

*Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*

*Third Issue*

**Sense(s)**

Editorial team:

Oscar Man	Athena Stefanakou
Adrian Krieger	Paulina Bastián Alvarado
Martijn Rem	Mahtab Fazlali
Emma Cardol	Maike Siemes
Verónica Copello-Duque	Nicole Molinari
Jelle Christiaans	Nicolas Turner



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## Introduction: Sense(s)

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On March 20, 2023, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change delivered its “final warning” that governments must act now on the climate crisis.<sup>1</sup> Six days earlier, the research corporation OpenAI released the latest version of its artificial intelligence-powered chatbot, ChatGPT, promising to further revolutionize an accelerating era of technological transformation.<sup>2</sup> Critical to both these events is the concept that forms the theme of this special issue of *LEAP*: sense. The multiple meanings inherent in the notion of “sense” are expressed in a climate catastrophe experienced both sensorially—as, for example, heat, rain, and wind—and as a transformation in humanity’s sense of its place in the world. The virtual also plays with sense’s fertile multivalence, with virtuality appearing as simultaneously a refuge from the sensory overload of climate collapse, a transformation of sensory experiences in new contexts, and a space in which to make sense of the world.

The development of the field of sensory studies parallels and reflects developments in climate and technology as defining themes of (post)modernity. Approaching culture through the senses and the senses through culture, sensory studies has drawn from across disciplines, challenging purely scientific approaches to the study of the senses.<sup>3</sup> In an overview of the field’s development, the anthropologist David Howes foregrounds the key role played by Steven Feld’s *Sound and Sentiment*, a sensory ethnography of the Kaluli people of Bosavi in Papua New Guinea.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the year of this work’s release, 1982, showcases how the emergence of “the senses” as an object of academic study is entangled with the

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey, “Scientists deliver ‘final warning’.”

<sup>2</sup> Bhuiyan and Hern, “OpenAI says new model GPT-4 is more creative.”

<sup>3</sup> Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,” 1–34.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, 2.

development of contemporary technology and shifting understandings of the human relationship with the environment. Most resonantly, 1982 was the year in which the protocols that today underpin the internet were adopted by the United States' Defense Communications Agency, laying the foundations for the internet as a worldwide network.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the early 1980s were a key transitional period on the path to recognizing the human impact on the environment and the necessity of transnational collaboration to mitigate this impact, an understanding that was being developed between major climate conferences in Stockholm (in 1972) and Rio de Janeiro (in 1992).<sup>6</sup>

A similar embroilment with the virtual can be seen when tracking the so-called “affective turn” in the humanities, which has produced a theoretical framework that privileges the intersection between the “lower’ or proximal senses . . . such as touch, taste, smell, [and] rhythm” and “the ‘outside’ realms of the pre-/extra-/para-linguistic.”<sup>7</sup> This theoretical framework is critical to a number of the essays in this special issue. The affective turn is generally dated to 1995 and the publication of two key works, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect.”<sup>8</sup> That same year, Bill Gates wrote his “Internet Tidal Wave” memo, transforming Microsoft into a company focused on the Web.<sup>9</sup> The interpolation of the abstract and the physical, the idea and the body, the (in

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan, *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future*, 90–1. These protocols were Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), which were fully adopted by the entire US military network by June 1983.

<sup>6</sup> The field of literature on the history of climate change and environmentalism is vast. Some useful accounts of this period include Ebbesson, “Getting it Right,” 79–83; Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth*, 91–317; and Attfield, *Environmental Thought*, 143–215.

<sup>7</sup> Seigworth and Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 8. See below for the articles in this special issue which most explicitly draw on affect theory.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*, 5. Massumi’s article went on to be a part of his *Parables for the Virtual*, 23–45.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, “Browsers and Browser Wars.” The IPCC also released its Second Assessment Report, which cautiously confirmed for the first time that “the balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernible human influence on global climate”—Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *IPCC Second Assessment*, 22.



Massumi's terms) "virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual"<sup>10</sup> are recurring arguments in the work of Sedgwick and Frank, as well as Massumi.<sup>11</sup>

The arguments advanced by these early affect theorists are explicitly framed against the rise of a digital paradigm only just becoming apparent in 1995, in particular through the linkage of the growing digital hegemony to the then dominant position of poststructuralist theory.<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, for example, draw on the analogy of the digital in their critique of twentieth-century poststructuralist theorists' attempts "to detoxify the excesses of body, thought, and feeling by reducing the multiple essentialist risks of analog representation to the single, unavowedly essentialist certainty of one or another on/off switch."<sup>13</sup> Their critique is not aimed at denying the value of poststructuralist thinking, but to suggest the ways in which poststructuralism, by resisting the essentialist risks inherent in biological thinking—for example, of race—has imposed a set of fixed subject positions that reinscribe a different but newly essentialist discourse. The sensorial and the affective offer not only a critique of a poststructuralist approach that continues to occupy a central position across much of the humanities, but also a way to understand the genealogy of that centrality in relation to the digital. This issue's contributors draw throughout on the sensorial as a theoretical approach that troubles the discourses of race, language, and identity that are central concerns of the debates into which all the pieces intervene.

While the senses have been studied in diverse cultures throughout history as fundamental instruments through which humans experience the world, it was not until recent decades that scholars in the humanities took the senses as a subject of investigation. From food to music, visual arts to oral tradition, scholars have drawn on insights from anthropology and sociology to examine the five senses of the human body.<sup>14</sup> Through an

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<sup>10</sup> *Parables for the Virtual*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 518-21; *Parables for the Virtual*, 30-5.

<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 511-8; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1-4.

<sup>13</sup> "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 517.

<sup>14</sup> Howes, "The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies," 2-4.

ethnographic lens, scholars have considered how our senses pertain to deeper structural questions in social issues, politics, the economy, and diplomacy. The influential work *Sweetness and Power* (1985), by anthropologist Sidney Mintz, for instance, elucidates how sugar—a sought-after substance because of its pleasing taste—has factored in the history of industry and capitalism. This paradigm-shifting work has inspired subsequent research on the history of particular sensations and foregrounded the incipient field of sensory studies, which has grown in relevance and reach since the 1980s. With the establishment of journals such as *The Senses and Society*, founded in 2006, and a wide range of articles and monographs dedicated to the study of the senses, sensory studies has become a burgeoning field in its own right.<sup>15</sup>

The definition of “sense” in this issue, however, goes far beyond our bodily senses. Indeed, the word “sense” is highly ambiguous and carries within it a number of different definitions that deserve more investigation. One of these sites of inquiry emerges from the understanding of sense as “meaning,” a theme that can be found throughout philosophical history. For example, German philosopher Kant distinguishes three mental faculties in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781): sensibility, understanding, and reason. Sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*), to Kant, is the vehicle through which sensory representations are generated. Instead of being material and physical, like a sensory experience, sensibility is the cognitive capacity of human beings to receive and apprehend sensations. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s work *The Logic of Sense*, on the other hand, uses “sense” as a tool to examine metaphysical, epistemological, and psychoanalytical questions, putting various preceding philosophical discussions of sense (such as Frege’s “Sense and Reference”) into dialogue. Their philosophical usage of the word “sense” understands the word’s connotation of “meaning” as abstract and hypothetical. This connotation, however, is also ubiquitous in our everyday language: think of how often we use the phrases “in a sense” and “that makes sense.” This extends to the dictionary itself, in which each entry carries a “sense” of the word that can be divided into different sub-

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<sup>15</sup> Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,” 1.

senses to, ultimately, make “sense” of the world through the acquisition of language and the exchange of these linguistic symbols with others.

In addition, the word “sense” also carries a connotation of feeling, or, more precisely, the feeling of being or identifying oneself. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy defines “sense” as “being-toward-the-world,” which “does not take place alone.”<sup>16</sup> The word is a notion of multiplicity because sense as “being-toward-the-world” is also always “being-toward-more-than-one.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, “sense,” to Nancy, is a collective consciousness of being together with other people in and toward the world. Indeed, throughout history, constructing an imagined, shared, and collective identity was always enacted through appropriating this sense as being-toward-the-world and being-toward-more-than-one. Take the Cultural Revolution in China as an example: the extreme homogeneity of people in this turbulent political period was sustained through ideological operations that fabricated a sense of being the same and being a single whole. This “sense” of commonality has been utilized and appropriated throughout history by different regimes. It is often intertwined with our sensory experience, since this collective sense is manufactured through visual, aural, oral, and even tactile propaganda.

Contributors to this special issue of LEAP put all of these meanings of “sense” to work across a wide range of disciplinary approaches and topics. The broad notions of “sense” sketched above organize the diverse contributions into three groupings: sense-making, affect, and belonging. Clearly, however, this structure is one of many possible ways to organize the contributions, a fact which itself points to the multiplicity within the notion of sense.

The first set of articles collected in this issue study the interpolation of the sensational and sense-making, focusing on how actions can create an emotional response because of sensorial experiences. Oscar Man’s article “The Sense(s) of the Law” puts the diversity in meanings of sense at the heart of his argument, playing with the term’s ambiguity in his examination of the Hong Kong court

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<sup>16</sup> *The Sense of the World*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

case of Foo Hoi-ching. Man's article looks into the diversity of the senses through the word "sensational," exploring the bodily experiences and performativity inherent to a courtroom by studying a mitigation plea letter by Foo Hoi-ching written in 2019, who used this courtroom tradition to condemn the Hong Kong court system rather than to plead for leniency. Man also analyzes the drawings of Pak Sheung Chuen, who used what he saw and heard in court proceedings to fuel his art and show his impressions of a courtroom's sensory experience.

Adrian Krieger's article "The Sensory for Sale" engages with sense and meaning through an examination of Dubai Global Village, a Dubai shopping center built in 1997 that seeks to represent all cultures of the world in one space. Krieger links the sensory experiences in Dubai Global Village to a desire for a commodified pseudo-cosmopolitanism, to a notion of Dubai as both center and representative of the entire world, and to the idea of hyperreality, a condition in which it is impossible to differentiate between reality and fiction. Krieger's article reads Dubai Global Village through these concepts to generate fresh understandings of the cultivated sensory experience it offers and the broader ontological fracturing within the Gulf.

Engaging with similar themes, Martijn Rem's article "Making Sense of Tradition" is a study of how senses play into the portrayal of tradition in Japan's Kakunodate samurai district. After World War II, there was a rise in interest in the preservation of heritage sites across the world. The Kakunodate samurai district is an area that many people visit to experience traditional Japanese architecture. Rem posits that the idea of tradition in the district is expressed through the sensory experiences it offers to visitors, a further example of the way in which meaning is generated through the sensorial.

Photography represents another site in which the senses are in dialogue with ontology. In "Escaping the Eyes of Empire," Emma Cardol discusses representation in the recent African disease photography of photographers Eric Gottesman and Geert van Kesteren. Cardol also examines projects by researchers studying self-representation in relation to the AIDS epidemic. Cardol suggests that while recent photography has attempted to provide

more diverse possibilities for African self-representation, colonial trends continue to resurface in the depiction of disease and African bodies.

While the first set of articles in this issue begins from the way in which external stimuli can generate meaning, the second set reverses the starting point by beginning with affect, a form of relations inside and between bodies. The first article in this set is Verónica Copello-Duque's review of *Cochina Envidia* (2022), a Colombian television series revolving around the friendship between four upper-middle-class women in Bogotá. Copello-Duque reads envy in the series as an affective and sensory experience embodied in the preparation of a dinner party. She suggests that *Cochina Envidia* provides a novel approach—a sensory exploration of affect—to understanding envy and class conflict in Colombia.

Coming from the field of linguistics, Jelle Christiaans reminds us that affect resides not only in fields of history, politics, and art but can also emerge through the grammatical structure of language itself. In his article, "How Verbal Aspect Structures Stories," Christiaans argues that verbal aspect in Ecuadorian Siona can transmit emotion, affecting the audience response to a story. His analysis focuses on imperfective verb forms that, besides announcing that an action or conversation has not yet been completed, can be used to create a sense of suspense.

Completing this section's complication of the relationship between affect and its structural expressions, Athena Stefanakou examines Carmen Maria Machado's experimental memoir *In the Dreamhouse* (2019). Machado's memoir, which recounts a same-sex psychological abuse, disrupts normative ideas about truth and fiction in trauma writing. Central to Stefanakou's argument is the suggestion that the formal presentation of fictional elements in a memoir can help a reader understand and interpret the reality of another's pain.

While the first two sets of articles take as their starting point the question of how a person makes sense of the world through sensory and affective experiences, the final set of articles examines the role of the senses in constructing identity. This movement from affect to identity is introduced through an interview with the literary scholar and writer Piet Devos. Devos' work, which centers on the

relationship between sensory perception, literature, and visual culture, includes both scholarly texts and creative projects. Devos lost his sight when he was five, and, as he reports, this has had a lasting impact on how he interacts with the world and conducts his work. Devos seeks to engage with sensory studies through both an academic approach and by deliberately breaking the boundaries of traditional academic writing. In doing so, he challenges our perceptions of sensory studies and what it could become.

In “Defying the Binaries of Passing,” Maaïke Siemes analyzes how the duality of passing between two African American sisters is visualized in Britt Bennett’s novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Siemes understands passing in the novel as both mimetic and performative, arguing that while the mimetic approach propagates ideas of white supremacy by reproducing racial stereotypes, the performative approach is potentially subversive because it can disclose the social construction of race.

Paulina Bastián Alvarado is similarly interested in questions of hybridity and performativity in her examination of Lucia Berlin’s short story collection *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (2015). In her article, “Of Course I Have a Self Here,” Bastián Alvarado argues that the cultural and linguistic dislocation often associated with the migration experience is reflected in the main character’s dislocated sense of self and identity, showcasing how the narrative’s fragmented subjectivities and structure emerge as a consequence of the narrator’s position living in an “in-between” state.

The theme of identity is further developed in Nicole Molinari’s article, “Collective Identity in a Microstate.” In her investigation, Molinari studies a set of petitions called the *Istanze d’Arengo* to identify characteristics of a coherent national identity among the people of San Marino. Molinari’s analysis of the themes raised in the petitions suggests that San Marino’s residents express and feel a distinct identity as Sammarinese, rather than Italian, despite the closeness between the two countries and their overlapping cultural and historical heritage.

In this issue’s closing article, “Making Sense of America’s Post-War Racial Landscape,” Nicolas Turner examines two works by Philip Roth to explore how the category of Jewishness has functioned as an object of affective “desire” in constructing ideas of

Jewish identity and the field of Jewish American studies. Putting Roth into dialogue with the African American author Ralph Ellison, Turner showcases how this desire is expressed through senses of nostalgia and primitivism in Roth's semi-autobiographical *The Facts* (1988) and short-story collection *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). His analysis points to the ways in which the lens of the sensorial can provide new perspectives on the construction of seemingly stable and deep-rooted identities, be they racial or cultural. This finding is emblematic of a special issue that uses the many meanings of sense to problematize understandings of culture, language, and heritage across a wide range of disciplines and approaches.

*Emma Cardol*  
*Oscar Man*  
*Athena Stefanakou*  
*Nicolas Turner*

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PART ONE

**SENSE-MAKING**



## The Sense(s) of Law: Sensationality and Sense-making of Legal Trials

Oscar Man

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The fainting of De-Nur, a Holocaust survivor who testified at the Eichmann trial, is probably the most dramatic courtroom moment in recent history. In *The Juridical Unconscious* (2002), literary scholar Shoshana Felman argues that the twentieth century is an era of recorded and televised trials that are no longer exclusively legal events, and have instead penetrated many aspects of public life.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the dramatic impact of De-Nur's fainting is an effect of it being recorded and televised. The sharp cut to the fainted witness, the surprised faces of the people in the courtroom trying to comprehend the situation, and the security guards' dragging of the unconscious witness are all cinematically captured, enhanced, and dramatized by the camera, enabling the voyeuristic gaze of the audience in front of the television.<sup>2</sup> While the fainting did not arouse as much public attention and discussions as some more recently mediatized trials, such as the Depp v. Heard case, possibly due to the extremely long duration of the Eichmann trial, it still exposes something crucial about legal trials that usually remains, intentionally or otherwise, concealed. For instance, political theorist Hannah Arendt discusses this event through her first-hand account as a courtroom spectator to reiterate the impossibility of recounting an atrocity individually and retrospectively.<sup>3</sup> Felman, on the other hand, highlights the muteness

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<sup>1</sup> *The Juridical Unconscious*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> The footage of the fainting of the witness is archived and accessible through the website of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<sup>3</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 249-50.

implied in the fainting and illustrates the implications of such a moment of aphasia.<sup>4</sup>

What is not emphasized by Felman about this dramatic moment of fainting, however, is that it is also *sensational*. The word “sensational” here bears two denotations. The first one, according to *Online Cambridge Dictionary*, in itself bears two similar yet opposing senses that can be either approving or disapproving: it means “very good, exciting” or, disapprovingly, refers to the media’s attention-grabbing approach that “intend[s] to be shocking and exciting rather than serious.”<sup>5</sup> The second denotation derives from the word “sensation,” which means “the ability to feel something physically, especially by touching, or a physical feeling that results from this ability.”<sup>6</sup> The witness’s fainting reveals, I will argue in this paper, that a legal trial is at once mediatized and sensorial. Both Arendt and Felman have linked the fainting to the witness’s inability to speak or respond. But what neither has elaborated on is that such a linkage discloses the fainting primarily as a bodily, sensorial, and border-crossing event. By border-crossing, I mean that this bodily collapse of the witness breaks and divulges the form and fixity of legal trials. It questions and exposes, through the senses of the body, the highly institutional nature of legal trials, the impossibility of leeway in legal procedure, and, ultimately, the performativity of law.

It is perhaps apparent at this point that I have intentionally conflated and played with the different *senses* of the words “sense” and “sensational.” In addition, by dissecting the word “sensational” and “sense,” I maintain that the five senses of the body are not only sensational, in the sense of emotive feeling, and sensorial, in the sense of our sensorium, but also a sense-making device. Engaging with this conflation, this paper will examine the sensorial and sense-making aspects of legal trials through the case of a 22-year-old persecuted student participant, Foo Hoi-ching, in the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement in Hong Kong. Postulating that her appropriation of a legal genre in the courtroom is sensorial both in a literal and allegorical sense, this

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<sup>4</sup> “Theaters of Justice,” 201–38.

<sup>5</sup> *Online Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “sensational.”

<sup>6</sup> *Online Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “sensation.”

paper demonstrates how the sensationality of a trial *transforms* it and exposes the performativity of law. It also asks what is archived and preserved after a trial, as a legal trial always implies the documentation of the legal event in question. However, the sensorial aspect of the trial is typically omitted from the archives. Through the case, I address how the senses are documented in a different archival logic than the law. In addition, this paper looks into the courtroom drawings of artist Pak Sheung Chuen. The drawings, which do not attempt to re-present the reality of the courtroom, demonstrate how the “other” of a legal trial is also an active participant in the legal event. They also showcase how the senses are sensed by the other in legal trials and how, in a legal context, the senses form a sense of commons through artistic practices.

### **A Plea Without Plea**

In 2019, an unexpectedly large political movement emerged in Hong Kong to fight the introduction of a controversial extradition law amendment. As the amendment could potentially impede Hong Kong’s legal independence and facilitate political prosecution, several million residents of the territory participated in demonstrations, protests, and other campaigns to express their discontent. The Anti-ELAB movement lasted for over a year and ended without a clear cut. This outcome resulted from multiple factors, including continuous prosecutions, increased use of violent force by the police, and, arguably, the loss of political energy, which is common in long-term political movements. During the course of the Anti-ELAB demonstrations, over ten thousand people were arrested and prosecuted, and some were subsequently sentenced to prison. The Hong Kong government also seized the chance to introduce a national security law that, because of its highly ambiguous nature, further prevents dissent. Judges of national security cases are appointed directly by the Hong Kong chief executive. Such an act, therefore, sparks further controversy over the issue of judicial independence in Hong Kong. Generally speaking, the introduction of the national security law means that any anti-China or anti-governmental activities bear a high risk of prosecution. For instance, three people were arrested after allegedly

calling for others to cast a blank vote in the latest Legislative Council election in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Foo Hoi-ching was convicted of rioting in November 2019. Among the many convicted at that time, Foo, a 22-year-old student, was one of the few who received media coverage. This attention came after she turned what was supposed to be a plea into a declaration of her political stance (see fig. 1 below, with my own translation).<sup>8</sup> Apart from her prophetic prediction that the plea would not work in political cases because her conviction followed a specific political agenda (those who pleaded in the same case did not receive any mitigation), her act of turning a legal genre into something else *speaks* to something important about the essence of legal trials. Before we delve into Foo's appropriation of legal genre, however, let us focus first on the plea letter itself. This testimony is important within the context of this essay because of its tone. It is immediately noticeable that her tone is extremely calm and restrained. Contrary to what one might expect of a political criminal, Foo does not use the letter to make a rousing, galvanizing, or passionate proclamation. It is not an outcry or manifesto that demands actual political changes. Instead, the letter merely expresses the writer's personal views on Hong Kong's political situation and legal system. The final sentence of the letter even suggests that the judge could sentence her as heavily as possible if that judge thinks such a heavy sentence could force her to bend before the unjust law. In this, the letter exudes a sense of exceptional indifference and fearlessness of political imprisonment. One must ask: what does this unusual calmness signify? How do we make sense of her unusual calmness? I maintain that this unusually calm tone is sensorial, both literally and allegorically. As the letter was read aloud in a courtroom and specifically mentions the silenced

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<sup>7</sup> Inmedia Hong Kong, "Three People Arrested."

<sup>8</sup> There were multiple news reports regarding her act, but many of which could not be found due to the closing down of multiple pro-democracy news outlets. (Some are shut because employees were arrested on suspicion of conspiring to publish seditious material.) For one of the few remaining online reports, see Cheng, "5 Hong Kong ex-students."

voice of the dissident, it can be viewed as essentially a voice or, I contend, a noise in the courtroom.

法官閣下：  
在還押期間，感化官向我索取背景報告時，我坦言對於自己的行為並無後悔，亦沒有說話向法官閣下求情，因為我並不認同法例本身，亦不覺得自己有助錯的地方。簡單而言，我不認為這是合理的裁決。  
亦可能  
在部分人眼中，不感者「犯法就係犯法，就係要負責」，如果公眾認為法庭的裁決證明了不感者的行為是錯誤的、是徒勞無功的。但我認為，權威並不代表正確。  
首先，香港現時的法律並非由人民共同認可，社會並沒有空間討論現行法律合理與否。其次，暴動條例的定義本來就模糊不清，以便政權靈活解釋和操控。2019年後暴動案件急升，法庭因時而重新詮釋暴動定義，令更多行為被列為「法律不認可的行為」，從而令更多人入罪，令政權得以打壓異見者。因此，極權下的法律只是政權用以規範人民行為的不流血暴力手段，而法庭也不是一個彰顯公義的地方。這裏只會流於表面地關注社會秩序，並不會著眼社會撕裂的根本原因。  
當政治案件的刑罰日益加重時，有些被告會選擇認罪或向法官求情，以減輕刑罰，但這些或許並不代表他們認同法律具有道德正當性。法官閣下可能指出，若不滿閣下裁決，又可以申請上訴。然而，本人已不再相信香港的司法制度，再高級的法庭亦不見得會傾聽異見者的聲音。我正是希望藉此機會向法庭表達我的不滿。如果法庭聽取本人以上的言論，認為可以用宣判的形式令本人從而後悔或反省自己的行為，本人亦無話可說。  
此致  
符凱晴  
8/10/2021

Figure 1: The handwritten letter by Foo Hoi-ching, 2021.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous source.

*Oscar Man*

*Full Translation:*

Your Honor,

During custody, the probation officer asked for my background report. I asserted that I feel no remorse for my behavior. I also do not intend to plead to your honor because I do not agree with the law *per se* and I do not think I did something wrong. Simply put, I do not think this is a reasonable verdict.

To a few, protestors are obliged to “take the responsibility of committing a crime”. The general public might also think that the judgment of the trial proves that the protestors’ behavior is wrong and futile. However, I think power does not justify what is right.

To begin with, the current law of Hong Kong is not approved by its people. The society did not have any space to discuss whether the law is just or not. Secondly, the definition of riot is in itself ambiguous to facilitate a convenient interpretation and manipulation by the political power. After 2019 riot cases surged. The court timely re-interpreted the definition of riot to include more acts as “legally unapproved acts” so as to put more people in jail, so that the political power can suppress the dissident. Therefore, law under totalitarianism is a violent tool without bloodshed to let political power regulate its people’s behavior. The court is neither a place where justice is done or upheld. It is a place which pays skin-deep attention to social order and where the fundamental reason why society is split and torn apart is never seriously examined.

As the sentence of political cases aggravated, some defendants chose to plead guilty or plead to the judge in hopes of mitigation. However, it does not mean they agree that the existing law is morally just. Your honor may suggest that I should appeal if I am not pleased with the judgement. However, I no longer hold faith in Hong Kong’s legal system. No matter what higher court, I believe it will not listen to the voice of the dissident.

I only wish to use this chance to express my discontent. If, after hearing my speech on the above, the court reckons a heavy sentence could make me feel remorseful and reflect on myself, I suggest the court do whatever it pleases.

Regards,

Foo Hoi-ching

8/10/2021



### **The Great Criminal**

It is obvious that the calm, factual, and descriptive tone of Foo's letter exudes something *beyond* the courtroom and the law. In other words, it exposes the circumscription of law itself. In "Critique of Violence," German philosopher Walter Benjamin raises key questions regarding violence, law, and justice. Pointing out that violence is inherent to law even though law's end might be justice, Benjamin distinguishes between law-making violence and law-preserving violence. Taking militarism as an example of law-preserving violence, Benjamin highlights how legal violence also implies an involuntary subordination of citizens to law. For instance, the fact that conscription is compulsory and that citizens must fight for the country reveals how the citizens cannot but succumb to a law for the sake of the country. In addition, Benjamin emphasizes that law-making and law-preserving violence are sometimes coterminous or overlapping. In the Hong Kong context, it is clear that police violence and political prosecution are instances of law-preserving violence that the government exercises to maintain its status quo. At the same time, these are also instances of law-making violence in the sense that they establish new laws stipulating what citizens can or cannot do, similar to Benjamin's suggestion that the purpose of capital punishment "is not to punish the infringement of law but to establish new law."<sup>10</sup>

Benjamin identifies a type of criminal who attracts and charms the public. This "great criminal," in Benjamin's words, "confronts modern law with a threat: the threat of positing a new law, which, in spite of its impotence where it really matters, even today makes the people shudder as it did in primeval times."<sup>11</sup> To apply this concept to Foo's case, the fact that she chose not to follow the legal procedure of the mitigation plea is in itself a confrontation of the legal system. Her refusal to plead and her prophetic accusation that the plea in mitigation is useless since the defendants are politically prosecuted express a threat of positing a new law, a moral law positioned outside the judicial system that directly confronts the legal law. Foo's refusal rebuffs the verdict and judgment of the court

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<sup>10</sup> "Critique of Violence," 286.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*, 283-4.

for its ignorance of morality and reveals that the legal law is being abused to prosecute whoever might challenge the status quo of the government. This refusal underscores the legal law and invalidates it as a violent means for legal ends. Elaborating on Benjamin's theorization of the great criminal, philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that this figure "is not someone who has committed this or that crime for which one feels a secret admiration; it is someone who, in defying the law, lays bare the violence of the legal system, the juridical order itself."<sup>12</sup> By appropriating the legal genre (plea in mitigation) and turning it into a factual expression of her political stance, Foo is not just assailing the government and addressing the unjust political prosecution masquerading as justice, but also, most fundamentally, using subdued and dignified language to lay bare the violence of law to the public who granted trust to the legal system. The appropriation of legal genre is an act of bypassing the legal system, resisting to step into an unjust procedure, and telling the public that the current law is unjust and merely performative.

A plea, which means either "an urgent and emotional request" or,<sup>13</sup> in a legal sense, "an opportunity for you to explain to the judge the circumstances of the offence, so that the judge can arrive at an appropriate sentence,"<sup>14</sup> turns into the exact opposite. Foo alters the function of the legal form and invalidates it by breaking that form. In the sentence pronouncement document of this case, the judge responded to the mitigation factors proposed by the defendants. None of the other four defendants who did plead and show remorse received any mitigation from their pleas apart from the mitigation factor that they had no previous criminal record.<sup>15</sup> However, it is conspicuous that only Foo's non-plea was not mentioned in the document at all, as if the law is unable to respond to Foo's letter since it breaks the form and logic of the judicial system. This failure to respond to Foo's non-plea further highlights the distance between legal law and moral law, with legal law being the institutional means to exercise legal violence. The judge's lack of address to Foo exposes

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<sup>12</sup> "Force of Law," 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Online Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "plea."

<sup>14</sup> Singapore Courts, "Prepare Your Mitigation Plea."

<sup>15</sup> Hong Kong Judiciary Legal Reference, "DCCC 361/2020 [2021] HKDC 1309."

the aphasia of the law when it faces an extra-legal logic that it finds incomprehensible and illegible. The law is silent as it is incapable of responding to Foo's logic, which is outside the judicial system, while, on the other hand, the letter is *speaking* about something.

### **Bring the Noise to the Courtroom**

As mentioned above, merely illustrating the implications of the letter's unusual calmness is insufficient, for the letter is not only a collection of written words but an utterance, a speech act, an auditory event that takes place sensorially in a courtroom. In *The Parasite*, theorist Michel Serres deconstructs the French word "parasite" by playing with its multiple senses. Apart from the senses of biological and social parasite, the French word "parasite" also means "static" or "interference."<sup>16</sup> In the sense of classic information theory, noise, for Serres, is not only an extraneous background disturbance in the transmission of messages between a sender and a receiver. It is fundamental and subversive. Serres holds that "as soon as we are two, we are already three or four . . . In order to succeed, the dialogue needs an excluded third."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the "excluded third," or the noise, is always necessary in order to make communication possible. In addition, he writes: "[t]he parasite, nesting on the flow of the relation, is in third position," but the noise eventually becomes an interlocutor within the flow of the relation, obscuring and disrupting this flow.<sup>18</sup>

This notion of noise as both parasitic and disruptive makes it possible to further deconstruct Foo's plea letter and its functions in a sensorial and sense-making sense. Firstly, the calmness in her accusation confirms that the letter is not merely a dissident voice against the legal apparatus. The letter escapes the oppressor-oppressed binary since it does not attempt to revolt against or overthrow the oppressor. Instead, precisely because of its unusual calmness and its factual description of the legal system, it functions as noise *within* the apparatus. Here Serres' notion of noise becomes critical to understanding Foo's plea letter. On the surface level, one

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<sup>16</sup> Wolfe, "Bring the Noise."

<sup>17</sup> *The Parasite*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*, 53-4.

could easily imagine that Foo's legal trial is an information exchange between a sender (the government) and a receiver (Foo), with the message clearly being that dissident political acts are illegal. If, however, we take into consideration the complexity and multivalence of Serres' notion of noise, one realizes that the letter's unusual calmness exposes the real relation of information exchange, where the sender is the government, but the real receiver is the general public. As much as the legal procedure of the letter of plea presents itself as private, personal, and one-on-one, it is ultimately public and didactic. The part of the letter where Foo presciently states that it is futile to plead for a mitigated sentence because the legal system is already unjust exposes the performativity and, thus, the hypocrisy of the entire legal trial. It once again lays bare the fact that the legal procedure is entirely performative because the government relies on the superficial objectivity of the law to communicate political messages to the general public with the discursive and legal intention to intimidate. In other words, the letter is neither an outcry for political awareness nor the receiver of political messages, but, in essence, the noise *within* the apparatus. It is a noise that, in Serres' words, "through its presence and absence, the intermittence of the signal, produces the new system."<sup>19</sup>

### **Courtroom Drawings to Make Sense**

While the defendant is undoubtedly involved in the space and senses of the courtroom, others bear witness in the courtroom in different ways. The spectator, for instance, is both an insider and outsider who gazes at and participates in the legal event. Hong Kong artist Pak Sheung Chuen, for instance, fell into a prolonged depression after the abrupt end of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Intriguingly, his way of dealing with depression was, rather arbitrarily, *legal*. After walking, by chance, past a court of law, Pak became obsessed with listening to legal cases as a courtroom spectator. While his drawings are not directly related to Foo's case, his witnessing of political cases in Hong Kong further reveals how these trials are sensational. Pak has said that the courtroom is like a buffer zone for emotions: the "highly controlled" nature of its space

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 52.

ensures an undisturbed environment for him to manage his feelings and stay focused.<sup>20</sup> While listening to legal cases, Pak would note down details of the trials. More often, though, Pak's courtroom documentation is a mixture of handwritten words, sketched portraits of trial participants, and extremely abstract symbols that he drew almost automatically and unconsciously and which even require post-drawing interpretations by himself.<sup>21</sup>

According to art historian Lynda Nead, courtroom sketches first appeared as an alternative form of documentation after photography was banned in courtrooms on account of concern at the time that "the newspapers [had] brought the public into the courtroom" and "penetrated its enclosed and rarified space."<sup>22</sup> The ban on photography in courtrooms, according to Nead, "effectively removed the mass public from the courtroom and prevented the law being turned into an emotive spectacle."<sup>23</sup> Even with this ban, it is clear that legal trials are not free from emotive, spectacled, and sensational interpretations. Examining the graphic trial reports of the Papon v. France case in 1998, law and media scholar Yasco Horsman points out how the artists interpret, distort, and dramatize the trials subjectively through their representations of people in the courtroom.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Papon is portrayed in an uncannily animated manner when he speaks from the witness stand. He appears extremely lively, with exaggerated, theatrical gestures, reflecting the artist's attempt to depict Papon as an old man trying in desperation and futility to defend himself. Highlighting the drawing hands and the sketchbook drawn within the graphic trial reports, Horsman reminds readers that the artist is always present in the trial as a bystander, a witness, and a spectator. It is important to note that in Horsman's analysis not only is the witnessing other made present in the trial and that the reading of the graphic trial reports shown as always interpreted and mediated, but that the legal trial as such is exposed as sensorial and performative. The cross-examination

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<sup>20</sup> Choi, "Speed Drawing."

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed analysis of his drawings, see Pang, "Facing Up."

<sup>22</sup> "Freedom from Publicity or Right to Information?," 63-81.

<sup>23</sup> "Courtroom Sketching," 81.

<sup>24</sup> Horsman, "Laughter in the Courts of Law."

process, for instance, is always determined by the ways in which witnesses deliver their stories. Gesture, tone, volume, and eye contact are all sensorial details of the legal trial in a courtroom.

I contend that courtroom drawing is, therefore, key to exposing the theatricality and sensationality of legal trials. For instance, Horsman illustrates how fluctuation in style in the graphic trial reports indicates specific moments of disruption that are often represented in conspicuously detailed depictions, bringing to light the affective aspect of the trial.<sup>25</sup> In other words, since the courtroom is a “highly controlled” space with “mundane administrative accoutrements” that allows no space for emotions, the spatiality of legal trials is, indeed, enclosed and rarified.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the often unbearably long hours of legal trials—in which most people feel bored, tired, or stuck—form the suffocating temporality of the courtroom. The spatiality and temporality of the courtroom construct the legal trial as a highly regulated space with little to no room for affective or physical freedom. However, it is precisely this spatially and temporally controlled setting that generates the potential theatricality of legal trials. In other words, spatial and temporal invariability allows the courtroom to function almost as a blank page or empty stage on which courtroom events can be exaggerated and dramatized.

Pak’s drawing is key to exposing the theatricality of such a highly regulated legal space. The fact that Pak takes the courtroom and the experience of listening to cases as a therapeutic practice to treat his depression illustrates how he appropriates the courtroom into an empty space for personal, creative use. His presence in the courtroom obviously obscures the law’s intention to construct the space as enclosed and the law as entirely non-emotive. Because of their highly natural and unconscious nature, Pak’s drawings are non-representational, affective, and sensationality, which reveal the

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<sup>25</sup> *Id.*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Pak, *Nightmare Wallpaper*, 46-7.



Figure 2: "Blood and Fire."<sup>28</sup>

theatricality of legal trials. Incorporating written details of the trials, sketched portraits, and abstract symbols, Pak's drawings expose the ultimately affective and sensorial nature of legal trials. While listening to the case of Ng Lai-ying, a female protestor who had been arrested with her face bloodied and was accused of assaulting police officers with her breasts, Pak draws a symbol of blood and fire (see fig. 2).<sup>28</sup> Producing this drawing automatically and unconsciously, Pak has to interpret the symbol retrospectively. According to Pak, he first interpreted the symbol as a representation of Ng's hair and bloody face, with an eagle standing on her nose. But when Pak turned the symbol over and re-interpreted it nine months later, he saw it as a representation of a human figure behind a burning fire.<sup>29</sup>

According to Hong Kong Studies scholar Pang Lai-kwan, Pak's drawings are capable of capturing the transcendental *sense* of "being carried forward, reaching afar, echoing among many people."<sup>30</sup> Drawing on insights offered by Elizabeth Grosz and Jean-Luc Nancy, Pang posits sense as something that remains beyond language, an always-multiple "being-toward-the-world."<sup>31</sup> For Pang, the insistence of Pak's drawings on allowing contradictions and ambiguities to exist truthfully allows them to present a lasting and multiplying *sense* of political struggles. For instance, the blood and fire symbol represents not only the police violence of Ng's arrest but also the reciprocal violence of protestors who committed arson and threw bricks. This interpretation resembles Foo's unusual calmness in her letter, as they both eschew a one-sided political expression, instead insisting on presenting the whole picture and its complexity

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<sup>28</sup> See Plucinska, "Hong Kong Woman Got Sentenced."

<sup>29</sup> Pak, *Nightmare Wallpaper*, 46-7.

<sup>30</sup> "Facing Up," 263-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

in their own ways. In other words, by representing and re-creating the details of the recounted legal events, Pak brings the sense of the past events back to the present through his drawings with the power of sensing, and thus connecting, with others who are also in political despair. Pak's drawings are a brave and honest dialogue with the past, the self, and the senses. They exude the sense of commons through their almost unconscious and automatic strokes driven by Pak's overwhelmingly affective and sensorial experience in the courtroom.

### **Archiving the Law**

Cultural memorist Jie Li proposes the concept of "dossier literature" as opposed to "drawer literature," a term coined by Chinese scholar Chen Sihe, to refer to the forbidden literature of the Mao era that was often kept in a drawer since its content was sensitive and thus might have been used as evidence for political prosecution. Li's book *Utopian Ruins* reviews personal accounts of the Cultural Revolution in unusual forms, such as the blood letter on a prison wall, dossiers, and police files. Li highlights the potential of these forms of personal account to resist homogenous, state-orchestrated, and unfaithful historical narratives, documenting the history that political power attempts to wipe out. A blood letter on a prison wall, for example, was used as evidence of anti-revolutionary crime and justified the execution of the political criminal Lin Zhao. The blood letter was recorded by the police and used in Zhao's prosecution and sentencing to execution. However, the blood letter was also documented and turned into an archive, a historical account of the dissident. Later historians discovered the documents and excavated the story of a brave elite who devoted her life to exposing the failures of the government at the time. In other words, the dossier acts as another form of archive that continues the life of the blood letter on the prison wall, which could be easily erased. This example introduces a dialectical relationship between law as tool and dossier as documentation. This implies that when the government relies on the seemingly just apparatus (that is, the law) to justify its existence and its ruling power over the people, the dossier inevitably becomes the rare and perhaps singular shelter for dissident voices. In other words, the stage (law) on which the government relies to perform



political play *per se* provides a private space for the prosecuted to archive a suppressed dissident history.

