or even distorted, but it still shows faith in all its positive and negative ways. And so can the audience.

48. David Cote, "Joyce Words," interview with Stephen Colbert, *Time Out* (New York), June 9–15, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060820014908/http://www.timeout.com/newyork/DetailsAr.do?file=hotseat/506/506.hotseat.html>.

49. E. J. Dionne, "Colbert Turns Truthiness into Truth," *Post Partisan*, *Washington Post*, October 10, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2010/10/colbert_turns_truthiness_into.html.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Franke, Astrid. *Pursue the Illusion: Problems of Public Poetry in America. European Views of the United States 2*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2010. 281 p. ISBN 978-3-8253-5751-1.

Astrid Franke's monograph investigates a tradition of public poetry through analysis of American poets from Phillis Wheatley to Robert Hayden. Moreover, in a final chapter she discusses three post-9/11 anthologies of antiwar poetry. A winner of the 2009 EAAS Rob Kroes Publication Award, *Pursue the Illusion* contributes to the field of literary and cultural studies by foregrounding less prominent 20th-century poets like Muriel Rukeyser and Robert Hayden in the light of their public poetry. Even major figures like Henry Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and Robert Lowell are examined from a fresh perspective.

Franke bases her analysis on pragmatic theories of the public sphere that were drafted by John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) and developed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Of the two approaches, she finds more useful Dewey's vision of "the public . . . as a particular moment in the process of political action" (8). Following this argument, art "as communication contributes to a process of self-recognition, and thus helps to establish a public as a [democratic] sphere of social reflexivity" (14). In her analyses of poets and their works, Franke first uncovers "the relation between poet and public as implied and construed in the poem," and, second, attempts to "trace the tensions within the text . . . in order to relate them to unresolved problems of the public" (26). This approach proves interesting, yet in some of the poets examined in the third chapter Franke works with an insufficient body of poems, which undermines her interpretations and makes them less valid.

In the first chapter, Franke juxtaposes Phillis Wheatley and Philip Freneau, two late-18th-century American authors whose poetry had the ambition to achieve "a unity of public, poetry, and politics" (28). They both "struggled to reshape the conventions of public poetry available to them: the funeral poem, the panegyric, the ode, and the elegy" (35). In Franke's opinion, Wheatley, a black female slave who had to pass a writing trial before her poems could be published, became America's "melancholy muse," whose poetry made her a household name. Centuries before she was able to affect readers with confessional poetry about her experience of being an African American slave of special status, Wheatley "not only invokes the muse but boldly refers to herself as one" (56). Freneau, a member of the white educated elite, developed as a poet from an early reviser of Augustan pastoral poems to a poet of the Revolution, only to end as an elegist. According to Franke, Freneau's poetry is limited as it is "bound to the Deweyan idea of democracy as a cultural challenge rather than merely a system of electing the government" (78) wherein the poet must prefer reason to imagination, like the British

Lake Poets. While Freneau is best known for his poems about the American pastoral and the Revolution, Franke highlights the importance of his elegies.

The second chapter focuses on Longfellow and Whitman, 19th-century poets whose claims for public attention, according to Franke, “rested less on their comments about public issues than on their exemplary personae, created through their poems and the carefully chosen portraits that appeared in their books” (89). One might easily disagree with her and argue that both poets did embrace the role of public speakers, different from their poetic selves. Franke analyzes Longfellow’s early *Poems on Slavery* (1842) to highlight the problem of writing about a topic of public interest. In these poems on painful subjects, Longfellow, in Franke’s opinion, reaches the limits of his style, a formally accomplished genteel poetry that strives to control and balance the passions and “the violence lurking in the heart of America” (105). She can see the same problem of self-restraint even in Longfellow’s major poems such as “The Psalm of Life,” and longer narrative poems, including “The Building of the Ship” and “The Courtship of Miles Standish.” Although the ship poem drew large audiences, the poet failed to marry subject matter of national significance with a modern language and form. Trying to be a popular and democratic author, Longfellow strives to speak plainly, but, like Priscilla in “The Courtship of Miles Standish,” the poet “suppresses passions and energies that are so clearly an undercurrent of his poetry” (119). If Longfellow’s genteel sensibility precluded his poetic achievement from writing a public poetry that plucks all the strings, Walt Whitman managed to do just that. Whereas Longfellow could not escape sentimentality and self-conscious artistry, Whitman early became bold enough to “transform sentimental rhetoric” into a fully modern poetic idiom (121). Franke identifies an interesting problem of Whitman’s poetry, namely a defect of the persona in many poems, which become “strangely impersonal” and require an “imaginative leap” so that the readers, too, might celebrate themselves (124–25). One may agree that while, in “Song of Myself,” Whitman still does not quite appeal to a wider readership, in *Drum-Taps* (1865) he introduces the mature voice of a poet who integrates traumatic war experiences into peacetime life (133). Whitman’s innovative practices, however, did not fare well with his audience, as is documented by the popular success of “O Captain! My Captain!,” a sentimental rhymed lament in ballad meter that was not typical of his major work. Finally, Franke stresses the centrality of a late Whitman masterpiece, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” in which the poet “figured out how to attribute national significance to Lincoln’s death while simultaneously divorcing the president from the political endeavor for which he is known” (140).

