



The Fiction of America  
Performing the Cultural Imaginary in American  
Literature and Culture

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Mag.<sup>a</sup> phil. Susanne Hamscha

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## **Gutachter**

Erstgutachter: Prof. Winfried Fluck

Zweitgutachter: PD Stefan Brandt

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Berlin, im Dezember 2011

# THE FICTION OF AMERICA

PERFORMING THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY IN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Susanne Hamscha



Let me indulge the American habit of  
quotation.

— Ezra Pound to William Carlos Williams

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## PROLOGUE

### THE FICTION OF AMERICA—AMERICA AS FICTION

What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world. Even if every detail of America were insignificant, America is something that is beyond us all. . .

—Jean Baudrillard, *America* 29.

The English translation of *America* (1988), Jean Baudrillard's "collection of traveler's tales from the land of hyperreality" (*America* backcover), opens with a frontispiece by Chris Richardson, which shows a man on a horse, looking at the screen of a drive-in movie theater that is centered against a mountainous desert landscape (see figure 1).<sup>1</sup> On the screen, he sees his postmodern alter ego: a space explorer, who is on a mission to conquer the final frontier. This frontispiece depicts something that is easily and unmistakably identifiable as 'America,'<sup>2</sup> and it does so by engaging two concepts: performance and the cultural imaginary. It is by way of performance that a notion of 'America'—or, more specifically, of 'Americanness'—is produced which is anchored in the imaginary, in national fantasies that serve to unite a very diverse body of American citizens.



Fig. 1: Chris Richardson's frontispiece to Jean Baudrillard's *America*

<sup>1</sup> Richardson's frontispiece does not appear in the French original *Amérique*, and, interestingly enough, *Amérique* features completely different pictures than *America* throughout. While the pictures in *America* primarily show highways and desert(ed) landscapes, *Amérique* furthermore contains photographs of graffiti art, storefronts, and billboards. It is also interesting to note that the graffiti art included in *Amérique* is violent and aggressive, as it shows, for instance, menacing, masked men shooting their guns. In short, the images in *America* seem to perpetuate fantasies of America (wide and open spaces, absolute freedom), whereas the illustrations in *Amérique* ostensibly contribute to a more critical, nuanced, and 'realistic' portrayal of life in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study, I use 'America' when I refer to a cultural concept, that is, to representations of national fantasies and imaginings, which "provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity" (Berlant, *Anatomy* 20). I will use the term 'United States' when I refer to the geographical space on the North American continent and its concrete political, economic, or social developments. Of course, the terms 'America' and 'United States' conflate and determine each other in the daily reality of American citizens and in the perception of the United States in the rest of the world. For analytical purposes, however, it is important to make this distinction.

Richardson's strategy of doubling is as simple as it is effective. He picks specific items from a pool of cultural concepts, symbols, and myths that are commonly associated with American culture and doubles them by pairing each of these items with a counterpart. The cowboy, the embodiment of American masculinity, meets his *alter ego*, the astronaut; the 'original' frontier, the vast territory of the West, collides with the 'final' frontier, the indefinite reaches of space; the asphalt highways and (empty) automobiles of a tamed civilization impenetrate the wilderness of untouched nature in the imaginings of American landscape. In his frontispiece, Richardson assembles mythical figures and concepts that are deeply engrained in American culture and that (re-) surface again and again in literature, film, music, paintings, photography, advertising, and other cultural products, which lets these notions appear to be 'truly' and 'naturally' American. However, as Judith Davidov reminds us, the crucial point here is that "everything—the landscape before us and the moonscape on the screen, western hero and space explorer, the artwork itself—is a construction, or what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum*" (296-297; italics in the original). In other words, the Americanness of this piece is not intrinsic to the cultural concepts used by Richardson, but is carefully constructed through a process of performative doubling.

Baudrillard defines the simulacrum as an image that "bears no relation to any reality whatever" and has become a truth in its own right (*Simulacra* 6). This definition can certainly be applied to Richardson's frontispiece: it depicts a version of America that does not correlate with the 'reality' of American culture. Rather, it is a representation of a very specific imagining of American culture which is grounded in an elaborate system of stock concepts and images, whose manifestations in actual cultural products may vary and are contingent on the context in which they appear. However, the basic structure of these concepts essentially remains the same. What is more, it is precisely the transformability of these images/concepts and their ability to adapt to the course of time which contributes to their persistence in American culture. Their continued presence is so strong that it appears as if they indeed reflected 'reality' when, in fact, they represent an imaginary version of 'America.' Richardson's method of doubling visualizes very effectively the many possibilities in which one and the same concept/image can manifest itself and institutionalize itself, as it were, as part of a cultural identity or imaginary. Most crucially, it is through performance, through

reiteration, through “*a stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, *Gender* 179; italics in the original), that specific stock concepts, such as the individual items depicted in Richardson’s frontispiece, come to signify American culture, or Americanness.<sup>5</sup>

I think that Richardson’s visual representation of America is an excellent example to illustrate how the cultural imaginary and performance work together in constructing Americanness, and how they sustain each other in the process. The cultural imaginary depends on constant reiteration, otherwise it could not reach a degree of institutionalization. Any kind of performance, on the other hand, needs to be embedded in a larger set of established performances, as every replication must be based on something that had been there before. Americanness emerges in the interplay of the cultural imaginary and performance, and is instituted through “acts which are internally discontinuous [and] which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, *Gender* 179).

This dissertation investigates how the performance of the cultural imaginary constructs—and at the same time also always deconstructs—the notion of Americanness and the illusion of a homogenous American culture. Most crucially, I look at ‘America’ as a practice, as a concept that is constituted by performative acts. That is, I understand America as something that is *done* rather than as something that just *is*. My analysis juxtaposes ‘classics’ of American literature with recent films and twentieth-century pop culture phenomena; for instance, I

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<sup>5</sup> My understanding of the term ‘performativity’ is informed by J.L. Austin’s notion of the ‘performative’ and is based on Judith Butler’s usage of the term. For Austin, a performative refers to cases in which “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (6). A performative utterance is thus an illocutionary speech act: it is both deed and effect at the same time. ‘I hereby declare you husband and wife’ would be a prime example of a performative utterance. Utterances as these are not merely conventional, but, as Austin says, “ritual or ceremonial,” hence repeated in time and not restricted to the moment of their uttering (19). In her definition of performativity, then, Butler takes cue from Austin and from Jacques Derrida, who replaced the term ‘ritual’ by ‘iterability’ and thus established a structural model of repetition. Derrida sees both world and stage as characterized by a pervasive theatricality, where individual, collective, and institutional identities are iteratively constructed through the repetition of complex citational processes (cf. “Signature” 72). In the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduces the concept of performativity when she states that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). While I do not mean to suggest that ‘gender’ and ‘Americanness’ are constructed or operate in the same way, I do believe that the notion of performativity can be usefully applied to ‘America/nness.’ I acknowledge the differences between individual and collective identity formation; however, I find Butler’s definition of gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*,” immensely useful in thinking about the performative quality that is common to all constructions of identity (*Gender* 179; italics in the original). For a more detailed account of the relation between performativity and America, see the first chapter of this dissertation.

compare Ralph Waldo Emerson with Disney movies, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) with the blockbuster movie *Jaws* (1975), or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) with Madonna. By bringing these texts into a dialogue, I aim to show that Americanness is produced through the reiteration of 'foundational scenarios' that have come to define a distinctly *American* culture. My starting point is the American Renaissance, the brief period between 1850 and 1855 in which, as F.O. Matthiessen says, America "came to its first maturity" and affirmed its "rightful heritage in the whole expanse of literature and culture" (vii). As Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman have noted, the institutionalization of an American literary canon helped to promote an "imaginary homogeneity," a powerful ideology which proposed "that every moment of historical time constituted the occasion for the potential repetition of the sacred time of the nation's founding" (16). Although Matthiessen's position has been scrutinized and revised in the past decades, the works produced in the American Renaissance are still generally perceived as the first 'classics' of an 'original' and markedly *American* literature (cf. Pease, "Introduction" vii).<sup>4</sup> If these works are indeed 'foundational' in the sense that they put American literature on the cultural map, then juxtaposing them with recent texts might enable one to identify the stamp these works have left on American culture and to discern recurring cultural patterns, which, borrowing from Diana Taylor, I will call 'foundational scenarios.'<sup>5</sup>

Foundational scenarios designate patterned performances; that is, they act out those values, ideals, or characteristics that are, because of their frequent recurrence up until today, oftentimes regarded to be quintessentially American. The Emersonian scholar, who understands that one needs to have trust in oneself and be a nonconformist constitutes such a foundational scenario, which is re-

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the most substantial examination and revision of Matthiessen's ideological project has come from a scholarly movement which Frederick Crews called "The New Americanists" in a 1988 essay for the *New York Review of Books*. The New Americanists, Crews writes, "claim to belong to the first scholarly cohort that does not consist of ideologues" and the "most familiar issue on [their] agenda" is, therefore, their preoccupation with the institution of the ideologically charged canon (68). Crews applies the term "New Americanist" to the authors of the essays in two edited volumes and of five monographs, which include *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, edited by Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (1985), Russell S. Reising's *The Unusable Past* (1986), Donald E. Pease's *Visionary Compacts* (1986), Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* (1985), David S. Reynolds' *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988). Crews believed that the New Americanists would significantly shape academia in the years to come; however, he had several concerns about the movement, which led him to dismiss it. In his essay "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon," published in a special issue of *boundary 2*, Donald Pease performed a close reading of Crew's article and called into being a critical Americanist project for which he appropriated Crew's catchy label.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on Diana Taylor's definition and usage of 'scenario,' see the next chapter.

worked, for instance, in *Finding Nemo* (2003). Or, the social experiment of self-sufficiency and self-governing Henry David Thoreau performs in *Walden* (1854) is a foundational scenario which one can find in slightly different form in *Jurassic Park* (1993). However, foundational scenarios are not merely endless repetitions that one can stack in an archive of performances. Rather, their reactivation or reiteration opens up a space that allows for affirmation and consolidation, but also for parody, reversal, and reconfiguration. In other words, the space opened up in the reiteration of foundational scenarios always harbors a potential for resignifying the meanings of 'Americanness' and 'America.'

A juxtaposed reading, I thus want to argue, allows one to see a disruptive moment in the performance of America, which exposes American culture as highly ambivalent, paradoxical, and fraught with tension. This disruptive moment emerges out of a spectral narrative, I suggest, which runs parallel to the dominant narrative of 'America,' but has been systematically subdued and pushed to the background. Haunting American culture since the inception of the United States, this spectral narrative seeks to break surface and leave an imprint on dominant notions of 'America' and 'Americanness.' My dissertation zooms in on those moments in which the spectral narrative moves to the foreground and American culture is confronted with its inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.