In this sense, Foo's unusual calmness in her letter can also be understood in archival terms. Foo's shocking self-awareness is derived from her attempt to turn a plea into a moment of personal witness, an archive, and an account of history that would soon be wiped out by political power. In this attempt, she spends half of the page lucidly explaining why the current legal system is unjust and why she feels no remorse for her alleged crimes. Foo's rational explanations resist the manipulations of ideological propaganda that might attempt to alter the letter's content and represent its composition as an illicit action. Foo's appropriation of law not only archives the event but also documents the suppressed history for future historians to excavate. Inasmuch as political power still relies on law to perform and achieve its agenda, Foo's personal witness lingers and remains *with* the law and forces the law not to close but to remain open. On the other hand, Pak's drawings document trials visually, affectively, and sensorially. His work constitutes what literary scholar Hillary Chute calls "visual witnessing."<sup>32</sup> Being both journalism and testimony, this form of visual witness transcribes and archives the trials first-hand. Pak's work is also an artistic form of archive that depicts the trial as an event, presenting trials as performative and theatrical.<sup>33</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The above legal instances undoubtedly reveal the sensorial aspect of the courtroom and how its performativity can be exposed through artistic practices. While the Eichmann trial and the Depp v. Heard case both aroused enormous attention for their historical significance and sensoriality, legal cases like Foo's are proceeding daily in Hong Kong. With the increasing number of trials and convictions on a daily basis, the legal process in the courtroom almost becomes mechanical, automatic, and gestural. The sensoriality within the courtroom is often buried under the quantity and repetitiveness of trials. The imminent danger of this burial is not

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<sup>32</sup> *Disaster Drawn*, 141-2.

<sup>33</sup> Horsman, "Laughter," 3.

only that the public becomes indifferent to the political trials. It is also that such indifference might be abused to further facilitate political prosecutions and render the law as the dispositive and the machine that consumes all political energy and blocks all future possibilities for opposition to sovereign power. Instead of reinvigorating and highlighting the senses in law, contemporary media further blur and displace the sensoriality of legal trials by mediatizing and mediating these trials. Media turn trials into spectacular events rather than exposing the sensationality of legal events, thus further concealing the performativity and violence inherent in law.

By positing a new law and voicing out a noise in the courtroom, Foo is able to expose the performativity and sensoriality of legal trials. Through this exposure, Foo also teases out the underlying fabrics of law, presenting its violence and its political agenda to the public through the senses. On the other hand, as a spectator, Pak is able to transform private, personal affect into a shared, public, and common sense that bears witness to and archives the legal trial. The critical perspective of these two cases exposes and deconstructs law as an objective, unbiased, and emotionless machine in society through the senses. They also reveal the potential of conflating the senses with sense in law to undo the automation of law. I hope that this study, an initial attempt at exposing the “sensationality” of the courtroom, will provide a theoretical framework for future studies to further expose the seemingly immutable apparatus that is called the law.

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*Oscar Man*

**List of images**

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## The Sensory for Sale: A Sense of Pseudoc cosmopolitanism and Hyperreality in Dubai Global Village

Adrian Krieger

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The sale of sensory commodities, or commodities that gain their desirability through their excitement of our senses, is nothing new. Indeed, spectacle and amazement, delivered through our sensory receptors, have long been relevant qualities for the desirability of commodities. Modernity, nonetheless, has brought something new to these sensory commodities: an ease of reproducibility that would have previously been impossible. In this paper, I engage with a double meaning of “sense:” first, as the sensory, or the experiences of phenomena as communicated through our sensory organs; second, as meaning-sense, or the sense of something as the attribution of a certain quality and interpretation. Analyzing the case study of the Dubai Global Village (DGV), I showcase how a *sensory* construction creates a specific *sense* of cosmopolitanism.

DGV claims to be one of the world’s largest tourism, leisure, and entertainment projects as well as the first cultural shopping destination in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup> Within it, visitors are greeted by an amalgamation of commercial outlets, event locations, restaurants, and carnival rides. At the heart of DGV lie its (inter-)national pavilions,<sup>2</sup> 27 buildings supposedly representing different world cultures.<sup>3</sup> These pavilions claim to offer “unique and

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<sup>1</sup> Dubai Global Village, “About Us.”

<sup>2</sup> DGV itself switches between calling the pavilions “national” and “international.” For the purposes of this paper, I will call them “national pavilions” to emphasize the monolithic nature of presentation within them.

<sup>3</sup> Dubai Global Village, “Pavilions & Selfie Spots.”

authentic experiences” in the form of cultural goods, foods, and events.<sup>4</sup> Each pavilion, adorned with exterior signage specifying the national culture or group of cultures it supposedly represents, is constructed and decorated to remind visitors of those cultures. The pavilion system and its methods of presentation have been compared to the national pavilions of nineteenth-century world’s fairs.<sup>5</sup> With DGV’s offerings representing sensory stimuli, the aforementioned importance of spectacle and amazement for the desirability of commodities becomes apparent.

DGV’s engagement with representations of world cultures is emblematic of Dubai’s reimagining of the global and its place within it. Dubai has risen to be a bustling hub of commerce and luxury by investing oil revenue into a petro-fueled service and tourism economy,<sup>6</sup> helping fulfill desires to be an attractive location for businesses and tourists alike, a “global city of superlatives.”<sup>7</sup> Following Saskia Sassen’s seminal work on cities in a globalized world, we can describe a global city as a complex hub within the international network characterized by international finance, business, and communication, as well as a high level of cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism.<sup>8</sup> The Dubai government proudly embraces the economic axes of this definition, but it keeps silent about the cultural and cosmopolitan axes except to present Dubai as a space for intercultural encounters.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have problematized the sense of cosmopolitanism propagated in Dubai and the Gulf due to its restrictive political context. For example, Helene Thiollet and Laure Assaf have claimed that cities in the Gulf showcase a paradox of cosmopolitanism, exhibiting both highly diverse populations and exclusionary politics restricting the freedom of these populations.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dubai Global Village, “About Us.”

<sup>5</sup> O’Connor, “Spectacular Memory,” 214.

<sup>6</sup> Haider, “The Growing Pains,” 1063-4.

<sup>7</sup> Stephenson, “Tourism, Development and ‘Destination Dubai,’” 728.

<sup>8</sup> “The Global City,” 38-40.

<sup>9</sup> Pagès-El Karoui, “Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism,” 171-2.

<sup>10</sup> “Cosmopolitanism,” 2.

Matthew Gray argues that such state-mediated cosmopolitan appearances are best described as “pseudocosmopolitan.”<sup>11</sup>

Gray’s critique of pseudocosmopolitanism focuses on the incorporation of perceived cosmopolitan virtues into national identity. This paper builds onto this critique by analyzing the object subjects engage with to achieve this desired image. Through an analysis of DGV, I argue that the creation of pseudocosmopolitan spaces in Dubai also involves the creation of specific objects with which subjects can engage. I will characterize this creation by invoking the Baudrillardian concepts of the simulacrum (i.e., a copy without an original) and hyperreality (i.e., the inability to differentiate between reality and fiction). To do this, I will first describe the desire to be a global city and the counterpoint of cosmopolitanisms in the Gulf. Subsequently, I will showcase DGV’s construction as a pseudocosmopolitan space. Finally, building on the existing concept of pseudocosmopolitanism, I will characterize the objects of engagement in DGV as simulacra and DGV itself as a space of hyperreality.

### **Global Cities and Cosmopolitanism in the Gulf**

Before engaging with DGV itself, it is necessary to take two preliminary steps: first, to identify the reasons that being a “global city” is desirable and understand the role of cosmopolitanism in becoming such a city; second, to clarify the “fuzzy” concept of cosmopolitanism and the state of cosmopolitanism in the contemporary Gulf.

As mentioned, Sassen refers to global cities as those that sit at the intersections of global flows of money, people, and knowledge. In this, global cities constitute spaces in which the conceptual dichotomy between “global” and “local” is breached, exhibiting the conditions of globality in a local setting.<sup>12</sup> This situation means that global cities occupy the top positions in an international urban hierarchy. Through their entanglement with production, consumption, investment, migration, decision-making, and other “globalized” flows, global cities can “‘fold’ global space and time to

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<sup>11</sup> “Heritage, Public Space, and Cosmopolitanism,” 5.

<sup>12</sup> Sassen, “The Global City,” 32.

their advantage.”<sup>13</sup> It is important to note, however, that Sassen introduced the term “global city” not as a descriptor but as a critical concept to analyze and evaluate global divisions of labor, center-periphery distinctions, as well as urban segregation and segmentation resulting from growing globalization. The critical literature on global cities has largely followed this conceptual focus, garnering criticism for its portrayal of the city as a passive actor, a “plaything” of globalization controlled by structural forces.<sup>14</sup> Almost ironically, then, the idea of the global city as a seat of power and influence has been taken up by state and local authorities as an object of desire, leading cities to implement policies seeking to establish themselves as global cities.<sup>15</sup> As cultural geographer Doreen Massey has noted, “going global has become a universal urban imperative.”<sup>16</sup>

What, then, is the role of cosmopolitanism in following this urban imperative? Since the *raison d'être* of the global city extends beyond mere economics, a sense of cosmopolitanism is one of its foundational elements.<sup>17</sup> The sense of cosmopolitanism in a global city derives not just from diversity but also from citizens' ability and willingness to engage with those perceived to be outside of their own cultures. The portrayal of citizens as capable of such intercultural encounters is thus integral to creating the perception of a global city.<sup>18</sup> A city needs to appear cosmopolitan, consequently, to fulfill the “urban imperative” that it become a global city. Dubai's desire to position itself as a global city of superlatives thus necessitates a presentation of its citizens as cosmopolitan subjects. To fully understand this process, the term “cosmopolitanism” needs to be defined further and placed in the context of the Gulf.

Due to the term's ambiguity, I want to start with a negative definition of the sense in which I will use “cosmopolitanism” here. I will not be talking about so-called descriptive cosmopolitanism, in which “cosmopolitanism” is often used interchangeably with the

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<sup>13</sup> Warf, “Global Cities,” 929.

<sup>14</sup> Ljungkvist, *The Global City 2.0*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> *World City*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Warf, “Global Cities,” 930.

<sup>18</sup> Cheah, “Cosmopolitanism,” 492.



equally ambiguous term “diversity.” The interchangeable usage and confusion of descriptive and normative meanings of “cosmopolitanism” leads to what Pnina Werbner called the “dialectics of cosmopolitanism” in contemporary urban environments, where cosmopolitanism is both a descriptor and an object of debate.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, I will not be engaging with debates about cosmopolitanism in political philosophy and ethics, where the question is whether we owe special obligations to compatriots and members of our communities as compared to others.<sup>20</sup> The conceptualization of cosmopolitanism I will discuss rests upon those debates, but engagement with their particularities is beyond the scope of this paper.

Instead, starting with its etymological roots, I want to define cosmopolitanism, fittingly deriving from ancient Greek *cosmos* (“world”) and *polis* (“city”), as the belief in a single, worldwide community of which all human beings are members.<sup>21</sup> The relevant elements of “community,” a term with its own conceptual history and debate, which also unfortunately is beyond the scope of this paper, are shared values and common enterprises.<sup>22</sup> It may thus be more accurate to describe all human beings as potential members of this worldwide community once they move beyond the recognition of only their local communities and embrace cosmopolitanism. In his conceptualization of cosmopolitanism and locality, Ulf Hannerz has described the praxis resulting from this definition of cosmopolitanism as a mode of being characterized by an aesthetic openness to the other combined with the mastery of evaluating differences and incorporating desirable specificities.<sup>23</sup> Notably, however, for Hannerz this engagement does not result in specific ethical commitments.<sup>24</sup> Other authors, like Martha Nussbaum, have argued that recognizing such a community entails the recognition of similar structures of obligation to both those who

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<sup>19</sup> “Cosmopolitanism,” 309.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Brock and Brighouse, *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*.

<sup>21</sup> Cheah, “Cosmopolitanism,” 487.

<sup>22</sup> Bradshaw, “The Post-Place Community,” 10.

<sup>23</sup> “Cosmopolitans and Locals,” 240.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 237.

are far away and to those who are near.<sup>25</sup> Local duties of recognition and obligation thus need to be externalized to a universal level.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, contemporary discourse on cosmopolitanism often positions it as the universalist opposite of localism and nationalism, which build upon particularistic theories of identity. However, the embeddedness of contemporary cosmopolitanism in national (i.e., particularistic) contexts calls this position into question.<sup>27</sup> Arising from this contrast of ambiguous definitions and stemming from the interest of appearing cosmopolitan which I laid out earlier is the concept of the contemporary cosmopolitan subject, who has internalized the ideals of cosmopolitanism, “believes” in the global, but locally acts according to these ideals only in relevant and strategic contexts.<sup>28</sup> Cities attempting to present themselves as “global cities” desire populations comprised of such contemporary cosmopolitan subjects.

The specific context of the Gulf, and Dubai in particular, reveals further tensions of this sense of cosmopolitanism in subjects and the mechanisms through which it is fostered. Historiographical research into cosmopolitanism in the Gulf is multiple and controversial, often being met by criticisms that cosmopolitanism was introduced through Ottoman and British colonial rule and thus carries with it a distinct colonialist sense.<sup>29</sup> However, especially in, but not limited to, trade centers and places of pilgrimage, another form of cosmopolitanism was also found, resulting from encounters with travelers and merchants and determined by diverse and changing populations.<sup>30</sup> Thus, stemming from these two historical senses of cosmopolitanism, contemporary senses of the term have specific characteristics. In his account of studies of cosmopolitanism in the Middle East, Will Hanley identifies three such characteristics: a focus on elite cosmopolitanism, a mainly descriptive instead of

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<sup>25</sup> “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” 12-3.

<sup>26</sup> Warf, “Global Cities,” 931.

<sup>27</sup> Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism,” 433.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, “Educating the National Citizen,” 388.

<sup>29</sup> Thiollet and Assaf, “Cosmopolitanism,” 2.

<sup>30</sup> Iqtidar, “Muslim cosmopolitanism,” 627-8.

normative usage of the term “cosmopolitan,” and a tone of grieving nostalgia for an imagined cosmopolitan past.<sup>31</sup>

These characteristics, combined with the aforementioned conceptual plurality of cosmopolitanisms, lead to severe conceptual tensions. To analyze the dynamic of these tensions from which the specific sense of cosmopolitanism in Dubai arises, I shall focus on two specific tensions: first, the tension between the desired cosmopolitanism of Dubai’s elites and undesired cosmopolitanism of its margins; second, the tension between the universalist conceptual groundwork of cosmopolitanism per se and Dubai’s exclusionary and restrictive political context.

As we have seen, cosmopolitanism in the Gulf context has generally focused on elites, in which highly skilled expats and the Dubaian elite gain their cosmopolitan capital through their ability to “master” intercultural encounters.<sup>32</sup> Opposed to this elite sense of cosmopolitanism is the cosmopolitanism of border-crossing workers and migrants, whose recognition of a global community does not arise from free choice but from displacement and economic necessity. To speak with Ulrich Beck, this sense of cosmopolitanism has become the standard for vast swaths of the global population.<sup>33</sup> This sense may be called vernacular cosmopolitanism. It is a cosmopolitanism of the margin, resulting in its oxymoronic nomenclature combining the locality of vernacularity with the universality of cosmopolitanism.<sup>34</sup> Invocations of cosmopolitanism in Dubai emerge into this tension between two senses of cosmopolitanism. We can identify further tensions by situating the senses of cosmopolitanism in relation to their political context in Dubai.

In the politically exclusionary context of Dubai, the subjects exemplifying the sense of vernacular cosmopolitanism are further marginalized and suppressed. Their position on the margins of society is solidified through exclusionary and segregationist politics,

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<sup>31</sup> Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism,” 1358.

<sup>32</sup> Koning, *Global Dreams*, xvi.

<sup>33</sup> Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*, 103-105.

<sup>34</sup> Werbner, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” 496-8.

and they are physically pushed out to the city's peripheries.<sup>35</sup> The visibility of vernacular cosmopolitan subjects in public space is mainly possible through the utilization of abandoned spaces, while their presence in the spotlight is policed and inhibited.<sup>36</sup> From this results a paradox: The vernacular cosmopolitan subjects are engaged in the construction of Dubai's many attractions which allow its presentation as a global city. To achieve this image, Dubai's elites present themselves as cosmopolitan subjects utilizing spaces built by those on the margins whilst their vernacular cosmopolitanism is pushed further out. From this results a simultaneity of difference seemingly incompatible with cosmopolitanism's universality.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the sense of cosmopolitanism present in the Gulf is an instrumental one, a cosmopolitanism of elites whose higher social positions are allocated to them based on the mastery of intercultural encounters only made possible by those on the margins.<sup>38</sup>

A threat to the exclusionary regime arises, however, from the imperative that elite subjects become cosmopolitan subjects in service of the recognition as a global city. Fuyuki Kurasawa points out an emancipatory potential of critical reflections on cosmopolitanism arising from discovering overlapping consensus and the fusion of horizons.<sup>39</sup> Here, recognizing cosmopolitanisms universalism and using it to criticize existing conceptions of the term in state policy can lead to the recognition of injustices through the identification with those on the margins. This recognition, according to Kurasawa, could lead to challenges for neoliberal economy, state violence, and fundamentalism.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Dubai seeks to control these "intercultural encounters" in such a way that it functions solely to reinforce a city's perception as a global city. Thus, from the interaction amongst the desired sense of elite cosmopolitanism, the hiding of vernacular cosmopolitanism, and the exclusionary political context of the Gulf, the sense of cosmopolitanism arises that

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<sup>35</sup> Kothari, "Migrant Cosmopolitans," 513.

<sup>36</sup> Sassen, "Does the City Have Speech?," 218.

<sup>37</sup> Bhabha, "Vernacular Cosmopolitans," 141.

<sup>38</sup> Thiollet and Assaf, "Cosmopolitanism," 3.

<sup>39</sup> "Critical Cosmopolitanism," 286.

<sup>40</sup> "Global Justice," 98-100.

Matthew Gray has termed “pseudoc cosmopolitanism.” According to Gray, pseudoc cosmopolitanism

is driven not by a profound humanist impulse nor a genuine attempt to transcend national identities, but rather uses state-created places and spaces with supposedly-cosmopolitan values and narratives to serve and strengthen national identity and loyalty to national-level institutions.<sup>41</sup>

Pseudoc cosmopolitanism is the desired form of cosmopolitanism in the Gulf, a cosmopolitanism that simultaneously portrays citizens as cosmopolitan subjects whilst mitigating potential threats to the exclusionary political context in which it takes place by controlling and mediating spaces and narratives through the state. It thus enables the portrayal of cities in the Gulf as global cities without engaging with the vernacular cosmopolitanism of large parts of their population and the emancipatory potential of critical cosmopolitanism.

### **Dubai Global Village as a Pseudoc cosmopolitan Space**

Having thus shown the dynamic of cosmopolitanisms present in Dubai and the specific sense of pseudoc cosmopolitanism arising from it, I now want to show how we can understand DGV as a pseudoc cosmopolitan space. For this, I will engage with the three parts of Gray’s conception separately.

To show the state-created nature of DGV, we need to analyze its history and current ownership structure. DGV started in 1997 as a collection of kiosk stalls on the side of Dubai Creek and, after short stays at the district of Oud Metha and Dubai Festival City, found its present location just outside Dubai along the Shaikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Road in 2005.<sup>42</sup> In its current form, DGV is operated by Arab Media Group, an entertainment company specializing in “broadcasting, event management, and family

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<sup>41</sup> “Heritage, Public Space, and Cosmopolitanism,” 5.

<sup>42</sup> Zaki, “Dubai’s Global Village.”

entertainment.”<sup>43</sup> Arab Media Group, for its part, is owned by the holding company Dubai Holding, which lists DGV in its entertainment portfolio.<sup>44</sup> Finally, Dubai Holding is owned 99.67% by Dubai’s ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum and can be regarded as his personal investment, exemplifying an overlap between local government and business that has led some to call the city Dubai Inc.<sup>45</sup> In the history of DGV, we see the continued role of Dubai’s government and ruler in the creation, ownership, operation, and continuous re-creation of DGV, allowing us to see DGV as a “state-created space.”

What, then, are the values exemplified within this space? If we examine DGV’s “mission statement,” we can find the claim that:

[w]ith a strong belief that the world’s diversity and creativity is a limitless source of excitement and that human connection should have no boundaries, Global Village brings together extraordinary people to create a More Wonderful World [sic] for guests from around the globe.<sup>46</sup>

Here, we can see several of the aforementioned senses of cosmopolitanism existing in the Dubaian context surface. The invocation of “human connection without boundaries” reflects the cosmopolitan view that humanity is a global community, but the characterization of that community as being primarily a “source of excitement” again shows the elite connotations of that sense of cosmopolitanism. Vernacular forms of cosmopolitanism are absent. Recognizing the profit imperative under which DGV operates, it seems necessary for DGV to hide the forms of cosmopolitanism present in Dubai and a globalized world that do not lead to commodifiable and sellable excitement and wonder. Further elite connotations can be found in the portrayal of a cosmopolitan project as being driven by “extraordinary people,” showcasing the

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<sup>43</sup> Arab Media Group, “About Us.”

<sup>44</sup> Dubai Holding, “Dubai Holding Entertainment.”

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, “Dubai,” 162.

<sup>46</sup> Dubai Global Village, “About Us.”

importance of being cosmopolitan in the attainment of extraordinary status and high social positions. The cosmopolitan values portrayed in the “mission statement” thus reflect the conceptual tensions within the Gulf, allowing us to characterize them as, in Gray’s words, “supposedly-cosmopolitan.”

Finally, connecting these findings about DGV and its values with the aforementioned strategic importance of appearing cosmopolitan, we can see the state’s interest in DGV’s continued existence. The space simultaneously fosters ideas about what it means to be a cosmopolitan subject and supports a conceptualization of the *global* centered around Dubai so that visitors flock to the city to experience the cultures of the world. This dynamic, in addition to the economic benefits of the space, points towards the role of DGV as a sensory wonderland and a space for public education that produces and shapes ideal cosmopolitan subjects.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the space has a clear role in strengthening what Gray calls “national identity and loyalty.”

### **Simulacra and Hyperreality in Dubai Global Village**

DGV can be described as a pseudocosmopolitan space characterized by state control and mediation. However, I want to expand on this state-mediation by proposing that not only the space and the act of engagement are mediated but also the object that is being engaged with. Examining the “cultures”<sup>48</sup> presented for the intercultural encounter that shapes the pseudocosmopolitan subject, I will show that they are simulacra, copies without an original, that reveal the hyperreal constructions foundational to DGV.

Hyperreality is a concept in the analysis of postmodernity that describes something appearing to be real whilst not being real. Hyperrealities are based on the imitation of reality, disguising the differences between original and copy and breaking down the distinction between reality and fiction.<sup>49</sup> However, we need to

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<sup>47</sup> Biln, “On the Fabrication of Cultural Memory,” 28.

<sup>48</sup> I will be using the ambiguous term “culture” to refer to the object of engagement without further clarifying its definition. I recognize potential problems of essentialization, but hold that since I will be critiquing such essentializations in DGV, the usage of the term is merited.

<sup>49</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 71-2.

recognize here that hyperreality is not a matter of epistemology—the subject does not, for instance, simply lack the capacity to differentiate between reality and fiction—but ontology. The hyperreal construct is in its being unclassifiable as reality or fiction.<sup>50</sup> According to cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, hyperrealities show themselves through simulacra, copies without an original, which can be best understood through the language of semiotics. In semiotics, the study of signs, every sign (e.g., images, words, etc.) is made up of a signifier and a signified. While the signified denotes the underlying concept, the signifier is used to allude to this concept, thus constituting our communication. We can distinguish three orders of simulacra. First-order simulacra are based on imitations; they are counterfeits of the signifiers of an original. Second-order simulacra are based not on imitation, but exact reproduction, enabled through the large-scale reproduction capacities stemming from modernity. Third-order simulacra, then, are neither based on imitation nor reproduction, but are creations in their own right. Through the eclectic combination of signifiers, they create signs which are only self-referential, not referring anymore to a specific signified. Thus, the simulacrum precedes reality, the original cannot be located, and the distinction between reality and fiction breaks down.<sup>51</sup> Through the simulacra, hyperreality can be engaged with like reality but carries with it an uncanniness resulting from the aforementioned indistinguishability.

I argue that the “cultures” presented in DGV are such third-order simulacra. To demonstrate this, I will evaluate the presentation of these cultures through the sensorial in two pavilions of DGV, the Indian pavilion and the Japanese pavilion.<sup>52</sup> Presentations and processes similar to those I describe here also happen in other pavilions, but for lack of space, I will focus on the two. My analysis will focus on three dimensions of the pavilions: architecture, offered commodities, and presented spectacles.

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<sup>50</sup> Trifonova, “Is There a Subject in Hyperreality?”

<sup>51</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Following the Indian government’s international tourism campaign, the pavilion is officially called the “Incredible India pavilion.” For the sake of clarity, however, I will call it the Indian pavilion.





Figure 1: Outside View of the Indian Pavilion.<sup>52</sup>

I start by examining the Indian pavilion, beginning with its architecture. From the outside, the Indian pavilion exhibits a combination of different architectural styles present on the Indian subcontinent (fig. 1). The archways, wall carvings, and domes all resemble parts of architecture on the Indian subcontinent, but they are combined without showcasing an awareness of the differences between Bengali, Rajput, Mughal, and other types of architecture.<sup>54</sup> In this, they are signifiers lifted from their context and eclectically combined throughout the pavilion. Their sensory experience for visitors, however, happens in their totality, leading to the signification of a single signified of “Indian-ness.”

When we move to the inside of the pavilion, we see further evidence of this process (fig. 2). Multiple bright colors frame the sale of a multitude of cultural and sensory commodities like jewelry, tea, and spices.<sup>55</sup> Again, individual commodities are lifted from their context, only chosen for their supposed representational value or sensational capacity. In her study of the role of color in Western depictions of India, Jagjeet Lally argued that India has been an object of desire for chromophile fantasies, juxtaposed to the

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<sup>53</sup> Dubai Global Village, “Incredible India.”

<sup>54</sup> Bahga and Raheja, “Postcolonial Indian Architecture,” 475.

<sup>55</sup> Dubai Global Village, “Incredible India.”



Figure 2: Inside View of the Indian Pavilion.<sup>56</sup>

greyness and mundaneness of everyday life.<sup>57</sup> This is reflected in the sensory amalgamation offered within. Further, the focus on certain cultural commodities, especially spices, not only expands the sensory excitement beyond the visual but also reflects India's standing within the global sphere during and before the age of colonialism.<sup>58</sup> Despite this eclecticism, these signifiers again point to a single signified of "Indian-ness" through the totality of their sensory experience.

Moving to the Japanese pavilion, we see similar processes at play. The outside of the Japanese pavilion is almost caricature-like, with visitors entering through the fan of a *geisha* flanked by statues of two *samurai* with walls reminiscent of *shoji* (i.e., paper walls) painted in the style of traditional Japanese paintings (fig. 3). The eclectic choice here seems even more based on the recognizability of the signifiers through the sensory experience. The individual signifiers may exist in reality but are again taken from their context and combined in such a way that they point towards a specific signified of "Japanese-ness."

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<sup>56</sup> Dubai Global Village, "Incredible India."

<sup>57</sup> Lally, "Colour as Commodity."

<sup>58</sup> Morton, *The Poetics of Spice*, 20.



Figure 3: Outside View of the Japanese Pavilion.<sup>59</sup>

This continues in the events held at the Japanese pavilion. The so-called “Japan Show” claims to showcase “Japanese culture through their popular fan and parasol dances.”<sup>60</sup> The stage of the Japan Show is adorned with blooming cherry trees and pagodas, and dancers in kimonos move to music played on traditional Japanese instruments (fig. 4). While fan dances are also an existing practice, the lifting from the cultural context shows itself even more strongly here. This deterritorialization, combined with the presentation of other signifiers on stage, creates a sensory experience based on vision and audio that, again, signifies a single certain signified.

The cultures presented in DGV, if we recognize the space’s role as a cultural *shopping* center, follow a logic of commodification based on their recognizability. The cultural commodities are fixations and essentializations of a fluid culture in order for them to be subjected to the commodity logic of a cultural shopping center.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, those parts of the culture that cannot be transformed into sensory commodities, as well as those parts that lack recognizability, are not represented in DGV’s portrayal. The

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<sup>59</sup> Dubai Global Village, “Japan.”

<sup>60</sup> Dubai Global Village, “Japan Show.”

<sup>61</sup> Pocock, “Authenticity,” 4.



Figure 4: Fan Dances as Part of the “Japan Show.”<sup>62</sup>

eclecticism of combined signifiers shows a certain arbitrariness but still is done along the terms of recognizability. Individual signifiers are taken from reality, lifted from their context and permuted in such a way that their totality signifies a single signified, the hyperreal culture that shares its name with a geographical region of reality.

The signifiers serve the construction of a certain sense of culture; they are chosen for their ability to signify “Indian-ness” or “Japanese-ness.”<sup>63</sup> Such cultures do not really exist in the sense in which they are portrayed in DGV but play into pre-held convictions about these cultures already held by visitors. As such, visitors can engage with these cultures in the same way that they could with a real culture but are supposedly still aware of their position within DGV’s commodified logic. From this, the uncanniness of the hyperreal culture emerges; the “Indian culture” of DGV, for instance, becomes indistinguishable in its capacity for engagement from any cultural practice in India.

The pavilions are thus representative of a deliberate construction of culture that lies at the bottom of DGV. These cultures are only constituted of the cultural parts, the signifiers, which are included within them and serve as self-referential points. The totality of eclectic signifiers we can find in the above-described

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<sup>62</sup> Dubai Global Village, “Japan.”

<sup>63</sup> O’Connor, “Spectacular Memory,” 219.

national pavilions thus only signifies this exact totality. The physical construction of the pavilion and its filling with commodities thus parallels the construction of such a hyperreal culture, a representation of a representation without an original.

The simulacrum of culture is then presented as the object of intercultural encounters, and it is able to fill this role through its hyperreality. Visitors, unable to distinguish reality from fiction, are served this simulacrum of culture and engage with it as if it were real. It is here that the connection between the sensory and the meaning-sense surfaces. Visitors engage with the sensory commodities laid out before them, seemingly engaged in an encounter with a different “culture.” From this perceived engagement, they draw their sense of elite cosmopolitanism—their identity as cosmopolitan subjects—which is desired by Dubai to portray itself as a global city.

A bitter irony accompanies the constructions of simulacra in DGV when viewed with the tension of vernacular cosmopolitanism in mind. The space in which the act of marginalization takes place, where the elite is able to portray themselves as cosmopolitan subjects, despite the pseudocosmopolitan nature of the encounter, is dependent on the construction of hyperreal cultures that share their names with many of the points of origin of those that exhibit vernacular cosmopolitanism. The emancipatory capacity of critical reflections on the cosmopolitanism imperative presented in DGV is minimized for state-sanctioned cosmopolitan subjects through the hyperreal cultures with which they engage. As a commercial space, DGV fosters the desired sense of elite cosmopolitanism whilst simultaneously supporting the exclusionary political contexts of Dubai.

This minimization, at the heart of the construction of DGV, serves the sense of pseudocosmopolitanism. Not only the space and the action, but also the object of the intercultural encounter is constructed and mediated by the state. It is thus an attempt to overcome the dilemma of the global city in exclusionary contexts, with the simulacra of cultures and the hyperreality of the object to be engaged with further expanding the control of the state’s authority. Returning to cosmopolitanism’s emancipatory potential, even if visitors feel like they are merging horizons and finding consensus with the object of their encounter, these are only found

with the hyperreal culture that plays into already pre-held convictions. Furthermore, the narrowness of the hyperreal culture only allows largely inconsequential mergers, like the recognition of the appeal of a certain commodity, which have little emancipatory potential and are solely determined by the desires and wishes of the visitor. In the end, the visitor as a pseudocosmopolitan subject only relates to themselves, and the danger for the state's authority is overcome.

### **Conclusion**

Dubai's meteoric rise on the global stage was dependent on and created further imperatives to portray itself as a global city. The cosmopolitan imperatives associated with this portrayal, however, would lead to undesirable side effects, threatening the exclusionary politics of the Gulf states. Consequently, the approach of pseudocosmopolitanism enabled cities like Dubai to create spaces in which their pseudocosmopolitan subjects can be fostered without undesirable side effects. Pseudocosmopolitanism thus remains an important concept for analyzing cosmopolitan imperatives in the context of the Gulf. However, as I have shown, beyond the space and the action, the object encountered in the pseudocosmopolitan space also needs to be recognized as state-controlled and constructed. The analysis I presented here only engaged with a single space and the sensory commodities it offers. Further research into the presence of this sense of pseudocosmopolitanism and its connection to the hyperreal could yield important results for understanding the dynamics of cosmopolitanism in our contemporary times, especially in the context of the Gulf.

The present study has shown the importance of analyzing the connection between the sensory and meaning-sense, especially in matters of constructed sensory experiences. Such constructions should be recognized to fall within fields of tension and power, serving certain meaning-senses whilst also deriving from them. The space of DGV is a prime example of this, being derived from the historical tensions of cosmopolitanism in the Gulf while also playing into the specific sense of pseudocosmopolitanism. As such, the sensory and meaning-sense are caught in a circle, influencing each other as well as being influenced within and by their contexts.

Analyses of these connections and their contexts may show possibilities for critical engagement with the concept of cosmopolitanism in Dubai and the Gulf in order to kindle the emancipatory potential within. Projects like the one carried out in this paper are, however, only the first step. In contexts where a certain meaning-sense is desired for reasons of power, like the sense of cosmopolitanism in Dubai which only serves its position as a global city, further research and analysis may bring senses of vernacular cosmopolitanism into the spotlight. Through this, the structural contexts pushing the vernacular cosmopolitan subject to the margins may be better described and the projects determining this push critiqued. The ideals of cosmopolitanism hold in them such a potential, but the usage of the term and the different sense of its meaning need to be understood in order to free it.

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## On Making Sense of Tradition: The Preservation of the Kakunodate Samurai District and the Portrayal of Traditional Japan

Martijn Rem

*Heritage wasn't only about the past—though it was that too—it also wasn't just about material things—though it was that as well—heritage was a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present.*

Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (2006)

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Walking into Japan's Kakunodate samurai district feels like travelling back in time. The district's traditional houses and the centuries-old trees provide the visitor with a sensory experience, as if they had suddenly walked into seventeenth-century Japan. Visitors can complete this experience and fully immerse themselves in Japan's traditional past by renting a kimono from one of the local shops. Since the 1990s, the number of visitor arrivals to Japan has increased almost annually,<sup>1</sup> and heritage preservation and heritage tourism can bring economic benefits, particularly in smaller cities. At the same time, preservation can lead to the commodification of heritage and the "corruption of pre-existing social ties and heritage value," as is the case in Lijiang, China.<sup>2</sup> Commodification can also result in "ecological degradation and conflicts between different users," as is the case in Okinawa, Japan.<sup>3</sup> In the Western gaze, Japan is a country filled with traditional

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few exceptions to the annual increase. After the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of 2011, and the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of visitors to Japan has decreased massively. For the specific data see: Japan National Tourism Organization, "Trends in Visitor Arrivals."

<sup>2</sup> Su, "Urban entrepreneurialism," 2885.

<sup>3</sup> Rots, "Whose sacred site?," 108.

culture and architecture, including tea ceremonies, Buddhist temples, tales of samurai, and the former samurai districts of which I examine one in this article. Promoting a “traditional Japan” is therefore a powerful way to raise interest in visiting Japan among Western tourists. In this article, I examine the portrayal of tradition in traditional architecture preservation districts. Using the Kakunodate samurai district as a case study, I investigate the particular role that “senses” play in constructing an image of “traditional Japan.” To be more specific, I am interested in how the senses create representations of tradition.

The concept of “tradition” can be discussed in regard to various fields, but in this article, I draw primarily on the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, who propose the idea of the “invented tradition.” The term “invented tradition” refers both to “‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted” and “those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period . . . and establishing themselves with great rapidity.” Invented tradition involves “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”<sup>4</sup> The concept of tradition itself has a long history in the Japanese context. During the Meiji Revolution of 1868, modernity and tradition became critical topics of debate: one group strove for modernization, while the other group wanted to return to Japanese tradition. While it was clear, that “modernity” in this debate referred to new ideas and innovations of the West, the meaning of Japanese traditionality was not as easily definable. Even those in Japan who favored tradition, in the words of Roy Starrs, were “influenced by modern Western ideas of exactly what was meant by ‘Japanese tradition’.”<sup>5</sup> Starrs cites *seppuku* or *hara-kiri*, suicide by cutting open one’s own abdomen to restore one’s honor, as an example of this uncertainty around tradition. After it was taken up as a subject by Western and Japanese writers, ritual honor suicide became a world-famous symbol of “traditional Japanese culture”

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<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Modernism and Japanese Culture*, 37-9.

and a typical “Japanese way of death.”<sup>6</sup> According to Starrs, the so-called double gaze, where the Japanese watch Westerners watching the Japanese, played a powerful role in the formation of the contemporary Japanese sense of national identity.

This concept of the “double gaze” shows the importance of the gaze of an Other in the creation of identity. Starrs argues that the gaze of an Other—crucial in a number of fields, particularly postcolonial theory<sup>7</sup>—plays a particularly critical role for the Japanese, as they are “prone to this ‘other-conscious’ tendency—as many phrases in the Japanese language advising us to beware the ‘eyes of others’ (*hito no me*) . . . also attest.”<sup>8</sup> Starrs’ example explains the construction of identity based on the gaze of an Other and shows how traditions can be adapted because of this gaze. As a result, *seppuku* is now considered a symbol of traditional Japanese.

In this article I contribute to discussions about the image of tradition by looking at the role of the senses in the construction of this image. I begin by introducing the Kakunodate samurai district and its background. Next, I explain the importance of the senses in experience creation in Japan. I end by analyzing the role of the senses in constructing the Kakunodate samurai district’s image of traditional Japan.

### **Background of Kakunodate**

The Japanese interest in tradition as a counterpoint to Western modernity developed during the twentieth century. After the enormous wave of migration from the countryside to the cities in the decades following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a nostalgic symbol of Japanese tradition emerged: *furusato* villages. *Furusato* can refer to one’s birthplace or hometown, but it can also, as Chris McMorran argues, refer to “an idealized rural village that is spiritual home to all Japanese people.”<sup>9</sup> The difference between these two senses is clearer in Japanese. The word *furusato* can be written with the

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Said, *Orientalism*; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>8</sup> *Modernism and Japanese Culture*, 50-1.

<sup>9</sup> “Understanding the ‘Heritage’,” 339.

Japanese characters 故郷, the first meaning “old” and the second meaning “village; hometown.” The combination of these characters can be read as *furusato* or as *kokyō*, both meaning “hometown; birthplace.” On the other hand, the word can be written in hiragana, one of the two Japanese syllabaries, as ふるさと. When it is written this way, the word can only be read as *furusato*. According to Jennifer Robertson, the latter way of writing is most used today, signifying the abstract idea of *furusato* and the “warm, nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention” rather than any particular real old village.<sup>10</sup>

McMorran goes on to explain that three aspects make up *furusato* heritage: proximity to nature, architectural cohesiveness and familiarity, and a sense of cooperation and community. This nostalgia for the rural hometown continued throughout the twentieth century. Starting in the 1970s, it was adapted by the state-owned railways in the 1970s, facilitating the “Discover Japan” (1970) and “Exotic Japan” (1984) advertising campaigns, which were some of the most successful in the country’s history. Amidst rapid industrialization, these domestic travel campaigns urged the Japanese to discover the remaining parts of their premodern past.<sup>11</sup> In 1984, a project called *furusato-zukuri* (“native place-making,” as McMorran translates it) was set up to help local governments fund the preservation or creation of these nostalgic landscapes. *Furusato* and *furusato-zukuri* also became a central political interest given the widespread public interest in heritage following the Second World War. In 1950, the Japanese National Diet advanced heritage site preservation by establishing the Law for the Protection of Cultural Property, which was intended to enhance the cultural quality of Japan and contribute to the evolution of world culture.<sup>12</sup> An amendment to this law in 1975 created a system for the preservation of districts containing traditional architecture.<sup>13</sup> This category of cultural properties differs from others because it contains groups of

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<sup>10</sup> “Furusato Japan,” 496.

