

ZESZYTY NAUKOWE UNIwersYTETU ZIELONOGORSKIEGO

SERIA

# SCRIPTA HUMANA

TOM 7

*American Literature  
and Intercultural Discourses*

*editors*

*Agnieszka Łobodziec, Iwona Filipczak*

Uniwersytet Zielonogórski

**American Literature  
and  
Intercultural Discourses**

#### RADA REDAKCYJNA SERII

Zbigniew Chojnowski, Alfred Gall (Niemcy), Karel Komárek (Czechy),  
Vyacheslav Nikolaevich Krylov (Rosja), Danuše Kšicová (Czechy),  
Leszek Libera, Jarosław Ławski, Piotr Michałowski, Małgorzata Mikołajczak,  
Marie Sobotková (Czechy), Alexander Wöll (Niemcy)

#### KOLEGIUM REDAKCYJNE SERII

Andrzej Ksenicz, Sławomir Kufel, Dorota Kulczycka (redaktor naczelny),  
Wolfgang Brylla (zastępca redaktora naczelnego),  
Radosław Szyber (sekretarz), Paweł Zimniak

Seria „Scripta Humana” to projekt wydawniczy będący pokłosiem cyklicznych spotkań odbywanych w ramach Zielonogórskich Seminariów Literaturoznawczych, organizowanych przez Zakład Teorii Literatury i Krytyki Literackiej Instytutu Filologii Polskiej Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego. Kolejne monograficzne tomy serii poświęcone są badaniom literaturoznawczym oraz kulturowym, ogniskują się wokół zagadnień i nurtów istotnych z punktu widzenia współczesnej humanistyki.

W serii ukazały się:

*Interpretacje i reinterpretacje*, red. D. Kulczycka, M. Mikołajczak, Zielona Góra 2013 (t. 1)

*Historia i historie*, red. D. Kulczycka, R. Szyber, Zielona Góra 2014 (t. 2)

*Eugeniusz Sue. Życie – twórczość – recepcja*, red. D. Kulczycka, A. Narolska, Zielona Góra 2014 (t. 3)

*Obcy świat w dyskursie europejskim*, red. N. Bielniak i D. Kulczycka, Zielona Góra 2015 (t. 4)

*Kryminał. Między tradycją a nowatorstwem*, red. M. Ruszczyńska, D. Kulczycka, W. Brylla, E. Gazdecka, Zielona Góra 2016, (t. 5)

*Literatura a film*, red. D. Kulczycka, M. Hernik-Młodzianowska, Zielona Góra 2016 (t. 6)

W przygotowaniu – *Kultura nie tylko literacka. W kręgu myśli Karola Wojtyły – Jana Pawła II*, red. A. Seul, E. Bednarczyk-Stefaniak (t. 8)

Staraniem i nakładem jednostek  
Wydziału Humanistycznego  
Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego  
Instytutu Filologii Germańskiej  
Instytutu Filologii Polskiej  
Instytutu Neofilologii

ZESZYTY NAUKOWE UNIwersYTETU ZIELONOGÓRSKIEGO

Seria  
Scripta Humana  
tom 7

# American Literature and Intercultural Discourses

EDITORS

**Agnieszka Łobodziec**  
**Iwona Filipczak**

ZIELONA GÓRA 2016

## THE COUNCIL OF THE PUBLISHING HOUSE

Andrzej Pieczyński (*chairman*),  
Rafał Ciesielski, Beata Gabryś, Michał Drab, Krzysztof Witkowski,  
Van Cao Long, Małgorzata Konopnicka, Marian Adamski,  
Agnieszka Zembroń-Łacny, Marian Nowak, Anna Walicka, Zdzisław Wołk, Bohdan Halczak,  
Franciszek Runiec (*secretary*)



UNIwersYTET  
ZIELONOGÓRSKI

### REVIEWER

Kurt Müller

### PROOFREADER

Richard Sharp

### LAYOUT

Arkadiusz Sroka

### COVER DESIGN

Grzegorz Kalisiak

© Copyright by Uniwersytet Zielonogórski  
Zielona Góra 2016

ISBN 978-83-7842-271-6

ISSN 2353-1681

## OFICyna WYDAWNICZA UNIwersYTETU ZIELONOGÓRSKIEGO

65-246 Zielona Góra, ul. Podgórna 50, tel./faks (68) 328 78 64  
www.ow.uz.zgora.pl, e-mail: sekretariat@ow.uz.zgora.pl

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	7
<b>Alaa Alghamdi</b> , Beyond Scheherazade: The Re-emergence of the Female Arab Literary Voice Through Multiple Forums .....	11
<b>Reygar Bernal</b> , Spanglish: Linguistic Aberration or Linguistic Hybridization? A Linguistic, Cultural, and Literary Approach .....	23
<b>Sonia Caputa</b> , Nostalgia and Mourning in Anthony Bukoski's Literary World of Polish Americans .....	39
<b>Iwona Filipczak</b> , Out of the Margins: Negotiating American Identities in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's <i>The Mistress of Spices</i> .....	53
<b>Urszula Gołębiowska</b> , Moving Beyond (Cultural) Criticism in Henry James's Late Transatlantic Encounters .....	65
<b>Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch</b> , Ana Castillo in Search of Herstory .....	79
<b>Magda Mansour Hasabelnaby</b> , Hybrid Imagination: A Study of Mohja Kahf's <i>Emails</i> <i>from Scheherazad</i> and <i>The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf</i> .....	97
<b>Agnieszka Łobodziec</b> , The Black Theological Call for an Extended Global Family in Toni Morrison's <i>Paradise</i> .....	123
<b>Akshaya K. Rath</b> , Allen Ginsberg in India: Life and Narrative. ....	137
<b>Xiaohong Zhang</b> and <b>Xiaomin Chen</b> , Speak Beyond the Edge: Chinese and American Confessional Poetry in a Cross-cultural Context .....	151
About the authors. ....	165



## INTRODUCTION

This volume presents American literature as a field inviting varied intercultural discourses. This is not unsurprising in that literature is a form of cultural expression, and the American cultural mosaic is a composite of diverse influences.

The attempts that have been made to define Americanness have disclosed the heterogeneous nature of the American nation. Michael Walzer observes that

Americans have homesteads and homefolks and hometowns, and each of these is an endlessly interesting topic of conversation. But they don't have much to say about a common or communal home. Nor is there a common *patrie*, but rather many different ones – a multitude of fatherlands (and motherlands). For the children, even the grandchildren, of the immigrant generation, one's *patrie*, the “native land of one's ancestors,” is somewhere else. The term “Native Americans” designates the very first immigrants, who got here centuries before any of the others. (334)

History demonstrates that America as a nation was repopulated by non-natives arriving in the New World voluntarily, in search of freedom, or involuntarily, in bondage. The two dynamics gave rise to socio-political hierarchal structures that were supported by the maintenance and employment of essentialist race, gender, and class conceptualizations.

Notwithstanding that disparate individual social and political status, the experiences of all newcomers in the New World have commonality in terms of mainly confrontation with differing cultures and the resultant endeavors to cultivate and maintain group cultural heritage, i.e. customs, literary traditions, oral traditions, religious beliefs, rituals, value systems, philosophies, music, paintings, and languages. Although with the passage of time white supremacist Anglo-American cultural practices were predominant, imposing English as the official American language and elevating White Anglo-Saxon

Protestantism to the ecclesiastical and political ranking, cultural pluralism within the American nation continues to advance.

Cultural pluralism in America invoked multicultural and intercultural studies. For a considerable period, the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism, employed interchangeably, and perhaps erroneously, were deemed to be synonymous. Later on, cultural theoreticians began to differentiate between the two conceptualizations (*Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* 244 and *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* 153). While multiculturalism is concerned with coexistence of cultural groups, interculturalism accentuates the reconciling, mutually interacting processes between different cultures and the resulting circumstances.

The discernment, definition, and systematization of multiple cultural phenomena are outgrowths of intercultural studies. In terms of language, several varieties of English have been identified. For instance, African-American Vernacular Speech, Chicano English or New York Latino English are established upon the basis of cultural and ethnic background, while Arabish (Arabic English), Chinglish (Chinese English), Hinglish (Hindu English), Dunglish (Dutch English), Poglish (Polish English), and Spanglish (Spanish English) are portmanteaus describing the effects of interactions between English and other languages. With regard to the religious sphere, calls for ecumenical communication and inter-faith dialogue emerged from the formation of American interdenominational churches and theologies. In addition, American literary canon has been enriched by the recognition of such particularities as African American, Arab American, Asian American, Chicano, Jewish American, and Native American literatures. Identity studies, in turn, have brought about conceptualizations that note the intercultural nature of American identities. Concepts such as W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness", Gloria Anzaldúa's "new mestiza", Homi Bhabha's "hybridity" and "the Third Space" raise awareness of the multi-faceted conception of American selves, at the same time undermining the essentialist notions of the self as unchanging and pure. Where cultures meet, be it as a result of colonialism, slavery, migration, globalization or diasporas, the mutual exchange of cultural elements leads to the formation of hybrid identities marked by ambiguity and ambivalence, and therefore not easily identifiable.

The studies undertaken and presented by the authors within this volume encompass a wide spectrum of American literary intercultural discourses. **Alaa Alghamdi** portrays the unique literary expressivity that contemporary Arab women writers, Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi, Farzaneh Milani, Simin Tehran, Hissa Hillal, and Joumana Haddad, have developed in their efforts to maintain the significance of their own oral traditions, to challenge derogatory Western stereotypes, and to demarginalize their voices within their own patriarchal cultures. **Reygar Bernal** explores the phenomenon of Spanglish,

an example of linguistic hybridity. Apart from the discussions of its linguistic, social, and cultural significance, Bernal investigates also the literary importance of Spanglish in narrative works by Puerto Rican Ana Lydia Vega and the Dominican-American Junot Díaz, literary essays by the Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa and poems by the Spanish-born Cuban-American Richard Blanco. Issues of cultural hybrid identities permeate the article of **Sonia Caputa**. She looks at the complex experience of Polish immigrants and their descendants focusing especially on expressions of nostalgia and mourning for the land of their ancestors in short stories of a contemporary Polish-American writer Anthony Bukosky, which were published between 1986 and 2008. **Iwona Filipczak** discusses problematic hybrid identities in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by the contemporary Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, arguing that even “culinary fiction” may be seriously engaged with issues of political import, such as the need of constant renegotiation of American identities. **Urszula Gołębiowska** analyzes Henry James’s travelogue *The American Scene* (1907) and tale *A Round of Visits* (1910) as portraiture of the dilemmas that American expatriates face upon returning from Europe to a land that has undergone fundamental socio-political and cultural changes. **Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch** examines the transformation of subject position from that of a radical to moderate feminist that the contemporary Chicana writer Ana Castillo exhibits through her novels *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, 1986; *Sapogonia*, 1990; *So Far from God*, 1993, and *The Guardian* (2007). Employing Homi Bhabha’s notions of “hybridity” and “the Third Space,” **Magda Hasabelnaby** elucidates the Arab American literary pursuit to reconcile two seemingly disparate culturally determined identities reconstructed in two works of the Syrian American writer Mohja Kahf – collection of poetry entitled *Emails from Scheherazad* (2001) and the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Incorporating black theological concepts of “interfaith dialogue” and “extended family,” **Agnieszka Łobodziec** ferrets out the critique of institutionalized black patriarchal religious separatism and the attention given to black theological call for spiritual interdenominational unity depicted in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997). **Akshaya K. Rath** demonstrates how India experience influenced Allen Ginsberg’s writing. Mainly in Ginsberg’s *Indian Journals* (1970) but also in his later poems Rath traces the impact of Buddhist and Hindu mythical beliefs on Ginsberg’s poetics and his rebellion against American capitalist and imperialist ideology. **Xiaohong Zhang and Xiaomin Chen** present a cross-cultural comparison of Western and Chinese modes of literary confession. Focusing on the impact of American confessional poetry upon the Chinese literary scene in the 1980s and a discourse of women’s poetry in particular, the Authors are interested in the political potential of Chinese confessional poetry.

*Agnieszka Łobodziec and Iwona Filipczak*

**Works cited**

Cashmore, Ernest et al. Eds. *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Bolaffi, Guido et. al. Eds. *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*. SAGE, 2003.

Morrison, Toni. Interview. America Festival. France. 20-23 Sept. 2012.

Walzer, Michael. "What Does It Mean to Be an 'American?'" *Social Research* 57. 3 (Fall 1990): 591-614. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Aug. 2015.

**Alaa Alghamdi**  
Taibah University

## BEYOND SCHEHERAZADE: THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE FEMALE ARAB LITERARY VOICE THROUGH MULTIPLE FORUMS

### Abstract

Arab women have had a long history of participation in literary life, particularly in the community oriented, interactive literary salons that have existed since pre-Islamic times. The inherent message of such forums has always been, and continues to be, that literature is for sharing. Today, the voice of the female Arab writer persists, multifarious and authentic – it can neither be obscured nor ‘packaged’ in a way that is readily comprehensible to a global audience. Writers included in this analysis of the Arab female literary voice include Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi, Farzaneh Milani and Simin Tehran. Each in her own way, these women express an interest in social justice and freedom that is inherently consistent with the true principles of Islam. Hissa Hillal, winner of the Millions Poet Contest, is also discussed with regard to her contribution to a very public dialogue. Joumana Haddad, a radical poet, writes of killing Scheherazade and the oppression that she embodies. Whether or not we continue to honor that legendary storyteller, it is evident that the voices of the new generation of female Arab writers take us to a place that is beyond Scheherazade and the strictly patriarchal social system she survived. These women have a literary voice in their own right, not merely in reaction to harsh circumstances.

**Keywords:** Scheherazade, Arab women, voice, female writers, social systems

### Introduction

Literature in the Middle East has a unique trajectory that in some ways parallels, but by no means follows or duplicates, that of Western literature. One might argue that literary life has a keen and up-to-the-moment relevance for those living in the Middle East, which, in western countries, has been supplanted by the juggernaut of popular culture. Of course, that may be an oversimplification - but it does seem to speak volumes that the Arab equivalent of ‘American Idol’ is a program in which contestants recite poetry and are judged on its literary merit, not on their glamour or manner of presentation.

In fact, Arab women have had a long history in literary life. The literary salon, facilitating the exchange of ideas and showcasing of creative work, is an ancient form going back many centuries. Al Khansa, in the seventh century, established a literary salon in her home, as did Sukayna Bint Al-Husayn, great-granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed, centuries later<sup>1</sup>. The tradition persisted or was periodically revived up until the twentieth and twenty-first centuries<sup>2</sup>. These relatively informal literary establishments offered an ongoing, cooperative forum in which women could hone their literary talents and exchange ideas. Perhaps this long history of literary salons is part of the reason that literature has continued to play such a central role in the Arab consciousness - literature is for sharing; it is an informal and communal activity. Whereas in the West the primacy of the shared, curated word became a casualty to technology, the oral tradition giving way to the commodity of books, subject to market fluctuations, in the East, any such breach was minimized and literary life continued to be seamlessly integrated into society. Of course, that may be an idealistic view, given that literature throughout the world has long since become a commodity, and the artists themselves, male or female, are all too often 'packaged' so as to fit the demands of the market. However, the presence of traditions and their modern translations which provide alternatives to that trend play a vital role in keeping the literary voice alive.

What, specifically, is the place of the female Arab writers within that ancient tradition and its modern permeations? The voice of the Arab woman may occasionally appear to be in dispute, but it has never been, and still is not, obscured. Rather, there is a roster of women waiting to take their places in the continuum of literary tradition, while boldly interpreting that tradition and their own identity. Whereas some women boldly speak out against repression, other women continue to weave their own perspectives into the continuation of an age-old tradition. Implicitly and by necessity, they forge their identities and promulgate their ideas in subtle or explicit opposition to that tendency to 'package' and essentialize the experience and voice of a Muslim woman. New literary voices must emerge, in part, in resistance to existing perceptions.

Yet their challenges in doing so are significant, and not least because of the perception of the stance of the Arab Muslim female writer in the West and worldwide. As Lamina Ben Zayzafoon notes, the Arab Muslim woman is "produced according to the law of supply and demand to serve various political and ideological ends"<sup>3</sup>. To determine what these ends are, one need only consider persistent American interests in Middle Eastern land and resources and the familiar, constructed figure of the 'brave'

<sup>1</sup> A. al-Uhhari, *Classical Poems by Arab Women*, London 1999, p. 58 and G. Talhami, *Historical Dictionary of Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, Plymouth 2013.

<sup>2</sup> G. Talhami, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> L. Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film*, New York 2008, p. 2.

Muslim woman battling the oppression of her society and daring to make her voice heard. Moore rightly points out that such a figure has been made into a commodity by news media and literary criticism alike. The content of the message that these writers convey, though in practice multifarious, may all too often be distilled down to a set of predictable tropes. After all, accounts of resistance and “escape from disabling circumstances”, as Moore points out, “sell”<sup>4</sup>.

Of course, that is not to suggest that accounts of resistance and escape by Muslim women are in any way inherently inauthentic; only that such accounts may be privileged above others, and that a certain, consistent interpretation of women’s authentic accounts may be chosen and assumed without much question or debate - in some cases, without even a second look.

Taking this second look is what we should all, as readers, feel a moral obligation to do. Every writer’s message is rooted in her own lived experience and community, while the reader’s perceptions are likewise rooted in his or her own. One writer discussed here, Hissa Halal, likens herself and her poetry as a message in a bottle, hoping it will reach the other shore. Like the recipient of a message in a bottle, we must be acutely aware of what it is, exactly, that we hold in our hands; the vessel, the message within it, and somewhere beyond our reach the autonomous and complete life, the courage and the intent, of the person who wrote it. When considering the current and future literary contributions of emerging female Arab writers, one must receive their message within the context of culture but also, even more importantly, separate from it, as only doing so can create an openness which allows the awareness of new permutations of identity to flow in. If we can find the space within which to listen, the emerging voices of these female writers offer the potential to transcend and forever change entrenched positions and stereotypes.

## Re-examining tradition

When examining the voice of the currently emergent female Arab writer, one must not forget that she comes from multiple strands of history, one of them being the feminism that emerged in parts of the Arab world in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1928, Syrian writer and feminist Thunaya al-Hafez (1911-2000) established the Damascene Women’s Awakening Society promoting female membership in her nation’s intelligentsia; some years later, she started a literary salon named after Sukayna Bint Al-Husayn, her predecessor in such enterprises<sup>5</sup>. May Ziyadah had established a women’s literary

<sup>4</sup> L. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> G. Talhami, *op. cit.*

salon in Egypt as early as 1912<sup>6</sup>. Though these women appeared to be pioneers, they were certainly aware that they were part of a lineage. Al Khansa (575-664) recited her poetry in a market in Mecca, critiqued the work of other poets, and was considered the finest elegiac poet of her day<sup>7</sup>. Surely the cultural memory of such distinct figures influenced later writers. Many writers of today are incontrovertibly part of the same lineage. At the same time, the women who created and participated in the twentieth-century movement continue to exercise and hone their voices today.

Assia Djebar is an Algerian writer who was educated partly in France, and writes primarily in French<sup>8</sup>. Although her publication history dates back to the 1950s with her debut novel *La Soif* (the thirst), she has garnered international attention in the past few decades, winning prestigious literary prizes such as the Neustadt Prize for Literature (1996) and a Peace Prize for the German Book Trade (2000). Whereas *La Soif* – published under an assumed name because she feared repercussions from her family – is a coming-of-age novel about a young woman's liberation and adventures, in later years Djebar tackled topics more closely connected with the tenets of her Muslim faith. In *Far from Madina* (1991) she examines the role of women in the time of Mohammed. In fact, this novel has been called a re-telling of the Qur'an from the female perspective, as the author attempts to rehabilitate the relationship between Muslim beliefs and the status of women<sup>9</sup>. As is often noted by historians and sociologists alike, the initial effects and intention of Islam was to promote equality between men and women. It was subsequent political situations and interpretations that obscured this initial purpose.

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan writer of the same generation as Assia Djebar, expresses a very similar perspective. In her work entitled *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi notes that Mohammed himself included his wives in social and religious practice<sup>10</sup>. The exclusion of women was a deviation from the principals outlined in the Qur'an, which the author delineates, although she questions hadith interpretations – those stemming from the collection of traditional sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, rather than from the holy book itself. Both of these authors express an important and empowering perspective – namely, the idea that the repression of women's rights and social participation represents a repudiation and indeed a perversion of Islamic principles. This stance is a valuable one as it allows women to strongly assert their right to social agency from within the faith that is a unifying tenet of their societies of origin. Once the proper orientation to women's rights has been found within Islam, women are supported by this

<sup>6</sup> J. Peterson and M. Lewis, *The Elgar Companion to Feminist Economics*, North Hampton 2001.

<sup>7</sup> A. al-Uhhari, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> L. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

religious and cultural identity rather than being bound by it. The shifting perspective also involves, of course, a rethinking of the stereotypical understanding of the 'plight' of the Muslim woman that has been perpetuated in the West.

## Protest and finding 'voice'

There can be no denying, however, that the voices of Arab female writers – like that of female writers worldwide, living in patriarchal societies everywhere - have been curtailed by social mores and socio-political circumstances. The wearing of the veil – which in itself takes several forms, and is sometimes voluntary and sometimes prescribed either by tradition or by law - may appear to invite a facile interpretation of the garment as oppressive, obscuring identity and preventing free participation. Whether and to what degree this is the case is, I would suggest, something that only a woman wearing the veil is qualified to determine. We must acknowledge that there are and must be strong individual variations in that judgment. At the same time, more generalized trends and counter-trends may well be noticed. In her examination of Iranian women and the literary tradition, Farzaneh Milani notes several far-reaching patterns and trends. Titling her study *Veils and Words*, Milani describes the interplay between the two and she identifies the enforcement of wearing the veil as a form of containment and absence, which women themselves, by engaging in writing and allowing their voices to flourish, refuse and reject<sup>11</sup>. Milani opines that veiling “curtails verbal self-expression as well as bodily expression”<sup>12</sup>, creating a “fetishized” and “idealized” public silence. Thus, the first movement to unveil, occurring in the mid 1800s, was also the era during which Iranian women first published literary works. However, Milani admits that Iranian women are currently subverting that earlier trend to equate the veil with silence. With veiling compulsory in the country, literature by women proliferates<sup>13</sup> (Milani 231).

Simin Tehran is cited by Milani as a poet overlooked by the establishment. Prevalent in a number of her poetic works, her literary creation of the 'Gypsy', a woman with a hybrid identity, a member of the society but not of it, is an “autonomous, unconventional female”<sup>14</sup>. In *Gypsy Poem #8*, the Gypsy is urged to scream and sing in response to the “terror of the night”, where “rapacious monsters” threaten women. In the midst of chaos, the Gypsy has a “longing for liberty” that is expressed through voiced, noisy and inquiring expressions: “stomp your feet/ to receive an answer”. The interplay between

<sup>11</sup> F. Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women*. Syracuse University Press 1992, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238.

repression and expression is present throughout the poem, so that the Gypsy is almost obliterated and yet, even in her compromised state, is the emergent heroine:

*Ages dark have crushed your body, warping it inward... rise up and sing  
O Gypsy, to stay alive you must slay silence!... you must sing*

They Gypsy is quite clearly the figure of the female poet herself, fighting repression and silencing, responding to the subtle as well as the explicit dangers that face women within that silence. Life itself is equated with the ability to express oneself. It is most interesting, however, that the subject the author uses is a Gypsy, deemed in all cultures she inhabits to be an outsider, culturally and visibly different from those she encounters, perpetually the Other. Living outside of the parameters of mainstream society, and with the cultural association of the Roma with traveling, the Gypsy embodies a freedom that other women in the society would not be able to attain. At the same time, however, she is imprisoned by her own failure to truly belong. The Gypsy is, in short, a paradoxical figure.

The Gypsy is both the woman's other self and her liberator or heroine, Tehran implies. Like the Gypsy, a woman is part of the society but never truly integrated into it, always in some way apart, because the society disenfranchises her. The Gypsy therefore speaks of alienation. At the same time, the Gypsy, while sorely compromised and crushed inward, possesses a peculiar power that allows her to remerge, to redeem and rehabilitate herself, to slay silence and begin the story anew.

Hissa Hilal is a Saudi woman who caught the attention of the world's media in 2010 when she became the first female contestant on the Millions Poet Contest, described as a Middle Eastern version of American Idol – the obvious difference being that contestants on Millions Poet Contest are not judged on the basis of their ability to perform dances and catchy show tunes while wearing eye-catching costumes; rather, they are poets, reciting or reading verse and judged based on the intrinsic literary merit of their offerings. The set of the Millions Poet Contest is opulent, befitting a show of its stature and the tradition and dignity surrounding poetry itself. Among the row of contestants, Hissa Hilal stood out starkly, but it took a second glance to establish why. All the male contestants were dressed alike, but Hilal was wearing an abaya and niqab, fully veiled but for an opening that allowed her to see out. Fully protected by her garb, she was also vulnerable; before the show was to air, reports of death threats against her resounded. Western news reported that this courageous woman was 'defying death threats' in order to compete<sup>15</sup>. The very fact that a woman was participating in this highly publicized

<sup>15</sup> M. Moezzie, *Hissa Hilal Fights Fatwas with Poetry*, "Ms. Magazine Blog", 24 March 2010, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/03/24/hissa-hilal-fights-fatwas-with-poetry/> [access 24 March 2010].

and public event was shocking to some segments of the public, and the content of her work made her performance unmistakably subversive.

In fact, the content of Hilal's poetic work was a strong statement against the sometimes repressive laws of her country and others in the Muslim world. The poem she shared was entitled "The Chaos of Fatwas", and as the title implies, the piece condemns the practice of violence on religious grounds. The strong sentiments are apparent in Hilal's own explanations of her presence as a contestant. That explanation in and of itself seems to focus on the ability of her message to transcend cultural boundaries and to reach, by implication, the other side of the world. Before the contest, Hilal recalls telling herself: "You'll be like a message in a bottle and reach the other side of the sea" ("Millions poet inspires millions"). Similarly, in an interview, Hilal emphasizes the ability of poetry to transcend national boundaries and build global solidarity. She stated in an interview: "Maybe poetry can do what other things couldn't – to make people feel all over the world that we have to share and care"<sup>16</sup>.

Hissa Hilal is remarkable for the fact that her radicalism does indeed take the form of a 'message in a bottle' – contained, closed (but with the potential for opening), and having a potency that is not immediately apparent. The image of that bottle is one that meshes quite well with the image of the woman covered head to toe in her dark niqab. The cover and the uniformity that it provides hides but in no way negates the power of what is inside. Perhaps the tacit message and utility of the veil is not necessarily effacement, as some have been tempted to speculate, but, rather, containment. Containment may appear, and may indeed be, repressive, but one should never underestimate the power of that which is thus contained, once it is released into the world.

Hilal's talent and message are also contained within traditional forms. In the past, she has edited books of Bedouin women's poetry, clearly interested in maintaining as well as adding to the artistic lineage in her country. She has written two collections of her own, *Lahjat Al Hail* and *Al Nadawi*. Lina Khati, Arab media expert at Stanford University in the USA quoted in Bland 2010 "It's a hybrid of the modern and the traditional. So it's packaged within acceptable parameters. Because it's poetry, one of the most respected forms of expression in the Arab world, you can push the boundaries..."<sup>17</sup>

In stark contrast to Hissa Hilal is the Muslim woman who finds freedom of expression seemingly completely outside of her heritage, or perhaps in reaction to it and to Western stereotyping of Arab women. Joumana Haddad is a controversial and outspoken figure. Her 2010 work *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman* has been called a "sexual polemic". It is an outspoken, semi-autobiographical,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Bland, Archie. 2010. Saudi Woman Poet Lashes Out at Clerics in 'Arabic Idol'. *The Independent*, World News: Middle East section, 24 March.

occasionally humorous work in which she blatantly attacks what she calls the hypocrisy of repressive theocratic laws and attitudes as well as the myriad stereotypes Arab women are subject to. Even the title of her work is calculated to be provocative; if there was ever a quintessentially Arab female storyteller, it is that heroine of One Thousand Nights who kept death at bay by entrancing the murderous Sultan with tale after tale. What quarrel could one have with Scheherazade? Haddad's reasoning is explained with great clarity in a prologue to her work: Scheherazade must die because it is time for women to "tell their own stories", un-coerced.

After all, there is desperation to the actions of Scheherazade. Her accomplishment is grace under pressure, at its most extreme, as not only her fate but that of myriad other maidens rests in her ability to perform, to entertain, ultimately, to please. It is a type of power that is, paradoxically, very much bound and shackled. Moreover, everything depends on the favour that Scheherazade is able to find from the powerful male gaze. The power of Haddad's work and her central concept of killing the legendary princess who has come to symbolize the grace under pressure of Arab women are explained as follows:

A historical myth had to be killed so the body, and therefore also the mind, could be liberated, and this experience had to be written so it could be better affirmed. So, before listening to noise, we must listen to silence.<sup>18</sup> (Haddad 1)

It is a simple and yet a tall order. The nature of the desired silence is something that Haddad addresses in an introductory section entitled "Dear Westerner", in which she systematically dismantles preconceptions westerners may have regarding Arab women, warning that she will not provide the "never-ending lullaby of the clash of civilizations"<sup>19</sup>. She asserts that although the misunderstanding, historically, has been mutual, it is wrong to characterize Arab women as "veiled", 'oppressed', or any of a half-dozen stereotypical concepts that are often applied. Rather, Hammad asserts the uniqueness of the individual which transcends these cultural norms. Much as her point is valid, of course, it is also tempting to view it as both simplistic and exclusive of some Arab women who do wear the veil, and who may indeed, in one way or another, feel themselves to be oppressed. However, Haddad's argument is primarily one against essentializing these – or any – qualities of the female. In the last lines of her book, an afterword addressed, this time, to both Westerners and Arabs, she makes a simple and powerful point: individual identity is changing all the time, and therefore simply cannot be pinned down or generalized. She states: "I have drastically changed *while* you were

<sup>18</sup> J. Haddad, *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*, Chicago 2010, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

reading. And so have you”<sup>20</sup>. The best defense against the tendency to essentialize is simply the knowledge that identity itself is never static.

It may be unreasonable to blame the fictional princess for the predicament in which she finds herself, or, indeed, to fail to praise her for her ingenuity in overcoming it. It is reasonable, however, to want to find one’s way beyond the Scheherazade paradigm, and finally to shed her as one would an outworn skin. As Scheherazade is at least in some way a temptress, relying on her beauty to find favor, it may even be said that the wearing of the veil aids in freeing one from the patriarchal gaze, if only by hiding one’s essence from it. The key factor is what is created and expressed behind that barrier, and how it can find its way to the outside.

### The Importance of forums

The resurgence of the literary salon offers a forum that is enmeshed in both European and Arab history and has the potential to exist outside of the literary publishing establishment. It is event-based and cooperative. It harkens back to that earliest form, the oral tradition, as practiced by Al Khansa and her contemporaries in the marketplace in Mecca in the seventh century, as well as later incarnations of the literary salon (al-Udhari). In Damascus, Syria, a weekly poetry salon is held every Monday night at *Bayt al-Quisid*, or House of Poetry. It is described variously as a ‘populist’ and a ‘free-wheeling’ space. Though not exclusive to women, the salon encourages and engenders free participation from both men and women, most of them young and unpublished. According to participants, it is a “space for freewheeling expression in a country where that space is usually in short supply”<sup>21</sup>. Women are also finding forms for expression in purely online communities, one example being “Wallada’s Salon: Poetry of the Desert Women” (2004 to present)<sup>22</sup>. The site calls for Arabian female poets writing in English. Its pages reference Scheherazade as well as various historical female figures, clearly drawing upon a sense of shared history and bringing it forward into the contemporary era.

The creation of these poetry salons is profoundly liberating to the individual voice of the emerging artist. It is paradoxical, though, likewise, totally logical that in our current digital age a tradition harkening back to the earliest forms of literature – the oral tradition – is finding a new power and relevance. Poetry salons typically grow within fairly

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> K. Fahim and N. Mahfoud, *Evening of Poetry Provides Space for New Voices*, “Damascus Journal.” “New York Times,” 19 September 2010 [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/world/middleeast/20poetry.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/world/middleeast/20poetry.html?_r=0) [access 19 September 2010]/

<sup>22</sup> “Wallada’s Salon: Poetry of the Desert Women,” <http://www.freewebs.com/reem22/>.

tight-knit communities of participants, who share their work by reading or reciting out loud for the audience. The poet receives both support and valuable feedback from the audience. The paradigm engaged therein is fundamentally different from either a typical paid performance or sharing work through traditional publication channels. In both of those scenarios, the literary work becomes a commodity, through the sale of tickets to a performance or through the sale of a literary manuscript and, later, of a published book. In a poetry or other literary salon, the tendency toward commodification is, at most, very slight – that is, if there is a fee for participation, it is nominal, and primarily existing to cover the cost of the venue. There is no industry behind literary salons, and no potential to make a significant financial profit. Likewise, the barriers to participation are low. A literary salon is the perfect venue for an emerging writer who would not be able to gain an audience through traditional, commodified publication channels. There can, of course, be a meritocracy that occurs within the salon format, as the work of some writers and performers may become more popular than others. However, there is typically no real barrier to even those less developed in their craft to participate. Moreover, the supportive and communal environment lessens the effect of any hierarchy that emerges based on merit.

The literary salon, in which individuals share their stories and poems with a small group, obviously recalls the very beginnings of literature – the oral and storytelling traditions. Largely, the salon is a reprise of these ancient traditions, interrupted by the invention of print. However, today's digital and social media provide the opportunity for an indefinite expansion of the salon community. These impromptu and naturally small communities are no longer in any real sense closed, as the sharing of the works produced can occur almost effortlessly and with little cost through venues such as Youtube. The capabilities of social media merely extend the characteristics already present in the literary salon format – namely, the presence of a community, the communal (circular) way in which work is shared, and the absence of any profound barriers to communication. Moreover, the dispersal of individuals' work through digital media also facilitates eventual access to traditional publication in some cases.

Literary salons, in one form or another, are gaining momentum in many parts of the world. In some countries, the sharing of poetry takes the form of a contest, almost like a sporting event. These 'poetry slams' allow emerging writers to move through the ranks, some winning titles which launch them on performance tours. Even when they achieve relative fame, however, the tendency to commodify art within this particular forum is low. The poets are participants in a system of interaction rather than product or feature that one pays to access, such as through traditional publishing or performance. For Arab women, participation in a literary salon is, as has been mentioned, part of an ancient tradition which has been revived in the modern era.

## Conclusion

This paper is obviously not exhaustive, nor is it meant to be. Rather, the intention is to gauge the current status and influences upon emergent literary work by Arab Muslim women, while being mindful of the various influences that affect the propagation and perception of this work. It is also worthwhile to recognize that we cannot truly accomplish even this goal except as a description or impression of a moment in time. As Haddad implies in the conclusion of her controversial work, we “drastically change” even in the time it takes to read a book, let alone write one<sup>23</sup>. Even though history, once enshrined in published volumes, may appear to remain static, our orientation to it changes constantly. In this sense, the biggest disservice we can do to emerging writers of any persuasion is to strictly contextualize them within a time and place and make conclusion based on our impression of what those circumstances entail. And yet, as readers and consumers of literature we are constantly driven to try and delve deeper, to understand and interpret the message behind the message, hopeful that the writer’s background might give us some clues as to its nature.

The human tendency toward classification is inherent, and possibly insurmountable. This is precisely why the manner in which we view literature and the means of its propagation are such important factors. If literature is viewed primarily as a commodity and its propagation occurs through promotion and subsequent commercial success, the temptation to ‘package’ it in specific ways, to ensure that commercial success, quickly overwhelms any complexity or fluidity in its interpretation. The networks that are currently arising to foster and facilitate the sharing of ideas and of literary work are a cause for optimism. Of course, these are not perfect systems. Access to a literary salon depends hugely on one’s geographic position, and participation may be limited by informal rules consisting of community and social norms and preferences. Online forums offer greater accessibility, but the ease of their proliferation means that any success they have in showcasing literary voices may be scattered and temporary. Some such forums rise and fall with the fashion, and are not able to provide an organized and stable basis from which emerging writers can work. Nevertheless, despite their flaws, these community-based forums – whether virtual or embodied – can be a source of exposure, dialogue and improvement for emerging writers. They have the potential to circumvent commoditization and provide more direct access and contact between readers and writers. Perhaps these forms are successful because they harken back to a community-based oral tradition that flourished, in various parts of the world, for many centuries.

---

<sup>23</sup> J. Haddad, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

This is not to suggest that any other mode can or will replace traditional publishing; but access to multiple channels and numerous voices can only be a positive thing, for female Muslim Arab writers as well as for writers and readers in general. For Arab women, conscious of a long history of women's writing, the empowerment that comes with access to multiple channels of expression is profound. Women continue, rehabilitate or reject the stories that have formed the conceptual frameworks of their lives. Whether the result is a re-orientation of the tenets of faith or a movement away from them, a desire to 'kill' Scheherazade or to honor her, the space opens in which they can tell their own stories and debate these issues openly. Nothing more than that is needed to foster a robust body of work from female Arab writers, as the interest and talent clearly exist.

**Reygar Bernal**

Universidad Central de Venezuela

## SPANGLISH: LINGUISTIC ABERRATION OR LINGUISTIC HYBRIDIZATION? A LINGUISTIC, CULTURAL, AND LITERARY APPROACH

### Abstract

This paper is a review of the linguistic, social, cultural and literary phenomenon known as Spanglish, starting from the different hybrid dialects spoken by the Latino diaspora in the United States and following their evolution towards becoming a language. We do not pretend to offer a definitive answer to the rhetorical question in the title of the essay, but to participate in the debate from a cultural and literary perspective. We start by searching for the basic meaning of the term in both physical and digital sources. In this section we tackle concepts like code-switching, pidgin, creole, dialect and languages. Then we present different academic connotations of the term by authors like Stavans (2003) and Nginios (2011). These concepts allow us to highlight a series of linguistic and cultural elements which are relevant for the debate between those who reject Spanglish as a linguistic aberration and those who think its consolidation as a language is imminent. To support the latter, we present a general literary review of narrative works by Ana Lydia Vega and Junot Díaz, Gloria Anzaldúa's literary essays and Richard Blanco's poetry. At the end we speculate about the future of Spanglish in the short, medium and long term.

**Keywords:** Spanglish, languages, Latino/a, identity, culture, literature

Si tú quieres to earte un buen bisté  
habla inglés, habla inglés  
Listen to me que yo hablo inglés  
habla inglés, habla inglés  
¿Cómo compruebo'so si yo no sé?  
habla inglés, habla inglés<sup>1</sup>  
*Pasó en Tampa* (2001) Bang Matu

---

<sup>1</sup> "If you want to eat a good steak / Speak English, speak English / Listen to me, I speak English / Speak English, speak English / How do I make sure if I don't know? / Speak English, speak English". *It Happened in Tampa* (2001), a song by Bang Matu. All the translations are the author's, unless indicated otherwise.

To speak about Spanglish at an ELT Conference nowadays is dangerous. This peculiar way of speaking Spanish and/or English (or both combined!) has produced the most heated debates among scholars in both languages, but mostly among those who study the former. In the best of cases, they see it as a dialect spoken by Latinos and Latinas in the United States; in the worst of cases, however, they judge it as badly-spoken Spanish, a linguistic aberration, a *chupacabras* miscarried by Cervantes' language that must be sacrificed in order to preserve his legacy.

On the other hand, there are scholars who believe Spanglish is an irrefutable demonstration of the dynamic nature of languages, and they even dare to predict that, far from the purist sacrificial invocation of their colleagues, Spanglish is a hybrid cultural, social and linguistic phenomenon that will eventually become a formal language in a not too distant future. Nevertheless, beyond the academic debate, to think that this discussion only pertains to linguists and that the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language has nothing to worry about remains short from seeing the wider picture of the discussion. Leaving the linguistic approach aside, Spanglish has social, cultural and literary implications that further complicate the issue. In this regard, the present paper is a review of Spanglish from a cultural studies approach, starting from its linguistic and social characteristics and then moving on to observe the rich cultural and literary elements that complement its use as a means of communication and identity feature in the United States. Rather than offering a final answer to the rhetorical question in the title of this study, I will participate in the debate from a cultural and a literary perspective.

## Spanglish denotations

It is necessary to start by searching for the basic meaning of the term in both physical and digital sources. I propose readers do the following exercise: look up the word *Spanglish* in a dictionary, any dictionary you have at home. If we take for granted that the most obvious evidence is true, that is, Spanglish is a combination of two languages, Spanish and English, it would be logical for the term to appear in dictionaries of both languages, especially if we consider that, according to Manfredi<sup>2</sup>, the first modern registered evidence of Spanglish dates back to 1948: a newspaper column called *Teoría del Espanglish* (Spanglish Theory), published in the *Diario de Puerto Rico* by humorist Salvador Tió. However, for Ilan Stavans, Spanglish history spans back a century and a half only in the United States:

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Manfredi, *Creole Spanglish: ¿Dialectos o Lenguas del Caribe?* *Eventos*, VI, Caracas 2010, p. 168.

El primer momento importante es el Tratado de Guadalupe-Hidalgo, en 1848, cuando Estados Unidos compra territorios que hasta entonces habían sido mexicanos y hay 200.000 personas que hablan español y que se convierten en estadounidenses. En seguida hubo textos que mezclaban inglés y español en los periódicos de la región. El segundo momento es la Guerra del 98, cuando España se va de Puerto Rico y entra Estados Unidos. Ahí tenemos los dos territorios desde los que irrumpe el nuevo idioma<sup>3</sup>.

In spite of this, my experience with dictionaries is very disappointing. The word *Spanglish* does not appear in the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995). This may be due to the fact that it is a British publishing company, and therefore it does not take into account a phenomenon that does not affect European English. However, I had the same bad luck with the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (2003)<sup>4</sup> and *The Oxford New Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus of American English* (2009)<sup>5</sup>.

I did a bit better with the search in Spanish. The *VISOR Encyclopedia* (1999)<sup>6</sup> does not include the word, but the *Illustrated Pequeño Larousse* does include a brief definition: "s.m. (voz inglesa). Variedad lingüística formada a partir de elementos del español y del inglés, que hablan algunos sectores de la población hispana norteamericana"<sup>7</sup>.

When it comes to on-line dictionaries, the definitions are also brief. For instance, *Merriam Webster* defines Spanglish as "Spanish that includes the use of English words" and "Spanish marked by numerous borrowings from English; broadly, any of various combinations of Spanish and English"; *Oxford* on-line, on the other hand, defines it as: "a hybrid language combining words and idioms from both Spanish and English, especially Spanish speech that uses many English words and expressions"<sup>8</sup>. This is an interesting definition because it sees Spanglish as a *hybrid language* and the example it uses to illustrate it ("Martínez switched back and forth from English to Spanish to Spanglish") introduces a common practice among people who speak two languages: *code switching*.