As it turns out, the seemingly coherent Americanness that we find in products like Richardson's frontispiece is troubled in its very moment of production. Let us, for instance, consider the cowboy, who is not only the emblematic representation of an idealized American masculinity but also embodies values such as unrestricted freedom and self-reliance, which are central to the dominant American belief-system (cf. Packard 2). Recently, Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1997) and its film adaptation have challenged this very straight-forward image in quite radical fashion by presenting us with two cowboys who fall in love with each other. Quickly labeled 'the gay cowboy movie' (as if it were the first of its kind) Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) put something on screen that had been there for ages, albeit in an oftentimes more subtle way: homosexual desire, or homoeroticism, between men who seemingly embody everything that 'America' stands for. Same-sex desire has always been, in fact, an essential element of popular representations of cowboys in literature and film, as Chris Packard notes: "References to lusty passions appear regularly [in Westerns], when the



cowboy is on trail with his partners ... In fact, in the often all-male world of the literary West, homoerotic affection holds a favored position. A cowboy's partner, after all, is his one emotional attachment, aside from his horse..." (3). Packard shows that in novels by legendary Western writers such as, for instance, James Fenimore Cooper, Owen Wister, and Mark Twain, homoeroticism was a key aspect long before *Brokeback Mountain* entered the scene. The reason why *Brokeback Mountain* had such an impact then lies in its explicitness: it dares to articulate that which has generally been silenced to a large audience.

*Brokeback Mountain* thus did not so much simply add the dimension of homosexual desire to the concept of the 'cowboy' as it instigated a reevaluation of previous performances of cowboys, which then appeared in a new light. Although every reenactment of quintessential Americanness may disrupt the dominant narrative that persists in American culture, as the example of *Brokeback Mountain* shows, it is paradoxically precisely this constant threat of disruption that makes the performance of the cultural imaginary all the more important for the constitution of a seemingly unified sense of American culture. This paradox underlies performative cultures, as Della Pollock asserts: "A performative culture is immanently on the edge of becoming otherwise. It relies for its vitality on the variable repetition that threatens its stability and disrupts the authority of origins—or first stories, foundational premises, original referents" (123). This premise, however, leads the concept of origination and the notion of origin as legitimation into crisis. If there is no origin, then a nation's legitimation becomes performative and thus contingent (cf. Feldman 4). Yet, the disruption of origins has a very productive side, because, as Pollock points out, a performance-centered approach to culture "displaces narrative into practice; defines practice by repetition; finds in the unstable aesthetics of repetition an ethics and politics of possibility" (123). Culture is thus shifted from a relatively rigid structure to a dynamic, indefinable, and endlessly open field of significations.

In her discussion on the construction of gender, Butler mentions parody as one way of revealing that "the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (*Gender* 175). Parody always entails the loss of the sense of normality and the failure of achieving an ideal. An analysis of parodic performances might therefore also prove to be useful in exposing Americanness as a construct, as an imitation without origin. However, I find non-parodic moments

of disruption even more intriguing, because they oftentimes function on a less overt and less radical level but are nonetheless very effective in destabilizing signifiers. This study then focuses on non-parodic disruptive moments in which the smooth surface of Americanness breaks and normative notions of Americanness are fundamentally challenged.

### **Inventing America**

Performance, as I will argue throughout this study, lies at the heart of American culture. Even more, I believe that American culture is and always has been performance. Repetition and reiteration are the foundational principles on which America was invented in the first place. If we consider American history prior to the inception of the United States, it seems almost paradoxical to think and speak of the newly discovered land as the ‘New World.’ The continent had long been invested with European fantasies and expectations, which renders debates over the ‘first,’ ‘original’ discovery futile.<sup>6</sup> “Inaugurated in expectations of replication,” as Winfried Siemerling reminds us, “the ‘New World’ was as much ‘discovered’ as it was articulated through colonial projection that sought to decipher and recognize familiar patterns” (4). The assumption of replication of identity and sameness underlies the first colonial encounters, as well as the whole enterprise of European settlement, as, for instance, the term ‘colony’ suggests (cf. Siemerling 4). ‘Colony,’ derived from the Latin *colere* (‘to cultivate’) implies the transplantation of a known order into a new, unfamiliar setting. A colony is, in other words, a repetition with a difference—or, to use Baudrillard’s terms, it is a perfect performative, a *simulation*.

So far, I have used the terms ‘America,’ ‘performance,’ and ‘performative’ as if their meanings were clear and stable. In fact, all these terms prove to be highly contested. ‘America,’ just as its adjective ‘American,’ has been subject to constant negotiation since the inception of the United States in 1776. Already in 1782, only six years after the United States was founded, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur raised the famous question “What is an American?” in Letter III of his *Letters of an American Farmer* (928).<sup>7</sup> “The American is a new man,” Crèvecoeur answers his

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Rob Kroes: “[L]et us not forget that it [America] was already invented by the European imagination before it was actually discovered...” (144).

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent analysis of Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* see, for instance, Edward Larkin’s article “The Cosmopolitan Revolution.” Larkin argues that *Letters from an American Farmer* has often been misread as promoting American nationalism and envisioning a specifically American character,

own question, “who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions” (931). Very clearly, Crèvecoeur emphasizes the newness of that “race now called Americans” that stands in stark contrast to ‘old’ Europe (929). Crèvecoeur’s constant repetition of the terms ‘new’ and ‘newness’ seems almost forced, as if repeating those terms imbued America with some sense of originality or authenticity and obliterated all traces of European influence. At the same time, Crèvecoeur makes a point of insisting on the new nation’s European roots: “I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations” (931). What sets the new nation apart from Europe, according to Crèvecoeur, is that here, “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men” that has left behind their “ancient prejudices and manners” and embraces a “new mode of life” (ibid). To paraphrase Crèvecoeur, America is a repetition with a difference, a re-enactment of its various source cultures within a distinctive framework that is not so much based on citizenship and nationality, but rather on “new principles,” “new ideas,” and “new opinions” that supposedly all Americans share. Crèvecoeur’s America is a mythical place, as it were; it is a practice rather than a territory.

As Sacvan Bercovitch reminds us, the roots of the mystification of America are already to be found in Puritan rhetoric. Puritan New England was knit together by a cultural ‘errand’ into the wilderness, which the Puritans understood to be prophetic and of a divine order (cf. *Assent* 33-35). However, it was only with the Revolutionary War and the founding of the new nation that “the errand took on a special, self-enclosed *American* form” (*Assent* 38; italics in the original). Held together by a rhetoric of consensus and a “coherent system of symbols, values, and beliefs, and a series of rituals designed to keep the system going,” ‘America’ has, from its beginnings on, always been a fictional place (*Assent* 30). It is a place that constantly needs to recreate itself in order to generate the illusion of a stable, unified American culture. In other words, ‘America’ is continuously produced

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when, in fact, Crèvecoeur was a loyalist and resisted the American Revolution. Larkin suggests that Crèvecoeur was committed to the “ideals of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism” (53) that sought to reconcile a “distinct American identity within the context of the British Empire” (59). At first glance, Larkin’s argument seems to contradict my reading of Crèvecoeur. However, my primary concern is not if and why Crèvecoeur’s text has been misread as promoting American nationalism. Also, Crèvecoeur’s actual political agenda is not really important to make my point. For the purpose of this study, I am first and foremost interested in Crèvecoeur’s definition of the ‘American race,’ and I find it significant that to Crèvecoeur, being an American is related to ‘principles’ and ‘ideas,’ and not to questions of nationality and citizenship.

through performative acts that serve to construct precisely that which is generally perceived to be 'American.' To be 'American' is thus not a static condition but a process which is achieved through the reiteration of regulatory practices. However, the mere necessity of reiteration is a sign that 'American/ness' is a regulatory ideal and its materialization never complete (cf. Butler, *Bodies* 1-2). Indeed, to borrow from Judith Butler, "it is the instabilities, the possibilities of rematerialization, opened up by this process [of reiteration] that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law" (*Bodies* 2).<sup>8</sup>

The attempt to consolidate an American culture can be traced throughout American (cultural) history and permeates all cultural spheres. The "legend of cultural origins," as Bercovitch calls it, is a motif that is repeatedly used in political speeches to conjure up an idealistic version of 'America' (*Assent* 36). In his inaugural address in 2001, George W. Bush, for instance, expressed his confidence in the "principles that unite and lead us forward" (n.p.). It is not "blood or birth or soil" that holds America together, Bush states, but "ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interests and teach us what it means to be citizens" (ibid). Being American, it follows, is not primarily tied to U.S. citizenship, but rather to an abstract, almost mythical concept of 'America' that has been carefully constructed over time. Unlike European cultures, which are very much held together by the sense of a shared history, blood-lines, and the concept of the nation state, the U.S. is rather united by the "idea of America," as singer Bono Vox called it in an interview with Oprah Winfrey (n.p.). The question then arises: Where and what is 'America?' Where can we locate it? Where can we find it? How can we grasp it? What constitutes 'America' in literature and culture?

### **Performing America**

"What you have to do," Baudrillard encourages us, "is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction" (*America* 29). According to Baudrillard, "it is this fictional character which is so exciting" (*America* 95). I want to follow Baudrillard's advice

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<sup>8</sup> Butler makes these remarks in the context of the materialization of 'sex,' which is a category that certainly cannot be equated with 'American' or 'Americanness.' However, if we concede that 'American/ness' is performatively constituted, then we also need to acknowledge that its materiality, that is, its embodied existence, is produced by regulatory practices. I therefore find Butler's explanation of materialization processes very useful for my own purposes.

and, for the purpose of this dissertation, access the illusion and illusiveness of 'America' by regarding it as a place in the mind rather than a place on the map. I will use the term 'America/n' as a cultural concept that is not restricted to the territory and inhabitants of the United States, and certainly does not find its limits at the nation's borders.<sup>9</sup>

This approach to America is by no means new. My study draws on a variety of works that understand 'America' as a concept which, "by definition, creates itself elsewhere" (Kalfopoulou 48). Taking cue primarily from Winfried Fluck's notion of the "cultural imaginary" and Lauren Berlant's "National Symbolic," I argue that America creates itself in the realm of the cultural imaginary, at the intersection of foundational myths and signs of 'reality,' of (re-) inscription and displacement, of authenticity and performativity. America is "everywhere but here," as Baudrillard asserts halfway through his traveler's tales (*America* 56). Constantly re-inventing itself, America "anticipates reality by imagining it" (*America* 95), bearing a nostalgia for the future that significantly distinguishes it from the "Old World stasis" (Bercovitch, *Jeremiad* 23). Its continuous move to recreate and redefine itself suggests a strong relation between America and performance—a relation, which this dissertation will scrutinize and trace in American literature and popular culture.<sup>10</sup> The role performance plays in and for American culture has been pointed out in numerous critical works, most notably in the three publications my own study draws on: *Cities of the Dead* (1996) by Joseph Roach, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) by Diana Taylor, and *Performance in America* (2005) by David Román. All three studies focus on the contribution of performances, rituals, ceremonies, and embodied practices in the construction of a culture and of a cultural collective. Underlying all of them is the basic argument that performance is memory sedimented in the body and restored in new form. My study certainly

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<sup>9</sup> I take cue here from Richard P. Horowitz, who writes that for some scholars, "*America* is a symbol, a social construction that people associate with a geopolitical terrain. ... It is a conected, contestable, and mobile entity, more like a set of beliefs or way of life than a tangible or legal object. ... Its contents can be shaped not only by topography, law, and poer but also word-of-mouth, ritual, the circulation of goods, arts, amusements, flights of fancy, and acts of will" (xxvii).