<sup>11</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 34–6.

<sup>12</sup> Article 2, Item 1.

<sup>13</sup> These districts are referred to in Japanese as *dentōteki kenzōbutsugun hozon chiku*, meaning “traditional architecture preservation districts.”

traditional buildings and the surrounding environment rather than single buildings. Similar to nostalgia for the *furusato* villages, these architecture preservation districts are intended to portray traditional Japan and to step away from modernity.

The Kakunodate samurai district is one of eighteen traditional architecture preservation districts containing samurai. Sometimes called the little Kyōto of Tōhoku (*Tōhoku no shōkyōto*), in recognition of the atmosphere created by the district's historic architecture and cherry blossoms, Kakunodate is located in the inland city of Semboku, in the central-eastern part of Akita Prefecture. The preservation district in Kakunodate, a samurai castle town founded by the Ashina clan in 1620, contains the former residences of upper- and middle-class warriors. Features of the samurai town, including Edo period houses, a gate and a storehouse, are well preserved. Kakunodate has become widely known throughout Japan as a town of samurai residences and cherry blossoms, attracting over two million tourists a year.<sup>14</sup>

The popular image of the Kakunodate samurai district for Westerners and Japanese results partially from the way in which the district is preserved. The earliest samurai residences date from the end of the Edo period (1603–1867). Very few sources are available on the period before that, indicating that the restoration of the area is, therefore, based on the townscape from the end of the Edo period to the early Meiji period (1868–1912). Hiroshi Izumi argues that because townscapes change constantly and the Japanese interest in the samurai residences started around the time of its designation as a traditional architecture preservation district in 1976, the restoration of Kakunodate's residences is not necessarily faithful to an actual historical moment but can be better understood as a restoration to an ideal type. In other words, it is not a restoration of the townscape as such but rather the restoration, maintenance and construction of the scenery<sup>15</sup> based on an ideal image of what the

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<sup>14</sup> Semboku City, "Kakunodate." After the 2011 earthquake the number of tourists decreased but has gradually recovered since then. The document dates back to August 2020, meaning that the number of two million tourists is dating back to before the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>15</sup> The Japanese term often used to describe this process is *shūkei* which translates to "landscaping; beautification."

townscape should look like.<sup>16</sup> Among the preservation projects that have adjusted the appearance of the district to conform to this idea are the construction of new walls, hedges, and gates (seen as appropriate for the townscape and the samurai residences), the replacement of concrete walls with wooden fences, and the restoration of shops and offices in an appropriate style.

### **The Sensory Experience in Japan**

Recent work by Nina Konovalova building on Tatiana Grigorieva's insight,<sup>17</sup> has begun to understand Japanese culture as sensual, a culture of "feeling." Konovalova, for example, argues that sensory experience "has been defining both traditional rites and ceremonies" throughout Japan's history.<sup>18</sup> One Japanese ritual defined by sensory experience is the admiration of the teacup in a traditional tea ceremony. Konovalova explains that participants in a tea ceremony first pass the cup from hand to hand; they are "to pick it up at first, to hold it, to feel the textured pattern, and only after that to start talking about its aesthetic qualities."<sup>19</sup> Tea ceremonies are not just about drinking tea, and therefore the obvious scent and taste of the tea, but about the entire sensory experience and, in particular, the tactility of the teacup.

Taking a wider view beyond the Japanese context, numerous scholars have examined the role of the senses in creating experiences and memories.<sup>20</sup> Heritage studies scholar Rodney Harrison has identified a shift in leisure, tourism, and travel at the end of the twentieth century from "the marketing and sale of 'services' to the marketing and sale of 'experiences'."<sup>21</sup> This new approach, which Joseph Pine and James Gilmore understand as the experience economy, values goods and services no longer for their function but rather for the sensory experience they create, both in

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<sup>16</sup> Izumi, "Between Creation and Conservation," 77.

<sup>17</sup> *Japan: The Way of the Heart*.

<sup>18</sup> "Architecture of Sensory Experience," 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Jelinčić and Mansfeld, *Creating and Managing*; Dias, Correia, and Cascais, "Traits in Tourists' Experiences;" Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*.

<sup>21</sup> *Heritage*, 85.



their purchase and their use.<sup>22</sup> Daniela Jelinčić explains creating such an experience involves seven key design principles: attributing a theme to each experience, harmonizing impressions with positive cues, eliminating negative ones, supplying memorabilia as additional experience enhancers, engaging all five senses, stimulating participation and co-creation, and stirring emotions in visitors.<sup>23</sup>

These criteria suggest that while the sense of sight is critical to the sensory experience, even for the creation of visual experiences this sense alone is not sufficient. Combining visual and auditory stimuli, according to Jelinčić, can be used to “create atmosphere” and “increase the intensity of the tourists’ experience.”<sup>24</sup> Sounds can also create an emotional response in listeners, further intensifying their experience. Olfactory stimuli can evoke an even greater emotional response. Since the sense of smell is closely linked to memory, the use of scents can result in “audiences stay[ing] longer at the attractions and remember[ing] the consumed experiences for a longer time.”<sup>25</sup> Cuisine—where the structure, temperature, and consistence of a dish are important—appeals to the sense of taste in combination with the senses of smell and touch. The example of dining demonstrates that engaging multiple senses is often needed to create a complete experience. The sense of touch plays a particularly important role in creating complete experiences given its ability to drive active participation. Creating a complete sensory experience requires an appeal to all of the senses.<sup>26</sup> The Kakunodate samurai district provides visitors this complete sensory experience.

### **Kakunodate’s Traditional Atmosphere**

The Kakunodate samurai district was one of three samurai districts designated as a traditional architecture preservation district in 1976. As one of the first districts, it gained interest among the Japanese people as well as among foreign tourists. The idea that visitors are transported back in time upon entering the district is one of the

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<sup>22</sup> *The Experience Economy*.

<sup>23</sup> Jelinčić and Mansfeld, *Creating and Managing*, 7–8.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 11–2.

appeals of Kakunodate. This “time-travel feeling” is described on many travel websites:

Though some of them are still functioning homes, the residences are open to the public so visitors can get a feel for the traditional samurai life. Tourists can travel back in time to the Edo period by strolling around the traditional streets in an antique Kimono from one of the rental stores in town! A rickshaw ride from the Kakunodate Denshokan Museum will enhance the experience.<sup>27</sup>

Kakunodate stayed a large feudal city and has barely changed over the last 4 centuries. Of an easy access by train . . . it is one of the major sightseeing destinations in Akita prefecture, appearing as an ideal traditional postcard of Japan, with a preserved architecture enhanced by the blooming of sakura . . . in spring.<sup>28</sup>

The impressive samurai and merchant quarters will give you an idea of life in Japan’s feudal past.<sup>29</sup>

While English-language websites like the above emphasize the feeling of temporal displacement and the experience of tradition, Japanese websites emphasize the sensorial aspects of the district. For example, the tourism website of Akita prefecture suggests that visitors can “wa no fuzei o ajiwaeru.” This can be translated as “enjoy the Japanese atmosphere.”<sup>30</sup> Although this translation renders *ajiwaeru* as “can enjoy,”<sup>31</sup> the Japanese word contains the noun *aji*, “flavor, taste; experience,” resulting in a more literal translation of

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<sup>27</sup> Travel to Tohoku, “Kakunodate Bukeyashiki.”

<sup>28</sup> Kanpai Japan, “Kakunodate.”

<sup>29</sup> Japan National Tourism Organization, “Akita, Kakunodate & Around.”

<sup>30</sup> Akita prefecture, “samurai residences of Kakunodate.” Note that from this point on all translations from the Japanese are the author’s own.

<sup>31</sup> *Ajiwaeru* is the potential of the verb *ajiwau*.

*ajiwaeru* as “can taste/experience.”<sup>32</sup> While many other words in Japanese have meanings similar to “enjoy” and “experience,” the deliberate choice of *ajiwaeru* in this case encourages the reader to associate Kakunodate with a sensory experience.



Figure 1: Pictures of the Kakunodate samurai district showing some of the samurai residences and their gates, and the natural scenery in the district.<sup>33</sup>

Visitors are also encouraged to rent a kimono and walk through the district as if they have “travelled back in time.”<sup>34</sup> Travel websites explain that the feeling of having gone back in time is enhanced by wearing Japan’s traditional clothing, having the very cloth touch one’s skin.<sup>35</sup> This feeling can be further enhanced by taking a rickshaw ride and enjoying the sensation of movement. The sense of hearing is also involved when a visitor walks through the district,

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<sup>32</sup> The verb *ajiwau* is written in Japanese as 味わう. The first character 味, read as *aji*, is a noun in which case its meaning is “flavor; taste,” but also “charm; appeal; experience.” The noun *aji* is commonly used in sentences and expressions such as *aji ga deru* “the taste of something becomes apparent,” *aji ga usui* “lightly seasoned,” or *aji o totonoeru* “to flavor; to season.”

<sup>33</sup> Travel to Tohoku, “Kakunodate Bukeyashiki,” originals in color.

<sup>34</sup> Akita prefecture, “samurai residences of Kakunodate.” Original Japanese: *taimusurippu*, literally “time slip.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

hearing the sound of people walking in the traditional houses and the sounds of the rickshaws on the streets.

The experience of a traditional Japanese atmosphere in the Kakunodate samurai district also engages the sense of smell. The district is filled with a variety of scents that add to its overall atmosphere, attempting to make visitors feel that they have “travelled back in time.” One of the most prominent scents in the district is that of wood. Many of the historic buildings in the district are made out of wood, which creates a smell that is earthy and warm. Visitors can smell the wood as they walk through the streets, reminding them of the physical materials and human labor that went into each building’s construction.

Finally, the sense of touch plays an important role in the district’s immersive atmosphere as visitors can experience the texture of the district’s traditional architecture, as well as the tactile qualities of its natural surroundings. One of the most notable tactile experiences in the district is the feel of the wooden buildings. Many of the historic buildings in the district feature traditional Japanese wooden architecture, which has a distinct texture that visitors can feel as they walk through the district’s streets and enter its houses. Walking through these buildings sounds and feels different as well. Some of the residences have tatami mats—traditional Japanese mats used as flooring material—on the floor, giving visitors the opportunity to experience the traditionality of a historic residence.

### **Experiences in Kakunodate**

Beyond the overall atmosphere Kakunodate creates, it also offers experiences that engage visitors to participate more directly. I will discuss these experiences by focusing on several specific buildings in the district and exploring the possibilities they offer visitors.

One of the better-known residences in Kakunodate is the former Aoyagi house, currently functions as a samurai museum, showcasing the lifestyle and traditions of the samurai class. At the Aoyagi house, visitors can see artifacts and objects from the samurai era, including weapons, armor, and clothing. The museum also features reconstructed rooms from a samurai home, providing visitors with a glimpse into the daily life of samurai warriors. An armory and multiple galleries atop the main building of the house,

provide visitors with the chance to engage with Japan's traditions and history. For example, visitors can wear a samurai helmet and hold samurai swords.<sup>36</sup> As Jelinčić explains, active participation and immersion in an experience are crucial for creating experiences. Letting visitors engage with historical items like swords, helmets, and armor allows them to not only see but experience Japan's traditional past.

The Ishiguro residence, the oldest samurai house in Kakunodate, is considered to be one of the best-preserved of such houses in the district. The Ishiguro residence is special in that it is the only samurai residence in Kakunodate in which descendants of the original occupants continue to live, making the connection to the past in the Ishiguro residence not only physical but literally genealogical. As visitors look at the house, guides can also provide information about its rooms, the building in general, and its exhibits, which contain weapons and armor, old documents, and snow tools.

Kakunodate's Kabazaiku Museum promotes the traditional craft of Kabazaiku. Often translated as birch craftsmanship, Kabaizaku is a traditional Japanese woodworking craft that mostly uses cherry bark. The museum exhibits a wide range of materials on Kakunodate's history, culture, and residents, with a focus on Kabazaiku. The museum also offers demonstrations of Kabazaiku production, allowing visitors to see the skills of traditional craftsmen. The museum shop sells different products of the city's traditional crafts, providing visitors with the chance to see and touch these products.<sup>37</sup> According to Jelinčić, using their sense of touch, visitors engage in "active participation and immersion in the experience" which is part of the "most powerful" experience.<sup>38</sup> However, the sense of touch and the sense of sight are not the only senses Kabazaiku Museum engages. Kabazaiku is a woodworking craft, and the scent of wood lingers during and after these demonstrations. The sounds resulting from the production of traditional crafts complete this experience.

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<sup>36</sup> Aoyagi Samurai Manor Museum, "Welcome."

<sup>37</sup> Rakuten Travel, "Kakunodate."

<sup>38</sup> Jelinčić and Mansfeld, *Creating and Managing*, 12.

It is also possible for visitors to participate in the district's hands-on workshops where they can learn, for example, the history and etiquette of a tea ceremony. Like at the Kabazaiku demonstration, participants in a tea ceremony engage with both the tangible and intangible aspects of local and Japanese traditions. Both the tea ceremony and Kabazaiku production transfer Japan's traditions to visitors. Given that both these crafts are multisensory experiences, they are likely to create long-lasting memories.

The Ishiguro house is used for tea ceremonies and cooking classes.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the district is home to several local restaurants and food vendors, offering visitors the chance to taste traditional Japanese dishes and sample local sake, the traditional Japanese rice wine produced in Akita Prefecture. These restaurants and vendors offer traditional Japanese food, giving special attention to local flavors and locally produced ingredients. Going to a local restaurant can be a multisensory experience, particularly when having Kakunodate Kaiseki, a traditional Japanese dinner of multiple artistically arranged small dishes.<sup>40</sup>

### **Nature in Kakunodate**

Nature also plays a key role in the construction of the experience of tradition, which can be seen, for example, in a cultural context in which nature is central to Japan's historic Shinto religion.<sup>41</sup> One other example of nature in cultural context can be found in traditional teahouses. Traditionally a teahouse should always have a front garden; passing through the garden is "the first step in detachment from the outside world and everyday life."<sup>42</sup> As discussed before, *furusato* villages must also have proximity to nature, as they are seen as a sort of alternative to modern city life.<sup>43</sup> The traditional architecture preservation districts consist of groups of traditional buildings and their surrounding environments. The natural environment is, thus, an equally important part of these

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<sup>39</sup> Semboku City, "Kakunodate."

<sup>40</sup> Rakuten Travel, "Kakunodate."

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Aston, *Shinto*; Cali and Dougill, *Shinto Shrines*; Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology*.

<sup>42</sup> Konovalova, "Architecture of Sensory Experience," 39.

<sup>43</sup> McMorran, "Understanding the Heritage," 339.



Figure 2: Cherry blossoms in the Kakunodate samurai district.<sup>44</sup>

districts as the buildings themselves. The main natural aspects of the Kakunodate samurai district are the gardens of the samurai residences and the district's centuries-old trees.

The changing seasons and the different colors of nature can be experienced by walking through the district and “feeling the seasons.”<sup>45</sup> The black walls of the samurai residences contrast with pink cherry blossoms and red autumn leaves, connoting a contrast between human life and nature.<sup>46</sup> Cherry blossoms are an important part of Japanese tradition; when the cherry trees blossom every year, people all over Japan go out to enjoy the flowers. This activity, called *hanami* in Japanese, is a traditional custom all over the country. One of the most popular places in Japan to enjoy the flowers is in Kakunodate (fig. 2). The trees, the activity of *hanami*, and the samurai residences combine to form the image most Westerners have of traditional Japan.

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<sup>44</sup> Tazawako Kakunodate, “Kakunodate Festival.”

<sup>45</sup> Original Japanese: *kisetsu o kanjinagara*. Rakuten Travel, “Kakunodate.”

<sup>46</sup> Travel to Tohoku, “Kakunodate Bukeyashiki.”

## **Conclusion**

Taking the Kakunodate samurai district as a case study, this article has investigated the role of the senses in constructing an image of traditional Japan. Having introduced the district and explained the sensory experience in Japan, I discussed three different aspects of that sensory experience in the samurai district: atmosphere, experiences, and nature. The atmosphere is created partially through the buildings and nature, and partially by giving visitors the opportunity to engage with the district by, for example, wearing a kimono and feeling the traditional clothing on their skin while walking through the district's centuries-old streets. The Ishiguro and Aoyagi buildings give visitors the opportunity to interact with Japan's traditions and history, providing a multisensory experience in the form of workshops. The natural features such as the gardens of the residences and the cherry blossoms, part of a traditional image of Japan, add even further to the experience in the district. The engagement of all five senses with Kakunodate's buildings and natural features is essential to the construction and visitor experience of tradition in the district. By looking at the role of the senses in the Kakunodate samurai district, I have shown the importance of the senses in conveying traditions and the traditional image of a nation. Sensory experience is one way for visitors to interact and engage with heritage and traditions. Future research could examine the sensory experiences of other types of Japanese cultural districts and build on the present study by comparing findings.

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## Escaping the Eyes of Empire: Diverting and Embracing Disease Photography

Emma Cardol

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Depicting Africa as a continent ravaged by disease has long been a common practice in Western media. One of the most famous literary accounts of Africa in the late nineteenth century, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, describes African workers as "nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom."<sup>1</sup> With the emergence of portable cameras, textual representations like Conrad's were supplemented with visual depictions, allowing Europeans to "see" Africa for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Photography allowed Westerners without ties to African colonies to visualize the people who lived there and the local conditions, creating a sense of connection between the global West and Africa.<sup>3</sup> Using photography as an educational tool also became appealing, given its perceived ability to surpass biases and represent truth "accurately."<sup>4</sup> This view of photography as the "eye of history," representing reality without interfering with it, diminished as society's knowledge of the practice of photography developed.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, stereotypes continue to persist in photographic depictions of African pandemics.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I discuss the conflict between emancipation and domination in photography of disease in Africa, arguing that projects intended to empower their subjects may still reflect colonial trends. To do this, I explore the work of Eric Gottesman and Geert van Kesteren,

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<sup>1</sup> *Heart of Darkness*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison, "Seeing Health and Illness Worlds," 861.

<sup>3</sup> Du Preez, "Through the Empire's Eyes," 429.

<sup>4</sup> Golden, Weisz, and Comacchio, *Healing the World's Children*, 151.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Shahidul, "Developing Countries," 60.

two photographers who have sought to capture the lived experience of AIDS patients in Africa, and a project conducted by a number of scholars around a treatment clinic in Uganda.

The creators of these three projects make clear that they aim to empower African people with their work. While this work is not a comprehensive overview of contemporary disease photography, it provides a useful set of case studies to examine how photography can both reconfigure the image of African disease and continue to reinscribe colonial-era ideas. It is important to note that these projects were set in Uganda, Zambia, and Ethiopia, places selected by the photographers for their high level of HIV infection. The colonial trends represented in the chosen case studies are, however, not geographically limited and are reflected in academic analyses about other regions of Africa as well. This article will thus at times refer to African trends rather than Zambian, Ugandan, and Ethiopian trends, since the photographers did not set out to depict local differences but rather seek to convey a sense of commonality across the continent. Both van Kesteren and Gottesman admit that they selected the area they documented based solely on its high percentage of people living with AIDS, without considering other regional specificities. This means that their photography, while based in a specific area, does not engage with questions of regional difference. As Dipo Fayolin stresses in her work *Africa Is Not a Country*, the West drew the borders between African nations during the colonial period without consulting local population groups, and these borders have been reiterated or neglected by Western political forces when convenient. Consequently, framing a photography project as speaking to “African” themes reflects complicated colonial echoes inherent within these projects’ production.<sup>7</sup>

Several academic works inform the analysis of these case studies. Susan Sontag has stressed the importance of depicting tragedies purposefully, warning that repeatedly exposing an audience to representations of disasters without making them feel able to contribute to a solution produces “compassion fatigue.”<sup>8</sup> Empowering photographs, like those that the present case studies

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<sup>7</sup> Fayolin, *Africa is not a Country*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 91.

present themselves to contain, could be a solution to this fatigue. By allowing an audience to experience the lives of those with HIV or AIDS in a more complex manner, it is possible to move away from the shock that creates compassion fatigue over time and instead creates deeper understanding and empathy. Focusing on complex narratives rather than shock seems more effective in creating compassion, exemplified by the fact that media depictions have increasingly started rejecting the “starving baby syndrome” as a central narrative in their visual storytelling.<sup>9</sup> Lillie Chouliaraki, an influential academic in the field of media and communications, discusses the way that aesthetic choices in visual depictions of tragedies can provide agency to victims or remove their humanity according to the goals the images are meant to serve, which in turn impacts the dignity awarded to the subject of the photograph.<sup>10</sup> Chouliaraki’s work pays close attention to where the camera is placed and how subjects are framed. These choices, Chouliaraki argues, reflect the level of power endowed to the person in the photograph, showing how seemingly innocuous photographs can still be framed in a way that empowers or undermines the subject.

I also draw on Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin’s idea of “image Africa,” from their work *Images and Empires*, which posits the existence of a version of Africa that has little to do with the lived experience of the local population but is instead entirely made up of Western depictions of the continent.<sup>11</sup> The “image Africa” concept is useful for understanding how Europe and North America instinctively imagine Africa, helping to demonstrate why the photographs analyzed in this article can be considered subversive depictions. The idea of an “image Africa” can be related to Richard Vokes’s argument that colonial powers in the twentieth century became a “regime of seeing,” with the visual representation of the African continent allowing for the continuation of colonial power into the twentieth century, legitimizing and categorizing the continent in order to rule it more efficiently.<sup>12</sup> While this regime did

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<sup>9</sup> Rutherford, *Endless Propaganda*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, 105.

<sup>11</sup> *Images and Empires*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> “On Ancestral Self-fashioning,” 348.

not fall when formal colonial rule in Africa ended, the photographs analyzed in this article show both the desire of some interested parties to move beyond colonial concepts and the difficulties in truly escaping hegemonic trends that continue to structure Western understandings of Africa and experience of African disease.

### **Dominant Photographic Depictions**

The first widespread use of photography to document an African pandemic was during the human trypanosomiasis epidemic prior to the First World War. Photos of patients suffering from the disease were omnipresent in many different Western publications, reflecting the interest in human trypanosomiasis among the European public. This interest arose from a number of different factors. First, the disease was deadly, killing the majority of the population in some areas and making it devastating for the economies of the new colonies.<sup>13</sup> Second, the disease was visually striking, with patients near death becoming emaciated and lethargic, able only to sleep.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the disease emerged at a moment when Europe wanted to be more involved in the welfare of the colonies and saw Western technological “progress” as the way to develop Africa into a “modern” continent.<sup>15</sup> Similar factors motivated Western attention to the early spread of AIDS. AIDS was a disease that primarily affected economically exposed populations, had a high mortality rate, and emerged at a time when television and events like LiveAid had made many in the West interested in the lives of African people.<sup>16</sup> In this article, I argue that the following trends described in this section seen in the media surrounding AIDS have roots in the colonial period, allowing for the perpetuation of a colonial “image Africa” decades after the end of formal colonial rule. The trends briefly discussed in this section are then traced in the case studies selected for this article, either as actively rejected representations or emerging as potentially unintended replications of earlier ideas of disease photography.

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<sup>13</sup> Lyons, *The Colonial Disease*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Goodwin, “The African Scene,” 112–4.

<sup>15</sup> Neill, *Networks in Tropical Medicine*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Baughan and Fiori, “Save the Children,” 133.

The first of these trends revolves around the continuously high percentage disease photography depicting children, even with diseases that are not known to primarily impact children. As Kaspin and Landau have argued, the “image Africa” in the West is one in which women and children are omnipresent but men are invisible.<sup>17</sup> Kaspin and Landau argue that this imbalance results from a Western belief that men should provide for themselves while children are emblematic of dependency, innocence, and victimhood.<sup>18</sup> Depicting children can also encourage parental feelings in the audience; seeing a child in need can inspire a desire to help ease the child’s discomforts, be that through donations or other forms of providing support.<sup>19</sup> African adults in colonial photographs were also often described as children by those who took the photographs, stressing their state of dependency on the colonial regime and their supposedly inferior level of development when compared to Europeans.<sup>20</sup> An emphasis on Africa as a land of innocent children has roots in colonial photography but persists in contemporary photographs of Africa.

Another hallmark of the pictures taken during pandemics in Colonial Africa is the lack of local surroundings. Rather than show patients within their communities, photographers isolate their subjects against non-descript backgrounds. This trend was particularly popular during ethnographic studies by colonial powers in the nineteenth century, but in many disease photographs the white background persists.<sup>21</sup> Photographing patients as if they exist in a vacuum is widely criticized by various patient advocates, who see the practice as removing a patient’s humanity, leaving behind only their diseased body.<sup>22</sup> While certain diseases require the isolation of patients, as we have seen during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the apparent isolation of patients in disease photography has been used to convey an impression of the represented

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<sup>17</sup> *Images and Empires*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Zarzycka, “Save the Child,” 30.

<sup>19</sup> Nathanson, “The Pornography of Poverty,” 105.

<sup>20</sup> Landau and Kaspin, *Images and Empires*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 259.

<sup>22</sup> Squiers, *The Body at Risk*, 156.

population as primitive or uncaring, unwilling to take care of their sick and dying.<sup>23</sup>

In analyzing a photograph, Chouliaraki suggests, it is essential to consider the positioning of bodies within the frame. Patients photographed lying down appear helpless, unable to pose or otherwise engage with the camera.<sup>24</sup> Patterns of gaze are equally important in eliciting a response from the viewer, with patients with lowered eyes or the photographer looking down on their subject suggesting a submissive attitude, while direct eye contact is meant to evoke a feeling of urgency in audiences.<sup>25</sup> Contrasting a Black patient and a white doctor also has a long history as a technique to imply a hierarchy of power in which the patient is helpless, as seen in representations of white male doctors towering over local patients.<sup>26</sup> Photographs where a caregiver hovers over a patient, standing tall while the patient is lying down, evoke a sense of domination even if care is provided when the picture is taken.

The following case studies show both the perpetuation of these trends as well as active resistance against them. The photographs selected for analysis are, according to the leaders of the projects in which they appear, intended to break with dominant narratives and offer an alternative perspective on disease in African countries. I argue that while the photographs achieve this goal to a certain extent, echoes of earlier ideas remain visible, showing the difficulty in moving beyond colonial discourses in the representation of disease.

### **Mwendanjangula!**

Geert van Kesteren's project *Mwendanjangula!*, based in Zambia, is an example of a project that sets out to promote empowerment while still reinscribing colonial trends. Van Kesteren is a Dutch photographer who has worked for various media outlets including Newsweek and the Dutch broadcasting network NOS.<sup>27</sup> In 1999, he

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<sup>23</sup> Lydon, "Behold the Tears," 42.

<sup>24</sup> Bleiker and Kay, "Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa," 141.

<sup>25</sup> Mittelman and Neilson, "Development Porn?," 377.

<sup>26</sup> Lynteris, *Visual Plague*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Van Kesteren, "Short Bio."



traveled to Zambia with journalist Arthur van Amerongen to report on the impact of AIDS on Zambia's population. *Mwendanjangula!* is the book that emerged from this project. Mwendanjangula, the name of a demon in Zambia related to AIDS, is shown in Van Kesteren's work as an omnipresent interference in the lives of patients—rather than seeking to photograph only disease, Van Kesteren states he wants to capture the larger societal context.<sup>28</sup> He collaborates with sculptor and AIDS activist Clement Mufuzi, who seeks to break the stigma that still exists surrounding the disease in Zambia.<sup>29</sup> The book contains interviews with the local population, who tell their stories about how being HIV positive or having AIDS impacts their lives. The book's back cover describes the work as “a blood-curdling reportage about love and death, hope and despair, and the daily life that, despite everything, continues.”<sup>30</sup>

This work was not well received among AIDS activists. Van Kesteren's own website makes no mention of the project, suggesting that he no longer finds the work worth promoting. Van Kesteren originally intended for *Mwendanjangula!* to be part of a 2000 exhibition by the International AIDS Conference, but in the end the committee rejected his work in favor of exhibitions that promoted “living openly.”<sup>31</sup> AIDS activist groups took issue with the reinforcement of negative stereotypes in his work, which shows African AIDS patients as Black, helpless and either nearing death or already dead.<sup>32</sup> According to Lynn Dalrymple, a South African AIDS activist, there is no need for photography to further stress the physical horrors of AIDS because the general public is acutely aware of this aspect of the disease. According to Dalrymple, it is more important to focus on how patients live with the disease than on the many tragedies that it causes.<sup>33</sup>

*Mwendanjangula!*, as its back cover promises, covers many facets of Zambians' lives and the manner in which they cope with AIDS. Photographs in the book show church services for those who

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<sup>28</sup> Van Amerongen and Van Kesteren, *Mwendanjangula!*, 83.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, back cover.

<sup>31</sup> Von Stauss, “Representations and Objections,” 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

have died of the disease, billboards urging the public to “stay faithful to one partner” to avoid spreading AIDS, and condom distribution by activists. However, the book also contains numerous pictures taken in hospices, pictures of bodies covered in cloth in a morgue, and even a close-up image of the face of a deceased man. The many photographs included in *Mwendanjangula!* do indeed show the lives of patients outside of their final moments, but they portray those lives in a very specific and at times limited way. Van Amerongen’s extended section on exorcisms and traditional healers, and the title of the book, referencing the “AIDS demon,” suggest a level of “otherness,” emphasizing the idea that medical treatment for AIDS in Africa is fundamentally different than in the United States or Europe due to the local population’s attitudes.<sup>34</sup> The book also contains an extensive section on prostitution and the supposed promiscuity of Zambian people, echoing Western perceptions that AIDS especially affects Black people due to their supposed hypersexuality.<sup>35</sup> This narrative of AIDS being more prevalent in Africa due to the supposed promiscuity of the “Other” not being disputed by this book, even if there is little empirical evidence to support these claims.<sup>36</sup> Van Amerongen also conducts an interview with a traditional healer, whom he describes as being “dressed in all her finery: a get-up of feathers, beads, monkey skulls animal skins and other indefinable bits and bobs.”<sup>37</sup> While they never express a negative opinion of traditional healing outright, Van Amerongen and Van Kesteren depict it in a manner that stresses its “strangeness.”<sup>38</sup> The text describes a meeting with the traditional healer as follows: “Her eyes begin to roll, her body shakes and she produces sinister sounds that slowly merge into a sort of cackle.”<sup>39</sup> This alien display is contrasted with an interview with a Dutch doctor, David Koetsier, who is photographed for *Mwendanjangula!* at work in a hospital in fig. 1. Van Kesteren and Van Amerongen

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<sup>34</sup> Egawa, “Social Construction of AIDS,” 15.

<sup>35</sup> Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 254.

<sup>37</sup> Van Amerongen and Van Kesteren, *Mwendanjangula!*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 1: Photograph by Geert van Kesteren titled “Dr. David Koetsier, tropical-medicine specialist, at the Kaoma District Hospital, 1999.”<sup>40</sup>

paint a vivid picture of Koetsier’s work, noting that his hospital rarely has running water or electricity. Koetsier himself says that he feels pride about what he can do in “wretched conditions,” praising his local staff, who always retain a sense of optimism.<sup>41</sup> His final quote tells us why he stays in Zambia even though its conditions are not optimal for saving patients’ lives: “Poverty has its own beauty. But I can’t bear it indefinitely.”<sup>42</sup> This quote is reminiscent of earlier colonial beliefs about people in Africa, which, as Sabine Wilke argues, present a sense of beauty in simplicity or destitution, an idea of African individuals being somehow untouched by modernity.<sup>43</sup> Koetsier also radically separates himself from both his patients and the local population in this quote, stating that while he cannot stand this life for long, they never seem to lose their optimism.

The photo of Koetsier in fig. 1 echoes this sentiment—he appears overwhelmed, crouching beside a lifeless Black body. He is not physically positioned above the patient in this photo, but he is

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<sup>40</sup> *Id.*, 99.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “Romantic Images of Africa,” 288.

undoubtedly the subject of the photograph, with the patient being a secondary concern. In this image, colonial trends can be seen, with the patient lying incapacitated on the table. The photograph is a visual representation of a narrative that was often used to justify colonial intervention, where Europeans needed to “save” the people of their empire. Koetsier, the white doctor, seeks to help the local population but is unable to do so due to poor infrastructure and a lack of resources. The Black patient, helpless and dying, is placed mostly outside the frame and out of focus, emphasizing Koetsier’s moment of emotion. In Van Kesteren’s photograph, the agency and life of the patient is secondary to the white doctor and his pain. This photograph pairs well with the quote that Koetsier provided about his working conditions. When Koetsier, Van Kesteren and Van Amerongen are eventually too overwhelmed to continue looking at the Black patients in front of them, they can leave. The Zambian people they photograph will likely not be given this same option.

Van Kesteren’s photography does not fall neatly into the category of shallow “poverty pornography” as described by academics involved in the humanitarian space like Janice Nathanson. According to Nathanson, poverty pornography compresses suffering into a distorted view of an area.<sup>44</sup> Van Kesteren and Van Amerongen traveled with an activist and interviewed Zambian people; their book’s photographs do not depict Black suffering only as colonial imagery presented it. However, that does not mean that echoes of earlier colonial imagery have disappeared from their work. Western medicine is portrayed with more nuance than traditional healers, who are portrayed as animalistic and wild. The helplessness of the locals is repeatedly stressed, and the doctor they photograph states he never intended to stay there. The voices of the local population continue to be filtered through Western perceptions in *Mwendanjangula!* Van Kesteren and Van Amerongen’s work repeatedly stresses the exotic nature of the local population, shows that Zambians know little about the disease they are struggling with, and indirectly blames the local population for the disease by stressing sexual promiscuity as its leading cause. Rather than breaking from stereotypes, Van Kesteren and Van Amerongen

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<sup>44</sup> “The Pornography of Poverty,” 104.

use similar visual representations to those seen in colonial photography. Rather than question the global West's sense of African disease, they stress its accuracy. The picture of Koetsier exemplifies this idea: a white man does what he can with the resources provided to him, but he cannot save the local population from themselves. This image is strongly reminiscent of the writing by colonial officers a century before.<sup>45</sup>

### **“I am a Kid”**

Despite the continuation of certain trends in photography of disease in African communities, various projects and some countries increasingly resist these stereotypes. Uganda, for instance, forbade photographers in the early years of the AIDS pandemic to take photos of its citizens suffering from AIDS due to suspicion of exploitation inherent in these projects.<sup>46</sup> Many African scientists pushed back against the common Western idea that the proximity between African people and monkeys made Africa the source of AIDS, arguing that this belief only reinforced negative Western stereotypes.<sup>47</sup> While Western media has a strong idea of their “image Africa,” there are local projects that show a sense of resistance against this characterization, for example explored by Kylie Thomas, who analyzes various different local art projects surrounding AIDS and its representation.<sup>48</sup> These projects attempt to reject colonial trends, seeking to complicate the West's image of disease in Africa. Even so, the trends previously mentioned have continued to remerge in the photos meant to empower the local population, suggesting the trends' continuing power.

Eric Gottesman is an American photographer who sought to reimagine photography of AIDS in Africa. In his first project, titled *If I Could See Your Face I Would Need Food*, he covered the faces of AIDS patients in different ways, showing the continued stigma surrounding the disease.<sup>49</sup> His second project, *Sudden Flowers*,

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<sup>45</sup> Neill, *Networks in Tropical Medicine*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Hooper, *Slim*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Chirimuuta and Chirimuuta, *AIDS, Africa and Racism*, 122.

<sup>48</sup> *Impossible mourning*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Gottesman, “If I Could See Your Face I Would Not Need Food.”

depicts the disease in Ethiopian children. Ethiopia at the time of this project had the second-highest population of “AIDS orphans” in the world and many children without housing suffering from the disease.<sup>50</sup> Gottesman gave selected children a camera and some loose guidelines and assignments for what they should try to capture, but he was otherwise uninvolved with the staging of the photos that the children produced.<sup>51</sup> The pictures that resulted from Gottesman’s project, which were shown at temporary exhibitions around Ethiopia, show an entirely different side to living with disease. These pictures show the children’s families, future aspirations, and daily lives.

One photograph from the *Sudden Flowers* project is known as “I am a Kid.” Tenanesh Kifyalew, the girl in this photograph, garnered a lot of attention from Gottesman due to her enthusiasm for photography and this project. Tenanesh, who was twelve years old when Gottesman met her, was born with HIV; her doctors had predicted that she would not make it past seven. She died nine months after the project was completed.<sup>52</sup> Tenanesh played an integral role in the exhibitions that Gottesman set up throughout Ethiopia, which were titled “Abul Thona Baraka.”<sup>53</sup> The exhibitions set up in Addis Ababa included not only photographs taken by the children, but also letters and postcards Tenanesh had written. The audience was encouraged to create a dialogue with the work by adding letters to the photos on display, creating a new form of communication surrounding HIV/AIDS. By engaging the audience in the design of the exhibition, allowing them to alter it through their own words, the project became part of the community rather than simply seeking to depict AIDS sufferers as isolated and diseased individuals.

In “I am a Kid,” Tenanesh poses with a poster of Jesus on her wall. She is centered in the photograph, looking at the camera as if she seeks to show off her living space. On the floor, there are

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<sup>50</sup> Bleiker and Kay, “HIV/AIDS in Africa,” 151.

<sup>51</sup> *Sudden Flowers*.

<sup>52</sup> Mengiste, “Sudden Flowers.”

<sup>53</sup> Gottesman, “Abul Thona Baraka.”

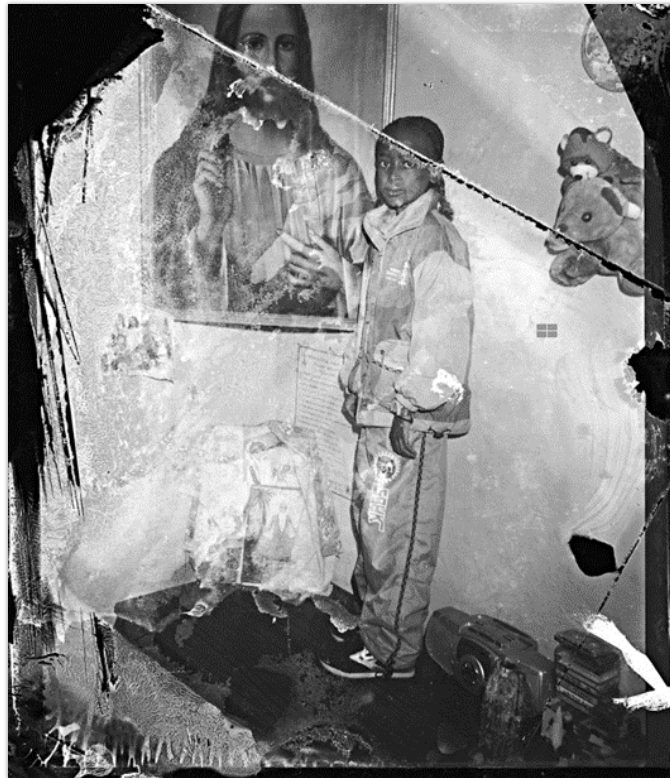


Figure 2: Photograph by Tenanesh Kifyalew titled “I am a Kid.”<sup>54</sup>

cassettes and a stereo, and stuffed animals are visible on the wall next to her. Tenanesh is deeply connected with her surroundings, and the blank void of early colonial photography is replaced here with the clutter of the subject’s daily life. The World Health Organization encourages photographing children in a “dignified” manner, which includes enduring that they are wearing sufficient clothing. Tenanesh’s photograph appears to achieve this goal. She appears to be in complete control of her surroundings and her body.<sup>55</sup> The scene represented in “I am a Kid” is entirely ordinary: a child showing off items and ideas which are important to her, including her Christian identity, her toys, and other forms of entertainment. Rather than being placed in a scene by a photographer, this photograph allows us to see her in the way she perceives herself. However, this photograph still reflects some

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<sup>54</sup> Gottesman and Kifyalew, “I am a Kid.”