<sup>3</sup> "The first important moment is the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, when the United States buys some territory that had belonged to Mexico till then, and therefore 200,000 Spanish-speaking people become US Americans. It did not take long for texts mixing English and Spanish to appear in the newspapers of the region. The second moment is the War of 98, when Spain leaves Puerto Rico and the United States takes over. There we have the two territories where the new language will rise". S. González, *Ilan Stavans: "El 'Spanglish' Es como el Jazz"*, March 31 2015, <http://www.elmundo.es/cultura/2015/03/31/55195e0022601dc1168b4571.html> [access April 5, 2015].

<sup>4</sup> M. Agnes, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., New York 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford New Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., New York 2009.

<sup>6</sup> *Enciclopedia VISOR*, Buenos Aires 1999.

<sup>7</sup> "N.m. (English word). Linguistic variation formed from Spanish and English elements that is spoken by some members of the Hispanic population in the United States". T. García, ed., *El Pequeño Larousse Ilustrado*, 18<sup>th</sup> ed., Mexico 2012, p. 943.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries* (n-d), "Spanglish", [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/es/definicion/ingles\\_americano/Spanglish](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/es/definicion/ingles_americano/Spanglish) [access January 28, 2015].

Of course, the digital source that offers more information about Spanglish is Wikipedia. The most famous encyclopedic source in the world today defines it as follows:

Spanglish is formed by the interaction between Spanish, a Romance language, and English, a Germanic language, in the speeches of people who speak both languages or parts of both languages. Spanglish is genetically unrelated to any other language because it is not a language itself, but rather an overlapping and mixing of Spanish and English lexical items and grammar. Spanglish is not a pidgin, because unlike pidgin languages, Spanglish has a linguistic history that is traceable. Spanglish can be a variety of Spanish with heavy usage of English or a variety of English with heavy usage of Spanish. It can either be more related to Spanish or English depending on the circumstances of the individual or people<sup>9</sup>.

Out of these four definitions taken from lexicographic sources we understand then that Spanglish is a sort of Spanish dialect with linguistic and lexical borrowings from English (or is it the other way around?), a hybrid or creolized language that often uses linguistic code switching and can be confused with a pidgin. This raises a new question: are all of these terms synonyms?

In order to answer this question and better circumscribe a definition of Spanglish it is necessary to further define some key terms mentioned above. They are *code-switching*, *pidgin*, creolized language, dialect and official language. To start with, *code-switching* is used to describe a practice by speakers of a language or dialect that involves linguistic borrowings from other languages or dialects. In the specific case of Spanglish, code switching means “moving from one language to another in the same phrase or sentence: ‘Welcome to my casa’”<sup>10</sup>. There is no doubt code switching is an important characteristic for Spanglish, but sticking to it alone would mean remaining on the surface of this linguistic, social, cultural and literary phenomenon. Let us now approach other concepts used to define variations of languages or dialects: *pidgin* and *creole*.

Authors like McCrum et al. (1987), Stavans (2003) and Mugglestone (2006) agree when defining *pidgin* as a simplified combination of grammar and vocabulary from two established languages used for communication purposes by speakers of two mutually unintelligible languages. It is believed that the word derives from a mistake made by the Chinese when trying to pronounce the English word *business* and that it dates back to 1793, the time when a British delegation arrived in China and the first com-

---

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia.org (n-d). “Spanglish”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanglish> [access January 22, 2015].

<sup>10</sup> English: “Welcome to my house”. M. Arado, *Spanglish in the Suburbs: People Are Split on a Trendy, Slangy Blend of Spanish and English*, “Daily Herald” October 17, 2004, <https://www.questia.com/article/1G1-124099482/spanglish-in-the-suburbs-people-are-split-on-a-trendy> [access January 28, 2015].

mercial and linguistic exchanges between English and Chinese people began<sup>11</sup>. John Thieme offers more details about it in his work *Post-colonial Studies* (2003). In his opinion, in the time of the slave trade and the colonies the world registered the rise of many pidgin dialects in English, French and Portuguese. Although he does not make any reference to Spanish, he does talk about variations of pidgin all over the coastal regions of the Atlantic Ocean, specifically in the African and Caribbean regions that had been colonized.

It is not easy to establish a difference between *pidgin* and *creole* or *creolized language*. Stavans says that creole “boasts a more fully developed syntax and vocabulary than a pidgin because it has become a community’s native tongue”<sup>12</sup>. Thieme, on the other hand, approaches the concept from a post-colonial perspective when he says that creolized languages are:

the mother tongues of speakers and lexically more complicated and capable of expressing *all* the linguistic needs of a speech community. The distinction is, however, less clear-cut than this suggests, since pidgins and Creoles characteristically operate on a “post-Creole continuum”, which itself may be seen as a linguistic expression of the flux of hybrid contacts<sup>13</sup>.

To the concepts of *pidgin* and *creole* we must add *dialect* in order to better mark out a definition of Spanglish. According to Thieme, a dialect is a variation or sub-division of an official language, generally used by a group of speakers in a specific region: “unlike creoles and pidgins, dialects are not languages in their own right, though the borderline can be porous [...] and popular usage does not always recognize this distinction”<sup>14</sup>. The author adds that dialects have been used in literature to give a comic or satirical effect to a work, as in the case of stereotypical representations of black people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American narrative, or in the context of Caribbean plantations, in which, according to Edward Kamau Brathwaite, it denotes linguistic and cultural inferiority<sup>15</sup>. Of course, these are definitions from a post-colonial studies perspective, but in general terms a dialect always refers to a variation of a language with which some specific regional communities communicate in many parts of the world. This assumption allows us to highlight the importance of dialect variations in a language, since it is thanks to them that many modern languages that we know today were created with the passing of time; at least that is the case of the romance languages, which include Spanish.

<sup>11</sup> L. Mugglestone, ed., *The Oxford History of English*, Oxford 2006, p. 421.

<sup>12</sup> I. Stavans, *Latin Lingo*, 2003, <http://webhost.bridgew.edu/lasociedadlatina/Articles/Latin%20lingo.pdf> [access October 13, 2007].

<sup>13</sup> J. Thieme, *Post-colonial Studies*, London 2003, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> E. K. Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, Port of Spain, Trinidad 1984.

Finally, since the concept of *language* is not going to be debated in this research, we can define it using lexicographic sources as “un sistema de signos lingüísticos que usa una comunidad de hablantes para comunicarse”<sup>16</sup>. Such an encoded system of signs “está sometido a un proceso de evolución y sujeto a ciertas normas dictadas siempre por las élites sociales y culturales”<sup>17</sup>. It is also associated with the “lengua de una nación”<sup>18</sup> and described as the “modo particular de hablar de un grupo o de unas situaciones determinadas”<sup>19</sup>. Having defined the key concepts, next we will try to circumscribe the term Spanglish to one of them.

## Spanglish connotations

Many scholars have approached Spanglish with definitions that reveal social and cultural characteristics that turn it into an identity trace closely linked to the different Latino communities which live in the United States. Ilan Stavans, for instance, defines it as “a jazzy hybrid language, part English and part Spanish, that is audible almost everywhere in the United States today”<sup>20</sup>. In a recent interview in Spanish the author develops this music analogy further:

el ‘spanglish’ es como el jazz, que también es aleatorio y arbitrario si quieren. Se improvisa, no se escribe y es inestable, pero esa también es su belleza. [...] El jazz tampoco tiene normas ni partitura, se toca y se graba. Y el ‘spanglish’, igual que hizo el jazz, está haciendo el viaje desde la periferia hasta el centro de la cultura<sup>21</sup>.

According to Stavans, at the beginning Spanglish was a pidgin, but nowadays its production involves not only inserting phonemes and morphemes, but identities as well. It also shows interesting signs of a development regarding more formal rules thanks to its use as a language that is spoken all along the United States, and the fact that every time more people write texts in Spanglish, enough reasons for it not to be seen as a cultural element that is exclusive of the Latin-American community, “a hot Latino

<sup>16</sup> “A system of linguistic signs used by a speech community to communicate”. T. Garcia, *op. cit.*, p. 544.

<sup>17</sup> “Is submitted to an evolution process and subject to certain rules that are always dictated by the social and cultural elites”. *Enciclopedia VISOR, op. cit.*, vol. 15, *lengua*.

<sup>18</sup> “A nation’s tongue”.

<sup>19</sup> “Particular speech of a group of people or determined situations”. *Enciclopedia VISOR, op. cit.*, vol. 13, *idioma*.

<sup>20</sup> I. Stavans, *op. cit.* par.1.

<sup>21</sup> “‘Spanglish’ is like jazz, which is also random and arbitrary, if you like. It is improvised, it isn’t written and it’s unstable, but that is also its beauty. [...] Jazz doesn’t have rules or scores, either; it’s played and recorded. And ‘Spanglish’, like jazz, is making its journey from the periphery to the center of culture”. S. Gonzalez, *op. cit.*, par. 5.

property”<sup>22</sup>, but as “the poetry of the people”<sup>23</sup>. In his opinion, the rise of Spanglish is an extraordinary opportunity to understand how languages are generally formed: its causes and its possible development.

On the other hand, Rosa-Triantafilian Nginios defines Spanglish as a language which is changing constantly thanks to the ways speakers use it. The author takes a social and cultural standpoint when she says that “el spanglish nace cuando un grupo de hablantes se ‘resiste’ de alguna manera a la asimilación completa; sin olvidar que no es una ‘etnia’ monolítica, sino que presenta diferentes porcentajes por países”<sup>24</sup>.

In Nginios’ opinion, Spanglish is a dynamic linguistic phenomenon that involves all the levels of the system: phonetics, morpho-syntax, semantics and vocabulary. Regarding its characteristics, she adds that Spanglish feeds from English borrowings that can be classified following the kind of adaptation made: there can be a phonological adaptation of an English word that is hard to pronounce, like *yarda* (yard) or *güisqui* (whiskey); there can be a morphological adaptation, like in *troquero* (camionero, truck driver) or *guáchate* (ten cuidado, watch out); there can be a semantic amplification when a new meaning is given to a word that already exists in Spanish, like saying *aplicación* (application) for *solicitud*, *atender* (to attend) for *asistir*, or *soportar* (to support) for *apoyar*. Sometimes new words are created to differentiate ambiguous concepts, like using *troca* (truck) instead of *camión* in México, where it has another meaning (buses used for public transportation)<sup>25</sup>. Syntactic transfer of English idioms and expressions into Spanish are also registered, like the already famous *¡llámame patrás!* (call me back!) or *pagar patrás* (saldar una deuda, pay back). Another characteristic described by the author is code switching (defined above), which can be applied to nouns, noun phrases, verbal phrases, subordinate or coordinate clauses, or idioms. We must always take into account that word transfer from one language into another is not arbitrary, and that the reference language is always the one where the verb is conjugated<sup>26</sup>.

These are just a few examples of how Spanglish involves different strategies that are common in the dynamic use and effective evolution of a language. However, many scholars are against using and studying Spanglish for different reasons. Ilan Stavans (2003) says that some language experts consider a real language should be capable of

<sup>22</sup> I. Stavans, *op. cit.*, par. 7.

<sup>23</sup> J. Everett, *Spanglish: A Review*, 2004, <http://www.geocities.com/tonguetiedzine/articles/2janfebmar04.html> [access October 15, 2007], par. 2.

<sup>24</sup> “Spanglish comes to life when a group of speakers somehow ‘resists’ total assimilation; we must not forget that this is not a monolithic ‘ethnic’ group, but that it includes different countries”. R. Nginios, *Sobre el Spanglish en los Estados Unidos* 2011, <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/3415421.pdf> [accessed June 7, 2015], p. 121.

<sup>25</sup> J. Lipski, *La lengua española en los Estados Unidos: avanza a la vez que retrocede*, “Revista Española de Lingüística” 2003, no 33, pp. 231-260 qtd. in Nginios, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> R. Nginios, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

expressing complex emotions and be understood by a large number of speakers. In the specific case of Spanglish, its use is limited almost exclusively to the main urban areas in the United States, it is oral and emotional, and restricted to an intimate and informal context, like the house, the church or the neighborhood. For higher-register communication, both oral and written, and official, educational, health and institutional needs, English and, to a lesser extent, Spanish are mostly used.

Stavans adds that other scholars criticize the fact that no academy supports Spanglish, and its lack of reference and agreement tools. English and Spanish, instead, boast great support from the academy; the latter even has a Royal Spanish Language Academy which studies, rules and endorses the proper use of the language regarding its linguistic aspects. This leads to another weakness of Spanglish: a lack of standardization. Indeed, there is not just one Spanglish but many, which represents a great obstacle for its study. It is not the same to approach the Spanglish spoken in a city like New York, or the ones used in states like California, Texas or Florida, or even the one spoken in the “Free Associated State” of Puerto Rico.

Then there is the so-called *Junk Spanish*, a kind of Spanglish used by English-speaking Americans who do not speak Spanish well and, therefore, create funny words or expressions with a Spanish-looking morphology, but they do not correspond to any structure in the Spanish language, for example, expressions like *no problemo*, meaning “don’t worry, no problem”, or *hasta la vista, baby* (so long baby) included in the film *Terminator 2* (1991) and still very popular among young people in the United States and the world. It also involves the stereotypical association of Spanish with words like *nada*, *adiós*, *macho* and *cucaracha*<sup>27</sup>. According to Nginios, “este *Junk Spanish* refuerza la visión peyorativa que se tiene del *spanglish*”<sup>28</sup>.

Other authors’ arguments are less academic and more loaded with value judgment against Spanglish. Nginios points out that for purists “es sinónimo de pérdida de la lengua española y de la cultura hispánica”<sup>29</sup>, and that it even represents a serious threat to the progress of Latino communities in the United States. Stavans speaks of critics who relate the existence of Spanglish with the *pereza* (laziness) of its users, or suggest that the English linguistic limitations registered by many Latinos is a consequence of the bilingual education policy implemented by the State. To such arguments Nieto responds the following:

---

<sup>27</sup> “Nothing, goodbye, male, cockroach”.

<sup>28</sup> “Junk Spanish reinforces the negative vision people have of Spanglish”. R. Nginios, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> “It is synonymous with a loss of the Spanish language and Hispanic culture”. R. Nginios, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

Often, bilingual education has been blamed for the lack of academic skills and educational opportunities of minority language students. However, those shortfalls are mainly a result of socio-economic structures of schools and in our society. Exploring the existing research literature makes it clear that the current negative vision of bilingual education is a response more to highly politicized questions about preserving the American ethnic identity and the whitewashing cultural melting pot than to empirical facts<sup>30</sup>.

Perissinotto also reacts in front of such criticism against Spanglish when he says that the use of this colloquial language is not due to *pereza*, or a lack of loyalty towards the country where they live, but to the fact that “millones de hispanohablantes no se han dado cuenta todavía de su poder político y cultural”<sup>31</sup>. However, the increasing use of Spanglish in mass media like the radio, television, printed press and, especially, the internet is setting the stage for its standardization.

Other scholars who defend the study of Spanglish say its establishment as a language is imminent, and that there are obvious signs that formal rules are in progress to provide it with coherence and more uniformity. Some even consider it an advantage to speak Spanglish. Stavans, for instance, speaks of the Latino population that lives in the United States as a trilingual community: “they speak Spanish and English – and they also speak Spanglish. This is especially so for members of the younger urban generation”<sup>32</sup>. It is also worth noticing that Spanglish is not displaced as Latinos improve their English skills, therefore there must be other reasons for it to continue on the rise. For many Latinos who live in the United States “Spanglish is more than a tongue and a marketing tool – it’s a political stand and an ID card”<sup>33</sup>. To this Stavans adds, “hoy tenemos novelas, mucha poesía, series de televisión, empezamos a tener atención académica e intelectual. Y, sobre todo, tenemos la música, que es el gran vehículo evangélico del ‘spanglish’”<sup>34</sup>.

Indisputable proof that Spanglish is steadily headed towards becoming a language – besides the number of speakers, its presence in mass media, and a possible standardi-

---

<sup>30</sup> D. Nieto, *A Brief History of Bilingual Education in the United States*, 2009, [http://www.urbanedjournal.org/sites/urbanedjournal.org/files/pdf\\_archive/61-72--Nieto.pdf](http://www.urbanedjournal.org/sites/urbanedjournal.org/files/pdf_archive/61-72--Nieto.pdf) [access June 7, 2015], p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> “Millions of Spanish-speaking people have not yet realized their political and cultural power”. G. Perissinotto, *Hacia una norma colectiva para el español de los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica*, [in:] *El español en América: aspectos teóricos, particularidades, contactos*, V. Noll, K. Zimmermann and I. Neumann-Holzschuh, eds., Madrid/Frankfurt 2005, pp. 113-131, qtd. in Nginios, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>32</sup> I. Stavans, *op. cit.*, par. 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, par. 13.

<sup>34</sup> “Today we have narrative, a lot of poetry, TV shows, we start to get academic and intellectual attention, and, above all, we have music, which is Spanglish greatest dissemination tool”. S. Gonzalez, *op. cit.*, par. 4.

zation – is precisely its growing use in different literary genres thanks to the works of young Latino writers, poets and musicians.

## Spanglish literature

The use of Spanish and English code-switching is not new in English literature. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century William Shakespeare himself made Hamlet, one of his most famous and up-to-date tragic characters, pronounce the following phrase “miching *malicho*; it means mischief” (II, ii, 129), which means nothing but *muy malhecho* in Spanish. It is then explained in English for those who may not have understood (Would it be a precedent for *junk Spanish*?). Then there is the more systematic use of Spanish words and phrases done by Ernest Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), a novel about the Spanish Civil War. Just like these writers resorted to Spanish to add exoticism or verisimilitude to their works, Ilan Stavans did an interesting exercise: translating into Spanglish the first chapter of *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605), the canonic Spanish novel written by Miguel de Cervantes. Here is an extract taken from the beginning:

In un placete de La Mancha of which nombre no quiero remembrearme, vivía, not so long ago, uno de esos gentlemen who always tienen una lanza in the rack, una buckler antigua, a skinny caballo y un grayhound para el chase. A cazuela with más beef than mutón, carne choppeada para la dinner, un omelet pa’los Sábados, lenteil pa’los Viernes, y algún pigeon como delicacy especial pa’los Domingos, consumían tres cuarers de su income<sup>35</sup>.

Of course, besides being an amusing translation challenge from Spanish into Spanglish, the fragment does not correspond with any of the different actual varieties of Spanglish spoken spontaneously by Latinos in the United States; some scholars even consider Stavans’s version only reinforces negative stereotypes about the hybrid language. We think, however, that the text contributes to the documentation and standardization that Spanglish has been experiencing lately thanks to irreverent writers who, from a literary perspective, have appropriated code-switching in order to construct their identity through their creative writings. Next, I briefly analyse some works that include Spanglish as part of their narrative and poetic structure in genres like the short story, the novel and poetry.

---

<sup>35</sup> “Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing. An occasional stew, beef more often than lamb, hash most nights, eggs and abstinence on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, sometimes squab as a treat on Sundays – these consumed three-fourths of his income”. M. de Cervantes, *Don Quixote: A New Translation*, trans. E. Grossman, New York 2005, p. 36 qtd. in Nginios, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

First, we have the short story *Pollito chicken* (1981) by Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega. It is a precedent for Stavans's translation of *Don Quixote* because it is written systematically and completely in Spanglish, but with very few equivalences in the actual use of the hybrid language in the United States or Puerto Rico. It presents the story of Suzie Bermiúdez, a female character who belongs to the so-called *Nuyorrican* community, that is, Puerto Rican people who make a living in New York City. Suzie has an identity crisis that is unveiled as the story develops. At the beginning the character confesses she “prefería mil veces perder un fabuloso job antes que poner Puerto Rican en las aplicaciones de trabajo y morir de hambre por no coger el Welfare o los food stamps como todos esos lazy, dirty, no-good bums que eran sus compatriotas”<sup>36</sup>. However, although she rejects negative and stereotypical features associated with her homeland, she goes to San Juan for a vacation. Once there, instead of meeting a “straight All-American, Republican, church going” man with a “rosto pecoso”<sup>37</sup> and “rubicundo crew-cut”<sup>38</sup>, she ends up having an affair with a “native specimen” with a “tarzánico pecho”<sup>39</sup> and a “virile baritone voz”<sup>40</sup>. The bartender from the Hotel Conquistador where she stayed helped her discover, in her intimacy, some features of Puerto Rican identity she had bottled up for a long time. Here is the end of the story:

Esa misma noche, el bartender confesó a sus buddies hangueadores de lobby que:

– La tipa del 306 no se sabe si es gringa o pueltorra, bródel. Pide room service en inglés legal pero, cuando la pongo a gozal, abre la boca a grial en boricua.

– Y ¿qué dice?

Entonces el admirado mamitólogo narró cómo, en el preciso instante en que las platinum-frosted fingernails se incrustaban passionately en su afro, desde los skyscrapers inalcanzables de un intra-uterine orgasm, los half-opened lips de Suzie Bermiúdez producían el sonoro mugido ancestral de:

–¡VIVA PUELTO RICO LIBREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> “Would prefer a thousand times to lose a fabulous job before writing Puerto Rican in the job applications, and to starve to death before choosing Welfare or food stamps like all those lazy, dirty, no-good bums who also came from her homeland”. A. L. Vega, *Pollito Chicken*, [in:] *eadem*, *Virgenes y Mártires*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico 1981, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> “Freckled face”.

<sup>38</sup> “Reddish crew-cut”. A. L. Vega, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>39</sup> “Tarzan-like chest”.

<sup>40</sup> “Virile baritone voice”.

<sup>41</sup> “That night the bartender confessed to his buddies who hang out around the lobby that ‘The chick in Room 306, I don’t know whether she’s American or Puerto Rican, brother. She asks for room service in English, but when I give her pleasure, she opens her mouth and screams in Puerto Rican Spanish.’

‘And what does she say?’

Then the admired womanizer narrated how, right when the platinum-frosted fingernails were passionately introduced in his afro, from the unreachable skyscrapers of an intra-uterine orgasm, Suzie Bermiúdez’ half-opened lips produced this roaring ancestral sound:

‘ALL HAIL PUERTO RICO FREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!’”. A. L. Vega, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

Another significant code-switching practice is the one applied by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlines/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Throughout her work, the lesbian, feminist Chicana presents the border as an extended metaphor, while using the term *betweenness* to explain how the life of Latinos and Latinas in the United States always takes place in between two or more countries, cultures and languages; this does not mean, however, that they feel comfortable with such an experience. In itself, the work is an example of hybridity, since it combines genres like narrative, poetry, literary and linguistic essay while alternating languages like Spanish, English, Spanglish and Mexican Indian dialects with an approach that is mainly biographical, ethnic, cultural, revisionist and archetypal. In general terms, Anzaldúa tells stories from her childhood and about the culture of her people by combining real facts and elements of fiction. In *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* she writes about an argument she had with her mother regarding the way she spoke English: “I want you to speak English. *Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent’*,” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican<sup>42</sup>. As you can read in this extract, while her mother sees a marked Latino accent as a problem and, therefore, something you must get rid of, Anzaldúa considers the accent as a key identity feature when defining her specificity as a hybrid Chicana. In front of the dominating American culture, the writer also uses code-switching to make a political and apocalyptic statement:

We know what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant *norteamericano* culture. But more than we count the blows, we count the days the weeks the years the centuries the aeons until the white laws and commerce and customs will rot in the deserts they’ve created, lie bleached. *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos* will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. [...] We, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain<sup>43</sup>.

A third narrative example is the kind of Spanglish used in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), written by Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz. It received the Best Fiction Work Pulitzer Prize in 2008, among other literary awards. It tells the story of Oscar Wao, a young, black, nerdy and virgin Dominican man who has to go through a series of misadventures in order to reach his most important goals before he dies: to find the love of his life and to lose his virginity. Even the name of the character

---

<sup>42</sup> “I want you to speak English. *To find a good job, you must speak English well. What good is there in all your education if you still speak English with an ‘accent’*,” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican.” G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco 1987, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> “Humble yet proud, quiet yet wild, we the Mexican-Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. [...] We, the hybrid women and men, will remain.” G. Anzaldúa, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

is a distortion of the name *Oscar Wilde* that other young men use to mock him because he likes to write. Technically, the novel is written in English. However, from a structural point of view, something that calls the English reader's attention is the amount of Spanish words that appear along the text without a corresponding footnote translation, or without quotation marks or italics, which is a regular editorial practice when including foreign words within a text in the native language, in this case, in English. Such a bold, formal decision in the use of linguistic code-switching makes the reading more difficult for those who do not speak Spanish, but it definitely *naturalizes* the text by inserting it in a more effective way in the context that produced it in the first place: the hybrid society of the Dominican diaspora and, to a greater extent, of all Latinos in the United States. I include below some examples of the powerful bilingual images achieved by Díaz using code-switching to write in Spanglish along the novel:

“Hijo, you're the most buenmozo man I know!”<sup>44</sup>

“You think you're someone but you ain't nada” (60).

“Yes, you can pick me up at the park at tal-and-tal time” (93).

“Hey, Dionisio, isn't that the girl que te dio una pela last week?” (118).

The regime would have been the world's first culocracy (217).

“Your own fucking neighbours could acabar con you” (226).

A final example of the use of Spanglish in literature comes from two poems by Richard Blanco, a Cuban-American poet born in Spain. He was the first immigrant, Latino and openly homosexual poet to write and read the inaugural poem for an American president, specifically for President Barak Obama's second period in 2013. In his poetry Blanco explores his cultural identity through his Cuban inheritance, his family's exile, his memories and his experience as a homosexual who makes part of the Cuban-American culture. The following fragments from two poems included in *Looking for the Gulf Motel* (2012) show how the poet uses code-switching:

Papá refused to bet on any of the Misses  
because Americanas all have skinny butts,  
he complained. There's nothing like a big  
culo cubano. Everyone agreed—es verdad—  
except for me and my little cousin Julito<sup>45</sup>

I don't ask how she survived her exilio:  
Ten years without her mother, twenty  
As a widow. Did she grow to love snow  
Those years in New York before Miami

<sup>44</sup> J. Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York 2007, p. 24. The following quotations are from the same edition, the page number is given.

<sup>45</sup> R. Blanco, *Betting on America*, [in:] *idem*, *Looking for the Gulf Motel*, Pittsburgh 2012, p. 10.

And how will I survive winters here with  
out her cooking? Will I ever learn?

But she answers every question when  
she raises the spoon to my mouth saying,  
*Taste it mi'jo, there's no recipe, just taste.*<sup>46</sup>

## The future of Spanglish

After our linguistic, social, cultural and literary review of Spanglish and its use, a question remains unanswered: What is Spanglish, after all? Scholars still do not agree about it, but if we want to project into the future and speculate about the stage it is at, first it is worth taking a look at the past to review the evolution of Latin into the Romance languages we know today. In 476 AD, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the language spoken by the conquered European peoples divided into two main branches: on the one hand, *Classical Latin*, spoken by some noble men and church members, senators, philosophers, theologians, speakers and writers. On the other hand, *Vulgar Latin*, spoken by soldiers, farmers, the merchant class, secular scholars and most of the people from the conquered lands. After the fall of the empire, Classical Latin became the official language of the Catholic Church and academic fields like law, philosophy and medicine, while Vulgar Latin divided and evolved into several Romance languages: Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Rumanian.

In this sense, many things run parallel with the evolution of Romance languages, the road Spanish has covered so far, and a cooking recipe. Indeed, we could explain the evolution of Spanglish with the metaphor of a cooking recipe that includes several ingredients and steps we must follow in order to “cook” a sophisticated national dish. Let us see how it works: for Spanglish to become a language, it first needs a speaking community which communicates with it, at least orally. This already exists. Then there must be new generations of speakers who see Spanglish as an integral part of their culture and the context in which they function, and not as a badly-spoken language. This is also a fact. After that, transmission and dissemination must go from orality to paper through the production and reproduction of written texts that, at the same time, will promote reading and writing in Spanglish, not only among the members of the same Latino community in the United States, but also among the groups with whom they share common spaces like work, school, the marketplace and other public spaces. This is already documented history. At this level, Spanglish must also call the attention of formal academic institutions, which will make room for it in their Language Departments, or Cultural Studies, ethnic and linguistic lines of research which will

---

<sup>46</sup> R. Blanco, *Cooking with Mamá in Maine*, [in:] *idem*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

develop approaches and empirical research about the hybrid language. This is also happening already. It may seem shallow, but it is also important for Spanglish to include some representative, public figures from key areas of pop culture, like sports, music, the cinema industry, etc., among its users, because that way they will become conscious or unconscious references of Spanglish and will use the mass media to exert some influence on those who do not speak it, whether they are Latinos or not. Needless to say, this is also a reality nowadays. But Spanglish not only has to exert its influence on pop culture's mass media, but also on the established, intellectual and cultural circles, for which there is already literature, music and cinema, as well as translations, awards and even the creation of a Spanglish canon that includes the most representative authors and works in the hybrid language. In this regard, we have included in this paper some literary examples.

Then, what else does it take for Spanglish to finally become a main dish in the modern languages menu? First of all, it needs the rigor and formality of the linguistic sign. For the standardization of Spanglish to take place, first there must be pragmatic studies that will evolve into the development of morphological, syntactic and lexicographic rules. The result of this will eventually be a standard descriptive and/or normative Spanglish grammar to guide the way people speak this hybrid language in the main urban areas of the United States. This is one of the steps that is still at its very initial stage, therefore it is very difficult to agree on the different criteria to be taken into account when it comes to conducting research on the Spanglish spoken in California, Florida, New York, Puerto Rico or Texas; or on the Chicano culture and literature that exists at the Mexican border; or on the influence of American English in the use of code-switching in Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico, the Dominican Republic, or even Venezuela. Another important ingredient for Spanglish to become a formal language would be the existence of a nation that takes it up as its official language. Right now, besides a limited number of urban areas in the United States with a significant Latino population<sup>47</sup>, there is no "nation"<sup>48</sup> to claim Spanglish as its official language, as it was the case with the mix of French and African dialects that became the Haitian creole that is now an official language, or the case of Papiamentu, the official language in Aruba and Curacao, which is also the product of a language mix that includes Spanish, English, Portuguese and Dutch.

---

<sup>47</sup> For more statistic details on the Latino population regarding states, percentages, etc. see R. Nginios, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>48</sup> Globalization, mass migration and the new diasporas have brought into question the concept of nation nowadays. However, our study focuses on the linguistic, social, cultural and literary phenomenon of Spanglish, which occupies a very important space in the multicultural US context, but is never mentioned officially in any geographic context defined as *nation*. That is why we do not discuss the concept extensively here.

## Conclusions

Before we conclude this study, it is important to offer some final thoughts. First of all, in front of the growing use of Spanglish in the United States and its dissemination around the world through American cultural industries, those of us who study languages should not imitate the reaction of Europe's Middle-Age elite or high culture regarding the rise of different Vulgar Latin dialects, since they eventually became the official languages of several nations that would be powerful cultural, political and religious centers in the modern world, like Spain, France and Portugal, not to mention the case of modern English, which is the evolution of a mix of Germanic and Scandinavian languages with the Roman Latin, the Norman French and the Florentine Italian; it eventually crystallized in English Renaissance literature thanks to playwrights like William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and all the drama and poetry written during the Tudor dynasty, especially during the Elizabethan Period. Therefore, the dynamic process Spanish and English are going through for Spanglish to become a reality, including linguistic borrowings, syntactic transfers and code-switching, do not represent a real threat for these languages, but a middle point for the bilingualism or trilingualism Ilan Stavans talks about.

Furthermore, instead of complaining about what Spanglish is doing to two "adult" languages like Spanish and English, scholars should be celebrating the obvious fact that we are in front of an "adolescent" language which is growing to become an adult language as well. After all, how often do we have the chance to study a language in the making from direct sources and users?

Finally, to the question on which would be the ideal nation for Spanglish to establish as an official language, I would have answered Puerto Rico, but its social and cultural reality, as well as the results of the most recent referendum about its political status in 2012, in which most of the participants voted in favor of turning the Caribbean island into an official American state, suggest we must forget about this possibility. In any case, probably the question is irrelevant when the global village of the 90s has turned into a virtual metropolis inhabited by migrant citizens who are constantly moving, and the concept of diaspora questions the traditional concept of the nation-state. In this context, probably Spanglish is just one of the many new languages spoken without restrictions in the new virtual metropolis.

**Sonia Caputa**  
University of Silesia

## NOSTALGIA AND MOURNING IN ANTHONY BUKOSKI'S LITERARY WORLD OF POLISH AMERICANS

### Abstract

Contemporary America has discovered high, cultural, therapeutic, as well as commercial values in the notions of history, memory and nostalgia. Renewed interest in languages of ethnics, their literature and Old World customs constitutes evidence of a surge in ethnic identity. The American nostalgic ethnic revivalism also affected Polish American studies and Polish American literature, even though the latter is probably still establishing its place in the canon of American literature, and has undergone a long struggle to be considered an object worthy of scholarly research. Anthony Bukoski is a contemporary Polish American writer whose creative work explores the complex experiences of Polish immigrants and their descendants caught between the ethnic and the dominant host cultures. The aim of the present article is to shed some light upon ethnic expression in Bukoski's short stories especially grounded in ubiquitous nostalgia for the past, the controlling forces of folk religiosity, the network of family relationships, the attachment to the land, and polka music, which permeates community life within the ethnic reality.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, Polish Americans, Anthony Bukoski, folk religiosity

Contemporary America has discovered, in the opinion of some experts, high, cultural, therapeutic, as well as commercial values in the notions of history, memory and nostalgia<sup>1</sup>. Renewed interest in languages of ethnics, their literature and Old World customs has been observed in the USA especially since the 1960s, and constitutes, according to some sociologists, evidence of a surge in ethnic identity<sup>2</sup>. At the same time the awakening of a collective memory of various ethnic groups, reconstructions of a lost ethnic identity, opening of immigrant museums and the establishment of new university departments with scholars whose areas of interest include history, memory

---

<sup>1</sup> See D. Ugresic, *Konfiskata pamięci*, [in:] *Nostalgia. Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, eds. F. Modrzejewski, M. Sznajderman, trans. S. Caputa, Wołowiec 2002, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> See R. D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, New Haven and London 1990, p. 29.

and the study of sometimes neglected or forgotten cultural identities, are also the results of the nostalgic fascination<sup>3</sup>. Whether there is something more here than the nostalgic fascination is still an open question. This renewed interest might probably be explained by the fact that nowadays there exists some sort of an “epidemic of nostalgia”<sup>4</sup>, using Svetlana Boym’s terminology, and in her opinion it is a craving for a reconstruction of the community tied by the specific, common, collective memory, the desire for a continuity in the fragmented world.

The American nostalgic ethnic revivalism also affected Polish American studies and Polish American literature, even though the latter is probably still establishing its place in the canon of American literature, and has undergone a long struggle to be considered an object worthy of scholarly research.

Anthony Bukoski<sup>5</sup> is a contemporary Polish American writer whose creative work explores the complex experiences of Polish immigrants and their descendants caught between the ethnic and the dominant host cultures. Bukoski is a considerably new, important voice of the American authors of Polish descent in the United States. The author created the literary town Superior, modelled on the real Polish neighbourhood in Superior city, in the state of Wisconsin (which is the place of his birth), and has succeeded in making the Polish culture of Superior a microcosm of the world. Bukoski published his first collection of short stories *Twelve Below Zero* in 1986, and even though only one short story from this collection portrayed Polish Americans, his subsequent publications, such as *The Children of Strangers* (published in 1993), *Polonaise* (published in 1999), *Time Between Trains* (issued in 2003), and the latest book *North of the Port* (printed in 2008), are peopled with Polish American cultural exiles, who “assess and reassess, discover and confront [their] loyalties, the ethnic self, the buried past”<sup>6</sup>. The stories cover the last 50 years of the twentieth century and are

<sup>3</sup> See D. Ugresic, op.cit., p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> S. Boym, *Nostalgia i postkomunistyczna pamięć*, [in:] *Nostalgia. Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, eds. F. Modrzejewski, M. Sznajderman, trans. S. Caputa, Wołowiec 2002, p. 274.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Bukoski was born in 1945, in East End, the Polish neighbourhood of Superior, Wisconsin. His parents came to the United States from the suburbs of Warsaw, and were peasants. In one interview (J. Merchant, M. Urbanowski, *Pisząc spłacam dług Bogu... – rozmowa z Anthony Bukoskim*. “Arcana” 1999, vol. 29, no. 5, pp. 87-91) the author mentions his grandparents, who also immigrated to America. Taking into consideration the generational location, some scholars tend to perceive Bukoski as a second generation writer (M. Longrie, *Replaying the Past: An Interview with Anthony Bukoski*. “Wisconsin Academy Review” vol. 42, issue 1, 1995-1996, p. 29), nevertheless, since both the grandparents and the parents immigrated to the United States and Bukoski was raised in the two generational Polish American home, he equally may be perceived as a representative of the third generation of Polish Americans. In 1984 Bukoski obtained his Ph. D. degree and started teaching at the Northwestern State University in Louisiana, but then moved to Wisconsin State University where he teaches American literature until today. (T. Napierkowski, *Polscy sąsiedzi. Proza Anthony’ego Bukoskiego*, “Akcent” 1990, vol. 1-2, no. 39-40, p. 246).

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Gladsky, *Princes, Peasants and Other Polish Selves*, Amherst 1992, p. 264.

loosely connected by characters who appear in different tales. Unlike the fiction of Nelson Algren, often criticized by Polish organizations, Anthony Bukoski's prose has been valued and appreciated by both Polish and American literary critics. His collections of short stories attracted widespread recognition and gathered a number of awards; for instance, the author was awarded the Sarmatian Review Literary Prize in 2002 for the "superb ability to transform the often mundane and inarticulate lives of ordinary Polish Americans into art of the highest quality"<sup>7</sup>. He was also a winner of the Oskar Halecki Literary Award, and the Ann Powers Book-length Award granted to the best authors from Wisconsin.

Ethnic expression in Bukoski's short stories is especially grounded in ubiquitous nostalgia for the past, the controlling forces of folk religiosity, the network of family relationships, the attachment to the land, and polka music, which permeates community life within the ethnic reality, "mythologizes the land of the ancestors [and] provides focal points for family life"<sup>8</sup>. As Thomas Gladsky observes:

Bukoski despairs for the past, [...] for old values and old ways [but, while mourning, he simultaneously] points toward a redefined sense of ethnicity, an awareness by the young that something out there must be preserved; toward a new dialogue, a new expression of ethnicity<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the fact that Bukoski, according to David Ruenzel, is "too good a writer to engage in nostalgia"<sup>10</sup>, his short stories lament the loss of the past, and his protagonists yearn for the sense of rootedness, security and belonging, which can only be provided by the rusting away Polish American neighbourhood. Gladsky asserts that "Bukoski juxtaposes the end of ethnicity through the death of the immigrant generation with the ethnic awakening of the younger generation"<sup>11</sup>, but it may not escape one's attention that the voices that tell his stories are mostly sorrowful, regretful, and at times, carry too heavy Polish cultural baggage on their shoulders. It may probably result from the fact that the Polishness in Bukoski's short stories, apart from the web of family relationships, abiding Catholic faith and polka music, evokes "foods, a sprinkling of myths, proverbs, [...] Polish language phrases, and occasional references to history and geography"<sup>12</sup>. His characters can hardly conceive of happiness in America without their ethnicity grounded in humility, endurance and loyalty to family and nation.

<sup>7</sup> A letter from Ewa M. Thompson, the editor of "The Sarmatian Review" September, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> G. J. Kozaczka, *The Invention of Ethnicity and Gender in Suzanne Strempek Shea's Fiction*, "The Polish Review" 2003, vol. 48, no. 3, p. 334.

<sup>9</sup> T. Gladsky, *op.cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>10</sup> D. Ruenzel, *A Way of Life Rusts Away in the North*, "The Milwaukee Journal" 1994, no. 2, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> T. Gladsky, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Bukoski's protagonists, however, are far from being sanctified by the author. Literary Polish Americans are not elevated to such a point that they are without any fault. On the contrary, Bukoski draws his readers' attention to the fact that his characters are far from being models of virtue.

Nostalgia does not only imply mourning over displacement and irreversibility of time but it also denotes a craving for a place or home which does not exist anymore, or has never existed. Nostalgia, in Svetlana Boym's view, may be compared to a romance with one's own imagination, a blend of two perspectives: the reality and sheer fantasy, the past and the present. It would probably be hard to unequivocally define what people long for because the alluring target is perpetually ungraspable. Nonetheless, it has been assumed that nostalgia denotes homesickness and the desire for a different dimension of time, especially the time of one's own childhood, or youth<sup>13</sup>. Anthony Bukoski openly states that "writing his simultaneously imaginative and real stories brings [him] consolation [...]. I can return to the past time and become younger"<sup>14</sup>, he adds.

Nostalgia might be also catalyzed by the displacement from a cultural community. Roberta Rubenstein defines this kind of feeling as the "cultural mourning" which, in her view, signifies "an individual's response to the loss of something with collective or communal associations: a way of life, a cultural homeland, [...] or the related history of an entire ethnic or cultural group from which [one] feels severed"<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, Rubenstein asserts that "culturally displaced or exiled people may mourn their separation from homeland, community, language, and cultural practices that contribute to identity"<sup>16</sup>.

As for Bukoski's short stories, it seems that his Polish American literary characters are tormented by nostalgia for Polishness, for cultural distinctiveness and the vanishing Polish American community of Superior, for whom the Catholic religion and family values are of the highest importance. Although Bukoski has never visited the homeland of his grandparents, his prose has been characterised as the living memory of the American Polonia. Yet, the author confessed in one of the interviews that "the vital Polish and Polish-American culture and heritage in the stories exists more in [his] mind than in reality, and [...] probably the one remaining vestige, or at least most visible vestige, of this heritage is [their] Polish Club, [...] the Thaddeus Kosciuszko Fraternal Aid Society [...]"<sup>17</sup>, which he often refers to in his prose.

---

<sup>13</sup> See S. Boym, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

<sup>14</sup> J. Merchant, M. Urbanowski, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> R. Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, New York 2001, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> D. Bowen, *The Land of Graves and Crosses. An Interview with Anthony Bukoski*, "Main Street Rag" 2003, vol. 7, no. 3, p. 15.

The protagonists of Bukoski's short stories possess a great sentiment for the Polish-immersed, dilapidating neighbourhood of Superior, which does not simply constitute a place of their dwelling, but becomes their landscape of Polish American memory, an emotional space. Some of his characters are even preoccupied with remembering the geography of the place. For example Thaddeus, one of the characters of the story *A Geography of Snow*, returns to Superior for a short period of time during the interval in his military service in Vietnam, he drunkenly kisses and vacantly stares at a map of the Polish neighbourhood because "the map's contours [are] the contours of his life", and "when he gets killed, it'll be close by so a medic can get it for [him] while [he's] dying"<sup>18</sup>. Bukoski, using the map as the trigger, endows his character with better knowledge of himself and, consequently, the map becomes a tangible marker which has a special emotional appeal for him, because it joins the protagonist with his ancestors who used to live in Wisconsin and earlier also in Poland.