<sup>10</sup> Throughout this study, I will use the term 'popular culture' rather than 'mass culture,' for primarily two reasons. First, mass culture in the sense of mass-produced artifacts of the culture industry, as it is described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, implies that consumers are passively and uncritically entertained, while popular culture has an active dimension of cultural appropriation in the sense that its artifacts may function as the source of social and political empowerment. Second, 'pop culture' as a shorthand for popular culture triggers associations to a Warhol-esque pop aesthetic, that is, the continuous recycling of (commercial) images and the conflation of art and commercial or mass-produced products (cf. Kooijman 11-12). I will use the term 'pop culture' whenever I want to stress the pop aesthetic of popular culture.

shares this approach to performance, but seeks to add to the notion of cultural memory the concept of the imaginary. Institutionalized memory and national fantasies produce a notion of ‘Americanness’ that often appears to be disembodied, timeless, and universal. However, as its representations in American culture show, ‘Americanness’ is, of course, very much an embodied and culturally specific concept. Conceptualized along the unmarked categories ‘white,’ ‘straight,’ and ‘male,’ the cultural imaginary that structures the notion of American culture privileges an ‘American/ness’ constructed around those categories, while non-white, non-straight, and non-male voices that make their claim to Americanness are being systematically silenced.<sup>11</sup>

The lens of performance, I argue throughout this study, enables us to recognize those silenced voices that haunt American culture and unveils a spectral narrative which instigates a resignification of what ‘America/n’ might also mean. Based on the principles of repetition and difference, performance, in other words, always carries the potential to radicalize well-established, traditional readings and to resist hegemonic discourses. As Richard Schechner’s often-cited definition of performance as “restored behaviors” or “twice-behaved behaviors” suggests, performance is, essentially, a repetition with a difference (28). Performances are actions that are “not-for-the-first-time,” but repeat, reiterate, or cite something that had been there before (29). They cannot exist without a frame of reference, without memories of past performances, without an archive that embeds them in a larger body of performances. Although performances cite other performances, Schechner is also quick to point out that “every performance differs from every other one” and cannot take place twice in one and the same way (30). There is a gap between past and present performances, we can conclude from Schechner’s argument, which allows for radicalization, revision, and reconfiguration.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison makes a similar point when she writes that “[institutionalized] knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to this [African and African-American] presence. There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States” (5).

<sup>12</sup> See also Elin Diamond, who writes that “while a performance embeds traces of other performances, it also produces experiences whose interpretation only partially depends on previous experience. This creates the terminology of ‘re’ in discussions of performance, as in *re*imbody, *re*inscribe, *re*configure, *re*signify. ‘Re’ acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition – and the desire to repeat – within the performative present, while ‘embody,’ ‘configure,’ ‘inscribe,’ ‘signify,’ assert the possibility of materializing something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines other as yet unsuspected modes of being” (1-2). Discussing the

In a different context, Judith Butler also refers to this gap that opens up between performances, which I want to employ to push my own line of reasoning further. Discussing the constitution of subjectivity, Butler writes that

for Foucault, the subject who is produced through subjection is not produced in an instant in its totality; it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced (which is not the same as being produced anew again and again). It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization. (Butler, *Power* 93)

Just as subjectivity is, as Butler suggests here, a work-in-progress that essentially depends on reiteration and the power of performance, I want to propose that ‘America’ is also always “in the process of being produced” and *must* be repeatedly produced in order to emerge as a seemingly stable, homogeneous unit. Paradoxically enough, these processes of normalization also bear the greatest potential of subverting the very same normalization they seek to purport. The temporal gap between performances, as Butler claims, “produces the possibility of a reversal of signification, but also opens the way for an inauguration of signifying possibilities that exceed those to which the term has previously been bound” (*Power* 94).<sup>15</sup> Different, non-conformist repetitions that resist normalization open up the possibility of reconfiguration and offer other visions of ‘America’ that had previously been excluded from dominant discourse.

Approaching America as a work-in-progress that is continuously re-produced, I propose that entering America as fiction means entering it as performance. This is not to suggest that performances of America are fictive in the sense of being ‘not real.’ I rather suggest that they construct a reality which does not necessarily bear any resemblance to actual political, social, cultural, or economic developments in the United States. In performance, a fictional reality of America is produced, which is very real in the sense that it is omni-present and all-pervasive; however, it is so not necessarily in tangible, material objects but primarily in the form of

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physical theater as “the most haunted of human cultural structures,” Marvin Carlson makes a similar argument when he states that “[t]he present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection” (*Haunted* 2).

<sup>15</sup> Butler’s argument recalls Derrida, who states in “Signature Event Context” that “every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in doing so, it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not mean that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring” (185-86).

symbols, fantasies, and desires, which have come to signify Americanness. If we recall the frontispiece to Baudrillard's *America* and consider, for example, the space-cowboy, who can be regarded as a repetition with a difference of the mounted cowboy in the desert landscape, then we have to concede that there is nothing inherently American in either of the two figures, nor do these representations correspond to the 'reality' of actual (space-) cowboys. However, endless repetitions of the figure of the cowboy in cultural productions and the associations he triggers—such as freedom, being an outlaw, individualism, self-reliance—have created a mythical image of the cowboy that is deeply embedded in core values that American democracy is based on. The mythical cowboy embodies America, he performs America, he perpetuates foundational principles and ideals, and he thus constructs a very specific version of America that, in its existence as a place in the mind, permeates virtually all spheres of life.

### **Imagining America**

As I have mentioned before, 'America/n' and 'Americanness' are concepts that are not so much tied to the United States as a nation than to a set of myths, symbols, fantasies, ideals, and desires, which I would like to subsume under the term 'cultural imaginary.' The concept of the 'imaginary' has a long tradition in psychoanalysis and sociology and can most usefully be employed in Cultural Studies for the analysis of collective identity and collective memory. Indeed, I regard memory to be closely related to the cultural imaginary, and I understand the notions of cultural imaginary and cultural memory, by which I mean a collective memory that is based on cultural phenomena rather than on historical events, as feeding into each other. As Graham Dawson defines it, the cultural imaginary refers to "those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs, and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions" (48). I find Dawson's definition particularly useful because it underlines the intersection of the psychic and the social in the cultural imaginary and points to the complexity of the term.

My understanding of the cultural imaginary relies heavily on Winfried Fluck's definition of the term as outlined in his study *Das kulturelle Imaginäre* [The Cultural Imaginary] (1997), and on Lauren Berlant's notion of the "National Symbolic" as she develops it in *Fantasies of National Anatomy* (1991) and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997). Both Fluck and Berlant are interested in questions of



national identity formation, but they approach this issue from different angles. Fluck's study is very much indebted to Cornelius Castoriadis's observations on collective identity formation and the imaginary. Each and every society, as Castoriadis points out, needs to define itself as distinct from other societies, otherwise "there can be no human world, no society, no culture – for everything would be undifferentiated chaos" (*Institution* 147). Society thus "defines and develops an image of the natural world, of the universe in which it lives," Castoriadis explains, "attempting in every instance to make of it a signifying whole, made not only for the natural objects and beings important for the life of the collectivity, but also for the collectivity itself, establishing, finally, a certain 'world-order'" (*Institution* 149). Symbols, insignias of existence, and, most importantly, a collective's name do not merely denote something, but carry with them connotations that always refer to an imaginary signified (cf. *Institution* 148). However, it is this imaginary characteristic—the mystification of a collective identity—that proves to be the most stable and enduring constituent of national identity formations. Taking cue from Castoriadis's argument, Fluck discusses the nineteenth-century American novel as the primary place in which the cultural imaginary is continually re-worked and which thus serves as an important site of articulation of an American national identity (cf. *Imaginäre* 23).

In her analysis of 'citizenship' as a concept that negotiates the lines between the promise of America and reality as experienced by U.S. citizens, Lauren Berlant introduces the term "National Symbolic" to refer to the archive of "official texts" (the Stars and Stripes, the Pledge of Allegiance, Uncle Sam, etc.) that create "a national 'public' that constantly renounces political knowledge where it exceeds intimate mythic national codes" (*Queen* 103).<sup>14</sup> The texts Berlant mentions are images that form an essential part of an American cultural imaginary and forge a sense of unity that is based on fantasy. "America," she notes, "is an assumed relation, an explication of ongoing collective practices, and also an occasion for exploring what it means that national subjects already share not just a history, or a political allegiance, but a set of forms and the affect that makes these forms

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<sup>14</sup> Berlant's "National Symbolic" takes cue from what Lisa Lowe calls "the national collective" in her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996). American culture, Lowe suggests, is "broadly cast yet singularly engaging," thus allowing "diverse individuals to identify with the national project" (2). Individuals are transformed into American citizens through the terrain of a national culture and thus become immersed "in the repertoire of American memories, events, and narratives" (ibid).

meaningful" (*Anatomy* 4). Berlant attests nations the inherent drive to "provoke fantasy," to challenge individuals in their perception of what it means to be citizens (*Anatomy* 1). In the case of the United States, she argues, one can easily see that the myths of the common, collective culture constantly collide with the reality of racially, sexually, and culturally diverse citizens, which demonstrates that the National Symbolic works by principle of exclusion and conceals the heterogeneity of American culture (cf. *Queen* 36). "[H]ardly anyone asks critical questions about [the] representativeness" of the "normal," unmarked national body, as Berlant observes (*Queen* 36). The straight, white, middle-class, male citizen is represented and recognized as the "modal American," which automatically attributes inferiority to those who do not meet these criteria of normality.

This is the level on which my study enters the discussion on American culture and the cultural imaginary. I, too, am interested in the role the cultural imaginary plays in the formation of an American national identity. I concur with Berlant that American national fantasies work by way of exclusionary practices and I agree with Fluck that this tendency can be most readily be observed in nineteenth-century literature. However, my study diverges from Berlant and Fluck's work on the cultural imaginary in some ways. First of all, I am not only interested in how nineteenth-century literature has contributed to the formation of a supposedly specifically American identity, but also in the perpetuation of that Americanness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Secondly, I do not only want to point towards processes of national identity formation, but also to their simultaneous subversion. In other words, I want to shed light on the spectrality that underlies American culture. And thirdly, I will approach America through the lens of performance and thus conceive of America as a practice rather than an object of study. If seen as a practice, it becomes clear that America is always re-created in the now, in its contemporary performance, and is thus by definition elusive and open to reconfiguration and exchange.