<sup>55</sup> Black, “WHO Photography Expectations.”

trends in photographic documentation that emerged in the colonial period.

Gottesman deliberately focused on the experiences of children in *Sudden Flowers*, likely knowing that a child suffering from disease evokes more sympathy than an adult in the same position. While the children and the communities were involved in the design and execution of the project, Gottesman eventually published the book and had final editorial power, not the children. Ultimately, Tenanesh could not have taken the photo that she did without being selected for the program that Gottesman designed.

“I am a Kid” represents the tensions that continue to exist in disease photography in Africa, allowing for more agency and power for the subject of the photograph while still containing a power imbalance between the Western gaze and the African subject.

### **Dagie’s Candle**

Tenanesh’s photograph seems to have a generally positive tone—although she is not smiling, the photograph does not directly allude to the hardships that she may have faced as an HIV-positive child in Ethiopia. Other photographs, however, both within the *Sudden Flowers* project and beyond it, have allowed African youth to address the darker side of living with HIV and AIDS. A 2020 photography-based study produced through the collaboration of numerous scholars from a variety of different backgrounds sought to allow young people in Uganda to depict the stigma that they faced as HIV-positive young people.<sup>56</sup> These teenagers, aged between 12 and 19, were part of a support group near their treatment clinic and in an active treatment program at the time of their participation in the study.<sup>57</sup> The goal of this study was to represent the social hardships that these young people continued to face even as they received healthcare. The emotional turmoil stemming from an HIV diagnosis is a key theme in the photographs that emerged from this photography project. Fig. 3 is a photograph taken by Dagie, a 17-

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<sup>56</sup> Kimera *et al.*, “HIV-Related Stigma.”

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*, 3.





Figure 3: “‘Because people tell me that I can die anytime, I fear darkness and I have to light a candle every day before I sleep. This also is very dangerous because one time I almost got burnt while asleep, yet I stay alone in my room.’ (Dagie, 17-year-old boy).”<sup>58</sup>

year-old boy who participated in this photography study. The picture is not a portrait, but it is still deeply personal, giving a glimpse into the fear that continues to be part of the lives of many people living with HIV. In this, the photograph contradicts the notion that only faces can evoke emotion in a crisis situation.<sup>59</sup> The photograph, containing a candle seen through a wired fence, conveys Dagie’s fear of death and his need to leave a candle burning at all times because he is unable to sleep in the dark. The physical barrier present in the picture also conveys a feeling of Dagie’s isolation from the rest of his surroundings. This feeling of isolation is frequently seen in photographs surrounding stigma.<sup>60</sup> Many participants in the study communicated to the researchers that they felt ostracized in their social circle, being present but not being afforded the ability to

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<sup>58</sup> Kimera *et al.*, “HIV-Related Stigma,” 10. Both the caption and the photograph are included in the original text.

<sup>59</sup> Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, 106.

<sup>60</sup> Moletsane *et al.*, “Image of Stigma,” 66.

participate.<sup>61</sup> One participant even remarks that she feels that people in her area want HIV-positive people to be separated from the rest of society, a feeling represented by another photograph taken of a fence.<sup>62</sup> Candles are a common way to memorialize the dead and have been used as a metaphor for life's fragility in many different forms of media, a famous example being the "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" speech in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which states that life is nothing more than a "brief candle."<sup>63</sup> The photographs produced by these Ugandan youth show that they are constantly confronted with the possibility of death even as they are being treated against further progression of their HIV into AIDS. The candle in Dagie's photograph is meant to drive away the dark, but at the same time, a physical barrier keeps this candle away from the audience. As Dagie explains in his caption, a candle has the potential to burn the person who most finds comfort in it. In this photograph, the lived experience of an HIV-positive youth in Uganda is captured. Rather than depicting dying bodies, the photograph shows the fragility and fear in their lives indirectly.

Dagie's photograph does not include a human subject, so the early colonial trends that emphasized the physicality of disease are not seen in his work. This can be seen as an implicit rejection by the photographer of the colonial focus on the African photographic subject as a body rather than a person with an internal life. Despite the considerable differences between the projects from which they emerged, Tenanesh and Dagie's photographs have this in common. Dagie and Tenanesh represent their relationship with AIDS as more than a physical reality, instead focusing on their individuality. As a result, the viewer receives a sense of Dagie and Tenanesh as people, not as patients. The researchers who organized the project in which Dagie participated employ the photovoice practice, which seeks to gather information about participants' lives through their photography, researching *with* the participants rather than simply researching them.<sup>64</sup> While Gottesman is not a researcher, allowing

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<sup>61</sup> Kimera *et al.*, "HIV-Related Stigma," 11.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> *Macbeth*, 53.

<sup>64</sup> Kimera and Vindevogel, "Youth Living With HIV/AIDS in Uganda."

children to tell their own stories allowed him to gather glimpses into the children's lives that go beyond their diagnosis and health condition. Both these photography projects serve the goal of broadening general understanding of the lives of children living with AIDS.

### **Conclusion**

Photography of and around disease in Africa has changed significantly since photography first became a tool of the colonial order. The "regime of seeing" and the "image Africa," which afforded the global West all agency in determining the way that Africa was seen, has started to become less all-encompassing, allowing for the lived sensations of African people to emerge visually. That said, colonial trends can still be found in disease photography that seeks to empower the photographed subject. In van Kesteren's work, agency was given to the European doctor instead of the anonymous Zambian patient, reaffirming pre-existing power hierarchies even within a work that sought to explore AIDS in a more complex manner. Gottesman's project makes a more conscious effort to escape from colonial trends by allowing Ethiopian children with AIDS to self-represent. However, Gottesman still belongs to a power system that allowed him final editorial discretion. By focusing on children, moreover, Gottesman repeats a long-running trope of African disease photography. Finally, Dagie's photograph allows him to speak about the inner fears he experiences as an HIV-positive teenager in Uganda, depicting the social experiences of those with the disease and proving that resistance to colonial tropes can be found in many different forms, as can be seen in all projects analyzed here in different ways. This study has analyzed photographs that defy the "image Africa" imposed in the early twentieth century and complicates our understanding of disease in Africa by showing the people behind the medical labels they receive. The analysis has shown that fully discarding these trends is more difficult than it may initially appear because a larger power imbalance between the global West and Africa continues to structure audience understandings of photographs from Africa. As mobile phones and inexpensive camera equipment continue to broaden the possibilities for visual

representation, it will be interesting to see whether colonial trends will finally be put to rest or if they will continue to haunt disease photography in the years to come.

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PART TWO

**AFFECT**





## REVIEW

### Trivial or Valid? On Class Conflict and Envy in Prime Video's *Cochina Envidia*

Verónica Copello-Duque

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The Colombian mini-series *Cochina Envidia* was released in late 2022 on the global streaming platform Prime Video.<sup>1</sup> The series, adapted from Carolina Cuervo's play *Veneno* (2012), focuses on four upper-middle-class friends in their early forties—Ana (played by Cuervo), María, Tina, and Flora—who gather to celebrate after María wins a prestigious literary award from Spain.<sup>2</sup> María (played by Ana María Orozco, who is known for the role of Betty in the classic *telenovela*, *Yo soy Betty, la fea*)<sup>3</sup> is an engineer by profession. Her success is the object of Ana's envy, as Ana is a writer who refuses to “sell herself” to commercial publishers. Ana and María's relationship is complicated by Flora; in addition to being Ana's sister, Flora is the editor who publishes María's award-winning novel, although she does so only after implementing a few changes to make the text more relatable to the public. Tina, who is often reduced to being Flora's “sidekick” (Ana calls her “Sancho,” alluding to Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*), is a humorous character who provides comic relief. Tina does not read María's book, telling Flora she has never read anything that long because she is too lazy.

*Cochina Envidia* is different from other series in the array of Colombian television produced for and currently available on streaming platforms. Most Colombian productions currently available on Netflix, HBO Max (Warner Bros. Discovery), and

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Spanish to English, the title of the series is *Filthy Envy*. All translations in this text are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Title translates to *Poison*.

<sup>3</sup> Title translates to *Ugly Betty*.

Prime Video (Amazon) can be broadly categorized into three genres: *telenovela*, narco thriller, and drama (often historical).<sup>4</sup> With their conventional plotlines, these dominant streaming genres draw on specific tropes of Latin American television: the *sicario*, or hitman; the drug lord; and the overly sexualized and racialized female character (e.g., the lover or prostitute) in conflict with the virtuous female character (e.g., the “virgin” wife). *Cochina Envidia* moves away from these tropes and plotlines and falls into different ones. The series is more reminiscent of (situational) comedies produced in the Anglophone world, such as the popular American TV series *Sex and the City*, or the comedy, *Girls*. As *Cochina Envidia* is a series about friendship and envy in the Colombian upper-middle class, it is at first strange to find oneself looking to American television in an attempt to situate the series in familiar territory. But without these other conventional plotlines of the American comedy, the series’ greatest achievement would probably not have been possible: the dramatization of envy through sensory experience. By drawing inspiration from American television, *Cochina Envidia* not only takes on a radically different subject from that of mainstream Colombian television but also provides a novel approach to the subject of envy.

*Cochina Envidia* dramatizes feelings of envy through sensory experiences such as touch and taste. This is relevant as the series revolves around a celebratory dinner that Ana organizes after asserting that she is a better cook than María. Each of *Cochina Envidia*’s six episodes is titled after a different element of a meal: episode one is “Ingredients and Recipe” and the final episode is “Dessert.” *Cochina Envidia*’s intimate portrayal of envy between friends is not only entertaining: it makes one wonder what emotions, especially emotions understood as undesirable, have to do with the senses.

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<sup>4</sup> See Netflix’s *Narcos* (narco thriller) and *Bolívar* (historical drama); *Los caballeros las prefieren brutas* or, *Gentlemen prefer them dumb* (*telenovela* originally produced by Sony and Caracol, now streaming on Prime Video); and HBO Max’s *Mil Colmillos* or, *A Thousand Fangs* (narco thriller).

As with other “negative” emotions, public discourse does little to critically engage with envy. Perhaps because it is undesirable, envy is kept in the private realm of negative feelings. And yet, critical engagement with “negative” emotions (e.g., envy, anger, disgust) does take place in certain contexts. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), for instance, the literary scholar Sianne Ngai studies the political work done by “negative” emotions like paranoia, irritation, and envy and their affective capacity to problematize certain registers of social life.<sup>5</sup> Taking a different approach, Richard H. Smith and Sung Hee Kim review psychological research on envy and discuss the difficulty of arriving at a single definition of the emotion.<sup>6</sup> Despite this difficulty, Smith and Kim categorize envy as a generally unpleasant, painful, and hostile emotion.<sup>7</sup>

*Cochina Envidia* begins from the notion that envy is unpleasant, undesirable, and even shameful. One of the first scenes in the series shows Ana sitting on the toilet with María’s novel, just after watching news of her friend’s achievement on TV. Ana drops the novel and picks up her own unpublished manuscript, ripping it apart before turning towards the camera and breaking the fourth wall: “Yes,” she declares. “I feel envious. Pure envy. What? Don’t look at me like that. I know it’s a terrible word and we should act as if it doesn’t exist. But I know you feel it too.”<sup>8</sup> Characters in the series often break the fourth wall to make confessions. Since envy is a shameful emotion, the four friends cannot turn towards each other and admit their feelings; in turning towards the viewer and even asking the viewer rhetorical questions, the characters implicate the viewer directly, eliciting the viewer’s own reflection on feelings of envy.

Ana focuses passionately on creating the perfect dinner to celebrate María. In doing so, she channels her envy into a task at which she is more skilled than her friend. The rest of the series explores the dynamics of the relationship between Ana and María. In this way, Ana’s kitchen is a place where envy can move around.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ugly Feelings*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Comprehending Envy,” 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “Ingredientes y receta,” 03:17.

Throughout the first episode of the series, the viewer attentively follows Ana's hands as she bakes a blueberry cheesecake. The viewer hears the sounds of Ana's hands crunching nuts, battering eggs, and mixing dry and wet ingredients. Then the viewer hears the careful splash of blueberries, dropping one by one into water, and again the sound of Ana's hands mixing all of the ingredients together. While the viewer perceives these sights and sounds, Tina's voice resonates in the background. Tina tells Flora: "If I had to choose which one of us, on any day, would kill the others, I would say it's Ana."<sup>9</sup> We see the textures of food form under Ana's hands, and we hear each step in the cooking process until dessert is finished and satisfaction overcomes her. Then Ana makes a second cheesecake, this time strawberry. She also adds a dash of insecticide to the second cheesecake. "Have you never had the urge to do something like this?" Ana asks the viewer. "Ah, right, this doesn't happen to you. You probably never shit either, right?"<sup>10</sup>

Ana channels her envy into senses that affect the atmosphere of her home. The dramatization of her cooking process exposes the ways envy moves in an environment, always obsessed with its subject. If there is any agreement amongst the definitions of envy that Smith and Kim present, it is that envy relies on antagonism: this hostile feeling results from awareness of another group or person that enjoys what one desires.<sup>11</sup> Envy must always be directed at something. For Ngai, envy has the potential to address social inequalities precisely because of its characteristic antagonism: the object of envy can result from a perceived inequality.<sup>12</sup> However, Ngai also writes that envy is usually understood "as a static sign of deficiency rather than a motivated affective stance."<sup>13</sup> The envious subject is therefore often perceived as egotistical, and the antagonism is erased.

Although *Cochina Envidia* is certainly grounded in an antagonistic relationship, the series fails to represent this

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, 16:58.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, 19:38.

<sup>11</sup> "Comprehending Envy," 47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ugly Feelings*, 128.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 127.

relationship in ways that raise the questions Ngai finds most enriching in her critical analysis of envy. One reason for this failure is that *Cochina Envidia* is only concerned with Bogotá's upper-middle class, failing to reach out to other spheres of Colombian society. It is thus difficult to see how Ana's discourse could be exposing a social injustice: both she and María have had equal opportunities to develop their careers. While Ana attributes María's success to having "sold herself to the market," others, such as Flora, might argue Ana is idealistic and stubborn. Though this suggests that the workings of envy in *Cochina Envidia* are limited, the series does not entirely reduce envy to egotism or hysteria, a minimization that Ngai warns against.

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The tradition of *telenovelas* and subsequent *narco-novelas* is an enduring influence on Latin American television, making it significant that *Cochina Envidia* moves away from these genres. Since the late 1950s, telenovelas are often associated with Mexican television. According to Hugo Benavides' entry on "Mexican Telenovelas" in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, these programs "inherited the melodrama" of earlier *radio-novelas* and *folletines* (pamphlet novels).<sup>14</sup> While melodramatic plotlines written for middle-class viewers and grounded in romance (such as forbidden love and tragic love) were once the main drivers of telenovelas, plotlines subsequently developed to include "overblown plots, overt sexual content, (usually including nudity), and subjects chosen for controversy and scandal, such as deception, incest, murder, and adultery."<sup>15</sup> The emergence of narco-novelas in the early 2000s brought drug-themed plotlines into the traditional telenovela narrative, adding elements of violence, national-political discourses on the drug trade, and international events between Mexico, the United States, and as of recently, Colombia. The relation between these countries as portrayed in the media also affects the international distribution of

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<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, s.v. "Mexican Telenovelas."

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "telenovela."

narco-novelas: “The Colombian connection thus links the earliest influences of narco-representation and the telenovela genre to the rest of the Spanish-speaking American continent,” writes Benavides.<sup>16</sup>

It appears that the very real elements of the drug trade in Latin America—particularly in Mexico and Colombia—gave television an endless supply of source material for conjuring dramatic and thrilling stories. The drug trade also contributed to what has been termed narcoculture: a body of cultural meanings and representations associated with the industry. As a comedy-drama portraying four female friends, *Cochina Envidia* steps away from this heritage, embracing other subject matters that have not been completely absorbed by narcoculture. In fact, the television genre that acts as the backbone of *Cochina Envidia* is the situation comedy: a genre independent of and with a radically different history from telenovelas and narco-novelas. The *sitcom*, which originated in American radio of the 1920s, emerged as a television genre in the 1950s. Sitcoms are known for their short, 30-minute episodes that draw comedic value from relations between friends, family, or other groups in a shared and recurring social space. The “stock situations” of sitcoms are usually “easily recognizable to members of a culture or interpretative community as ‘typical’ scenarios.”<sup>17</sup>

Excluding flashbacks, the six episodes of *Cochina Envidia* take place in Ana’s home, where the increasingly drunken friends turn a night of celebration into one of emotional turmoil and tension. Middle and upper-middle-class Colombian audiences may identify with some of the characters’ experiences and the series’ comedic referents; a running joke throughout the series, for instance, refers to the types of alcoholic beverages that the friends drink. In the first episode, Tina brings Ana a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Ana rejects this, stating that Sauvignon Blanc does not pair with the meal: she needs a Chardonnay. (Ana mocks Tina’s pronunciation of “Chardonnay” to the camera.) Tina goes back to

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<sup>16</sup> *Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, s.v. “Mexican Telenovelas.”

<sup>17</sup> Chandler and Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, s.v. “stock situations.”

the grocery store after Ana insists on the importance of celebrating María with the right wine. The irony of it all is that when María arrives, she only wants *aguardiente*: a popular Colombian drink made from anise and sugar cane, commonly known as *guaro*. Mocking María's taste, Ana states: "There is no aguardiente here. That's such a tacky drink."<sup>18</sup>

Entering the terrain of the sitcom allows *Cochina Envidia* to comedically exploit a friendship grounded on envy in a particular societal and class-based context. Nonetheless, the series does use a few elements from the genre of the thriller, including suspense. Suspense is introduced from the moment Ana decides to add insecticide to María's favorite dessert and Tina states she believes Ana is capable of killing one of the friends in the group. Ana is the Yolanda Saldívar of the group, according to Tina.<sup>19</sup> She mentions this to Flora while smoking weed in her car, hoping to escape for a while from Ana's house. And although it is a violent reference, mentioning Yolanda Saldívar is intended as a hyperbole of envy rather than a desire to commit violence. We return to this thrilling element in the last episode of the series, when Ana brings out the blueberry cheesecake with a knife in her hand. Although the viewer knows this cheesecake is not poisoned, the characters do not. Ana locks her friends inside the house and refuses to let them leave until they eat it.

The viewer only arrives at this thrilling conclusion to the series after having navigated the envious relationship between Ana and María across the six episodes. On the one hand, the dramatization of the cooking process allows envy to move (via touch and sound, for instance) through Ana's home, saturating the dinner party. On the other hand, the other people present in that atmosphere—Tina, María, Flora—react to this feeling that has now permeated them. In *The Transmission of Affect*, the late Australian philosopher Teresa Brennan opens with the following question: "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the

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<sup>18</sup> "Aperitivos," 00:28.

<sup>19</sup> Yolanda Saldívar is an American woman who was convicted of the murder of Selena, the famous Mexican singer, in 1995.

atmosphere?”<sup>20</sup> She continues: “The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate *sui generis*: it did not develop solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes.”<sup>21</sup> Brennan terms this process the “transmission of affect.”<sup>22</sup> It is revealing to study the transmission of affect when the affect in question is envy. This is because envy is commonly understood as negative and undesirable and because limited scholarship exists on the subject. This is, in fact, what *Cochina Envidia* is about: finding a place for envy where it is constantly rejected.

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After Ana locks her friends in the house, she begins cutting the blueberry cheesecake into pieces. As we again hear the crunching and wobbling of the cheesecake, Ana unfolds into a monologue about what each of them desires that another person possesses. Tina, already feeling claustrophobic after being locked in, anxiously binge-eats the cake in response. The scene is both grotesque and comedic: as Flora, Ana, and María begin to fight and Flora is accidentally stabbed, Tina vomits the cake, declaring it poisoned. We hear the pieces falling from her mouth: *Plop. Plop. Plop.* Although in fact the cake is not poisoned, it serves as an image of envy: just like other “negative” emotions, envy must have an outlet. Otherwise, it gets stuck, poisoning the self.

Underlying the main plotline of *Cochina Envidia* is the question of when envious feeling is valid and when it is not. This question has to do with some of the other questions—mainly rhetorical—posed to the viewer about social dynamics in a society stratified by class and race. For instance, Flora expresses to Tina that, as a black woman, she has had to work incredibly hard to attain

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<sup>20</sup> *The Transmission of Affect*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Following Brennan, I find it insightful to think about the relation between the senses and the transmission of affect. I have written elsewhere on this subject: Copello-Duque, “Affective Methodologies.”



a senior position at a publishing company. Her sister, Ana, is white; she is married to a “lazy man” and lives off her father’s money as she pursues her dream of writing. Flora is excluded from this heritage because her father believes that she is a very successful professional who does not need it. The tense relationship between Ana and Flora thus exemplifies the type of envy that Sianne Ngai finds most productive: “a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities.”<sup>23</sup> Ana will always benefit from her father’s coddling, and neither Ana nor her father recognize that Flora might also want financial or emotional support from her family. Does Flora’s independence indeed mean she has no need or desire for the financial support of her family? The tension between the sisters leads to conflict when their father announces to them that Ana will be the sole inheritor of their family home. Flora immediately states that she is pregnant, even though she does not intend to keep the pregnancy; rather, this is Flora’s attempt to balance an unfair family relationship, given that she knows Ana has been unsuccessfully trying to get pregnant.

Since Ana and Flora’s relationship exposes many more instances of envy as an agonistic emotion that can denounce social inequalities, it is unfortunate that the series is grounded on Ana and María’s relationship, failing to address some of the critical questions the series initially posed to the viewer. As represented in the series, envy can therefore also seem devoid of significance. Ngai has warned against this, noting that envy is too quickly associated with egotism, pettiness, and even hysteria. And yet, Ana’s envy is petty: it represents the trifling discourses of the Colombian upper-middle class surrounding success, elitism, and condescension. Perhaps the series does this too well, thus overlooking more significant discourses about social dynamics in Bogotá. Nonetheless, *Cochina Envidia* gives the viewer a novel take on envy and friendship: envy must be allowed to move, and it must be communicated. Otherwise, it becomes a poison.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ugly Feelings*, 128.

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## How Siona Verbal Aspect Structures Stories: Narratological Experience and a Sense of Suspense

Jelle Christiaans

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**H**umans not only experience the world through their senses but also have a strong propensity to communicate their inner world to other humans (“Mitteilungsbedürfnis”).<sup>1</sup> Stories are one of the main ways we do this: we tell our children bedtime stories, pass down traditional stories about the origins of our families, and never stop telling our spouses how we ended up falling for them. As such, stories are a means to transfer a sensory experience to an audience and affect their senses. The narrator has different tools available to do this. One of these is words: when we hear that a *ghost* approaches the protagonist, a shiver runs down our back. Other tools include intonation, gestures, and facial expressions. Yet another is the focus of this article: grammar.

This article examines how speakers of Ecuadorian Siona (a Western Tukanoan language) use verbs to create a narratological experience for the audience—in particular, the grammatical category of verbal aspect. First, verbal aspect in general gives the audience a sense of time: it allows them to understand when and how events occurred in relation to each other. Second, verbal aspect in Ecuadorian Siona specifically can give the audience a sense of the structure of the story, specifically in the verb *kaje* “to say.”<sup>2</sup> In particular, verbal aspect can inform the audience whether or not a particular discourse segment (usually a conversation) is already over. Third, verbal aspect in Ecuadorian Siona can be a device to instill a

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<sup>1</sup> Zuberbühler, “Syntax and compositionality in animal communication,” 7.

<sup>2</sup> The root of this verb is *ka-* and *-je* is the ending for the infinitive, which is pronounced like the *ge-* in English, *gem*.

sense of suspense in the audience. These three functions will all be treated in succession in this article, but first I will elaborate on my corpus, methodology, and guiding theoretical assumptions.

### Corpus and methodology

Ecuadorian Siona is spoken by roughly 250 people in Ecuador's northeastern Sucumbíos province, where it is the predominant language in the towns of Soto Tsiaya and Puerto Bolívar. It is an endangered language because many children now grow up speaking Spanish instead. The language is related to Colombian Siona and varieties of Secoya, which are spoken in and around the same region.<sup>3</sup>

The corpus of this study consists of two stories told by a native speaker of Ecuadorian Siona (henceforth: "Siona"). These were recorded by Martine Bruil, who also transcribed and translated them into Spanish and English in collaboration with native speakers. The first story is the hammock story (*hãĩdi* in Siona)<sup>4</sup> which is about a young man who, against the advice of the elders, goes to lie down in a hammock that turns out to be bewitched, and becomes stuck to the man's back. The second story is the bat man story (*ojobãĩ* in Siona), which is about a cannibalistic father with some very strange habits who ends up eating his children and himself. Although *ojobãĩ* literally means "bat man," it is used to mean "cannibal" in Siona.<sup>5</sup>

The methodology consists of a careful close reading of these two stories, giving special attention to verb forms. This involves both a morphological and a semantic question. Not only is it important to establish which form a particular verb has (morphology) but also the discourse context that it is used in, from which it is possible to

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<sup>3</sup> Bruil, *Ecuadorian Siona*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout this article, I use the linguistic transcription of the language. Tildes on the vowel indicates a nasal vowel, and <j> sounds like English <j> as in *jungle*. The vowel [ĩ] is a close central unrounded vowel, which sounds similar to the pronunciation of *e* in *glasses* in most varieties of American English. The Siona also have their own orthography, where "hammock" is written *jaẽrẽ* and "bat man" is written *oyobaj* for example. See Bruil, *Ecuadorian Siona*, 132, for a detailed comparison between these two orthographies.

<sup>5</sup> The hammock story is available in Bruil, *Ecuadorian Siona*, 343, and the bat man story is accessible through the online ELAR archive.

glean the meaning of the verb form (semantics). This close reading is coupled with two theoretical considerations outlined in the section below.

### **Framework**

As Michael Halliday has recognized, the meanings of linguistic signs—which include both lexical categories (i.e., “words”) and grammatical categories<sup>6</sup>—can lie on different communicative levels.<sup>7</sup> I will here discuss two: the ideational level and the textual level. On the ideational level, linguistic signs have a meaning that describes a facet of the world of the language user<sup>8</sup> or the world of a certain story (both subsumed under “narrated world”). For example, saying the word *chicken* refers to a chicken in a narrated world, and using the plural suffix *-s* signals that more than one chicken exists in the narrated world. But linguistic signs may also have a textual function, referring to facets of discourse itself. This becomes clear in example 1 below.

- (1) *Debby has many animals on her farm. First, she has a dozen chickens in her yard. Next, she keeps a couple pigs in her shed. Finally, two cats roam her property.*

In this text, the words *first*, *next*, and *finally* do not (directly) say anything about the narrated world (i.e., about Debby’s farm or the animals on it); instead, they give the text structure. They help the audience understand not the content of what is being said but the way it is conveyed. As such, these linguistic signs refer to facets of discourse; they are concerned with the fabric of the text itself.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of the linguistic sign was famously first proposed by De Saussure as described by his students in *Cours de linguistique Générale*. It used to be a much more restricted notion, but nowadays, it has been extended in the way that I have presented it here. For the development of this notion, see Hoffmann and Trousdale, “Construction Grammar,” 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Systemic Functional Grammar*, xxvii.

<sup>8</sup> That is, a speaker, writer, or signer of a sign language.

<sup>9</sup> We might object that Halliday’s term textual function is biased towards the written word and is not cognizant of spoken discourse or sign languages, but I will leave this issue for now.

The German linguist Karl Bühler theorized the function of language and linguistic signs.<sup>10</sup> He distinguished between *sprachlicher Ausdruck* (“linguistic expression”) and *sprachlicher Appell* (“linguistic appeal”).<sup>11</sup> His point is that referentiality (*sprachlicher Ausdruck*) is only one function of the linguistic sign. That is, linguistic signs do more than refer to entities or events in a narrated world or facets of discourse. They may also be oriented toward influencing, affecting, and moving the audience. The clearest examples of this are imperatives such as *Come!*. These do not assert any event but impel the addressee(s) to carry out a particular action (in this case, to move toward the speaker).

Modern linguists now often refer to work by Roman Jakobson. He introduced English-speaking audiences to Bühler’s concept of “linguistic appeal” three decades after Bühler’s publication, also translating some of the German terminology into English. Since Jakobson, Bühler’s “linguistic appeal” has been known in English as the “conative function” of language,<sup>12</sup> a term I will also use here.

The remainder of this article will use both the idea of the textual discourse function of linguistic signs and the conative function of language to describe the use of verbal aspect in Ecuadorian Siona. Although much work on verbal aspect focuses on the ideational function,<sup>13</sup> there has also been research on the interaction between discourse and aspect. It seems that for many languages, it is the *type* of discourse that affects the use of verbal aspect. This is the case for French,<sup>14</sup> Dutch and English,<sup>15</sup> as well as

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<sup>10</sup> Even though Bühler did not have the notion of a linguistic sign yet, we can well combine this theoretical notion with Bühler’s theory.

<sup>11</sup> Bühler, “Die Axiomatik der Sprachwissenschaft,” 81.

<sup>12</sup> “Closing Statement,” 355. Jakobson theorized even further than Bühler and described four additional functions of language. His six functions of language have become canonical within linguistics and are still widely used, e.g. Bergqvist and Grzech, “The Role of Pragmatics in the Definition of Evidentiality,” 4. For reasons of space, I will not discuss them further.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. the work that is still standard in linguistics, Comrie, *Aspect*. But see also De Swart, “Verbal aspect,” or Gvozdanović, “Perfective and Imperfective Aspect.”

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Fleischman, *Tense and Narrativity*.

<sup>15</sup> Boogaart, “Aspect and Temporal Ordering,” 224.

many Bantu languages.<sup>16</sup> In all of these languages, the use of aspect depends on whether the language user is producing narrative, or if they are engaged in a non-narrative genre (often dialogues).

Paul Hopper showed that aspect can also make reference to discourse *structure*.<sup>17</sup> In Russian, for instance, the imperfective can be used to signal digressions in discourse, or “non-sequencing” of events.<sup>18</sup> In Classical Greek, the imperfective can be used to carry a narrative forward and describe its main storyline, whereas the perfective can introduce narrative intrusions.<sup>19</sup> This article adds to the discussion of how aspect interacts with discourse structure by describing the particular way in which Siona verbal aspect gives narratives structure. I will also show how verbal aspect in Siona can have the conative function of language, which is something that has not been described before for verbal aspect in other languages.

### **Perfective and imperfective aspect**

Although one can identify a number of different types of aspect,<sup>20</sup> I will here only consider perfective and imperfective aspect. On the ideational level, the difference between these two is best understood as a distinction of completeness in temporal terms.<sup>21</sup> For example, the English past simple generally expresses perfective aspect: the language user asserts that at a given moment in time, an event took place that also reached its end-point (example 2a). By contrast, the English past continuous expresses imperfective aspect: the language

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<sup>16</sup> E.g. Van der Wal, “Word Order and Information Structure in Makuwa-Enahara,” 100.

<sup>17</sup> Hopper, “Aspect and Foreground in Discourse,” and Hopper “The Typology of Focus and Aspect in Narrative Language.” See also Fleischman, “Tense-Aspect Oppositions in Narrative.” There is also work on the use of the so-called “historical present” structuring discourse, but this concerns tense and not aspect, e.g. Carruthers, “Discourse and Text,” 307.

<sup>18</sup> Grønn, “The Russian Factual Imperfective,” 255-69.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Basset, “The Use of the Imperfect,” or Allan, “The Imperfect Unbound.” A comparison between the findings for Classical Greek and my findings for Siona would be most worthwhile, but is much outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>20</sup> Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca, *The Evolution of Grammar*; Bohnenmeyer, “Aspect vs. Relative Tense,” 949.

<sup>21</sup> I consider aspect a temporal category, following Harweg, “Aspekt als Zeitstufe”; Johnson, “Tense and Aspect”; Klein, *Time in Language*.

user asserts that at a given moment in time, an event took place that did not (yet) reach its end-point (example 2b).<sup>22</sup>

- (2) a. This morning, I **biked** to campus . . . and then I rushed into my lab.
- b. This morning, I **was biking** to campus . . . and then got hit by a car.

In example 2a, the Past Simple *biked* informs the audience that the language user not only got on their bike and started making their way to campus but also that they reached that destination. As a result, the speaker can now start recounting events that happened after their arrival on campus (rushing into the lab). In 2b, however, the Past Continuous *was biking* informs the listener that the speaker got on their bike and started biking but had not yet reached campus. This gives the speaker room to relate events that happened during their journey to campus (e.g., getting hit by a car). It is important to note that imperfective aspect does not inform the audience that the end-point was never reached at all. The phrase *I was biking* only tells the audience that at this point in the story, the speaker is still on their way. One must infer from the rest of the story whether they made it at all.

### Aspect forms in Siona

Siona encodes only perfective and imperfective aspect directly onto its verbs. Neither aspect is marked with a single form, and both use different endings depending on gender, number, and “type” of subject (see below). In tables 1a and 1b on the next pages, I have put

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<sup>22</sup> This end-point may be given by the verbal predicate itself in cases such as *to walk to school* (telic predicates) or by our knowledge of the world in cases such as *to sleep* (atelic predicates).



the conjugations of verbal forms that are marked for aspect.<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that Siona expresses verbal aspect only on non-final verb forms; verb forms at the end of a sentence are not marked for aspect.<sup>24</sup>

As for number, aspect forms distinguish between singular and plural forms. As for gender, only the singular marks a distinction between masculine and feminine, whereas the plural is neutral with respect to gender. There is also a distinction between “same subject” and “different subject” forms: whereas *saió* indicates that the person who is on their way is also the person who is doing the next event (as in “when she was on her way, she passed by the river”), this is not the case for *saiona*, which indicates that the person who is on their way is not the same as the subject of the next event (as in “when she was on her way, I stayed home to cook”).

		Regular verb <i>kaje</i> “to say”	
Aspect	Number/gender	Same subject	Different subject
Impf.	Fem. sg.	<i>ka-ko</i>	<i>ka-ko-na</i>
	Masc. sg.	<i>ka-ki</i>	<i>ka-ki-na</i>
	Plural	<i>ka-hi</i>	<i>ka-hi-na</i>
Perf.	Fem. sg.		<i>ka-o-na</i>
	Masc. sg.	<i>ka-ni</i>	<i>ka-i-na</i>
	Plural		<i>ka-de-na</i>

**Table 1a:** Paradigms of aspectual verb forms in Siona.

<sup>23</sup> Ecuadorian Siona has two verb classes, which Bruil calls non *-i* verbs and *-i* verbs. The former contains almost all verbs in the language and uses the same verb stem throughout the paradigm, but *-i* verbs are “irregular” in the sense that they have three verb stems that alternate in the paradigm, and for *saije* “to go” these are *sai-*, *sah-*, and *sa-*. The plural imperfective of the irregular verbs has the *-bi* suffix in the more conservative Soto Tsiaya variety, whereas the more innovative variety in Puerto Bolívar has taken the *-hi* suffix from the regular verbs. Bruil, *Ecuadorian Siona*, 209–10.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 175, 199. Bruil calls the former “dependent verbs” and the latter “main verbs.”

Irregular verb <i>saije</i> “to go”			
Aspect	Number/gender	Same subject	Different subject
Impf.	Fem. sg.	<i>sai-o</i>	<i>sai-o-na</i>
	Masc. sg.	<i>sai-i</i>	<i>sai-i-na</i>
	Plural	<i>sai-bi / sai-hi</i>	<i>sai-bi-na / sai-hi-na</i>
Perf.	Fem. sg.		<i>sah-ko-na</i>
	Masc. sg.	<i>sa-ni</i>	<i>sah-ki-na</i>
	Plural		<i>sa-hi-na</i>

**Table 1b:** Paradigms of aspectual verb forms in Siona.

In these tables, I have not translated each form into English. The reason for this is that these forms do not correspond to a single sentence or phrase in English. For example, the verb *sai-o* can mean “when she was on her way, she . . .” but also “when I was on my way, I . . .” or “when you were on your way, you . . .” but only if the *I* or *you* is one woman (“feminine singular”). Moreover, the difference between “same subject” and “different subject” forms cannot be captured in a single translation, only transpiring in the context of language use.

### A sense of time

Let us first consider the use of aspect on the ideational level in Siona. This is very similar to the situation in English that was described above. I here reiterate that on this ideational level, the difference between perfective and imperfective aspect is best understood as a distinction of completeness in temporal terms. With perfective aspect (PERF), the language user asserts that at a given reference time (span), an event took place that also reached its end-point (example 3a). By contrast, imperfective aspect (IMPF) expresses that at a given

moment in time, an event was taking place that did not (yet) reach its endpoint (example 3b).<sup>25</sup>

(3) a. **go'i-ni**            *ĩ*                            *kia-ijã*            *jehk-wa'i-de.*  
 return-PERF    he                            told-M            other-PL-ACC  
 “After he returned he told the others.”<sup>26</sup>

b. **ãi-hi**                    **tuhtu-hi-na**    *jeo'ka-bi*  
 eat-IMPF.PL    sit.high-IMPF.PL-DS    below-from  
                   *ziaja-bi*            *jõ'kwe-dihcho-ijã*  
                   river-from            move-made.fall-M  
                   *hãowa'i*            *dõmitsĩ-de.*  
                   these                    girls-ACC  
 “While they were eating and sitting up top, something from below from the river moved and made these girls fall.”<sup>27</sup>

In 3a, the perfective *go'ini* tells the listener that the male protagonist in the story not only started to make their way back to the village but that they also reached that destination at this point in the story (the reference point). As a result, the narrator can now start recounting events that happened after their return to the village (telling the other people about what had happened). In 3b, however, the imperfectives *ãihi* and *tuhtuhina* tell the listener that the girls were still eating and sitting at the reference time. This gives the narrator

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<sup>25</sup> Abbreviations used: 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, PERF = perfective, IMPF = imperfective, SG = singular, PL = plural, M = masculine, F = feminine, NOM = nominative, ACC = accusative, NEG = negation, PST = past tense, FUT = future tense, DEM = demonstrative, DIST = distal, EXIST = existential, NML = nominaliser, CLS = classifier, COMPL = completive, CONT = container, INTENS = intensifier, DS = different subject (from the next verb). The vowel [i] is a close central unrounded vowel, which sounds similar to the pronunciation of *e* in *glasses* in most varieties of American English. A tilde on a vowel indicates that the vowel is nasal. The apostrophe represents the glottal stop, which also occurs in the middle of English *uh-oh*. The <j> and <ch> sound like English <j> and <ch> as in *jungle* and *chicken*.

<sup>26</sup> Bruil, *Ecuadorian Siona*, 351, line 27. All translations of the Siona example sentences are mine.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*, 161. There is no overt subject expressed for the main verb, so that the subject is interpreted as an indefinite subject “something.”

the room to relate events that happened during this eating and sitting (in this case, a mysterious object made them fall, putting an end to the eating and sitting). In these functions, verbal aspect in Siona gives the audience a sense of the temporal relations between events, similar to English.