The third chapter reviews the first decades of the 20th century, in which American poetry witnessed the rise of modernism, populism, and radicalism. Franke portrays four very different poets—Vachel Lindsay, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Muriel Rukeyser. This chapter is the most problematic of the whole book since Franke makes questionable poem choices and bases

her argument on a very limited body of poems. Lindsay is discussed as a populist writer who merged elements of popular song and entertainment to reach “a mass audience in an attempt to revive the image of the poet as bard and to convert a large and anonymous audience into a community” (150). Franke examines “The Kallyope Yell,” a poem in which Lindsay celebrates poetry as an auditory spectacle, juxtaposing “the sacred and the profane” (155) to shock readers with a Whitmanian exuberance, while still using a form that comes closer to ordinary readers and consumers of cheap public entertainment. Franke claims that at his best, Lindsay brings poetry to the masses and entertains them with a poetic burlesque. The pitfall of his public voice, however, lies in his obtrusive manipulation of his readers by using persuasive techniques pioneered in “commercial advertising, public relations, propaganda, and defamatory campaigns” (192). While the Lindsay argument seems persuasive, it is not well served by Franke analyzing a single poem.

The author proceeds to have a cursory look at T. S. Eliot, juxtaposing this most private, consciously elitist of high moderns with his more public poetic contemporaries. Again, a too-brief mention is made of “Portrait of a Lady” and “The Waste Land,” which does both poems injustice. The latter poem is hailed as having “a peculiar potential as public art” (165) by sharing with its readers the fragmented voices of cultural history and the present. The omission of Ezra Pound from Franke’s discussion of the moderns leaves one baffled, for his many poems on the art of poetry and the need to revise public taste would have made a useful comparison. The next poet featured in this chapter is William Carlos Williams, a contemporary of Eliot who cares about Deweyan notions of art as an enterprise in democratic participation. Looking at “Tract,” an early poem of considerable didacticism, Franke shows how Williams teaches his audience the reversal of the public and private spheres (170). Williams’ avoidance of symbolism and his adoption of simple language and form evoke for her an “egalitarian spirit and an awareness that permits one to examine and revise collective gestures” (172).

The last poet discussed in the third chapter is Muriel Rukeyser, a less well-known radical feminist poet. In her seminal collection *The Book of the Dead* (1938) she merges modernist experiment with social criticism. Using Eliotic fragmentation and documentary language of law to expose “the practices of big businesses” (183), Rukeyser achieves a unique effect of mourning the victims of a mining disaster without anger, seeking compassion “that drives the mind to relate the dead to the living, to bridge the gap between factual and emotional knowledge” (188). While the inclusion of Rukeyser alongside the more famous modernists is useful and the brief analysis of her work innovative, the treatment of public poems by Lindsay, Eliot, and Williams in this chapter is far from adequate, while the omission of Pound is untenable.