My body of primary sources consists of very diverse texts which, at first glance, do not seem to have much in common. Ralph Waldo Emerson's relation to the missing fish in *Finding Nemo* might seem as obscure as that between Walt Whitman and *Spider-Man*. However, a closer look shows that many symbols, images, values, ideals, and myths that were employed by nineteenth-century writers to establish a distinctly American literary tradition, reappear in adapted

form in more recent pop culture productions. Juxtaposing Emerson with Disney, or Whitman with a superhero, is thus not as arbitrary as it first might seem. For the purpose of this project, I have selected texts which are, for one reason or another, said to be ‘classics’ of a specifically *American* literature and I pair them with pop culture productions which reiterate certain aspects and components of these ‘classics’ and thus strengthen the impression that a genuine and stable Americanness really does exist. However, by tracing Americanness from the American Renaissance, which was institutionalized to describe “an ‘authentic’ beginning for American literary history” (Pease, “Introduction,” vii) and which was central in the formation of an American literary canon, to pop culture phenomena like Madonna, I want to bring canonical texts into a dialogue with popular culture and argue that their relationship is reciprocal. When I read Emerson’s “The American Scholar” (1837) and “Self-Reliance” (1841) alongside *Finding Nemo*, for instance, I want to analyze in how far Emerson’s ideas are reproduced in the search for a fish and how, simultaneously, the search for a fish triggers off a reconfiguration of Emerson’s ideas. Approaching these two texts as sites of enunciation in which Americanness is performed, I want to suggest that when watching *Finding Nemo* we can detect an Emersonification of Disney and when reading Emerson’s essays a Disneyfication of Emerson.<sup>15</sup>

Juxtaposed readings such as the one of Emerson’s essays and *Finding Nemo* enable me to point out how Americanness is continuously performed and reconstructed in literature and culture. As performance is transitory and momentary, all performances of Americanness take place in the elusive temporal frame of the contemporary. As a temporality that cannot be adequately captured and represented, the contemporary transcends the linearity of succession and the teleology of time, in order to set up a circular model of exchange which is based on repetition and difference. *Finding Nemo*, I suggest, reenacts Emerson’s conceptions of self-reliance, originality, and space and time—but it adapts Emerson’s ideas for a new framework and ‘radicalizes’ them, thus provoking a reconsideration of

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<sup>15</sup> Here again, I rely on Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulation, which does not distinguish between ‘copy’ and ‘original.’ A simulation, as I pointed out before, is a replication with a difference, or a perfect performative. The determination of a chronological ‘first’ is consequently virtually impossible and rather a matter of ideology than of some inherent quality that distinguishes the ‘first’ from the ‘second.’ In other words, the concept of simulation will allow me to put my primary texts on the same level, which will—I believe—provide more insights than a one-dimensional, ‘hierarchical’ reading. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (esp. “The Precession of Simulacra,” 1-42) and Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies* (esp. 133-138) for details.

Emersonian thought as expressions of 'real' Americanness. By radicalization I mean that each of my juxtaposed readings will unveil the spectral narrative of American culture and recognize its attempt to resignify the meaning of 'American/ness.'

The moments in which the "modal American," to quote Berlant once again, is recognized as an insufficient representation of Americanness and 'other' Americans make their claim to adequate representation are moments of disruption and destabilization. They evoke a sense of oddness and defamiliarization, as they produce a version of America that goes against the grain and strikes us as unusual. These moments are moments of spectrality: brief interruptions, in which the interaction of a specific text with the cultural imaginary generates a different version of America in performance. I use the term 'spectrality' in the sense of Derrida, who theorized the specter as a disruptive and transient figure that is often perceived as threatening to hegemonic culture, but that also describes a "condition of possibility," because it comes and goes unexpectedly, is not expected to commit to any social contract or institutional power, and can thus freely transgress the rules and norms which govern hegemonic culture (*Specters* 82). The specter is a marker of 'otherness' within hegemonic culture, a "proper body without flesh" that might be a "self, subject, person, consciousness, [or] spirit" which is always present in its absence, which always looks at us but is rarely being seen (*Specters* 6). I suggest that in moments when the spectral disrupts normative culture, the presence of other, different narratives is recognized as an essential part in the construction of Americanness and, in consequence of that intervention, "available symbols are invested with other significations than their 'normal' or canonical significations" (Castoriadis, *Institution* 127).

My point of departure in my 'search' for America in literature and popular culture will be the nation's fictional origin, namely the city of Philadelphia, or, to be more precise, Liberty Hall. In "Act I: Setting the Stage," I analyze the Declaration of Independence as performative and performance, showing how America, the cultural imaginary, and performance are entangled. Employing Philadelphia as a metaphorical and literal stage on which America is repeatedly recreated, I place performance and the cultural imaginary at the center of my analysis and at the center of American culture, thus establishing the theoretical framework and

methodological premises of my study. The aim of this chapter, then, is to examine how the founding moment of the United States set the stage for the creation of a mythical America, whose existence crucially depends on the continuous reiteration of the founding moment. The signing of the Declaration of Independence and the recreation of that event in American popular culture and political activism is thus the first foundational scenario I want to analyze. Focusing on three popular films (*Rocky*, *National Treasure*, and *Philadelphia*) and the activism of the non-profit organization *Declare Yourself* on the occasion of the 2008 presidential election, I suggest that every reiteration of the founding moment contains a re-birth of dominant mythical imaginings of America, on the one hand, but also harbors a possibility for the spectral narrative that yearns for articulation and representation to find an embodied voice.

“Act II: Will The Real American Please Stand Up!” explores the spectrality within the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. All three writers shared a sense that America had not yet exhausted its full potential and had not yet established its own, discrete cultural identity. Their attempts to define the meaning of ‘America’ and to sketch the ideal, ‘real’ American predestined them as the basis of a rhetoric of American exceptionalism, which Pease describes as a “much-coveted form of nationality that provided U.S. citizens with a representative form of self-recognition across the history of the cold war” (*Exceptionalism* 7). While the rhetoric of American exceptionalism has been widely criticized as totalizing and reductive, the declarations of Americanness that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman utter cannot and should not be dismissed. Therefore, I read their writings as performatives that simultaneously describe and construct an Americanness which is reiterated in numerous succeeding cultural productions. My readings of Emerson with *Finding Nemo*, of Thoreau with *Jurassic Park*, and of Whitman with *Spider-Man* draw attention to the reactivation of foundational scenarios—of patterned cultural performances—in American popular culture, on the one hand, and they also demonstrate that the three writers’ articulations of Americanness are far more complex and ambivalent than their reception by the proponents of an exceptionalism-rhetoric might suggest. My juxtapositions of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman with pop culture productions explore the fissures in mythical imaginings of America and unmask the inconsistencies and incoherencies in

normative constructions of Americanness by giving room to the specters of American culture.

“Act III: American Idols?” continues the project of unmasking commenced in Act II. The first part of this act, consisting of a juxtaposed reading of Herman Melville’s monumental novel *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Steven Spielberg’s immensely successful blockbuster *Jaws*, takes issue with the inscription of the seemingly original and ‘real’ Americanness declared in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman into the body of *Moby-Dick*’s narrator Ishmael. Cold war receptions of *Moby-Dick* hailed Ishmael as the ideal, prototypical American who embodies the essence of the American nation and may thus serve as the blueprint of the ‘normal’ American. However, a juxtaposition of *Moby-Dick* with *Jaws* shows that Ishmael’s supposed normal Americanness is, in fact, highly ambivalent, paradoxical, and haunted, as it bears ethnic, indigenous traits and displays homoerotic desires. *Jaws* can be read as an attempt to reinstitute normalcy by seeing the quest for the monster through and thus finishing what had been left unfinished in *Moby-Dick*. All that *Jaws* can reinstall, however, are *fantasies* of normalcy, for, as Ishmael shows, one always carries the specters of the ‘other’ on and within one’s own body.

In the second part of Act III, I juxtapose Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) with the music videos to Madonna’s singles “Papa Don’t Preach” (1986) and “Express Yourself” (1989) and her controversial book *Sex* (1992), in order to investigate a specter that takes center stage in American culture. As an adulteress and sexually transgressive woman, Hester Prynne is very much the embodiment of an ‘otherness’ with no legitimate existence within hegemonic American culture rather than a representative of ‘normal’ Americanness. While Hester is being put on the scaffold and publicly shamed for her unseemly behavior by the Puritan authorities, the Madonna of the mid-1980s and early 1990s seemed to deliberately put herself on the scaffold in an attempt to defy patriarchal authority and claim public space and a public voice for women. Their performances of femininity and sexuality share the vision of a female order that may supplant patriarchal law, a vision that necessarily remains utopian, as it is based on unimaginable and unrepresentable cultural structures. The female order cannot be articulated and, consequently, Hester and Madonna relinquish their voices to the authorities they had tried to undermine, but their untold narrative haunts American culture.

## ACT I

### SETTING THE STAGE: ENCOUNTERING 'AMERICA' ON THE STREETS OF PHILADELPHIA

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words ["We, the people, in order to form a more perfect union"], launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787. The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished.

—Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," March 18, 2008, Philadelphia.

The history of Philadelphia is, and always will be, inextricably linked to the origins of American democracy and the formation of a union that promises life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all its citizens. These promises were written into the nation's founding document, the Declaration of Independence, and they are woven into the fabric of American culture. However, America's promises, as Barack Obama reminds us in his speech "A More Perfect Union," were not kept to everyone. When the nation was founded, slavery, but also the exclusion of women and non-propertied men from full citizenship, stained the parchment on which the words "all men are created equal" were put into print.

It might be a coincidence that Barack Obama delivered "A More Perfect Union," which has also been dubbed his "Race Speech," in Philadelphia of all places. Coincidence or not, Obama's references to the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and race issues leave the audience with a feeling of eeriness and unease. It confronts America with its past, with the specters that still haunt the nation's conscience, and with a promise that has not been kept. It exemplifies the wide gap between the ideals upon which the nation was built and the reality American citizens are faced with. Obama's speech shows quite plainly the cracks in the façade of American culture, the incoherencies and inconsistencies that are generally glossed over for the sake of the vision of a "more perfect union," as it is propagated in the Constitution's Preamble.

I begin this chapter with Barack Obama because his "Race Speech" is a prime example of ghostly spectrality, which is, I suggest, a key aspect of all performance. In this chapter, I will trace the spectrality of performance, suggesting that at times the ghosts that haunt America gain fleshly existence and disrupt hegemonic American culture. I will provide some theoretical considerations on those moments of rupture, pointing out the circumstances of their production and the impact they may have on our understanding of what 'America' means. In order to do that, it is necessary to shed some light on hegemonic 'Americanness' first and pinpoint legitimate (or possible) versions of 'America,' as produced in the interplay between performance and the cultural imaginary. In a second, or rather simultaneous move, I will keep an eye on the glitches and loopholes within the possible narratives of America, through which impossible narratives break surface and instigate resignifications of 'Americanness.'