The Polish part of the literary Superior is inhabited by the characters for whom the Polish American neighbourhood transforms into a cultural repository and becomes a Polish American identity marker. It carries its own emotional history and supports the ethnic identity of its dwellers. The narrator of *The Wood of Such Trees* says:

[...] If someday I got lost, I would have the map of this Polish neighborhood to direct me back. I'd have rosaries, scapulars, and a prayer book with a Table of Movable Feasts I could pray from no matter where I was. I am saying the litany, "Lord Have Mercy on Us... Christ Have Mercy On Us"<sup>19</sup>.

As Bukoski's literary characters mourn over the transformation of the town and the deaths of the representatives of the older Polish American generation, it may seem that in fact they grieve for Polishness, the cultural heritage threatened to be – as if – forgotten, lost or wiped out by the children of strangers, the Americans who "have taken only a minute to learn about centuries of struggle and grow bored"<sup>20</sup>. That is the reason why his protagonists cling so tightly to the last remnants of the Polish culture in literary Superior. For instance, in a short story *President of the Past* the narrator, Rick Mrozek, returns home to become president of the local Polish Club and realizes that the club building is going to be taken over by some other businessmen, and eventually closed. The narrator of the story is not able to accept the fact that another Polish American organization will sink into oblivion, and that he would be deprived of the place where he could find solace and cherish his heritage. The protagonist confesses:

<sup>18</sup> A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between Trains*, Dallas 2003, pp. 11, 13.

<sup>19</sup> A. Bukoski, *The Wood of Such Trees*, [in:] *idem*, *Polonaise*, Dallas 1999, p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of Strangers*, Dallas 1993, p. 89.

with our past stored away, the club could disappear like Superior's Polish and Slovak churches. Churches gone, lodge membership dwindling, old people gone. If it keeps up, we'll have no memories. They'll all be in storage. [...] How can we let this go? How can I myself let the club go? [...] I, Rick Mrozek, am the president of the past<sup>21</sup>.

Polish buildings, backyards which once belonged to Rick Mrozek's ancestors, the picture of Black Madonna, or the old photograph depicting the Polish American society named after Tadeusz Kościuszko together evoke sacred and poignant memories, which possess the power to bring the apparitions from the past back to life.

There is an enduring spirit of Poland in short stories written by Bukoski, and most of his protagonists are desperate lovers of the past. According to Thomas Gladsky, ethnicity reconstituted and rekindled in Bukoski's stories is not only limited to symbolic gestures connected with the past because the majority of his youthful protagonists sense their connection with the past and witness the immigrant dilemma. Some of the characters happen to fantasize about Poland, or they brim with nostalgia for Polish national heroes, striving to become paragons of virtue themselves. Tad, a young soldier from the short story *A Geography of Snow*, and a namesake of Tadeusz Kościuszko, endeavours to "do something brave, [...] to be remembered as the East End man who wore a Purple Heart on his chest. [...] I want to be [Kosciuszko], I want to win the war. I want to be a hero"<sup>22</sup>. Thus, Tad reasserts his ethnicity by expressing his wish to become the Polish hero.

As it has already been observed, ethnic expression in Bukoski's fiction is deeply rooted in simple, folk, highly emotional religiosity. According to Deborah Anders Silverman, "although a Polish-American's relationship with God is intense, it is also complex and mediated by priests, the Virgin Mary, and a host of saints who act as intercessors for the faithful"<sup>23</sup>. Such an interdependence between the pious, the saints, priests and the Virgin Mary which, in result, provides the Polish American protagonists with some access to God, is perfectly depicted in Bukoski's fiction. His short stories are characterized by God's constant presence in the daily lives of St. Adalbert's parishioners, who pray to their patron saints, to Virgin Mary, in front of the pictures of Black Madonna "with wounds that have saved the Polish nation over and over"<sup>24</sup>, and, in return, God responds with physical signs to the pleas of the people.

Lesczyk [sic!] Iwanowski, the narrator of *A Guide to American Trees*, openly admits that "Jesus' mysteries appear in East End, [Superior]"; in *The Wand of Youth* Tadek prays for a blithe life of his mother, a new wreath for the Polish Club and health for his sister

<sup>21</sup> A. Bukoski, *President of the Past*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, pp. 183, 186.

<sup>22</sup> A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, pp. 14, 17.

<sup>23</sup> D. A. Silverman, *Polish-American Folklore*, Urbana and Chicago 2000, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> A. Bukoski, *The Shadow Players*, [in:] *idem*, *North of the Port*, Dallas 2008, p. 49.

Janina, being confident that “the Madonna would heal her regardless of what Dad says privately about her chances”<sup>25</sup>. Catherine Kalinowski, a 17-year-old character from *North of the Port* finds a tiny crucifix that had belonged to her grandmother and places it beneath her tongue to assert control over her sexuality, “to keep [her] soul safe from the devil”<sup>26</sup>, thus, making sure Jesus would protect her from her sexual concupiscence and lust for the older Polish sailor her family has boarded since he jumped ship to escape communism. Bukoski makes Catholic religion an important part of the cultural and spiritual world of the community: the lives of the protagonists are governed by the yearlong cycle of holidays and family rites-of-passage celebrations. Occasionally, it seems that even the whole Polish American neighbourhood physically responds to particular religious holidays, as it is depicted in the short story *Gossamer Bloom*:

[...] on Assumption Day in August 1950, when the Blessed Virgin is taken soul and body into heaven, thousands of threadlike strands began falling from a sky as blue as the Virgin’s robes<sup>27</sup>.

It is probably not a coincidence that the inhabitants of Superior act peculiarly under such specific conditions. Magda Podgorak, for instance, the protagonist of *Gossamer Bloom*, loses herself in the mysteries of the Catholic faith and, trying to find Jesus, commits suicide because, as the narrator of the short story notices, “what but a sign from Jesus could have possessed a churchgoing woman to gaze heavenward, take a deep breath, and soar outward from the trestle [...]?”<sup>28</sup>

Faith and ethnicity in Bukoski’s fiction are inseparable since his protagonists equate Polishness with their religious affiliation and justify most of their actions with the Catholic faith. This particular stance is aptly illustrated by one of the key quotes from the short story *Gossamer Bloom*:

[Magda Podgorak, who committed suicide in fact] had made the sacrificial flight for Poland, the “Christ of Nations,” which has suffered through much of its history but, like Jesus, would come again in glory. She had leapt from the trestle for Mr. Zielinski, dying of heart problems in the East End; for Ada Borski, [...] for St. Adalbert’s nuns, who had little. [...] “For my country America, for my country Poland, and for You, I will give myself, Dear Lord *Pan Jezus*”<sup>29</sup>.

What seems significant is also the fact that even though the protagonists reconsider their ethnic identity they never enter the sphere of religious doubt. In the story *The Case for Bread and Sausage* two teenage boys, Wally “Gówniarz” Moniak and Ted, the

<sup>25</sup> A. Bukoski, *The Wand of Youth*, [in:] *idem*, *North of...*, p. 97.

<sup>26</sup> A. Bukoski, *North of the Port*, [in:] *idem*, *North of...*, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> A. Bukoski, *Gossamer Bloom*, [in:] *idem*, *North of...*, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

narrator of the story, serve during a Catholic Mass and look with disdain at the new non-Polish American priest, who is to substitute Father Nowak. Nowak, who also reappears in other short stories, is an elderly stroke victim who had served St. Adalbert's Parish for forty years, and had become a paragon of virtue for the members of the younger generation. Although the new priest is a man of God, Polish American boys have doubts about if he is worthy of the sacred profession as "[there is] the beer smell on him [and it would be possible] to tuck a sign that reads 'Na Zdrowie' into one of his three chins"<sup>30</sup>. As the teenagers administer the sacrament of Communion holding their patens to catch tiny crumbs from the Host, Ted realizes that the Polish American worshippers have a lot of longing for the Eucharist "that fills them in a different way than it fills people like [him]"<sup>31</sup>. Despite the fact that the youthful narrator perceives Communion, perhaps surprisingly, as another meal to "edge off of [his] hunger [...] even if it can't fill [him] as much as a Ritz cracker"<sup>32</sup> or "a lunch of Polish sausage and ring baloney"<sup>33</sup>, he confesses that "it's a mystery what [his] grandma or Mrs. Kosmatka, [his] neighbor, get from it, in their case [he] wonders if it has something to do with what they remember from Poland"<sup>34</sup>.

Because the young ethnics are away from their ancestral country due to physical space and time, their perception and understanding of certain Polish/Catholic rituals is different from the older generation's awareness of the very same customs. The adolescent protagonists growing up within the American reality but, at the same time, in the Polish American neighbourhood, have to construct and redefine their ethnicity anew because, as Grażyna Kozaczka asserts, "ethnicity is not an attribute transplanted miraculously from the old country, but rather it is created by individual migrants and their communities to fulfill their needs"<sup>35</sup>. Even though the characters cannot fully comprehend the mystery of the sacrament of Communion, they see that the new priest does not practice one of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy – to feed the hungry – as he devours all the food, leaving the hungry boys only with dirty breadcrumbs, which they eventually feed on.

The young descendants of Poles in America realize that they have a mission to accomplish, that they provide continuity; they are the remnants, the living memory of their Polish American community, representatives of the pious who still cherish Catholic values in consumerist America. The simple crumbs of bread they collect and share, acquire more meaning in the broader context; bread is not only the secular

---

<sup>30</sup> A. Bukoski, *The Case for Bread and Sausage*, [in:] *idem*, *North of...*, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> G. J. Kozaczka, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

counterpart to the body of Jesus but, in the Polish tradition, it is also the symbol of prosperity and wealth. Ultimately, the protagonists of the story remind themselves that their ancestors came to the New World from Poland “for bread, *za chlebem*” in order to be saved. Therefore, because of the sacral character of this food, Ted and Wally become aware of the fact that the Eucharist is holy bread and “if [they] drop a piece of bread at home, when [they] pick it up, Mother makes [them] kiss it”<sup>36</sup>.

Because Poland with its history and old customs is a felt presence in Bukoski’s short stories, most of his Polish American literary characters listen to music composed by Chopin or Paderewski. For Bukoski’s protagonists Polish music is a route to a reconnection with roots; it reminds them of ancestors, “express[es] Polish people’s courage and spirit”<sup>37</sup> and carries the echoes of the Old Country. The narrator of *Children of Strangers* claims that “[these] are haunted melodies that hurt a person with their sadness, the unforgotten music of the past”<sup>38</sup>, and it is probably the reason why Bukoski’s characters are, paradoxically, happy in their grief when they listen to music of Polish composers. Other Polish Americans in Bukoski’s prose are polka lovers who approach the music with a frenzy akin to religious devotion, immersing themselves completely in “polka happiness”. Despite the fact that polka originated not in Poland but Czechoslovakia, and the connection with Poland is probably expressed only in its name, Deborah Anders Silverman asserts that polka as a distinctive American form of ethnic music occupies a central position in Polish American culture, it is a class and identity marker, and polka musicians play a vital role of the “gatekeepers of the Polish culture”<sup>39</sup>.

In a short story *Polkaholics*, Superior in Wisconsin is depicted as the phantasmagorical Polish homeland, or rather “Polka Country” with its roaring polka jamborees, and melancholic and grief-stricken wailing of the accordions. *Polkaholics* offers the image of a frozen in time and petrified culture, from which there is no way of escape, because polka haunts its inhabitants. The polka land is a background for presenting the conflict between the younger representative of the Polish descendants, Edek Patulski, and his sincere, self-sacrificing and fiercely patriotic father, Stash, the king of the polka, “that poor, foolish man [who] would put on his miller’s cap like he missed work, sit out in the shade of the elm tree, and dream about the Yankovic boys”<sup>40</sup>. For Edek, the nostalgic fascination of his father with Polish culture, the usage of Polish language at home, as well as his devotion to the Catholic faith is a source of shame, annoyance and embarrassment. With time however, the narrator gets infected by the father’s obsession with polka and attempts to experience what it means to be a polkaholic. Unable to do that,

<sup>36</sup> A. Bukoski, *The Case for Bread and Sausage*, [in:] *idem*, *North of...*, p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> A. Bukoski, *Leokadia and Fireflies*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, p. 156.

<sup>38</sup> A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of...*, p. 87.

<sup>39</sup> D. A. Silverman, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> A. Bukoski, *Polkaholics*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of...*, p. 134.

he “lies about being Polack. [He] eats beef and ham on days of fast and abstinence. He wipes off his Ash Wednesday ashes from [his] forehead”<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, when Stash passes away, his son, not being fully aware of his actions, turns on the polka radio station, “makes tapes on a tape recorder and plays them back to [himself], [or] maybe to [his father] if he’s out there listening”<sup>42</sup>. The narrator confirms that the memories will never fade away and Polish values, which he often sneered at, finally become meaningful to him because the polka dance functions as a thread that connects him to his father, and at the same time to his lost ethnicity.

A cultural marker of Polish identity in the United States, i.e. polka music, sometimes turns into a catalyst of nostalgia for a lost childhood, like in the short story *The Moon of the Grass Fires*. Here, the narrator, retired Joe Lesczyk [sic!], finds a church confessional in an industrial waste landfill and brings it home because “he [can] not stand the sight of the crucifix poking out from demolition debris”<sup>43</sup>. The church confessional becomes an impulse for Joe to retrieve emotional memories of some Polish American parishioners and especially his mother, who was addicted to Asthmador Powder and the polka dance. It is revealed, however, that Joe’s mother, frequently lost in her drug induced-hallucinations, used to send her son with a polka request to the local polka-playing musician, Buck Mrozek. Whenever the accordionist started his performance, Stella Lesczyk gave herself completely to the music, achieving the state of “polka catharsis”<sup>44</sup>. Even though Mr. Lesczyk told his son that “[mother’s drug oblivion] has nothing to do with polka,” the polka dance becomes the narrator’s nightmare because he associates it only with his mother’s addiction. “She shouldn’t give polka a bad name”<sup>45</sup>, Joe’s father adds, suggesting that his wife disgraced the dance by her unseemly behaviour. However, on the day of her death Joe credulously believes that only “the right combination of words and polka music [would] keep [his mother] alive”<sup>46</sup>. With Stella gone, the polka era has reached its end, leaving the narrator with a painful problem – his memory of a past time and bitter dreams of childhood.

Polka tunes, just like religion, permeate family life within Bukoski’s ethnic reality; they constitute a tool which breaks the barriers among the representatives of different generations, and enables Polish Americans to feel some connection with the land of their ancestors. Polka jamborees and the sound of the accordion become a unifying factor, which promotes family harmony. After all, everybody meets in front of the radio to listen to the “Polka Hour”, or gathers in the kitchen to enjoy nightly music entertainment

---

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 138.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 144.

<sup>43</sup> A. Bukoski, *The Moon of the Grass Fires*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, p. 101.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

provided by the father, who plays “Hoopi Shoopi”, “I’m from Planet Polka”, or the Polish national anthem “Our Poland Shall Not Perish While We Live”.

While addressing the question of the emergence of ethnicity as a social construct Grażyna Kozaczka notices that the invention of Polish American identity relies on the attempts of the immigrants and ethnics who “by blending the Polish with the American recreate many of the rituals that become powerful ethnic markers”<sup>47</sup>. Various gatherings and festive celebrations which have a religious, family or social character are, in fact, reinvented in the American context by a mixture of customs brought to the New World from different parts of Poland, adopted from the host culture, or created by a particular community. In this context, the characters in Bukoski’s short stories are the leaders of the sodality Polish ladies worship groups, like the eccentric Mrs. Piłsudski, the character from *Holy Walker*. Some protagonists collect pasture weeds and bring them to the church believing that they are “old-time talismans against thunder, witches, weak eyes”<sup>48</sup>; some others are passionate and devoted members of bowling teams who win trophies for the Polish parish and attach stickers to the rear bumpers of their cars: “You betcha your dupa I’m Polish” as with Al and Pete Dziedzic, the protagonists of *Report of the Guardian of the Sick*. It is also common that Bukoski’s Polish Americans fly Polish flags in their yards to honour their ancestors, they have decals of an eagle and the word *solidarność* in white letters on their front windows, they put on the Polish mountaineer outfits, or wear *rogatywka*, a four-cornered cap a person in the Old Country might wear, just to make themselves noticeable among the Americans.

Anthony Bukoski’s fiction is also grounded in the so-called “culinary nostalgia”, using Anita Mannur’s expression; ethnic food ways have their place in American ethnic literature and, as Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu observe, “food often has an ability to last longer as a signifier for ethnicity than other markers, such as language and fashion”<sup>49</sup>. There exists a meaningful relationship between food and ethnicity because:

[the] language of food offers a portal to ethnic history, culture and roots, [and] this language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafes, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and reestablish identities<sup>50</sup>.

Ann Hetzel Gunkel maintains that, apart from playing a “significant role in the work of ethnic memory”<sup>51</sup>, food imagery serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the ethnic

<sup>47</sup> G. J. Kozaczka, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

<sup>48</sup> A. Bukoski, *Winter Weeds*, [in:] *idem, Time Between...*, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup> F. Gardaphé, W. Xu, *Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures*, “Melus” 2007, vol. 32, no. 4, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> A. H. Gunkel, *Of Polka, Pierogi and Ethnic Identity: Toward a Polish American Cultural Studies*, “Polish-American Studies” 2005, vol. 62, no. 1, p. 39.

self in various literary contexts. Most of the Polish American characters depicted in Bukoski's fiction eat *pierogi*, (which are even eaten by the soldiers in Vietnam, who "ask for *pierogi* when they come back from search-and-destroy operations near An Ho"<sup>52</sup>) sauerkraut, *kielbasa*, pigs' feet, horseradish soup, or *bigos*, a hearty hunter's stew, consumed in order to "gain strength for the Advent season"<sup>53</sup>. They also drink vodka at the "Warsaw tavern" raising a toast to somebody's health, or *zubrówka*, convincingly described by the narrator of *A Geography of Snow* as "bison brand vodka flavored with an extract of the fragrant herb beloved by the European Bison"<sup>54</sup>, which, as the narrator additionally reminds, possesses an amazing hypnotising quality. Food, and especially *bigos*, often becomes a common denominator, it serves as a sort of elixir, or linchpin which binds people together, like at the end of the aforementioned story *The Wally Na Zdrowie Show*. One may encounter Polish recipes in Bukoski's stories which, as Ann Hetzel Gunkel observes, "work as an apt metaphor for the reproduction of culture from generation to generation"<sup>55</sup>. Although, in his stories, Bukoski does not depict Polish American *busias* (grandmothers), who teach the third generation ethnics how to prepare Polish meals, the young descendants of Polish immigrants always associate their childhood days in the Polish American neighbourhood with the smell of freshly baked bread and other Polish culinary specialties<sup>56</sup>.

The reassessment of the ethnic self of young Polish American characters usually takes place in Bukoski's fiction upon the death of a relative associated with the immigrant generation. *Children of Strangers*, for instance, is one of the heartbreaking stories which depicts the corrosion of a way of life of a generation of Catholic Polish Americans. Ralph and Josephine Slipkowski, the main characters, are preparing themselves for the moving and dignified ceremony of paying tribute to Sister Bronisława, the last living Polish American nun in the neighbourhood, who devoted fifty years of her life to the service in the parochial school. Bukoski's spokesmen painfully come to understand that the Polish American neighbourhood is in a state of deterioration and all the virtues the characters were taught to live by, such as "to work, to honor the Polish flag, to grow up in the faith"<sup>57</sup>, seem to be meaningless now, especially when "people

<sup>52</sup> A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, p.11.

<sup>53</sup> A. Bukoski, *Winter Weeds*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between...*, p.8.

<sup>55</sup> A. H. Gunkel, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> The two above paragraphs are going to be published in a modified version in Polish in the article „Kultura etniczna Polonii amerykańskiej i kulinarna nostalgia w twórczości amerykańskich autorów polskiego pokolenia: proza Leslie Pietrzyk i Anthony'ego Bukoskiego” in a post-conference volume entitled *Literatura polska obu Ameryk. Studia i szkice, seria druga*, ed. B. Szalasta-Rogowska (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016).

<sup>57</sup> A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of...*, p. 83.

without a heritage who draw public assistance have overtaken [them]”<sup>58</sup>. The bitter tone of quiet despair is visible in the story further, when the young cultural intruders, who are new residents, i.e. the threatening children of strangers, violently enter the church hall where the ceremony is held, disrespect the parishioners and remorselessly invade their lives. When the two boys observe the old Polish people, “they stare at the face of Poland, whose age and civility mean nothing to them”<sup>59</sup>; and when the smirking teenagers pass the parishioners they do not look at them “but through [them] as though [they] count for nothing at all on this earth”<sup>60</sup>. Ralph Slipkowski reaches a conclusion that any representative of the Polish American group gathered in the school building could tell the children of strangers everything about Polish history, describe the fierce battles with the enemies of the nation, elaborate on the redemptive power of Polish Catholicism and “the two intruders wouldn’t care”<sup>61</sup>.

For Josephine Slipkowski there is no hope for a better future, “no tomorrow, no ethnicity reinvented”<sup>62</sup>, as Thomas Gladsky reiterates. The woman instinctively senses that “what’s coming will be worse”, she doubts whether she can survive and believes that “extinction might be better”<sup>63</sup>. The elderly couple is fully aware of the fact that the old ones have “faith that has travelled far”<sup>64</sup>, a great spirituality, a dogged perseverance in Catholic loyalty which provides a continuity and gives the Polish Americans a sense of direction. It does not really matter how loud they can sing “Joining Poland’s Sons and Daughters, We’ll be Poles Forever”, the growing realization is that their ethnic generation is coming to an end. Being afraid of the loss of memory and the general obliteration of Polish history and heritage, the Slipkowskis come to understand that, in fact, their ethnicity resides “in the mirrors in the Polish homes and in the wrinkles of the old faces and in the eyes and deep within the memory”<sup>65</sup>.

There is an overwhelming fear that, especially, the older representatives of the American Polonia in Bukoski’s fiction are gripped by and become the victims of the ingrained fear that “bleeds into successive generations so that a war or defeat or forced labor or internment are not over when they are over”<sup>66</sup>. This fear that the characters experience results from the fact that their lives, as well as the lives of their ancestors, had been influenced by the powerful historical and economic forces. Therefore, normal

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> T. Gladsky, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

<sup>63</sup> A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of...*, p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>66</sup> L. Vallee, *Articulating the Polish American Experience*, <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/904/243vallee.html> [access January 8, 2015].

existence was always precarious, tentative, poverty-stricken; always perceived as “a temporary armistice”<sup>67</sup>, rather than a permanent state of peace. Hence, the hardworking, long-suffering Polish Americans in Bukoski’s stories lean on their heritage, Catholic faith and the cultural repositories, such as the parochial school, St. Adalbert’s church, or polka bands. They find solace in their connectedness and their hearts still yearn for better lives and dreams are waiting to be fulfilled even in grim surroundings<sup>68</sup>. However, what is even more significant, they discover in the ethnic culture they create “sagacity and the redeeming power which sustains [their] lives”<sup>69</sup>. It is probably due to Bukoski’s ability to find light even in the darkest corners. The overall picture seems to be that Anthony Bukoski is believed to possess, as one of his reviewers noticed, a “fine aesthetic sense of the grim, downward spiral of the lives he chronicles, but such gloom is offset by the author’s artistry and evident compassion”<sup>70</sup>.

To recapitulate, nostalgia produces significant emotional distress, and most of the Polish American characters in Bukoski’s short stories are full of despair and grief. They harbor warm feelings for the home of their ancestors, Poland and their Polish cultural heritage, Polish customs, because they constitute the integral part of their identity. They also long for their adopted domicile – the decaying Polish American neighbourhood of Superior associated with the sense of rootedness and belonging. They adhere to the last vestiges of Polish culture in the United States, hear echoes of the Old Country in polonaise or polka music, and nostalgically recall their childhood spent in a Polish American neighbourhood in order to preserve the past.

---

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>68</sup> D. Watt, *Live and Yearn. A Review of ‘Time Between Trains’*, “The Dallas Morning News” October 5, 2003, p. 9G.

<sup>69</sup> T. Napierkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>70</sup> R. Rees, *Hometown Author’s Tales of Superior Turn Out to Be Just That. A Review of ‘Children of Strangers’*, “Saint Paul Pioneer Press” September 4, 1994.

Iwona Filipczak  
University of Zielona Góra

## OUT OF THE MARGINS: NEGOTIATING AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

### Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss the discourse of hybridity employed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. It is argued that under the veneer of exoticism (otherness created by culinary images, magic, and cross-cultural desire) the novel displays political engagement: it destabilizes mainstream categories such as white/black, authentic/inauthentic, American/un-American, introduces ambiguity and ultimately challenges the center/periphery paradigm. The nation's margins, represented by an immigrant from the Indian subcontinent and a half-Native American, display a creative potential of dismantling exclusionary narratives of the nation (Bhabha). Accordingly, the novel can be read as Divakaruni's attempt to show the complicated cross-cultural relations in America, thus indicating the need of constant renegotiation of American identity without a discernible center and periphery.

**Keywords:** Asian American fiction, hybrid identity, authenticity, diaspora

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's magical realist novel *The Mistress of Spices* has been classified, perhaps somewhat disparagingly, as culinary fiction. As such it has enjoyed popularity and wide readership, yet has not received acclaim from literary critics. This is because, as Anita Mannur tries to explain it, the food novel is regarded as an attractive form of writing, "safely ethnic"<sup>1</sup>, serving as a narrative of alterity but with no obvious political content: "[narratives about food] have been viewed with suspicion because they are an appealing form of writing that appears to be ethnically affirmative and 'merely' cultural. There apparent lack of 'hard' political content, and attention to the social and cultural, make these thematic interventions 'acceptable' to the mainstream"<sup>2</sup>. The employment of culinary idiom is thus regarded as rendering Otherness. It allows

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Mannur, *Culinary Fictions. Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, Philadelphia 2010, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

a consumption of the difference, which is often presented in Orientalist images, and makes narratives “palatable” for the Western audience. Culinary fictions composed by writers of the Indian diaspora have catered for the “Indo-chic”; that is, a fashion for India and Indian literature<sup>3</sup>, and have become the “latest commodity in the niche market for ethnicity catering to the notion that Desi cultural practices are consonant with culinary practices”<sup>4</sup>. “Eastern cuisine” is regarded as a “Western exoticist staple”, therefore gastronomic images, through which India is commonly presented, serve as an exoticizing discourse, which becomes a “mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness”<sup>5</sup>.

Exoticism is classified as a discourse of the margin, which may have a subversive function. According to Graham Huggan, postcolonial cultural production is often “subject to fetishization of cultural difference”<sup>6</sup>, yet, it does not have to be the rule. The metropolitan center’s demand for “authentic” voices results in the appreciation of cultural difference which is easily translatable, but, certainly, it does not mean that all postcolonial writers will try to fulfill this request. The examination of such works as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* leads Huggan to state that exoticism is “incorporated into works that challenge – often looking to subvert – metropolitan mainstream cultural codes”<sup>7</sup>. In his view these writers consciously employ “imperialist perceptions of an ‘othered’ India”, that is connect it with a world of magic, mysteries and wonders, forbidden space of cross-cultural desire, site of colonial nostalgia<sup>8</sup>.

Also Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* under its easily consumable veneer of magic realism, exoticism and the convention of romance displays its concern with the political. Such an observation is already made by Mannur, who counters the popular belief that the food novel is not usually politically engaged, and who in her reading of Divakaruni’s novel examines its involvement with social inequalities: racial politics in the United States and gender politics, the latter being a criticism of Indian society patriarchal culture and restriction of female sexual autonomy<sup>9</sup>.

What is even more conspicuous in the narrative is its attempt to challenge mainstream cultural categories. The novel touches the issue of complex American identities trying to destabilize the binary division into the center and the periphery. It works

---

<sup>3</sup> G. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*, New York 2001, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> A. Mannur, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> G. Huggan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> A. Mannur, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-101.

against essentializing categories which depict identity as fixed, unchanging and pure, thus easily identifiable. In contrast, Divakaruni shows the currency of hybrid identities in an era of globalization and empire, and consequently she postulates the need for the constant renegotiation of what it means to be American.

The goal of this article is to show how the novelist raises questions about the stability of the binary oppositions of such concepts as American/ un-American, white/black, authentic or inauthentic. By destabilizing these oppositions Divakaruni introduces ambivalence and resists the dominant discourse of presenting a minority as a margin and ultimately undermines the opposition between the center and periphery. Interestingly, Divakaruni refers to two different types of “margins” of American society: members of the Indian diaspora (immigrants) and a half-Native American (descendant of indigenous peoples), and so different contexts of their hybrid identities formation are presented, not to mention the fact that the novel refers to both cultural and biological hybridity. In doing so, the novelist emphasizes her point of the prevalence of hybrid identities which result not only from contemporary global movements of people but may be a present yet muted history within the American nation. In both cases hybridity is ultimately seen as an emergence of new energy that enables the production of something new, and that can be read as the new perspective on the American identity.

Divakaruni’s novel reverberates the notions introduced by the postcolonial discourse about the problematic cultural identities and about the validity of the center and periphery paradigm. Since the 1980s the discourses of hybridity have been trying to destabilize any binary oppositions, those of the colonizer and the colonized, oppressor and the oppressed, center and margin. Homi Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and the Third Space put emphasis on ambivalence, likewise Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of new *mestiza*. Recently theorists of globalization such as Arjun Appadurai prefer to speak of global culture without discernible center and periphery, characterizing it as a culture of flows and fluid identities, since increased mobility, not only of people but also of goods, images and ideas, enables frequent cultural encounters and leads to homogenization of culture around the world<sup>10</sup>. In this context it might be stated that especially diasporic literature shows how identities become problematic when cultures come in contact. It shows how difficult it is to remain culturally pure, and also how marginalized groups become empowered and gain their own voice, registering a desire for the center and the periphery to merge.

The discourse of hybridity becomes a form of contestation of the binary oppositions, a place of productivity and creativity, and a hope for a new consciousness. Its

---

<sup>10</sup> See A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis 1996, and his notions of ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples, which are intrinsically fluid, amorphous and unpredictable.

opposing nature cannot be ignored, as Robert Young states: “in its more radical guise of disarticulating authority, hybridity has also increasingly come to stand for the interrogative languages of minority cultures”<sup>11</sup>. In a similar manner Homi Bhabha stresses the potential of hybridity to open “new sites”, which “may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them”<sup>12</sup>. In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, Bhabha argues that diasporic and other minority communities, which may be perceived as the nation’s margins, are highly complex, also flexible and productive, from here various oppositional forces may emerge. They may lead to a dismantling of exclusionary narratives of the nation. The space between the margins, the so called Third Space, which constitutes the space of overlap of cultures and histories, becomes the site from which new narratives of national and cultural identity can be written and imagined. In hybrid identities one can find an element of revolt, an element that challenges authority, in other words, an element that contests any fixed structures, proposing in its stead ambiguity and dissolution of the borders. This may be an inevitable course of events in a world in which cultures more and more frequently come into contact. As Gloria Anzaldua anticipates writing about mestiza consciousness, which is a hybridized consciousness: “the future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures”<sup>13</sup>. The US is a good illustration of these processes; as a country of immigrants with a constant influx of newcomers and also with the past as a colonizer of the indigenous nations, it needs to continuously reformulate its identity when confronted with a new kind of immigration today or when deeply buried histories are uncovered.

In *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni brings together two kinds of hybridity and thus refers to different contexts of identity formation. She introduces a migrant, who initially wants to retain the cultural purity but fails to do so, and a native born American, who turns out to be of mixed origin: his father was white while mother was Native American. He is biologically mixed and he has yet to decide whether and how to embrace his cultural heritage. Accordingly, Divakaruni establishes the so called “margins of the nation”, marginalized minorities, who are on a quest to locate themselves. In each case she refers to the aspect of voluntariness in the formation of identity and therefore addresses the question of the subject’s acceptance of their hybrid identity. Addressing issues such as Americanness, whiteness or authenticity leads towards a destabilization

---

<sup>11</sup> R. J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London and New York 2005, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation*, [in:] *idem*, *The Location of Culture*, New York 2004, p. 216.

<sup>13</sup> G. Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, San Francisco 1999, p. 102.

of the opposition between the center and the periphery, the mainstream and minority, and ultimately it becomes a call for reinvention of the American identity.

The narrative plays with the concepts of center and periphery from the very beginning, reversing them, in other words, giving the members of the Indian diaspora the central position. Moreover, initially it stresses the need for separation of cultures. The Indian community located in Oakland, California, is in the focus of attention, presented from an even more central point, that is, the shop with Indian herbs, run by Tilo, the Mistress of Spices. Tilo uses the magical powers of the spices in order to help people in distress. The centrality and significance of this ethnic community is clearly marked, Tilo is allowed to help only her own people, as the Old One commanded her: "To help your own kind, and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need"<sup>14</sup>. The boundary between "us" and "them" is established; "they" or "others" are all of the people who are not of Indian ethnicity. That means that also people from the so called mainstream America, most visibly recognized as white and constituting the majority of American society, from the perspective of the shop are the periphery, and the centrality of the Indian community is thus confirmed. Those "others" obviously visit the shop but are of no interest for the Mistress:

It's not as if I haven't seen Americans. They come in here all the time, the professor types in tweed with patches on jacket elbows or in long skirts in earnest earth colours, Hare Krishnas in wrinkled white kurtas with shaved heads, backpack-toting students in seldom-laundered jeans, leftover hippies lankhaired and beaded. They want fresh coriander seed, organic of course, or pure ghee for a karma-free diet, or yesterday *burfis* at half price. They lower hoarse voices *Hey lady got any hashish*.

I give them what they want. I forget them<sup>15</sup>.

The Mistress is required to maintain the purity of her culture and magic is at work to assure of the fulfillment of her duties. If she breaks any of the rules guiding the Mistress's conduct she will be destroyed in Shampati's fire. And so Tilo is confined to the location of her shop, does not have a permission to go beyond its borders. What is more, she promises to live in solitude and not to fall in love, which she believes is easy to fulfill: "I need no pitiful mortal man to love"<sup>16</sup>. In order to resist temptations she has traded her youth and beauty for a body of an old woman. From the moment of her transformation into Tilottama, her shop becomes the center of her universe, with "its protective shell around [her]"<sup>17</sup>. At the same time her special powers of clairvoy-

<sup>14</sup> C. B. Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, London 2005, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

ance (she can read the minds and hearts of her visitors) enable her to probe the world outside, to examine the lives of people who visit and ask for advice.

Initially, the narrative presents a desire, quite frequent among diasporans, to maintain a separation of cultures. In a strange land, in America, surrounded by the foreign culture, Tilo draws strength from the rootedness in the homeland traditions, symbolized by the powers the Indian spices offer her. She falls in one category of diaspora women, whose aim is to preserve the homeland culture:

[W]omen in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a “home” culture and tradition – selectively. Fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the host country<sup>18</sup>.

Tilo cannot reach out to the world outside and to people who are not of her kind, for her role is to maintain and strengthen the Indianness of the members of her community. Even though she accepts that America may influence Indians and that it sometimes may be positive, she herself must remain uncontaminated, intact by another culture, and this is the source of her empowerment, enhanced by the mystery and wonder which constitute her world.

However, as the narrative develops it transpires that a total separation of one culture from another is not possible. Borders are both lines of separation and lines of contact, and it would be utopian to think they are impermeable. Cultures come in contact and start to influence one another gradually blurring the boundaries between them. This is represented by the romance between Tilo and Raven, an American customer who visits her store. Although Tilo pronounces her indifference towards Americans focusing on the needs of her own folk and promises never to fall in love, she unexpectedly begins to feel attraction to a stranger, to the “other”, who enters her shop one day. With his following visits the attraction grows and turns into a mutual affection. Tilo is willing to break the rules of conduct of a Mistress, to fall in love with a mortal man and also to reach beyond her culture, to transgress the border, even though she expects severe punishment for that – destruction in Shampati’s fire.

So the element of voluntariness to undergo transformation is highlighted – despite the harsh punishment that may occur to Tilo she makes a decision to go beyond the borders. But it is not only her romance that pulls her out of the store. The narrative introduces also an element of inevitability, the reader feels that Tilo’s transgression of the border of her culture, represented by the threshold of her store, is only a question of time. From the very beginning Tilo is presented as a rebel who wants to be autonomous in her actions. She feels she could help people more effectively if she could physically

---

<sup>18</sup> J. Clifford, *Diasporas*, “Cultural Anthropology” 1994, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 314.

leave her store, and the restriction generates a feeling of dissatisfaction. As the sense of frustration grows in her she decides to violate the order and pays visits to Geeta and Haroun, who are in need of her assistance.

Tilo's free will in stepping beyond the border is contrasted with Raven's situation. His mixed roots were a secret for him, because his mother did not reveal her Native American background for many years, while his appearance would not be in any way questionable, but would actually posit him as a white man. When he finally learns about his background, he is shocked and disappointed. The knowledge of his hybrid identity (biological) is thrust at him and it is beyond his power to deny it, the only decision he has to make is what relation he should have to the cultures of his ancestors. He decides to embrace both of them. Raven's story reveals that it is always possible to discover breaches in one's identity, some forgotten or hidden histories, which may lead to the renegotiation of one's identity. Identities are complex and do not have to be comprehensible at first sight. What is believed to be mainstream – Raven is considered to be white by Tilo, which will be discussed later in the article – can turn out to have a peripheral position, and certainly, also the reverse situation can be true.

The characters' agreement on their cultural hybridity is manifested with the adoption of new names. The act of choosing a name, a "true-name", for oneself and not being given one symbolically represents the characters' empowerment. Thus an act of questioning the center/ periphery paradigm, which takes place in hybrid or hybridizing identities, is additionally reinforced by the act of the characters' re-naming themselves. The way in which it is presented in the novel refers the reader to the problem of the subaltern, who cannot represent himself/herself but has to be represented, thus invoking the marginal position of both Tilo and Raven. The power of one's "true-name" lies also in its appropriateness. It is the name the subject gives him/herself on the basis of all the available knowledge he/she has about his/her own position, in other words, the knowledge of one's roots, as well as a recognition and coming to terms with one's actual position.

The act of naming is an expression of the conscious and free activity of the subject, and symbolizes breaking away from some kind of oppression and consequent empowerment on various levels. Tilo flees from patriarchal control and an image of an Oriental female<sup>19</sup>; in the case of Raven it is an escape from his life immersed in lies, which concealed the fact of his mixed origin. Tilo's first name was the symbol of

---

<sup>19</sup> Grace Daphne notes the double oppression of the heroine: as a woman, and as a black woman and claims that Tilo's shifting identities (represented by the different names of the woman) help Divakaruni to "reposition woman within [...] dichotomized existence, with the aim of bridging divides and accessing empowerment" (G. Daphne, *Relocating Consciousness: Diasporic Writers and the Dynamics of Literary Experience*, Amsterdam, New York 2007, p. 118).

patriarchal dominance. In her family village in India she was Nayan Tara – Star of the Eye, Star-seer, but probably the old meaning of the name, that is, Flower That Grows by the Dust Road<sup>20</sup> describes her condition in the best way: an unwanted baby-girl, rejected after her birth: “Wrap her in old cloth, lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except a dowry debt”<sup>21</sup>. As a girl, additionally with rather dark skin, she is not a desired progeny in an Indian household, which favors boys and light skin. The circumstances of acquiring a second name show her progress into a liberated subject, free of the patriarchal control but still attached to Indian culture. After her transformation on the island the Old One is going to give her a name suitable for the Mistress. The young woman, however, objects, for she has her own choice – Tilo, short for Tilottama, which means “the essence of *til*, lifegiver, restorer of health and hope”<sup>22</sup>. Her third transformation takes place in California and is a consequence of her falling in love with Raven and her willingness to embrace another culture. When she decides on the name Maya it is clear that in this way her double belonging will be expressed, as she explains to Raven her name will be “[o]ne that spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now”<sup>23</sup>.

Raven’s identity also shifted several times, which was reflected in the changing names. Although he never mentions what his previous names were he suggests their great number: “My true-name, that’s what you want? Well. Maybe I *can* figure out which one it is”<sup>24</sup>. When finally he reveals his “true-name” to Tilo he confesses: “All the other names were given to me, but this one *I* chose”<sup>25</sup>. “Raven” is the name the man gave himself only after he learnt that he is a descendant not only of white, but also of Native Americans. It reminds him of the encounter with his greatgrandfather and a spiritual vision in which he saw a bird – raven, which is a symbol used by many Native American tribes, it may symbolize creation or transformation and healing power. The choice of the new name shows Raven’s desire to accept the part of identity which has so far been unknown. It helps him to find integrity and displays his wish for empowerment. With his new name Raven dismisses his mother’s act of hiding the truth about her Native American roots. He discards also her feeling of shame of her ancestry; Raven, in contrast, wants to embrace and cultivate his double-belonging. The narrative shows that what for mother felt marginal and represented helplessness, that is, being a Native American, for Raven becomes a way to find wholeness – his roots turn out to be of central importance for self-understanding.

---

<sup>20</sup> C. B. Divakaruni, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

The act of naming may be important for the individual and symbolically express a wish for empowerment, nevertheless, learning one's "true-name" does not guarantee the full knowledge of the subject. The motif of naming continues the play with oppositions of the center and the periphery and maintains ambiguity. When Tilo asks her American customer for his name, which, she believes, will reveal his self to her, he tries to undermine her enthusiasm and asks: "Is it so easy, then, to know what one is?"<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, the name introduces complication, for Tilo interprets "Raven" as an "unAmerican" name: "In tender amusement I see that my American is embarrassed, a little, by his unAmerican name"<sup>27</sup>. This interpretation is quite problematic because it situates the man outside Americanness. Yet, as a descendant of indigenous people, who lived on the American continent long before the Columbian colonization, Raven has even more claims to being called "American" than any descendant of European settlers.

Further destabilization of the center/periphery paradigm occurs through the interrogations of whiteness. Whiteness is associated with the American mainstream, in other words, with the center. People of color, those who belong to ethnic minorities, constitute the peripheries. Yet, the novel puts forward an idea that the color of skin often misleads when one wishes to discover the identity of an individual<sup>28</sup>. Although Raven's skin is white, he belongs to the margins of society, for he is a descendant of the native peoples of the North American continent. His ancestors were colonized by European settlers, and oppressed for centuries. Before learning about Raven's roots Tilo is impressed by his whiteness, she admires his skin, and somewhat fondly calls him "my American". Tilo is misled by the man's whiteness and locates him in the center, implying that he might be a descendant of the white majority. This feeling is reinforced by Tilo's repeated mention of her own "brownness", which seems to put her in the margins, not only in America but also in India. Since her birth her darkness generated a condescending attitude from others, made her feel inferior and on the point of exclusion from social structures. She recollects her parents' sadness at seeing her as a newborn: "another girlchild, and this one coloured like mud"<sup>29</sup>. She calls her own folk, who just like her emigrated from India to the US, "a brown people who come from elsewhere, to whom real Americans might say *Why?*"<sup>30</sup>. The awareness of her dark skin creates in

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsey Claire Smith states that because of the complex cross-cultural encounters in Americas "evaluating American Indians as defined by color or 'race' is ineffective", since "blonde-haired, green-eyed Cherokee-speaking Indians in Northeastern Oklahoma claim authenticity just as 'full-blood' individuals living on reservations in New Mexico or Arizona do" (L. C. Smith, *Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American Literature: From Faulkner and Morrison to Walker and Silko*, New York 2008, p. 4).