### A sense of structure

So far, I have shown how verbal aspect in Siona tells the audience something about the *content* of a story: it gives the audience a sense of how and when events happened in relation to each other. When we look at the verb *kaje* “to say,” however, we find a different situation. Instead of making reference to the way events unfold in the narrated world, verbal aspect in forms of *kaje* “to say” gives the audience a sense of the *structure* of the story they are listening to. More specifically, it does not indicate the completeness of a particular event but the completeness of a discourse segment as a whole (almost always a conversation). Imperfective aspect signals that the discourse segment has not yet come to an end, whereas perfective aspect signals that the discourse segment is over.

Let us look at an example of an imperfective form of *kaje* “to say” in example 4, below, which is from the bat man story. This sentence is from a passage where bat man exhibits very strange behavior, such as eating fish that is only half-cooked. When his wife comments on this peculiarity, bat man gives an unexpected reply.

- (4) But when the fish was only half-cooked, he put it on a plate and while he was eating it, his wife said “you are eating raw meat.”

<i>ka-ko-na</i>	“ <i>zoe kwa’kusi</i> hko-a”
say-IMPF.SG.F-DS	already cooked-COPULA
<i>ka-ijã</i> .	
said-M	

“When she had said (that), he said ‘it is already cooked’.”<sup>28</sup>

Here, the imperfective form *kakona* refers to a situation where bat man’s wife had finished speaking. As such, it expresses perfective

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<sup>28</sup> ELAR, Bat man story, line 18.

aspect with respect to her “event” of speaking (her “speech act”)—that is, on Halliday’s ideational level. However, this form expresses imperfective aspect on the textual level of discourse: it signals that this particular conversation has not yet come to an end with the wife’s first remark in the previous line. It gives the audience a sense of anticipation: the wife’s remark stems from her confusion about bat man’s behavior, and she would like to have an explanation for it. Both the wife and the audience are waiting for this explanation, and thus, the imperfective form directs the attention of the audience to bat man’s reply that is to come. This interpretation is also supported by the suffix *-na* “different subject,” which indicates the subject of *kakona* (i.e., the wife) is different from the subject of *kaijã* (i.e., bat man).

There is a discrepancy between the aspect form in Siona and the English translation. In this case, the Siona imperfective form is not translated with an imperfective form in English but with a (past) perfective. This is because the Siona imperfective and the English imperfective have different ranges of functions. In English, the imperfective can only signal temporal overlap between events (ideational function), whereas the Siona imperfective can also reflect the structure of discourse, since it can anticipate a reply from the interlocutor in a conversation. In this case, it would be odd to translate *kakona* with an English imperfective, because (I argue) the Siona form *kakona* does not signal temporal overlap. A possible way to make the Siona meaning explicit in a paraphrase is “When she had said that, expecting her husband to reply, he said . . .”

If the Siona imperfective can signal the anticipation of a reply in a conversation, we find the opposite situation for perfective forms of *kaje* “to say.” An example of a perfective form is given in (5) below, which is from the hammock story. At this point in the story, the male protagonist has fled into the forest with the hammock stuck to his back. There, the hammock turns into a woman and orders the male protagonist to fulfill all of her wishes.

- (5) “That other bunch, that big bunch of coconuts is ripe, take that one down,” she said.

<i>ka-o-na</i>	<i>ĩ</i>	<i>mi-ni</i>	<i>kwã'sēkiwi</i>
say-PERF.SG.F-DS	he	go.up-PERF	hook
<i>nesihko-de</i>	<i>mia-ni</i>	<i>ĩ</i>	...
made-ACC	take-PERF	he	...

“When she had said that, he went up and he took a hook he had made and he . . .”<sup>29</sup>

Here, we find the perfective form *kaona*, which refers to the speech act by the hammock in the previous line. Just like the imperfective *kakona* in (4), the perfective form refers to a situation where a speaker (in this case, the hammock) had started to speak and also finished what she had to say. In that respect, *kaona* and *kakona* are not different. However, the difference between them lies on the textual level of discourse: the perfective *kaona* indicates that the conversation between the hammock and the male protagonist has come to an end. No reply from the male protagonist is anticipated, and the narrator proceeds to relate events that happen outside of the conversational context. In this case, the male protagonist uses one of his own hooks to grab coconuts from a nearby tree.

To summarize, verbal aspect in the verb *kaje* “to say” signals the completeness of a discourse segment (a conversation, by virtue of the meaning of *kaje* “to say”). Whereas imperfective aspect signals that the conversation has not yet come to an end and anticipates some kind of reply, perfective aspect signals that the conversation has reached its end and that something else, outside of the conversational context, is going to happen.

### Sensing the suspense

Thus far, we have seen that imperfective forms of *kaje* “to say” are used to anticipate a reply from an interlocutor in a conversation. However, this is not the only thing that imperfective forms can anticipate in a story. They can also instill a sense of suspense in the audience by anticipating a particularly scary or gruesome moment. I

<sup>29</sup> Bruil, *Ecuadorian Siona*, 350, line 23.

will give two examples of this function in this section. The first is from the final passage of the hammock story, where the male protagonist has finally managed to shake off the bewitched hammock in the forest and repents his mistake in front of the elders back in the village.

- (6) “*ĩo jude mi’ hãĩdĩ*” ***ka-hĩ-na***  
 she now your hammock say-IMPF.PL-DS  
 “*zoe behtohubi-na*  
 already coconuts-in  
*gã’ne-wesi-o-na*  
 be.entangled-forever-IMPF.SG.F-DS  
*hẽõgõ-ni dai’ĩ*” ***ka-ki*** *ĩ*  
 leave.behind-PERF came say-IMPF.SG.M he  
 “*meme-kina g<sup>w</sup>ina-obi*  
 be.afraid-IMPF.SG.M do.again-NML.F  
*dah-si-o” ka-ni jowi*  
 come-FUT-F say-PERF canoe  
*aja-mi-ni jehk-i*  
 fill-go.down-PERF other-M  
*ti’wa-na ĩ hẽ-ni kãh-kijã.*  
 side-on he cross-PERF sleep-PST.M

“They said ‘and your hammock?’ and he said ‘she was entangled in a bunch of coconuts and I left her behind and came (here)’ and he said ‘I’m fearing she will come back and do it again’ and he went down into the canoe and he crossed it and fell asleep on the other side.”<sup>30</sup>

The two boldfaced verb forms are of interest here, the imperfective *kaki* in particular. First, we find the imperfective form *kahina*, which indicates the first speech turn by the elders, who inquire about the absence of the hammock. They had seen the protagonist leave for the forest with the hammock and know that one cannot easily shake off a bewitched hammock; they would like to know how the male protagonist nonetheless managed to do this. The imperfective here functions as we saw in the previous section: it anticipates a reply by

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<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, 352, line 28.

the male protagonist and indicates that the conversation is not yet over.

This reply then comes, and it is marked with the imperfective form *kaki*. However, no reply from the elders comes after this, and it turns out that *kaki* only interrupts the male protagonist's final words in the story. The conversation is essentially over, and we might therefore have expected a perfective form to mark this end of the conversation instead. But we still find the imperfective form *kaki* in this case: why is this?

Here, the imperfective form *kaki* occurs at the end of the story and the final comment by the male protagonist is not without importance. The narrator has him end the story on an ominous note: even though the protagonist has shaken off the hammock for now, she is still roaming around, quite possibly waiting for revenge. Having the protagonist express his worry about this creates a big cliffhanger, and the imperfective form *kaki* creates the suspense that anticipates such a cliffhanger. As such, the imperfective fulfills the function of “linguistic appeal” (Karl Bühler) or the conative function of language (Roman Jakobson). It does not indicate how this particular discourse part is structured but instead aims at effectuating an emotion (i.e., fear and suspense) in the audience.

Thus far, we have only considered the verb *kaje* “to say” when looking at non-ideational functions of verbal aspect. Indeed, the division of labor seems clear: whereas verbal aspect in forms of *kaje* “to say” has the ability to structure discourse and create suspense, verbal aspect in other verbs functions on the ideational level, indicating if an event was completed or not yet at a particular point in the story. However, this division of labor is not a strict requirement of the grammar. Sometimes, other verbs may also be used to create suspense, as in example 7, which comes from the bat man story.

Previously in the story, bat man had—by way of ruse—invited his wife to look for their children near the river (recall that bat man had actually eaten their children but lied about it to his wife, and he intends to eat his wife too). When they go there, the wife goes to the river on her own for a moment, and she finds a round white object that turns out to be her son's head. Horrified, she realizes that her husband is a cannibal (*ojobãĩ* in Siona, “bat man”) who intends to



eat her as well, and she goes to hide up in a tree. She watches her husband from above as he calls her out to reveal herself and come to the campfire. At this point, the story reaches its narratological peak: the wife finds out about something even more gruesome than her husband's cannibalism.

- (7) She watched him, and he said “I am hungry” and took off his tunic, the one he used to wear.

*duhta-ki-na*                      *jã-ko-na*                      *hã-de*  
take.off-IMPF.SG.M-DS    see-IMPF.SG.F-DS    DEM:DIST-ACC

*goa*    *be'o-doro-wi-deba*  
just    NEG.EXIST-penis-CLS:CONT-INTENS

*ãi-sih-ki*                      *bah-kijã*                      *ĩ.*  
eat-compl-m.sg              was-M                      he

“And when he had taken it off, she saw that he had cut off his private parts and he was all eaten.”<sup>31</sup>

The most gruesome fact of this story has been revealed: bat man not only eats his own children, he eats at himself too. Compared to the revelation of the cannibalism, this auto-cannibalism instills an even greater sense of disgust in the audience, which is amplified by the suspense that the imperfect form *duhtakina* creates. In this case, it is difficult to determine if the imperfect has its ideational value: taking off a tunic is done within seconds, and it is only after one has taken off a piece of clothing that one can see what is underneath.

More pertinent here seems the conative function that the imperfect fulfills. It serves to create an anticipatory effect, and directs the attention of the audience to what happens next: upon hearing the imperfective, the audience knows that they are going to hear something horrendous, and the suspense has them sit at the edge of their seat. What will happen when bat man has taken off his tunic? What will he do, or what will be visible? In this function, the imperfective may be compared to the way ominous music is used in horror films to anticipate a jump scare. Without the music, you would still wonder what happens next (as one does throughout a

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<sup>31</sup> ELAR, Bat man story, line 49.

film), but ominous music, like the imperfective in Siona, creates a peak of anticipation about the scary revelation to come.

This is different from the effect that a perfective form *duhtaina* would create. In that case, there would be no (special) anticipation about whatever it is that will happen after bat man's has taken off its tunic. An audience may expect a more mundane and typical event happening after, such as bat man going to bathe in the river. This would be the equivalent of a lack of ominous music in a film.

### **Conclusion**

In Ecuadorian Siona, the grammatical category of verbal aspect makes an important contribution to the sensory experience of a story by its audience. It not only gives the audience a sense of the temporal relation between events (the ideational function) but also gives the audience a sense of structure (the textual function): imperfective forms of *kaje* "to say" anticipate some type of reply in a conversation, whereas perfective forms signal that the conversation has reached its end. Narrators may also use the imperfective to instill a sense of suspense in the audience (*sprachlicher Appell* "linguistic appeal," or conative function): in those cases, the imperfective does not signal that another conversational turn is expected but rather anticipates a particularly scary or gruesome event that is to come.

These different functions of verbal aspect in Ecuadorian Siona broaden our horizon of what grammar can do, particularly verbal aspect. Verbal aspect is not just a way to get the content of a message across intelligibly but also a narratological device that the narrator can use to interact with the audience and enhance the narratological experience for said audience. Ultimately, this study shows that grammatical categories must be taken seriously to fully understand how sensory experiences are constructed.

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## The (Un)Reality of Abuse in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019)

Athena Stefanakou

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Carmen Maria Machado's 2019 memoir *In the Dream House* recounts a story of same-sex psychological abuse by the narrator's ex-girlfriend, whom the narrator identifies as the "woman from the Dream House."<sup>1</sup> In this article, I argue that *In the Dream House* achieves a form of "hermeneutic justice" through its deliberate use of fictional and non-fictional elements, transcending the premium usually placed on factual accuracy in the genre of memoir. In doing so, the text conveys a "deeper" truth through the narrator's play with the form and structure of language. To make this argument, I draw on Miranda Fricker's notion of "hermeneutic injustice," which refers to a gap in the way that disadvantaged people understand and interpret negative social experiences because of their social position.<sup>2</sup> One of the examples that Fricker uses to describe "hermeneutic injustice" is that of women whose experience of sexual harassment in the workplace is not recognized as such due to a "gap in the collective hermeneutical resource."<sup>3</sup> Fricker means that the lack of a specific term to name the social experience of sexual harassment prevents the harassed from understanding their experience as harmful. These women, therefore, are "wronged in their capacity as a knower." For Fricker, this wronging results from "a specific sort of epistemic injustice—a hermeneutical injustice."<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> *In the Dream House*, 5. Note that throughout my analysis of the memoir, I will deliberately be using the term "narrator" to refer to what could otherwise be identified as the author. That is because I want to emphasize the storytelling aspect of the memoir.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistemic Injustice*, 148.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, 149.

this article, I suggest that the narrator of *In the Dream House*, a woman abused within a queer relationship, faces a hermeneutical injustice in her lack of linguistic and hermeneutical tools to frame and understand her experience of abuse. As the narrator says: “putting language to which you have no language is no easy feat.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, “when she [the abuser] walks into your office and tells you that this is what it’s like to date a woman, you believe her. . . . you trust her, and you have no context for anything else.”<sup>6</sup>

Previous scholarship, particularly Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain’s work, followed the narrator’s own framing of *In the Dream House*, examining the memoir for its contribution to resisting “the violence of the archive” by documenting a form of previously disregarded abuse.<sup>7</sup> In the memoir’s opening, the narrator herself discusses the “violence of the archive,” referring to inequities in the recording of personal stories that result, for example, in inattention to stories of queer abuse.<sup>8</sup> While I do not refute this reading, I intend to open up alternative approaches to the text. Analyzing the memoir through the lens of hermeneutic justice and injustice, I argue, allows for a more open-ended exploration of trauma narratives, breaking down a range of binary distinctions. These include the distinctions between truth and lie, fiction and non-fiction, and, more broadly, between clearly defined identities as abuser and abused. Bussey suggests a possible reading for hermeneutic injustice in her assertion that the formal incoherence of the memoir owes to the absence of similar abuse narratives as points of reference.<sup>9</sup> However, I go beyond this reading by explaining how the memoir’s formal irregularities ultimately lead, due to their incoherent and unstable character, to a specific type of hermeneutic justice. I present this argument in three parts. First, I show how Machado’s notion of “the Dream House” acts as an imaginary space for hermeneutic justice. Second, I analyze how the interplay of fiction and non-fiction inside the Dream House points

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<sup>5</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> “Every Lover Is a Destroyer,” 1.

<sup>8</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> “Every Lover is a Destroyer,” 17.

to new ways of interpreting abuse narratives and narratives that move away from the oppression of the fact. Finally, I close read the use of language in *In the Dream House* to examine how the narrator subverts and reimagines the meanings of overdetermined words such as love, abuse, and fatness.

### **The notion of the Dream House: hermeneutic justice and abuse narratives**

I begin my analysis by considering the ambiguous notion of “the Dream House,” which is first mentioned at the very beginning of the memoir. The Dream House, which frames the memoir’s narrative structure, troubles the boundaries between “reality” and “fiction.” The narrator explains the idea of the Dream House in several ways. On one level, she suggests it is an actual house in the world outside of the memoir: the narrator claims that “I could give you the address and you could drive there.”<sup>10</sup> On another level, the Dream House is a constructed space in the narrator’s memories, imbued with abuse in every possible conceptualization of it by the narrator. The Dream House also serves, however, as a mental space in which the narrator can present “unrealistic” events that do not fit normative understandings of abuse. As the phrase “Dream House” itself suggests, it is also a place that the narrator associates with dreams, nightmares and the unconscious. Finally, the “Dream House” is a trope that structures the memoir itself, with each chapter title comparing the Dream House to a different fictional or non-fictional genre or concept: “Dreamhouse as Sci-Fi Thriller,” “Dreamhouse as Pop Single” or “Dreamhouse as Confession.”

I wish to offer an understanding of the Dream House beyond those provided by the narrator herself: that her construction of the Dream House is also the construction of a new context in which hermeneutic justice can be attempted at. By this, I mean that even if there “is a gap in the collective hermeneutical resources” of society to understand and interpret the narrator’s experiences as a psychologically abused queer woman, she creates a safe space to explain these experiences in the Dream House.<sup>11</sup> The dedication of

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<sup>10</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 169.

*In the Dream House* states that “if you need this book, it is for you.” I read this as a suggestion that the memoir can function as a tool with which anyone who feels that their abuse narrative does not fit the dominant forms—male abuse of a female within a heterosexual relationship—can reframe their understanding of their own experience and develop a new sense of its meaning.

As an “unreal” place, the Dream House can house sensations, feelings, and impressions that would not be perceptible in real life and present them in a form the reader can access. As such, it encloses all the forms of evidence that, as the narrator states in the chapter “Dream House as Proof,” she has no other way of representing or calling upon as proof of her abuse. For example, it is in the Dream House that the narrator places “the rancid smell of anger. The metal tang of fear in the back of my throat.”<sup>12</sup> With these descriptions, the narrator makes emotions such as anger and fear material and tangible, giving fear a physical presence as “metal.” These emotions then become proof otherwise lacking in cases of purely psychological abuse. An obsession with the materiality of pain makes the narrator wish that “she [her ex-partner] had hit you. Hit you hard enough that you’d have bruised in grotesque and obvious ways, hard enough that you took photos.”<sup>13</sup> A conscious or unconscious need for visual evidence to verify the truthfulness of an abuse narrative, especially regarding psychological abuse between queer women, is a clear instance of hermeneutical injustice. The narrator lacked the hermeneutical tools to effectively communicate her experience, and the people she confided in could not perceive or evaluate this deficiency.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the Dream House creates a space in which the “testimonial injustice”<sup>15</sup> that the narrator faces in the chapter “Dream House as Myth” can be resisted: “we don’t know for certain that it [her relationship with her ex-girlfriend] is as bad as she says. The woman from the Dream House seems perfectly

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<sup>12</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 225.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> Testimonial injustice in the case of the narrator occurs because, due to prejudices regarding her identity, she is “receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have—a credibility deficit.” This is analyzed in Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.



fine, even nice.”<sup>16</sup> People were reluctant to believe her account due to her identity as a queer woman and their lack of hermeneutical resources regarding women abusing other women in relationships. The Dream House provides then the space for the narrator and the reader to recognize the difficulty in expressing one’s pain to others when there is no physical evidence for it and the uniqueness of the narrator’s experience that cannot be conveyed through preexisting abuse narratives.<sup>17</sup>

This materialization of the intangible is also expressed in the haunted or oneiric quality of the house. In the chapter “Dream House as Set Design,” the house is anthropomorphized: “the house inhales, exhales and inhales again.”<sup>18</sup> The only physical witness to the terrors that took place, the Dream House itself, now appears to reflect those terrors in its very being. This understanding can also be seen in the narrator’s claim in “Dream House as American Gothic” that “[a] house is never apolitical . . . Windex is political. So is the incense your burn to hide the smell of sex, or a fight.”<sup>19</sup> In this passage, the narrator shows how easily a person can be deceived by their physical perceptions. Despite these deceptions, the house will always “know,” will always be marked by some type of “psychic pain.”<sup>20</sup> While some stories of queer abuse make it into the newspapers, perhaps because they involve murdered women, the narrator wonders how many other stories are forgotten because they are not sensational enough. These stories, the narrator states, are lost in “archival silence.”<sup>21</sup> As in Gothic fiction, where hauntings can be interpreted as “the return of the repressed,”<sup>22</sup> the Dream House is haunted by the silenced and otherwise unheard. In the chapter

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<sup>16</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 223.

<sup>17</sup> Meretoja refers to the violence of concepts developed by Friedrich Nietzsche as: “Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent,” which she then argues makes one “forget the singularity of each individual and [the] crucial differences within each group,” “Philosophies of Trauma,” 29.

<sup>18</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 74.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories*, 14.

“Dream House as Equivocation,” the narrator explains that queer communities tend to propagate images of a queer utopia in which abuse is nonexistent.<sup>23</sup> The narrator finds this attitude unhelpful and dehumanizing because it makes queer people forget, as she puts it, that “we’re in the muck like everyone else.”<sup>24</sup> This attitude sustains the hermeneutical injustice that queer abused people experience.

The Dream House progressively mutates into different forms, showcasing how the experiences it houses, including traumatic ones, are temporally and socially mediated.<sup>25</sup> Describing the transformations of the Dream House, the narrator recounts: “The Dream House was never just the Dream House. It was, in turn, a convent of promise, a den of debauchery, a haunted house, a prison and finally a dungeon of memory.”<sup>26</sup> This fluidity of the Dream House points to what Hana Meretoja calls a “non-subsumptive narrative understanding,” according to which concepts are not fixed but are formed based on unique experiences.<sup>27</sup> Meretoja argues that narratives “can be a vehicle of stretching one’s imagination towards what feels incomprehensible.”<sup>28</sup> Through the instability of its meaning, the Dream House shows to the reader how a house that might initially seem “a convent of promise” can, in time, transform into “a prison.” In the end, however, “the inhabitant gives the room its purpose,”<sup>29</sup> making it the reader themselves, by reading and thus “inhabiting” the Dream House, who will ultimately decide if the incidents narrated in the Dream House, fantastical or not, could prove to be useful in extending their hermeneutical framework regarding abuse narratives.

After the narrator has been “wronged in her capacity as a knower,” the ambiguous presentation of the Dream House offers her the necessary context and hermeneutical tools to transmit her experience of psychological abuse to others.<sup>30</sup> The narrator achieves

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<sup>23</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 199.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> Meretoja, “Philosophies of Trauma,” 25.

<sup>26</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> “Philosophies of Trauma,” 34.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 149.

this not just by constructing the narrative space of the dreamhouse but also by simultaneously problematizing the stability of notions such as truth and unreality that might affect the credibility of her abuse story. In the next section, I will move one step deeper in my stylistic analysis of the memoir to discuss the variety of genres that the Dream House houses, especially those that are closer to fiction genres like fantasy and fairytale. These genres, provocative to include in a memoir, are unconventional ways of achieving hermeneutic justice and of accessing the reality of someone else's pain.

**Genre and the boundaries of truth: fiction and non-fiction as tools for hermeneutic justice**

The division of the memoir into different chapters titled in the formula of "Dream House as 'X'" also requires an analysis of each "X." Some of these titles refer to non-fictional discourses (e.g., the "Dreamhouse as Second Chances"), and others to fictional ones, (e.g., "Dreamhouse as Noir"). In each chapter, the narrator borrows the aesthetics of the discourse mentioned in the chapter title to recount her experience. This approach showcases how familiar concepts can be applied to something unfamiliar and incomprehensible, eventually broadening sensibilities regarding abuse narratives. The title "Dream House as Gaslight," for example, reflects a long tradition of cultural discourse on psychological manipulation. Like the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, the "fictional" Dream House could alter our hermeneutical framework. This alteration could prove particularly important for people who, like the narrator, experience a hermeneutical lack in the expression of their pain.<sup>31</sup> The inclusion of fictional concepts in the memoir points to Machado's view that "in many cases we need more than reality to accurately describe reality."<sup>32</sup> In my view, this inclusion of fictional elements in the memoir aligns her work with the theory of post-trauma poetics as proposed by Houston A. Baker Jr. While Baker Jr.'s analysis emphasizes black subjectivity and Zora Neale Hurston's "poetic intuition in reading darkness" through what he

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<sup>31</sup> *Id.*, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Mahindra Humanities Centre, "Carmen Maria Machado," 17:36.

terms an “archival dance,”<sup>33</sup> the theory of post-trauma poetics is applicable to Machado’s work. In the same way that, as Baker Jr. suggests, “Hurston’s archive inhabits a different interpretative universe,”<sup>34</sup> Machado’s archive also does not conform to the rules of realistic writing where titles and concepts such as “memoir” and “fantasy” are stable signifiers that evoke specific expectations.

Besides the use of chapter titles that belong to fiction, such as “Dream House as Fantasy,” the Dream House also hosts chapters that are entirely fantastical both in title and content matter, as in the chapters “Dream House as Bluebeard” and “Dream House as the Queen and the Squid.” These chapters are adaptations of a fairytale and a fable that, at first glance, have no relation to the story of the Dream House. Fairytales and fables are not traditionally considered part of the “real,” an attitude some people—including the narrator’s aunt—extend to queer people as well: “I don’t believe in gay people.”<sup>35</sup> The narrator’s response: “Well, we believe in you,” foreshadows her own use of fairytales, of the unreal, to make real events more comprehensible to the reader.<sup>36</sup> As Stephen Benson notes, fairytales are a form of storytelling traditionally associated with “the constitution of selves and identities.”<sup>37</sup> Julia Christensen stresses that storytelling is also “a mode of knowledge production and dissemination.”<sup>38</sup> These ideas align with my argument that the narrator of *In the Dream House* constructs a new hermeneutic framework through her storytelling, drawing on the frameworks of existing genres to break down the binary distinctions between truth and falsehood, fiction and non-fiction.

The fairytales in *In the Dream House* feature explicit instances of psychological abuse, manipulation, and gaslighting, aiding the narrator in overcoming her difficulty in conveying her traumatic experience to others. In the narrator’s adaptation of the fairytale of the Bluebeard, for example, she clarifies that while the traditional image of Bluebeard is as a wealthy man with supernatural

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<sup>33</sup> “Intuiting Archive,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Contemporary Fiction*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Activating the Heart*, xii.

powers, he can also “be simple. And he doesn’t have to be a man.”<sup>39</sup> In the narrator’s retelling, the increasing acquiescence of Bluebeard’s new wife to his irrational demands renders her escape impossible. Out of docility and potentially love, she voluntarily becomes a victim of abuse. The fairytale ends with the moral: “you are being tested and you are passing the test; sweet girl, sweet self, look how good you are; look how loyal, look how loved.”<sup>40</sup> If the narrator, or anyone, for that matter, were to let themselves be submerged in their abuser’s reality, as the moral of Bluebeard suggests, the result would be “a scene where Bluebeard [would] dance around with the corpses of his past wives . . . and the newest wife would [sit] there mutely.”<sup>41</sup> Such a scene would reemphasize the inescapability of manipulation and abuse. In contrast, the narrator’s telling of the fable of the Queen and the Squid gives the reader the impression that the abused squid comes to realize its pain and rejects the queen’s advances for reconciliation: “your words are very pretty. And yet they cannot obscure the simple fact that I have seen your zoo.”<sup>42</sup> Once again, the fairytale is “a force that stretches beyond inherited ideological limitations” and “expands the repertoire of the tellable.”<sup>43</sup> Hermeneutic justice is achieved through the vehicle of the fantastic, which opens up a space for alternative visions of reality.

Another parallel world of fantasy that destabilizes the veracity of the memoir emerges through the narrator’s use of footnotes in some chapters. These footnotes refer to Thompson’s *Motif-Index*, which categorizes recurrent motifs in world folkloric literature.<sup>44</sup> The motifs cited in the narrator’s footnotes are taboos or types of behavior; they constitute a rhythmic undercurrent to the memoir, reminding the reader of the taboo nature of trauma, particularly in queer abuse narratives. This stylistic technique is an alternative way of utilizing preexisting concepts to recount unique experiences. The distribution of footnotes throughout the memoir does not follow a specific pattern; they appear in chapters of all different genres as a

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<sup>39</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*, 60.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, 204.

<sup>43</sup> Benson. *Contemporary Fiction*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Rosell Castells, “The Dream House was never just the Dream House,” 52.

type of evidence corroborating the main narrative. For example, when the narrator's mother does not support her against her aunt's discriminatory comments: "I don't believe in gay people,"<sup>45</sup> the footnote at the end of the line reads: "Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk Literature, Type S12.2.2, Mother throws children into fire."<sup>46</sup> This is not what happened literally in the main storyline, but the footnote does abide by the rules of the folkloric universe, which is a foundational part of the memoir. Ultimately the moral in the main text and the paratext is the same: that mothers can be cruel, even to the point of annihilation of their children or their identity. In this way, the affective impact of the event in the main text is amplified by the footnote.

The inclusion of fictional discourses in the narrative of *In the Dream House* covers the gap of hermeneutical injustice, providing the narrator with a framework to understand and then express her experiences. It also potentially reveals the inadequacies of non-fictional discourses to capture the nuances of some social experiences, possibly even when there is no gap in the collective hermeneutic resources. One might expect that these fictional discourses compromise the narrator's reliability, since the genre of the memoir is traditionally realistic. However, I would emphasize that the question of the narrator's reliability is of no importance. The narrator, to put it in Baker's words, does not "merely make[s] another deposit in history's consignments without troubling its fervid limitations and fissures."<sup>47</sup>

### **Reshaping the discourse of abuse: the vocabulary of hermeneutic justice**

In this final section, I examine how the narrator's use of language to describe in recounting her personal abuse story creates "new vocabularies for dealing with traumatizing processes" that go beyond the inherited biases of the linguistic system.<sup>48</sup> More specifically, the narrator subverts the convention in abuse narratives to represent the

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<sup>45</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 71.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> "Intuiting Archive," 3.

<sup>48</sup> Meretoja, "Philosophies of Trauma," 31.

abuser as a strong and physically large man and the abused person as a weak, white, and petite woman. Even though the narrator describes herself as fat, which implies a larger physique, and the woman in the dreamhouse as petite, the narrator's linguistic choices convey her feelings of smallness and weakness, particularly during the manic, spiteful, and borderline violent attacks of her ex-girlfriend. In a moment in the narrative in the chapter "Dreamhouse as House in Florida" where her ex-girlfriend is hurting her arm, the narrator remains motionless, stating to herself: "You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can."<sup>49</sup> This line reflects the narrator's attempt to minimize herself in front of her lover. Another example of the narrator's self-minimization comes in the chapter "Dream House as the Pool of Tears," where the narrator shrinks from being gigantic to dwarfish in an *Alice in Wonderland* fashion and, while tiny, risks drowning in her own tears. These images contribute to the reader's sense of the narrator's helplessness and weakness.

The narrator's word choices also resist dominant gender discourses that structure a reader's cultural assumptions. One of these assumptions is that a frail, blond, white woman must be weak. As dramatized in the chapter "Dream House as Murder Mystery," however, sometimes a blonde, "helpless" woman is a culprit who, being outside of the hermeneutic framework for suspicion, goes unsuspected. In "Dream House as Murder Mystery," the blonde woman "wipes the blood of the blade [of her knife] onto the dinner guest's dress and replaces it in her purse. Everyone continues to argue as she walks out the front door and into the night."<sup>50</sup> The "Murder Mystery" chapter shows how restricted hermeneutic frameworks can have harmful real-life consequences. The narrator asks herself: "Who is capable of committing unspeakable violence?"<sup>51</sup> Gender norms mean that the reader might not suspect a blonde, white woman with a "dazzling smile," even if the evidence of her guilt is blindingly obvious.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*, 182.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*, 182.

Throughout *In the Dream House*, the narrator offers both society's perspective on her body, which facilitated her abuse, and her later empowerment and acceptance of her body image, which allowed for her escape from that abuse. The narrator mentions that she grew up with the notion that "you should be grateful for anything you get as a fat woman,"<sup>53</sup> internalizing the idea that she was "undeserving of worship."<sup>54</sup> Her memoir, like her overweight body, overflows across different genres. It questions not only the boundaries of reality but also which bodies, and by extension, which texts, matter in society. As the narrative progresses, the narrator redefines the word fat by stripping it of its negative connotation. For example, when the narrator says that "My fat still remembers, but just barely—within a few years it will have turned itself over completely,"<sup>55</sup> she contrasts this to her memory: "But my nervous system still remembers . . . My memory has something to say about the way trauma has altered my body's DNA, like an ancient virus."<sup>56</sup> Fat and fatness are fundamental to the narrator's identity but nonetheless inferior to her memory, where abuse will always be hard-wired. The narrator now uses the word fat in a more neutral way than in its previous connotation of unworthiness. Lastly, the "fat raccoon,"<sup>57</sup> a figure that the narrator recognizes as a trickster, appears in a chapter where her friends or acquaintances dismiss the veracity of her story and remind her to keep fighting through her trauma: "he [the raccoon] doesn't look up, he doesn't speak to you, he just keeps going. But keeping going is a way of speaking."<sup>58</sup> The encouraging appearance of the fat raccoon contributes to the memoir's reexamination of prevalent ideas about fatness, showcasing how they can be overturned in a positive way. The re-signification of fatness in *In the Dream House* follows Meretoja's argument that literature is a means to create "new vocabularies for dealing with traumatizing processes,"<sup>59</sup> the traumatizing process here

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<sup>53</sup> *Id.*, 213.

<sup>54</sup> Young, "Haunted by humiliation."

<sup>55</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 225.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*, 223.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> "Philosophies of Trauma," 31.



being caused by the negative connotations of fatness. By re-signifying fatness, the narrator combats what I would term here *hermeneutic violence*; while there is a hermeneutical space for her experience of fatness, it is one dictated by people who do not look like the narrator. By reimagining her relationship with fatness in more positive terms, the narrator does justice to her embodied experience.

The narrator also reframes dominant understandings of the relationship between love and suffering. The idea that one must suffer for true love is recurrent both in the fictional and non-fictional worlds inside the Dream House. For example, a footnote in the chapter “Dreamhouse as Myth” contains a quote from New York Times opinion columnist, Maureen Dowd, who argues that “experiencing the ordinary brutality of love does not make one a victim. It makes one an adult.”<sup>60</sup> This inclusion of Dowd’s idea in the footnote suggests that love has always been connected with abuse, making the two perhaps, in fact, one. The narrator of *In the Dream House*, however, problematizes this association. For example, she addresses herself: “You laugh and nod and kiss her, as if her love for you has *sharpened* and *pinned* you into a wall.”<sup>61</sup> Here the love expresses itself sensorially as physical abuse, represented by “sharpness” and “pinning.” This line highlights that the association of love and suffering will later lead to the narrator’s abusive relationship. Once again, the narrator is opening a space for hermeneutic justice by suggesting that this abuse, which was psychological, can be represented in such physical terms.

To conclude my analysis of *In the Dream House*, I examined specific uses of language in the narrative that show concretely how, in addition to hermeneutic injustice, the narrator was subjected to hermeneutic violence. The narrator experienced hermeneutic violence in that the existing hermeneutical framework and resources for representing her experiences and identity were rather harmful. As with formal elements of the memoir analyzed in previous sections, the narrator’s re-inventing of language in the Dream House is, I have argued, a means to hermeneutic justice.

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<sup>60</sup> Machado, *In the Dream House*, 223.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.*, 68, emphasis mine.

## Conclusion

Machado's memoir suggests that the narrator, a queer abused woman, has faced a type of hermeneutic injustice that prevented her from completely understanding and transmitting her experience to others. The memoir proposes narrative form as a means to overcome this injustice, drawing on a descriptive matrix that oscillates between fiction and non-fiction, imagination and reality. My analysis began with the ambiguous notion of the Dream House, where I showed how the Dream House constitutes the constructed space where hermeneutic justice can take place. I also showed that the difference between unreality and reality in abuse narratives becomes irrelevant inside the Dream House; in the Dream House, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction collapse. The "unreal" space of the Dream House allows the narrator to incorporate fictional genres and discourses. In doing so, the narrator defies the insufficient collective hermeneutical resources of society and the insistence that abuse stories be works of non-fiction verifiable with material evidence. This insistence is particularly harmful to victims of psychological abuse. In the chapter "Dreamhouse as Myth" where the narrator confides in people her abuse story and then learns about their disbelief, she confesses about herself to the reader that: "You will never feel as desperate and fucked up and horrible as when you hear those things."<sup>62</sup> Even when the narrator has concepts available to understand and interpret her experiences, she shows how these concepts, like fatness, abuse, and love, can be disadvantageous for her self-definition. Reimagining these concepts, the narrator overcomes a hermeneutic violence. *In the Dream House* ultimately demonstrates how the creation of more inclusive and open-ended hermeneutical frameworks through the formal elements of the memoir does hermeneutic justice to queer abused people and points to new ways of understanding and interpreting abuse narratives.

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<sup>62</sup> *Id.*, 223.

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PART THREE

**BELONGING**



## INTERVIEW

### **Interview with Piet Devos: “We Are All Multisensory Beings”**

Paulina Bastián Alvarado and Mahtab Fazlali

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**T**o the writer, literary scholar, and lecturer Dr. Piet Devos (Kortrijk, 1983), sensory perception has a richness that is often overlooked in our visual culture, where the sense of sight is considered not only the most important sense but also the main source of knowledge. Taking a different approach, Devos has dedicated his career to sensory analyses of culture from the perspective of literary studies, exposing how language and culture influence our perception of the world. His work is characterized by a sensory approach to literature that stems from his personal history of visual disability. Having gone blind at the age of five, the experiences both of seeing and not seeing have shaped Devos’s critical thinking and creative writing, leading him to a multisensory perception of reality. In his research, Devos studies the relationships between language and perception, and between disability and the arts. Furthermore, he tackles topics such as the hierarchy of the senses, foregrounding the importance of haptics, a concept that relates to the sense of touch.<sup>1</sup>

Devos is a Leiden University Master’s graduate (2009) and holds a Ph.D. from Groningen University (2013), where he wrote his dissertation on the visual and haptic perception in the avant-garde poetry of Vicente Huidobro and Benjamin Péret. Earlier this spring, we met Piet for a conversation about how literature and philosophy can broaden our perspective on what it means to be human and offer new approaches to thinking about the senses.

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<sup>1</sup> See Devos, “Themes.”

*Your personal story plays a substantial role in your academic and creative work. How has your blindness influenced your experience of the world and shaped your work?*

In many ways, I think. But before coming to this, it is important to know that I was sighted before the age of five, so I also know the world, so to speak, from a sighted perspective. I still have lots of visual memories of the time when I was sighted, like colors, animals, people, places I have seen, pictures, and many other things. The combination of both perspectives [the sighted and the unsighted] was quite important for me, shaping me as a person and later shaping me as a thinker and a writer. It made me curious about sensory perception and the different ways we can perceive the world, to which there are many aspects. One is synesthesia.

At the age of eight, I realized that for me, every letter had a color, and every number and every piece of music evoked colors in me. I came to that conclusion because I had written a text in braille, with dots on a special typewriter. There was actually no ink on the paper, but I said to my teacher that I really liked writing and reading because texts are so colorful. And she didn't understand. She said, "You know, this page is just completely white. There are only white dots on it." And I didn't understand because, for me, every letter had a color. And then I suddenly realized that I perceived the text and language differently than she did. I obviously did not know the name for this at the time.

I discovered many years later that it is a neurological phenomenon called synesthesia, the effect of certain neuronal networks in the brain that intertwine and become mixed up. In most people, they are separated. In my case, my sonic or auditory perception is intertwined with my visual perception. So, when I hear music, I see colors for the instruments, for melodies, and for tones. When a tone is high in pitch, I see bright colors, and when it's low in pitch, they are darker in color. This influences not only my perception of music but also of letters, numbers, days of the week, and many other things, actually.



*Could you explain more about synesthesia and how you understand the concept of haptics?*

Before I come to haptics, it is important to know that synesthesia is the filtering of one sense through the other. The estimate is that one in 5,000 people have it. They are mostly creative people, so synesthesia is more common among artists. The most common form of synesthesia is this sound-coloring synesthesia, like in my case. But there are other forms as well. I once met a perfume maker whose perfumes were inspired by music. So, when she listens to

music, all kinds of imaginary scents come to her mind. Her perfumes are based on particular sounds.

“We often overestimate sight as a source of knowledge. We often think that if we lose sight, we are also excluded from the world.”