I believe that the notion of ‘Americanness’ can be best grasped if one begins where it all began: in Philadelphia. As the birthplace of the nation and the cradle of American democracy, Philadelphia takes center-stage in American culture. A popular act to be performed on that metaphorical stage is the Declaration of Independence. Signifying America’s birth-certificate, the Declaration of Independence can be regarded as the ur-American text, which legitimizes the existence of the United States, on the one hand, and defines the cornerstones of ‘Americanness’ on the other. The latter aspect is, of course, of primary interest to me. References to the Declaration of Independence abound in American cultural products, by way of which “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” for instance, are reinscribed into the fabric of American culture as specifically ‘American’ core values.

As the title of this chapter, “Setting the Stage,” already suggests, the purpose of the following sections is to prepare the way for the ‘main act’ of this dissertation, that is, the analysis of my primary texts. However, this chapter will also illustrate the setting of another stage, namely that of ‘Americanness.’ The Declaration of Independence, I argue, organizes some of the foundational principles of what it means to be ‘American,’ but it is also full of shortcomings and deficiencies, and thus, ironically enough, prepares the way for its own subversion and deconstruction. Moreover, “setting the stage” also alludes to the awareness that the nation’s founding moment was a staged, performative act and that performance lies at the heart of American culture. By highlighting some appearances of the Declaration of Independence in American films, music, online videos and advertisements, literary texts, and political speeches, I want to flesh out the intricate interplay between ‘America,’ performance, and the cultural imaginary. In the manifold re-births of the nation in American cultural products, the continuous attempt to solidify the notion of ‘Americanness’ and its continuous failings become apparent, suggesting that ‘America’ has been full of contradictions and fraught with tension from the moment it was born.

### **The Scenario of Performance: Processes of Tension and Adjustment**

Disentangling a triangular relationship always proves to be a difficult task, for at which point of the triangle is one to begin? In my attempt of unraveling the relations between ‘America,’ the cultural imaginary, and performance, I choose to begin at the point of ‘performance’ because, as I suggested above, it forms the core

of American culture and it is the guiding principle by which hegemonic notions of ‘Americanness’ can be upheld.

Obviously, the notion of ‘performance’ has a long tradition in theater and film studies, in that we talk about the performance of an actor or the performance of a play. ‘Performance,’ especially in the latter context, often conflates with ‘production’; it is useful, however, to keep the two apart and, as David Román suggests, define performance as “stand[ing] in and of itself as an event” and as “part of the process of production” (*Acts* xvii). Román adds that “[a] performance is not an entity that exists atemporally for the spectator; rather, the spectator intersects in a trajectory of continuous production. A production is generally composed of a series of performances” (ibid). These performances can, of course, never be exactly the same, but they are nevertheless consciously repeated copies, and their deviations are simply part of the dynamics of “twice-behaved behavior.”

On a broader cultural level, ‘performance’ has come to be employed as a “central metaphor and critical tool,” as Marvin Carlson puts it, “for a bewildering variety of studies, covering almost every aspect of human activity” (*Performance* ix). If we move back in history, we notice that already in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the significance of performance in American culture in his *Democracy in America* (Volume II). According to Tocqueville, performance is fostered by democracy. In a political system which ostensibly creates an equality of opportunities, the principles by which people are able to distinguish themselves from others are personal and material success, which again result from one’s performance at work, for instance, or in the community (cf. 767-769). As Tocqueville detects in American writers and orators, calling attention to oneself and presenting oneself assertively to others is another way in which performance allows people to distinguish themselves (cf. 596-597). Another sense in which performance is central to American culture is, according to Tocqueville, motivated by “the confusion of all ranks,” in which “everyone hopes to appear what he is not” (565). Here, performance conflates with self-fashioning and theatricality, but also with performativity, as the act of performance is also constitutive of reality.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 150 years later, Baudrillard makes similar observations in *America*, when he notes the proliferation of ‘performance’ is especially vivid in an American

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<sup>1</sup> See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Vol.II, Book I, chapter XI “Of The Spirit in which the American Cultivate the Arts” and also chapter XIX “Some Observations on the Drama amongst Democratic Nations” for Tocqueville’s remarks on art, theater, and drama.

context, because America is “a world of performance” (*America* 110). Performance in business, performance and rituals, performance and physical exercise, performance on- and off-screen—performance seems to be indeed deeply engrained in American culture.

A focus on performance and performative practices in American Studies takes the relation between performance and America to yet another level. Not only interested in performance *in* America but also in America *as* performance, the union of American and Performance Studies is based on and contributes to a paradigmatic shift “from the what of culture to the how,” that is, from the mere accumulation of data to a consideration of how this data operates and performs within culture (cf. Carlson, *Performance* ix). From this shift to culture’s “how,” Carlson extracts the importance of repetition in performance: “its [performance’s] embodiment of the *tension* between a given form or content from the past and the *inevitable adjustments* of an ever-changing present make it an operation of particular interest at a time of widespread interest in cultural negotiations” (*Performance* ix; italics mine). I emphasize the words “tension” and “inevitable adjustments,” because they imply that in the act of performance, past and present engage in a productive dialogue that entails changes and amendments which are—at least to some degree—conscious and deliberate.

Let me return to Baudrillard once more, as *America* contributes to the continuing significance of performance, because it reenacts, at least implicitly, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835). Baudrillard’s dialogue with Tocqueville exemplifies the dialogue between present and past which is the basis of all performance. Baudrillard and Tocqueville were both French intellectuals whose sharp and insightful observations provide their readers with valuable insights on the New World. However, this is where the obvious parallels between those two men end. Their lineage is thus rather of an imaginary than a primarily factual kind; the backcover of *America*, for instance, features an excerpt from a New York Times review, which, in stating that “[s]ince de Tocqueville, French thinkers have been fascinated with America,” suggests that Tocqueville can be regarded as Baudrillard’s spiritual predecessor. And indeed, Marco Diani points out, Tocqueville must have left his print on Baudrillard, who shared the former’s worry about “America as the obvious example of modern society” (53). Both men examine America “with concern for the future of Europe, the next in line to

receive what in America has become a fatally barren, self-perpetuating future” (ibid). They both believed, in other words, that the developments in the United States would give direction to the way in which Europe was going to develop.

The aspect I find most intriguing in this context, however, is Baudrillard’s self-fashioning as a modern-day Tocqueville. The principal question underlying Baudrillard’s endeavor in the second half of his book is as to “what has become of this paradoxical grandeur, the New World’s original situation as described by Tocqueville,” and he refers back to Tocqueville’s observations a number of times in the passages following this question (*America* 88). Baudrillard revisits Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy and, by asking what has become of the America Tocqueville encountered in 1831, he finds that America is an illusion, a “transparent landscape where Tocqueville’s most overt concerns disappear” (Diani 54). Tocqueville’s concerns, Diani argues, “become part of the landscape Baudrillard uses to explain the literal and figurative character of America” (ibid). Baudrillard, in other words, does not merely use Tocqueville as a point of reference, but he *incorporates* Tocqueville into his own observations in the truest sense of the word. If we take the meaning of ‘incorporation’ in its bodily sense, then Baudrillard revitalizes Tocqueville and brings him to life, as it were, through his own performance as New-World-observer.

Tocqueville finds expression in Baudrillard, whose re-enactment of Tocqueville lets the same enter into a dialogue with an America that differs from the one Tocqueville had encountered 150 years earlier and has yet stayed the same. Addressing the founding moment of the new nation, Tocqueville states that in the United States “society had no infancy, but is born in man’s estate” (365), attesting the United States a kind of “radical, spontaneous birth” (Diani 57), which Baudrillard senses, too. Americans “are born modern, [they] do not become so,” he writes, and he attributes their addiction to simulation to their lack of and desire for their own history and culture (Baudrillard, *America* 73). In a way, as Diani suggests, Baudrillard takes up images of conflict and paradox that Tocqueville touched upon but did not develop to their full extent, and thus reintroduces Tocqueville to “the extremities of his own instinct” (Diani 58). The relation between Tocqueville and Baudrillard is thus marked by processes of tension and adjustment. Partly implicitly, partly explicitly, Baudrillard refers back to Tocqueville, ponders upon his observations and insights, and borrows some of

his premises—which he immediately adjusts to the particular context in which he finds himself. Not only does Tocqueville influence and affect Baudrillard considerably, but Baudrillard’s treatment of Tocqueville also opens up new perspectives on the latter’s observations. The example of Baudrillard and Tocqueville illustrates that performances are always processes of exchange between past and present, returns to familiar patterns and their adaptation to a contemporary framework.

As the dialogue between Baudrillard and Tocqueville shows, Carlson’s insight that performance does not only recur to the past, but also always appropriates it, is crucial. Joseph Roach takes the same line as Carlson when he argues that “[t]o perform ... means to bring forth, to make manifest, to transmit. To perform also means, though often more secretly, *to reinvent*” (*Cities* xi; italics mine). If contents of the past are adjusted to the present in performance, then the past is not merely re-enacted but it is rather reinvented, as Roach rightly observes. Schechner’s notion of “twice-behaved behavior” also draws attention to the revisions that this behavior is subject to. The terms “reinvention,” “reiteration,” and “revision” all point out that behavior cannot happen the same way twice, even if in some situations the “constancy of transmission” over time is “astonishing” (Schechner, *Theater* 36).

Schechner, Carlson, and Roach’s definitions all assume that there is something that preexists performance. Performance, Roach suggests, is thus memory embodied in a particular time and place. In other words, performances transmit those memories of a culture that are regarded as worth to be remembered and reinvented. What is commonly called “culture” therefore is, as Roach suggests, the result of “social processes of memory and forgetting” (*Cities*, xi). Both “memory” and “forgetting” are systematic processes of inclusion and exclusion that work to establish an institutionalized collective memory, a dominant cultural narrative.<sup>2</sup> In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach explores the three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution (which results out of reinvention). He argues that the process by which a culture re-creates itself can be best described by the term

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<sup>2</sup> See also Aleida Assmann, who writes: “When thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting. ... In order to remember some things, other things must be forgotten. ...[We] can distinguish between two forms of forgetting, a more active and a more passive one. *Active* forgetting is implied in intentional acts such as trashing and destroying. Acts of forgetting are a necessary and constructive part of internal social formations; they are, however, violently destructive when directed at an alien culture or a persecuted minority” (97-98).

“surrogation.” The process of surrogation, he suggests, “does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (Roach, *Cities* 2). Loss, death, and other forms of departure leave holes that are attempted to be filled with satisfactory alternates. This process can never be exact and complete, as collective memory works “selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely” (ibid). Surrogates may not be able to fulfill expectations, or they may exceed them; they may polarize and incite anxiety or even fear; they may provoke emotions ranging from nostalgia to paranoia; they may alienate and thus deepen social and cultural rifts. Baudrillard may be perceived as a surrogate for Tocqueville; however, the process of this surrogation cannot be complete, as Baudrillard and Tocqueville write from different contexts and with different purposes in mind. At such times of surrogational processes, Roach claims, “improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin,” which is certainly true in the Baudrillard/Tocqueville case (*Cities* 3). Tocqueville reaffirms his ‘original’ status through Baudrillard, who, in turn, legitimized his own observation by referring back to Tocqueville. Performance, Roach concludes, then “stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace” (ibid). Arguing that performance stands for an entity that can always only almost-be, Roach’s conclusion actually describes what I have termed the ‘spectrality’ of performance.