The fourth chapter focuses on two postwar poets who tried to revise cultural history—Robert Lowell and Robert Hayden. While the choice of Lowell is predictable, the inclusion of Hayden, an African American poet whose modernist versions of black history were outdated in the 1960s, is

surprising. Lowell, an American poetic voice from the 1940s through the 1970s, is analyzed through readings of his major poems in which the speaker is “[w]atching a public issue through a medium and then turning himself into one” (202). Franke succinctly exposes Lowell’s major weakness as a public poet, that is, his failure to merge the self and the public, for “the self threatens to drown in narcissism and the public becomes a stage for the eternal ironies of history” (215). If the choice of Robert Hayden seems odd, for there are more public and iconoclastic black poets of the 1960s to discuss, juxtaposing his public poetry with that of Lowell makes Hayden a surprisingly powerful speaker of the age. Avoiding the angry tone and militant readings of American culture which were produced by some of his African American peers (for example, Amiri Baraka), Hayden produces elegiac poetry which combines “imagery and symbolism with legal documents, prayers, and short narratives in an Eliotic assembly of voices and personae” (221). Moreover, Hayden copes with the traditional problem of a mainstream audience that is blind to ethnic America’s history of injustice and suffering. “Middle Passage,” the poem Franke chose as central for documenting the restrained poet-critic of past persecution, is a remainder “that distorted vision and the difficulty of self-knowledge are central issues in African American writing” (231). Ultimately, Hayden succeeds where Lowell fails, namely in winning a share of public attention for the poetry of private suffering.

In the final chapter Franke examines the modes of American poetry dealing with the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. She looks at three major American anthologies of recent antiwar poetry—*Poets against the War* (2003), *Cry Out: Poets Protest the War* (2003), and *enough* (2003). The dominant aspect of all three anthologies is disgust with politics and an attempt to relate public suffering to individual lyric utterance. This, however, makes the poet unable to “see oneself as an individual agent of change” (238). That is why in America, “a public poet today is likely to be a ‘poet.org’ rather than a charismatic individual” (238) with the sort of reputation enjoyed by writers in the previous centuries. This chapter betrays another deficiency of Franke’s book. Readings of several post-9/11 poems that fit the frame of Franke’s argument about public poetry are included, yet the paradigmatic short lyric poems in the post-confessional mode do not represent all recent American poetry on the subject of war. For example, nothing is mentioned of the formalist poetry of the major 1960s poets like Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan, who both wrote important public poems of artistic value and formal diversity, transcending the clichés of free verse antiwar poetry. The main omission in this chapter is, however, Galway Kinnell, the legendary author of a lot of antiwar, socially-conscious poetry. The masterpiece of anti-terrorist poetry that is ignored is Kinnell’s “When the Towers Fell,” a Whitmanesque polyphonic elegy of cosmic proportions, ambition, and appeal that evokes the metaphysical angst of the poet witnessing the 9/11 attack and its victims and aftermath. In comparison, the anti-war, anti-government poems discussed in this chapter seem like the

formulaic work of free verse poetasters who fail to relate the experience of remote war and suffering to their embarrassed sense of prosperity. Likewise ignored is the post-1980s proliferation of the American workshop poem in the confessional mode, as well as the ongoing critical debates about form and its absence in recent American poetry. While Franke briefly addresses *Poetry and the Public* (2002), a book-length study by Joseph Harrington, there is no discussion of the much-discussed and influential 1990s endeavor of New Formalist poet-critics like Dana Gioia and proponents of poetry slams who have tried, Lindsay-like, to bring poetry back to the spotlight of public attention.

Despite the omissions and several questionable choices of poets and poems, the book is a useful addition to the body of recent studies of American poetry and its public manifestations, explaining cogently why American poets since the 18th century have been trying, as Whitman put it in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “to cheer up slaves and horrify despots” with poetry that incorporates the public and private spheres in a combination of formal excellence and aesthetic value.

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Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature, edited by Šárka Bubíková. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice; Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2008. 176 p. ISBN 978-80-7395-091-0.

Literatures for children and young adults have gained prominence in literary studies in recent years, and yet there are hardly any monographs that testify to this trend in the Central European milieu. Šárka Bubíková has enlisted seven collaborators from respected research institutions to aid her in redressing this imbalance. The final product manages to imbue childhood and young adulthood in fiction with a critical framework, adequate terminology and (with two exceptions) well-chosen “case studies.” The initial section by Šárka Bubíková, the mastermind behind the project, offers a short historical introduction to childhood and the teenage years as depicted in literature, tracing the subject matter from Puritan times till the postmodern era. The book title, vague as it is, seems to suggest that its focus will be not only on books aimed at children, as well as those preferred and read by children throughout history and, especially, nowadays, but also that it will cover narratives of growing up for a general audience.