Haptics is another wide range of sensory modalities, I would say, like synesthesia. Haptics is, very simply put, the sense of touch. But if we speak about touch in common daily

speech, we often only mean the sense of the skin. We mean touching by hands, touching your skin, touching a surface, touching a table, or touching anything else. But touch is so much more complex than just the skin and the hands. That’s why we use the word haptics in academia. Haptics covers all these complex layers of touch. You have the tactile level of the skin, but you have also, for example, proprioception. Proprioception is our sense of being in space. When you move through space, you know, you feel, that you’re standing upright, or you know that you are seated, or you feel that you’re on a slope, that the floor is going down or up. These are all sensations that are communicated through our proprioceptive faculties in the body. Proprioception is the perception of the complete body, so that is another layer of haptics. But there is much more to haptics because it’s also about our reception of temperature, for example. Haptics is about cold and heat, and also softness, when something is soft or hard. Haptics involves sensory modalities of tactility, and also of weight. When you lift something,

like a box from the table, you can estimate its weight. That's also part of haptics.

*Speaking of your background, would you tell us why you chose literature as your object of study and means of expression?*

This brings me back to my experience of losing sight. First of all, I can say I was born in the library, almost literally. My father's house was full of books, from the bottom to the roof. He didn't count them anymore, but the house must have contained close to 15,000 books. It was really a huge library. He always talked about literature, writers, and philosophers, so I certainly picked up a lot from him. But it was also the fact that reading really stimulated my sensory imagination. Reading detailed descriptions triggered not just my visual imagination but also, obviously, my other forms of imagination. It also stimulated my inner visuality, so to speak. Literature was a passion from a very early age.

*How do you read poetry as a non-sighted person? Do you read it in braille, or do you listen to it?*

I usually prefer to read it in braille, to feel it on the page, because then I have the same chance to interpret it in my own way. Sometimes nowadays, more often even, I read it in digital form with my braille display, which is a little device I connect to my computer that shows in braille what is on the screen. When I have a digital version of a poem or a collection, I can read it with this device. I also often listen to poetry, which I love, but obviously, this introduces the interpretation of the performer. This can be very nice, and it can even help you to understand the poem. But obviously, it's the coloring. It's like someone playing the violin. When he plays Beethoven, he will have a different interpretation of Beethoven. So I read poetry in several ways.

*In your work, you point out that we live in both a highly visual culture and a sight-oriented society. Implicit in this is a hierarchy of the senses, with the sense of sight at the top. Why do you think that this hierarchy exists?*

If we look at Western thought and philosophy, this hierarchy is a very old idea. We find it in Aristotle. Humans already discerned five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Western philosophers and thinkers considered vision and hearing as the highest senses because they don't require any immediate bodily interaction. These are distant senses. Sight, especially, creates an illusion that the spectator is looking at the world with an objective separation between the viewer and the world. It gives us the illusion of having a stable image or overview of our surroundings that gives us the most reliable kind of knowledge of the world. This has stimulated the idea in philosophy and science that sight is the most objective sense. In the last couple of hundred years, many technologies have strengthened the importance of sight. Think of photography, film, imagery, and the whole visual culture we live in that has strengthened the supremacy of sight. I think the hierarchy of the senses is a question of philosophical ideas and technological practices.

*What are the consequences of this hierarchy, and how do you think it can be challenged?*

The consequence is that we often overestimate sight as a source of knowledge. We often think that if we lose sight, we are also excluded from the world and have a very poor worldview. But actually, we are all multisensory beings. It is too limited to see a human being as just sighted. But it is a common way to approach sensory perception. Many people ask me, "Why would you travel to another country if you don't see?" I always emphasize that there are so many other things to experience when I am abroad. I can talk to people; I can listen to the stories and to the musical plays; I can taste the food and touch the buildings. There are so many ways to experience a country. It is a strange question, but you cannot imagine how many people have asked me this.

There is an overestimation of sight as a source and transmitter of knowledge. Our education is mainly audio-visual. We use listening and talking, fortunately, but apart from that there is a lot of imagery and PowerPoint nowadays, so it's very audio-visual. Especially in education, at least in Western countries like the Netherlands and Belgium, the lower senses, as they are called, are

not trained. We do not develop our vocabularies for taste or smell. We are very poor at describing our senses. That is really a pity, I think. It's another consequence of this old hierarchy of the senses.

*It seems that in the humanities, too, all we do is read and write. We are not trained to develop other senses, other skills.*

Absolutely. But I also hear it from other scientists who are, for example, just in the laboratory studying. Nowadays they often use only computer imagery. Anthropologists and biologists are the only ones who still go into the field and make observations with their own senses. Even in medicine, doctors nowadays don't use all their senses anymore. They use a lot of scans and imagery. It is really impoverishing, making us poorer as human beings and observers, to not use all of our senses.

*Would you say that your work presents a different approach to this hierarchy of the senses?*

It certainly tries. In my research as a literary scholar, I try to emphasize the importance of haptics, for example. My Ph.D. thesis was about haptic perception in surrealist poetry, so I wrote about all kinds of tactile descriptions. I also wrote about movements and proprioception in literature. More recently, I wrote about touch and sound in the writings of blind authors, showing exactly the richness of the sensory world and how they [the senses] are being translated into literature in metaphors, sonic poetry, descriptions, and many other ways. There are so many ways we can deal with senses in literature. I say this as a researcher, but also as a creative writer. In my short stories and poetry, I really try to write from my own authentic experiences. My own writing is also very multisensory. I try to express my own haptic experiences and sonic experiences and my inner visuality. But also smell. I try to be as multisensory as I can, and this is often a challenge. As I said, in our culture we often lack new words and other terms to speak about smell and taste. But I certainly try to do that. If you want to have an example, on my website there is a short story that has been translated into English. The story, called "The missing child in the mirror," is about a

sculpture in a museum that must be explored by touch. It is really one of those stories where I tried to be very haptic.

*In your work, you talk about the concept of “blind phenomenology.” Could you explain what this notion entails and what its implications are?*

Phenomenology is the branch of philosophy where we try to describe as authentically as possible what comes to our consciousness. When you walk in the street, you have all kinds of sensations, but what we usually do is immediately translate those sensations into words and concepts and say, “there is a car passing,” “there is my friend,” or “what a beautiful day.” We don’t pay attention to the stream of consciousness, which is mainly a stream of sensations. As a sighted person, you see patches of light, you see coloring, and you see objects from a certain perspective. We are hearing sounds, smelling a shop. As phenomenologists, we try to describe this bunch of sensations, first of all, as sensations, and to make notes of the descriptions before interpreting them. So, we try to return to fresh consciousness.

Phenomenology was first done at the beginning of the twentieth century, as is usually the case, by middle-aged white males. The classical philosophers. Later on, there were fortunately female philosophers and philosophers of color who started to do phenomenology. And now, there are also disabled and, as in my case, blind writers who try to do it. This is what you can call blind phenomenology, where you try to describe your blind experience as accurately as you can. And you really try to bring your subjective perspective into the open, to share it with other people, to disclose your own subjectivity, and to make it into an orchestra of analyses.

*Taking into account the great importance of the senses and perceptions in the development of art and culture throughout history, what do you think will happen to human creativity with the overuse of technology, social media, and artificial intelligence, especially nowadays with ChatGPT?*

I'm not a cultural pessimist in the sense that I think this will destroy all our imagination. I really think that the human being is way more creative and imaginative than any machine will ever be. I am not so afraid of technology in many respects. I think it's certainly true that technology does affect our perception and our practices, so it's not that it will change nothing; it will, and it does. But I think it is more of an interconnection. The interesting experiment, even if it was also a tragic experiment, occurred during the pandemic, because then we were all doomed to use screens and to have chats with each other via online services. We had no choice. But we also noticed that we missed life, interconnection, and live meetings. We noticed that we wanted to touch and smell each other and be at the table with other people.

It also showed us, I think, the richness of our other senses. I think that such technology and technological development often show us the importance of our other senses. I also noticed that many artists nowadays turn to the lower senses, so to speak, and “lower” is always between brackets, because obviously they are not lower but perceived to be in the traditional hierarchy. When I notice that many artists are nowadays experimenting with smell, sound, taste, and touch, I think in the art world there is certainly a revival of the other senses. So, I am not so pessimistic about technology.

“I really think that the human being is way more creative and imaginative than any machine will ever be.”

When you go to an exhibition, you will find a lot of multisensory installations. In the Netherlands, museums are still a bit afraid of touching. But there are other museums abroad where you are allowed to touch artworks like sculptures. I think these are very interesting tendencies. So, I am not so pessimistic about the future in this sense. Maybe we will also develop technologies that are more interesting in relation to touch. Nowadays, these technologies are still rather rudimentary and functional, but maybe in the future they will be more complex and relate to the other senses. I think that technology can also mean stimulation, but obviously, we also need to be critical. It's not that technology is a solution to everything and

everything technological is wonderful. We need to be critical. But once again, I don't share, let's say, the doomsday prophecies of certain cultural analysts who say that technology will kill all our imaginary power. I don't think so.

*[This interview has been edited for length and clarity.]*

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## Defying the Binaries of Passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

Maaïke Siemes

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Brit Bennett's 2020 novel, *The Vanishing Half* explores the effects of passing on African American identity during the segregation era in the United States. "Passing" is a survival strategy to escape often-violent imposed social categories, such as race, gender or sexuality. Individuals are often perceived and accepted as members of a certain category based on their physical appearance and their environment. Changing appearance, location, speech, or clothing can therefore be an attempt to move into a different social category.<sup>1</sup> While the term passing emerges from the context of a society that seeks to preserve those social categories as meaningful, and can therefore have pejorative connotations, in this essay I am interested in how passing can showcase the performative nature of social categories. As the historian Allyson Hobbs has argued, interrogating acts of passing creates the opportunity to unpack the social construction of race, revealing how this construct is performed rather than preexistent as a set of epistemologically verifiable categories.<sup>2</sup> Following Hobbs, passing showcases the extent to which identity is constructed through the performance of certain socially agreed signifiers. Throughout this essay, however, I am alert to the ways in which passing also accepts these signifiers as meaningful signs of identity and therefore risks reinscribing essentialist notions of race and class.<sup>3</sup> I will therefore study passing in *The Vanishing Half* to explore how the practice can both critique and reinforce the social construct of race, ultimately arguing that

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 10.

Bennett's novel can offer a path to escaping this binary around the notion of passing.

*The Vanishing Half* revolves around Stella and Desiree Vignes, identical twins who grow up in Mallard, Louisiana, during the 1960s. The residents of Mallard all aim to marry people with a lighter skin color, attempting to ensure that each generation has a lighter complexion than the previous one. Stella and Desiree eventually split up and live separate lives; a life in which Stella decides to pass as white and Desiree does not. Through a close reading of the novel, I will show how it frames the act of passing. First, I will analyze Stella to examine how the novel frames passing as an act that can reinforce a hierarchy based on the construct of race. Subsequently, I will focus on how Desiree and other citizens of Mallard undermine the social construct of race. When analyzing these characters, I will not only consider them in isolation but also place them in relation to their social and geographic environments to examine how their surroundings affect their decisions.

As Bennett's novel was released only recently, it has received only limited scholarly attention. Ohad Reznick's "Getting into Character: Racial Passing and the Limitations of Performativity and Performance in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*" presents the most sustained engagement to date. Reznick argues that the novel challenges the idea that the act of passing confirms racial identities.<sup>4</sup> Building on this work, I provide a more in-depth analysis of racial performativity in the novel by considering the characters of Desiree and Kennedy, Stella's Daughter. I also examine the sensory aspects of the deconstructive potential within passing. I will examine these aspects of *The Vanishing Half* with an eye toward invisible assumptions about race, such as certain dialects and social associations. For its theoretical framework, this article draws upon Homi Bhabha's mimicry theory to consider passing as a form of

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<sup>4</sup> "Getting into Character," 270.

mimicry.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, I engage with Jullie Cary Nerad's work on passing narratives in American novels and films and Allyson Hobbs's work on historical passing narratives.

The work of Hobbs provides an important theoretical background for this research. Hobbs argues that passing is historically a means to secure freedom and a way to survive and fit into the prescribed norms set by society.<sup>6</sup> During the antebellum period and the Jim Crow era in the United States, passing as white could be a way to escape slavery, racial prejudice, or other forms of racial degradation. Black people passed deliberately to escape systemic racism in the United States. Since liberty can be claimed through passing, it is a performance that potentially provides agency to the passer.<sup>7</sup> Nerad adds that individuals can also pass situationally, for convenience, or to gain access to spaces otherwise closed to them.<sup>8</sup> Hobbs suggests that passing is always an act of rebellion since it challenges the social construct of race within a hegemonic society.<sup>9</sup> Passing demonstrates that identities are constructed categories that can be performative. Moreover, it disturbs the expectations of people who want to base identity on visual signifiers linked to race.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of passing exposes the unreliability of assumed visual signifiers and the flaw in using them to construct identity.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, it defies essentialist notions that someone's identity reveals "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial . . .

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<sup>5</sup> The decision to analyze passing vis-à-vis Bhabha's theory is made because passing involves a form of mimicry; the tension inherent in the act of passing is to some extent similar to the ambiguity within Bhabha's concept of mimicry, as it simultaneously involves internalization and parody. Therefore, although colonialism and the Jim Crow South are two different systems, Dimple Godiwala emphasizes that Bhabha's theories can be applied to "any hierarchized subject who perceives the values of another group as superior to his or her own and aspires to the ideologically constructed behaviour, attitudes, and culture of that group." "Postcolonial Desire," 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 8-10.

<sup>9</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 8-10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

‘selves.’”<sup>12</sup> According to essentialist definitions, a person’s essential identity is determined according to their skin color, biological sex, or other physical characteristics.

Postcolonial theory, however, reframes identity as something fluid and mutable. Stuart Hall, for example, argues that identity is both a matter of “becoming” and a matter of “being.”<sup>13</sup> To be more precise, one’s identity is created through one’s personal history and cultural background. Simultaneously, one’s sense of identity is continually transformed by life experiences.<sup>14</sup> Neraud notes that the definition of passing “paradoxically undercuts and reinscribes an anti-essentialist position.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, passing demonstrates that identities are performed. On the other hand, successful passing as white requires that passers overperform “classifications which have historically been assigned on biological heritage and the body.”<sup>16</sup> To escape notice, the passer must assimilate assumptions about the characteristics of particular racial identities.<sup>17</sup>

### **Passing on America’s White Ideals**

The plot of *The Vanishing Half* revolves around the identical twins: Stella and Desiree Vignes. Throughout the novel, the twins are juxtaposed in Stella’s decision to pass as white and Desiree’s decision not to pass. This juxtaposition highlights the extent to which Stella’s act is a consequence of her internalization of colorism, a form of discrimination in which people with a lighter skin tone are treated more favorably than people with a darker skin tone.<sup>18</sup> Colorism preserves whiteness as the ideal of beauty and upholds a social hierarchy based on race.<sup>19</sup>

Although both sisters grew up in Mallard, Stella internalizes the village’s “colorstruck” ideologies while Desiree actively resists

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<sup>12</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 222-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Passing Interest*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> National Conference for Community and Justice, “Colorism.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

them.<sup>20</sup> In Mallard, a light skin is seen as a “gift,” and the ideal of whiteness is promoted in school.<sup>21</sup> For instance, during the Founder’s Day picnic of the school, speeches are given by the teachers about Alphonse Decuir, the founder of Mallard, and his ideology. Alphonse’s ideas center around the creation of “a more perfect Negro [sic].”<sup>22</sup> This phrase echoes the preamble of the United States Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form *a more perfect Union*, establish Justice.”<sup>23</sup> Paralleling the preamble of the constitution, the phrase emphasizes that lightness of skin is inscribed in the “civic identity” of Mallard. Additionally, the twins “grew up hearing stories about folks who’d pretended to be white.”<sup>24</sup> In these stories, passing is perceived by Stella as “funny” and even “heroic.”<sup>25</sup> In this manner, the girls are indoctrinated with the idea that having a light skin is beautiful and desirable. Moreover, growing up in Mallard teaches the girls that “whiteness” has practical advantages.<sup>26</sup> That Stella internalizes these views can be concluded from the first time she enters Darlene’s Charms shop, which is for white people only. In this passage, she enters the shop without changing her voice, gestures, clothing, or hair. However, because the shop is for white people only, the cashier perceives her as white, allowing Stella to purchase items that are otherwise unavailable to her. According to the omniscient narrator, this makes her act “practical, so practical that, at the time, her decision seemed laughably obvious.”<sup>27</sup> Stella’s passing as white in the shop demonstrates that racial categories are constructed, emerging not from a set of verifiable signifiers but imposed on those signifiers in arbitrary ways. A few years later, after Stella and Desiree have run away from Mallard, Stella takes a secretary job in New Orleans

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<sup>20</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> National Archives, *The Constitution of the United States*, emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 78.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> When using “whiteness” in this context, I am referring to the assumptions of the society of the time about what whiteness entails, rather than suggesting that whiteness and Blackness can be located as verifiable categories within the world.

<sup>27</sup> Bennet, *The Vanishing Half*, 250.

intended for white people only. After holding the job for half a year, Stella decides to leave Desiree behind for good. Stella makes this decision because of practicality and because she meets Blake Sanders, her future husband. She and Blake start a relationship in which she starts to benefit from the privileges of his whiteness: he is respected, and he offers elevated social and economic stability. Stella's benefit from these privileges, in combination with her internalization of Mallard's colorism, cause her to perform more committedly the assumed social signifiers of whiteness.

In contrast, Desiree resists colorist assumptions. As a child, Desiree "rolled her eyes" at the mention of Mallard's founder rather than listen to speeches about him.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, when Desiree learns the history of Mallard, she decides that she does not want "to be a part of the town that was her birthright. How she felt like you could flick away history like shrugging a hand off your shoulder."<sup>29</sup> It becomes evident that Desiree tries to ignore the topic of colorism when people talk about it. "[E]veryone's obsession with lightness" is the reason why Desiree wants to run away from Mallard: "They funny down there. Colorstruck. That's why I left."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Desiree resists these ideals of colorism after leaving the village by marrying "the darkest man she could find."<sup>31</sup> In this act, she consciously opposes Mallard's colorism since "in Mallard nobody married dark."<sup>32</sup> Desiree's resistance to racist ideals draws attention to Stella's internalization of them. Stella's decision to perform whiteness, with its subsequent painful consequences, is emphasized through the omniscient narrator's shifts in focalization between Stella and Desiree's narratives. Moreover, the fact that the two protagonists are identical twins emphasizes the social construction of colorism and race even more.

Throughout the novel, Stella performs race and class roles traditionally assigned to white upper-class women. For instance, she adjusts her dialect from African American Vernacular English

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, 10 and 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, 5.

(AAVE) to General American English.<sup>33</sup> As Frantz Fanon has argued, speech can “measure” how people culturally adapt: by speaking a language, one adopts a culture.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Stella speaks AAVE. When the twins are starting a job in the Dixie Laundry factory, just after running away, Stella comments: “I don’t care how many toilets I got to jump in. . . . I ain’t goin back to Mallard.”<sup>35</sup> Apart from using the word *ain’t* (here for “am not”), which is a typical feature of AAVE, Stella pronounces the word *going* not with a velar nasal at the end, but with an alveolar nasal (like in the word *nasal* itself). This is frequent in AAVE, and in almost all Southern American English varieties, and is known as *g*-dropping because the final *g* is not written to represent this change (although no actual sound is dropped in the pronunciation).<sup>36</sup> In addition, Stella leaves out the auxiliary verb *have* in “I got to jump in.”<sup>37</sup> She also leaves out the copula in “White folks, so easy to fool!”<sup>38</sup> These are also common features in AAVE.<sup>39</sup> Stella uses language differently after she decides to pass, speaking with different features. Desiree also notes this change during their reunion at the end of the novel: “‘You talk different now,’ Desiree said. ‘What do you mean?’ Stella said. ‘Like that. Wut do you mean. How’d you learn to talk like that?’ Stella paused, then smiled. ‘Television,’ she said. ‘I used to watch hours of it. Just to learn how to sound like them.’”<sup>40</sup> Desiree points out that Stella speaks in a different variety pronouncing “what” like “wut,” which is common in General American English. Stella’s reply also emphasizes that she actively learned how to sound like white upper-class Americans.

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<sup>33</sup> AAVE is a variety of English which is primarily spoken by working and middle-class African Americans. This variety exhibits many similarities with Southern American varieties in terms of phonology and syntax. In this sense, this dialect is a result of intersections between geography, social class, and the community. Thomas, “Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics,” 452.

<sup>34</sup> *Black Skin*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Yuan and Liberman, “‘g-dropping’ in American English.”

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas, “Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics of African American Vernacular English,” 450.

<sup>40</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 360.

Stella's passing can be usefully understood through Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Bhabha suggests that colonization sets up a hierarchy of cultures, creating the conditions in which the colonized begin to mimic certain aspects of the colonizer's culture, although in so doing he also suggests that the colonized can begin to deconstruct that very cultural hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella internalizes colorism and, as a result, takes over certain language characteristics traditionally assigned to upper-class white women. Moreover, Stella's word choices reveal that she has started to mimic beliefs in negative stereotypes about African Americans. She often calls her daughter Kennedy "darling" instead of "honey," which she uses at the beginning of the novel to refer to Desiree.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Stella describes Kennedy's acting as "marvelous" and "lovely."<sup>43</sup> These words, commonly associated with a higher social class, reflect Stella's rise in social class status and alienation from her previous life in Mallard. Besides, after Jude confronts Stella with the truth at the theater in Los Angeles, Stella describes Jude, Desiree's daughter, as "that dark girl [who] emerged from the shadows" and the "dark girl [that kept on] creeping up."<sup>44</sup> These words articulate Stella's belief in racist stereotypes about African Americans. Stella imagines Jude as a Black girl waiting in the shadows to creep up and blackmail her. This belief is based only on the color of Jude's skin, which Stella immediately associates with negative stereotypes about Black people. In this case, the stereotype is that African Americans steal from white women: "Maybe this girl thought she could come to California and threaten to expose Stella. Blackmail her, even!"<sup>45</sup> Although Stella showcases the performative nature of racial identity in her act of passing, to do so she has started to accept essentialist notions of African Americans, reinscribing stereotypes from the dominant white culture.

In this sense, Stella's mimicry has a negative impact on the African American characters in the novel. Rather than Bhabha's

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<sup>41</sup> Godiwala, "Postcolonial Desire," 61.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 287, 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*, 287.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*, 284, 288.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*, 284.



performative mimicry, it is a mimicry that thoroughly integrates the hegemonic structures of the colonizer.<sup>46</sup> As Dimple Godiwala argues, the colonized can either mock and question the dominant structures of Western colonialism or internalize the colonizer's values and beliefs so thoroughly as to repeat the hegemonic structures of colonial discourse.<sup>47</sup> In this second form of mimicry, the colonized person preserves the hierarchies of Western power by unconsciously internalizing the colonizer's insidious values.<sup>48</sup> Godiwala argues that this can happen easily, such that mimicry has become dangerous. Racist ideologies now become embedded in the attitudes of the colonized, who repeat that same attitude towards the same non-white people they represent.<sup>49</sup>

Through Stella's thorough performance of whiteness, she reinscribes a racial hierarchy and enforces it on other African Americans. When Reggie, Loretta, and Cindy Walker, an African American family, want to move into Stella's white neighborhood, she is the most "fervent" objector at an "emergency Homeowners Association meeting."<sup>50</sup> During the meeting, Stella "gripped the room" with her speech, even though "she [normally] never spoke up in their meetings" and "wasn't one for demonstrating."<sup>51</sup> Stella's intense need to speak up at the meeting demonstrates her commitment to hindering the integration of the Black family into the neighborhood. It also emphasizes how Stella tries to reinforce the segregation of white neighborhoods from colored neighborhoods. Although Stella also wants to block the family's presence in fear that they could uncover and reveal that she is secretly passing, in doing so she actively preserves the dominant ideology of Jim Crow.

Moreover, Stella teaches this white supremacist ideology to her daughter, Kennedy. Through Stella's focalization of the narrative, readers learn that Kennedy is not allowed to play with Cindy after the Walker family eventually does move into the

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<sup>46</sup> Godiwala, "Postcolonial Desire," 62-3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*, 63.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*, 66.

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 164-5.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

neighborhood. When Stella catches the girls playing dolls together, “[s]he’d stormed across the street and grabbed her daughter’s arm, both girls gaping as she dragged Kennedy back into the house.”<sup>52</sup> Once inside, Stella uses a racial epithet to explain to Kennedy why she should not play with Cindy.<sup>53</sup> After this passage in the novel, the narration shifts in time to Stella’s childhood and reminds the reader how a woman once discriminated against Stella as she played with a white neighbor. Even though Stella was once forbidden from playing with a white girl, she reiterates what the white mother said to her when she was younger and teaches the same ideas about Black people to her daughter. Stella’s mimicry of the white mother emphasizes that she has internalized white supremacy. Later on in the novel, Kennedy repeats these ideas to Cindy, reminding Cindy that she does not play with her because she is Black.<sup>54</sup> In this manner, Stella repeats the racial slur towards Black people and even teaches racial biases to the next generation.

### **Overcoming America’s Binaries by Passing**

Like Stella, most citizens of Mallard have internalized colorism. Everyone’s “obsession with lightness” is inscribed in the “civic identity” of Mallard.<sup>55</sup> At the local barbershop, men argue “about whose wife was fairer.”<sup>56</sup> According to the narrator, Mallard’s residents “believ[ed] ridiculous things, like drinking coffee or eating chocolate while pregnant might turn a baby dark.”<sup>57</sup> In this sense, the creation of the fictional town of Mallard “literalizes colorism” because the idea of colorism pervades the village so thoroughly that it becomes immediately “tangible and concrete” for the reader.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, most citizens reinforce these ideas within the village. After Desiree leaves her abusive husband and returns to Mallard with Jude, Jude is continually discriminated against by both the adults and her peers in the village. Jude’s darker skin tone makes

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<sup>52</sup> *Id.*, 185.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*, 223.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Bennett, interview.

her stand out in Mallard, leading some citizens to make “crude whispers . . . each time [Desiree and Jude] walked around town.”<sup>59</sup> Later, as an adult, Jude enumerates the degrading names she was called as a child in Mallard: “Tar Baby. Midnight. Darky. Mudpie. Said, Smile, we can’t see you. Said, You so dark you blend into the chalkboard [sic].”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Mallard’s citizens pass them over to the next generation, in which they again preserve colorism. Jude’s grandmother, for example, pressures Jude to keep “out of the sun” during the summer and to wear a “big gardening hat” to ensure that her skin does not darken any further.<sup>61</sup> These harmful instructions reaffirm Jude’s racial self-loathing, teaching her that her skin tone does not adhere to Mallard’s ideals. In this context, the colorism of Mallard’s citizens is so thoroughly embedded in their community that they reinscribe the hegemonic structures of white America in their behavior toward other African Americans within their community. This behavior corresponds to Godiwala’s negative form of mimicry.

At the same time, their acts of passing, and the idea behind Mallard as a village, resist and ridicule racial segregation laws. According to Bhabha, mimicry can mock the authority of the colonizer and pose a threat to the “normalized knowledges” of the host culture.<sup>62</sup> In copying the norms of the colonizing culture, the colonized subject becomes familiar to the colonizer but not quite the same.<sup>63</sup> This difference allows the colonized to question the norms of the colonizer and recognize their flaws. As a result, the colonized can destabilize the hegemonic and cultural relations within society.<sup>64</sup> However, Bhabha points out that mimicry can only destabilize this power if the colonizer is aware that the colonized subject is not quite the same.<sup>65</sup>

This form of mimicry is found in Bennett’s novel. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator mentions that

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<sup>59</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*, 94.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> “Location of Culture,” 86.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Godiwala, “Postcolonial Desire,” 62.

<sup>65</sup> “Location of Culture,” 86.

Mallard “was more idea than place.”<sup>66</sup> The idea behind Mallard mocks the authority of segregation laws. The town’s founder, Alphonse, imagined a place in between the binaries of the segregation laws: “The idea arrived to Alphonse Decuir in 1848, as he stood in the sugarcane fields he’d inherited from the father who’d once owned him . . . A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes [sic]. A third place.”<sup>67</sup> In creating Mallard, Alphonse resists racial segregation laws, which rest upon the binary of Black versus white. Instead, he creates “a third place” from which its citizens can resist both categories; they neither define themselves as “Negroes [sic],” nor as white.<sup>68</sup> From this liminal place, citizens undermine the normalized knowledges of the Jim Crow era and pose a threat to the racial hierarchy. For example, many of its citizens regularly pass as white: “Warren Fontenot, riding a train in the white section, . . . Marlena Goudeau becoming white to earn her teaching certificate, [and] . . . Luther Thibodeaux, whose foremen marked him white and gave him more pay.”<sup>69</sup> By momentarily passing, Mallard’s citizens not only show that race is a social construct but also resist social categorization.

In addition, the novel contrasts this setting, Mallard during the segregation era, with other narrative settings. Although the novel centers on Louisiana in the 1960s, *The Vanishing Half* shifts settings from the early 1960s to the late 1990s and from Louisiana to Los Angeles and New York. Through these shifts, the novel provides snapshots of various American societies. These time and space shifts contrast earlier essentialist notions of identity with the more contemporary notion of identity as a mutable concept. For instance, the novel contrasts Louisiana during the Jim Crow era, a society that is grounded in the binary of black and white, with the multicultural city of New York in the 1990s. The novel’s shifts in time and space suggest the absurdity of racial essentialism.

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<sup>66</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*, 73.

In particular, the novel challenges the essentialist notions of identity through the character of Kennedy, who becomes a professional actress. It is through her character that the novel emphasizes how everyone performs an identity. Of her work as an actress, Kennedy notes that “[t]rue acting meant becoming invisible so that only the character shone through.”<sup>70</sup> This comment can be taken quite literally. Kennedy, who was raised as “white,” has unconsciously been acting all her life: “Her whole life, in fact, had been a gift of good fortune—she had been given whiteness. Blonde hair, a pretty face, a nice figure, a rich father. She’d sobbed out of speeding tickets, flirted her way to endless second chances. Her whole life, a bounty of gifts she hadn’t deserved.”<sup>71</sup> Despite Kennedy living as white, the one-drop rule of the Jim Crow era—which defined that any amount of African heritage made one African American—would have made her Black.<sup>72</sup> According to the framing of the novel, which is mostly set in the segregation era, it can be said then that Kennedy has been passing as white because of her Black mother. This example of Kennedy underscores that race is constructed through external signifiers. However, the novel uses Kennedy—an actress—to play with the concept of identity. To be more precise, *The Vanishing Half* creates an analogy between acting, passing, and reality, blurring the lines between these three concepts. If Kennedy has been “passing” all her life, the novel asks readers whether her “white” identity then not has become reality. The novel shows that the act of passing is not simply an act of crossing the border from one category to another but moreover entails a nature of becoming both/and; the analogy between passing and reality shows how passing does multiple things at once. Acts of passing in the novel take place across, over, and between identity categories. In this regard, *The Vanishing Half* defies the notion that identities are discrete, natural, and fixed.

Lastly, Desiree Vignes’ decision not to pass as white challenges the segregation laws and the social hierarchy based on race. When Desiree looks for a job after returning to Mallard, she

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<sup>70</sup> *Id.*, 299.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.*, 336.

<sup>72</sup> Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 10.

faces racial discrimination. During her interview for a job as a fingerprint examiner at the local Sheriff's Department, the deputy is very impressed by her resume. She had previously examined fingerprints during her ten years of employment at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C. The deputy notices "in amazement" that her print examiner test "might have been a record."<sup>73</sup> However, once he "saw [that] her address is listed in Mallard," he dismisses her and says: "No use wasting my time."<sup>74</sup> The moment he discovers that Desiree is African American, he rejects her for the job. In this passage in the novel, the deputy perceives Desiree as white because she has a light skin tone and previous professional work experience. Although Desiree could have gotten the job by either deliberately passing as white by omitting her address, she decides not to. When the deputy then decides to reject her for her skin color, she accepts the consequences. This example displays how Desiree exerts agency over her own identity, resisting the efforts of others to impose a white identity on her. Simultaneously, it shows how assumed external markers of identity still have social and economic effects. Although Desiree demonstrates that her skin color has nothing to do with her ability to recognize fingerprints, her African heritage is the reason why she has been turned down for the job. This rejection has decisive economic consequences on her life.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, *The Vanishing Half* uses the theme of passing to analyze race and class constructs in the United States, emphasizing the tension inherent in the act of passing. This tension is most visible through the novel's main characters. While Stella challenges assumptions about the visibility of race and class categories, she also strengthens the ideologies of racism and colorism by conforming to white upper-class ideals. Moreover, she has internalized these ideologies and transmits them to her daughter, Kennedy. The examples of Kennedy, Desiree, and Mallard's citizens, however, demonstrate that the act of passing can be a strategy to resist and

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<sup>73</sup> Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 47-8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

undermine hegemonic norms. Mallard's citizens perform as white to ridicule racial segregation laws and resist categorization. Their village is an in-between space, which is uncategorizable in terms of the established binaries of the segregation era. At the same time, the citizens preserve the ideals of colorism. Desiree decides not to pass as white, the efforts of others to impose a white identity on her. The novel's nuanced characters depict the difficulties and tensions inherent in the act of passing; characters who pass simultaneously reinscribe and undermine the dominant social construction of race in the United States. Moreover, the novel underscores how passing is not simply crossing the line from one social category to another. Instead, the novel redefines passing as an act which does multiple things at once. In this, the novel challenges essentialist notions of identity, most notably through Kennedy. Through Kennedy, the novel blurs the binaries between passing, acting, and reality, thereby demonstrating that identity categorizations based on visible external signifiers are flawed. In this manner, the multicultural characters are an ideal basis upon which Bennett reimagines what a twenty-first-century passing narrative looks like.

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*“Of Course I Have a Self Here”*

## “Of Course I Have a Self Here”: Migration, In-Betweenness, and Sense of Self in the Narrative Art of Lucia Berlin<sup>1</sup>

Paulina Bastián Alvarado

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When people migrate and experience intercultural contact, they often find themselves performing different types of crossings as they dwell in between countries, cultures, and languages. This ambivalent experience of living among worlds, as theorists have put it, constitutes the condition of “in-betweenness.” According to Anne Sigfrid Grønseth, living in between is “a cognitive, bodily, emotional and existential human experience” for migrants as they “move between places, times and conditions.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, alluding to the fact that when people migrate, they do so not only across physical spaces but also across symbolic and metaphorical ones, MariaCaterina La Barbera defines migration as “the material and existential condition of being at the borderland, in-between, in transit.”<sup>3</sup> Using this framework, the present article analyzes the condition of in-betweenness in Lucia Berlin’s short story collection *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (2015). Through the close reading of four stories that foreground unique personal accounts of mobility, interculturality, and bilingualism, I study the subjective effects of these experiences and their impact on their protagonist’s identity and sense of self. In doing so, I discuss how migration affects the protagonist’s psyche and alters

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a modified version of the second chapter of my master’s thesis “Living in the Borderlands: Migration, *Mestizaje*, and Border Identity(ies) in the Narrative Art of Lucia Berlin,” Leiden University, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Identity and Migration,” 10.

her self-perception, causing her to experience—and remain in—a state of in-betweenness.

Lucia Berlin (1936–2004) was a US-American short story writer who spent most of her life traveling through and living in different Latin American and U.S. cities.<sup>4</sup> As Elizabeth Geoghegan puts it, Berlin “moved, albeit not quite seamlessly, between lives, between worlds.”<sup>5</sup> An almost unknown writer during her life, Berlin only was rediscovered and widely acclaimed in 2015. But despite becoming a literary sensation and receiving extensive media attention, Berlin has received limited academic attention. The existing scholarship on Berlin’s work focuses on the autobiographical and metafictional aspects of her writing, mainly tackling the similarities between her stories and her personal life.<sup>6</sup> An example of this approach aimed at a non-academic audience can be found in the foreword to *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, where Lydia Davis explains that “Lucia Berlin based many of her stories on events in her own life . . . Although people talk, as though it were a new thing, about the form of fiction known in France as auto-fiction (‘self-fiction’) . . . Lucia Berlin has been doing this, or a version of this . . . from the beginning, back in the 1960s.”<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, the present article offers an original contribution to the study of Berlin’s work by addressing her stories from the field of migration studies, enriching current scholarship on the literary representation of migration and the subjectivities of migrant women.

The four stories analyzed here, “So Long,” “Fool to Cry,” “Panteón de Dolores,” and “Wait a Minute,” can be read as a fragmented narrative about the same set of facts, characters, and events narrated by one and the same character-bound narrator and

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<sup>4</sup> Although the commonly used demonym for people from the United States is “American,” in this article I use the term “US-American.” The reason for this is that the former lacks accuracy and is often misleading: since America is an entire continent, an American could actually be anyone from North, Central, or South America. In brief, “US-American” is a more appropriate and non-imperialist demonym for people from the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> “Smoking with Lucia.”

<sup>6</sup> See for example Ellis, “The Short Autofictions of Eve Babitz, Lucia Berlin and Bette Howland;” Navarro Romero, “The Beautiful and the Dirty.”

<sup>7</sup> “Foreword,” x.

focalizer. In each story, the narrator is a middle-aged US-American woman whose name is not disclosed and whose sister Sally, a US-American living in Mexico City, has terminal cancer. To take care of her ill sister, the protagonist has quit her job, moved out of her home in Oakland, California, and relocated to Mexico indefinitely. As my analysis will show, although each story is set at a different point in time, they complement each other and tackle the same topics. In all four stories, the prospect of Sally's death intertwines with the mental, emotional, and sensorial impact of having a new life both in a foreign country and in a different language. In the following sections, I argue that moving to Mexico affects the protagonist's sensory perception, psyche, and, in particular, her identity. I claim that one of the many consequences of the protagonist's relocation to a new sociocultural environment and changing of languages is a feeling of geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation, resulting in the loss of both a sense of belonging and a sense of self. In the final section of this article, I connect the in-betweenness of migration to the fragmentation of the protagonist's identity, which I argue is reflected in the fragmentation of the narrative itself.

### **Life In Between Worlds: A Starting Point**

In Berlin's stories, the experience of living in between Mexico and the U.S. is the starting point for a number of other experiences of in-betweenness, ambivalence, and contradiction. Of these, the experiences in between cultures, between languages, and between life and death are the most predominant. Throughout the stories, the protagonist constantly reflects on and tries to understand the overall condition of in-betweenness in which she finds herself and the persistent feelings of confusion and discomfort that derive from it. She observes her immediate surroundings through the eyes of a foreigner, describing what she finds beautiful and strange about Mexico City by contrasting it with the familiar environment in the U.S. that she has left behind. The following quote from "Wait a Minute" sums up the protagonist's in-betweenness and serves as an introduction to her predicament: "The *camote* man whistles in the street below and then you help your sister into the *sala* to watch

Mexico City news and then U.S. news with Peter Jennings.”<sup>8</sup> As the fragment shows, the protagonist not only writes using both English and Spanish, the two languages she speaks, but also refers to two different national newscasts that, in turn, symbolize—and explicitly refer to—the two different worlds that come together in this sequence of stories: the US-American and the Mexican. These two worlds encompass a set of dualisms: two cultures, two social systems, two languages, two systems of knowledge, and so on.