The notion of ‘spectrality’ may serve as a middle ground in debates over performance’s ephemerality. Peggy Phelan, a leading scholar in the field and an ardent Lacanian, delimits the power of performance to the present, arguing that performance “cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation” (*Unmarked* 146). Schechner, Carlson, and Roach, as I have pointed out, insist that all performances leave traces and therefore have a lasting power.<sup>5</sup> The notion of spectrality acknowledges performance’s elusiveness while it also recognizes its constant aspirations to materialize in embodied form. Spectrality, I suggest, can be said to be something like the flipside of performativity, or its complement. In a Butlerian sense, performativity means the process of socialization whereby identities are produced

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<sup>5</sup> At first glance it may seem that such leading such a debate is splitting hairs. However, Diana Taylor remarks that “[d]ebates about the ‘ephemerality’ of performance are, of course, profoundly political. Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit knowledge?” (*Archive* 5).

through normative citational practices; however, reiteration renders the constructedness of those identities invisible. According to Derrida, the specter stands for the inherent instability of reality (cf. Jameson, "Letters" 39). In analogy, I argue that spectrality is the subversive element of performativity which disrupts the normalization process. It describes the repressed and forgotten performances that linger at the bottom of American culture and that can only find their way into the mainstream if their existence is recognized by those who construct and participate in American culture.<sup>4</sup>

Performance, I thus argue, must not only be analyzed in terms of temporality and longevity, but rather in terms of multiple interactions. While these interactions take place in the moment of the now and are therefore elusive and ephemeral (as Phelan rightly points out), they may have long-lasting effects as they can serve to reaffirm or to deconstruct hegemonic notions of Americanness. In this study, I therefore approach performance as a constant process of tension and adjustment, as "vital acts of transfer" that transmit "social knowledge, memory, and sense of identity" (Taylor, D., *Archive 2*). Transfer, or interaction, takes place on multiple levels: on a temporal level, between past and present; on a spatial level, between the events on the 'stage' and the re/actions in the 'auditorium' (both literally and metaphorically); on a cultural level, between imaginary and 'reality.' As the term 'interaction' already implies, these exchanges are always reciprocal and dynamic. Obviously, the performance of a play, for instance, will have a certain impact on the audience; the audience's reaction will, however, also always affect the performance on stage. Similarly, literature and films have an effect on their readers, while they are themselves constantly (re-) interpreted and are thus different every time they are consumed (even if the consumer remains the same), because all acts of transfer are dynamic and situational. To stick to Diana Taylor's terms, the modes of "storing and transmitting knowledge are many and mixed"

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<sup>4</sup> Defining the term 'mainstream' is a difficult undertaking. The formation of a mainstream always works by principle of exclusion; the mainstream is the unmarked in a given culture, while its opposite, the margin, is marked as "other," different, or alternative. In *Margins and Mainstreams*, Gary Y. Okihiro explains the need for the formation of a mainstream as follows: "Despite the historical ebb and flow of competing ideologies about America's national character ... there is, wrapped within that exceptionalist longing for a simpler past, a persistent and pervasive notion about American history and culture: the idea of a unifying mainstream, embraced in the motto 'Out of many, one'" (149). The mainstream, Okihiro then suggests, "offers movement, vitality, and clarity, unlike the inert, insipid, and muddy fringes of the margin. The margin, composed of racial minorities, women, the underclass, gays and lesbians, is exhorted to join the mainstream, composed of European Americans, men, the ruling class, heterosexuals" (ibid). When I use the term "mainstream" or speak of "mainstream American culture," I mean that part of American culture that is constructed along the categories Okihiro enumerates: white, male, middle-class, straight.

(*Archive* 22), and performance allows us to “take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge” (*Archive* 26). While the embodied performances of the repertoire “have often contributed to the maintenance of a repressive social order” (*Archive* 22), as Taylor argues, performance studies “offers a way of rethinking the canon” (*Archive* 27) by shifting the focus of analysis from narrative structures to scenarios as “meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (*Archive* 28).

As Taylor defines it, the scenario, “like performance, is never for the first time” (*ibid*). She compares it to Roland Barthes’ mythical speech, which is made of “material which has *already* been worked on” (Barthes 110). Its framework is transferable and “bears the weight of accumulative repeats,” making visible “what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes” (Taylor, D., *Archive* 28). The scenario includes features like narrative and plot, which are well theorized in literary studies, but it also takes into account several aspects which cannot be reduced to the written word, such as gestures, attitudes, and the milieu (cf. *ibid*). Scenarios are both setup and action at the same time, Taylor suggests, because they “frame and activate social dramas” (*ibid*). The setup lays out the possibilities of performance, which are contingent on the very same social, political, and economic structures that they then reproduce. The meaning of all scenarios is thus very much tied to the time, place, and circumstances of their production, but it may pass as universally valid if it fits into a well-established framework (cf. *ibid*). The action arising from that setup “might be predictable, a seemingly natural consequence of the assumptions, values, goals, power relations, presumed audience, and epistemic grids established by the setup,” but it is ultimately “flexible and open to change” (*Archive* 29). Scenarios are performed by social actors, in other words, who are assigned *relatively* static roles—‘relatively,’ because there is still room for cultural agency and critical detachment, which makes an internal subversion, or resignification, of those roles possible (cf. *ibid*).

The notion of ‘foundational scenarios’ as I have introduced it in my Prologue, is based on Taylor’s definition of the scenario. By foundational scenarios I mean patterns of performance that are deeply engrained in the fabric of American culture. They are the embodiment of ideals, values, behaviors, and desires that are commonly perceived as ‘typically’ American. However, it is their constant



reiteration in American culture that actually produces their Americanness. Foundational scenarios are, in other words, embodied performative acts that constitute a reality which they in fact purport to be. They are ‘foundational,’ then, in the sense that they are constituents of a collective American identity and of an original American culture. To put it differently, foundational scenarios produce fantasies of national unity and integration, fantasies of an indivisible ‘America.’ The embodiment in foundational scenarios can thus be regarded as *pars pro toto*, or metonymic embodiment, as the bodies performing the foundational scenarios are representative of the whole nation. Foundational scenarios constitute a site of identification that bridges the gap between individual subjects and the abstract category of ‘citizen,’ by creating a sense of national identity. This sense of national identity is achieved through the individual subject’s identification with others in “an ‘Imaginary’ realm of ideality and wholeness, where the subject becomes whole by being reconstituted as a *collective* subject, or citizen” (Berlant, *Anatomy* 24).

Berlant’s usage of ‘Imaginary’ clearly goes back to Jacques Lacan.<sup>5</sup> The Lacanian Imaginary is a pre-verbal register whose moment of formation has been named “mirror stage” and describes the moment between six and eighteen months in which an infant first recognizes his/her image in the mirror. It designates the moment, in other words, in which the child is first able to make a connection between its own motricity and the images moving in the mirror. For Lacan, the mirror stage describes a fundamental and unbridgeable gap between the subject and its own self:

But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical synthesis by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality. (*Écrits* 2-3)

As Frederic Jameson points out, the words “in a fictional direction” underscore that narrative and fantasy have an important function in the subject’s attempts to integrate his/her alienated, fragmented image (cf. “Imaginary” 353). The mirror stage, Jameson further explains, also opens an “irreducible gap between the infant

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<sup>5</sup> Lacan first introduced the Imaginary in his lecture on “The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the *I* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” which he held at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress in Marienbad in 1936 and which was later published in *Écrits* (1966).

and its fellows,” as there does not yet exist “that ego formation which would permit him to distinguish his own form from that of others” (“Imaginary” 353-54).

Berlant reads, for instance, the Statue of Liberty as a Lacanian mirror that represents a utopian promise of the nation, a ‘promise of totality’ which, needless to say, cannot be kept. As Berlant points out, the Statue of Liberty can be invested with a range of fantasies, desires, and expectations, enabling anyone to participate in the “perpetuation of a political and cultural collective life,” which overwrites individual subjectivity and fosters collective identification (*Anatomy* 25). The same holds true for other national symbols, such as the Stars and Stripes, or Uncle Sam, for instance. While I find Berlant’s explanations persuasive, it seems as if her ideas could only account for the formation of national identity as brought forth through national symbols or icons. But what about the contribution that literature and popular culture make to the construction of national identities?

In contrast to Berlant, Fluck’s *Das kulturelle Imaginäre* focuses on the imaginary in literature and thus provides some answers to the above question. Fluck explores the role of the nineteenth-century novel in the formation of an American national identity, by employing the notion of the “cultural imaginary” to describe the “inventory,” as he calls it, of images, affects, and desires that both determines and challenges one’s perception of reality (cf. *Imaginäre* 21).

Fluck’s understanding of the cultural imaginary is grounded in the work of Wolfgang Iser and Cornelius Castoriadis, who approach the imaginary from a slightly different angle than Lacan. In his seminal study *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* [The Fictive and the Imaginary] (1991), Iser seeks to chart literature anthropologically, by way of which he establishes a triadic model of the real, the fictive, and the imaginary, which are inextricably intertwined and cannot exist in isolation.<sup>6</sup> Arguing that the opposition between ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ does not hold

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<sup>6</sup> As the terms ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ come with a series of (partly ambiguous, partly misleading) associations, it seems necessary to clarify Iser’s usage of these concepts: “Das Reale ist ... als die außertextuelle Welt verstanden, die als Gegebenheit dem Text vorausliegt und dessen Bezugsfelder bildet. ... Das Fiktive ist hier als intentionaler Akt verstanden, um es in der Betonung des ‘Aktcharakters’ von seinem landläufigen, wenngleich schwer bestimmbareren Seinscharakter zu entlasten. ... Das Imaginäre ist hier als seine vergleichsweise neutrale und daher von traditionellen Vorstellungen noch weitgehend unbesetzte Bezeichnung eingeführt. Deshalb wurde auf Begriffe wie Einbildungskraft, Imagination und Phantasie verzichtet, die alle eine beträchtliche Traditionslast mit sich führen und sehr häufig als genau bestimmbar menschliche Vermögen ausgewiesen sind, die von anderen Vermögen oft deutlich abgegrenzt werden” (Iser 20, n. 2-4). Although such a neat separation of these three concepts cannot hold in practice because of their porous boundaries, Iser’s differentiation wonderfully demonstrates the advantages of defining the imaginary as an undefined potential. Such an approach to the imaginary as a program rather than a human faculty dissociates the imaginary from terms like dream, fantasy, or the unconscious, which

because these two concepts merge in literary texts, Iser introduces the imaginary as the link that connects and feeds both 'real' and 'fictive.'<sup>7</sup> A text, Iser argues, can be neither confined to its fictional features, nor to its elements taken from the reality it refers to, because such an approach would presuppose that fictional features are a closed entity characterized by an absence of the 'real.' A more differentiated look at literature shows that texts reproduce items of reality, which again bring forward purposes that are not part of the reality reproduced and are thus products of a fictionalizing act. This fictionalizing act, in turn, cannot be deduced from reality. This is where, according to Iser, the imaginary, as a quality that does not belong to the reproduced reality but that also cannot be separated from it, comes into play (cf. 18-19).