<sup>29</sup> C. B. Divakaruni, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

her a feeling that she does not belong to “real America”, which she, for the most part, associates with the light-skin majority.

Both the names and the skin color lead to the question of what it means to be a real American, in other words, an authentic American. Yet, the narrative reinforces from the very beginning the view that there is ambiguity hidden behind certain labels, such as an “un-American name” or “white”. Who is a real American – a descendant of white Europeans or a descendant of indigenous peoples, who have been pushed to the margins of the American nation?

The question of authenticity touches also diasporans. Who is more authentic, that is to say, true to the original culture: a newly arrived immigrant who preserves and cherishes customs of the homeland or an individual who lets the culture of the host-land influence him, and thus gradually undergoes hybridization? The narrative poses this question but seems to discredit any definite answer. In the novel Tilo examines a group of Indian girls who visit her store in search of traditional Indian products. These bougainvillea girls have lived their whole life in America, and their cultural hybridity is quite conspicuous: they wear American clothes (not saris), behave in an American way (are noisy and self-confident) and “look like they’ve never cooked a meal – certainly not an Indian meal”<sup>31</sup> (while tradition demands from an Indian female that she should take care of the household, most importantly prepare the food for the family). So bougainvillea girls are very far from what a traditional Indian woman should be, and what, initially, Tilo represents in the novel. Tilo envies their youth and beauty and is jealous of Raven, who politely engages in a conversation with them. The man misinterprets Tilo’s reaction and assures her: “You’re authentic in a way they’ll never be,” and these words stir Tilo: “*Authentic*. A curious word to use. ‘What do you mean, authentic?’”. Raven answers: “You know, real. Real Indian.” This is not a satisfactory answer for Tilo, who reflects: “the bougainvillea girls are in their way as Indian as I. And who is to say which of us is more real”<sup>32</sup>. Despite her earlier attempt to establish somewhere a point of reference when she spoke about “real Americans” confronted with immigrants<sup>33</sup>, in the end Tilo realizes that it is impossible to state with certainty who is “real”, or, who is “authentic”. As it was with the white/black opposition, also the borders between the categories authentic/inauthentic, or between Americanness and non-Americanness, become blurred.

Consequently, hybrid identities impose a need to reformulate the concept of American identity, which is emphasized also by the imagery used in the novel. The fault lines of the national identity should be crossed, and bridged but not in a way

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 254.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 255-6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

that will suggest any fixedness of categories. Furthermore, it is by no means a peaceful process. Divakaruni uses the trope of an earthquake and destruction of the city as the background of Tilo's changing identity, her transformation into Maya who wants to embrace both cultures – her native Indian and adopted American. More generally, the earthquake suggests a wish for re-establishment of American identity. The use of this trope by Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Leave It To Me* has been similarly interpreted by Jopi Nyman: “the destruction of San Francisco is not the final end of the Western civilization but a call for, and a sign of, the reconstruction of Americanness, both individual and cultural”<sup>34</sup>. The metaphorical fault line of identity is translated into a physical and realistic experience of an earthquake, which may happen as a result of Californian San Andreas Fault.

Divakaruni's presentation of negotiating identities in *The Mistress of Spices* is an attempt to show the ambiguities of American identities. They are a result of globalization, the mass movements of people which lead to the dispersal of many peoples around the globe who, even though often maintain the ties with their countries and cultures of origin, alter the shape of nations which receive them. It is certainly true of Asian immigrants to the US:

Regardless of cultural attachments or the unique conditions of their arrival, Asian Americans today are dispersed across the national landscape, crossing its fault lines, and negotiating multiple contact zones that make their own cultures and hegemonic national culture susceptible to mutual influence<sup>35</sup>.

Thus it is possible to read the novel as an expression of the view that the formation of American identity is a constant process, in the effect of which the essentializing notions of identity cannot be held as valid. Divakaruni strengthens her point by referring to the history of indigenous American peoples, which was also marked by cross-cultural contacts, and which therefore contributes to the complexity of Americanness.

---

<sup>34</sup> J. Nyman, *Imagining Transnationalism in Bharati Mukherjee's Leave It To Me*, [in:] *Cultural Identity in Transition: Contemporary Conditions, Practices and Politics of a Global Phenomenon*, eds. J. Kupiainen et al., New Delhi 2004, p. 416.

<sup>35</sup> G. H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* Lexington 1999, p. 173.



**Urszula Gołębiowska**  
University of Zielona Góra

## MOVING BEYOND (CULTURAL) CRITICISM IN HENRY JAMES'S LATE TRANSATLANTIC ENCOUNTERS

### Abstract

The essay examines Henry James's late reengagements with America enacted in his travelogue *The American Scene* (1907) and his tale *A Round of Visits* (1910). Featuring Europeanized Americans returning to the United States after a long absence, both texts explore a complex relationship between the altered culture and the visitors' shifting attitude towards it. The essay demonstrates that it is those shifts in the autobiographical narrator's or character's stance that allow them to overcome a customary critical attitude and engage differently with the ambiguously familiar/unfamiliar reality. A detached position, initially adopted, produces responses which reflect the repatriated observer's alienation and a harsh criticism of American commercial culture, while immersion in the reality results in the abandonment of the detached, critical stance, allowing for a different, non-intentional engagement with the scene. By foregrounding other than intellectual modes of seeing and experiencing, the texts problematize the very idea of definitive judgment and masterful stance vis-à-vis reality. As the insights presented in the analyzed works are later echoed in Walter Benjamin as well as in Proust, their conceptions of 'intentionless state of being' and 'involuntary memory' respectively were enlisted to illuminate James's characters' experience.

**Keywords:** America, commercial culture, criticism, perception shift

Henry James's works abound in intercultural encounters which invariably explore the difficulty of understanding otherness, both cultural and individual. Inscribed in the writer's general epistemological skepticism, this impossibility of extracting meaning from an unfamiliar reality is thrown into relief in his late transatlantic writings which document experiences of Europeanized Americans returning to the United States after a long time away from the country. James's travelogue *The American Scene* (1907), which established the writer as a cultural critic, as well as subsequent short fictions, *The Jolly Corner* (1908) and *A Round of Visits* (1910), were inspired by the writer's own 1904-5

visit to America after a twenty-year absence<sup>1</sup>. The theme of repatriation explored in these texts features an autobiographical narrator or a fictional Europeanized American, whose return to America occasions an encounter with a culture not only different from its European counterpart, but also radically altered from what it had been.

The motif of repatriation represents an obvious, geographical shift in James's signature international theme, which, in many of his novels and tales from the late 1870s to the early 1900s, involves Americans in Europe, confronted with the baffling Old World. In critical evaluations of the theme, the impossibility of understanding the foreign culture those works dramatize has been often attributed to American innocence (or ignorance) faced with sophistication and duplicity embodied in European characters. In fact, far from mere victims of European cynicism, James's Americans often figure as crudely materialistic and acquisitive, displaying a neo-colonial attitude to Europe – a site of cultural re-discovery and appropriation<sup>2</sup>. This attitude may also take the form of a desire to possess otherness through knowledge, which effectively prevents the characters from relating to a different culture. Thus, regardless of the configurations of power inherent in the international theme, casting Americans either as victims or perpetrators of exploitation, the motif of failure to understand otherness figures prominently in the 'international' works.

This failure to comprehend an unfamiliar culture in James's transatlantic writings involves a complex interplay of the external and the internal, evident in the impact of the foreign or quasi-foreign culture on the visiting outsider and, conversely, the influence of the stance he adopts on the observed reality. The purpose of this essay is to examine both fictional and non-fictional reengagements with America enacted in *The American Scene* and in James's last published tale *A Round of Visits*. My aim is to interrogate these texts in terms of representations of space and its inhabitants which

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1980s and 1990s mark a discovery of Henry James as a cultural critic in addition to his well-established reputation as an innovative proto-modernist writer. James's legitimacy as a cultural critic has been debated ever since, with assessments of his achievement in the field ranging from enthusiastic, emphasizing the writer's perceptiveness and wide implications of his observations such as Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity. Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York and Oxford 1991), to more critical studies, e.g. Mark Seltzer's *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca 1984). Despite the controversy, or perhaps because of it, *The American Scene*, the writer's classic text of cultural criticism, has been in recent years widely read and commented upon.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Roberts (*The Geopolitics of Literature: the Shifting International Scene in the Works of Henry James*, "The International History Review" 2012, no 34.1) argues that the emergence of acquisitive American tendencies in James's fiction of the early 1900s coincides with the growing political and economic importance of the United States on the international scene, particularly evident in the Venezuela crisis or the 1898 Spanish-American War over Cuba. The fact that James's twentieth-century novels repeatedly stage exploitations of Europe by predatory Americans correlates, in Roberts's view, with the writer's perception of the shift in the international position of the United States and his indictment of America's emerging imperialism (pp. 100-101). However, it is worth mentioning that those tendencies are evident as early as in James's 1877 novel *The American*.

highlight the most problematic aspects of America. The complex response they evoke in the repatriated narrator or character depends as much on the scene encountered as on the observer's attitude towards it. As I will argue in this essay, it is shifts in the narrator's or character's stance that allow them to overcome the customary critical attitude and engage differently with the ambiguously familiar/unfamiliar reality.

A corresponding polarity of the autobiographical narrator's position is recognized in the Prologue to *The American Scene*. Due to his long absence from the country, he "had had time to become almost as 'fresh' as an inquiring *stranger*, [he] had not on the other hand had enough to cease to be, or at least to feel, as acute as an initiated *native*"<sup>3</sup>. A repatriated native, the narrator searches for and registers familiar "sights, sounds, smells" (AS 3) which, inevitably, become mixed with or even drowned by the strange and the unfamiliar, making him feel like an "inquiring stranger." The mixture of familiarity and strangeness does not deter the observer from deriving pleasure from the "chaos of confusion and change", where "recognition became more interesting and more amusing in proportion as it became more difficult, like the spelling-out of foreign sentences of which one knows but half the words" (AS 5). The trope of impeded readability captures the challenging confrontation with early twentieth-century America, profoundly transformed by the recent industrialization, building boom, and mass immigration. As John F. Sears observes, "change itself – rapid and unrestrained – had become the dominant characteristic of American life"<sup>4</sup>.

Not only is the narrator's native/alien status ambiguous, but also his response to the complex scene is far from definitive and unequivocal, for it depends on the stance adopted vis-à-vis the observed reality. On the one hand, the "restless analyst," as the narrator often refers to himself, assumes a detached, intellectual attitude to the American scene, apparent in his explicit critique of the hollowness and vulgar materiality of American culture (AS 12). Random impressions occasioned by city or country sights give rise to scathingly critical remarks about the domination of the commercial aspect at the expense of other values. The objective, analytical position is, however, difficult to maintain, for the narrator is not only a critic wishing to penetrate the surface of reality and capture the essence of the American scene, but also a "repentant absentee," deeply interested, curious, and emotionally involved (AS 6). Tellingly, after lengthy reflections about New York skyscrapers obliterating the city's past, the air seems to issue an admonition: "[I]t's all very well to 'criticize,' but you distinctly take an interest and are the victim of your interest [...] You care for the terrible town" (AS 83). The interest, restless curiosity, and emotional attitude that the narrator embodies are clearly at odds with

<sup>3</sup> H. James, *The American Scene*, New York 1994, p. 3, emphasis added. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by the abbreviation AS and page number.

<sup>4</sup> J. F. Sears, *Introduction, The American Scene*, New York 1994, p. XI.

the detachment of the cultural critic, whose facile condemnation cannot give justice to the complex reality. An alternative to the critical stance seems to be an immersion in the material reality and a relaxation of the desire for intellectual domination, which will facilitate a radically different response.

The narrator's initial critical stance is apparent in his response to the New York skyscraper – the embodiment of the American commercial spirit, elevating money to the status of a universal principle and power. The narrator is appalled by how, unrestrained by a sense of the past or respect for cultural legacy, the commercial building boom has rendered the famous Trinity Church scarcely visible among recently erected towers (AS 60). While obscuring the view of the historic landmark, the skyscrapers represent “the expensively provisional,” serving only immediate commercial purposes as “triumphant payers of dividends” (AS 60). It is not only that “the very scale of things had changed” – the prominence of the skyscraper is also indicative and symbolic of a shift in values<sup>5</sup>. For the writer, the church's “smothered visibility,” caused by “those monsters of the mere market,” stands for American greed and pursuit of material profits at all costs (AS 63). It is not only the Trinity Church that has been affected: though less visible it is at least still there, while James's birthplace in Washington Square has vanished, replaced by another high, impersonal building, leaving the writer with the feeling “of having been amputated of half my history” (AS 71).

Interestingly, those bitter remarks are soon softened. The narrator realizes that succumbing too easily to the impulse to judge and condemn means that a chance for an “intellectual adventure” is renounced (AS 63). Driven by curiosity, he qualifies the initial critical response, wondering if there might not be more in the phenomena than at first admitted. The detached, masterful stance gives way to a desire to become immersed in impressions and submit to experience, followed by a brave decision to give himself up to the “thrill of Wall Street”(AS 63). As a result of the change of attitude, the narrator begins to admire the play of light and shade on the buildings, which lends “the white towers, all new and crude and commercial and over-windowed as they are, a fleeting distinction”(AS 63-4). Even the skyscraper overshadowing “poor old Trinity” is no longer merely ugly, but becomes endowed with the quality of romantic sublimity: “the vast money-making structure quite horribly, quite romantically justified itself, looming through the weather with an insolent cliff-like sublimity”(AS 65). After venturing inside one of the tall buildings, the narrator produces a suggestive image of “huge constructed and compressed communities, throbbing, through its myriad arteries and pores, with a single passion” (AS 64).

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. IX.

The paratactic stringing of alliterative phrases, apparent in the sentences quoted above, represents a strategy that evinces an impulse toward a non-masterful recreation of the scene. Unable to penetrate the surface and grasp the essence of the “monstrous phenomena” which have “got ahead of [...] any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture”, the narrator performs the opposite – the metonymic enacting of the impenetrable reality (AS 65). Momentary perceptions, registered without analysis or interpretation, convey a sense of immediacy and immersion in the world, clearly opposed to the previous mastery and detachment. It is the ubiquitous alliteration that, according to Gert Buelens, “weaves together the text in a [...] manner that is distinctly at odds with the penetrative thrust of the analysis to which that text purports to submit the American scene”<sup>6</sup>. An intellectual possession of the scene being out of reach, this linguistic strategy effects a transformation of the observed phenomena. The phrases, “crude and commercial”, “constructed and compressed communities” or “throbbing, through [...] pores [...] passion”, remain on the surface of the skyscraper impressions but, at the same time, through rhythm and alliteration, endow the recalcitrant reality with a continuity and order it manifestly lacks. To use Sharon Cameron’s words, the device reflects James’s implicit belief that “what is of value is not the apprehended object but the transforming apprehension”<sup>7</sup>. Instead of continuing to capture the phenomena in intellectual formulations, the narrator transforms his apprehension into a vision less threatening and reprehensible as it derives from being embedded in, not outside the reality.

Still, the critical impulse remains difficult to resist, which may be related to a protective function of the conventional discursive and intentional response to the modern city. In his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, written more than thirty years after James’s travelogue, Walter Benjamin argues that the conscious engagement with reality allows the city dweller to minimize the impact of overwhelming and shocking impressions, but it also results in a diminished capacity to experience life. It is due to the fact that consciousness, acting as a protective shield, prevents impressions from being integrated at a deeper level of experience. Benjamin explains: “The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one’s life (*Erlebnis*).” *Erlebnis*, in contrast to the long, coherent *Erfahrung*, is reduced to isolated moments of sensation, impressions of the moment, unassimilable into deep

<sup>6</sup> G. Buelens, *Henry James and the “Aliens”*. In *Possession of the American Scene*, Amsterdam 2002, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> S. Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*, Chicago 1991, p. 4.

experience, and leaving no memory trace<sup>8</sup>. The critical attitude of *The American Scene's* narrator, consistently with Benjamin's theory, helps to parry the shocks of reality, enacting a semblance of mastery and domination over the strange urban scene. However, it is in the immersive moments when he shies away from making categorical judgments that James embodies a non-appropriative, intentionless state of being, potentially capable of fostering true experience and reflection.

The movement from harsh criticism to the "transforming apprehension" is also visible in the narrator's response to the human scene encountered in a New York hotel. What initially strikes him at the Waldorf-Astoria is the self-sufficiency of the establishment operating according to its own laws and wholly devoted to making its guests happy. The success of the hotel management is readily apparent in the "perfect human felicity", which evokes the narrator's astonishment and envy (AS 80). All around him, in "the endless labyrinth" (AS 77) of the hotel, hundreds of people move around, sit "under palms and by fountains" in the opulent setting, obviously deriving pleasure from the performance of these collective and public "rites" (AS 81). The whole scene appears as if orchestrated by some all-American, invisible but pervasive master-spirit of management, capable of controlling and commanding the guests, while making them at the same time "think of themselves as delightfully free and easy" (AS 82).

The astounding ability of the hotel-spirit both to control and maintain the illusion of freedom is matched by its creative power. This managerial force, as James perceptively observes, does not mirror existing instincts but, as the spirit animating American capitalism, seeks to create an "insatiable desire for consumption"<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the "amazing hotel-world" (AS 78) aims not just at satisfying the desires of the public but, above all, at creating "new and superior ones". It "anticipates and plucks them forth even before they dawn" (AS 324), becoming the source of modern man's "manufactured instincts"<sup>10</sup>. The resulting social uniformity means that the scene is populated by types, mimetic selves, "merging completely with the [...] impersonal rhythms of the marketplace", devoid of individuality and incapable of mutuality<sup>11</sup>. Arguably, the ease with which people yield to the coercive force of the market has a lot to do with the vacuity of American social life, strikingly devoid of sophistication and manners. This absence, felt most acutely by the writer, seems to derive from the American perception of money as the principal value, capable of compensating for all inconveniences, including manners. Money is the shortcut on the way to social advancement, enabling Americans to achieve a higher

<sup>8</sup> W. Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, [in:] idem, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York 2007, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> R. Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity. Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*, New York and Oxford 1991, p. 265.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 266.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 274.

status without experience, education, cultural tradition or sustained effort over time. The general “American formula” the Jamesian narrator has discovered is “[t]o make so much money that you won’t, that you don’t ‘mind,’ don’t mind anything”(AS 176). For the writer, however, it is impossible not to mind the “crude displays of wealth [...] lapses in genteel behavior [...] the accents in which people speak [...] their tone of voice”<sup>12</sup>.

The narrator’s incisive observations become interrupted, as in the skyscraper analysis, by a momentary surrender to the appeal of the place. While the penetrating critique of the invisible mechanism operating behind the scenes exposes its coercive power (as well as resists its pressure), the narrator’s abandonment of the “analytic mastery” enables him “vicariously to enjoy the site’s control”<sup>13</sup>. Once the critical impulse relaxes, the hotel seems like “the golden glow in which one’s envy burned, and through which [...] one carried one’s charmed attention from one chamber of the temple to another” (AS 80). No longer able to analyze and interpret elements of the scene which become a “golden blur”, the narrator yields to the attraction of this “paradise peopled with unmistakable American shapes, yet in which, the general and the particular, the organized and the extemporized, the element of ingenuous joy below and the consummate management above, melted together and left one uncertain which of them one was, at a given turn of the maze, most admiring” (AS 81). Admiration and enjoyment replace the former need to explore and analyze, leaving the critic no longer a master of the scene, but possessed by it.

The ventures beyond analytic criticism played out in the analyzed fragments of *The American Scene* are consistent with the way James’s earlier fictions have problematized the possibility of achieving an intellectual grasp of the world and understanding of otherness, in short, the writer’s “unease with the knowing subject and with the prejudicial categories that organize the subject’s epistemological project”<sup>14</sup>. However, while in the travelogue the non-critical attitude to the observed reality is sought after and willingly embraced by the narrator, in his fictions it comes unannounced. The sudden revelation experienced by the protagonist at the end of James’s short story *A Round of Visits* releases him from the compulsion to look and judge. The experience involves a sense of being part of the world as well as a temporary disappearance of self-other dichotomy. Like in *The American Scene*, the protagonist’s response to reality shows an analogous movement from detachment to a sensibility grounded in the bodily presence and immersion in the world. The character’s shift of vision occurs when, touched by

<sup>12</sup> J. Sears, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

<sup>13</sup> G. Buelens, *Henry James’s Oblique Possession: Plottings of Desire and Mastery in The American Scene*, “PMLA” 2001 no 116.2, p. 304.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 310.

the other, he becomes, impinged upon by the world, vulnerable and opening up to another mode of knowing.

Although *A Round of Visits* has been referred to as one of “the fictional embodiments, or the fictional twins of the impressions James documented in *The American Scene*”, the main character, Mark Monteith, is no restless analyst wishing to understand the altered American reality<sup>15</sup>. An accidental observer passing through a labyrinthine hotel and New York streets, he is not driven by the opposed impulses for sensual immersion and analytical detachment. Still, he is detached – it is his feelings that distance him from the world which he observes from the outside, filtering impressions through his inner turmoil. Similarly to the autobiographical narrator of *The American Scene*, Monteith is an American returning to his country after a long absence only to discover that his meagre assets had been embezzled by a friend and relative, Phil Bloodgood. Embarking upon the eponymous “round of visits”, Monteith meets with acquaintances and friends who, much to his frustration, fail to show interest in his story or offer consolation. The incommunicable grief isolates him, causing the New York scene, especially the hotel, to appear alien and menacing – at one and the same time a prison and a phantasmagoric jungle.

Monteith’s emotional separation effects a mode of seeing where his feelings and the impact of the scene converge in a highly idiosyncratic vision of reality. Separated from the outer world by the storm and a bout of grippe, Monteith feels alienated both from the hotel and its guests. His room on the tenth floor is a “high cage”, from which he watches the raging winter blizzard<sup>16</sup>. The Pocahontas hotel, reminiscent of the establishment described in *The American Scene*, is isolated from the outside world – a self-contained, “social scene in itself” (RV 847). When Monteith eventually ventures out of his room, he is shocked by the hotel’s décor and ambience – its “extraordinary masquerade of expensive objects, [...] the heavy heat, the luxuriance, the extravagance, the quantity, the colour” – and with the guests, the “vociferous, bright-eyed, and feathered creatures [...] half smothered between undergrowths of velvet and tapestry” (RV 847). This startlingly inhuman environment is likened to “some wondrous tropical forest” through which the character passes aimlessly, unable to stop thinking about Phil (RV 847). Thus the “high cage” of his room and the “massive labyrinth” of the hotel function as architectural metaphors for Monteith’s mind locked in and revolving around

<sup>15</sup> C. Meissner, *Talking about Money: Art and Commerce in America*, [in:] *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings, London 2007, p. 275.

<sup>16</sup> H. James, *A Round of Visits*, [in:] idem, *The American Novels and Stories of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen, New York 1973, p. 845. Future references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by the abbreviation RV and page number.

itself (RV 844)<sup>17</sup>. His emotions are reflected in his perceptions, which in turn affect the observer: “the fauna and flora startled him alike, and among them his bruised spirit drew in and folded its wings” (RV 847). Through this dynamic, the objects of his perception enact his fear and isolation and, at the same time, deeply affect him, intensifying his alienation.

Implicit in Monteith’s perceptions is a criticism of American mercantile culture, even if the judgment is not intentional. His impressions of the hotel-jungle and its bird-like occupants owe their terms and analogies to the character’s emotional state, revealing at the same time his aesthetic and moral opposition to the American reality. What surfaces in Monteith’s disgust with the “great gaudy hotel” is an undisguised sense of superiority, not just in matters of taste, but also in moral perception, which is subsequently confirmed when he meets an old acquaintance, Mrs. Folliott (RV 844)<sup>18</sup>. Another victim of Phil Bloodgood’s, Mrs. Folliott is not interested in Monteith’s story, talks ceaselessly and vulgarly about her own loss, unable to rise to his “broader perceptions” (RV 848). Eventually, it becomes clear to Monteith that “she shouldn’t have the benefit of a grain of *his* vision or *his* version of what had befallen them” since “any shade of inward irony, would be Greek to Mrs. Folliott” (RV 849). In Monteith’s eyes, Mrs. Folliott, entirely preoccupied with her money, had no manners – an observation confirming his sense of superiority and distance. At the same time, he also remains blissfully unaware of inward irony – the woman’s inability to stop talking about her loss is mirrored in his own analogous obsession with Bloodgood.

Monteith’s alienation, effected in part by his emotional hurt, is also a mark of the condition of man in the modern metropolis. In his wanderings through the maze of the hotel and, later, the streets of New York, he remains detached, registering fragmentary sense impressions. They do not enter his inner experience and fail to provoke reflection or evoke associations with the past, remaining at the level of Walter Benjamin’s *Erlebnis*. As mentioned earlier, the dynamic at play here is that, while registering overwhelming or shocking impressions, the consciousness acts as a protective shield, preventing them from being integrated at a deeper level of experience. Paolo Jedlowski explains that the superficial impressions, “treated by the intellectual, conscious strata of the mind”, become divorced “from the deeper level where impressions can settle and lend themselves

<sup>17</sup> See Victoria Coulson, *Prisons, palaces, and the architecture of the imagination*, [in:] *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings, London 2007. Coulson observes that “architecture is a richly creative metaphor for James”, providing examples of fictional buildings figuring as prisons, while the movement through them functions as a metaphor for thinking (170).

<sup>18</sup> Monteith’s response to the hotel’s ugliness and conveniences resembles Mrs. Gereth’s reaction in *The Spoils of Poynton* to the “imbecilities of decoration” at Waterbath. Mrs. Gereth functions in the novel as an exponent of the superiority of taste. See: Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, London 1987, p. 35.

to the work of accumulation and association. Somehow, the impressions treated by awareness are cut off from their incorporation in the realm of *Erfahrung*: they remain ‘sterilized’ – as Benjamin states – from any further association<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, the shocking perceptions evoke implicit criticism and judgment in the traumatized protagonist, apparent in the animalistic associations – “the fauna and flora”, “vociferous, [...] and feathered creatures”. This conscious treatment neutralizes shock, but at the same time, prevents the character from engaging deeply with the world around him.

The protective aspect of *Erlebnis* is also apparent in the superficial treatment of momentary impressions that Monteith registers when he leaves the hotel to visit his old friend Mrs. Ash. The menacing urban landscape can be handled when treated as a string of superficial, fragmented, dream-like images, not followed by any association or reflection. That the impressions are paratactically strung together, intensifies the sense of fragmentation: “the void and chill”, “vague crossroads, radiations of roads to nothing”, the “long but still sketchy vista [...] of the northward Avenue, bright and bleak, fresh and harsh, rich and evident somehow” (RV 851). Monteith’s movement through the empty, inhospitable urban landscape repeats the alienating experience at the hotel, the analogy being apparent in the recurring animalistic imagery. The district in which he finds himself is “redeemed from desolation but by a passage [...] of a choked trolley-car that howled [...] beneath the weight of its human accretions” (RV 854). This grotesque image brings to mind the deformations of the expressionist paintings of the period as well as similar images in *The American Scene*<sup>20</sup>. The “pushing male crowd, moving in its dense mass” (AS 65) through the streets of New York and the “trolley-cars stuffed to suffocation” evoke a vision of alienating (not necessarily peculiarly American) modernity, threatening to engulf the individual (AS 69). The dehumanized scene is not redeemed by the human contact that Monteith has been seeking in Mrs. Ash, who is not interested in the story he wishes to tell and takes advantage of his presence to talk about her marital problems.

The human connection Monteith has been longing for occurs, quite unexpectedly, during the last and most significant encounter in his round of visits. In Monteith’s view, the visit has been designed by Providence to save him from the “cultivation of the sin of selfishness, the obsession of egotism [...] by [...] directing his attention to the claims of others” (RV 855). No longer hoping to find a sympathetic ear, Monteith decides to see Newton Winch, another gripe sufferer and a classmate he has not seen in years to render him the service he has been all day expecting from others. This apparently

---

<sup>19</sup> P. Jedlowski, *Simmel on Memory*, [in:] *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* Volume 119. *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, eds. Michael Kaern, Bernard S. Phillips, Robert S. Cohen, Dordrecht 1990, pp. 137-8.

<sup>20</sup> The painting that comes to mind is Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s “Nollendorfplatz” (1912).

selfless act he intends to perform is, however, not matched with a disinterested disposition – Monteith is anything but diverted from his obsession with Phil Bloodgood. It stirs again when the charming host, miraculously transformed from the coarse and common Winch of the past, expresses a surprising insight into his guest's state of mind: he divines that it must be due to a recent illness or a bad shock. Starved for attention and compassion, Monteith is moved to tears by this empathetic remark, but also very tense “for fear of too hysterically gushing” (RV 860). Still, he becomes emotional about Phil, and expresses a wish to help and understand his wrongdoer. Preoccupied with his ideas, Monteith fails to observe the impact of his compassion for Phil on the host. Winch warns him against seeking the embezzler, presumably, to spare him the torment of his victim's compassion. Eventually, as a result of Winch's interest in his suffering, Monteith's egotistic need to talk about himself subsides, “as if his personal case had already been *touched* by some tender hand” (RV 859, emphasis added). Evidently, the touch of the other diminishes the self-absorption that has so far dominated his vision.

Another curious effect of Winch's insightful observation is a gradual change in Monteith's perception of his host. At first sight, Winch seems immensely improved, an impression which is further intensified when he makes his touching remark – his empathy makes him appear “the most distinguished of men” to Monteith's “excited imagination” (RV 857). Soon, however, as if to highlight the unreliability of looking and judging, Monteith becomes aware of some vague quality, something other than his friend's improved appearance, which he is yet unable to identify. It is as if the touch of the other has initiated an altered mode of perception, less dependent on critical seeing and receptive to indirect stimuli. His host's body position and movements become suddenly full of significance. For the first time since Monteith's arrival, Winch appears “curiously different with his back turned [...]. Everything had changed – changed extraordinarily with the mere turning of that gentleman's back, the treacherous aspect of which its owner couldn't surely have suspected” (RV 863). Monteith's intuition is confirmed by Winch's confession – he is, like Phil Bloodgood, an embezzler of other people's money, waiting now for the police to arrest him.

The shock of the news and Winch's subsequent suicide mark the end of Monteith's self-absorption, initiating the final stage in his movement from the intellectually detached, critical perception to an embodied and immersed response to the world. When the police officer arriving at the scene asks him if he could not have prevented the accident, Monteith says that he “must practically have caused it” (RV 866). Regardless of how profound his illumination is, whether it concerns the sudden awareness of the effect of his confession on Winch, or extends to a more general perception of his responsibility – it is after all people, like himself, living comfortably in Europe off the proceeds from financial investments in America, who have created a demand for financial schemes – it

certainly involves a recognition of his participation in the observed reality. Shaken out of the obsession with Phil and the preoccupation with his own emotions, he is no longer the disembodied eyes and intellect, compelled to observe, understand and judge. The intellectual engagement with the world has given way to an immersion in reality and the realization of his mysterious implication in the lives of others.

That such insight does not result from an intentional pursuit of understanding confirms Walter Benjamin's belief that "truth is an intentionless state of being"<sup>21</sup>. The surrender of the intellect leads to another mode of seeing and knowing – the embodied response, resembling the non-intentional immersion in impressions in *The American Scene*. Benjamin's concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* which have been enlisted to comment on the character's experience, illuminate as well the change in his perceptions. The shock he undergoes seems to provide the necessary stimulus for the previously fragmented, phantasmagoric impressions to be unconsciously accessed, as in Proust's *memoire involontaire*, and transformed into a deep, reflected upon experience<sup>22</sup>. As Paolo Jedlowski explains, "in order to achieve a settlement of the contents of life as *Erfahrung*, an access of these contents themselves beyond the threshold of consciousness is necessary"<sup>23</sup>. Under the influence of the shock, "Mark took a hundred things in, it seemed to him – things of the scene, of the moment, and of all the strange moments before" (RV 866). All kinds of connections, relations and associations between the hitherto discrete and fragmentary impressions as well as between himself and others have become apparent to the character who has moved from describing to being in the world.

Indisputably, both *The American Scene* and *A Round of Visits* give voice to James's harsh criticism of American commercial culture. At the same time, as so often in James, the texts problematize the very idea of criticism and judgment. The writer's distrust of the purely intellectual way of engaging with the world and a valuation of other modes of seeing and knowing attest to his proto-modernist sensibilities echoed in, among others, later ideas of Proust and Benjamin. What emerges from James's inquiries into the nature of truth and knowledge is a belief that a detached vision and categorical, definitive judgments cannot give justice to the complexity of the world, as we are always deeply implicated in the reality. The truth intentionally pursued refuses to be captured; it is accessed in unexpected epiphanies, brought about by the abandonment

---

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in R. Posnock, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>22</sup> Marcel Proust makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory in the first volume of his *Remembrance of Things Past*. According to the writer, 'voluntary memory', being "in the service of the intellect", can retrieve information about the past, but is unable to retain any trace of the past. It is 'involuntary memory', triggered by some accidental event, that can bring back the past. See: Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, New York 1956, pp. 61-66.

<sup>23</sup> P. Jedlowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8.

of a self-interested vision, an immersion in the world and a brief erasure of the separation between the subject and object. In James's world, only those "intentionless state[s] of being" can offer fleeting glimpses of insight into the reality and the self.



**Agnieszka Gondor-Wierciach**  
Jagiellonian University

## ANA CASTILLO IN SEARCH OF HERSTORY

### Abstract

The paper discusses four novels by Chicana writer Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, *Sapogonia*, *So Far From God* and *The Guardians* which demonstrate gradual change in the author's position from a supporter of the radical feminism towards an advocate of moderate feminism. Another interest of Castillo that may be traced in her novels is the search for a counter-history of Mexican-Americans connected with their quest for identity and the deconstruction of the utopian Aztlan. In my analysis and interpretation I also focus on the issues of religious syncretism in Castillo's fiction and her attachment to parody and the grotesque, which is a tribute to her literary master: Gabriel García Márquez.

**Keywords:** Chicana literature, feminism, herstory, Latina representation, border studies, Mestizo myths

No Chicana writer is so preoccupied with the feminist perspective as Ana Castillo. For Castillo the ethnic is always connected with the feminist and the deconstruction of the static Latin American legacy, in which woman protagonists belong either to the realm of Malinchismo or Marianismo<sup>1</sup>, seems to be her primary goal. In my paper I would like to trace the artistic journey of Castillo starting from the radical feminism of her first novels (*The Mixquiahuala Letters*, *Sapogonia*, *So Far From God*)<sup>2</sup> to the moderate

---

<sup>1</sup> Malinchismo refers to a derogatory perception of women in Latin American culture as the followers of Malinche (portrayed as the one who betrayed and gave birth to an illegitimate Mestizo) and therefore does not deserve any respect and Marianismo illustrates the completely opposite perception; women are seen as the followers of Mary, Mother of God, always patient and submissive, totally devoted to family life. One of the first critics of these extreme portraits of women was Octavio Paz in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) and in later revisions of the daughters of Malinche see T.D. Rebolledo, *Women singing in the snow*, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Castillo wrote three more novels between 1993 and 2007, but they are not relevant for my paper; *My Daughter, My Son, the Eagle and the Dove* (2000) is for young readers and the remaining two (*Peel My Love Like an Onion*, 1999, and *Watercolor Women, Opaque Men*, 2005) do not focus so much on Mexican past.

feminism of *The Guardians* in which she continues recording the counter-history of those marginalized in the official discourse of history, not only women.

Critics who analyse the works of Castillo usually start from a brief summary of her literary manifesto *Massacre of the Dreamers*<sup>3</sup> in which Castillo sounds very similar to Gloria Anzaldúa and especially her idea of Mestiza, always rebellious against the patriarchal culture. This rebellion also consists of rewriting the history of Americas that leaves space for women. Thus the image of history is revisionist to the extreme (in many instances, if not all) because contemporary Mestizas construct their identity by recreating a feminist memory that is connected with regaining power. In order to regain power, they “repair” history tainted by the bias resulting from the patriarchal perspective. Individual subjectivity also needs reconfiguration because it has to encompass its hybrid and transnational aspects. Chicana identity has been destroyed or dissolved in the patriarchal version of history and its integration is possible by, among other methods, acknowledging Indian identity. Similarly as in the prose of Sandra Cisneros, Indian identity in the works of Castillo is perceived as homogenous (both writers do not refer to specific Indian tribes, but to a general category) which is visible even in the term they use, “Mexic Amerindian”, which, e.g. Benjamin D. Carson<sup>4</sup> elaborates in his article. Carson’s ideas are really useful for my interpretation because he refers to the most important philosophical and literary theories that Castillo uses both in her criticism (*Massacre*) and her fiction.

Carson starts from recalling Derrida, with whom Castillo agrees, that history is “a centered structure”<sup>5</sup> which a writer-archeologist might oppose as long as he/she does not give up in excavating a heterogeneous representation of postmodern ethnicity, i.e. in tracing counter-histories and exposing complex ethnic portraits. Carson also recalls a theory about Mestizas by Cheli Sandoval who notices that a Mestiza must alter her consciousness to be able to rebel against the dominating ideology of white representatives of Western culture. In order to do this, mixed-blood women have to get to know the system of oppression because only in this way can they work out their strategy of resistance thanks to which they can finally obtain the power necessary for protecting their autonomy. Another academic Carson refers to is Mary Louise Pratt who writes in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* that even though the colonized were not able to control the culture imposed by the colonizers, they could decide to some extent which elements of that culture they could accept and what they could use them for and this strategy might be useful for a Mestiza. Carson indicates a wider network

---

<sup>3</sup> A. Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma*, New York 1995.

<sup>4</sup> B.D. Carson, *The Chicana Subject in Ana Castillo’s Fiction and the Discursive Zone of Chicana/o Theory*, “Billingual Review” May 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

of similarities between critics and academics connecting Sandoval's and Pratt's ideas with the theory of "differential consciousness" by Sandoval and the theory of Chicano/a historical consciousness<sup>6</sup> by Emma Pérez. The latter type of consciousness was born out of rebellion against the dominating discourse, as Pérez explains:

If we divide history into these categories – colonial relations, postcolonial relations, and so on – then I would like to propose a decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history<sup>7</sup>.

According to Carson, the theory of Pérez corresponds well with that of Homi Bhabha who was the first who showed the so-called "third space" conditioning the articulation of the cultural difference. The task of Mestiza was best described by Anzaldúa, quoted by Carson:

What this means for the Chicana subject, the "new mestiza", is that she must cope by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates from a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else<sup>8</sup>.

Carson concludes that Chicana identity has more and more characteristics of post-modern and postnational identity.

In Castillo's prose transculturation also plays an important role. To explain that, Carson refers to the analysis of transculturation by Pratt<sup>9</sup> and the artist Gómez-Peña who contrasts homogenized global culture and new essentialist culture (promoting national, ethnic and gender separatism which aim at regaining cultural autonomy, regional identity and traditional values) with hybrid culture stressing the cultural, political, esthetic and sexual diversity that encompass many ethnic and linguistic traditions and many contexts of interpretation. Gómez-Peña suggests that hybrid culture is a product of history and results from the experience of nomadic migration which has become more important in postmodernism. Thus, the Mestiza position is similar to the position of an intercultural diplomat or intellectual "coyote" who smuggles ideas. A Mestiza also plays the role of a nomadic chronicler, intercultural translator and political trickster who does not accept borders, fills in the gaps, builds bridges, draws new cultural maps, reinterprets and redefines signs and symbols in order to define

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 1992.

the external borders of her culture and transgress them<sup>10</sup>. It is hard not to notice that Castillo included some of these variants of a Mestiza in her fiction which has been noticed by different literary critics.

In the article on *The Mixquiahuala Letters* Lesley Larkin<sup>11</sup> interprets the novel by relying on a feminist and post-colonial analysis focusing to some extent on the ways in which Castillo reconstructs the history of women in her fiction, i.e. herstory. I start from *The Mixquiahuala letters* because the relation between this novel and the other works of Castillo I mentioned at the beginning is similar to the relation between Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and her *Women Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo*. In *Mango*, Cisneros shows the consequences of the lack of history for Mexican immigrants in the U.S. which contributes to their sense of alienation and rootlessness and in *Caramelo* she introduces the history of immigrants to counterbalance the picture of dislocation. Similarly Castillo in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* portrays the landscape without history stigmatizing the main protagonists who desperately try to identify with alien cultures and in her later novels she includes a historical perspective which helps to understand the dilemmas of the heroines deprived of history. For that reason reading the first texts of Cisneros and Castillo without the context of their later production is challenging.

At first glance, the epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* has nothing in common with the history of Chicana/os or Latina/os, even though it registers the trip of two Chicanas to Mexico in search of their roots. The trip is far from satisfying because the main characters do not find any community with which they might have something in common, in contrast they travel as individuals who are not able to discover their own place but become more alienated because Mexico, as described by Castillo, is a patriarchal hell that leaves no space for female autonomy. What is worse, Alicia and Teresa go to Mexico because they want to escape the American culture which marginalizes them and they want to reach Mexico which they perceive as utopian, frozen in time, pre-Columbian Aztlan. Castillo deconstructs this myth brutally, simultaneously uncovering the ignorance of the travelers who imagine that Mexico hides an Indian world untouched by European colonization. Leslie Larkin is right<sup>12</sup>, when she notices that Castillo even in *Massacre* voiced her protest against such romantic treatment of the Aztec culture which was extremely patriarchal. Larkin concludes that for that reason it is absurd to expect that the identity of contemporary emancipated women might have anything in common with that of pre-Columbian women. Alicia and Teresa learn this lesson well because instead of meeting Indians of their utopia they repeatedly

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> L. Larkin, *Reading as Responsible Dialogue in Ana Castillo's the Mixquiahuala Letters*, "Melus" 2012, vol 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

meet more or less ostentatious machos who try to reduce them to sexual objects. It is difficult not to agree with Larkin that, in this case, the journey to one's place of origin does not bring satisfaction of reaching an inspiring homeland<sup>13</sup>. This mythologized Mexico created by the American/Chicana tourists is not only a country with a simplified pre-Columbian culture but it is also a place devoid of colonial and neocolonial history. It is a Mexico from tourist brochures, a Mexico canonized in pop culture. The authentic Mexico has been affected by centuries of imperial influences which sanctified relationships based on exploitation and violence. In order to challenge this oppressive space it is necessary to work out a fluid identity which helps to combine the past with the present and find a counterbalance for historical abuses. Therefore Castillo's protagonists cannot just become daughters of the Mixquiahuala region, but they have to identify with Mexican folk culture and the culture of the U.S. which enriches the novel with transcultural themes. As Larkin points out<sup>14</sup>, in this way Castillo warns us against defining identity through the prism of static gender or cultural notions which is emphasized not only on the level of the content of the novel, but also its form. While reading we get confronted exclusively with the letters of the protagonists that Castillo proposes to read in three possible sequences (paying homage to Cortázar's *Hopscotch*). They in turn lead us towards three types of interpretations. In this way the readers can cooperate in deciphering the meaning of the novel and through this interactive reading become aware that the context is crucial in the interpretation of identity and personality; Larkin notices that depending on the sequence of reading the characters become different women, once conservative, once cynical and once mad. This engagement of the reader is particularly important in the context of ethnic literatures, Larkin writes<sup>15</sup>, which become prone to a "tourist" interpretation without the reader's involvement. "Dialogic" reading is therefore an ethical interpretative practice.