During the protagonist’s time in Mexico City, she not only experiences life in a foreign country but also spends her days providing care and support to her ill sister. Consequently, in all four stories the protagonist recounts that she has been emotionally affected by migration as much as by her sister’s illness, describing moments and situations in which she has felt bewildered, gloomy, and displaced. These emotional states are expressed through the protagonist’s reflection on her sensory perceptions and the multiple contrasts she perceives in various issues. One of the most prominent causes of the protagonist’s perplexity is the imminence of Sally’s death, which contrasts with Sally’s apparent vitality and the closeness of the pair’s relationship. This state in between life and death occupies a significant place in her narration. In “Fool to Cry,” the protagonist describes her sister as full of life and sensuousness:

Everyone stares at her, fascinated . . . Everyone knows she is dying, but she has never looked so beautiful or happy . . . it is as if the sentence [of death] had been a gift. Maybe it’s because she fell in love with Xavier the week before she found out. She has come alive. She savors everything. She says whatever she wants, does whatever makes her feel good. She laughs. Her walk is sexy, her voice is sexy. She gets mad and throws things, hollers cusswords . . . She is strong, radiant now; her zest is contagious.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 381.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Although a central theme of the four stories is Sally's illness, the protagonist narrates that her sister does not appear to be sick. Furthermore, the protagonist explains that even though Sally's health and voluptuousness gradually but inevitably fade, their relationship does not deteriorate. In fact, as time passes and Sally's condition worsens, the sisters' friendship becomes stronger than ever before, a development that stands in striking contrast to the prospect of death. At the beginning of "So Long," the protagonist describes her life with Sally as follows: "I have lived in Mexico City for almost a year now. My sister Sally is very ill. I take care of her house and children, bring her food, give her injections. I read to her, wonderful books. We talk for hours, cry and laugh, get mad at the news, worry about her son out late."<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, this intimate routine creates a symbiosis between the sisters. Referring to this emotional and sensorial connectedness, the protagonist says: "It is uncanny, how close we have become. We have been together all day for so long. We see and hear things the same way, know what the other is going to say."<sup>11</sup> This bonding becomes especially important when the protagonist remarks that their time together in Mexico City is their first experience of true sisterhood, which she compares to the unique sensation of love: "She and I have become close, sisters. That's been like falling in love."<sup>12</sup> However, as a negative consequence of this closeness, the protagonist feels she is losing her individual identity.

In the state in between Mexico and the U.S., between life and death, it is therefore significant how attached the sisters become. The protagonist's notion of selfhood is altered as she becomes a substantial part of Sally's life and leaves her own life behind. For this reason, the protagonist repeatedly reflects on her mixed feelings about being Sally's caregiver while residing in Mexico City. She finds local customs enduringly strange and admits to feeling both fascinated and annoyed by the many differences between Mexican culture and her own. This sense of strangeness is expressed in the text through the protagonist's constant feeling of physical closeness

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, 252.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, 230.

with others. In Mexico, she explains, she never gets to be alone; she is always in the company of Sally, relatives, friends, or strangers. Feeling a need to be on her own, in “So Long” she notes: “I miss solitude . . . In Mexico there is never not anyone else there. If you go into your room to read somebody will notice you’re by yourself and go keep you company. Sally is never alone. At night I stay until I am sure she is asleep.”<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of “Fool to Cry,” she adds:

Solitude is an Anglo-Saxon concept. In Mexico City, if you’re the only person on a bus and someone gets on they’ll not only come next to you, they will lean against you. When my sons were at home, if they came into my room there was usually a specific reason. Have you seen my socks? What’s for dinner? . . . But in Mexico, my sister’s daughters will come up three flights of stairs and through three doors just because I am there. To lean against me or say, *¿Qué honda?*<sup>14</sup>

This fragment contains one of the protagonist’s many comparisons between Mexican and US-American customs: in Mexico, she thinks, people behave differently, coming up to “lean against” her wherever she goes. Similarly, in “Panteón de Dolores,” the protagonist compares her sister’s personality with her own, saying that her own character is “more Mexican.” She explains that “Sally and her children have lived here for twenty-five years” and “Sally adores Mexico, with the fervor of a convert. Her husband, her children, her house, everything about her is Mexican. Except her. She’s very American, old-fashioned American, wholesome. In a way I am the more Mexican, my nature is dark . . . Most days I don’t even notice that period when the room has sunlight in it.”<sup>15</sup> The protagonist goes on to say that Sally, unlike herself, “sees beauty and goodness everywhere, in everyone. She loves her room, all the

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 249-50.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 221. *¿Qué honda?* is colloquial Spanish for “what’s up?”

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, 248.

souvenirs on the shelves.”<sup>16</sup> By essentializing both the Mexican and US-American characters, the protagonist tries to identify the prominent features of the two conflicting worlds around her, form an opinion about them, and thus understand the state of in-betweenness in which she finds herself. Likewise, by stating that everything about Sally is Mexican “except her,” the protagonist conveys that although her sister was not born in Mexico, she grew into Mexican culture and way of life. However, based on the protagonist’s perceptions of Mexico, she thinks Sally is too “wholesome” and cheerful to be a Mexican.

This kind of comparison between characters and customs, which can be found throughout the four stories, can be seen as an attempt by the protagonist to comprehend and cope with her geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation. Karim G. Dajani defines dislocation as “the removal of a person from a location organized by a particular set of cultural practices and placing them in another location organized by a substantially different set of cultural practices.”<sup>17</sup> By cultural practices, Dajani refers to shared ways of seeing, understanding, and behaving. As Dajani explains, relocation from one’s original home and community can affect a person in profound and fundamental ways. This dislocation can shock and alter the ego, producing “perceptual distortions, cognitive confusion and emotional turbulence.”<sup>18</sup> This sensory and affective response, in turn, can “generate serious problems like depression, alienation, confusion, excessive anger, frustration and other intense negative emotions.”<sup>19</sup> Dajani’s explanation provides a framework for understanding the protagonist’s transformations as she repeatedly claims to feel overwhelmed by her new life in Mexico. Cultural dislocation affects her senses and her psyche, causing her to experience emotional turmoil to the point that she feels not only stressed but also angry about Mexican culture. Intertwined with the protagonist’s sense of dislocation is her distress at Sally’s illness.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “Cultural Dislocation,” 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 18.



Thus, she asks herself: “Am I really just mad because Sally’s dying, so get mad at a whole country?”<sup>20</sup>

### **Life In Between Selves: The Relationship Between Language, Culture, and Identity**

To better understand the protagonist’s plight, it is worth considering that besides being relocated to a new sociocultural environment in which she is indispensable to her ill sister, she must communicate in a different language. Let us remember that although the protagonist knows Spanish, she is a native English speaker. I therefore argue that one of the main causes of the protagonist’s bewilderment and sense of self-alienation is that she must lead an entirely new life in a language that is not her mother tongue, altering her self-perception and eroding her sense of identity. For this reason, she recurrently thinks about the different languages to which she is exposed and the different identities that are attached to them. After describing the closeness she and Sally have developed, the protagonist narrates: “I speak Spanish with her and her children, everybody.”<sup>21</sup> And then, as if it were a consequence of living both in another country and in another language, she goes on to observe:

I feel I have vanished. Last week in the Sonora market I was so tall, surrounded by dark Indians, many of them speaking in Nahuatl. Not only was I vanished, I was invisible. I mean for a long time I believed I wasn’t there at all. Of course I have a self here, and a new family, new cats, new jokes. But I keep trying to remember who I was in English.<sup>22</sup>

In this fragment, the protagonist reflects on her individuality specifically in terms of language, thus bringing to the fore the complex relationship between language, culture, and identity. According to Vera da Silva Sinha, Ana Moreno-Núñez, and Zhen Tian, “Language has an inextricable connection with cultural

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<sup>20</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 249.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*, 253.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

identity and cultural practices, which in turn shapes personal identity.”<sup>23</sup> As they explain, “Language is the cord that ties the individual to their community” and culture, and it reflects the “socio-political values and world views” of said community.<sup>24</sup> The language we speak is connected to our origins and the culture or cultures we are familiar with; consequently, it shapes us and our perceptions of the world. What happens, then, when we are suddenly bereft of our native language and culture? As the fragment from “So Long” quoted above shows, the protagonist is immersed in a multilingual and multicultural foreign context, making her feel estranged and struggle to remember *who she was* before migrating. When she goes to the Mexican market, the protagonist finds herself surrounded by otherness in the form of “dark Indians” who speak a local indigenous language that she does not know. The reason for the protagonist’s sensory confusion and feeling of having “vanished” is that she is located in a completely unfamiliar environment where people only speak foreign languages, making her own language useless. Because her presence in the market seems to go completely unnoticed, the protagonist feels “invisible” to the point of believing she is not there at all. In other words, she has lost her sense of self.

Iain Chambers asserts that “language is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted. There is no clear or obvious “message,” no language that is not punctuated by its contexts, by our bodies, by our selves.”<sup>25</sup> This idea allows us to understand that the importance of language goes far beyond its utility for expressing and exchanging information. Language is intimately linked to our notion of self, “constitut[ing] our sense of identity, place and belonging.”<sup>26</sup> Juliana Díaz Baldocchi claims that, since humans are inherently social beings, communication with others is a constitutive part of personal identity. As she puts it, “the notion of the self is dialogically constructed through interrelationships with others, through language in a relation to

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<sup>23</sup> “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Migrancy*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 4.

social and cultural forces.”<sup>27</sup> Here, the importance of others lies in the fact that they play an active role in self-awareness. The relational and dialogical aspect of identity is particularly relevant in migration contexts since shifts in identity are a consequence of relocating. Díaz Baldocchi asserts that “identity for the migrant is recomposed as it fluctuates from a past native tongue and culture that is left behind, and a new language that constructs and defines the new self in a new place.”<sup>28</sup> In essence, identity changes as the language we speak changes.

Investigating language as a place of belonging, Irmina van Niele analyzes the cultural displacement that occurs when people migrate and move “through and across linguistic worlds.”<sup>29</sup> According to van Niele, one lives and grows up inside a language, and therefore one is that language.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, one is not quite the same person in different languages; one has a specific self imbricated with each language. Migration involves constant changeovers that challenge a person’s notion of selfhood. The most significant of these may be switching between languages, a process that is neither neat nor easy. As van Niele explains, “language is a cultural construction within which our identities exist; we cannot simply finish with one language and start with another, abandoning our previous identity.”<sup>31</sup> Van Niele claims that “language utters culture, through cultural thought-patterns expressed in words. The difficulty with translation is that it aims to transfer a particular set of thoughts, experienced by a particular self and in a particular place, into another language, while *different selves operate within these different languages*” (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> Here, translation is considered a practice not simply of finding equivalent meanings in different languages but, moreover, of finding equal ideas conceived by different identities. The notion of multiple, different selves is as predominant in van Niele’s theory as it is in Berlin’s stories, demonstrating that being immersed in a foreign environment and

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<sup>27</sup> “A Translation of the Self,” 97-8.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, 98.

<sup>29</sup> “Wandering Words,” 221.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, 211.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*, 210.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, 213.

having to communicate in another language can deeply affect a person's sense of self.

Let us take a closer look at the last part of the fragment from "So Long" quoted earlier: "Of course I have a self here . . . But I keep trying to remember who I was in English."<sup>33</sup> In addition to the protagonist's *current self* in Mexico, with its related affects and lifestyle, the protagonist has *another self* that exists in English and belongs to the U.S. Notably, she refers to this self in the past tense, as if English had become the language of the life and identity she left behind. With a new life in Spanish, she also has a new identity. These two selves coexist as integral parts of the protagonist's subjectivity; together, they constitute the narrator. But because they are embedded in different cultural frames of reference—the Anglo-American and the Latin American—these two selves are divergent. The protagonist has, indeed, two different identities, or, to put it in the words of Edwina Barvosa, a "decentered and multiple subjectivity."<sup>34</sup> Barvosa's theory, like van Niele's, belongs to a paradigm that regards individuality "not as a self-unifying system, but rather as a collection of selves that operate independently in different contexts."<sup>35</sup> This paradigm can be applied to Berlin's protagonist as she lives between two conflicting worlds and constantly reflects on her *selves* as if she were made up of "a mixture of different and contradictory identities."<sup>36</sup> As I explain in the next section, this state in between identities shapes not only the protagonist's psyche and self-perception but also her narrative construction.

### **The Fragmentation of the Narrative: A Consequence of In-Betweenness**

The experiences of in-betweenness and dislocation explored in the previous sections of this study are not just reflected in the content of Berlin's stories but also embodied in the fragmented structure of the narrative, which makes constant use of comparisons and flashbacks,

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<sup>33</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 253.

<sup>34</sup> *Wealth of Selves*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*, 58.

plays with chronology and scenery, and interpolates Spanish words. In part, this occurs because the protagonist and Sally spend their precious last moments in Mexico City analyzing each other’s past. Crucially, the protagonist mostly remembers another state of in-betweenness: a period when she had two romantic relationships at the same time and was undecided about which man to choose. These two men were opposites in many ways, different partners who represented distinct lifestyles and prospects in two different countries. Thus, this first in-between experience, this intersubjective space between individuals, also took place in between Mexico and the U.S. Living between worlds in Mexico City reminds the protagonist of earlier ambivalent experiences. As the protagonist delves into these experiences, the narrative shifts between her current life, her previous life in the U.S., and even earlier experiences elsewhere in Mexico. Memories bring her back to the present only to push her back into the past again. As each association leads to another and each in-between state follows another, the protagonist makes more comparisons between the two countries where she has lived.

In this peripatetic and scattered narration that moves between the present and the past, the protagonist also worries about the future. One reason for this restlessness is that she no longer considers her former country—the country where her sons and ex-husband live and to which her former identity belongs—to be her “home.” She has lost her sense of belonging there. As a consequence, she asks herself where she will go after Sally dies: “I’m here for an indefinite period. But then what, where will I go?”<sup>37</sup> The protagonist’s uncertainty resonates with Chambers’ notion of an “impossible homecoming” and his idea that migration “involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain.”<sup>38</sup> Adding to this idea, La Barbera observes that “the process that begins when one leaves his/her own country never ends, and it generates an unfinished condition of not yet belonging ‘here’ but no longer ‘there.’”<sup>39</sup> This is a condition of

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<sup>37</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 244.

<sup>38</sup> *Migrancy*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> “Identity and Migration,” 3.

in-betweenness. The perpetual displacement these authors describe is consistent with the migration experience of Berlin's protagonist and its representation in the four stories. Since the protagonist continually moves across worlds, she finds that neither time, space, sense of belonging, nor sense of self is fixed. This is why the four stories are organized as separate yet complementary segments of a fragmented narrative that is recounted by one narrative voice that constantly travels between places, times, languages, cultures, and identities.

It is precisely because the protagonist lives between two different worlds, no longer knowing where her home is and feeling as if she has lost her sense of self, that she repeatedly admits to feeling overwhelmed. She confesses: "I am terrified, I am losing all sense of what is . . . precious, true."<sup>40</sup> Overloaded with a myriad of sensations, she feels disoriented and lost. Discussing this feeling, Grønseth asserts that the experience of migration and its concomitant in-between state must be understood as an all-encompassing condition because it is "embodied in people's senses of self, well-being, emotions and consciousness in everyday living."<sup>41</sup> This condition permeates all aspects of a person's life; for this reason, it also permeates the narrative a person might create. I therefore conclude that the fragmentation of Berlin's stories is both a representation and a consequence of the protagonist's persistently discomfiting and confusing condition of in-betweenness. It is in an attempt to make sense of her particular migration experience that the protagonist travels back and forth between the present and the past, her new life in Mexico and her former life in the U.S., and her identities in Spanish and English. In doing so, the protagonist pinpoints the many cultural contrasts she perceives and builds a comparative portrait of Mexican and US-American cultures.

### **Conclusion**

My analysis of Berlin's stories has shown that the notion of in-betweenness as a mental, emotional, and sensory space is key to understanding the subjective effects of migration, interculturality,

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<sup>40</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 244.

<sup>41</sup> "Introduction," 2.

and bilingualism. Following Grønseth, who considers migration “not only as geographical movements from here to there, but also as movements that constitute an embodied, cognitive and existential experience of living ‘in between’ or on the ‘borderlands’ between differently figured life-worlds,”<sup>42</sup> I have argued that moving to Mexico affects the psyche, identity, and narrative of Berlin’s protagonist. One of the many consequences of her migration experience, I have shown, is a feeling of geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation. Another consequence, I have shown, is a loss of a sense of belonging and a sense of self. As I have discussed, Berlin’s stories foreground the psychological consequences of mobility and relocation, offering a realistic and personal account of migration from a first-person female point of view. Berlin’s stories, which have received scholarly attention only recently, enable a rich analysis of the subjectivity of migrant women and offer insight into what Tony Capstick describes as “the sometimes disorienting, sometimes stimulating experience of migration.”<sup>43</sup> Migration, I have argued, is much more than just the process of moving. More importantly, it is a state of the self in between—or rather, a state of the *selves*.

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<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Language and Migration*, ix.

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*Collective Identity in a Microstate*

## Collective Identity in a Microstate: The Sense of National Identity in San Marino

Nicole Molinari

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In this article, I use the case study of San Marino to argue that microstates have national identities with specific attributes that make those identities distinguishable and recognizable despite the restricted dimensions of the states. My analysis draws on the *Istanze d'Arengo* (IdAs), a unique form of direct democracy in San Marino consisting of petitions applications through which citizens can raise issues of public interest to the government. Studies on national identity have yet to examine these petitions, which offer unique insights into citizens' assumptions about the attributes of San Marino's national identity and suggest ways this identity differs from that of its much larger neighbor, Italy.

This article engages with broad debates around concepts of collective and national identity. Following Ohad David and Daniel Bar-Tal's conceptualization, I understand collective identity as belonging to the collective level. The identification process of the individual stands at the basis of the collective level. As the authors explain, the individual must recognize the group to which they belong, show a willingness to be part of the community through emotional attachment, and attribute importance to the community membership. However, the development of collective identity requires more than just individual identification. Further, all individuals in the community must know they share the same identification process. This awareness creates a sense of belonging, an identity whose definition is shared by all that characterizes the whole group as a unique entity.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will use David and

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<sup>1</sup> David and Bar-Tal, "A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity," 356-61.

Bar-Tal's model for studying collective identity, specifically national identity, to analyze the IdAs in a structured way.

Studies on national identity in microstates have focused on cases such as Luxembourg, Andorra, and Palau. In the case of Luxembourg, researchers explored the construction of its national identity and inner conflicts, also considering the relevance of language and multiculturalism. A study of Andorra specifically juxtaposed the importance of national identity with regional and territorial identity between individuals. And in the case of Palau, the focus was on how young people structure their identities.<sup>2</sup> Although relevant, these studies mostly explore identity at the individual level. In the case of San Marino, the most representative national identity studies are those of Lisa Gualtieri and the yearbooks published by the Associazione Dante Alighieri di San Marino, titled *Identità Sammarinese*.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Gualtieri offers a good overview of Sammarinese national identity; however, the author suggests that the characteristics discussed are broad and not very detailed. The author also focuses on the influence of identity on the country's relationship with the European Union.<sup>4</sup> The *Identità Sammarinese* yearbooks, of which there are currently fourteen, provide valuable information about the identity of San Marino through a wide range of written contributions that touch on various themes related to the state and its population. However, the stated intention of the publication is primarily to provide a space where any Sammarinese who wants to contribute can do so without academic training.<sup>5</sup> Despite their limitations, these studies on Sammarinese identity suggest that the Sammarinese population is characterized by a solid national identity despite the territory's small size, its enclosure within another sovereign state's territory, and its many affinities with Italy.

In this study, I rely on the concept of a "sense of national identity," defined by Anthony Smith as "a powerful means of

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<sup>2</sup> See Fehlen, "Struggling over Luxembourgish Identity;" Rohstock and Lenz, "The Making of the Luxembourger;" Murdock, "Identity and Its Construal;" Monné-Bellmunt *et al.*, "Identitas Inclusives i Complementàries a Andorra;" Agarwal, "Asserting Identity."

<sup>3</sup> Title translates to *Sammarinese identity*.

<sup>4</sup> Gualtieri, "The National Identity of the Republic of San Marino."

<sup>5</sup> Capicchioni, "Presentazione," 12.

defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture.”<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Smith’s definition of the concept, my article offers a new perspective on Sammarinese identity, focusing on the collective level and exploring national identity as shaped by perceptions rather than as a fixed concept. The originality of my approach also extends to the corpus that I study, the IdAs. However, the IdAs can only provide information regarding the interests of those citizens who participate in San Marino’s system of direct democracy. What is expressed in these documents cannot be interpreted as representative of San Marino’s entire population.

I begin by discussing the collective identity model developed by David and Bar-Tal, applying this model to categorize the attributes that inform the petitioners’ sense of national identity. I then investigate the IdAs, present some reflections on their usefulness and limitations, and perform a thematic analysis of the corpus. From this, I draw preliminary conclusions regarding the attributes of petitioners’ sense of national identity. Finally, I end with a short conclusion summarizing the contribution of this study to the extant literature on both San Marino’s and microstates’ national identity, the limitations of the study, and areas for further research.

### **The Analysis of the Istanze d’Arengo**

David and Bar-Tal’s collective identity model can help to examine any collective identity, but the authors specifically apply the framework to national identity (fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> The model is sociopsychological, bridging the individual level with the macro level and treating the individual as part of macro-systems such as nations. In Bar-Tal’s words, “individuals think, feel, and act as society members, and therefore any understanding of the functioning of

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<sup>6</sup> *National Identity*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> “A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity,” 357.

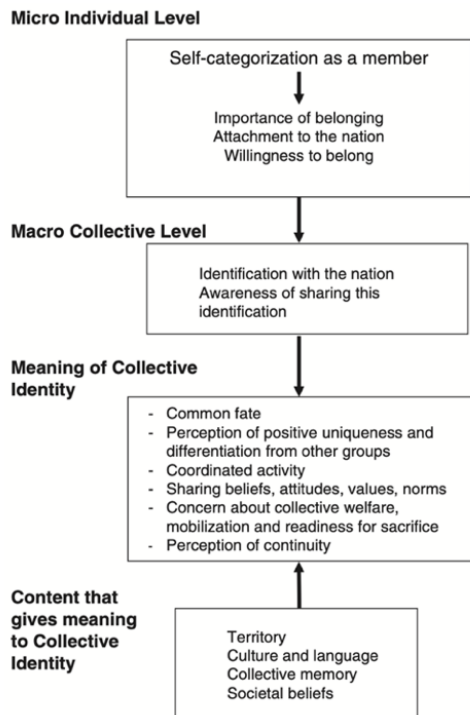


Figure 1. David and Bar-Tal’s “model of national identity.”<sup>10</sup>

social systems must include an analysis that relates between society members and societal system.”<sup>8</sup> The meaning of society can only be understood when considering the cognitive-affective repertoire of society members.<sup>9</sup> With this sociopsychological model, which treats collective identity as a macro-level issue, the relevance of the IdAs petitioners’ perceptions to understanding Sammarinese national identity is clear. Based on this model, the authors argue that national identity at the collective level relies on two pillars. One is

composed of generic features that characterize all national identities. These are features of national identity for citizens regardless of specific national context. The other pillar is formed of characteristics that define the uniqueness of national identities, the contents which give meaning to the first pillar.<sup>11</sup> The model provides a framework for studying the specific attributes that characterize the Sammarinese national identity.

The IdAs can be submitted to the Captains-Regent—San Marino’s two heads of state—by every adult citizen with the right to vote on the first Sunday after every start of the Captains-Regent’s term, once every six months. The distinctive aspect of these petitions is that they must be of public interest. Personal issues are not

<sup>8</sup> “Bridging Between Micro and Macro Perspectives in Social Psychology,” 343–5.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, 344.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, 359.

<sup>11</sup> David and Bar-Tal, “A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity,” 361–7.

allowed; issues raised in petitions must involve the collective. The petitions are presented to San Marino's parliament, known as the Great and General Council, and must be treated as a priority during the heads of state's term in office.<sup>12</sup> In the present research, I considered only those IdAs that explicitly refer to the issue of identity by containing the words *identità*,<sup>13</sup> *identitario/a*<sup>14</sup> or *sammарinesità* (a specific term that refers to attitudes, behaviors, and traditions that express a strong sense of belonging and identity within the Republic).<sup>15</sup> I analyzed twenty different IdAs dating from the ten years between 2012 and 2022.<sup>16</sup> Multiple citizens or local associations endorsed most of the IdAs I examined. Even when presented by a single person, these petitions speak as a community using the first-person plural. Hence, these documents suggest collective perceptions of petitioners that form their sense of national identity.

Unfortunately, not much information is available in the Great and General Council archive on the promoters of the different IdAs. However, various studies concerning other countries have found petition writers more educated than the general population. They are mostly older people and retirees with more time and significant socioeconomic resources than the rest of the population, primarily civic skills. In addition, petitioners belong to networks such as civic associations that expose them to more opportunities for participation in direct democracy. In general, they are more active in the political arena.<sup>17</sup> I argue that this is a description of the people whose perceptions I study here. However, given the restricted populace of San Marino, a more significant share of the population probably participates in direct democracy. Citizens, who know each other directly, are linked to their government through personal

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<sup>12</sup> "Legge 24 maggio 1995."

<sup>13</sup> Translates to *identity*.

<sup>14</sup> Translates to *identitarian*.

<sup>15</sup> Council of Europe/ERICarts, "Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe," 7.

<sup>16</sup> The time scope has been dictated by the availability of the *Istanze d'Arengo* in the official online archive of the Great and General Council.

<sup>17</sup> Sheppard, "Online petitions in Australia," 487-91; Lindner and Riehm, "Broadening Participation Through E-Petitions?," 13-9.

bonds, entailing greater political involvement and awareness of political issues.<sup>18</sup>

The IdAs are more relevant to a study of Sammarinese national identity than similar initiatives (e.g., legislative initiatives and motions to call a referendum) due to their more informal formulation, which can offer a more accurate account of people's real perceptions and genuine convictions.<sup>19</sup> Janne Berg has seen that more informal petitions tend to reveal more about emotions than formal ones. The language is more expressive and affective and better communicates what people feel is valuable to them.<sup>20</sup> The fact that identity is a recurring theme in these informal petitions shows that petitioners perceive identity as a central issue.

I analyzed the IdAs using a thematic approach. Thematic analysis explores social meaning around a topic, including people's views and perspectives. Since it aims to identify shared patterns, thematic analysis helps to understand a collective rather than an individual.<sup>21</sup> As Helene Joffe claims, thematic analysis is an ideal method to understand the "specific nature of a given group's conceptualization of the phenomenon under study" by considering the symbolic meaning and social construction of that phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> Since my analysis is based on the collective identity model of David and Bar-Tal, I adopt a deductive approach, identifying the main attributes that inform the sense of national identity and its subdimensions.

### **The Attributes of the Sense of Sammarinese National Identity**

According to David and Bar-Tal, the attributes that inform the meaning of national identity vary between nations. Depending on the context, some may be more prominent than others.<sup>23</sup> Still, the authors believe some general attributes shared by nations can be identified. I argue that these can be identified in the context of

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<sup>18</sup> Veenendaal, "Politics of the four European microstates," 157; Erk and Veenendaal, "Is Small Really Beautiful?," 140-1.

<sup>19</sup> Łukaszewski, "When the People's Needs Are Not Listened to," 125-6.

<sup>20</sup> Berg, "Political Participation in the Form of Online Petitions," 23-6.

<sup>21</sup> Clarke and Braun, "Thematic Analysis," 297.

<sup>22</sup> "Thematic Analysis," 212-3.

<sup>23</sup> Bar-Tal, *Shared Beliefs in a Society*, 124-5.

Sammarinese national identity through the analysis of the IdAs, which contain a range of specific aspects that the petitioners perceive as fundamental to their sense of national identity. These attributes are interconnected even if they can each be studied separately. The main characteristics of national identity identified by David and Bartal are shared territory, culture and language, collective memory, and societal beliefs that the community deems crucial for its existence.<sup>24</sup> Building on this framework, I have identified specific subthemes related to the Sammarinese sense of national identity, mainly associated with culture (fig. 2).

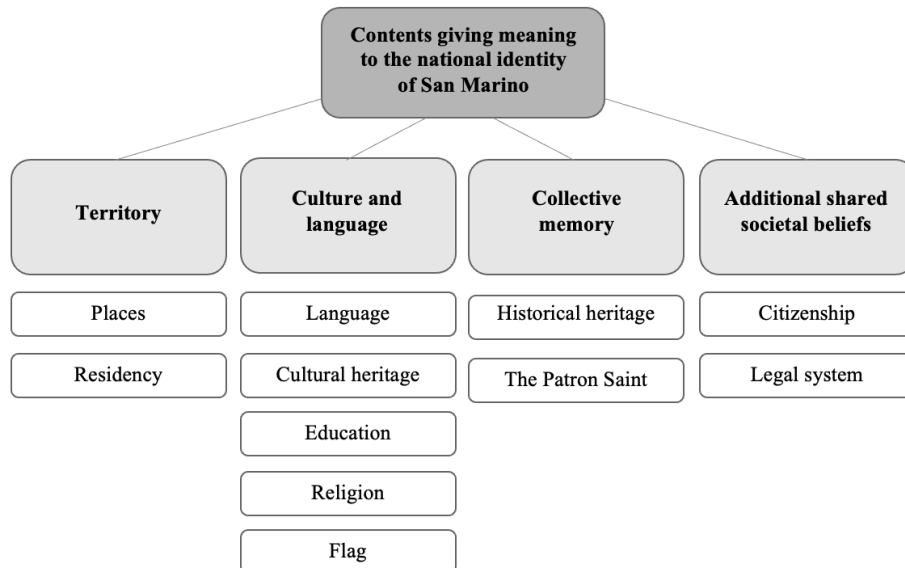


Figure 2: Characteristics of national identity of San Marino.<sup>25</sup>

Attachment of nationals to territories is a fundamental trait of national identity. The authors of many different IdAs highlight certain territory aspects relevant to their national identity. For example, the authors show significant attachment to specific places representing national identity. An IdA from 2017, approved by the Council, concerned the appropriate set off of the decorations and symbols on the exterior side of the Church of St. Francis. Here, the promoters addressed the Church as an important religious

<sup>24</sup> “A Sociopsychological Conceptualisation of Collective Identity,” 367-9.

<sup>25</sup> Author’s own representation.



monument, a precious source of collective memory for the community and its identity.<sup>26</sup> Another relevant IdA, also approved by the Council, concerns maintaining the management and public ownership of the *Casa per Ferie San Marino di Pinarella di Cervia*, the national summer colony. In the petition, which dates from 2014, the authors describe the colony as the holiday destination for a significant share of the Sammarinese community for decades and a symbol that “strengthens the Sammarinese identity and social ties among the territory’s citizens.”<sup>27</sup> They consequently claim that the place must be considered part of the collective heritage.<sup>28</sup> Another place petitioners perceive as prominent is the railway that used to connect the Republic with the Italian territory. An IdA approved in 2021 advocated for the completion of the bicycle path that now stands there, which it deemed a vital task considering “the important historical heritage of the Rimini-San Marino railway, a symbol of identity for Sammarinese citizens, and that the recovery of the Railway can keep its memory and identity alive.”<sup>29</sup>

Other petitioners discuss the capital's historical center and Mount Titan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Petitioners take pride in this designation and care about conserving the places they view as central to the nation. A specific theme related to the historical center concerns the notion of residency. In 2017 the residents’ association *Contiamoci* presented an IdA, later approved by the Council, discussing the value of residency in the historical center of San Marino and the importance of the area’s preservation and conservation. The association deemed the issue important because “over the years, depopulation was followed by the disappearance of essential services and life during night and winter, with a loss of Identity and Community becoming more and more

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<sup>26</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.21 del 2 aprile 2017.”

<sup>27</sup> Original text: “*rafforza l’identità sammarinese e i legami sociali fra i cittadini del territorio.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.4 del 05-10-2014.” Note that from this moment on, translations are the author’s own.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Original text: “*l’importante patrimonio storico della ferrovia Rimini-San Marino, simbolo di identità per i cittadini sammarinesi e che recuperare la Ferrovia possa tenerne viva la memoria e la storia.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.15 (04-04-2021).”

prominent.”<sup>30</sup> The inhabitants of the historical center declared that “they are in fact in love with their country, which they care about and strongly desire to contribute with their presence to keep alive Community and Identity, their properties, and being together,”<sup>31</sup> which would be lost if they had to leave. Therefore, the residents must be considered an essential defense of the intrinsic value of the Republic and the UNESCO heritage.<sup>32</sup>

Culture is a broad term that, in the context of national identity, refers to all the concrete aspects that define identity as unique and provide an account of its expression.<sup>33</sup> Culture is transmitted across generations and is continuously constructed and reconstructed. Many attributes can be included under the umbrella of culture. Many IdAs relate to the cultural theme, indicating that this is one of the most prominent aspects of petitioners’ national identity.

David and Bar-Tal argue that language is essential to national identity.<sup>34</sup> San Marino’s population does not have a distinct language but speaks Italian. An IdA from 2014, which the Council disapproved, asked the government to support school programs to safeguard and promote the Sammarinese dialect. As seen in the IdA, its promoters are still attached to their dialect. In their words, “the dialect—other than the unique treasure of our 1700 years of history—remains one of the few possibilities to protect our identities.”<sup>35</sup> The authors see preserving their dialect as protecting their national identity, roots, and traditions. In their view, the dialect symbolizes the collective heritage and its historical and civic memory, so the language must be maintained and transmitted to

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<sup>30</sup> Original text: “*Negli anni, allo spopolamento sono seguite la scomparsa di servizi essenziali e di vitalità nelle ore notturne e invernali, con una perdita di Identità e Comunità sempre più marcata.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.25 dell’8 ottobre 2017.”

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* Original text: “*Sono infatti innamorati del loro Paese a cui vogliono bene e desiderano fortemente contribuire con la loro presenza a tenere vive Comunità e Identità, le loro proprietà e lo stare insieme.*”

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Facos and Hirsh, *Art, Culture and National Identity in Fin-De-siècle Europe*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> “A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity,” 368.

<sup>35</sup> Original text: “*Il dialetto—oltre alla ricchezza unica dei nostri 1700 anni di storia—resta una delle pochissime possibilità di salvaguardia di queste identità.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.18 del 06-04-2014.”

future generations. The petitioners proposed to do this by introducing school activities to teach typical expressions, proverbs, and idioms of the Sammarinese dialect.

The petitioners emphasize the role of education in shaping national identity, especially that of young people. In addition to the 2014 IdA discussed above, my research uncovered three other petitions that regard education as a primary tool to teach the Republic's fundamental values, history, and cultural heritage, giving Sammarinese nationals a sense of community.<sup>36</sup> A 2018 IdA, which the Council ultimately disregarded, asked for the introduction of civic education as a school subject. Petitioners stated that “education for citizenship means carrying on a continuous and irreplaceable process directed toward the cultivation of the Sammarinese identity, also with the scope of understanding that we live in an international community with common interests.”<sup>37</sup> Introducing the topic could strengthen students’ national identity development and understanding of the Sammarinese community belonging in the petitioners’ opinion.<sup>38</sup> Another IdA from 2022, not accepted by the Council, proposed that parents give informed consent before their children participate in curricular and extracurricular educational activities. The petition wanted to ensure that the school did not usurp the role of families in children’s education. The consideration of families in the petition is, therefore, that of a relevant shaper of young people’s identities and communicator of the values of the Republic.<sup>39</sup> The other IdA on the topic, also from 2022, contained a request to increase art history education in Sammarinese schools. The Council did not approve the request, which reflects the petitioners’ belief that education makes students aware of their origins and develops a shared identitarian consciousness. Knowledge of the artistic traditions of the community plays a vital role, the petitioners claim:

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Original text: “*Educare alla cittadinanza significherebbe portare avanti un processo continuo ed irrinunciabile teso a coltivare l’identità sammarinese, anche allo scopo di far comprendere che viviamo in una comunità internazionale con interessi comuni.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.2 del 7 ottobre 2018.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.3 (02-10-2022).”

Recently, we have seen a more significant commitment to valorizing cultural heritage in our Republic and different countries. This new interest, starting from the knowledge of our history, aims to instill in young generations a critical sensibility and, at the same time, to allow them to rediscover a shared identitarian consciousness—thus making this heritage not only available to the collective, understood in the broadest terms, but also to dedicate it as a means of peaceful union among populations.<sup>40</sup>

This IdA suggests that cultural heritage is perceived as another critical attribute. Cultural heritage includes various cultural manifestations the community views as fundamental to its sense of national identity.<sup>41</sup> A 2017 IdA on the preservation and value of cultural and landscape assets represents San Marino's archaeological and historical sites as attributes of past communities and, therefore, as a source of collective memory. The authors of this petition write that “the preservation of cultural assets, especially in our country, becomes an identitarian issue to transmit to future generations and make it known to the rest of the world.”<sup>42</sup> Another IdA from 2014 on the ratification of the European Convention on the Protection of Archaeological Heritage, accepted by the Council, clarifies that the “knowledge, preservation and appreciation of

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<sup>40</sup> Original text: “*In tempi recenti si assiste, nella nostra Repubblica e nei diversi Paesi, a un crescente impegno volto a valorizzare il patrimonio culturale. Questo nuovo interesse, partendo dalla conoscenza della propria storia, aspira a far nascere nelle giovani generazioni una necessaria sensibilità e, al contempo, permette di ritrovare una comune coscienza identitaria culturale—rendendo così tale patrimonio non solo fruibile alla collettività, intesa nel più ampio senso possibile, ma anche facendolo assurgere a veicolo di unione pacifica tra i popoli.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.20 (03-04-2022).”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Original text: “*la tutela dei beni culturali, soprattutto nel nostro Paese, diventa un fatto identitario da trasmettere alle generazioni future e far conoscere al resto del mondo.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.6 del 2 aprile 2017.”

historical and archaeological heritage are fundamental for the development of cultural identity.”<sup>43</sup>

The emphasis on cultural heritage also reveals the importance that petitioners attribute to museums. In an IdA from 2020, petitioners called for a museum dedicated to Sammarinese pottery. Although the Council did not welcome the idea, the petition demonstrates that its authors perceive that the artistic field of pottery is integral to national identity. A pottery museum could help display the community’s capabilities and traditions across past centuries. In the minds of the petitioners, these artifacts make the San Marino citizenry unique.<sup>44</sup> Other artistic manifestations of cultural heritage are also perceived to provide meaning to national identity. Stonecutting, an ancient tradition dating from the founding of the Republic, was mentioned in an accepted 2017 IdA that concerned the set off of a master stonecutter’s sculpture representing St. Marinus. The petitioners claimed that stonecutting has a high cultural and identitarian value.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Sammarinese-dialect theater is mentioned in the IdA previously examined concerning the topic.<sup>46</sup>

Another perceived symbol of national identity in petitions is the Republic flag. The Council did not adopt two different IdAs concerning the institution of a national holiday dedicated to the flag, one from 2016 and the other from 2019. Nevertheless, for the authors of these petitions, the flag symbolizes the *sammarinesità*.<sup>47</sup> Religion is the last critical cultural characteristic. The IdA concerning the Church of St. Francis greatly emphasizes the Roman Catholic aspect of national identity.<sup>48</sup> The religious element of national identity is also related to the fact that a saint founded the Republic. A specific IdA from 2019, not approved by the Council,

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<sup>43</sup> Original text: “*la conoscenza, la tutela e la valorizzazione del patrimonio storico e archeologico rivestono fondamentale importanza nello sviluppo dell’identità culturale.*” “Istanza d’Arengo n.1 del 06-04-2014.”

<sup>44</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.2 (04-10-2020).”

<sup>45</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.18 del 2 aprile 2017.”

<sup>46</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.18 del 06-04-2014.”

<sup>47</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.22 del 3 aprile 2016;” “Istanza d’Arengo n.29 del 7 aprile 2019.”