To try to pin the imaginary down in a concrete form is an impossible task, for the imaginary "ist in seiner uns durch Erfahrung bekannten Erscheinungsweise diffus, formlos, unfixiert und ohne Objektreferenz. Es manifestiert sich in überfallartigen und daher willkürlich erscheinenden Zuständen, die entweder abbrechen oder sich in ganz anderen Zuständlichkeiten fortsetzen" (Iser 21). Iser's definition is indebted to that of Castoriadis, who describes the workings of the imaginary as follows:

Suffice it to say that here representations (and affects, and intentions or desires) emerge in an 'absolutely spontaneous' way, and even more: we have intentions (desires, drives) which are creations of this a-causal *vis formandi* in their sheer being, their mode of being and their being-thus (*Sosein*). And, for all we know, this stream of representations *cum* affects *cum* desires is absolutely singular for each singular human being. ("Imagination" 143-144; italics in the original)

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have been invested with multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings, and allows for a more neutral and unbiased evaluation of free associations, images, and desires that overflow and fuel our perception. See Iser 20, n. 4, and also Fluck, *Imaginäre* 346, n. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Iser's triadic model owes much to Cornelius Castoriadis's understanding of the imaginary. Castoriadis refutes Lacan's definition of the imaginary, "which is obviously only an image *of* and a reflected image, in other words a *reflection*, and in yet other words a byproduct of Platonic ontology (*eidolon*) even if those who speak of it are unaware of its origin. The imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the 'mirror' itself and its possibility, and the other as mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is a creation *ex nihilo*" (*Institution 3*; italics in the original). To define the imaginary as an image *of* something is, according to Castoriadis, simplifying matters, because it renders the imaginary a mere reproduction and disregards its role in the construction of 'reality.' The imaginary, as Castoriadis has it, "is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can never be a question *of* 'something.' What we call 'reality' and 'rationality' are its works" (*Institution 3*; italics in the original). By placing it at the intersection of 'real' and 'fictive,' Iser clearly follows Castoriadis in his assessment of the imaginary, ascribing it a central role in our meaning-making of both 'real' and 'fictional' worlds.

Both Iser and Castoriadis emphasize the diffuse manner and fleeting, spontaneous impressions in which the imaginary manifests itself. Fiction, then, controls the diffuseness of the imaginary and brings it into form, providing it with a determinacy it actually does not possess (cf. Iser 22). Affects, images, and desires can thus be articulated and, as Winfried Fluck explains, the individual gets empowered:

Das Imaginäre erhält eine intentionale Struktur und wird Teil eines fortlaufenden Prozesses kultureller Selbstverständigung, durch den eine Aufwertung (*empowerment*) des Individuums erfolgt, weil dessen 'insgeheimen' Vorstellungs- und Gefühlswelt Gestalt gewinnt und damit ausdrucksfähig wird. Freilich kann das nur um den Preis einer 'Sozialisierung' des Imaginären entstehen, denn Bestimmtheit kann nur durch Grenzziehung entstehen, und jede Verbindung mit dem Realen, die dem Imaginären überhaupt erst Gestalt gibt, stellt zwangsläufig eine Kompromißbildung dar. (*Imaginäre* 20)

We thus move from an individual to a cultural imaginary, with the literary text, as Fluck argues, functioning as both the field of experimentation in the attempt to bring to bear the imaginary, and as the exemplary site of the diverse manifestations of the cultural imaginary (cf. *Imaginäre* 20).

Fluck concludes his discussion on Iser with the observation that the imaginary becomes 'real' in fiction, but that in the process of becoming real the imaginary also activates a redefinition of reality.<sup>8</sup> The imaginary that finds representation in fiction differs from the one that sought articulation; a new motor for articulation has to develop out of this non-identity, which lets the cultural imaginary simultaneously shape and fuel our individual imagination and affects. It is the indeterminacy, insatiability, and inexhaustibility of the imaginary that, according to Fluck, becomes the starting point of processes of constant redefinition and reconfiguration (cf. *Imaginäre* 21). As he concludes,

Das kulturelle Imaginäre ist dabei beides: Ort imaginierten Bedeutungen, die zur Artikulation drängen und kulturellen Geltungsanspruch anmelden, und zugleich Fundus von Bildern, Affekten und Sehnsüchten, die das individuelle Imaginäre neuerlich stimulieren und in diesem Prozess unser Wirklichkeitsverständnis fortwährend herausfordern (*Imaginäre* 21).

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<sup>8</sup> To support his argument, Fluck quotes Josué V. Harari's very comprehensible explanation of the exchange between imaginary and reality: "The imaginary world is always with us, as a parallel to our world; there is not a single moment of our existence which is not imbued with the imaginary. ... The closest one can get to describing how the imaginary stands in relation to the real is to refer to the familiar Saussurian image of the sheet of paper whose front cannot be cut without its back being cut at the same time. In like manner, the real cannot be separated from the imaginary or the imaginary from the real ..." (Harari 57).

The definition of the cultural imaginary Fluck provides here recalls Jan Assmann's notion of the "cultural sense," as he sketches it in *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992). Social identity, Assmann argues, is constructed and reproduced through interaction. What is circulated in this interaction is a "cultural sense" [kultureller Sinn], which is encoded and articulated in a collective language, collective knowledge, and collective memory. He defines the cultural sense as "der Vorrat gemeinsamer Werte, Erfahrungen, Erwartungen und Deutungen, der die 'symbolische Sinnwelt' bzw. das 'Weltbild' einer Gesellschaft bildet," and thus already introduces the term "inventory" as a collective term under which a variety of abstract concepts can be subsumed (*Gedächtnis* 140). In order to create a sense of community and collective, Assmann argues, the cultural sense needs to be steadily circulated and reproduced. "Kultureller Sinn zirkuliert und reproduziert sich nicht von selbst," he reminds us. "Er muss zirkuliert und *inszeniert* werden" (*Gedächtnis* 143; italics mine). I put special emphasis on "inszeniert" [staged], because it implies a certain awareness of the constructedness and illusiveness of the cultural sense, which explains the need for constant reiteration to foster its institutionalization. Also, it is here that Assmann makes an implicit claim for performance. Assmann's wording suggests that the cultural sense is embodied by and exchanged through cultural agents, who draw from the inventory at a specific time and place, in order to both re-construct and re-affirm their social identity.

As Assmann's "cultural sense" emerges out of his notion of "cultural memory," which constitutes the crucial link between cultural imaginary and performance, it seems necessary to look at Assmann's work more closely. Assmann's understanding of cultural memory derives from the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who developed his notion of "mémoire collective" [collective memory] in the 1920s. Halbwachs's main thesis is that memory is always relational and embedded in a social framework. He argues that individual memory can only be developed and maintained within a collective frame of reference, because "no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections" (*Memory* 43). Each individual's memory, it follows, is shaped by a collective memory. Or, to put it differently, while a collective strictly speaking cannot have a memory as such, it determines the memories of its individual members, as individual memories are always shaped in the exchange and interaction with other members of society. Memory is thus a

product of socialization,<sup>9</sup> and as such it is always partial, in both senses of the word: it is selective and ideologically determined as well as fragmented and always incomplete (cf. Halbwachs, *Cadres* 103-108).

In his conclusion to *Le Cadres Sociaux de la Memoire* [The Social Framework of Memory], Halbwachs makes an important point, which has significantly shaped later studies on cultural/collective memory. Halbwachs notes that social ideas or convictions bear a double character, as they are collective traditions or memories, but at the same time evolve out of a specific present situation. There is no contemporary social idea, he argues, which is not always part of a collective memory. However, those remembrances (events, historical facts, etc.) can hardly ever be recalled in concrete terms. Rather, they enter the collective memory as symbols and concepts; they are invested with new meanings and become elements of a society's ideals and value system. For Halbwachs, this explains the smooth correlation of traditions and contemporary ideas. Contemporary ideas are always also traditions, he proposes, which are appropriated to a new framework and thus receive a timeless character (cf. *Cadres* 210-211).

Using Halbwachs's theories as a point of reference, Assmann develops the concept of "Erinnerungsfiguren" [figures of memory] in *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*. Figures of memory, Assmann explains in a later essay, are "fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutionalized communication (recitation, practice, observance)" ("Memory" 129). Assmann's figures of memory bring Roach's definition of culture as the result of social processes of memory and forgetting back to mind. As Roach argues, it is by means of performance that certain aspects of the past become institutionalized memory, while others are forgotten. Assmann's figures of memory, then, are institutionalized memory embodied. They are embodied performative acts, tied to a specific time and space related to a specific collective, and marked by their reconstructivity, as Assmann has it (cf. *Gedächtnis* 38). The last of the three, reconstructivity, deserves some more

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<sup>9</sup> See also Paul Connerton, who states that "[it] is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory" (3). He later adds that "[it] is to our social spaces ... that we must draw attention, if our memories are to reappear. Our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group. ... If we want to continue to speak, with Halbwachs, of collective memory, we must acknowledge that much of what is being subsumed under that term refers, quite simply, to facts of communication between individuals" (37-38).

attention, as it sheds some light on the workings between memory and performance.

Reconstructivity, in Assmann's terms, denotes the ability of collective memory to reorganize the past and adapt it to a contemporary frame of reference. As Assmann explains, "Sie [die Vergangenheit] vermag sich in ihm [dem Gedächtnis] nicht als solche zu bewahren. Sie wird fortwährend von den sich wandelnden Bezugsrahmen der fortschreitenden Gegenwart her reorganisiert. Auch das Neue kann immer nur in der Form rekonstruierter Vergangenheit auftreten" (*Gedächtnis* 41-42). The new/present, to paraphrase Assmann, cannot emerge *de novo* but it borrows from the past, which gets reorganized and adapted to a new frame of reference. Already at the outset of his study, Assmann points out that the past can always only come into being through being remembered (cf. *Gedächtnis* 31). In other words, the past only comes into existence in the present in the form of memories, by virtue of its reiteration. The recurrence of the present to the past is, then, a performance in Schechner's sense. It is a 'twice-behaved behavior,' because the past is reproduced in the present, albeit with a difference.