In the novel *Sapogonia* there is a bigger focus on history than in the first novel by Castillo, but it is worth emphasizing that what distinguishes her works is a mixing of historical facts with totally fictitious events and processes; visible even in the title (*Sapogonia* is an invented country very similar to Mexico). The novel is no historical reconstruction, even though historical references or allusions are important. This strategy of Castillo makes the novel more universal and enables to sustain the distance between the reader and the fictional world. In my opinion, it is important at this point to take into account the literary tradition which inspired Castillo and might help us to understand what effects she wanted to achieve. As she often remarked, one of the writers who truly impressed her was Gabriel García Márquez and it is really difficult not to

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

notice some affinity between the grotesque world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*<sup>16</sup> and other works of the Colombian author and some works of Castillo. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is especially helpful in the analysis of *Sapogonia* because it also tells the story of the colonization of America on the basis of fictional Macondo, the space in which the probable merges with the fantastic. The same intertwining of the real and the magical takes place in *Sapogonia* and *So Far From God*, what Castillo additionally shares with Márquez is the grotesque characterization of the protagonists who are both archetypes and individualities and the position of the narrator who reports miracles in a language full of realistic accuracy and is never shocked or surprised. Like in Márquez's prose, in Castillo's fictional history blends with myth, and elite culture blends with a popular one and everything is possible thanks to the style of the invincible storyteller whose art is a homage to oral literature.

This introduction into the strategies that stand behind the creation of fictional Sapogonia would not be complete without noticing the elements that go beyond Márquez's legacy and these are connected with feminist and Chicano issues. The latter elements are visible mainly on the level of content. In her novel Castillo introduces the character of Máximo Madrigal, who came to the U.S. from Sapogonia and having forgotten his Indian roots, chose the American Dream as his main goal in life. The punishment for the denial of his tradition is a subsequent degeneration of Madrigal who gradually loses his integrity and becomes an even bigger Macho abusing women and ruining all relationships. Castillo counterbalances this character with two feminine figures: Mamá Grande and Pastora Ake, the former Madrigal's grandmother and the latter his lover who are faithful to the Indian tradition. Mamá Grande lives in Sapogonia and Pastora is a woman Madrigal meets in the U.S. so their ties with the Indian tradition are different. The grandmother is a Mexican traditionalist who represents the indigenous legacy of this country and the lover is an illustration of the New Mestiza concept that I have already discussed. They share a belief in the need to achieve harmony between the material and the spiritual which Castillo juxtaposes with the patriarchal tradition of the U.S. and Sapogonia. According to the followers of the patriarchal tradition this kind of balance cannot be reached. Pastora is called Coatlicue<sup>17</sup> by Madrigal exactly because she can combine the extremities such as life and death, beauty and horror. She is also a witch ("la bruja") who has a matriarchal power at her disposal. In Castillo's prose one can thus see an analogy to the way in which Sandra Cisneros used Mexican syncretic myths, as Tey Diana Rebolledo noticed in her study<sup>18</sup>. "Syncretic" because they encompass not only pre-Colombian tradition but also these mythical qualities

<sup>16</sup> G.G. Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. G. Rabassa, New York 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Coatlicue was the Aztec goddess of the Earth, see e.g. [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)

<sup>18</sup> T.D. Rebolledo, *Women Singing In the Snow*, Tucson 1995.

that Coatlicue develop during colonization as a result of contact with Western culture. Similarly as in Cisneros' prose, feminine versions of Coatlicue in Castillo are characterized by rebellion against the imposed order (the patriarchal culture) and they use different strategies aimed at the destruction of the oppressive system. Modern Coatlicues never accept the roles the system imposes on women and the result of their attitude is a war between the model of a passive Virgin of Guadalupe (marianismo) and an awareness of her power as Coatlicue. Finally, the latter wins because Pastora defeats Madrigal and deconstructs the patriarchal world.

The question of interplay between history and fiction is also a focus of the article by Joy M. Lynch<sup>19</sup>, who shows the connections between the novel of Castillo and the history of the Southwest. Repeated loss of land resulted in identity problems, best exemplified by Madrigal, the man for whom the broken tie with tradition is a first step towards auto-destruction. Lynch agrees with other scholars that the most traumatic year was 1848, the year of the Guadalupe Hidalgo treaty which forced Southwest Mexicans to become a part of the U.S. Lynch writes:

At that historical moment in 1848 when all Mexican nationals in the conquered borderlands overnight "became" United States citizens, 'the Mexican Americans were created *as a people*: Mexican by birth, language and culture; and United States citizens by the might of arms' (Rodolfo Alvarez qtd in Saldivar 17). So how does that subject survive in exile? Divested in nationhood and reinvested with new loyalties, the wanderer claims or feels claimed by no nation and bears the emotional costs for losing placement in history and in time<sup>20</sup>.

In this way Mexican Americans broke the bond with the landscape, like in the case of Native Americans, but for Latinos the landscape was a familiar place, as Lynch puts it, familiarized by the anthropocentric impulse to give it a name that reflects its value and usefulness for the people who inhabit it<sup>21</sup>. In this frame location is a human property, a homeland and the process of naming is never objective. Ethnic writers often explore the relationships between geography and identity because the way of perceiving one's place in the world usually reveals identity dilemmas exposed by post-colonialism. As the scholar explains: "For the displaced, the sense of "belonging" becomes disguised, concealed or hidden behind borrowed words, gestures, and silences that form the language of identity"<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Lynch, *A Distinct Place in America Where All Mestizos Reside*: *Landscape and Identity in Ana Castillo's Sapogonia and Diane Chang's The Frontiers of Love*, "Melus" 2001, vol. 26, no. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p.120.

<sup>21</sup> There is a difference between the Native American and Latino/a and Euro-American attitude to landscape which has been best described by Leslie Marmon Silko's in her essays *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit*, New York 1996.

<sup>22</sup> J.M. Lynch, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

Joy M. Lynch devotes lots of space for the rhetoric of the colonizers who, right from the moment of reaching America, started to create a coherent myth to sanction the conquest. Lynn points out that, from the beginning, this vision was a masculine vision because it was, in majority, men who “discovered” and “conquered” the American continents.

The frontier has always been presented as an encounter between civilization and barbarity and what it is worth emphasising that the landscape has been repeatedly feminized and sexualized which resulted from colonizing impulses. Thus, the American land was a “Virgin Land”<sup>23</sup> that had to be won in order it to stop it from being wild and so it could bear fruit for the colonizers. Lynch gives many examples of this rhetoric referring to feminist research focused on certain transformations in the analogies between the American land and the female body. According to the critic, in the description of the American soil one can see a gradual transition from the vision of the wild Virgin Land transformed by the strong conqueror’s hands into a pastoral paradise. What is more, this last image has also evolved into the vision of the American soil as a wasteland ruined by industrialization. In all these concepts the American land is compared to a woman responsible for its own destruction because, just like a women, the land seduced the explorers<sup>24</sup>. This rhetoric is dangerous because in each of these cases the real reasons of exploitation are veiled and history is falsified by the suggestion that Americas were nobody’s land.

Lynch claims that Madrigal is a perfect example of the colonial product and he represents a man lost by following the rhetoric of America’s conquerors. Madrigal rejects Sapogonia to profit from the materialistic American culture. Introducing this character into the novel Castillo recalls the myth of the conquistador who is only interested in the exploitation of the soil and women; treated as subjects. Thus, as Lynch quotes from the novel, Madrigal is “the Cortes of every vagina he crossed”<sup>25</sup>.

Lynch is also right when she notices that right from the beginning of the novel geographical space is used as a pretext to speak about the inner condition of Castillo’s characters. We understand that Madrigal is torn inside because he comes from Sapogonia characterized as:

[...] is besieged by the history of slavery, genocide, immigration and civil uprisings, all of which have left their marks on the genetic make-up of the generation following such periods as well as the border outline of its territory<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 160.

<sup>26</sup> A. Castillo, *Sapogonia*, New York 1990, p. 1.

and we realize that it is a space that all ethnic minorities share. Madrigal is a fallen Mestizo, Lynn concludes, because he renounces his identity (selling it sometimes) and he undergoes “self-colonization”<sup>27</sup> by eliminating Sapogon elements from his identity. Sexual conquests help him to create a fake identity that could compensate for his inner emptiness. Everything complicates when Pastora stands in his way because she intrigues him with her power and mystery. His obsession with Pastora is, according to Lynch, proof that Madrigal knows nothing about himself and he knows to know everything about Pastora and starts to perceive her as Coatlicue which drives him crazy. Thus Madrigal’s encounter with the past is nothing more than a haunting by suppressed memories that cannot lead to regeneration. Pastora, in contrast, can profit from tradition and overcome the historical trauma of a Mestizo (she is a Mestiza fortunately).

In this way Castillo, similarly to Sandra Cisneros for example, reinforces the matrilineal perspective by writing a counter-history of America in which it is women who take control over reality by transforming the tradition in a way that makes continuation possible without sacrificing one’s cultural heritage and Madrigal pays a high price for the denial of the Mestizo identity and the performance in his ‘conquistador costume’. Castillo does not write a revisionist version of history by altering the facts from the official history but incorporates simultaneous narratives about the past forcing us to observe the process of creating such stories as other postmodernists do. Her novels are kinds of games with the reader who is the last interpreter of sense and has to negotiate between different versions of the same story. To achieve this affect of a reader’s empowerment, Castillo creates distance between the reader and the presented world, among other ways, by hyperbolic and grotesque characterization. Her Madrigal resembles, to a great extent, Márquez’s Aureliano Buedía, a famous arch-macho of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and her Pastora is his counterpart by posing as an arch-witch. For that reason the identification of the reader with the characters is absolutely impossible, similarly as in the case of the novel *So Far From God*, which I would like to analyze now.

As Roland Walter<sup>28</sup> writes, in the novel *So Far From God* the reader is faced with a complete vision of the world governed by women who grow into power. The main protagonists of the novel: Sofia, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe and Loca from New Mexican town Tome are types rather than individualities (or flat rather than round characters). Thus Castillo shows a fusion of the individual and communal experience of female representatives of the country about which Porfirio Díaz once said is: “So far from God, so near the United States”. The context of these words is connected with the annexation of a vast territory of Mexico by the U.S. in the first half of the 19th century

<sup>27</sup> J.M. Lynch, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> R. Walter, *The Cultural Politics of Dislocation and Rrelocation in Ana Castillo’s Novels*, “Melus” 1998, vol. 23, no. 1.

which links the novel with a historical context important for *Sapogonia* and makes it political. The heroines of *So Far From God* do not live in the 19th century, but in the 20th and their activity denies the stereotype about the passivity of Mexican women and men (more on the stereotype can be found in an article by Carlos R. Herrera)<sup>29</sup>. This activism only guarantees survival to some; the war with the cultural imperialism of the U.S. takes the lives of all Sofi's daughters. As Walter<sup>30</sup> points out, the community of women created by Castillo is a utopian project which aim is to prevent the loss of identity, gradual assimilation and Americanization. It is a discourse of radical liberation completing the quest initiated in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, the novel exposing the consequences of displacement and continued in *So Far From God* where Castillo shows the stages of relocation, which also might be interpreted as search for identity through individual and collective history culminating in finding one's place in the ethnic group. As Walter explains: "The politics of dislocation and relocation, seen as the political unconscious of the novels, instantiate counter-hegemony in the Chicano borderlands through an affirmation of otherness – an otherness not imposed but recreated"<sup>31</sup>. Castillo reconstructs Indian roots for her characters and the result of it is their historical and political awakening. The new Mestiza, according to Walter, is able to transform cultural practices in a way that liberates and empowers her.

The most important question for me is how Castillo creates her revolution through literary strategies. B.J. Manriquez<sup>32</sup> points out the use of oral tradition by Castillo who introduces the narrator *Mitotera*, in a Mexican context associated with a "know-it-all nosy neighbour". The language of *Mitotera* is ungrammatical, full of exaggeration and stereotypes, reflecting her prejudice and bias. In my opinion, it again resembles the achievement of Castillo's literary master Márquez who repeatedly admitted that writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would not have been possible without reconstructing the language of his grandmother from Aracataca who always blended the real with the fantastic in a fluid way. The difference stems from the fact that Márquez's language is grammatical, but still the narrators of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *So Far From God* seem to be related, just as the presentations of the fictional worlds full of parody and irony. Manriquez does not take this comparative context into consideration, but notices Castillo's love of the absurd which the critic explains by her motives. According to the scholar, Castillo does not want to reform the world which is so degraded that

---

<sup>29</sup> Carlos R. Herrera, *New Mexico Resistance to U.S. Occupation During the Mexican-American War of 1846-48* in *The Contested Homeland: a Chicano History of New Mexico*, ed. by Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David R. Maciel, Albuquerque 2000.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> B.J. Manriquez, *Ana Castillo's So Far From Go: Intimations of the Absurd*, "College Literature" 2002, vol. 29, no. 2.

it cannot be understood or improved, but by portraying the absurdity of the situation with which Chicanas are faced, Castillo concludes that it must be some type of cosmic joke<sup>33</sup>. The biggest paradox in the situation of Mexican-Americans is that neither denial nor acceptance of Mestizo heritage can guarantee success in the Anglo-Saxon world. Fortunately, Castillo does not succumb to the rhetoric of the absurd and in her novel she shows that even if society is absurd, life is not. That is why Sofi is able to live after the death of her daughters. The recipe for achieving success, despite the tragedy, is combining folklore, Catholicism and feminism into a new ideology that can challenge the negative power of the patriarchal culture.

What specific elements constitute the feminist resistance ideology in *So Far From God*? The answers to this question have been partially provided by Ralph E. Rodríguez<sup>34</sup> and Daniel Cooper Alcarón<sup>35</sup>. Both critics refer to religious syncretism included by Castillo in the novel, which is of course connected with the historical context of colonialism.

Rodríguez also finds it important to point out to the development of the history of Chicano literature. He distinguishes two phases of this literature in the U.S., the first initiated by the Chicano movement in the years 1966-1972 whose main motive was to retrieve Aztlán as a homeland, and the second, also known as the New Wave of Chicano literature the scholar dates as starting from 1984. These two phases differ by the intentions of the writers, the first wave Rodríguez calls “resistance literature” and the second “contestation literature”, the latter stressing more the awareness of the loss of historical sense and a disintegration of subjectivity. The antidote for the loss of sense is a return to the past.

Rodríguez<sup>36</sup> sees the precursors of this way of thinking about America in the writers and poets of the second half of the 19th century such as Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson and Melville, who resurrected collective American memory. According to the scholar Ana Castillo has a similar goal in mind when in *So Far From God* she tries to recapture the collective memory of Latinos, as in the U.S. In my opinion, this conclusion might be extended to all ethnic writers who do this work for the sake of their groups, e.g. Toni Morrison for African-Americans, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie and James Welch for Native Americans or Cristina García for Cuban-Americans. Rodríguez continues his analysis stating that in *So Far From God* Castillo returns to the past in order to find a myth that would not diminish the role of women. This impulse of recreating past

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> R. E. Rodríguez. *Chicano/a Fiction from Resistance to Contestation: the Role of Creation in So Far From God*. “Melus” 2000, vol. 25, no. 2.

<sup>35</sup> D. Cooper Alcarón, *Literary Syncretism in Ana Castillo's So Far From God: Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, University of Arizona 2000

<sup>36</sup> R. E. Rodríguez, *op. cit.*

mythology is similar to which inspired the writers of American romance literature, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, but the form of Castillo's novel is entirely different, most often described as anti-romance.

Castillo herself admits that a doctrinal reading of the Bible and the conservative teaching of the Church contribute greatly to the suppression of women by forcing them into submission and for this reason, Rodríguez notices, one of the goals of her writing is to show a syncretic alternative for orthodox Catholicism which will enable a deconstruction of the oppressive system. As a proof of the incorporation of this strategy in *So Far From God* the scholar gives the story of the Black Christ that Castillo retells in one of the sub-plots.

The figure of the Black Christ, called *Nuestro Señor de Esquipúlas* is a story connected with Caridad, Sofi's daughter who becomes a follower of the syncretic religion. Rodríguez notices<sup>37</sup> that kind of transformation of Eurocentric Christianity is a powerful tool for many post-colonial authors. I agree with this remark, but I would like to emphasize the fact that even before postmodernist interest in religious syncretism it was used by many Latin American novelists which, similarly to Márquez, might be a more important source of inspiration than U.S., European or African authors. Syncretism in Latin American masterpieces of the XXth century (e.g. in *Balún Canán* by Rosario Castellanos, *Deep Rivers* by José Marii Arguedas, *Lituma in the Andes* by Mario Vargasa Llosa, *People of the Maize* by Miguel Ángel Asturias or *Son of Man* by Augusto Roa Bastos) plays a similar role like in the novel by Castillo, i.e. it becomes a source of the subversion of the colonized characters. The novel by Roa Bastos is particularly important here because it also tells the story of the cult of the Black (and Leprous) Christ which united 20<sup>th</sup> century Guaranís in their resistance against the official Catholic Church.

The analysis of Rodríguez<sup>38</sup> uses the story of the Black Christ who probably came from the region of contemporary Guatemala, from a place called Esquipúlas. What is interesting is the fact that the carving of the figure was ordered by Spanish conquistadors in 1594 and the artifact was put in a local church in 1595. The figure was traveling as the conquest was spreading and in 1595, Don Juan de Oñate brought its replica to the territory temporarily called New Mexico where its cult has continued up to the present. Thus Castillo does not invent a new syncretism but uses one that is historically grounded.

Another mythical reference that is a constituent of the religious syncretism of the characters in *So Far From God* comes from the creation myths of Acoma Pueblo Indians. In the novel it is Caridad who is looking for a pan-Indian religion and decides that

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem.*

apart from the Black Christ it should include Tsichtintako, the heroine from Pueblo oral literature. Rodríguez and other critics are right in concluding that the myth of Tsichtintako also functions as a counter-narrative opposed to patriarchal Catholicism. The Pueblo myth is indeed a part of matrilineal tradition and has nothing in common with the myth of the biblical Eve who is blamed for the fall of the human race. Rodríguez writes<sup>39</sup> that this contrast between the Pueblo and Christian myth is crucial because Castillo herself remarked in *The Massacre of the Dreamers* that the biblical story of Eve is a tale about taking autonomy from women. The choice of Tsichtintako, the woman who, together with her daughters, filled the earth with plants and animals in the Pueblo creation story is a complete reversal of the Book of Genesis story where it is a man who has the power to create, and a woman (Eve) who causes auto-destruction through her disobedience. In Castillo's novel *Caridad* and her partner Esmeralda participate in an act of creation when they jump into "the womb of the Earth" to meet Tsichtintako. This act is interpreted as a sacrifice that makes the fulfillment of the Tsichtintako myth possible and it is also an escape from a world that does not provide many opportunities for independent women. Additionally, it is, however paradoxical it sounds, the happiest death in the novel, because other sisters die in miserable conditions, e.g. Fe dies of cancer after working in a toxic American factory and Esperanza dies as a war correspondent sacrificed by her American bosses. The proof that the death of *Caridad* and *Esmeralda* is happier comes from the novel:

But much to all their surprise, there were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground, down, down, like bad pottery or old bread. There weren't even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing.

Just the spirit deity Tsichtintako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back not out towards the sun's rays or up to the clouds, but down, deep, within the soft, moist dark earth where *Esmeralda* and *Caridad* would be safe and live forever<sup>40</sup>.

The analysis of *So Far From God* by Daniel Cooper Alcarón completes the study of religious and literary syncretism of that novel<sup>41</sup>. Alcarón notices that apart from referring to Indian myths, the novel contains many intertextual references to the Bible, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, hagiographies, Catholic legends and American-Mexican folk tales. Simultaneously, Alcarón, just as Rodríguez did, grafts myths onto history, proving in that way that the goal of Castillo is not an interplay with multicultural motives but a strengthening of the rhetoric of resistance against colonial and neocolonial practices, the genesis of which is clear when one refers to history. The proof of using

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> A. Castillo, *So Far From God*, New York 1993, p. 211.

<sup>41</sup> D. Cooper Alcarón, *op. cit.*

this strategy is the fact that Castillo incorporates into her plot the character of Malogra, the monster from New Mexican folklore, who in *So Far From God* approaches Loca in her dream and later brutally rapes Caridad. Alcarón points out<sup>42</sup> that the image of Malogra in Loca's dream comes from a folklore version, but Malogra attacking Caridad is Castillo's transformation of the traditional monster because it not only rapes but also tries to devour Caridad. The critic concludes that through this transformation Castillo manages to introduce the plot of the Spanish conquest and colonization, which can be supported by other critical interpretations to which Alcarón refers and by the excerpt from the novel:

It was not a stray and desperate coyote either, but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that made be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never forget it, it was pure force<sup>43</sup>.

Alcarón agrees with those scholars who interpret this fragment as an allusion to the conquest, adding that this way the cruel rape of Caridad is not presented as a historical anomaly but as a part of the ruthless conquest of Indians in America. Similarly, Alcarón finds historical context for other events from the novel, this time not through the interpretation of the mythical beast but by referring to specific historical events that Castillo incorporated into her novel. The critic concentrates particularly on Fe. As I have already mentioned, Fe dies of cancer, which was a result of her poisoning while working in an American factory. Alcarón makes a connection between this plot and the events that took place at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s in one factory of the IBM concern where workers were also exposed to toxins (and this information was kept secret just like in the story of Fe) and many of them died of different forms of cancer. Taking into account that Esperanza dies in the Persian Gulf and Loca dies of AIDS after a blood transfusion, Alcarón concludes that in this way Castillo consistently shows the abuses of the imperial culture of the U.S., a country Castillo repeatedly portrays as full of violence and chaos. The antidote is the activity of Sofi after the death of her daughters who finds enough energy to create MOMAS, a society for mothers and consolidates her local community by creating a new ideology based on the myths of Saint Joan and La Llorona<sup>44</sup>.

Castillo plays with historical and mythological plots mixing them in the way that they become new syncretic versions of old stories and these hybrids take into ac-

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

<sup>44</sup> D. Cooper Alcarón, *op. cit.*

count a matriarchal tradition. The author of *So Far From God* and *Sapogonia* is not interested in balancing the female and male perspective because her ultimate goal is complete deconstruction of the patriarchal culture because **history** so far has left no place for **herstory**. When one takes this strategy as a trademark of Castillo, one might be surprised by her last novel *The Guardians* which, in my opinion is a departure from radical feminism.

It is hard to find in this novel a strong feminist commitment or grotesque characterization so typical for Castillo's earlier fiction. In *The Guardians*, Castillo puts parody and intertextuality aside and instead presents a realistic story about contemporary New Mexico and the drama of Mexicans and Americans divided by the border. What makes it similar to other works by Castillo, is its social and political criticism of the imperial policy of the U.S., although the presentation of borderline reality is far more subtle than in *Sapogonia*. In *The Guardians*, Castillo additionally managed to construct psychologically convincing characters that escape easy judgment because they complex individualities and not types or archetypes. The main protagonist is Regina, a single independent woman bringing up her teenage nephew Gabo whose father Rafa disappeared while being smuggled by coyotes through the Mexican-American border. Other important characters are Miguel, a divorced schoolteacher who helps Regina and Gabo to find Rafa and Miguel's grandfather Milton who becomes one's of Gabo's guardians. The novel again takes place in a small New Mexican town and on the level of form it consists of first-person narrations of the above-mentioned characters. The most striking is probably Gabo's part because they are letters to Father Pio (Gabo wants to become a priest). Milton's narrative is important for different reasons, it gives the novel a historical dimension. By using Spanglish, Milton reconstructs the history of New Mexico in a microscale, from a small town perspective, proving repeatedly that the violence that characterizes this region now has always been present in the borderline area. As he explains:

Legend has it that in the Wild West days, Wyatt Earp come by here before he went to Tombstone and found it too wild for him. All kinds of desperadoes passed through El Chuco looking for refuge. The gunslinger John Wesley Hardin is buried over in the Chinese graveyard. Los chinos were building railroads back in them days.

It's still pretty wild around here. Maybe no more than other places in the world. Just yesterday, a man got shot in broad daylight. He worked for a car dealership. He was shot by a woman. Her brother was driving the getaway car. [...]

I seen a lot during all my years of owning a cantina. Las viejas can be just vicious as any man. N'hombre. You gotta watch las güisas, también. Once a woman slit her man's throat, just like that, with a kitchen knife. Right in front of me<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> A. Castillo, *The Guardians*, New York 2007, pp. 128-129.

Milton consistently shows changing American presidents and technical novelties that were supposed to “civilize” the people in the region, but the constant presence of violence leaves no doubts that the frontier world has remained wild. El Chuco is a place that magnetically attracts men fascinated by violence who become even more dangerous at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century when they engage in drug and human trafficking. Milton is aware of this dangerous historical continuity and in the conclusion of his story admits that he is happy that almost all of his children have left the place. Milton knows the place and its inhabitants so well that he is the first who predicts Gabo’s tragedy; the old man unmistakably recognises the murderous instinct of the gang member Tiny Tears, who later kills Gabo as a result of his unrequited love.

Despite the drama, Regina decides not to abandon El Chulo and even adopts the child Tiny Tears leaves behind. Miguel also does not fall into despair and takes care of his children and their mother who had been raped by a gang of criminals involved in drug trafficking. Showing a male character who is capable of empathy and makes mature decisions is a breakthrough in Castillo’s prose and it is proof of liberation from the radical and sometimes naïve rhetoric of her earlier novels. For the first time, in my opinion, the past has not been used exclusively to speak about the abuses of the patriarchal culture, about the burden of the **history**. The past, accessible to the reader through the relations of Milton and partially through the stories of Regina and Miguel is not only the space contaminated by the patriarchal violence. Even Milton, the eldest and the most conservative out of the three narrators, emphasises the actions of violent women who influenced the history of the frontier, proving in this way that men had no monopoly on violence and cruelty. Milton’s observations finally get confirmed in Gabo’s story. In this way the discourse acknowledging historical contexts is well-balanced and his goal is not opening old wounds, but convincing the readers that violence, no matter if it comes from men or women, ruins the possibility of a decent co-existence of the inhabitants of the Mexican-American border. In this aspect, the character of Regina plays a very important role because she is the first strong female in Castillo’s prose who is not a literary illustration of the New Mestiza theory, but a person of flesh and blood.

What is more, in *The Guardians* Castillo creates a much subtler counter-discourse against Catholic ideology than in her earlier novels. It is particularly visible at the level of the title and the angelic motive in the book. The “guardian” is not just a “protector” but also a “guardian angel”; in the novel, the men around Regina have the names of angels: her brother is Raphael, her nephew Gabriel and her lover Miguel. Even though they have the names of the most powerful angels from the Christian tradition, they do not protect Regina but she has to protect them and she partially fails when she loses two of them to drug gangs. Castillo also makes us appreciate the male perspective in

the story of Miguel's transformation, who changes from an egoist into an altruist and has an important part to play in Regina's story when he starts to deserve his name by becoming a true guardian angel of his family. Through such solutions Castillo proves that she is a novelist who does not only deconstruct the contested space but is capable of creating something new in a frontier world struck by another "apocalypse" giving us hope that the reconstruction of history does not have to lead to digging up buried antagonisms, but might become a lesson of responsibility without sentimentalism and pathos.



**Magda Mansour Hasabelnaby**  
Ain Shams University

## **HYBRID IMAGINATION: A STUDY OF MOHJA KAHF'S *EMAILS FROM SCHEHERAZAD* *AND THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF***

### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to investigate the hybrid imagination in selected works by Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American poet (born 1967, Damascus, Syria). The term hybrid imagination is coined by the researcher drawing on both 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism and the contemporary post-colonial theory. Kahf's attempts at cultural reconciliation and human understanding are fraught with both pains and pleasures. Yet her ability to foster her hybrid imagination seems to allow her to choose a "Third Space" between two roads. The road not taken by Kahf is the essentialist position of identity which is either "purely Arab" or "entirely and exclusively American". Her novel and her poetry, as this paper attempts to investigate, seem to open "a Third Space" for both the poet and her readers, and to create a Utopia which poetry can sanction and publicize. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, and on earlier definitions of the imagination by the Romantics, the paper will attempt to explore Kahf's mechanisms (conscious or otherwise) which help open up and maximize such third space.

**Keywords:** Arab-American literature, hybridity, post-colonial literature, moslem women writers, Mohja Kahf

Mohja Kahf (1967- ) is an Arab American writer who was born in Damascus, Syria. She was three years old when her parents left Damascus in 1971 for the United States. Currently, she is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and a creative writer with many works to her name. "Hybrid Imagination", I argue in this paper, is the lens through which Kahf sees the world and represents it to her readers in her poetry and prose. The paper begins by an explanation of this key term "hybrid imagination", clarifying its two components: "imagination" and "hybrid", then moves to its application to the works of the writer, and to an investigation of how it shapes her oeuvre and fine-tunes her vision.

Two works by Kahf are selected for analysis: a collection of poetry *Emails from Scheherazad* (2001), and a novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and "the Third Space", and on John J. Su's study *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (2011), I have coined the term "Hybrid Imagination", as it captures best what Kahf and her readers are achieving or rather experiencing in her poetry and fiction.

## Imagination

Imagination is often associated with 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism when it used to be regarded as the chief creative faculty, a "synthetic and magical power" responsible for invention and originality<sup>1</sup>. Romantic writers have often identified imagination as genius, inspiration, taste, visionary power, and prophecy ("Imagination"). For William Hazlitt, the imagination is "that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are molded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power"<sup>2</sup>. These characteristics of the imagination seem to be applicable to Kahf's poetry and fiction; however, recent rediscoveries of the concept are even more relevant.

In spite of a recent distrust of the imagination in modern literary theory, John J. Su's book *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* reestablishes the value of this mental faculty as an epistemological tool. Building on writings by the contemporary philosopher Richard Kearney, and on recent works by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, Su argues that the imagination in a work of art could function as what Appadurai calls "a social practice" and not simply an individual activity<sup>3</sup>. Releasing the imagination from its historical misconceptions, Appadurai asserts:

No longer mere fantasy [...] simple escape [...] elite pastime [...] and no longer mere contemplation, the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work [...] The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order<sup>4</sup>.

Imagining is strongly needed to counter what Russel Jacoby calls an "age of extreme visualization"<sup>5</sup>. Su, therefore claims that, "[i]f ideology involves conditioning the empirical senses to take certain images as more real than others, then the imagination's

<sup>1</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* I, [in:] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol. 7, no. 1., Princeton 1983, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> W. Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets. Lecture IV*, Delivered at the Surrey Institution, London 1818, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Su, *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel*, Cambridge 2011, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> A. Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, London 1996, p.31.

<sup>5</sup> R. Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-utopian Age*, New York 2005, p. xvi.

unique status as a mediator between the senses and cognition makes it crucial to recognition and understanding<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, contemporary artists consistently retain faith in the power of the imagination: Doris Lessing in her 2007 Nobel lecture claims: "It is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, and create us – [...]. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix that represents us at our best and at our most creative"<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Chinua Achebe views imagining as a means through which individuals are provided with a "second handle on existence"<sup>8</sup>, and reach "the closest approximation to experience that [they] are ever likely to get"<sup>9</sup>. As such imagination can serve as a tool through which the colonizer could sympathize with the colonized. Imagination was also crucial to another influential African writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, for whom the writer of a novel is "totally immersed in a world of imagination which is other than his conscious self. At his most intense and creative the writer is transformed, he is possessed, he becomes a medium"<sup>10</sup>.

## Hybridity

In colonial discourse, hybridity was a term of abuse for those who are products of miscegenation and mixed-breeds. It is instilled in nineteenth-century scientific-racism<sup>11</sup>. Linguist and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin was the first to use the term to suggest the positive, yet "disruptive and transforming power of multivocal language situations and, by extension, of multivocal narratives"<sup>12</sup>. In a post-colonial context, however, the term has come to be: "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to 'negotiate the difference'"<sup>13</sup>.

Bakhtinian and post-colonial senses of hybridity are complementary. M. M. Bakhtin defines hybridization as:

[A] mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic

<sup>6</sup> J. J Su, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> D. Lessing, *Nobel Lecture*, Nobelprize.org, Nobel Media AB 2013. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture.html) [access February 2, 2015].

<sup>8</sup> C. Achebe, *Hope and Impediments: Selected Essays*, New York, 1989, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> N. Wa Thiong O., *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, London 1972, p. xv.

<sup>11</sup> R. J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London 1995, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*, London 2000, p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> A. Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World: the New Political Economy of Development*, Baltimore 1997, p. 158.

consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.<sup>14</sup>

Homi Bhabha adopts the Bakhtinian concept of hybridity to the condition of post-colonialism. He applies the subversive quality of the dialogic moment to the interaction and the narratives taking place between colonizers and colonized; “Black” and “White”; “Self” and “Other”. He thus subverts earlier static notions of identity and goes beyond fixed models of national identity and “rootedness”. In the *Location of Culture*, Bhabha, who is himself a migrant, advocates novel ways of thinking about identity as developing from “the great history of languages and landscapes of migration and diaspora”<sup>15</sup>. The introductory chapter of this book, entitled “Locations of Culture” expounds many ideas about culture, identity, fiction and the role of the critic which are relevant to the present research.

Bhabha’s concept of hybridity discards the idea that culture is fixed or “pure”. Instead, cultural identities are continually transforming and incorporating an array of influences. Cultures are constantly interacting with one another, in a constant historical process. Bhabha believes that:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural meaning is therefore created in a “Third Space” that exists on the borderlands between perceived oppositional identities. Although the concept of the “Third Space” has broad transcultural applicability, John Thieme points out, it has a particular colonial and postcolonial relevance<sup>17</sup>. Searching for a space of resistance that would undermine the authority of colonial control, Bhabha resorts to the potential of hybridity to create that space through linguistic ambivalence. For Bhabha, however, a hybrid writer does not only “invade, alarm, divide and dispossess, [but] also demonstrate the contemporary compulsion to move beyond; to turn the present into the ‘post’; or, [...] to touch the future on its hither side”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin 2008, p. 358.

<sup>15</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 235.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> J. Thieme, *Post-colonial Studies*, London 2003, p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

For Bhabha, the “Third Space” is a space of both intervention and invention, which allows history to proceed “*beyond* the instrumental hypothesis”<sup>19</sup>. Within this invention and intervention process, hybrid fiction writers often resort to what Bhabha terms the “unhomely moment”: Following Freud’s definition of the “unheimlich” as “everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light”<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, a few pages later, Bhabha makes the following statement on the political responsibility of the critic: The critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present”<sup>21</sup>, a statement which I take very seriously as I approach the works of Mohja Kahf.

## Objectives and methodology of research

The concepts of hybridity and “the Third Space” have considerable implications for Mohja Kahf as an Arab American and a Muslim American writer. They offer the possibility of a cultural politics that avoids a ‘polarity’ between Arabs and Americans, Muslims and Non-Muslims. The paper poses the following questions: Does Kahf manage to go “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities”<sup>22</sup>, and to highlight the unique moments and processes that take place while cultural differences are being articulated and negotiated? How does her work contribute to an approach that avoids the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and develops inclusionary, not exclusionary, and multi-faceted, not dualistic, patterns of cultural exchange and maturation? Does she make use of the “uncanny” to “relate the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence”<sup>23</sup>

The paper begins with an initial assumption that it is primarily through the imagination that Kahf is capable of actualizing Bhabha’s notions of hybridity. It is the imagination defined as inspiration, genius, visionary power, taste or prophecy” which allows her to “open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity* (italics in the original).<sup>24</sup> Kahf’s ability to disengage herself from the world of perception, I argue, is what immerses her and escorts her readers into that “Third Space”, where “we will find words with which we can speak

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

of ourselves and Others. And . . . elude the politics of polarity and emerge as others of ourselves.”<sup>25</sup>

The research is a cross-generic study which attempts to shed light on the power of the imagination in Kahf’s collection of poems, *Emails from Scheherazad* (2001), and her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The emphasis will be placed on Kahf’s synthetic and magical power, and the analysis will help reveal her abilities of myth-making; dream-making and storytelling emanating from, and adding to, her hybridity as a Muslim American writer. Explaining how the imagination has been critically appropriated to the specific situations and the two genres in which Kahf writes is a core concern of this study. Showing such imagination as hybrid, and Kahf as an author who “leap[s] the gulch between two worlds”<sup>26</sup> is also a major endeavor behind this research.

### **“This is my poem”: *Emails from Scheherazad***

Both imagination and hybridity create a Utopia which poetry *can* sanction and publicize. Kahf seems aware of this Utopic nature of poetry: “This is my poem and I can do what I want/ with the world in it”<sup>27</sup>, she writes in her poem “The Cherries”. Kahf’s poetry seems to intentionally blur the lines of demarcation between Arab/Oriental history and culture, and American/Western Technology and Urbanity. Characters fly freely from each of those spheres to the other. In flights of a hybrid imagination, Hagar sends a letter<sup>28</sup>; Scheherazad writes emails, and Scheherazad and Shahrayar get a divorce and a joint custody of their little girl<sup>29</sup>.

Within the context of Kahf’s “hybrid imagination”, seemingly opposing places can be collectively referred to as “here”. Her poem “The Roc” is named after the huge Arabic mythic bird *Arrokh* which has the power of carrying people across deserts and oceans. Both Syria and the United States are reconstructed as “the immediate place”; five out of six stanzas begin with the adverb “here” which evokes presence and availability, whether the poet is referring to Syria or the United States. The two places come alive in the poem by virtue of sounds, movement and the portrayal of human beings in action. The first stanza which describes the departure from “home” is an attempt to capture through the imagination a lost space:

<sup>25</sup> H. K. Bhabha. *The Commitment to Theory*. “New formations” 1988, no. 5. Summer, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> M. Kahf, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Florida, 2003, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> M. Kahf. “*The Water of Hajar*” and *Other Poems: A Performance of Poetry and Prose*. “The Muslim World” Spring 2001, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> M. Kahf, *E-mails From Scheherazad*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Here is my mom and dad leaving  
 Damascus, the streets they knew,  
 The familiar shape of food, the daily  
 Boiling and cooling of fresh milk,  
 The measurement of time by mosque sounds,  
 The scrape of heavy wooden shutter. Anyone  
 back home who had no phone fell off  
 the disc of their new world: tomato-cart man,  
 Crazy Fat'na the Goatwoman,  
 All the gatekeepers at the door  
 They left behind<sup>30</sup>.

The longer lines of the first seven lines of this stanza often turn into enjambments. This reflects the ease of that world in which routine and habit breed safety, stability and temporal spaciousness. The sentences however get shorter and fragmented as people “fell off the disc of their new world”. Those people, mostly subalterns, who used to function as grammatical “subjects” in everyday life, have now become “objects” as they hang loosely out of “space” waiting for the subject and the verb in “They left behind”, as if longing for the poet to include them within an open “Third Space”. They appear at the end of the stanza in fragments of the imagination. Such fragments, however, were enough to evoke: nourishment in “tomato” and “goat”; and natural safety in “the gatekeepers at the door”.

Yet, far from being pathetically nostalgic, Kahf sees America as her “home” which is equally charged with pleasant memories: “That’s mom/laughing at the strange loaf of the bread/There’s dad holding up the new world coffee in its funny striped boxes”<sup>31</sup>. The States is described by the mother in the poem as a “fantastic, lunar terrain”, and the “ten-cent toys” are transformed by the child’s imagination into “our treasures of Sinbad”<sup>32</sup>. With the mention of Sinbad the image of “the roc” in the title reiterates: Readers who know “A Thousand and one nights” would recall Sinbad attaching himself to the roc in order to be transported to the valley of diamonds. Here, in Kahf’s hybrid imagination, however, the diamonds are nothing but the ten-cent toys of the daughter of immigrants.

The new and the old worlds of the parents and the children thus merge and simultaneously pulsate in the poetry of the daughter. “Hybrid imagination” further allows her to blend two cultures via the two discordant motifs of the Roc and the telephone. Though derived from the totally separate domains of mythology and technology, these two symbols result in the shrinking of distances the poem miraculously achieves:

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

Here they are, mom and dad, telephoning  
back home, where the folks gather around  
the transmission as if it came from the moon.  
The phone call to Syria was for epic  
events only. The line pulsates  
with the beating of enormous wings.  
They shout and shout into the receiver  
as if the other end was a thousand and one  
ages away. Spiny talon  
digs into rock<sup>33</sup>.

The use of these two motifs, the roc and the phone, proves the capacity of the hybrid imagination and its ability to dismantle the binary oppositions between mythology and technology, between past and present, and between “East” and “West”. Spaces shrink in the poem, and shouting is ridiculed, since the poet’s/the child’s magical mind envisages the two places as not far apart. Yet the harsh metaphor of “the spiny talon [which] digs into rock” is subtly and ambivalently indicative of the effort required to bridge the gaps and to negotiate the differences.

This awareness of the effort required for inscribing and articulating culture’s hybridity is revealed in “Fayetteville as in Fate”, a poem of hybrid imagination par excellence. In this refined poem, the poet juxtaposes the farmers who pick and cook the wild herbs of “poke” in Fayetteville with those who picked and cooked “*khibbeze*” in Syria. Such juxtaposition reflects the Bakhtinian “mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance”<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, in the next lines, Kahf more openly admits practicing “intentional hybridity” in what may be termed “a meta-poetic” reverie. Kahf deliberately unveils her cautious act of “mixing metaphors” which she knows is fraught with danger:

Whole populations of seed-sowers and herb-knowers,  
some from Damascus, some from Fayetteville, they meet  
In my head like the walls of the Red Sea crashing together  
I roll dizzily toward them  
like the bowling ball of a very bad bowler  
I mix metaphors among them  
like a reckless cook throwing things into a pot,  
hoping they don’t explode when they touch each other,  
hoping they don’t turn bitter when the heat rises<sup>35</sup>.