<sup>48</sup> “Istanza d’Arengo n.21 del 2 aprile 2017.”

asked for having an image of St. Marinus in every public building to constantly memorialize the figure of the founder, a feature of national identity, and the Catholic path from which he took inspiration. In the authors' opinion, public representations of the saint would help to make everyone aware of the identity and history of the Sammarinese community.<sup>49</sup>

Essential for national identity is collective memory, which involves all memories of the past, critical events, and relevant people that shape the narratives around the nation. These narratives are passed among generations, providing the basis for the development of national identity in the present and future.<sup>50</sup> Petitioners perceive collective memory as associated with its sources in all the IdAs mentioned above and an additional one from 2017 not accepted by the Council regarding the naming of public institutions and buildings. For example, the Church of St. Francis is a *lieu de mémoire*. The material site is invested with a symbolic aura, a repository of history where memory is crystallized.<sup>51</sup> National historical heritage encompasses archaeological and historic sites, ancient buildings, historical figures, religious places, and more. This heritage is a vital attribute to petitioners' sense of national identity. Petitioners believe that conserving and restoring cultural heritage keeps memories of the community's history alive and strengthens the national identity. The petitioners also address the preservation of memory: "the preservation of historical memory is among those actions directed toward strengthening the identitarian factor in our country."<sup>52</sup> These actions allow future generations and the rest of the world to appreciate San Marino's historical memory and understand its peculiarity and relevance to the Sammarinese sense of national identity.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.22 del 6 ottobre 2019."

<sup>50</sup> Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory," 180-2.

<sup>51</sup> Nora, "Between Memory and History," 7-19.

<sup>52</sup> Original text: "*la tutela della memoria storica rientra fra le azioni volte a potenziare il fattore identitario del nostro Paese.*" "Istanza d'Arengo n.7 del 2 aprile 2017."

<sup>53</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.1 del 06-04-2014;" "Istanza d'Arengo n.6 del 2 aprile 2017;" "Istanza d'Arengo n.21 del 2 aprile 2017;" "Istanza d'Arengo n.15 (04-04-2021)."

The myth of the Republic's founding and the figure of its founder and patron saint, Marinus, are essential to forming collective memory. St. Marinus is associated with the nation's Christian roots and the idea that he is the reason for the country's existence; these claims can be seen in the IdA on the value of a sculpture representing the saint, the IdA petitioning for a representation of the saint in every public space, and the IdA concerning the Sammarinese dialect. The authors of these petitions believe that the community should always be grateful for the leadership of St. Marinus. For these authors, the saint represents the value of the wisdom that has always characterized the community, inspired by the honesty and simplicity of the saint. For these reasons, the figure of St. Marinus is crucial to the community's sense of national identity.<sup>54</sup>

David and Bar-Tal theorize that, apart from the shared territory, culture, and collective memory, every national community has its own set of additional shared beliefs essential for its existence. These beliefs shape the perception of reality shared by the collective.<sup>55</sup> In the case of San Marino, citizenship and the legal system support a sense of national identity. Citizenship is perceived as a distinctive element of Sammarinese identity that defines the limits of the community. A 2014 IdA not approved by the Council called for the complete application of the principle of uniqueness of Sammarinese citizenship, as it is not allowed to have multiple citizenships. The authors of this petition claimed that "Sammarinese citizenship is a sign of our identity and should not be degraded to an accessory."<sup>56</sup> According to this petition, citizenship is a precondition for being treated as a community member and sharing its identity. The same theme emerges in another IdA from 2012, not approved by the Council, on the issue of allowing citizens to vote from abroad.<sup>57</sup> The centrality of citizenship to national identity also

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<sup>54</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.18 del 06-04-2014;" "Istanza d'Arengo n.22 del 6 ottobre 2019;" "Istanza d'Arengo n.18 del 2 aprile 2017."

<sup>55</sup> David and Bar-Tal, "A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity," 369.

<sup>56</sup> Original text: "*La cittadinanza Sammarinese è un segno della nostra identità e non deve essere svilita ad un accessorio.*" "Istanza d'Arengo n.1 del 05-10-2014."

<sup>57</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.7."

explains the importance of teaching civic education previously highlighted. It can help young people understand what it means to be a citizen and a member of a specific community.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, the legal tradition of San Marino is also perceived as a part of the national heritage.<sup>59</sup> A specific IdA from 2020, accepted by the Council, concerning the simplification and reorganization of the judicial apparatus, makes explicit reference to the fact that the petitioners regard the country's legal system as a characteristic of their identity, as this system has regulated and preserved the Sammarinese community over time, guaranteeing a sense of community that, in the petitioners' opinion, must be preserved for future generations. The authors consider the legal system as an element that allowed the state to develop democratically and gain its autonomy, making it an essential attribute of the authors' sense of national identity.<sup>60</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This article identifies specific attributes of Sammarinese national identity that make this identity distinguishable despite the restricted dimensions of the state. Promoters of the IdAs perceive these attributes to inform their sense of national identity. As demonstrated, these attributes are identifiable in San Marino's specific places, notions of residency and citizenship, Sammarinese dialect, culture and heritage, flag, legal system, religion, patron saint, and education system. Thus, my study generally contributes to the literature on national identity in San Marino and microstates. Analyzing the IdAs, through which citizens can submit issues of public interest to the government's attention, has offered valuable insights into collective perceptions. These documents, which have never been previously studied in research on national identity, provide crucial information on how citizen petitioners perceive themselves, their identity, and their nation. This article also represents a concrete application of David and Bar-Tal's collective

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<sup>58</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.2 del 7 ottobre 2018."

<sup>59</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.2 d'Arengo (04-10-2020)."

<sup>60</sup> "Istanza d'Arengo n.4 del 5 aprile 2020."



identity model, which allowed me to analyze the IdAs in a structured way.

This study has analyzed national identity attributes at the collective level; other pillars and levels of national identity fall beyond its scope. As a result, future investigations of the topic might offer a more comprehensive analysis starting from the level of individual Sammarinese citizens, which is necessary for developing collective identity, and further exploring the pillars of national identity at the macro level. Future efforts could also integrate this analysis with other IdAs that implicitly refer to national identity. This could lead to identifying more themes and adding substance to the study of the subject. The other Sammarinese instruments of direct democracy mentioned earlier could also be considered, expanding the research. The methods of this study could also be applied to analyses of different microstates with direct democracy.

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## Making Sense of America's Post-War Racial Landscape: the "Desire for Jewishness" in Philip Roth

Nicolas Turner

*"It's a hard thing to be a Jew . . . it's a harder thing to stay one."*

Philip Roth, "Defender of the Faith" (1959)

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In this article, I explore the moment in the 1950s and 1960s which produced "identity" in the sense we understand it today, and the tensions and ambiguities that trouble that sense. In particular, I use Jewishness to re-examine the assumptions of the multicultural discourse—around race, culture, and memory—that underpins this sense of identity. I undertake this investigation through an exploration of two of Philip Roth's short stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* and a section of his semi-autobiographical *The Facts*, examining how the category of Jewishness functions as an object of "desire" in these works. I argue that an analysis of the "desire for Jewishness" in Roth offers a case study of how this desire operates more broadly in simultaneously constructing Jewish identity and underpinning the field of Jewish American studies. I examine this desire through two lenses which represent ways in which it has been reified: nostalgia and primitivism. Drawing on the conceptual work of Svetlana Boym and Samuel Spinner to provide a theoretical grounding for these lenses,<sup>1</sup> I close read my key texts to

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<sup>1</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism*.

understand how this “desire for Jewishness” is embodied and problematized in them.<sup>2</sup>

Roth’s 1959 work “Defender of the Faith” provides a launching-off point to discuss identity in relation to shifting ideas of Jewishness. In this opening section, I place Roth into dialogue with the African American author Ralph Ellison, offering a genealogical overview of their differing conceptions of identity in relation to the development of cultural nationalism in the 1960s and re-examining Roth’s ambiguous position with regard to that development. I then examine Roth’s short story “Eli, the Fanatic,” demonstrating how a nostalgia expressed as “Jewish primitivism”—Spinner’s notion that modernizing European Jews exhibited a unique form of primitivism toward Yiddish-speaking Eastern Jews—complicates ideas of Jewish racial identity.<sup>3</sup>

While Roth is the key author I investigate in this article, I place him into a broader history of identity and situate him in a wider debate on multiculturalism and race. In doing so, I challenge the ways in which contemporary critical readings of canonical Jewish American works perform the very “desire for Jewishness” dramatized in the texts I analyze. In contrast to this dominant approach, I suggest a shift in focus to how “the Jew” operates as a historicized, unified, and bounded racial subject around which the field of Jewish American studies is constructed.<sup>4</sup> This suggestion stands behind my broader argument that the field of Jewish American studies move away from a critical practice that begins with the prior category of “identity” to one that places an analysis of the “desire for identity” at the center of its critical project. This article ultimately argues that an approach grounded in the analysis of this desire for identity, rather than in identity itself, offers a new way to unpack the complex relations of race and culture at the center of the

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<sup>2</sup> This is part of a broader project of analyzing various forms of “desire for Jewishness,” of which nostalgia is just one expression and Roth just one example. For another reading of nostalgia in post-war fiction, see Turner, “The Uses and Misuses of Nostalgia,” forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Primitivism*, 1-4.

<sup>4</sup> As I outline below, I am indebted to Schreier for this framing, particularly his works *The Impossible Jew* and *The Rise and Fall of Jewish American Literature*, the latter of which traces the history of the field of Jewish American studies.

multicultural discourse of identity developed by the movements for racial and ethnic recognition of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

### **Nostalgia, Identity, and the Spectre of Race in Ralph Ellison and Philip Roth**

My reading of Philip Roth's 1959 short story "Defender of the Faith" offers an example of how privileging an analysis of "desire" helps uncover the constructed nature of the category of Jewishness, as well as showcasing how nostalgia can offer a route into understanding how that desire is operationalized. The story's protagonist, Sergeant Nathan Marx, has been redeployed, following American victory in Europe in 1945, to a training camp in Missouri, where one of the camp's trainees, Sheldon Grossbart, attempts to play on Nathan's sympathies as a fellow Jew to secure privileges for himself and his friends. In considering the question of what one Jew owes to another, the story explores various potential grounds for Jewish identity: the story's title places "faith" at its center, and it is on religious grounds that Sheldon begins his appeal to Nathan, arguing that "this is a matter of religion, sir."<sup>6</sup> The story also suggests, however, that Jewishness is a subjective position that one can move into and out of, a view again voiced by Sheldon: "It's a hard thing to be a Jew . . . it's a harder thing *to stay one*."<sup>7</sup> At another moment, it seems that identity comes down to a question of ancestry, that, as Sheldon claims, "Blood is blood, Sergeant."<sup>8</sup> Finally, and crucially, Nathan's own Jewish feelings are most aroused by nostalgia:<sup>9</sup> hearing a Shabbat service across the parade ground, Nathan feels that "memory plunged down through all I had anesthetized, and came to what I suddenly *remembered was myself*."<sup>10</sup> Remembering himself, Nathan finds his true self to be Jewish—an identity that only clearly emerges in the tension over its ontological grounding.

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of that historical shift see Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, 184-219.

<sup>6</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, 142, emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> The association between arousal and desire in my word choice is a deliberate one.

<sup>10</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129, emphasis mine.



Nostalgia is crucial for the construction of this meaning because of its affective power, which Nathan experiences “as though a hand were reaching down inside me”<sup>11</sup>—as something physical, sensual, and external in origin. Nostalgia has been increasingly theorized in recent years,<sup>12</sup> most relevantly for my analysis in the work of Svetlana Boym, who posits two nostalgic modes: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia.<sup>13</sup> The former “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” through the development of “invented traditions,”<sup>14</sup> while the latter “is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude.”<sup>15</sup> For Boym, reflective nostalgia is also a kind of “creative nostalgia,” which “reveals the fantasies of the age [...so that] one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been.”<sup>16</sup> Both forms of nostalgia can be related to notions of identity—restorative nostalgia, for example, builds on what Boym calls “cultural intimacy,” the “everyday games of hide-and-seek that only ‘natives’ play, unwritten rules of behavior, jokes understood for half a word, a sense of complicity,” but simplifies this “sense of play . . . to a single plot,” often a nationalist myth of a “return home.”<sup>17</sup> Restorative nostalgia ultimately builds identity by drawing on a straightforward narrative that combines otherwise disparate cultural practices and gives them a single sense of meaning. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, reveals “the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or . . . gentrified beyond recognition.” This gap creates a longing, a feeling closely related to desire, that drives people to “narrate the relationship between past, present and future.”<sup>18</sup> Reflective nostalgia

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> As well as Boym’s work, relevant recent studies include Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity”; Wilson, *Nostalgia*; Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*; Bonnet, *The Geography of Nostalgia*; and Łaskiewicz, Maszewski, and Partyka (eds.), *Dwelling in Days Foregone*.

<sup>13</sup> *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 41-2.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, 351.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*, 42-4.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*, 50.

highlights identity's paradoxes, as well as the sense of over- and underdetermination, the simultaneous importance and indefinability, accompanying any attempt to make identity make sense.

This kind of reflective nostalgia operates in "Defender of the Faith" through the story's play with temporality and Roth's use of the trope of "home." The story as a whole is narrated retrospectively from an unnamed future, creating a sense of distance that allows the narrator to reflect on the events described. Within this recollection, however, still earlier memories break the narrative distance. The most notable of these breaks occurs when Nathan hears the Shabbat service across the parade ground, a sensory experience which prompts him to remember "the childhood sounds of a Bronx playground where, years ago, beside the Grand Concourse, I played on long spring evenings such as this."<sup>19</sup> A memory that immediately proceeds his feeling of returning to himself. The relationship between a longing for home and identity reoccurs in a section where Sheldon convinces Nathan to give him a pass to leave camp and attend his aunt's Seder meal.<sup>20</sup> Sheldon draws again on the lure of his and Nathan's shared Jewish heritage in a dialogue replete with references to traditional Ashkenazi foods like *gefilte fish* and *kugel*. Ultimately, however, Sheldon goes for Chinese food instead of attending the Seder—a failed homecoming, albeit one that plays with the Jewish association with Chinese food.<sup>21</sup> Nathan's childhood memory similarly does not straightforwardly allow him to connect to a nostalgic Jewishness: it is framed against Nathan's more recent past liberating Europe, overshadowed by the unnamed horror of the Shoah—the ultimate loss of home, and imposition of essentialized identity, for its victims.<sup>22</sup> The reflective and complex nature of Nathan's nostalgia means that, as Boym would put it, it "does not signify a recovery of identity."<sup>23</sup> Instead, it raises identity as an issue for Nathan, with Nathan's sympathies switching between association

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<sup>19</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, 140–7.

<sup>21</sup> For the origins of this association and its meanings see Miller, "Identity Takeout."

<sup>22</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

with and distance from Jewishness. In this dynamic, the lure of Jewishness constantly pulls and repels the protagonist (and the reader) without fully resolving the ambiguities the story opens up.

My reading of Roth, however, does not simply engage with Jewishness as a locus of attraction. Instead, it is intended to problematize the concept of identity itself, revealing Roth's complex relationship with the foundational tenants of multiculturalism. An incident during Roth's appearance on a panel at Yeshiva University to discuss "The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction" in 1962, shortly after the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, offers a way into this discussion.<sup>24</sup> In *The Facts*, Roth recounts how he was heavily criticized by the panel chair and audience on the basis of their view that his work presented Jews in a negative light.<sup>25</sup> With Roth wilting under the audience's verbal assault, his fellow panelist Ralph Ellison stepped in and, in Roth's words, advanced a position "virtually identical to mine" but with "examples drawn from *Invisible Man* and the ambiguous relationship that novel had established with some vocal members of his own race."<sup>26</sup> Ellison was, in 1962, one of America's foremost writers, having won the 1953 National Book Award for his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, and was a well-known public intellectual on both racial and literary questions.

I want to pause on Roth's claim that he and Ellison shared "virtually identical" positions. *Invisible Man*, published ten years earlier, has been read by the literary scholar Jonathan Arac as marking "the cultural high point of the movement in U.S. life signified by the term *Integration*," an idea central to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s but which, by 1962, was about to come under serious assault from the movement for cultural and racial separatism that would become known as "Black Power." In Arac's formulation, "on behalf of an ideal of integration, Ellison resisted what we have come to call 'identity politics,'" although this "resistance to identity politics did not prevent [Ellison] from

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<sup>24</sup> The reception of *Goodbye, Columbus* is summarized in Nadel, "The Early Years," 63-5.

<sup>25</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, 125-129. In Roth's retelling, the chair opened by asking "would you write the same stories you've written if you were living in Nazi Germany?" (*The Facts*, 127), an incident later reused in Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> *The Facts*, 128.

affirming, and exploring, an American identity.”<sup>27</sup> This affirmation can be seen in the famous moment toward the end of *Invisible Man* where the protagonist rejects various models for African American life because of their “confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of *their American identity and mine*.”<sup>28</sup> As Arac argues, this appeal to “American identity” was founded in Ellison’s deep commitment “to the idea of America. Like Martin Luther King Jr., [Ellison] summoned the actually existing United States to transform itself in accord with its own stated principles of human equality.”<sup>29</sup> In this reading, the project with which Roth claims to be aligned in *The Facts*—his “virtually identical” position—privileges an American identity over a separate group identity, grounding itself in a reading of the United States as a source of positive values, even if those values are unrealized. This project can be understood as a version of Boym’s restorative nostalgia—with the master narrative of “American values,” as embodied in the Founders’ ideals, guiding the reconstructive project advocated for by the integrationists.

This project of aligning “America” and “universal values” was similar to that advocated by the group of post-war (Jewish) writers, critics, and social scientists known as the “New York Intellectuals,” with whom Roth was friendly and is still sometimes loosely associated.<sup>30</sup> In the 1950s and early 1960s, these intellectuals felt no need to speak “as Jews” and instead aligned themselves with America as the embodiment of universal human values.<sup>31</sup> For Black intellectuals in the 1960s such as James Baldwin, who critiqued the integrationist position of earlier writers like Ellison, the stance of the New York Intellectuals on universalism made them nothing more

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<sup>27</sup> “Toward a Critical Genealogy,” 204–5.

<sup>28</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 422, emphasis mine.

<sup>29</sup> “Toward a Critical Genealogy,” 205.

<sup>30</sup> Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, 6. My ‘Jewish’ in parenthesis is exactly the kind of default reading of Jewishness into authors that I am critiquing, but I leave it here to make the sense of my argument clear.

<sup>31</sup> Budick—in *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation*, 32–41—suggests that being able to speak *as an American* rather than only *as an African American* was precisely what Ellison was arguing for.

than avatars of the dominant white discourse.<sup>32</sup> Ellison, in contrast, wanted to characterize mainstream America not as “white” but as being involved in “a two-way process of interpenetration and influence” with African American culture.<sup>33</sup> It was precisely this commitment to a notion of a single, culturally hybrid “*American culture*,” as opposed to a plurality of non-hierarchized but fundamentally different cultures, that was attacked by the cultural nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s who would come to define the principles of multiculturalism.<sup>34</sup> A reader might, therefore, expect Roth to emerge from his Yeshiva University encounter with a renewed commitment to American identity, the very position his allies among the New York Intellectuals were advancing and to which Ellison was committed. Here, however, is how he actually ends his account of the Yeshiva incident in *The Facts*: “the most bruising public exchange of my life constituted not the end of my imagination’s involvement with Jews . . . but the real beginning of my thralldom”<sup>35</sup>—indeed, he goes so far as to say that “I was branded.”<sup>36</sup>

“Thralldom” and “branded” both provocatively draw on the language of slavery, implying that Roth’s future writings about Jewishness represented not a free choice but a compulsion, something he could not *but* return to. Sweep away the Rothian self-mythologizing for a moment—the idea that it was only because he was attacked *by* Jews that he wrote *about* Jews—and it becomes possible to see the hidden kernel of desire for Jewishness underlying Roth’s choice of words. Desire, after all, is kind of compulsion if not a form of enslavement: a person cannot choose *what* they desire, and, as an affective state, it pushes them to do things they may not otherwise want to do.<sup>37</sup> Why, then, does Jewishness end up being the

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” 3-12.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, 124.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*, 184-219.

<sup>35</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*, 130.

<sup>37</sup> For ‘desire’ as an affective state see Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 5-18. Particularly relevant to my analysis is Berlant’s claim, on 6, that “[d]esire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated

object of Roth's desire, a desire powerful enough to sustain not only a career but a wide readership? What is it about Jewishness that compels Roth as a writer and which attracts us as his readers?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to the work of the literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels and his unpacking of the contemporary notion of identity. In a seminal 1992 piece,<sup>38</sup> later developed in *Our America* and *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels attacks the multiculturalist claim that identity is grounded in a performative notion of culture, embodied in "what you do." Michaels argues instead that for multiculturalism's claims to make sense, this "culture" must be understood as ultimately reducible to biological race.<sup>39</sup> Given "pluralism's programmatic hostility to universalism," he writes, pluralists instead have to justify particular practices "by appeals to what seems locally good or true."<sup>40</sup> This means that the question of *who* we are must, for the cultural pluralist, remain prior to questions about *what* our cultural practices should be, since "it is only once we know who we are that we will be able to tell what we should do."<sup>41</sup> Yet the source of "who we are" cannot be the cultural practices themselves, as that would create a system of circular logic, so there needs to be something outside culture that creates the basis for a cultural practice to be ours or not—that something is race.<sup>42</sup> Michael Kramer has advanced a similar argument in the Jewish context, suggesting that Jewish literature be defined as literature produced by "a member of the Jewish race" since any other definition forces us into the "daunting and dubious task of deciding the validity of the various kinds, amounts, and qualities of Jewishness."<sup>43</sup> A biological conception of race, therefore, becomes the central paradigm for understanding identity, even if

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by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it."

<sup>38</sup> "Race into Culture."

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*, 680-5.

<sup>40</sup> Michaels, *Our America*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, 14-5. Michaels leaves slightly up for debate the question of whether this *needs* to be race or could, at least theoretically, be something else.

<sup>43</sup> "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish' Question," 290.

that foundation in race is suppressed by the multiculturalist advocates of identity who must ultimately rely on it.

Benjamin Schreier's *The Impossible Jew*, a starting point for my own project, picks up on this point and expands it to the very construction of the field of Jewish American studies as a whole. In his work, Schreier calls for a move away from "anchoring Jewish literary study . . . in a presumptive positive, nationalistic entity identifiable as 'The Jew'"<sup>44</sup> and toward "conceptualizing categorical group identity not as a secure, filial given but as a coordination of archives, beliefs, traditions, and attractions actively organized as much as they are presumed to be given."<sup>45</sup> For Schreier, this shift would privilege an "analysis of the way texts render *Jewishness as an attractor or focus*, of how texts deconstruct the givenness of Jewish identity."<sup>46</sup> In Schreier's approach, Jewishness becomes not a secure category that critics simply seek to identify in a corpus of texts but something which those texts themselves construct, in dialogue with the reader, from the nexus of race and desire at the heart of contemporary identity.

Through this brief genealogy of identity, Roth is readable as engaged in a project that emerges from within a multiculturalist discourse—centered on "the Jew" rather than "the American"—and, therefore, as not at all "identical" to Ellison's. Already in "Defender of the Faith," however, Roth undermines the role of race in that multicultural discourse, suggesting that "blood" is not a sufficient, or even necessary, basis for Jewish identity. Instead, he puts forward various alternative bases for Jewish identity, nostalgia being the most important, without settling on any one. Following the lead of Michaels and Schreier, critics of Jewish American literature must stop seeking a hidden kernel of Jewish identity, an overdetermined racial object at the heart of multiculturalism, and instead analyze the desire *for* such an object. While my argument leads to the conclusion that Roth is a multiculturalist before multiculturalism—more like Baldwin than Ellison—it also suggests that Roth offers his readers the tools to deconstruct the myths of multiculturalism: Roth

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<sup>44</sup> *The Impossible Jew*, 56.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*, 48.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*, 56, emphasis mine.

emerges as a proto-multiculturalist undermining multiculturalism's foundational tenets at the moment of its birth.

### **Blackness, Whiteness, and Primitivist Desire in Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic"**

While in "Defender of the Faith" the "desire for Jewishness" is expressed through nostalgia, in "Eli, the Fanatic," another of the stories collected in *Goodbye, Columbus*, the desire asserts itself in the more racially ambivalent form of primitivism. The story concerns the efforts of a community of secular Jews in the leafy suburb of Woodenton to evict a Hasidic Yeshiva that has been set up on the town's outskirts.<sup>47</sup> Eli Peck, the central character, is a lawyer tasked by Woodenton's secular leaders with securing this removal, in the course of which he is forced to confront his own Jewishness. As with *Goodbye, Columbus* as a whole, the prevailing critical approach is to read "Eli, the Fanatic" through the lens of Jewish assimilation (and its discomforts), a reading that perpetuates two assumptions I want to push against here.<sup>48</sup> First, it presumes a positioning of Jewishness as a predefined object that can then be tracked against its relationship to the American mainstream; second, it has increasingly become aligned in recent scholarship with an idea of a Jewish move into "whiteness,"<sup>49</sup> an approach that has tended to close off the space for more nuanced and suggestive readings of Jewish racial identity.<sup>50</sup> Instead of relying on this received narrative, therefore, I want to examine "Eli, the Fanatic" for what Dean Franco, one of Roth's most perceptive contemporary critics, has described as the "racialized identities, social race, and the gravity of

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<sup>47</sup> Two recent articles have linked the origins of the story to a real-life incident in Mount Kisco, New York. See Levinson, "Roth in the Archives," and Fink "Fact, Fiction, and History in Philip Roth's 'Eli, the Fanatic'."

<sup>48</sup> An exemplar of this reading can be found in Aarons, "American-Jewish identity in Roth's short fiction," 14-21. See Schreier, "The Failure of Identity," 110 for this argument's function as part of a broader nationalist project.

<sup>49</sup> Works in this vein include Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, and Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*.

<sup>50</sup> For works that start to push toward these more nuanced readings see Freedman, *Klezmer America*, and Kun, "Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos."



public assumptions about race [that] are central to Roth's tales of maturation, acculturation, and postmodern escape (and return)."<sup>51</sup>

"Eli, the Fanatic" plays throughout with whiteness and Blackness as key tropes. The opening line of the story has Leo Tzoref, the Yeshiva's principal, step "out from back of a *white* column to welcome Eli Peck"; shortly afterward, Eli is momentarily confused by Leo's skullcap, thinking that the "black circle on the back of his head" means "[t]he crown of his head [is] missing."<sup>52</sup> As Brett Kaplan has pointed out in her own analysis of "Eli, the Fanatic," Blackness in this opening passage is immediately associated with strangeness, absence, and anxiety.<sup>53</sup> The complaints of the secular Jews of Woodenton are focused in particular on another Hasidic male who goes into the town wearing his traditional black dress, including a "Talmudic hat" which is "the very cause of Eli's mission, the source of Woodenton's upset."<sup>54</sup> The first appearance of this Hasid in the story associates blackness with absence: "Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness—then the figure emerged."<sup>55</sup>

It becomes clear that both Tzoref and this other adult, along with the Yeshiva's eighteen children, are all refugees from Europe and, by extension, victims of the Shoah (although, as in "Defender of the Faith," the term is never explicitly used). The second Hasid, who is unnamed, is most explicitly linked to the genocide during a diatribe from Tzoref, who tells Eli that this second figure has been left without his "wife," "ten-month-old baby," "friends," or "synagogue," and was the victim of "a medical experiment." The result is that he has "[a]bsolutely nothing," or, in Tzoref's Yiddish, "*Gornisht*."<sup>56</sup> The absence that Eli perceives when first seeing the second figure, as well as the hint of medical brutality in his confusion

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<sup>51</sup> "Introduction," 83.

<sup>52</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 187, my emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*, 23. Kaplan's focus is more on Jewish anxiety about simultaneously being victims and potential perpetrators of racial violence, but her reading raises intriguing questions which I have picked up in my own analysis.

<sup>54</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*, 189-90.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*, 197, italics in the original.

over Tzuref's skullcap, is therefore eerily accurate—Nazi victimization has indeed left these Jews with *gornisht*. Although as Tzuref points out, they do not quite have nothing, because they still have their culture, “the one thing a man's got,” symbolized by their traditional dress.<sup>57</sup>

In the American context, unlike under the Nazi regime, it is not Jews but African Americans who serve as the ultimate racialized other.<sup>58</sup> “Eli, the Fanatic” only briefly features “[a] Negro woman, spreading some strange gospel,”<sup>59</sup> but the constant association of Hasidim with blackness in the story links the two groups.<sup>60</sup> For example, in a conversation with one of the other Woodenton residents, Eli jokes somewhat sarcastically that “[n]ext thing they'll be after our daughters,”<sup>61</sup> recycling a classic racist trope used against African Americans. The linkage between Blackness and the ambiguous Jewish racial status is made particularly clear when, moments after the Black woman has knocked on Eli's door, the unnamed Hasid deposits his black clothes with Eli in (both real and symbolic) exchange for one of Eli's Western suits. Examining the clothes, Eli “smelled the color of blackness,” and wearing them later, he feels “the black clothes as if they were the skin of his skin.”<sup>62</sup> The deliberate eliding of the blackness of the clothes and the Blackness of skin reveals the racial shifting available to “the Jew,” as well as the way in which this racialization can be experienced sensorially, as a smell or a change in the feel of the skin. The Hasid makes the reverse move—without the outward signifiers of his difference, he is integrated, in Eli's imagination, into whiteness, but a whiteness that retains a kernel of something uncanny: “white, white, terribly white skin (how white must be the skin of his body!).”<sup>63</sup> Here is the drama of post-war Jewish racial transformation in fast-forward: from a racial Otherness associated with Blackness to a whiteness almost whiter,

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Kaplan, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*, 25-6.

<sup>61</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 193.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*, 217.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*, 211-2.

and therefore more suspect, than, in Karen Brodtkin's phrase, the "white folk."<sup>64</sup>

Roth, however, has a more complicated view of Jewish racial identity than that offered by the clichéd story of Jewish assimilation. This complexity can be accessed through the notion of "Jewish primitivism," an idea I take from the work of Samuel Spinner.<sup>65</sup> Spinner has developed his concept by analyzing a range of German, Yiddish, and Hebrew writers and artists in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>66</sup> He argues that the unique position of European Jews in this period opened up a space to undermine the traditional dichotomy inherent in primitivism, as expressed in European modernism, between a distinctly "other" primitive object and a civilized European subject.<sup>67</sup> Jews, as both "plausibly primitive but also plausibly European," troubled this distinction.<sup>68</sup> This subversive possibility allowed Jewish writers and artists to advance a broader critique of "European modernity and its claims regarding collective identity and individual subjectivity."<sup>69</sup> Given this quite specific context to Spinner's notion of "Jewish primitivism," I do not want to imply here that his ideas can be simply applied to 1950s America wholesale, and indeed Spinner himself suggests that "Jewish primitivism" in his precise formulation comes to an end with the Shoah.<sup>70</sup> The term is, however, a useful one to think with as it captures something of the racial ambiguity and tension between desire and resistance that I am tracking here.

As Spinner describes it, "Jewish primitivism was a product of the effort to create and consolidate identity and nationhood through Jewish culture" by secularized Jews focusing on an object, the "savage Jew," which both appeared different and simultaneously

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<sup>64</sup> As per her book, *How Jews Became White Folks*.

<sup>65</sup> *Jewish Primitivism*.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*, 17-9.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*, 1. Spinner's own key interlocuter in this argument is Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*, 9-10.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*, 170-7. In my own argument I am (softly) pushing against this claim, suggesting that at least certain key features of 'Jewish primitivism' have a longer afterlife than Spinner acknowledges.

insisted on similitude.<sup>71</sup> Turning the “ethnographic lens on themselves” Jewish writers and artists were able to “undermine the [modernist] idea of ineradicable difference by blurring the border between savage and civilized” and “critique the distinction . . . between subject and object,” allowing them “to be both at once—European and foreign, subject and object, savage and civilized.”<sup>72</sup> The example with which Spinner begins his account comes from Kafka, who described the participants in a 1915 Hasidic gathering he had visited in Prague as “something like a savage African tribe.”<sup>73</sup> Spinner argues that “Kafka’s primitivism and his radical self-alienation exist in relation to one another,” and I would suggest that a similar dynamic can be seen in “Eli, the Fanatic.”<sup>74</sup> Here, for example, is Eli’s perception of the Yeshiva children when he first sees them playing on the Yeshiva’s lawn: “[t]he dusk made the children’s game look like *a tribal dance*.”<sup>75</sup> Another Woodenton resident attacks the Hasidim for their lack of modernity, for being “religious fanatics,” “[t]alking a dead language,” and indulging in “hocus-pocus abracadabra stuff” that is redundant in an “age of science.”<sup>76</sup> “This hocus-pocus” religion can be linked to the “strange gospel” propagated by the Negro woman, another example of the slippage between Blackness and the Hasidim in the story. As in the Jewish primitivism that Spinner finds in Kafka, however, the encounter with the “savage Jew” represented by the Hasid becomes, for Eli, “about the primitivist desire for difference,” a “desire for one’s own Western identity to be replaced by a Jewish, primitive identity.”<sup>77</sup> Once again, we meet the figure of “the Jew” as desired, although now, through primitivism, reconceptualized in the story as an object of difference through which the ambiguities of Jewish identity can be explored.

A scene in which Eli puts on Hasidic dress most clearly demonstrates this desire for difference. Smelling the clothes, Eli

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<sup>71</sup> *Id.*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Id.*, 2-4.

<sup>73</sup> *Id.*, 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Id.*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 189, emphasis mine.

<sup>76</sup> *Id.*, 206.

<sup>77</sup> *Jewish Primitivism*, 44-5.

finds “something special, some Jewish thing” and wonders if the Hasidic man left them to him to avoid being “tempted back into wearing his traditional clothes.” Beginning to dress, however, Eli wonders “who was tempting who into what,” and soon the narrator tells us that “[r]egardless of who was the source of the temptation, what was its end, not to mention its beginning, Eli, some moments later, stood draped in black.”<sup>78</sup> In this scene, Jewishness functions in the way I have been exploring throughout this study: as something ambiguous, readable in different ways, but nonetheless compelling. In much the same way, critics have sought to read an identifiable Jewish identity into the text itself, for example through the assimilation narrative, even as the text destabilizes any clear sense of identity. The response of the secular Jews of Woodenton to Eli’s new clothes is to pathologize him, so that by the story’s end he is being led away by psychiatrists, “[t]heir white suits” smelling, “but not like Eli’s.”<sup>79</sup> Yet the psychiatrists cannot “touch down where the blackness had reached.”<sup>80</sup> Eli’s desire for primitive Jewishness is, ultimately, stronger than the imposition of norms that attempt to de-racialize “the Jew.”

### **Conclusion**

The readings of Roth’s work through the lens of a “desire for Jewishness” offered here are intended to provide an opening for a new critical approach to the study of identity, replacing investigations that begin from the concept of “identity” with an approach that makes the “desire for identity” its critical focus. Nostalgia and “Jewish primitivism” offer two ways into this project, showcasing how this desire can be tracked through affective states of longing and resistance that simultaneously dramatize and enact the construction of Jewish identity. By historicizing the multicultural concept of identity, I have uncovered how Roth’s use of nostalgia in “Defender of the Faith” problematizes and reinscribes the principles underpinning multiculturalism. In my section on Jewish primitivism in “Eli, the Fanatic,” I have showcased the complex relation of this

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<sup>78</sup> Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, 212-3.

<sup>79</sup> *Id.*, 220.

<sup>80</sup> *Id.*, 221.

desire for Jewishness with race, providing a case study for the re-examination of the canonical texts around which the field of Jewish American studies is constructed. To continue building on this opening, further research could consider other key Roth texts that suggest further forms this desire can take in relation to race, particularly *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, and *The Human Stain*.

Despite focusing on just a small corpus of texts, this article's reading of Roth through the lens of "desire for Jewishness" troubles two major strains in contemporary Jewish American criticism. First, it demonstrates the ways in which ambiguities in the category of Jewishness can help unpack the complex relations of race, culture, and memory that underpin the contemporary discourse of multiculturalism, opening up multiculturalism's underlying assumptions to critical investigation. Second, this unpacking of multiculturalism's key terms troubles the narrative of Jewish assimilation into the American mainstream and racial whiteness, reopening the question of the Jewish racial position in America. Only by critiquing these dominant critical discourses can Jewish American studies trace a path towards new readings of the post-war racial landscape, offering a critical practice that makes identity not the end but the beginning of its horizon of possibility.

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## List of contributors

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**Oscar Man** is a Research Master student in Arts, Literature and Media at Leiden University. He is interested in East Asian Studies, Hong Kong cinema, cultural translation, and transnational cultural topics.

**Adrian Krieger** is a Master student in Philosophy and International Relations at Leiden University, focused on the intersection between political theory, cultural studies, sociology, and political science. His current research centers on the development of political identity, individual and collective conceptions of “the political,” and the influence of power and globality on imaginations of the world.

**Martijn Rem** is a Master student in Asian Studies at Leiden University, with a specialization in the History, Arts and Culture of Asia and a focus on Critical Heritage Studies. His current research focuses on heritage preservation in Japan and the concept of traditionality.

**Emma Cardol** is a Master student in Political History at Leiden University. Her current research is focused on humanitarian organizations in the twentieth century and ways in which they advertised their work, as well as the agency offered to minority groups within popular media. Before coming to Leiden, she completed a dual bachelor’s degree at the University of York in English Literature and History, inspiring the interdisciplinary approach of her work.

**Verónica Copello-Duque** is a Master student in Latin American Studies at Leiden University, with a focus on Cultural Analysis. She also holds a BA in Literary and Cultural Analysis from the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include affect studies, globalization studies, and contemporary Colombian literature. Her current research focuses on the relation(s) between

the body and space in the representation of the racialized, migrant subject in two Colombian narratives.

**Jelle Christiaans** is a Research Master student in Linguistics. He also has a BA in Linguistics and Classics. He is interested in all things linguistic, but is particularly focused on how people use language to achieve their rhetorical goals in text or speech and the phenomenon of verbal aspect. He is currently co-authoring a book about verbal aspect in Classical Greek. His contribution in this issue reflects his most recent research interest: the Siona language.

**Athena Stefanakou** is a Master student in Literature in Society at Leiden University. Her work revolves around feminist criticism, including both literature and the visual arts. She is currently conducting research on the depictions of feminine bodily experiences in the literature and photography of three artists.

**Paulina Bastián Alvarado** is a Master student in Media Studies at Leiden University, specializing in Cultural Analysis, Literature and Theory. Her academic interests are centered on Latin American literature, with a particular focus on Chilean narratives written by contemporary female authors. Her current research focuses on the representation of the migratory experience and its impact on the identity of migrant women.

**Mahtab Fazlali** is an Iranian Master student in Literary Studies at Leiden University. Her current research offers a sensory reading of a collection of poems by two twentieth-century female poets—Hope Mirreles and Marianne Moore—through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of “the Self and the Other.” Exploring the relationship between the internal and the external worlds in the context of war, she argues that the senses become the best tools for a phenomenology through which people acknowledge the world.

**Maaïke Siemes** is a Master student in American Studies and Literary Studies at Leiden University. Her academic interests focus on contemporary American literature, centering the themes of migration, social class, African American history, and (generational)

trauma. Her current research concentrates on literary representations of multinational corporations and their impact on the environment.

**Nicole Molinari** is a Master student in European Politics and Society as part of the Václav Havel Joint Master Programme at Leiden University, Charles University, and Jagiellonian University. She holds a BA in International Sciences and European Institutions from the University of Milan. Her primary research interests are European affairs, EU institutions, and inter-institutional relations, as well as the broader social context of public opinion, which she explores in her contribution to this edition of LEAP.

**Nicolas Turner** is a Master student in North American Studies at Leiden University. Before coming to Leiden, he completed a BA at the University of Oxford and an MPhil at the University of Cambridge. His current research focuses on questions of racial construction in relation to identity and multiculturalism in Jewish American fiction. He also worked as the Graduate Editorial Assistant on this edition of LEAP