As becomes obvious, young readers may favor virtually any genre, be it children’s classics, manga, graphic novels, vampire romances, or even Christian allegories. By the same token, not every book dealing with

childhood and growing up has been primarily targeted at this age group; for example, Victorian social novels featuring children were meant first and foremost to sway the opinions of adults. Trends in literature for children and young adults have a way of passing quickly, unpredictability being the only certainty, and yet an attempt at “venturing into the unpredictable” should have been made in *Literary Childhoods*. Sadly, this did not happen.

Šárka Bubíková has not only provided a theoretical framework and terminology for *Literary Childhoods* but also contributed three more chapters, one of them in collaboration with Hana Štráchalová. This one, “Becoming Little Women,” based on the contrast between a carefree childhood and the repressive clutches of newly found adulthood in a popular American classic, Louise May Alcott’s *Little Women*, may be considered one of the highlights of the volume. It contrasts two different layers of Alcott’s book: one a moral tale Alcott was pressed to write, paying lip service to the contemporary dogmas about the provinces of young womanhood, and another one, made up of apparent “flaws” in the narrative, undermining the book’s original preoccupation with ideal womanhood that amounts to a thinly veiled, angry revolt of the author trapped in a world of her own making.

The two remaining essays by Šárka Bubíková, “Growing Up and the Quest for Identity” and “Growing Up Postmodern,” concern the process of several young people’s initiation into the world around them, a process further complicated by their multicultural, elusive backgrounds and multifaceted identities: in Gish Jen’s 1996 novel *Mona in the Promised Land*, as Bubíková writes, “the Jewish American boy Seth lives in a teepee and studies Eastern religious traditions, while the novel’s protagonist, the Chinese American Mona, converts to Judaism” (137) and “her sister’s African American roommate Naomi cooks ‘Chinese food so genuine Mona finds it an encounter,’ doing an ‘authentic tea-smoked duck’ . . . while Mona herself follows her mother’s favorite recipe . . . where ‘the whole secret is soaking the duck overnight in Pepsi-Cola’” (137).

The rest of the volume consists of individual essays on the notion of childhood in British and American literatures, reflecting the fields of interest of the individual researchers. Patricia Ráčková delves deep into Rudyard Kipling’s *Mowgli Stories*, utilizing Hannah Arendt’s concept of a dual identity of the self, based on Mowgli finding himself a double outcast between his “Man-Pack” and “Wolf-Pack.” Milada Franková gives scope to the youthful rebellion of the protagonists in three novels by the British author Jane Gardam, featuring the negotiation of spirited, freedom-loving and observant children with authority. Libora Oates-Indruchová regards all the Harry Potter books as a politically loaded brand of *Bildungsroman*. Petr Chalupský devotes his attention to sinister and less-than-innocent childhoods in major novels by Ian McEwan.

However, two essays published in the volume lack the common denominator unifying the other texts of the collective work: Zofia Kolbuszewska’s article on Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* and Ewa

Kowal's "Motifs of Childhood in the '9/11' Genre." Their claim to appearing in a volume dedicated to childhood and growing up seems to rest mostly on the timeless truth that deep down there is an inner, lost child in each of us. The efforts of the two above-mentioned scholars are also marred by their taking undue liberties with their terminology, which is both quite inconsistent with that used in other contributions and obscures the issues at hand rather than helping to clarify them. How should we decipher, for example, Kolbuszewska's discovery that "[t]he plot of *Something Happened* thus employs the metonymic process of collapsing metaphor as a transformation which leads to the transactive metaphor ending the narrative" (127)? Concerning Eva Kowal's article, it is even highly questionable whether "9/11" fiction can be treated as a separate genre.

If a book aims to cover critical assessments of literature spanning well over two centuries and two continents, a degree of eclecticism needs to be taken into account and allowances made for it. Šárka Bubíková and her team of collaborators never aimed at providing the academic community with analyses of the full spectrum of narratives of childhood and young adulthood in British and American literature, merely to "offer a comprehensive overview of the issue, showing the complexity and potential of such an enterprise to introduce this interesting topic into the Czech study of British and American cultures, to create a basis for further research and discussion" (7).

Quite certainly, the book lives up to this very modest expectation and achieves a goal greater than the one the writers settled for. *Literary Childhoods* is a pioneering work in its field and, hopefully, not the last one of its kind.

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