As much as she is aware of the similarities, however, she knows very well that in reality people on both sides will continue to cling to the “us-them” dualism: “Their names and

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>35</sup> M. Kahf, *Emails, op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

their languages are wildly different/and they believe improbable, vile things about each other/But see the turn of the wrist when a woman from here / or a woman from there kneads dough/. . . the hands move with a similar knowledge”<sup>36</sup>. Bent on “coaxing” them into “The Third space”, Kahf sees poetry as the solution. The lines get shorter as she discovers the luring capacity of her imagination/poetry and turns into a whisper then transforms into a prayer whereby readers are lulled into a Utopic hybridity:

But who will coax them close enough to know this?  
 Darling, it is poetry  
 Darling, I am a poet  
 It is my fate  
 Like this, like this, to kiss  
 The creases around the eyes and the eyes  
 That they may recognize each other<sup>37</sup>:  
*May their children e-mail one another and not bomb one another*  
*May they download each other's mother's bread recipes*  
*May they sell yams and yogurts to each other at a conscionable profit*  
*May they learn each other's tongue and put words into each other's mouth*  
 Say Amen  
 Say آمين  
 Say it, say it<sup>38</sup>

Kahf's hybrid imagination is at its best in this interplay of different languages in “Amen” and “آمين”, and a blend of different registers within the same language which allows a prayer to include the legal term “conscionable” and the mundane words “e-mail”, “recipe”, “yam and yogurt”. Like most of Kahf's poetry, this poem/prayer, is emblematic of Homi Bhabha's “Third Space”, the space of transformation between cultures, the space of appropriate dialogue, the space of beyond and “in-betweenness”, the space of encounter and the site of potential.

From a “Third Space”, Kahf mediates between her grandmother and Midwestern women in another significant poem entitled: “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears”. In this poem Kahf's “in-betweenness” is materialized in the bathroom scene where she stands in the middle between her grandmother who washes her feet for *Wudu*, and the “Respectable Sears matrons [who] shake their heads and frown”. Kahf's imagination allows her to record her grandmother's inner thoughts whose “look in the mirror says, “*I washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul/ with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems/I have washed my feet in the bath-*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

*houses of Damascus/ over painted bowls imported from China*<sup>39</sup> (italics in the original). One can spot here undertones of Langston Hughes's "I have known rivers", where the black persona speaks in elated pride of the ancient civilizations to which he belongs in an attempt to dismantle stereotypes of backwardness and barbarism. Kahf's syntax and vocabulary parallel Hughes's: "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. / I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. / I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it"<sup>40</sup>. The pride in the two poems, is meant to provide a counter discourse of what Said calls: "[A] system of discourse by which the world is divided, administered, plundered, by which humanity is thrust into pigeonholes, by which "we" are human, and "they" are not"<sup>41</sup>. For the Sears' matrons, Mohja says: "my grandmother might as well have been squatting/in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor,/Mexican or Middle Easter"<sup>42</sup>. Being a hybrid writer, however, Kahf presents both camps sympathetically and sarcastically at the same time: "My grandmother knows one culture – the right one"<sup>43</sup>. But the granddaughter who is both imaginative and hybrid could see two:

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see  
at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers,  
all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent  
in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum<sup>44</sup>.

Aware of her "in-betweenness" and of the predicament it entails, Kahf wittily writes:

I smile at the Midwestern women  
as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them  
and shrug at my grandmother as if they  
had just apologized through me  
No one is fooled, but I  
hold the door open for everyone  
and we all emerge on the sales floor  
and lose ourselves in the great common ground  
of housewares on markdown<sup>45</sup>.

Though the grandmother and the Sears' women have not been *fooled* into understanding each other; Kahf's readers may be very well cajoled into sharing her double

---

<sup>39</sup> Mohja Kahf, "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/240896> [access 20 March, 2015].

<sup>40</sup> L. Hughes, "The Negro Speaks Of Rivers" "Poetry X", ed. J. Dempsey, August 29, 2005, <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/11617/> [access 25 August, 2013].

<sup>41</sup> E. Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, London 2005, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem.*

perspective and may be able to appreciate and even share her poetic wandering in the “Third Space”.

### **The journey towards/W=within “The Third Space”: *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf***

As in her poetry, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, 2006 (henceforth *GTS*) reshapes assumptions about culture and identity from an ‘us-them’ dualism to an inclusive sense of ‘both/and’. As shown in the analysis of the poetry above, the figurative indications of hybrid imagination are quite obvious and dense; in the novel, however, those elements are diffused throughout the narrative. Yet, elongated and elaborate as it is, *GTS* allows the reader to move slowly and gradually from his or her entrenched space of essentialism to what Bhabha terms the “alien territory” of the “Third Space”<sup>46</sup>.

In this quasi-autobiographical bildungsroman, Kahf's protagonist, Khadra Shamy, moves from what Homi Bhabha calls the “pedagogical” aspect of cultural identifications, which is fixed, exclusive and discriminatory, to the “performative” aspect of the articulation of identities. This, according to Bhabha “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People”<sup>47</sup> (upper case in the original).

This “pedagogical” identification is revealed at the beginning of the novel with the teachings of Kahf's parents wherein American people are homogenized into one category *kuffar*<sup>48</sup>, meaning the unbelievers. A rigid “us-and-them” hierarchy is enforced by the parents on the minds of Khadra, whose name in Arabic means green, and brings connotations of immaturity and naivety. According to this hierarchy “us” “the Muslims” are clean, faultless, and clever as opposed to “them”, “the Americans”, who are filthy, immoral and lazy. It takes the whole novel and a life journey for these rigid boundaries, and for stereotypes to dissolve in Khadra's consciousness.

Both the fear of the American “other” and that of “becoming” the American “other” reach their peaks at the bathtub scene which has a strong effect on Khadra's development. Coming home late and mud-spattered after an exciting excursion in the raspberry bushes of Indiana, Khadra is met with her mother Ebtehaj “trembling all over, her pale ivory face ashen”<sup>49</sup>. Ebtehaj, pushes Khadra into the bathtub while water runs hot and hard. She “scrubbed and scrubbed her daughter with an enormous loofah from Syria. ‘We are not Americans!’ she sobbed, her face twisted in grief. ‘We are not Americans.’”

<sup>46</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences*, [in:] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, New York 2003, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> M. Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, New York 2006, pp. 13-14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

Americans, her father and mother would define “were the white people who surrounded them, a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat”<sup>50</sup>. This sarcastic tone in which Kahf’s narrator often portrays the naivety of Khadra’s parents is only paralleled with the mockery with which she treats the other camp. For xenophobia was not by any means one-sided in *GTS*. Islamophobia and violence against Muslims takes different forms in the novel, some of them quite fatal. Yet, being the hybrid she is, Kahf is sensitive to accusations and antagonism from both parties.

As a result, Kahf’s tone is equally sarcastic when she deals with Anti-Muslim sentiments. Orvil Hubbard who initiated the “American Protectors of the Environs of Simmonsville” was “a gaunt man with a crew cut and a limp who liked to wear his old army uniform with the Congressional Medal of Honor pinned on whenever he protested against Muslim presence”<sup>51</sup>. Kahf is equally sarcastic of his way of speaking and the understatement he uses to reveal his “knowledge” about Muslims: “I am not speaking from ignorance . . . They *will* destroy the character of our town”<sup>52</sup> (emphasis in the original).

Within Kahf’s hybrid imagination, both Hubbard and the “learned” uncle Kuldip of the Da’wa center had prosthetic limbs, the former having lost his leg from stepping on a mine in Korea, while the latter lost his right arm in a printing-press accident in Pakistan. Indicative of loss in former colonies, both missing limbs may reveal the indelible marks of colonialism that will continue to haunt human interaction in the ‘new’ world. The parallelism, however, is meant to reveal how fragile, pitiful *and* ironically similar both antagonistic parties are. It may also be read in the light of the “unheimlich” which Bhabha sees as a novelistic device for “relat[ing] the traumatic ambivalences of personal psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence”<sup>53</sup>.

Ironic parallelism/similarity is created by Kahf in another scene where the two parties are exposed as fragile, frantic and pitiful. Invited by Ginny Debs, one of the white girls at Khadra’s school for a sleepover, Khadra was allowed by her parents to go to the party, but not to sleep over. The scene brilliantly captures reciprocal xenophobia:

Ebtehaj whispered three *kursis* for her daughter’s safety as she slipped behind the wheel of the station wagon. The thought of staying parked outside the kuffar house until pick-up time crossed Ebtehaj’s mind, but she cast a final doubtful glance at the door and pulled away.

Just as she did, Ginny Debs’s mother was picking up the phone. Her neighbor on the line said, “You know what you have in your driveway?”

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.* p. 15.

Mrs. Debs looked out the window. "It's just one of the mothers dropping off her kid," she said.

"Hmmpf," the neighbor said, and then hung up.<sup>54</sup>

It is Kahf's ability to gently expose both sides from an insider's point of view which gradually allows her to proceed to the "Third Space" and helps her readers to appreciate her imaginative 'border-crossing'. Kahf's journey towards the "Third Space" begins with questioning her parents' behavior and passes through disillusionment with the idea of a "pure" Muslim community, the realization of America as "home", the negotiation of many "Muslim" traditions, an acquaintance with Sufism, and finally an acceptance and a love for both the hybrid self and the different other.

All this takes place while Khadra is steeped into American culture, learning the language, making and breaking friendships, and watching TV programs including those which her parents considered inappropriate for children. Khadra used to watch Charlie's Angels at al-Deens's who are less strict than her parents, and used to subconsciously connect the characters in the show with her Muslim background: "Khadra liked Sabrina best because she never wore bikinis but dressed modestly . . . Sabrina was almost the Muslim Charlie's angel, she and Hanifa agreed"<sup>55</sup>.

Questions addressed at the Sunday school by Khadra and her two friends Hanifa and Tayiba attest to what Homi Bhabha calls "an interrogatory interstitial space" in which fixed "primordial polarities"<sup>56</sup> begin to be unsettled:

Khadra, Hanifa, and Tayiba gave Uncle Taher a workout with their questions. *Are birthdays haram? Mama said birthdays parties are vainglorious. What is vain-glorious? . . . How come Muslim men can marry non-Muslim women but Muslim women can't marry non-Muslim men? Will all non-Muslims go to hell?* He called them the "How Come Girls"<sup>57</sup>.

Khadra gets disillusioned about her family's moral codes when she discovers their attitude toward blackness and realizes the discrepancy between the just Islamic values they are constantly preaching and their racist attitudes towards people of color. When Khadra wanted to braid her hair in the African American style of her friends, her mother "vetoed it" and her grandmother's language of disapproval betrayed a stark racist attitude: "Such pretty hair, not like that repulsive hair of *Abeed*, all kinky and unnatural"<sup>58</sup>. It is interesting in this scene how the young girl and her brother begin to *teach* their parents morals and religion:

<sup>54</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>56</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> M. Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

“It’s haram to be racist,” Khadra protested. “Eyad! Isn’t it haram to be racist?”  
 “Yeah. You can’t say ‘abed.” He gave Teta a look that reminded her of his father  
 in his teenaged years, when he started to getting religion.  
 Teta looked bewildered. Hurt<sup>59</sup>.

In spite of such awareness, however, Khadra remains entrenched in her camp for most of her childhood and adolescence. In a chapter which begins with an extract from the final scene of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Kahf reveals how Khadra breaks her childhood friendship with Livvy Morton, who is also fixed in a rigid Christian dogma<sup>60</sup>. Again, Kahf makes her readers laugh at, yet pity, both girls for their antagonistic positions which ruin their friendship in the name of Allah/God. In doing so, she subtly invites her readers to occupy the “Third Space” and to question “the binary division through which spheres of social experiences are often spatially opposed”<sup>61</sup>. The scene is sad and satirical at the same time:

Livvy kept saying “God’s son this” and “God’s son that.” Each time she said it, fingernails scraped against a blackboard in Khadra’s head.  
 She finally put her hands to her ears and said, “Stop!”  
 “Stop what?” Livvy said.  
 “You don’t understand. That’s the worst possible sin in my religion, okay?”<sup>62</sup>

The conversation developed from there to Livvy assuring Khadra that Khadra is going to Hell because she has not accepted Jesus as Savior. The only exception that may save her friend from Hell, according to Livvy, is dying young and being accepted in limbo. An exception to which Khadra responded nervously: “You want me to die young? Well, guess what, Livvy, you’re going to hell too”<sup>63</sup>. The two girls are therefore victims of what Bhabha calls “pedagogical identification” and the stiff “us-and-them” hierarchy enforced by parents and religious institutions.

Khadra’s journey towards “the Third Space” paradoxically begins with a physical journey to Mecca to perform Hajj (pilgrimage) with her family. Kahf’s hybrid imagination selects this specific place to stage Khadra’s sudden awareness of the essence and meaning of home and exile. Kahf brilliantly captures Khadra’s hybridity as she views the Ka’ba for the first time in her life. The spiritual joy of watching the Ka’ba is intertwined in Khadra’s mind with her intellectual perplexity about racism and her subconscious attachment to American culture represented in a phil Collins song: Only within a hybrid imagination do a Muslim pilgrim’s feelings of longing for the sacred place get translated through a song by Phil Collins:

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>61</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 127-128.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

Khadra tried to keep the joyous talbiya in her mind and on her tongue: *Here I am, O my Lord, Here I am! Labbaik, allahumma, labbaik!* But she kept getting it crossed with Phil Collins in her head crooning, “*I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lo-ord . . . I’ve been waiting for this moment for all my life, Oh Lo-ord. . .*”<sup>64</sup>.

Calling the Ka’ba “Islam’s Lady in Black” can be read as her unique tribute to both women and blackness which is accentuated by remembering Zuhura, her black American Muslim friend who was literally raped and murdered by bigotry and racism<sup>65</sup>. Drawing on historical records which say that Hajar, prophet Ibrahim’s second wife and the mother of Ismail was Nubian, Kahf’s description of Al Ka’ba places blackness at the heart of Islam and the heart of the universe:

She was hostess. Come in, come in. Come into my circle, gracious and kind. . . Many pilgrims threw themselves into her Lap or *Hijr*, the half-circle on one side where the Kaba used to extend, where Hajar and Ismail slept: where a black woman lay buried in the heart of Islam. . . . *Imagine*, Khadra thought, looking at the massive tides of pilgrims around the Kaba, *these circles get bigger and bigger, as people all over Mecca face her to pray, then all over the world, even as far as America, wave after wave of people, in concentric circles going all around the earth, and I am here at the center of all that*<sup>66</sup> (italics in the original).

The Phil Collins lyrics playing in Khadra’s mind during *tawaf* function at this stage of the journey/the novel as dramatic irony where the reader is aware of Khadra’s hybridity while she herself still cherishes the “fixed” identity of the pure and superior Muslim woman. She gets disillusioned about this identity through several incidents during the Mecca episode. Mecca, idealized in her mind as the land of the prophet, seizes to be “home” for her through a series of encounters. The first of these occurs during the very act of pilgrimage, when a man jabbed Khadra in the ribs and “a wall of Arab Gulf men stormed through, elbows locked around their women kin [as] they shoved everyone aside barking: ‘we have womenfolk’”<sup>67</sup>. Khadra felt humiliated and angry: “What are we, chopped liver? [She] thought as she was pulled over to the right”<sup>68</sup>. Here again, Kahf’s hybrid imagination evokes Zuhura in the scene, as “a tall black teenage girl, round-shouldered like Zuhura, got pressed up against her . . . her face, up close to Khadra’s and meeting her eye, was serene. ‘Peace,’ she whispered in Khadra’s ear. ‘*Salamu. Yasalam*’”<sup>69</sup>. Arousing Zuhura in this scene, Kahf may be evoking the “unheimlich” in order to say that oppression is universal whether you are at “home” or in “exile”.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162-163.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

For Muslim women, black and white alike, Mecca, the land of the prophet should function as an impartial and secure “home”. Nevertheless, to Khadra’s dismay, racism and sexism could not have been worse. Two other episodes help Khadra to get disillusioned about her romanticization of “home”: first she is prevented from praying fajr at the mosque and brought home in humiliation by “two burly matawwa policemen with big round black beards and billy clubs belted over their white caftans”<sup>70</sup>. Again Kahf’s sarcasm is funny and sad at the same time: “‘Is this one of your womenfolk?’ they asked Uncle Zaid, . . . ‘we found her trying to get into the mosque.’ They said as if she was a vagrant or something”<sup>71</sup>.

Kahf then presents another episode which completely shatters Khadra’s romantic view of “home” and helps her proceed to the “Third Space” beyond what Bhabha calls “an originary [sic] identity or a ‘received’ tradition”<sup>72</sup>. Getting pulled into a car full of young Saudis, by her cousin Afaaf, she was driven at a high speed to the desert and was sexually harassed by one of the young men. The man who stereotyped Khadra as immoral said, “you grew up in *America*– don’t tell me you never do stuff like this in America –”<sup>73</sup>. Again dramatic irony occurs as Khadra keeps shouting and asserting “I am an Arab, like you”<sup>74</sup>, “I’m *not* American”<sup>75</sup>, yet when she wished to express herself and to counter attack Afaaf “she launched into a torrent of English: I *hate* you–you’re a FILTHY girl, with FILTHY friends – you take me home – you take me home RIGHT NOW. You –you – you *goddamn bitch*”<sup>76</sup>. It is interesting here how Khadra begins to use the word “home” with America in mind. The airplane flight back to the States marks her new awareness of America as her “home”, and of her identity as not purely Arab or Muslim, but rather a hybrid Arab-American and Muslim-American. This chapter of the novel/the journey ends with Khadra “press[ing] her nose against the airplane window. The lights of Indianapolis spread out on the dark earth beneath the jet. The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there – and only there, of all the earth”<sup>77</sup>. Although this awareness is a crucial point at Khadra’s story/journey, she has not yet entered into what Bhabha calls the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”<sup>78</sup>. This takes place later in the novel/the journey after Khadra passes through Four significant experiences: her acquaintance with the Shelbys, her

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 174.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 176.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179.

<sup>78</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

marriage to Juma, her encounter with Sufism, and her journey to Syria where she listens to her grandmother's stories and learns about her mother's and grandmother's traumatic histories that expose colonial and sexist horrors.

Meeting Joy Shelby at college and visiting her family marks the defeat of the ethnic purity principles that Khadra lived by throughout her life. Joy's name is quite representative of her family which relishes music, friendship, and good food; and that views Islam as a faith not as a strict lifestyle<sup>79</sup>. Joy's Anglicized family name Shelby, which is originally Shalaby attests to the hybridity of the family and to their ability to live *joyfully* in an "in-between" space. Khadra visits the Shelbys with her brother Eyad who was bewildered, but not fascinated, with that hybrid family:

She and Eyad had never seen Arab folk like this: women called Rose who mangled Arabic with an American accent and played Arabic music on American guitars, and men who looked like Hoosier farmers in denim overalls but a shade or two darker. All sitting around eating kibbeh<sup>80</sup> of an Indiana evening as the midges and moths played in the porch light<sup>80</sup>.

The Shelbys' chapter begins at the kitchen of ImLitfy, the family's Christian neighbor, where Khadra and Eyad accompanied Joy at the beginning of the visit. Not realizing the lady was Christian, Khadra and Eyad instinctively felt at home at ImLitfy's with the smell of peeled onions, ground lamb meat, and the site of the mountain of bulgur. Kahf seems to use kibbeh as a metaphor for the hybridity of cultures to which the whole chapter is a tribute. Speaking of Kibbeh ingredients: onions; meat; and bulgur, the narrator observes: "Into the maw of the Moulinex were poured these three, whose fates would be forever ground together, though they knew not each other before that hour"<sup>81</sup>.

Whereas Eyad is more rooted in his fixed identity, Khadra's infatuation with the Shelbys indicate that she is willing to trade the security of "roots" for itinerant "routes". These two homonymic terms "roots" and "routes" are borrowed from Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic*. Though dealing mainly with the development of identities through the Middle Passage, Gilroy's book is as relevant to black studies and the Atlantic world as it is to any diaspora. "The conceptual frameworks of motion, encounter, and identity shift" set by Gilroy in this book, are generally useful for understanding how cultural forms and expressions develop through routes of communication across borders"<sup>82</sup>. Gilroy stresses the importance of plotting routes which take migrants and their children

<sup>79</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 191.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>82</sup> J. Heathcott, *Urban Spaces and Working-class Expressions Across the Black Atlantic: Tracing the Routes of Ska*. "Radical History Review" 2003, no. 87, p. 183.

“*imaginatively* as well as physically, to many places and into contact with many people”<sup>83</sup> (emphasis added). Khadra experiences this at the Shelbys while also experiencing “loss and hope”, two feelings that James Clifford sees as symptomatic of diaspora consciousness<sup>84</sup>. Loss of the “pure” ethnic identity is expressed via interior monologue as Khadra realizes that ImLitfy is Christian:

Khadra glanced at their hostess’s face, her features so familiarly Syrian, her cadence and voice equally so. What other homes of similar sweetness and joy had they passed by all these years, insisting as they did on their separateness and specialness, then? What a waste. Something started to unravel in Khadra there in the kitchen, bringing her almost to the point of secret tears. Confused, she kept them in<sup>85</sup>.

The “loss” Khadra feels is accompanied by “hope” and the pleasure of exploring new “routes”. This is symbolized in her shaking hands with Baker, Joy’s brother, regardless of the stern looks Eyad flashes at her. It is interesting to trace Khadra’s imagination until the moment when “[her] little pudgy [hand] instinctively homed into [Baker’s] big clasp [as] he covered it with his other hand”<sup>86</sup>. When Khadra sees Baker, “Fresh cold air came in with him, and a smell of wood burning that made Khadra think of crackling logs on a fire and rustling piles of autumn leaves”<sup>87</sup>. Khadra was equally fascinated by Joy’s father; she couldn’t help compare him to her own father in a perplexity indicative of her transformation and her progress towards “in-betweenness”.

As Khadra made her way over the creaky floorboards after using the bathroom to make ablution, she spied, through a door slightly ajar, Joy’s father on his prayer rug, his back to her, finishing off a slow-morning rakat. He had made no fuss of “clap-clap-clap, it’s prayer time, everyone hop to it.” But wasn’t it a father’s duty to call everyone to prayer?<sup>88</sup> (192)

In spite of this confusion, the visit to the Shelbys helped Khadra “imagine” new “routes”; the Shelbys Chapter ends with Khadra imagining herself “riding full gallop through tall grasses right up to the edge of a deep woods”<sup>89</sup>. These “routes” open up between the East and the West in an “interstitial space” between the two; hence, Kahf’s use of the following Quranic epigraph: “Say, ‘He is Lord of the East and of the West and of all that is between the two’, if you have intelligence.’ Quran: The Poets, 27”<sup>90</sup>. It is interesting how

<sup>83</sup> J. McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester 2010, p. 249.

<sup>84</sup> J. Clifford, *Diaspora*. “Cultural Anthropology” 1994, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

such juxtaposition of the Quranic verse and the Shelbys' scene suggests a new reading of the Quranic verse, one which does not only imply the physical space between the East and the West, but also the cultural "in-betweenness", to use Bhabha's term. Kahf's intertextuality, which springs from her hybrid imagination, therefore, causes us to re-read, or reassess our understanding of the original text.

While the hybrid Shelbys give Khadra hope for itinerant "routes", it is Khadra's marriage, however, which signals her disillusionment with the fixed "roots" in which all Muslim women should tie themselves. Juma would not let Khadra "become" the hybrid woman she is destined to be. His rigidity and narrow mindedness would hinder her identification process by imposing on her what Bhabha calls "designations of identity"<sup>91</sup>. Yet Khadra's hybridity was too strong to be dismantled by such designations; this strength leads the marriage to end up in divorce and an abortion which precedes Khadra's own rebirth. Several scenes are indicative of such conflict between imposed identity and ongoing identification during the Juma phase. The bike on which Khadra insists on riding, while Juma adamantly rejects, could be read as a symbol of mobility and by extension of an ongoing process of identification. Unveiling Juma's perspective during one of the bike scenes, Kahf's narrator reveals how he feels perplexed while trying to understand the hybridity of his wife: "But—' he looked puzzled. She was an Arab girl, familiar with Arab customs. He hadn't expected her to be doing things that would embarrass him"<sup>92</sup>. As a result of several quarrels over the bike, in which Juma would leave home for days without telling her and would come back whenever he was ready, Khadra put the bike in the storage area until "the gears rusted and . . . [s] omething inside her rusted a little, too"<sup>93</sup>.

Khadra's education was another important step towards her final arrival at the "Third Space": "In Professor Eschenback's class, she began to see what her belief looked like if you *stepped* away and observed it from a *distance*"<sup>94</sup> (emphasis added). Renee Green uses exactly the same metaphor to express her dilemma as an African-American artist: "Multiculturalism doesn't reflect the complexity of the situation as I face it daily. . . It requires a person to step outside of him/herself to actually see what he/she is doing"<sup>95</sup>.

Later, however, Kahf exchanges the soft metaphor of "stepping away" with the tougher image of "earth plates" moving in different direction, an image reminiscent of the primordial "plate tectonics". Such tough image seems to convey more aptly Khadra's risky process of identification and its terrifying and unsettling moments:

<sup>91</sup> H. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>95</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Khadra felt as if she were standing atop two earth plates grinding as they moved in different directions. The one directly under her was the view of Islam she'd grown up knowing. The other was what she was catching glimpses of. A rift occasionally opened beneath her feet, but she steadied herself against it. Otherwise, suddenly, what she'd always thought was right appeared wrong, and what she'd always known was bad seemed, for an eye-blink moment, good. It was terrifying<sup>96</sup>.

The above quotation, with its “plate tectonics” metaphor can best be explained in terms of Bhabha’s definition of the “au-del’ a”, or the “beyond”, which according to him is “neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past”<sup>97</sup>. What Khadra is experiencing here is “The borderline engagements of cultural difference [...] which may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity”<sup>98</sup>.

Terrifying as it is for Khadra, stepping into the “beyond”, or moving to a state of “in-betweenness” requires an act of the imagination which transcends logic in order to reconcile opposites. This takes place in Khadra’s journey on the subconscious level while she tries to find her way to Professor Eschenbach’s house to deliver a delayed assignment. She goes through a horrifying, yet healing, experience in the night; subconsciously again, and in a way reminiscent of the Ka’ba scene “[she] found herself reciting Poe along with prayer as she picked a path over the uneven gravel”<sup>99</sup>. To her surprise the Professor was in the basement with many others who were swaying in time to the rhythm of words weirdly familiar: *All-lahh, All-ahh*. . . . then Khadra realized. . . *Hayy—Alive*. . . *The clashing earth plates shifted under [her]*<sup>100</sup>. In her attempt to capture Khadra’s dilemma, Kahf’s language then turns into what Julia Kristeva calls the “semiotic”; sentences get fragmented, and poetic as, on her way home, Khadra thinks of Juma and of whoever may hinder the enunciation of her new hybrid self:

She fled home, the car wheels slipping and sliding on the country road. Home. Bed. Edgar Allen Poe dreams, a brick cavity inside a house. A niche, a manger. Snow, a green branch in the white. Brick by brick. Mantle. Dismantle. A lamp in the niche, walled up. Oil lamp, yes, or maybe child. Flailing. Flail whale belly of a wail. She would pluck the child out of the wall and save the one who was “Alive.” Tracks in the snow like a gazzelle. Hold the lamp up high –run [...]<sup>101</sup>.

While the lamp in the niche connects with the lantern she has just seen in Professor Eschenbach’s house, it also stands for the light at the end of “the route” she wants to plot for herself, away from her family’s attempts to fix her in a specific “home”, which

<sup>96</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>97</sup> H.K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 1-2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>99</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*.

Juma steadfastly perpetuates. The plucking of the child out of the wall that has been built “brick by brick” may foreshadow the imminent abortion, but it can also refer to the birth of her own self which has been trapped by “pedagogical” cultural identifications; the plucking of *that* child, the old Khadra whose identity was fixed, exclusive and discriminatory, was the only hope for saving the mature one whose hybrid imagination can keep her and others truly “Alive”.

Khadra herself seems to realize the link between maturity, hybridity and the imagination. On her way from the hospital after the abortion, Khadra tells Joy Shelby, who does not approve of abortion yet stands by her friend’s side, that entomologists call “the adult instar—the mature bug”: an “imagine”. Khadra repeats: “Yeah. Like, you and I are the ‘imagines’ of the human species”<sup>102</sup>. By announcing herself and her hybrid friend Joy as the “‘imagines’ of the human species”, Khadra seems to be aligning herself with the Shelbys and with Joy/*joy*. She seems to be celebrating her maturity and her newly discovered hybridity which would allow her to bridge the “us-and-them” division like Joy does in Im-Litfy’s kitchen.

Yet Khadra does not come to full awareness of the hybridity of cultures until she visits her grandmother, Teta, in Syria and learns about her two friends the Christian Hayat and the Jewish Iman who worked with her as telephone girls in the Syrian *Centrale*. The choice of this triad and of their job is symbolic; the phone, as we have seen in the poetry, is a favorite symbol in Kahf. Tetare collects the old days and tells Khadra about her job and that of her two friends: “*AlôCentrale? Connect me, please – and we’d connect [people]. Strangers, neighbors, wasn’t it marvelous*”<sup>103</sup>.

Visiting Jobar *Kanees*, the synagogue of Teta’s old friend Iman, gave one final blow to Khadra’s essentialism. Listening to the rabbi welcoming her in a warm Damascene accent, “she could suddenly *imagine* being his granddaughter... pattering about in faded house slippers to find him dozing in his chair, his finger on a word in the holy book in his lap”<sup>104</sup> (emphasis added). Following such imagination she started to question her own identity: “Who was she? What was she, what cells of matter, sewn up into this Khadra shape, this in star? *Imagine*”<sup>105</sup>.

In his epiphanic moment, Khadra realizes her affinity with the rabbi and sees one more lantern in the wall of the synagogue; boundaries continue to blur in her imagination as glimpses of her lost friendships “flash upon her inward eye” in a Wordsworthian “host”:

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 250.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 271.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*.

She slept and woke. Slept again. Dreamt, cried, and blessed . . . Now the barrier was removed, and they all rushed into her heart, and it hurt: Livvy. Hanifa. Im-Litfy. Joy's Assyrian boyfriend, whose holocaust she denied. Drove of people, strangers and neighbors. *We are your kin, we are part of you.* Where are those who love one another through my Glory? *Their souls are in the roundness of green birds, roaming freely in paradise*<sup>106</sup>.

In the above extract, the *Qudsi* (sacred) *Hadith*, "Where are those who love one another through my Glory?", merges with a *regular Hadith* on the status of martyrs in paradise which describes their souls as "roaming freely" in "the roundness of green birds". Moreover, as usual within the hybrid imagination of Mohja Kahf, the two *Hadithes* gradually merge with Coleridge's *The Ancient Marnier* which flashes as another subtle intertext when Kahf suddenly realizes that "he prays best who loveth best":

Khadra came to prayer. She felt as though she were praying now for the first time, as if all that long-ago praying, rakat after rakat, had been only the illusion of prayer, and this – what she began to do now – was the real thing. All that had been lost was returning. All that had been disconnected was connected again – *alôCentrale?*<sup>107</sup>

In Syria, Khadra goes through many experiences that help her secure her entry into the "the Third Space": In Muhyiedeen Ibn al-Arabi's mosque, she is pacified by the sound of *dhikr* and the sight of architectural hybridity: "She was still. Dark brick, white stone, dark flesh and white side by side, striped the arch-work of the mosque"<sup>108</sup>.

Besides, Teta's stories reveal the hybridity of Khadra's "original" culture, while also debunking a painful personal and colonial history according to which Teta's teacher and her husband, with whom she eloped, are killed by Zionist terror squads in 1948. In another encounter, Aunt Razanne, tells Khadra the story of her mother's traumatic rape as a young girl by her history teacher in a school trip to France, a story which explains for both Khadra and the reader why Ebtehaj developed into the religious fanatic she is.

In Syria, also, Khadra meets a poet who tells her, "You are the baklava"<sup>109</sup>, and reminds her that she has to love her "self" regardless of its seeming contradictions. Like Paul D. who tells Sethe at the end of Morrison's *Beloved*: "You your best thing"<sup>110</sup>, this poet reminds Khadra at a crucial moment of her journey that in her very chest resides her "church" and her "mihrab"<sup>111</sup>. It is interesting how Kahf creates an ambiguity about

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306-307.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 307.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 292.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 308.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 335.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 302.

the character of that poet; she even makes the reader doubt at a certain moment that he exists outside Khadra's imagination.

Kahf's newly discovered hybridity, and her awareness of the continual flux of her ever-changing identity is symbolized by the tangerine scarf she buys in Syria, a scarf which she lets "hung from the crown of her head. Not tightly, the way Ebtehaj wore it [but] loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover"<sup>112</sup>. It is interesting how Khadra buys this scarf in Teta's favorite color and how she buys a long piece of tissue silk fabric enough to make two scarves, one for her and the other for Teta, a gesture which symbolizes the eternal connection between these two "girls", a connection which allows Khadra, like the scarf, to move and to fly, while she remains connected.

Syria, however, was not the last physical journey Khadra makes in her attempt to protect her newly discovered hybrid imagination; she has to come back to the States; "she whisper[s] as the wheels hit the ground. Homeland America. *bismillah*"<sup>113</sup>. Yet, in order to maintain the fluidity of her identity, Indiana was not the right place for Khadra; there, many people would fix her as "Wajdy Shamy's daughter of the Dawah Center?" and would require her "to carry the banner"<sup>114</sup>. Khadra, therefore, chooses Philadelphia, which her new Jewish friend Blu describes as "The City of Brotherly Love"<sup>115</sup>. From there, she manages to connect with her now old and fragile parents and to reassure them of her love. Making *tabouleh*, a traditional Syrian salad, with her mother in the kitchen, she is disappointed about how her mother believes she lost her to America: "Khadra sighed and went around to her mother and kissed her soft Nivea-scented cheek. 'I am not lost,' she whispered. 'I'm right here.' And there she was, hands flecked with parsley"<sup>116</sup>.

Expressing love, pity and gratitude to her parents, does not however deter Khadra from supporting her brother Jihad, in his decision to marry their white American Christian neighbor Sariah Whitcomb. After Jihad tells Khadra of his intention to marry Sariah, Khadra thinks: "It's going to take every inner resource we've got to give this love a place to grow. All our families"<sup>117</sup>. Kahf's use of irony and intertextuality is at its best in this episode: Jihad, the youngest child of the Shamys is a member of a music band named "The Clash of Civilization", after Samuel Huntington's famous "theory"/book. Jihad's band is an eclectic group of boys, which include two Muslims: Jihad and Garry Abdullah, an African American Muslim teen, in addition to Brig and Riley Whitcomb,

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 313.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 317.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 384.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 433.

two Mormon boys. Kahf's critique of Huntington is her novelistic "theory" that when civilizations meet, they produce music not war. She later uses the name of the band as a pun to hint at the potential of love and marriage to end the wars among people: When asked by Khadra about the future of his music band after he gets married to Sariah: Jihad answers, "When me and Sariah get married, it might break up The Clash of Civilizations. Or it might not"<sup>118</sup>. Kahf's choice of the name *Jihad* is also significant of her ironic inversion of cultural stereotypes; Jihad, the sweetest of the Shamys, is keen on love, not war, and his "Clash of Civilization" is nothing but a band of music.

Khadra's "in-betweenness", however has its perils in her own search of romance and marriage: "I'm too religious for the secular men, and too lax for the religious ones", she tells Blu<sup>119</sup>. She, however, feels attached to Hakim, her black childhood friend who is himself "on some kind of journey, he's somewhere betwixt and between, like she is"<sup>120</sup>. An Imam and a player of the trombone at the same time, Hakim is best suited to understand Khadra's incessant journey: He tells her he has always felt she had two sides: "You, and then you trying to fit the mold"<sup>121</sup>. Khadra is satisfied with how Hakim diagnoses her doubleness, and she comments using a language that coincides with Homi Bhabha's depiction of the "Third Space"; she says to Hakim: "I guess what I've been doing is trying to get to a *place* where I could reconnect the two, and be a whole person"<sup>122</sup> (emphasis added). The prayer scene where she and Hakim pray on grass is symbolic of a new beginning of love and sharing; Khadra's decision to stand beside and not behind Hakim as a "correct" prayer should be, and Hakim's flexibility as an Imam in accepting her different posture, foreshadows a relationship of equality, acceptance, malleability, and understanding.

Broad-minded and tolerant of difference, Hakim surrenders to Khadra's wish not be labeled by a fixed identity. Speaking in pride about his sister Hanifa who has become a professional driver and bragging that she is the first Muslim woman to share in professional races, he is nervously stopped by Khadra, who has suffered throughout her life from that type of fixation:

"Don't" Khadra says. She puts her hand up. "Don't say it. Don't put that on her. I'm so tired of everyone putting that on us. Every single thing we do has to 'represent' for the community. Zuhura, having to represent this and represent that. Everyone had to put their meaning on her. Just let her be, for God's sake. For the Prophet's sake, just let us *be*"<sup>123</sup>.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 432.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 354.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 411.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 394.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 395.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 399.

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a life journey of identification that the reader begins but never manages to finish. The final scene, which ends in a car race attests to the continuous mobility and risk-taking which even the last page of the novel cannot bring to a stop. The skidding of Hanifa's car against a wall, and her subsequent re-grouping echo Khadra's "loss and hope" and her perilous route in-between the "us-and-them" dyad. "I am regrouping too, Khadra thinks with elation, and she is full of gratitude – she is gathering speed – and there she goes!"<sup>124</sup> In media res, thus, do readers leave Khadra to continue her journey of hybrid imagination not towards but rather within "The Third Space" which lies on the borderlands between perceived oppositional identities.

## Conclusion

Both *E-mails from Scheherazad* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* are unique texts created by a hybrid imagination strong enough to sustain both writer and readers alike while "earth plates" seem to be moving in different directions beneath them. In spite of the stylistic differences between the poetry collection and the novel, both texts manage to merge "Self" and "other" in a "Third Space", where both are censured and loved at the same time. Hierarchies thus fade away and stereotypes are subtly destabilized as Kahf gently "coaxes" readers to see and "recognize each other". Due to characteristics of the genre itself, the poetry in *E-mails from Scheherazad* distills Kahf's experience of "leap[ing] the gulch between two worlds" before she realizes it is "Impossible to choose one over the other". The novel, on the other hand, with the narrative space it allows, reveals the arduous journey(s) towards and within "The Third Space", journeys which never end as the character is caught forever in what Homi Bhabha calls "an exploratory restless movement. . . here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither [and] back and forth"<sup>125</sup>.

By adopting the hybrid imagination, the two texts analyzed in this paper perform active intervention, which involves a dislocation of exclusionary conceptions of "Americanness" as essentially "white" and "Christian". They destabilize fixed cultural power relations between white and black, non-Muslim and Muslim, center and periphery, the "West" and the "rest", not through a mere inversion of these hierarchical binaries, but by throwing into question these very dualisms through an imaginative blurring of boundaries.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 441.

<sup>125</sup> H. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



**Agnieszka Łobodziec**  
University of Zielona Góra

## THE BLACK THEOLOGICAL CALL FOR AN EXTENDED GLOBAL FAMILY IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

### Abstract

Black theological considerations of human existence involve metaphors corresponding to the concept of family. The formation of a beloved extended family may require a redefinition of certain Christian doctrines, an attempt made by some of the characters depicted in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. The separatist, patriarchal leaders of the town of Ruby identify themselves as God-chosen, assume the responsibility of protecting their community from sinister forces, and violently murder women, who presumably embody evil, at a place called the Convent. Theologically, the patriarchs' commission of mass murder is an infraction of New Testament Christianity which mandates love of one's enemies and a call for seeking out the lost. In contrast, the women of the Convent spiritually console other women, regardless of race, class, and culture, who undergo a myriad of tribulations. In Black theological terms, also the figure of Reverend Misner embodies the hope for future reconciliation between people of varied religious and cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords:** black theology, interfaith dialogue, religious patriarchy, global family

### Interfaith dialogue as a black theological call for an extended global family

Since the origins of systematic black theology in the 1960s, black theological considerations of human existence have involved metaphors corresponding to the concept of family. Oppressed black people affirmed their humanity as children of God. Such a conceptualization engendered the empowering "theology of somebodiness [that] conveys that in spite of the world's denial of you, Jesus (God) affirms you. So you must

go on”<sup>1</sup>. The black theologian J. Deotis Roberts underscores the sacred unity of the black community as he defines the black church as “an extended family [as the family of God]”<sup>2</sup>. Joseph H. Jackson, a president of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. in the period from 1953 to 1982 employed family related metaphors when he proposed the utilization of Christian methods in the black freedom struggle. The methods “must be judged in the light of that social order that Jesus called the Kingdom of God [...] and based on the brotherhood of all mankind and the fatherhood of God”<sup>3</sup>.

The Black theological view of an extended family has broadened towards a worldwide perspective. Black theologian Dwight N. Hopkins observes that black theology seeks to carry out intercultural and interfaith dialogue. He recognizes three important reasons for the black theological necessity “to increase the interfaith dialogue on a global scale”<sup>4</sup>. The first is the fact that non-Christian believers outnumber Christian believers. The second relates to the victimization of people of all faiths through oppression, physical abuse, disproportionate employment policy, disability, marginalization, and loneliness. The third constitutes a range of globally observable predicaments that torment not only Christian but also non-Christian communities. They encompass

the international economy of monopoly capitalism, the destruction of indigenous cultures, racial discrimination against darker skin peoples around the world, the oppression of women, and the attack on the earth’s ecology<sup>5</sup>.

The formation of the beloved extended family may require a redefinition of some Judeo-Christian doctrines, the intricacy of which Toni Morrison outlines in her novel *Paradise*. The author says: “I’m interested in the differences between [...] the very stern Old Testament view of religion, with its emphasis on punishment, and the individualistic notion of God being in you”<sup>6</sup>. In *Paradise*, the residents of the town Ruby found a religious community that assumes the Old Testament perspective. This self-contained, separatist milieu constitutes a strictly organized, hierarchical, patriarchal, and all black enclave that resents the inclusion of outsiders, non-Christians, non-blacks, and the light-complexioned. They establish “a sleepy town, three churches [...] but nothing to serve to the traveler”<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> J. Grant, Jacquelyn, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Atlanta 1989, p. IX.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*, Philadelphia 1980, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> T. Walker, Jr., *Empower the People: Social Ethic for the African-American Church*, Maryknoll, New York 1991, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *A Black American Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* [in:], *Living Stones in the Household of God*, Minneapolis 2004, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> *This Side of Paradise: A Conversation with Toni Morrison*. „Literature and Fiction”, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=7651> [access March 21, 2015].

<sup>7</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, New York 1998, p. 12.

## Race and gender as obstacles in the pursuit of interfaith dialogue

Dwight N. Hopkins states that the examination of “social relations of power within societies will determine different ways of believing”<sup>8</sup>. The two underlying categories in the formation of a power structure are color and gender. If employed inappropriately, they impede interfaith dialogue and originate the policy of exclusion. Color

raises the question of a hierarchy of worth. This can translate into who is thought to be the most worthy of receiving the resources and privileges that God has provided for that community<sup>9</sup>.

The Ruby patriarchs, who consider themselves God chosen, render color a significant criterion that determines one’s humanity. Skin color is the “way people get chosen and ranked in this town”<sup>10</sup>. This indoctrination founded on principles of exclusion does not emerge as an outcome of an in-depth hermeneutics of the words of the heavenly Father, but as a painful memory of the Old Fathers’ history. In 1890, the Old Fathers, who were the forebears of Ruby’s nine leading families, in flight from the oppressive South, sought to settle in the new territory. During their exodus they suffered the rejection from the residents of the established black community in Fairly, Oklahoma. They found out that “they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders”<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, they had to confront another kind of discrimination: “Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black”<sup>12</sup>. The black, poor, formerly enslaved people termed this rejection by affluent blacks “Disallowing,” which

came from fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits. They were kind, though, as the story went. Gave them food and blankets; took up a collection for them; but were unmoving in their refusal to let the 8-rocks stay longer than a night’s rest<sup>13</sup>.

Proud of their ancestry and blood purity, although rejected by their own people, the Old Fathers continued their search for new, free land, obtained territory from the State Indians after “a year and four months of negotiation [and] of labor for land”<sup>14</sup> and founded an all black town named Haven. On the surface, the whole town appeared to be formerly governed by benevolent patriarchs. The Oven, the community’s cooking

<sup>8</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 98-99.

place, became the symbol of familial unity and freedom from white oppression. It also symbolized the men's authority that enabled them to liberate and protect their women. "They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white-man's kitchen or nursed a white child"<sup>15</sup>. However, the momentous days of Haven came to an end during World War Two and "the subsequent generations of 8-rock males did scatter, just as Zechariah [Big Papa] feared, into the army"<sup>16</sup>. Although entire families moved out of town before the young men returned from fighting overseas in 1949, the ex-soldiers "broke up the Oven and loaded it onto two trucks even before they took apart their own beds"<sup>17</sup> and reinstalled it in their newly established town Ruby, a reconstruction of Haven. Remembering the Disallowing, the Morgans, the most influential of the patriarchs, "carried the rejection of 1890 like a bullet in the brain"<sup>18</sup> and they insisted on racial purity.

Another determiner of one's role in the extended family is gender. Like in most mainstream Christian churches, the history of the black churches also testifies to their patriarchal nature in that black women were, most often than not, prohibited from ascending to the pulpit. For instance, regarding the African Methodist Episcopal church, even though

women in the 1870s and 1880s functioned as preachers and some as pastors, the denomination restricted them to the office of evangelist and barred them from attaining ordination. Generally, there seemed near unanimity among male ministers that deacon's and leader's orders should remain as gender privileges for men alone<sup>19</sup>.

In the twentieth-first century, black theologians challenge religious patriarchy in a number of ways. Dwight N. Hopkins calls for the examination of gender relations within the black church, asserting that

The issue of gender is closely connected to the different issues surrounding race and, likewise, must be taken seriously in all interfaith dialogues [...]. In the rituals of faith, men frequently function as the official representatives of the divine. This gives them the privilege to have an authority to represent, speak for, be closer to, be an interpreter of, or even embody the divine purpose within the community of faith<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> D. C. Dickerson, *A Liberated Past: Explorations in A.M.E. Church History*, Nashville, Tennessee 2003, pp. 121-122.

<sup>20</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

In accordance with contemporary black theological discourse, in *Paradise* Toni Morrison portrays the complexity of patriarchy. Above all, the male leaders of Ruby believe that their authority has a religious dimension. They interpret and appropriate the biblical message according to their interests. “The strong words, strange at first, becoming familiar, gaining weight and hypnotic beauty the more they heard them, made them their own”<sup>21</sup>. Deacon and Steward Morgan “behaved as if God were their silent business partner”<sup>22</sup>. Secondly, at first glance, their and other patriarchs’ attitudes towards women seem to exhibit benevolent patriarchy as they respect women, whom they consider inevitable in prolonging the family lines. Deacon states, “Women always the key. God bless’em”<sup>23</sup>. Ruby makes an impression of a haven resided by one beloved, extended family. Appointing themselves as guards of morality, the patriarchs undertake the control over the residents’ behavior. Therefore, “the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town’s view of itself were taken good care of”<sup>24</sup>. The fathers also prevent crime and violence so the town “neither had nor needed a jail”<sup>25</sup>. Above all, they protect their women so a

sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight [or] could walk out the yard and on down the road [or] might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby<sup>26</sup>.

However, their stern religiosity based on the conceptualization of a God who blesses only “the pure and holy”<sup>27</sup> does not allow the presence of the lost and broken. Overusing their patriarchal authority, identifying themselves as God-chosen, they assume the responsibility for protecting their community from sinister forces, and violently murder women at a place called the Convent, who presumably embody evil. The women are perceived as “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary”<sup>28</sup>, and “detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door”<sup>29</sup>. Theologically, the patriarchs’ commission of mass murder is an infraction of New Testament Christianity, which mandates love of one’s enemies and calls for seeking out the lost.

<sup>21</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 111.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

Another foundation of the hostile abuse of religion is the lack of communication that permeates Ruby. Deacon and Steward Morgan hardly look at each other. The history of their family reveals that their mutual adversity is not a first case of the Morgans' familial animosity. Their ancestors Zechariah Morgan (Coffee) and his twin brother Tea also did not communicate with each other after they could not overcome the shame that racism subconsciously inflicted upon these dispossessed black men. Coffee rejected Tea for dancing for

some drunken whiteboys [...]. Coffee couldn't take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself. It scared him. So he went off and never spoke to his brother again<sup>30</sup>.

Reverend Misner explains the main reason for the familial conflict: "Lack of words [...]. Lack of forgiveness. Lack of love"<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, the lack of communication engenders isolation that "kills generations. It has no future"<sup>32</sup>, as Misner states. In effect, the patriarchs project their repressed negative emotions upon others. Their desire to articulate their rage and ascertain their power also stirs a blinding imagination that excludes the other. Therefore, the accusations directed towards the Convent women by the Ruby patriarchs evidence the admixture of the men's rage, hostility, and desire for retribution. They are based more on a demeaning gossip than on a reliable source of information obtained through open, inclusive communication. The men speculate,

Remember how they scandalized the wedding? [...] Uh huh and it was that very same day I caught them kissing on each other in the back of that ratty Cadillac [...] Sweetie said they tried their best to poison her [...] My wife says they did an abortion on [Arnette] [...] Roger told me that [...] the girl he dropped off there was openly flirting with him. That's the one half naked all the time? [...] No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away [...] I hear they drink like fish too<sup>33</sup>.

While they enumerate all the offenses, they do not intent to discern their own imperfection and the fact that it is Ruby citizens who sometimes escape to and hide in the Convent

as adulterers, drunks, liars, would-be murderers of unborn children, and men expressing emotional needs and sexual desires not fulfilled or endorsed by their belief system and rigid code of behavior<sup>34</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 303.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 275-276.

<sup>34</sup> C. Romero, *Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'*, "African American Review" 2005, no. 39. 3.

For instance, Sweety seeks to escape taking care of her sick babies, and Arnette hits her stomach forcefully to get rid of the baby. The Ruby patriarchs do not know that the Convent women invent mysterious practices and means that rush Sweety back home and want Arnetted to deliver the baby. Since Ruby's religion and community is based on principles of exclusion, some people from Ruby demonize their victims. Sweety thinks of them as "these demons"<sup>35</sup>, the men assume that the content of a found letter is a "satanic message"<sup>36</sup>, perceive the women as "More like witches"<sup>37</sup> and believe the "evil is in this house"<sup>38</sup>.

## Interfaith dialogue and the challenge to principles of exclusion

*Paradise* critiques the false religious exegesis that envisions an authoritarian God and overuses this image while constructing a religious institution based on the exclusion of the imperfect and disobedient. As stated earlier, the formation of an extended global family based on interfaith dialogue requires a challenge to the apologetic Christianity through recognition and inclusion of people of various backgrounds. In Morrison's novel, the two characters Reverend Misner and Consolata assume such a stance, embodying an ethos of global family members.

Reverend Misner, in contradistinction to patriarchs of Ruby, recognizes the sacredness of all people as equal and beloved children of God. He believes that the unifying power of God's love enables the contesting families' reconciliation. When the patriarchs assemble in order to punish K.D., the Morgans' nephew, for hitting his young, pregnant lover Arnette, a daughter of the Fleetwoods, Misner says, "God's love is in this house [...]. We treasure His strength but we mustn't ignore His love. That's what keeps us strong. Gentlemen. Brothers. Let us pray"<sup>39</sup>. He also advocates the redefinition of God's power when he willingly listens to the young, who insist on replacing the word "Be" (instead of the formerly inscribed "Beware" in front of the Oven motto). One of the young people argues, "No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To 'beware' God [...] trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down"<sup>40</sup>. As a response to Deacon Morgan's accusations directed towards the young of disrespecting the ancestral history and tradition Reverend Misner defends their liberal and progressive viewpoint saying, "Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it. It's because

<sup>35</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 130.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 276.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 291.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

they do know the Oven's value that they want to give it new life"<sup>41</sup>. Further, when one of the patriarchs warns the young generation that "You can't be God" and Reverend Pulliam says that "You have to obey Him," a representative of the younger generation explains, "Yes, sir, but we *are* obeying Him [...]. If we follow His commandments, we'll be His voice, His retribution. As a people"<sup>42</sup>.

Reverend Misner also transcends the memory of painful history of racial oppression of black people by whites, who once saw themselves as the only legitimate Christians. On the one hand, he teaches young people that "whites not only had no patent on Christianity; they were often its obstacle. That Jesus had been freed from white religion"<sup>43</sup>. On the other hand, regardless of the victimization of black people facilitated by supposedly Christian forms of white oppression, he does not seek retribution, but postulates the inclusion of white people in the family of God. When he tells resenting Steward Morgan about the lost white visitors in Ruby, he states, "God has one people"<sup>44</sup>. Steward, however, immediately retorts, "Reverend [...] I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something *based* on ignorance"<sup>45</sup>.

Reverend Misner also defies the false religious exegesis performed by the domineering Reverend Pulliam, who sermonizes an authoritarian God, "not interested in you"<sup>46</sup> and conceptualizes God's love as an award for the strictly disciplined life, because "Love is not a gift. It is a diploma"<sup>47</sup>. Actually, Pulliam's words are

a widening of the war he had declared on Misner's activities: tempting the young to step outside the wall, outside the town limits, shepherding them, forcing them to transgress, to think of themselves as civil warriors<sup>48</sup>.

In order to neutralize "the poison Pulliam [has] sprayed over everything"<sup>49</sup>, Misner takes a crucifix in his hands and holds it in front of the congregation because he believes that cross is the symbol of kinship among people all over the world. He reflects upon the closeness between cross and all children of the world since it was

certainly the first sign any human anywhere had made: the vertical line; the horizontal one. Even as children, they drew it with their fingers in snow, sand or mud; they laid it down as sticks in dirt; arranged it from bones on frozen

---

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 142.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 145.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

tundra and broad savannas; as pebbles on riverbanks; scratched it on cave walls and outcroppings from Nome to South Africa. Algonquin and Laplanders, Zulu and Druids – all had a finger memory of this original mark.<sup>50</sup>

Holding the cross firmly, Misner hopes that his wordless prayer will deliver the uplifting message “that not only is God interested in you, He *is* you”<sup>51</sup>.

Misner’s advocacy of a formation of a divine extended family becomes a struggle against opposing, domineering patriarchs like the Morgan twin brothers, who, belonging to the most powerful congregation in town, “sorted [his] opinions carefully to judge which were recommendations easily ignored and which were orders they ought to obey”<sup>52</sup>. The destabilizing patriarchal autonomy engenders exclusion to the point that its executors resort to violent extermination of those who do not conform. The men’s inclination towards violence is gradually building up. For instance, Steward’s memory of his brother Elder, who came to a prostitute’s assistance insulted by white men evidences sleeping violence. The story

unnerved him [because] it was based on the defense of and prayers for a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own<sup>53</sup>.

The thought of black man’s humiliating helplessness in an oppressive society makes Steward Morgan “want to shoot somebody”<sup>54</sup>. Morgan’s nephew K.D. also violently abuses a young woman, upon which Reverend Misner reflects: “What did K.D. think he was doing? His relation to Deek and Steward protected him, of course, but it was hard to like a man who relied on that”<sup>55</sup>. Eventually, after the patriarchs’ most poignant act of oppressive patriarchy – the mass murder of women in the Convent – Misner pointedly observes that their “power to control was out of control”<sup>56</sup>. He contemplates the complex confusion that entraps the New Fathers:

They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. Unbridled

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 147.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 308.

by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seems to him was an unnecessary failure<sup>57</sup>.

Therefore, Reverend Misner decides to stay in this town to perform God's work. He embodies a middleperson between two opposite ideological milieus: exclusive Ruby and the inclusive Convent. Encouraging the young to cross over the walls of a conservative enclave, he outlines a point of departure towards an interfaith dialogue that enables the formation of an extended family.

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison portrays a microcosm of an extended interracial, interfaith, and intercultural household through the Convent, hosted by Consolata, whose embracing spirit welcomes the lost and driven. Mavis comes across the Convent in her flight from her husband's retribution for the accidental killing of her infant children, who suffocated being left inside a car. Gigi searches for a true love experience. Seneca leaves behind a convict boyfriend and escapes the humiliation she experienced when hired by a woman who wanted to indulge her perverse sexual fantasies. Pallas is a victim of rape and escapes from her domineering father. Even Ruby women seek solace in the Convent. Desperate, pregnant Arnette Fleetwood and Soan Morgan look for assistance in abortions. Sweetie Fleetwood longs to escape from her sick children. Consolata welcomes all women regardless of their faith, race and social status. Having been introduced to the power of God's grace by Catholic nuns, more unconsciously than not, she follows the way of Jesus, which means, as Dwight N. Hopkins elucidates, being

with the poor because that is where Jesus resides, [and] then we are not bound by church doctrines or institutional restriction [...]. If God is the spirit of freedom for the least in society, then this spirit has to be active as an event and process of struggle even where the name of Jesus is not known<sup>58</sup>.

The invading patriarchs from Ruby notice that there is "not a cross of Jesus anywhere"<sup>59</sup> in the Convent. When they foray the rooms, they perceive

strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner. A 1968 calendar, large X's marking various dates [...]; a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered; an astrology chart; a fedora tilted on the plastic neck of female torso<sup>60</sup>.

Their blinding and confusing imagination brings about connotations of diabolism instead of emotional desperation, which they utilize as justification for the massacres. Consolata, in turn, enables the women's open exposition of and confrontation with

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306.

<sup>58</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>59</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

their tribulations and painful memories. She perceives them as “broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying”<sup>61</sup>. In this manner, she is likely to carry out an interfaith dialogue, which involves one’s ability to discern the “emotional makeup of diverse communities [...]”. How do people deal with grief, pain, and death”<sup>62</sup>. She does not interfere in the women’s

foolish babygirl wishes. Mavis talked endlessly of surefire moneymaking ventures: beehives; something called “bed and breakfast”; a catering company; an orphanage. One thought she had found a treasure chest of money or jewels or something and wanted help to cheat the others of its contents. Another was secretly slicing her thighs, her arms. Wishing to be the queen of scars, she made thin red slits in her skin with whatever came to hand: razor, safety pin, paring knife. One other longed for what sounded like a sort of cabaret life, a crowded place where she could sing sorrow-filled songs with her eyes closed<sup>63</sup>.

Throughout her spiritual growth, Consolata also resists the oppressive vision of Christianity that seeks to erase indigenous cultures. Although the Catholic nuns formerly residing in the Convent assisted and educated Indian Girls, their mission was

to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption<sup>64</sup>.

For thirty years Consolata is a committed nun until she has a distorting relationship with a “living man,” Deacon Morgan. When her passion overwhelms and even threatens him, he leaves her. However, her personal misfortune does not prevent her development towards becoming a welcoming spirit and attaining otherworldly powers. Initially, she is skeptical about any thought of magic. When Lone, a former midwife in Ruby, soothes Consolata’s menopause symptoms, she hesitates to acknowledge any inexplicable powers because she regards herself as a conscientious Christian who accepts no “magic”<sup>65</sup>. Lone has just the opposite view when she says, “You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don’t separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don’t unbalance His world”<sup>66</sup>. Eventually, she makes Consolata aware of her exceptional gift and even capability of ‘stepping in,’ entering the dying

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 222.

<sup>62</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 222.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 227.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 244.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

person to save someone's life. Consolata prefers to name this practice "seeing in"<sup>67</sup>. Moreover, Consolata

deconstructs the founding binary opposition within the structure of Western thought, the Christian separation of spirit and flesh, by stating: 'Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve'<sup>68</sup>.

This magic woman unifies the Convent family through the ritual of loud dreams, which is categorized as one of the strategies that enable inter-faith dialogue. Dwight N. Hopkins contends that in order to exercise an interfaith dialogue one has

to see, hear, and listen to different cultural expressions of [...] faiths [that encompass] dreams, tradition, morals, and connection to the divine [...] hope that there is a force greater than they are<sup>69</sup>.

In this manner, Consolata holds dream sessions during which the brokenhearted reveal their dreams and reconcile with their past.

In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love [...] They spoke to each other about what had been dreamed and what had been drawn<sup>70</sup>.

This dream ritual engenders the women's transformation and unity. "With Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered"<sup>71</sup>. Consolata's inclusive spirituality enhances the ritual that

encourages them to confront them, acknowledge them, and to recognize similarities between their own and others' experiences [...] helps these women to overcome their own personal traumas and to create a more nurturing, healing community not based on the divisions and exclusions of Ruby<sup>72</sup>.

Consolata encourages a reconciling communication that is lacking in Ruby.

Interfaith dialogue also involves paying "attention to how people carry out their ordinary lives of survival"<sup>73</sup>. In *Paradise*, Consolata's everyday activities unite not only the women in the Convent, but also the outsiders. Because she is an extraordinary cook and a skillful gardener, the Convent becomes famous for the best barbecue sauce and

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 247.

<sup>68</sup> A. Read, *As If Word Magic Had Anything to Do with the Courage It Took to Be a Aan*: *Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'*, "African American Review" 2005, no. 39. 4, p. 538.

<sup>69</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>70</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 265.

<sup>72</sup> C. Romero. *op. cit.*, p. 418.

<sup>73</sup> D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

red peppers in the town. When Mavis came to the Convent, “in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of leaving it disturbed her”<sup>74</sup>. Consolata’s sharing food with others is analogous to the black theological endorsement of the ethic of breaking bread. The theologian Theodore Walker, Jr. emphasizes the manner in which adherence to this ethic enhances communal and familial unity.

We know now that the bread we ought to break internationally, nationally, and locally includes leadership, money, food, jobs, land, housing, righteous education, and socialization (including the use of such resources as religious ritual, music, and dance), vastly increased attention to male-female-family-church relations, health care, child care, home care, family care, elder care, power, and other opportunities and resources essential to the nurture, survival, fruitful increase, and empowerment of all the people<sup>75</sup>.

Further Walker asserts,

The bottom line of a black theological social ethical appropriation of the philosophy of black power is ‘Let us break bread together.’ Where bread is not broken, Jesus is not recognized, God is not served, and the people are not free<sup>76</sup>.

Accordingly, Consolata’s breaking of bread together with the marginalized and down-trodden not only includes food in a literal sense, but also a welcoming space and ambience which facilitates others’ sense of belonging, respite, recognition, and acceptance. Before the defamatory actions of the patriarchs of Ruby, many people had recognized the Convent as a haven, whose hosts “took people in – lost folks or folks who needed rest. Early reports were of kindness and very good food”<sup>77</sup>.

## Summary

In *Paradise*, in sync with recent black theological perspective, Toni Morrison cautions against religious institutions founded on principles of exclusion and calls for interfaith dialogue that is inevitable in the formation of a divine extended family. The character Consolata succeeds in establishing an interfaith household because of her ability to recognize the values of varied cultural religious expression. Chanette Romero observes,

Consolata’s teachings attempt to implement a new, more accepting form of religion that focuses on the communal worship of a multiplicity of beliefs. She speaks to multiple deities and combines the Catholic precepts of service and love with the African American womanist traditions of root working and conjuring that she

<sup>74</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> T. Walker, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 121.

<sup>77</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 11.

learned from Lone [...]. Consolata also draws on Candomble, a religion from her native Brazil that combines Catholicism with African spirit worship. Drawing on these multiple deities and natural spiritualities, Consolata teaches the Convent women to connect to the natural world and each other by eating a meatless diet, allowing the rain to help cleanse them of their traumas, and most importantly, participating in “loud dreaming” sessions<sup>78</sup>.

Towards the end of the novel, rain signifies the all-embracing natural world, the unifying power of which the women of the Convent discern and glorify. They dance together in the rain, God’s blessing, that is “like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces”<sup>79</sup>. Their closeness to nature empowers their divine kinship. On the contrary, the oppressive patriarchs do not recognize, or even hide themselves from this virtue of the natural world. While it is raining, the armed men of Ruby stay in a shed and prepare for their murderous act. Their companionship strengthens their killing rage. An analogous discrepancy between the attitudes of the Convent women’s and Ruby’s patriarchal society’s stances towards nature is manifested by their approaches to gardening. Consolata’s artful and fruitful gardening evidences her connectedness to nature, the crops of which she shares with other people. This is in contradistinction to Ruby citizens whose “habit, the interest in cultivating plants that could not be eaten, spread, and so the ground surrendered to it”<sup>80</sup>. While Consolata’s gardening renders the land prolific and bountiful in crops she shares, the ground of Ruby’s citizens becomes a wasteland overgrown by poisonous plants. The more the patriarchs of Ruby distance themselves from the natural world, the more apologetic and separatist their religiosity becomes.

---

<sup>78</sup> C. Romero. *op. cit.*, p. 417.

<sup>79</sup> T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 283.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

**Akshaya K. Rath**

National Institute of Technology Rourkela

## ALLEN GINSBERG IN INDIA: LIFE AND NARRATIVE

### Abstract

This article deals with Allen Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* and later poems and argues that Ginsberg domesticates Indian gods and goddesses to castigate American capitalism. After bringing American poetry out into the streets, Ginsberg takes refuge in Indian cultural heritage, and contemporizes its religious myths "to return to America to confront the nation at war". In his life-writing against capitalism and bombs, he embraces the victims of capitalism and against imperial poetics, he patronizes the colonized psyche. In short, highlighting Ginsberg's India chapter, this article suggests that the anti-capitalist poetics not only inherits the discipline of Buddhist and Hindu mythical beliefs, it also projects that the anti-establishment discourse liberates Ginsberg's poetry.

**Keywords:** Allen Ginsberg, *Indian Journals*, religion, myth, capitalism

### Introduction

How may one sing the song against capitalism and schizophrenia taking refuge in a different culture? How may one project the multi-fold subjugation of the self, be it cultural, historical or political? How may one resist the ever-lasting refusal of poets by the capitalist world and thereby bring life back from oblivion to light? This article reads Allen Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* and later poems and argues that Ginsberg domesticates Indian gods and goddesses to castigate American capitalism. After bringing American poetry to come out into the streets, Ginsberg takes refuge in Indian cultural heritage, and contemporizes its religious myths "to return to America to confront the nation at war"<sup>1</sup>.

In his life-writing against capitalism and militarism, Ginsberg embraces the victims of capitalism and against imperial poetics, he patronizes the colonized psyche. In

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Selected Poems: 1947-1995*, England 1996, p. xvii.

Ginsberg's life-narrative, life and art are one. Ginsberg dares madness, he comes out with a nonconformist poem; he rebels, he invents a new literary form; he castigates America's capitalist ideology, he creates a splendid musical note; and by taking LSD and marijuana he hallucinates, he re-invents cultural landscapes and civilizations. Rebellion is hence a metaphor for life and art; living in the periphery of society and thereby creating an alternative composition are its healing techniques; and the composition becomes so central to the proposed free-life that there is hardly any distinction between life and art. Apparently the symbolic proximity of life and art establishes a newer end to composite life which transforms artistic neurosis into creative energy. Ginsberg's India chapter is the foundation to such a transgressive energy that he took to life and art till the end. From the publication of the *Indian Journals* (1970) till his last lectures at Naropa on Buddhism, Ginsberg's life-narrative takes a transgressive turn in terms of content and form. Reading Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* and later poems, this article suggests that the projected anti-capitalist poetics not only inherits the discipline of Buddhist and Hindu mythical beliefs, it also suggests that the anti-establishment discourse developed by Ginsberg liberates his poems.

### **Life between two worlds: West and East**

Allen Ginsberg's association with India was formally established in the 1960s when he spent over a year travelling different parts of the country<sup>2</sup>. From the 1970s through the 1990s, he projected Indian themes and experiences in his volumes of work, and travelled in and about the country three times. When he started publishing in the 1950s, the popular poets were Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost<sup>3</sup>. The elite read Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur. He started the Beat movement in San Francisco with Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Neal Cassady<sup>4</sup>. They were gay artists circulating a counter-culture in and around San Francisco. Ginsberg took his inspiration from Dada, a European movement of the early 1900s, and that borrowing internationalized American literature to a significant extent. But his poetic roots were as much in the first gay poet of America, Walt Whitman, as in Spain's gay poetry of García Lorca castigating America in his *A Poet in New York* (1929)<sup>5</sup> and of the 1930s gay New York poet Hart Crane's *Brooklyn Bridge*. But Ginsberg also uses the French Impressionist Paul Cézanne's technique of foreshortening in *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) as Cézanne does in his

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive discussion on Ginsberg's letters and memoirs written in India, see D. Baker's *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*, New York 2008.

<sup>3</sup> J. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965*, Chicago 1984.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation*, New York 1976; A. R. Lee, *The Beat Generation writers*, London 1996.

<sup>5</sup> F. G. Lorca, *Poet in New York*, New York 1988.

depiction of Mont St. Victoire, the mountain in the landscape appearing extremely close to the viewer's face rather than in a perspective at a distance. In his poetry of madness he anticipates Ammons, Berryman, Sexton (the Confessionals), which was a revelation in his life. It is now established that Ginsberg made American poetry come out into the streets critiquing America's capitalism and militarism in general<sup>6</sup>.

In February 1962, Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky arrived in Bombay, India. While Ginsberg searched for a perfect spiritual teacher, he also made contribution to modern Indian poetry. Both the issues run parallel and the effect is visible in his later works and speeches. In a dream-vision in 1975, for instance, Ginsberg sang to musical accompaniment: "I cant find anyone to show me what to do / I cant find anyone / It's maken me so blue [sic]"<sup>7</sup>. It is only a perfect teacher who could lead America develop a "conscious mercy"; a world of understanding will come out "if we all sat down and decided not to be great"<sup>8</sup>. The rebellion continues in poetry but there is a quiet acceptance of the possibility of global understanding. And this understanding will come not from demilitarizing America but from the wisdom of a Guru:

I can't find anyone to show me what to do  
I cant find anyone  
    It's maken me so blue  
O I cant find anyone that knows me  
    Good as you  
Yeah I cant find anyone,  
    only you Guru [sic]<sup>9</sup>

A few significant phenomena develop during this period. Once Ginsberg initiates the search for a perfect teacher, the writing follows a pattern. Often the poems begin with a clear statement, a line like "And the Communists have nothing to offer"<sup>10</sup> as in *Kral Majales*, then unexpectedly an oppositional idea appears, a mythological figure is placed in surprise, the instincts in turn pour in – it is as if a wild beast is implanted into a human habitat, fanatics appear and suddenly there is an acceptance of the gloomy world:

... the beautiful engineers are all dead, the secret technicians conspire for  
    their own glamour  
in the Future, in the Future, but now drink vodka and lament the Security  
    forces,  
and the Capitalists drink gin and whiskey on airplanes but let Indian brown

<sup>6</sup> See J. Karmar, *Allen Ginsberg in America*, New York 1969; B. Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography*, New York 1989.

<sup>7</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals: Note Books Diary Blank Pages Writings*, New Delhi 1970, p. 283.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, *Kral Majales*, p. 147.

millions starve  
and when Communist and Capitalist assholes tangle the Just man is arrested or robbed or had his head cut off...<sup>11</sup>

That Ginsberg writes this poem on a jet seat allows him to understand how much he is subsumed by industrial civilization. Hence, understanding Ginsberg, without sidelining the contradictions and rebellions inherent in his life-work, is in fact an exceedingly difficult task. His had been a peripheral and erratic reputation. Defamed, haunted and disillusioned, Ginsberg reached India having just one dollar in his pockets, a fact which he neither completely rejected nor accepted in totality<sup>12</sup>. Meetings took place with great sages who took marijuana as a religious element to their lives. Acquaintances developed with drug addicts. There remained an everlasting “yes” to hashish and other drugs. Ginsberg lived by the *ghats* of Benares, witnessed Hindu death rituals, and saw the body burning into ashes. Religion is always a rescue for his hungry soul. Poverty and hunger chase him as do ill health and state surveillance. “Self conscious, I have nowhere to go. Maybe might as well leave it at that, continue to travel and die as I am when I die”, records Ginsberg on March 25, 1962<sup>13</sup>. Life has no meaning and multiple gods and goddesses grant him amateur thought: “Avaloketesvara, Kuan Yin, Jaweh, Saints, Saddhus, Rishis, benevolent ones, Compassionate Superconscious ones, etc, what can you do for me now? What’s to be done with my life which has lost its idea?”<sup>14</sup>.

Between the idea of “going there to look for a teacher”<sup>15</sup> and to come back to America to “confront the nation at war”<sup>16</sup>, Ginsberg’s activities are worth listing. He translated the poetry of anonymous rickshaw pullers in Benares, and in Calcutta he influenced Jibanananda Das’s poetry which he translated freely. During such a crucial time Ginsberg’s *Indian Journals* records the transcendence of the hungry body and soul in India, the colonized land, about whose suffering he understood much. Prior to his visit, he had read the *Bhagvad Gita*, the essence of Hindu spiritual life, Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s *Table Talk*, portions of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the grand epics of India, and the list grew when he started the trip. Among them were the *Jataka tales* and sections from the *Upanishads*. These are familiar texts from India, most of which were translated by Richard Burton, Christopher Isherwood and others. Notwithstanding the fashionable slander of Ginsberg’s anti-religiosity, his cultural journey had been so far that of a city-dweller whose battle-cry had been American

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> S. Ganguly, *Allen Ginsberg in India: An Interview*, “Ariel: A Review of International Literature” 1993, no. 4, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> S. Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Selected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. xvii.

capitalism that “destroyed the best minds of the generation”<sup>17</sup> and Ginsberg was its spokesperson. The City Lights edition of *Howl and Other Poems* was meant for the city dweller who would take the designed book in the back pocket of a pair of jeans and sing the saga of cultural and intellectual destruction. The epigraph not only indicated the poetic mentor Walt Whitman’s radical *Song of Myself* – “Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” – it also indicated that the modern song was already sung by Whitman and the new generation had received its new “master”. It also freely borrowed Ezra Pound’s neurosis that sang through the pages. Times till then had never been easy for Ginsberg. *Howl and Other Poems*, soon after its publication, was subsequently seized by the US customs and the San Francisco police. Dubbed “obscene”, it also became the subject of a court trial. America, for the new generation of city life, had received its new singer who sang Lucifer’s *non serviam*, and like his intellectual gay counterparts Isherwood and Carpenter, an eastward journey for peace of mind became inevitable.

His Highness the Dalai Lama shows him the path. The answer is in the illusive life Ginsberg takes to living. The Lama asked him: “If you take LSD can you see what’s in that Briefcase?” meaning though he has a battle to fight Ginsberg has renounced it and has taken refuge in the essence of capitalist life<sup>18</sup>. Guilt and shame continue on the backdrop of non-vegetarianism, homosexuality and child-love. Jazz would continue, so would LSD. Poetic compositions would flourish, so would frequent quarrels with Peter Orlovsky, his partner. This chapter of Ginsberg would continue till his last breath. The learning and memorabilia he would carry to Naropa where he lectured on Buddhism at the end of his life, wrote quiet lyrics to the Buddha, and Elizabethan love songs to his young lovers. Divinity is the only answer; writing, its soul.

In India, by then, Rabindranath Tagore had received a permanent status as a poet and singer, and such was the situation that other poets could hardly establish themselves. This visit of Ginsberg became a phase of transition – both for Ginsberg’s writing and Indian English poets – a transition in form, transition in theme; the personal became the radical and the radical came to the academia to be accommodated with the spirit of the time. Nissim Ezekiel is one of those generations of poets who were located in Bombay, along with Adil Jussawalla, and were shaping the future of Indian poetry. At Ezekiel’s residence, in Bombay, Ginsberg, true to the spirit of his rebellion, spoke:

Indian English poetry was often imitative, derivative, and literary, born of an idiom “too polite and genteel”, impossible as a vehicle of creative expression because there could never be an Indian English “like there is an American Negro English”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*, San Francisco 1959, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> C. Kulshrestha, *English Verse in India: Some Obstinate Questions*, [in:] *Contemporary Indian English Verse: an Evaluation*, ed. C. Kulshrestha. New Delhi: 1980, p. 9.

The direct impact of Ginsberg on Indian poets and poetry is not difficult to be traced. Anthologists and critics of the subsequent decades took Ginsberg's remark as a serious offense, defended Indian English poets, and tried hard to project what "Indianness" and "modernism" were there in Indian English poetry<sup>20</sup>. They did not forget to divide Indian poets by British "periods" and "-isms" as well, which Ginsberg in a roundabout way was opposing for artistic freedom. They traced the influence of Eliot and Pound, and other British poets on Indian English poets and tried hard to show the Western "-isms" in Indian English poetry. Makarand Paranjape's anthology *Indian Poetry in English* (1993)<sup>21</sup>, for instance, classified Indian poets in this light to a great extent. Moreover, most anthologists of Indian English poetry of the decades tried hard to show what "modern" Indian poetry in English was like. The spirit of the time demanded critics and anthologists to form canons of Indian English poetry not only for its individuality but also to be acknowledged in world literature<sup>22</sup>. Ginsberg's plea to poets and critics to foster a unique creativity of resistance to mainstreaming of literature by the Anglophone discourse remained at the centre of such artistic expressions. Consequently, what Ginsberg offered India, against an imitative artistic life, is lost in oblivion, and Indian poetry suffered from a relative lack of originality in themes and contents. Ginsberg, however, used his cultural experience of India in his works and found a reason to use the cultural learning, a path Forster, Carpenter and Isherwood had initiated.

## Domesticating Indian mythology

Ginsberg presents India as a place for refuge and righteous teachers for guidance. The political mayhem that tarnishes the image of America can only be saved in a world away from militarism. There is probably nothing more suffocating than the life of a poet in a capitalist society where freedom of speech is put on trial. Hence, India, a place with its glorious civilization unique to any land with its peace-loving people, who practiced religious tolerance, becomes the Promised Land for Ginsberg. In a 1993 interview, Ginsberg proposed the real intention behind his third trip to India, the first two being extremely rich:

By 1961, I was more interested in going beyond the traditional expatriate role or voyage, of wandering out in the East, particularly India, the most rich and

<sup>20</sup> See P. Lal, ed. *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*, Calcutta 1971; A. K. Mehrotra, ed. *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, New Delhi 1992.

<sup>21</sup> M. Paranjape, ed. *Indian Poetry in English*, Madras 1993.

<sup>22</sup> A. K. Rath, *Language Debate and Canonizing Indian English Poetry*, "The Challenge" 2013, no. 2.

exquisite and aesthetically attractive culture. And also least expensive....There were rare people, famous rare people who did that..."<sup>23</sup>.

The infamous snake-charmers of India bothered him, but the image which Ginsberg carried throughout has a definite purpose – like Isherwood and Carpenter – to “going there to look for a teacher”<sup>24</sup>. There were other reasons behind the trips as well. Reading Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, Ginsberg had anticipated the end of American capitalism and the end of Empire in the East, of which the latter took a long time to come<sup>25</sup>. So the liberation movement that he initiated drew him to the East and with the guidance of a perfect teacher would Ginsberg create poetic compositions to free America of its militarism.

In writing, driven by a passionate form of rebellion, Indian gods and goddesses are domesticated to help sing the saga of liberation. There is a shift from the site of rebellion to the form of rebellion as well. The impermanent status of the American West<sup>26</sup> – the chaos of Western science, Aristotelian mind – drive him to the East. Bits and pieces of memory from this cultural encounter form the heart of his later thought. Apparently, Ginsberg equates the political massacre of America with that of the destructive goddess Kali who fights demons against the atrocities inflicted upon them. On the backdrop, Ginsberg’s mother driven by madness would not be able to give him the real comfort and would be destructive in approach. All his life Ginsberg carried that suffocation, envisioned Kali as the destructive mother, who would destroy American supremacy and re-create a universe for the imbecile:

Kali’s insatiable blood thirst caused by eating  
too many Armies (Asura whose blood  
drops formed innumerable Asuras)  
Killed him with a spear & drank drips of blood.  
Black, half naked. Claws. Tusks. Garland  
of skulls, red tongue & mouth  
dripping blood  
Siva = Destruction devouring time = white  
Kali triumphs over white time – “abysmal  
void”  
Dance madness. Stepping on Shiva she comes  
down again –  
theres nothing left to dance on  
Kali as Statue of Liberty starts moving with ten arms [sic]<sup>27</sup> .

<sup>23</sup> S. Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals, op. cit.*, p. 22.

The metaphorical proximity of Kali and the Statue of Liberty continues further. Kali is terrible-faced, fearful, awful, yet benevolent. The *dhyana mantra* of the Goddess, as is composed, glorifies a potentially terrifying goddess, who dwells in the cremation ground surrounded by jackals; she is naked and though she betrays the love for the extreme, she is worshipped as the mother-figure as she is ever merciful. So also remain the modern references of Kali with her demonic or *birupa* figure and Ginsberg projects her as the divine mother – symbolizing both creation and destruction – to its extremity. The religious symbols – chiefly of Kali with her multiple destructive images and also of Siva – have been used to rationalize human sacrifice, sacrifice of capitalist thought and re-creation of the capitalist world. The Statue of Liberty is consequently invoked to take the form of Kali, the goddess, who would be destructive, but her destruction would bring back life from the periphery.

Drugs bring him to a gifted illusion. The *Bhagvad Gita's visva rupa* – the Hindu representation of creation and destruction – is not only metaphysical and transcendental, it also brings him a vision which is not otherwise possible in reality: “Why am I afraid to go back to that Creation? Afraid it is a 3-D delusion I’ll enter & never get out of”<sup>28</sup> and soon after he writes: “To be afraid to enter [that delusion] is a terrible fate. The echo of being afraid to be born, to leave Naomi’s womb, even – a sort of hit of pre-natal memory”<sup>29</sup>. Not being able to be protected by the parent-figure is death for the poet. Symbolically, not being able to achieve the envisioned liberation of the self and the soul is death anyway. This terrible state of understanding human misery is a dialogical synthesis which Freudian psychology has failed to understand. It is religion and its mystical tradition that allow Ginsberg to escape madness: “In the same as being afraid to leave the womb of life & go forth into the State of Death. All the religious songs counsel acquiescence”<sup>30</sup>.

In Ginsberg, as is hallucination, dream is a metaphor. Music transcends the sick soul, empathizing it, and once the metaphors transgress themselves as metonyms, a new desire of fulfillment can be perceived. This is true in life and art, and Ginsberg’s entire journey – non-conformism in *Howl*, fears of LSD hallucination, boy-love, quarrelsome lovers, meditation and lectures on the Buddha – makes sense. His life-writing is as serious as the blades of capitalism and life-narrative is as weird as India’s mystic life after colonial modernization. He wrote:

I walk alone several miles in night along ox-meat market street till I go thru  
fairylane gate to the Rashbehari Rich Section with modern Apartments on the  
Seaside – a beautiful front street rich waterfront like vaster Chicago – I wonder

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

what city I'm in, I'm deliriously happy, it's my promised land (I'm writing this in the promised land)<sup>31</sup>.

Such is the vision of the dark singer. And again “the wonderland where Man knows he's in a dream”<sup>32</sup>. In dream and writing comes Kali, showing the destruction of atom bomb. If destruction has to come, it has to come in the way Hindu philosophy preaches the end of the world – a reconstruction has to have its beginning. Consequently, Kali becomes a central figure in Ginsberg's advocating of anti-nuclear activities in the American West. Kali the destructive force is also the benevolent mother; her earthly appearance with skulls and freshly cut human heads also inspires awe as she is the caring-mother. Similar should be the face of the Statue of Liberty: “A huge bottomless throat and a great roar of machinery chewing on these Hydrogen bombs like bubble gums & bursting all over its mouth as big as the Lincoln Memorial”<sup>33</sup>. Ginsberg had his own concepts of sin and heaven. Sex is a metaphor. Love is its true communication. What is “heaven” he questions at multiple places and multiple times. Every time he asks the question, he receives a different answer. He records them. It is chiefly then a place beyond shit and desire<sup>34</sup>, which his poetic composition would aspire to achieve. But failing, here constructed as positive, he would soon realize that it is desire that brings sorrow to him, an echo of Buddhist tradition that he would embrace. “Not to be afraid of anybody or anything anymore” is so the characteristic of Hell. What is it that Ginsberg fears most? Why is the writing so raw, meaning why is it so explicit and rebellious? Endless is thus the suffering, of human, beasts and angels. “An ogre goes with every rose / A bee sting guards the honey / Immortality must disclose / Endless death”<sup>35</sup>. The soul is the poem. There is no salvation in and from the materialist universe except at the feet of the Buddha, who is eternally peaceful:

O What an ocean! whoever seeks  
The land of illumination:  
That is to say, the lifeboat leaks,  
Hunger is the ration,  
Thirst is the First and only water;  
There is no Salvation,  
Eternity gets shorter & shorter  
To finish its Creation!<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

This is “ruined Ginsberg” singing the heart-felt cry as hunger and illness continue and life’s uncertainty is still bothering him. Where is the political? Where is the state of Being? Even in dream and hallucination Ginsberg rebels. It is the perpetual motion of the mind that presents the state of Being. With much contemplation thus *Indian Journals* gradually develops where the noteless raga is the rebellious node; its less aesthetic tone is the tone of the industrial society. To survive on the run is also an aesthetic creation in India, which Ginsberg, despised and haunted, would present. Hence against capitalism and bomb, he embraces the victim of capitalism – the rickshaw pullers and the proletariats. Against the imperial West, he embraces the colonized nation – India – the worst affected of western supremacy and consequently he creates a new genre of writing – a collage of everyday speech, poems, notes and blank pages.

### **Between mythology and capitalism**

As Ginsberg embraces the victims of capitalism and embraces life in the periphery as his own state of being, he develops a life based on mythology and accepts its complete substances. He lived a ghetto life in America and witnessed a street-life in Benares; he dish-washed for a living and understood the life of lepers and beggars surviving in a colonized society. Kali comes back, this time not as a mythological figure to destroy America with its multiple images, but as a human figure to live a ghetto-life. In *Describe: the rain on Dasaswamedh Ghat* Ginsberg, the narrator of the poem, rents a cheap house in the holy city of Benares, and observes the everyday activity of the common people. The poem, like a painting, where everything happens at the same time, provides a detailed image of multiple human characters. Kali Ma is presented as a blind woman who is on her way finding a place, to urinate finally “to piss on a broom”; the broom is accidentally left by the stone cutters who “last night were shaking the street with Boom”<sup>37</sup>. Both the progressive modern humans and the colonized poor negotiate the space and have a share of their own. The blind man who rents the road at night as a habitat is shaken as several trucks unload stones, and his sex-life is destroyed. The open habitat of the poor is further shared by animals who rent it for different purposes: the cows and the dogs living a street life, the donkeys and the camels taking the burden of human movements, the elephants serving marriage processions with drummers, tourists and bathing devotees crowding the place, and lepers on their begging movements – all representing modern life come to be displayed in Ginsberg’s poetic sketches. Then comes Ginsberg, as he witnessed poverty in America, to sketch the life of the suburban Indian poor. Not that the violent reality of each individual does not bother the poet:

<sup>37</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Selected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

the leper...  
 emerge dragging his buttocks on the gray rainy ground by the glove-  
 bandaged stumps of hands,  
 one foot chopped off below knee, round stump-knob wrapped with black  
 rubber  
 pushing a tin can shiny size of his head with left hand (from which only a  
 thumb emerged from leprous swathings)<sup>38</sup>

The poet spends his time in a ghetto to understand the effect of forgotten colonialism. A cultural renaissance is envisioned, for freedom of mind. The powerful gods and goddesses have turned humans and possess no power. Kali Ma, representing a blind woman now, presents the life of an imbecile and vanishes; a dog barks at a mad man with dirty and wild hair:

...who rag round his midriff & water pot in hand  
 stopped in midstreet turned round & gazed up at the balconies, windows,  
 shops and city stagery filled with glum activity  
 Shrugged & said *Jai Shankar!* To the imaginary audience and Me's  
 While a white robed Baul Singer carrying his one stringed dried pumpkin  
 Guitar  
 Sat down near the cigarette stand and surveyed his new scene, just arrived  
 in the Holy City of Benares<sup>39</sup>.

The ghetto life represented here directly corresponds to Ginsberg's sexual life as well. There were other gay counterparts such as Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood whom Ginsberg read, and understood that the refuge of the homosexual self is only in Hinduism and Buddhism which tolerate homosexuality in their scriptures and sculptures. A personal autonomy away from the capitalist world, a sexual fulfillment in the colonized land and ghetto-living among the sub-urban poor where there remained enough liberty to attain a sense of freedom of the self that in turn would provide serious autonomy to literary creation. During such a crucial time, daring an autobiography of resistance is a difficult task here. It is as narcissistic as Narcissus himself. Recording it chronicles a scripted life especially when one is not sure of a future tomorrow. Years of travelling would mean losing all contacts whatsoever, be it relatives, friends, lovers – all unfaithful to Father Time:

Am I even here to myself? I daren't write it all down, it's too shameful & boring now & I haven't the energy to make a great passionnal autobiography of it all – for who's all that autobiography for if it doesn't deliver heaven or reasonable equivalent? Anyway, who is that autobiography for? Young kids after the

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 129.

movies? I guess I have nothing to contribute to general edification by this vague haphazard slow motion death<sup>40</sup>.

Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* is a significant departure from all other works, viz., *Howl and Other Poems*, *Kaddish and Related Poems*, and other scattered prose pieces. It is a queer collage of notebook, diary, blank pages, writings, tracts, stanzas and poems. Sometimes it is chronological and at other times it breaks the narrative thread to such a great extent that the structure of writing – composition, paragraphs, poems, sentences along with time and history – get upside-down. However, there is method in the writing and it directly borrows from William Carlos Williams who had, with great fascination, acknowledged Ginsberg's rebellion in the foreword to *Howl*. Williams' influence in this phase of literary creation is directly related to composition, which Ginsberg practiced in life and directly took to his journal. Like his other rebellions, his rebellion with form too became significant. Like his other rebellions in life, a composition also has to rebel for its independent structure:

There's no reason why ever line must begin at the left hand margin. A silly habit, as if all the thoughts in the brain were lined up like a conscript army. No, thought flows freely thru the page space. Begin new ideas at margin and score their development, exfoliation, on the page organically, showing the shape of the thought, one association on depending indented on another, with space-jumps to indicate gaps and relationships between Thoughts, broken syntax to indicate hesitations & interruptions, – GRAPHING the movement of the mind on the page, as you would graph a sentence grammatically to show the relation between subject verb & object in primary school – the arrangement of lines on the page spread out to be a rhythmic scoring of the accelerations, pauses & trailings-off of thoughts in their verbal forms as mouth-speech<sup>41</sup>.

William Carlos Williams is the progenitor here. Writing becomes an ethic, an obsession, that changes life. For Baudelaire, in the *Voyages*, the motto is "To the depths of the unknown to find the new"<sup>42</sup>. For Ginsberg, it is through drugs, tantra and Zen meditation<sup>43</sup>. If the pain of life is in life itself, healing comes from immersion into life, nature, people, tradition and things. Whitman lived in those regions, so did William Blake. The surrealists followed this supra-natural life. They are believers and materialists at once; poets are slaves of both body and mind. Between dream and life, Ginsberg seeks his path. He raised himself to the state of "universal communion" where subject and object, body and mind, absorb one another in writing. In Ginsberg there is no distinction between the object of thought and literary composition.

<sup>40</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>42</sup> P. Emmanuel, *Baudelaire: The Paradox of Redemptive Satanism*, Alabama 1967, p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

Though capitalism and bloodshed are major themes that have made Ginsberg a world-wide spokesperson, gradually it is an internal battle of body-mind-soul that keeps him engaged. What is the searching question? What is the answer? Ginsberg in India realizes that every answer is internal yet individualistic: “The question I asked was, ‘What is the answer’ and I realized as I went on my knees in lightness & carelessness it was better to ask ‘What is the Great Question that troubles me?’” And further, “I been *demanding* in mental war, and the point of the dream was that the light was outside demands but related to mercy-bliss-tenderness-peace-calm-‘spiritual’”<sup>44</sup>. The answer for Ginsberg is in Zen. Zen is the idea of not committing suicide, not going insane, it is to fight suicide and insanity. As a Zen saying has it “Those who speak, know not; those who know, speak not”. The body is being spoken about, the *Journal* ends, but only to indicate a state of the soul.

## Conclusion

In *Notes for Howl and Other Poems*, Ginsberg wrote, “Fate tells big lies, & the gay Creator dances on his own body in Eternity”<sup>45</sup>. The new concept of literature, proposed by Ginsberg in India, breaks America’s bourgeois and puritan culture. It becomes prophetic and esoteric. The poet’s performative body becomes an antenna for piercing the unconscious, the unseen. A re-invention in love is hence necessary for the artist-singer in the neurotic world. The artist’s rebirth from neuroticism into health and life is what Ginsberg learns in India. Initially, all the needs of the poet are anti-social, to be loved for himself so that ultimately he can love everybody as a god. The quest is both mystical and psychological, to go out of society to return to it forever. Ginsberg creates art so that America can imitate it. The greatest metafiction is the fiction of our lives. But it is only Time that gives a story a sequence and a meaning. Ginsberg’s India chapter is a prose-poem, a poem and prose, jazz, confession, mythology, diary, and a prognosis of a life. It is both fiction and metafiction that he carried to his later composition and living.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> A. Ginsberg, *Notes for Howl and Other Poems*, [in:] *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. P. Hoover, New York 2013, p. 879.



**Xiaohong Zhang and Xiaomin Chen**  
Shenzhen University

## **SPEAK BEYOND THE EDGE: CHINESE AND AMERICAN CONFESSIONAL POETRY IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

### **Abstract**

American confessional poetry surfaced on the literary horizon against the backdrop of the time-honored Western confessional tradition and a clamorous post-War American society. As an experimental poetic voice, it challenged the yokes of all kinds: political, military, moral, cultural and literary. In the 1980s, warm reception of American confessional poetry in China engendered a discourse of Chinese confessions that is markedly poignant, dark and introspective. This paper looks into the making of a Chinese confessional poetics, especially of a discourse of women's poetry, in terms of shared authorial thematic and stylistic preferences, in interaction with American confessional poetry as a cross-cultural literary construct imbued with political significance. In doing so, it examines Chinese and American confessional poetry as a self-positioning, self-defining, self-articulating and self-interpreting act on the margin of the socio-political domain.

**Keywords:** confessional poetry, reception, politics, women poets, gender politics

### **Introduction**

Western confessional literature has a history of more than 1,500 years. It registers the trail of Western civilization from the age of religious rule to secularization and to modernity. The desire to "get it out" links religious and secular confessions. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment are two significant points of reference when it comes to the advance towards secularization. The Renaissance which took place in the fifteenth century signalled the end of the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church had possessed supreme power over sovereign states and individuals. The Renaissance played a key role in separating the Protestant Church from Roman Catholicism and the state from the church. Three hundred years later, Enlightenment thinkers and activists took a big step forward in promoting the emancipation of individual selves from higher authorities by means of individual judgment and ideals. Surging individualism

continued to broaden the platform for secular confessions. In the post-World War II context, American confessional poetry arose as a distinctive voice among the currents of time-honored literary confessions, which, under the cover of self-disclosure and self-exhibition, articulate messages of personal politics. Psychotic self-expression by American confessional poets is reminiscent of the pervasive sense of despair, disillusion and scepticism felt by American and European intellectuals. It specifically targets the then-dominant capitalist consumerism and established power felt as repressive and restrictive.

The relative shortage of Chinese confessional literature is socio-psychologically induced, because most Chinese literati are reluctant to be marginalized politically and morally. Confucianism and Daoism as the bedrock of the Chinese cultural tradition are semi-religious, semi-philosophical by nature, and both attach great importance to life here and now rather than afterlife. Confucianism advocates moral and ethical excellence, as well as social and political commitment, through self-cultivation and self-discipline. The resultant literature is imbued with political aspirations, social awareness and moral pride. By taking a marginal stance, Daoism articulates strong scepticism of all effects and meanings of being (e.g., reputation, social status, power, fortune and misfortune, good and evil). The subject of Daoist literature often concerns a reclusive life-style and a let-it-be philosophy of life, articulated in a detached and escapist voice. It lacks the overtly subversive power of western confessional literature.

In the early twentieth century, the flooding of Western literature inspired a confessional mode of literary expression that had been subdued or had lain dormant in indigenous Chinese cultural tradition. Chinese intellectuals' surging interest in selves and selfhood went hand in hand with the grand narrative of national salvation and nation-building. History repeated itself in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when political correctness was the one and only yardstick to judge literary production and reception. Privatised literary expression like confessions was disavowed as pro-capitalist vice.

Almost 25 years after the critical "discovery" of the American confessional school, this form also emerged in contemporary China. In 1981 two of Robert Lowell's poems appeared in the Chinese authoritative journal *Poetry* (*Shikan*). Large-scale introduction and translation of American confessional poetry followed in the official and unofficial circuits, especially in China's southwest Sichuan province. Sylvia Plath's poetry in particular stood out in this cross-cultural literary communication as an eye-opener for Chinese poets who were then still struggling to divest themselves of ideological baggage.

This paper draws special attention to the impact of American confessional poetry upon the Chinese literary scene in the 1980s. When I did my preliminary study of

Chinese and American confessional poetry some ten years ago, I was inclined to see them primarily as cross-cultural aesthetic objects, something occurring in the middle ground of cross-cultural literary communication. With time, I came to realize not a few blind spots embedded in my earlier research. One, I failed to pinpoint the political potentials of this veiled self-expression. Two, my earlier contextualization was incomplete and inaccurate. This is why I transplant the material from my earlier research and extrapolate it into the present context where new meanings and arguments are generated<sup>1</sup>. In this article written with Chen Xiaomin we are arguing instead that both Chinese and American confessional poetry feature as aesthetic categories in particular intracultural and intercultural contexts as manifestations of personal politics, the personal is political, so to speak. American and Chinese confessional poetry can be read as a showcase of politicized self-expression at odds with established powers. We are particularly interested in how the confessional discourse relates to the acts of self-positioning, self-defining, self-articulating and self-interpreting and in how poets wrestle with politics to carve out a discursive space of their own, on the margin of the socio-political domain.

### American confessional poetry in its historical context

American confessional poetry as a distinctive voice emerged around the 1950s and was popularised throughout the 1960s. M. L. Rosenthal<sup>2</sup> was the first American critic who employed the term “confessional poetry” in a review of Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959). Lowell’s lyrical speaker in *Life Studies* assumes a bolder, more tormented personal voice than those of the *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946), and *The Mills of the Knavanahs* (1951). In *Life Studies* Lowell treats of deaths and failures in his family, of his imprisonment during World War II, and of his mental illness and institutionalization. Similar subjects informed the writing of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton after the two women poets attended the Boston poetry workshop instructed by Lowell in the late 1950s. The three poets’ shared preference for the same or similar subject matter is a major justification for American critics to lump them together as “confessional poets”. Additionally, both Lowell and Sexton credit W. D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle* (1959) as a source of inspiration and Snodgrass himself as their shared line of influence. The names of Theodore Roethke and John Berryman can also be

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Zhang, *American and Chinese Confessional Poetry: A Case of Cross-Cultural Intertextuality*, “Canadian Review of Comparative Literature” 2004, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 11-26.

<sup>2</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II*, New York 1967, p. 23.

associated with the group, through *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) and *Dream Songs* (1969) respectively.

American confessional poetry has its roots in the Western confessional tradition. Religious confessions address either God via church elders or the community of believers and potential believers, while secular confessions are directed towards an actual or “imagined community” for philosophical, political, ethical, or aesthetic purposes<sup>3</sup>. Through the act of confessing, personal feelings, frustrations, anguish, fears, failures, and a sense of guilt are poured out into the public arena, thus taking on communal significance. The harbinger of confessional literature dates as far back as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. In the autobiographical section, St. Augustine addresses his spiritual wanderings, or in Robert O’Connell’s words, the “odyssey of soul” — along adolescent mischief and sexual adventures, the theosophy of Mani, endeavour for secular successes, and diving into Neoplatonic mysticism — towards the soul’s union with God<sup>4</sup>. Augustine’s “I”-speaker confesses his sins before the one and only addressee — God, who is “my source of sweet light, my glory, and my confidence”<sup>5</sup>. If Augustine’s confessions aim at the purification and salvation of the soul from inside the Christian community, Jean-Jacques Rousseau unveils his confessions as part and parcel of his political philosophy. Rousseau reveals things “inside and under the skin” to reflect upon universal problems and conflicts of human nature<sup>6</sup>. His *Confessions* is a master copy of autobiographies that inspire, engage, and provoke readers and writers of later generations.

Robert Phillips scrutinizes American confessional poetry against the backdrop of the Western literary tradition of using “the Self as primary subject, the Self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint”<sup>7</sup>. He makes a long list of Western poets whose works more or less fit into the confessional mode: Sappho, Catullus, De Quincey, Musset, Wordsworth, Byron, Rilke, Baudelaire, and Whitman. American confessional poetry shares with previous confessional literature a desire for naked “truths” and continues to draw on the material of private life, but marked ruptures can be readily identified. Firstly, the subject matter of American confessional poetry shows unprecedented concern and enthusiasm for mental disorder and psychosis. Incidentally, among the concerned poets, Lowell suffered from long-term depression

<sup>3</sup> Here I am referring to Benedict Anderson’s formulation of the nation as an “imagined community”, of people who do not and cannot know each other. See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London and New York 1991.

<sup>4</sup> R. J. O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*. Harvard UP, MA 1969, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford 1991, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> C. Kelley, *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy*, Ithaca and London 1987, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> R. Phillips, *The Confessional Poets*, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1973, p. 4.

and died in a car accident, and Plath, Sexton, and Berryman all committed suicide. Secondly, American confessional poetry is spoken in a hard-edged and defiant voice, while much of previous confessional literature was of a gentle and cultivated tone. Thirdly, American confessional poetry, seemingly devoid of any religious, social or political commitment, works primarily as self-therapy.

Nevertheless, to put it in the right perspective, self-expression and self-therapy by American confessional poets is reminiscent of the pervasive sense of despair, disillusion and scepticism felt by American and European intellectuals. Traumatic experiences lurk in their collective memory: the two devastating wars, the indelible horror of the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Korean War (1950-1953), the shock of the French defeat in Vietnam in 1954, the McCarthy era with a hard-line anti-Communist stance, and the looming shadow of the Cold War between the super-powers of that time, i.e., the United States and its Western allies and the communist Soviet Union with its Eastern European allies and China.

The great fortune made during the war enabled post-War American society to redevelop the dynamic capitalist economy which had been retarded by the Great Depression in 1930s. According to George Tindall and David Shi<sup>8</sup>, the GDP of America almost doubled over the 1945-60 period; well into 1970, America with 6% of the world's population produced and consumed two-thirds of the world's products, propelling the expansion of consumerism. The society seemingly enjoyed great affluence and contentment. Houses were equipped with the latest appliances such as cars, TV sets and refrigerators. The divorce rate fell. The birthrate soared. Standard middle-class American women, with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, had to tend to the hearth and home as they enjoyed the fruits of capitalism yielded by decent and diligent men. Under the surface of economic affluence and comfortable domesticity lay a growing sense of unease as well as social upheaval. Many social critics, writers and artists reflected on the conflict of frugal Puritanism and excessive consumerism, targeting the alienating effects of profit-driven capitalism. A widespread sense of uneasiness fermented the Beats and the Hippies in the 1950s-1960s. Meanwhile, post-War Americans witnessed the start and peak of the civil rights movement, antiwar movement, prisoners' rebellion and native Indian movement. This helped accelerate the second-wave feminist movement of which the aim "was to challenge the 'cult of female domesticity' that had prevailed since the 1950s"<sup>9</sup>. Confessional poets who spent their adulthood in this clamorous era were caught up in between economic prosperity and spiritual deprivation, between big powers (government and military) and aspiring individuals; between social conventionality

<sup>8</sup> G. Tindall and D. Shi, *American: A Narrative History*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2004, p. 1279.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1391.

and self-emancipation. Seen in this light, American confessional poetry can be read as articulation by tormented men and women who consciously put up a defence against the yoke of all kinds, political, military, cultural, and moral.

Within the literary discourse, American confessional poetry responds to and reacts against elevated romanticism and impersonalized high modernism. It marks a collective poetic endeavor to carve out a discursive space of its own. Robert Phillips sees American confessional poetry as a poetic engagement with the “shattered heritage of overoptimistic and overheated romanticism”, but devoid of romanticist idealism<sup>10</sup>. By joining the self-centric romanticist tradition, these so-called American confessional poets absorb senses and sensibilities into the “I” lyrical speaker. Their confessional poetics also unmistakably target high modernism, as represented by T. S. Eliot’s “objective correlative” and Ezra Pound’s imagism. In their battle against impersonal, objective modernist poetry, these post-War poets write “balanced narrative poems with unbalanced or afflicted protagonists”, in an iconoclastic, ironic, egocentric manner, for therapeutic and purgative purposes<sup>11</sup>. In a similar vein, Billy Collins observes,

Lowell, Sexton, Plath, and other poets made to huddle under the “confessional” umbrella will drop the masks of Yeats, the personae of Pound, and the impersonality recommended by Eliot to achieve a more direct, less mediated form of personal revelation, often with wiggly psychiatric effects<sup>12</sup>.

To the young post-War American poets, modernism represented by T. S. Eliot stands for an orthodox, solemn and heavy European tradition, which does not fit them. They prefer considering poetry as a process of making a life instead of a tool of expression, so they highlight individual life and experience in the kaleidoscopic society and grow attached to the previously taboo matter such as mental disorder, sex and suicide. Their passionate, defiant and “naked” confessions serve as an experimental voice to counter the overheated, overoptimistic romanticism and the restrained, sophisticated modernism.

Religious and secular confessions have long been conceived as a matter of self-disclosure, and notably of “secrets” and “sins”. Likewise, confessional poems are often equated with artefacts of lived experience. We approach instead confessional poems as aesthetic objects in their own right, as part of the constructive/reconstructive process of making a life, politically and poetically. In doing so, we ask what the poem does and what the poet does in/with it. Neither the poem nor the poet is the passive object

<sup>10</sup> R. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> See K. Sontag and D. Graham eds., *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, Saint Paul, MN 2001, p. 84.

of some historical process. Both are actively engaged in the process as subjects, not as objects.

## Confessional literature in the Chinese context

If confessions have been deep-seated in Western literary tradition, Chinese confessions are much less prominent on the literary scene, especially in pre-modern China. According to Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang, the comparative shortage of confessional literature in China results from a cultural tradition that is “short of soul-questioning resources”<sup>13</sup>. Central to traditional Chinese poetics is the equation of literature with the vehicle of the Way (*wen yi zaidao*), be it collective responsibilities in Confucianism or nature in Daoism. Literature is supposed to abide by social, political, moral mandates or nature’s call in Confucian or Daoist terms. This poetics largely dismisses confession as a potentially subversive mode of literary expression. Consequently, confessional literature assumed a low profile in pre-modern China. Only under the huge impact of Western literature did tides of confession surface in modern Chinese works of literature, as in Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji*, 1918), Yu Dafu’s *Sinking* (*Chenlun*, 1921), Ding Ling’s *Ms. Sophie’s Diary* (*Shafei nüshi de riji*, 1928), and Mao Dun’s *Rainbow* (*Hong*, 1929), all professing aspirations to modernize the individual selves. In particular, Yu Dafu’s short story *Sinking* triggered off the so-called “Yu Dafu phenomenon”, reminiscent of the sensation provoked by Rousseau’s confessions that revealed things inside and under the skin to reflect upon universal problems and conflicts of human nature. Yet once again, modern Chinese writers’ yearnings for individuality and modernity were subject to the larger agenda of nation-building and national salvation, which radically diminished the disruptive power of modern Chinese confessions. The confessional passage at the close of *Sinking* is an example. The “I”-narrator is a hypochondriac Chinese young man studying in Japan. He is obsessed with European Romanticism and sexual fantasy. After his visit to an uninterested Japanese prostitute, he claims not to love any woman any longer but to love his motherland and later decides to take his own life<sup>14</sup>.

Surging confessional consciousness subsided in the 1930s when leftist literature became a dominant mode of literary production. Under the patriotic dictates of literature during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), confessional literature became politically undesirable. Literature written during this period was noted for its political

<sup>13</sup> Z. Liu and G. Lin, *Zui yu wenxue – guanyu wenxue chanhui yishi yu linghun weidu de kaocha* [*Sin and Literature – Studies of Literary Confessional Consciousness and Soul’s Orientations*], Hong Kong 2002, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> D. Yu, *Chenlun* [*Sinking*], [in:] *Zhongguo gongren chubanshe*, Beijing 2012, p. 51.

slogans and didactic message suffused with buoyant revolutionary ardour. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, leftist literature soon evolved into socialist realism (*shehui zhuyi xianshi zhuyi*), which propagated self-effacement and self-abandonment according to the standard of political correctness. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution constituted a watershed in contemporary Chinese literary history. Exemplary literature was political in nature, and literary subject matter was highly politicized with revolutionary zeal. The “I” speaker in socialist realism often features as an index of class, politics, and the discourse of nation building. Take Li Ji's *Black Eyes* (*Hei yanjing*, 1954) for example:

Dear big and bright black eyes  
Please don't look around in my direction again  
If you truly love paraffin and petrol  
We welcome you to visit our refinery<sup>15</sup>

The poem is at its best a veiled expression of love and at its worst slavishly complicit with the dominant literary discourse. However, the politically enforced “I”-speaking literary style turned into voluntary, purposeful confessions in contemporary Chinese literature, as gestures of resistance and subversion. Infamous examples are the labelled or self-labelled “glamour writers” (*meini zuojia*) who have scandalized all Chinese literary circles by blatantly portraying minute details of private life for commercial gains. For instance, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Babe* (*Shanghai baobei*, 1999), Mian Mian's *Candy* (*Tang*, 2000), and Chun Shu's *Beijing Doll* (*Beijing wawa*, 2002). Willy-nilly, this preference for self-exposure in the 1980s and 1990s has a historical link with the Maoist era. Then, confession in the form of “criticism” (*piping*) and “self-criticism” (*ziwo piping*) took place at various public gatherings where politically incorrect people (e.g., rightists, capitalists, and morally corrupted prostitutes) were forced to confess their wrongdoings and to have them corrected under the surveillance of the masses. A morbid synthesis of asceticism and eroticism emerged when the alleged convicts were forced to detail privacies. This practice is somewhat parallel to the strange mixtures that emerged out of confessional manuals in the Roman Catholic tradition—and in the history of the Inquisition, which was obsessed with documenting things like sexual transgressions.

As a prominent literary discourse, contemporary Chinese confessional poetry arises from a need to revive selfhood, gender the self, and articulate the silenced self. The self-absorbed, confessional “I” speaker articulates to reconstruct individual selves by deconstructing the class-based revolutionary “I” in socialist realism and the collective, morally privileged “I” in much of traditional Chinese literature. This simultaneous

<sup>15</sup> Z. Bian and H. Niu eds., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wushi nian wenxue mingzuo wenku: Xinshi jian 1949-1999* [A Treasure of Literary Masterpieces from the Past Fifty Years in the People's Republic of China: A Volume of New Poetry 1949-1999]. *Zuojia chuban she*, Beijing 1999, p. 87.

process of deconstruction and reconstruction requires points of reference. Like their modern predecessors, contemporary Chinese poets again turned to the West for role models to facilitate alternative self-expression.

### Chinese reception of American confessional poetry

Translation as a significant medium in cross-cultural literary communication works to surmount cultural-linguistic barriers. Translations of recent Western literature and new translations of Western classics began to flood China's bookstores and establishment literary journals in the 1980s. Official journals and publishers were engaged in (re-)introducing Western literature to inspire Chinese readers, among which American confessional poetry emerged from the literary horizon. The June 1981 issue of the Chinese journal *Poetry* published Yuan Keji's translation of Lowell's *For the Union Dead* and *Skunk Hour* as well as some biographical notes about the poet. Sexton's *Man and Wife* and Plath's *Morning Song* and *Letter in November* appeared in the *Poetry* issues of September 1985 and May 1986 respectively. It is also noteworthy that Zhao Qiong and Daozi of Xi'an embarked on the translation of American confessional poetry in the early 1980s. Their commitment led to the publication of *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School (Meiguo zibai pai shixuan)* by Lijiang Press in 1987 and of Plath's poetry collection entitled *Witch Burning (Ranshao de nüwu)* in Hong Kong in 1992. Some of their translation work was first published in unofficial poetry journals in Sichuan: *Modern Poetry Materials for Internal Circulation (Xiandai shi neibu jiaoliu ziliao)* and *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry (Zhongguo dangdai shiyan shige)*, both in 1985.

All sorts of unofficial and semi-official poetry journals (e.g., campus journals sponsored by university students) rivalled official publications in this endeavour. The irregularity of unofficial publication and distribution makes it impossible to trace all the relevant literature systematically. Still, Maghiel van Crevel's personal archive comprise many unofficial and semi-official journals that published the works of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton, e.g., *Sound (Shengyin)*, *Continent (Dalü)*, *The 1990s (Jiushi niandai)*, and *Peking University Graduate Student Journal (Beijing daxue yanjiu sheng xuezhi)*. Apart from the two aforesaid Sichuan-based unofficial poetry journals, another Sichuan-based unofficial poetry journal — *Chinese Poetry (Han shi)* — spurred on the "Plath tornado" in the wake of an overwhelming nationwide response to the official publication of Zhai Yongming's poem series *Woman* in 1986.

Chinese women poets encountered a fresh, enlightening, powerful voice in American confessional poetry – that of Sylvia Plath. Under Plath's influence, death and dark scenarios loom large in contemporary Chinese women's poetry. Three of Zhai Yongming's

poem series, i.e., *Woman, Jing'an village* (*Jing'an zhuang*, 1986), and *Death's Design* (*Siwang tu'an*, 1988), are all structured upon the conflict between art, womanhood, life, and death. Hai Nan's many death-related poems voice an obsession with her dead father and with death as a source of creativity. Wang Xiaoni's poetry on death often manifests a self-willed exile into the inner self against the clamor of a predominantly materialistic society like Shenzhen, where the poet has been living since 1985. In Lu Yimin's oeuvre, death takes on a tender, stylish, and feminine look, e.g., *American Women's Magazine* (*Meiguo funü zazhi*), *Death is a Ball-Shaped Candy* (*Siwang shi yizhong qiuxing tangguo*), *Die Softly in the City* (*Wenrou di si zai bencheng*), and *Die If You Can* (*Keyi si jiu siqu*), all of which were written in the mid-1980s.

Explicit and implicit references to Plath's poetry are scattered in the oeuvres of the aforesaid women poets. Take Zhai Yongming's *Silence* for example, in the first stanza, "she" turns up at night in reply to the call of a butterfly, in the manner of the cold, antique moon, mercury-like and inaccessible. Stanza 2 and 3 recollect minute details of the addressee's life: her failed suicide attempt; her provocative gestures; her deathly composure; her emotional crisis and deprivation; her residence surrounded by bright and black poppies; her unpredictable nature; her silence and death. All these sketches correspond to Plath's lived experience. The line "How did she master this art? She died"<sup>16</sup> is a re-rendering of the following lines from *Lady Lazarus*:

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else  
I do it exceptionally well<sup>17</sup>.

By doing so, the poem is a tribute to Plath, addressing the conflict between art and life, between voice and silence, and between death and eternity.

A multitude of male-authored Chinese poems also carry confessional overtones through the rendering of such subjects as drinking, brawling, sex, darkness, and death. For instance, *Chinese Department* (*Zhongwen xi*, 1984) by the "boor-ist" (*manghan zhuyi*) poet Li Yawei is illustrative of a confessional narrative in which the third-person narrator called "Yawei" gives an ironical account of his lived experience together with his fellow poets as students of a Chinese department. To give another example, male poet Jing Bute, the penname of Feng Jun who initially called himself "Jing Te", is clearly inspired by Berryman's *Dream Songs* for the creation of *Mr. Jing Te* (*Jing Te xiansheng*, 1986). Berryman invents a Henry who speaks alternatively in the first, second and third person, and has a friend who also calls him "Mr. Bones". In a similar vein, Jing

<sup>16</sup> Y. M. Zhai, *Cheng zhi wei yiqie* [*Call It Everything*], ed. X. D. Tang, [in:] *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku* [*A Treasury of Chinese Women's Poetry*], ed. M. Xie et al, *Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe*, Shenyang 1997, pp. 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> S. Plath, *Ariel*, London 1965, p. 17.

Bute fabricates an imaginary dialogue between the third person Mr. Jing Te (the poet of yesterday) and the “you”-narrator (identifiable with the poet now known as Jing Bute). *Mr. Jing Te* can thus be interpreted as a dialogue within the same personality split between past and present. Mr. Jing Te is a bizarre daydreamer, night-dreamer, killer, cancer patient, and self-willed transformer (into another Mr. Jing Te and a bat). The combined imagery of “dream” and “violin” refers to the title of Berryman’s poems<sup>18</sup>. If Berryman’s Henry features mainly as a sufferer and loser, Jing Bute’s Mr. Jing Te appears both surrealistic and violent. Speaking to the reception of Berryman’s poems, it is noteworthy that Lin Xue also weaves references to Berryman’s *Dream Songs* into her three poems titled *Songs* (Ge, 1992) with recurrent images like dream, music, and darkness. Nevertheless, textual evidence shows that Lin Xue clearly attributes a feminine edge to the images reworked on the basis of Berryman’s *Dream Songs*.

## The politics of Chinese confessional poetry

American confessional poetry provided a significant frame of reference for Chinese poets to seek a fresh, powerful language to speak of individuality on the margin of the socio-political domain. Chinese confessional poetry has evolved within the framework of Chinese Experimental poetry in the PRC. Experimental poetry began with underground poetic practices in the early 1970s, when rusticated young students gathered together to read and discuss literature in rural areas of China. Those rudiments developed into the so-called “Obscure poetry” (*menglong shi*) in the period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, when the first underground literary journal *Today* (*Jintian*) emerged in Beijing. Renowned *Today* poets included Bei Dao (b. 1949), Mang Ke (b. 1950), Duoduo (b. 1951), Shu Ting (b. 1952), Yang Lian (b. 1955), and Gu Cheng (1956-1993). The *Today* group was characterized by its quest for individual and creative freedom from contemporary political and cultural orthodoxy, and therefore was devalued by orthodox opponents as “opaque”, “bizarre”, “incomprehensible” or “modern”, as nothing but “anti-socialist” deviations from China’s Four Modernizations Program. On the other hand, Obscure poetry found a large readership among more liberal-minded supporters, young people in particular. During the 1983-1984 nationwide campaign against “spiritual pollution”, however, Obscure poetry was subjected to grave criticism and repression and the loosely defined *Today* school split. After a gradual relaxation of political suppression, the mid-1980s marked a high point in literary experimentation. Experimental poetry groups mushroomed in all major cities throughout the country. Both encouraged and haunted by the groundbreaking achievements of the Obscure

<sup>18</sup> See J. Xu et al eds., *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shiqi wun daguan* [Overview of Groups in Modernist Chinese Poetry 1986-1988], *Tongji daxue chuban she*, Shanghai 1988, pp. 178-179.

poets, the younger generation was eager to look for new dimensions in their poetic experimentation with subject matter, poetic technique and language. According to Maghiel van Crevel, post-Obscure poetry was precisely “an extension and intensification of Obscure poetry”; it had “taken individuality and the re-humanization of the Self to extremes”<sup>19</sup>.

In the mid-1980s, a constellation of women poets emerged on the literary scene. With their literary output, they not only joined in polemic on political issues, but also contributed to constructing a new gender discourse that had not yet been defined in terms of traditional or socialist ethics and aesthetics. Obscured by the pantheon of male masters, notably Qu Yuan, Li Bai, Du Fu, Su Shi, only a handful of women authors had their voice heard in Chinese literary history. Li Qingzhao is a figure who is highly commended according to the literary criteria designated by male poets. In her works female images appear dependent, weak and passive. Her self-expression fits well with the feminine tradition, epitomizing aspects of traditional Chinese femininity, such as elegance, tenderness, sentimentality, submissiveness and self-pity. Much of women’s poetry before 1980 is reminiscent of Li’s feminine self-expression.

In post-1949 China, women were mobilized as a workforce for nation building, thus realizing a superficial form of gender equality at the expense of sexual differentiation. Gender awareness, then an easy target for public criticism of petty-bourgeois sentiment, was effectively screened out of the Chinese mindset. This political intervention in gender issues indeed enforced a kind of revolutionary androgyny, according to which Chinese women dressed, talked, behaved and thought like men. Contemporary Chinese women poets feel compelled to revise both the traditional stereotyped images of women and the politically enforced androgyny. Their writing of night and the color black serves as a means, or indeed a strategy to position themselves within and without the Chinese cultural tradition and to construct new gender identities. The black night embodies a self-sufficient world away from daytime clamor and the peeping eye of the sun. There, women can give free rein to their sexual desires and fantasies. Thus the night becomes a space of their own – the very place where Chinese women poets subvert and abolish centuries of prejudices against and taboos on womanhood.

Chinese women poets’ imitation and emulation of certain American confessional poets lead to a collective predilection for the confessional mode of self-expression, black imagery and representations of a death complex. With such a collective predilection, their poetry is exclusively labeled as confessional or as a collective plunge into the “error zone of confession”<sup>20</sup>. In retrospect, we think that this labelling is no less

<sup>19</sup> M. V. Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo*, Leiden 1996, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> D. Zang, *Zibai de wuqu* [*The Error Zone of Confession*], “Shi tansuo” 1995, no. 18, pp. 48-52.

than a double-edged sword. In aesthetic terms, it works to belittle women's creativity by disavowing women's poetry as a marginal discourse with little aesthetic value. Women poets have been depicted as "gruesome", "perverted" and "exhibitionist", and their poetry has been called formulaic, lacking in expressive breadth and depth, and inferior to men's poetry, on the basis of critical yardsticks designated and controlled by male poetry critics. In such cases, gender criteria are indiscriminately superimposed on literary criteria. In political terms, the labelling of women poets turns a blind eye to the significance of confession as a politicized mode of self-articulation from the margins in ambush against (rather than in confrontation with) established powers. The night consciousness and death complex that loom large in unofficial Chinese poetry in the 1980s actually bespeak a powerful yearning for artistic autonomy and poetic justice beyond the pale of politics.

## Conclusion

American and Chinese confessional poetry emerged in different cultural, temporal and spatial domains. From an aesthetic point of view, American confessional poetry poses as a poetic revolution against overheated, overoptimistic romanticism and detached modernism. From an ideological point of view, American confessional poetry sides with earlier confessional literature by taking upon itself self-willed marginality against coercive powers of all kinds, religious, political, cultural, and ethical. As a product of cross-cultural communication, Chinese confessional poetry in the 1980s worked to counter political domination and to shake off the yoke of Confucian, Daoist, and socialist poetics. Since that time, Chinese poets have attributed positive readings into the ostensibly dark, highly personal subjects of American confessional poetry. Various rewritings are actualized through the emulation of role models, notably Plath. Certain confessional thematic and stylistic features reoccur in the selection process, e.g., "night consciousness" and "death complex". The sharing of textual sources by Chinese poets leads to poetic confessions, across gender, geographies, and poetry groups. Chinese women poets' collective predilection for the confessional mode of self-expression somewhat obscures the presence of confessional texts written by their male colleagues.

The received view is to see confessional literature as artefacts of personal experience disclosed in an exhibitionist way. We depart from this mainstream reading by shifting attention to the disruptive power inherent in confessional poetics that resists religious, political, ethical, and poetic coercion. To a large extent, confession is a self-positioning, self-defining, self-articulating and self-interpreting act within an actual or imagined community. Confessors across cultural-linguistic traditions tend to take a self-willed marginal position outside the religious, social, cultural or political mainstream. Literary

confessions often convey explicit or implicit political messages. Speaking beyond the edge thus turns into a politicized act of choosing the margins for the sake of self-empowerment and of pursuing poetic justice beyond the pale of the Establishment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Alaa Alghamdi** is an associate professor of English literature at Taibah University, Medinah, Saudi Arabia. Educated in Saudi and England, Alghamdi has been a prolific writer publishing academic papers and articles in magazines and journals worldwide. He is a columnist for Arab News and The Arabian Post.

**Reygar J. Bernal L.** – Venezuelan scholar and university professor specialized in comparative literature (Caribbean, English, Italian, and Spanish), cultural studies and literary translation. BA in Modern Languages (UCV, 2004). MA in Comparative Literature (UCV, 2011). Italian cultural studies (Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Italy, 2002); SUSI on Contemporary US Literature (University of Louisville, USA, 2014). He has published creative writings, poems, literary essays and research papers in print and digital format, as well as several literary and academic translations. He has participated as a lecturer in many academic events on different topics (literature and culture, gender, history, humor, languages, linguistics, music, otherness, politics, post-colonialism, research and translation)

**Sonia Caputa** currently works as Assistant Professor in the Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Silesia. She holds a Ph.D. in American literature from the same university, she is a fellow of 2014 Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association Symposium Defining America: New Writing, New Voices, New Directions, a participant of the summer Fulbright scholarship “The United States Department of State 2015 Institute on Contemporary U.S. Literature” (University of Louisville, Kentucky) and a member of the Polish Association for American Studies. She is a guest co-editor of RIAS Online Journal (Review of International American Studies Association: Wor(l)ds Apart: Navigating Differences, Vol. 7, Fall-Winter (2 /

2014) and a co-editor of the upcoming volume of *Grand Themes of American Literature: Love*, which will be published by the Silesian University Press. She teaches contemporary American ethnic literature and the survey courses of the history of American literature, her interests include but are not limited to: ethnicity, assimilation as well as stereotypes in literature and films.

**Xiaomin Chen** is a second-year graduate student majoring in British and American literature in Shenzhen University.

**Iwona Filipczak** works as an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Zielona Góra. She teaches courses on literature and American culture. Her scholarly interests include American realism in literature after World War II, particularly John Updike's fiction, American short story, and South Asian American fiction, narrowed down mainly to the questions of identity and experience of the Indian diaspora in the US: dislocations, cultural belonging, fears and challenges of the globalizing world. She is a member of Polish Association for American Studies and European Association for American Studies.

**Urszula Gołębiowska** works as assistant professor at the University of Zielona Góra. Her research interests focus on American fiction and the intersections between literature, culture and philosophy. She has written articles on the work of Henry James, Paul Bowles, Alice Munro and J. M. Coetzee.

**Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch** – Associate Professor in the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Teaches Latin American, American and Canadian literature. Recipient of the research grant of JFK Institute of Freie Universität in Berlin. Interested in the contemporary Latino/a and Native American fiction (transculturation in literature, reconstruction of history and identity search in ethnic and post-ethnic literature, hybrid and heterogeneous literature, syncretic religions represented in literary texts and the clash of incompatible cultural models). Published a monograph devoted to the comparative analysis and interpretation of the chosen works of Louise Erdrich and José María Arguedas and a couple of articles connected with the already mentioned areas.

**Magda Mansour Hasabelnaby** is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Women, Ain Shams University, where she teaches comparative literature, 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century British and American fiction. She published a number of translations of American poetry into Arabic, in addition to the translation of a novel,

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, 2010. For more than twenty years, she worked as an educational consultant, teacher trainer and trainer of trainers for several international organizations where she trained teachers in different parts of Egypt. She also shared in a number of national and international conferences in the Arab World, Europe, and the United States, the most recent of which is ACLA, New York 2014, and TESOL Arabia, Dubai 2015.

**Agnieszka Łobodziec** is Assistant Professor and the head of the Section of Literature of the English Speaking World, English Department, University of Zielona Gora, Poland. In January 2015 she was elected a member of the Toni Morrison Society's International Programs Committee. She is the author of *Black Theological Intra-racial Conflicts in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. She is a member of research team on "Marginalization and Minorities in Contemporary Literature and Film" under the supervision of prof. Jorgen Veisland, University of Gdansk. Currently, she researches black American internationalism, intercultural discourses and womanism.

**Akshaya K. Rath Ph.D.** on alternative Indian English poetry is from the University of Hyderabad. He specializes in postcolonial sexualities and theories for alterity. An Associate of Indian Institute of Advanced Study Shimla, Rath has been sanctioned a major R&D project by ICSSR, New Delhi, to research the history of prison transportation during the colonial period with a focus on the Andaman penal settlement. Presently, he is Assistant Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Rourkela, India, and teaches Creative Writing, Gender Studies, and Theories for Alterity. His edited collection *Secret Writings of Hoshang Merchant* (2016) is published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

**Xiaohong Zhang** is Professor of comparative literature and currently functions as Vice Dean of the School of Foreign Languages in Shenzhen University from the People's Republic of China. She is the sole author of *The Invention of a Discourse* (2004), *Women's Poetry From an Intertextual Perspective* (2008) and *Poetry and Pictures* (2014) and the co-author of two other books. She has published over 50 academic articles in prestigious international and Chinese journals as well as 8 books translated from English.