In his discussion on cultural identity, Assmann later adds: "Die Imagination nationaler Gemeinschaft ist angewiesen auf die Imagination einer in die Tiefe der Zeit zurückreichenden Kontinuität" (*Gedächtnis* 133). This observation suggests that the formation of national identity depends on the imagination of an origin, of continuity, of a past that pre-exists present re-inventions of the nation. This is achieved through the circulation of the cultural sense or, as I would prefer to call it, through the performance of the cultural imaginary. In order to be able to imagine a national community the cultural imaginary has to be constantly and continuously re-produced. To be sure, the term 'inventory,' which Assmann and Fluck use to describe the cultural imaginary, presupposes some sort of institutionalization or, at the very least, patterned recurrences of the images, symbols, and affects it contains. These patterns are embodied in foundational scenarios, which serve as the pillars in the constitution of a collective national identity and break the boundary between reality and fantasy, past and memory, authenticity and myth. At the intersection of these concepts, as the nodal point of this vast network of relations, emerges 'America' as an ongoing collective practice that gives its foundational scenarios form and makes them meaningful.

Although I argue that foundational scenarios have first been systematically inscribed into literature and culture in the period of and around the American Renaissance, they can be traced back to the very beginnings of the United States, or even further back to the Puritans. Foundational scenarios as I will outline them in the nineteenth century are thus by no means original; they rely heavily on the Puritan belief system and rhetoric, for instance. While I acknowledge these influences, it is beyond the scope of this study to also include them in my analysis of American culture. It is also important to note that although Puritan belief and rhetoric were systematically employed to push a certain cause, it was a *Puritan* cause they promoted, not an *American* cause. As I am primarily interested in American culture in terms of what has generally been perceived as distinctly American, I will therefore begin with the Declaration of Independence, which I treat as the fictional origin of both the United States and America. In the following sections, I will scrutinize the signing of the Declaration as the most foundational of foundational scenarios.

### **Founding the Nation**

The Declaration of Independence is an excellent example to illustrate the notion of “foundational scenarios” and to demonstrate how ‘Americanness’ is produced in the interplay between performance and cultural imaginary. Often referred to as the United States’ ‘birth certificate,’<sup>10</sup> it both confirms and legitimizes the existence of the new nation as in the act of its signing, the idea of an independent United States was turned into a reality. The United States came into being in a performative act, in other words, which has been well theorized by, for instance, Jacques Derrida and Christopher Looby. I propose to look at the Declaration as performance, which enables one to analyze the act of declaring independence as a foundational scenario, as a patterned behavior that produces and reaffirms Americanness.

The interesting thing about the Declaration of Independence is, as Derrida points out, that one cannot decide “whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance,” as the thirteen British colonies transformed into free and independent states precisely in the moment that the Declaration was issued

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Fliegelman 154-155. In an anecdote that Thomas Jefferson reportedly told a visitor to his Monticello home, he referred to the Declaration as “the great document which gave birth to an entire republic” (qtd in Fliegelman 155).



(“Declarations” 49). Outlining the circumstances and their reasons for pronouncing themselves independent in a lengthy preamble, the Representatives’ actual declaration “takes a textbook form” (Loxley 101):

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States (in *Federalist Papers* 528)

A declaration such as the Declaration of Independence is a “pure performative,” as James Loxley explains, a “piece of linguistic magic that conjures up the state of affairs to which it refers” (101). However, one question arises, and that is who the “We” that speaks here actually is. Partly, the Declaration itself answers this question by referring to the “Representatives of the United States” as its signers. Moreover, these “Representatives” are standing in for, and signing in the name of, “the good People of these Colonies,” who have “licensed this act, and who are the ultimate actors behind it” (Loxley 102). The problem, as Loxley states, is that the declaration suggests “that the People and their authority precede it” (*ibid*). They must already exist as a people, as an entity, in order to be able to appoint representatives and have them sign in their name. In that case, the “People” in the declaration would be, to use John Searle’s term, an assertive.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the declaration would merely describe an entity that had already existed prior to the declaration. However, as Derrida explains, exactly the opposite is true:

They [the People] do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, nor *as such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can only hold in the act of signature. The signature invents the signer.<sup>12</sup> (“Declarations” 49; italics in the original)

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<sup>11</sup> John Searle distinguishes between five “things we do with language: we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes and we bring about changes through our utterances” (*Expression* 29). The first class, “how we do things,” he calls “assertives.” Assertives “have the word-to-world direction of fit. In an assertive illocution the propositional content is expressed as representing an independently existing state of affairs in the world” (Searle, *Foundations* 53).

<sup>12</sup> Derrida’s claim that the “signature invents the signer” is echoed by Judith Butler’s assertion that, in performative acts, “there need not be ‘a doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (*Gender* 195). Identity, that is to say, is produced in the act of performance; the subject not only performs a deed, but it constructs itself at the same time. In this specific passage, Butler takes cue from Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously argued in his discussion on the genealogy of morals: “es giebt kein ‘Sein’ hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; ‘der Thäter’ ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet, – das Thun ist Alles.” (279). Our actions define who we are, in other words, and not nature or some higher power.

The Declaration does not merely describe a condition, but it produces the people as an entity. It constitutes a new state of affairs in the very moment of its utterance and ‘invents’ the American people as a unit. In his seminal study *Voicing America* (1996), Christopher Looby establishes a firm connection between performativity and the self-creation of America in the Early National Period. Looby looks at a variety of texts of the late eighteenth century, ranging from Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1793) to Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798), and traces “various ways in which writers in the early period of the national existence of the United States thought about the self-creation of the new nation as a process enacted in language” (Looby 1). In accordance with Derrida, Looby argues, in other words, that the nation needs to be conceptualized as an imaginary entity, as a “phenomenon of collective consciousness” that enjoys only “fictive status” (ibid). To Derrida, the inception of the United States is a truly “fabulous event,” in the sense that it is both extraordinary and a fable, as it bears no pre-existing materiality: “It [the signature] opens *for itself* a line of credit, *its* own credit, for itself *to* itself. The *self* rises forth here in all cases ... as soon as the signature gives or extends credit to itself” (“Declarations” 50; italics in the original). In the case of the Declaration of Independence, it follows from Derrida’s observations, the signature invents not only the signer *per se*, but also the body of citizens as an entity and the United States as a nation.

All nations are, Benedict Anderson famously argued, imagined communities, as “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members” (6). The European nation-state Anderson scrutinizes is, of course, conceptualized quite differently than the United States. However, Anderson’s insight that a nation’s citizens can only feel connected with each other on an imaginary level is crucial to understand that a sense of national identity, unity, and belonging can exclusively—albeit very effectively—be attained on the level of representation.<sup>15</sup> The reiteration of the United States’ founding moment in literature, film, music, art, political speeches, or live reenactments for instance, then works to confirm an American national identity, by way of which the act of

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<sup>15</sup> I understand the imaginary level on which a nation’s citizen connect to be comparable to Charles Taylor’s notion of the “social imaginary,” which he defines as follows: “By social imaginary I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (23).

declaring independence, I suggest, becomes not only a collective but also an individual act. The social actors who reiterate the Declaration of Independence both reaffirm their belonging to a collective of American citizens and individual existence as self-governing subjects.

Let me illustrate this point with an example: On the occasion of the 2008 presidential election, the non-profit organization *Declare Yourself* launched an online campaign with the purpose of encouraging young U.S. American citizens to register and vote. The campaign's message—"Only you can silence yourself"—addresses eligible voters as self-governing individuals, and also the organization's name—*Declare YOURself*—appeals to voters on an individual level. The individualist aspect of declaring independence is underscored by a series of controversial advertisements which were published on the official campaign-website and that show Hollywood actress Jessica Alba wrapped in black duct tape and wearing 'The Muzzler,' a mask that is reminiscent of Hannibal Lecter's in *Silence of the Lambs* (see fig. 2 and 3). Both ads focus on the (in-)ability to speak, on the violence of being silenced and the importance of having a public voice. Furthermore, in both of these ads, the inability to speak goes hand in hand with bodily restriction. Alba, an expression of distress and fear on her face, is stripped of her clothes in both pictures and, especially in the duct-tape ad, is limited in her bodily movements. These ads suggest that speech acts are very much bodily acts, and also that independence or self-governance are very much bodily concepts. Declaring independence is, in other words, a bodily act that is not only inscribed into the collective body of citizens, but into each individual body. In the act of voting, the *Declare Yourself* campaign implies, one reenacts the foundational scenario of the signing of the Declaration and thus 'voices' one's independence as a self-governing, self-sufficient individual fully in control of oneself.



Fig. 2: Jessica Alba's duct tape ad for *Declare Yourself*



Fig. 3: Jessica Alba's "Muzzler" ad for *Declare Yourself*

I believe the *Declare Yourself* ads work so powerfully because they address the ability and freedom to speak, which enables one to reaffirm one's status as an American citizen and thus lies at the core of American democracy. As the United States is a nation that was "spoken into being," as is occasionally claimed (Looby 4), and that grounds its legitimacy solely in an utterance, it does not come as surprise that *Declare Yourself* hinged its whole campaign on the importance of the act of speaking. As Looby points out, vocal utterance "has served, in telling instances, as a privileged figure for the making of the United States," most notably, of course, in the Declaration of Independence (ibid). However, the "figure of the voiced nation," Looby remarks as a caveat, "represents both an aspiration to intentional unity and a recognition of the fragility, temporality, and intrinsic dissemination of the imagined unity" (5). He echoes Benedict Anderson's observation that "there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests," namely that of a coherent nation whose members speak and understand the same language and who all partake of the same cultural system of communication as simultaneous participants. Anderson proposes that poetry and songs, especially national anthems, produce such an "experience of simultaneity," in which "people living unconnected lives can feel themselves joined by occupying the same homogenous temporal moment" (Mitchell 14).<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, the performance of the U.S. American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," on the occasion of big sports events, such as the Super Bowl, or collective recitals of the Pledge of Allegiance can be said to evoke an experience of simultaneity, as "people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody" in unisonance, thus physically realizing and reaffirming their imagined community (Anderson 145).

In line with "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the Pledge of Allegiance stands the Declaration of Independence as a text that legitimizes and affirms the

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of "homogenous time" was developed by Henri Bergson in his *Essai sur la donnée immédiate de la conscience* (1889) and further expanded on by Walter Benjamin in "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (1950). Bergson famously argued that, in order to be able to both distinguish between different moments and establish connections between them, one needs to conceive of time as a homogenous and indifferent medium, as a chain of successions from which we can derive a sense of "reality." The experience of homogenous time thus rests on a spatial expression of temporality (cf. 68-69). According to Benjamin, the notion of homogenous time is especially significant with regard to historiography. History, Benjamin explains, tends to be conceived of as a teleological and linear continuum, whose temporality is marked by emptiness and homogeneity. However, history is always re-constructed in the now, Benjamin continues, and the thus needs to be understood as an interpretation of past events that emerges out of the present situation (cf. 276).

existence of both the United States (as a nation) and America (as a concept). The Declaration is the point of intersection between political reality and cultural imaginary, as it established both a new political order and a new imagined community in a single utterance. As Looby states, the United States is “the first modern nation deliberately fabricated *de novo*, founded in a self-conscious performative act of new political creation,” and the Declaration of Independence is “the paradigm of such self-recognizing acts of nation-making, the autoreferential rhetoric act that claims to be effectively founding the nation” (3). While it called the United States into being out of nothing, the Declaration itself did not emerge out of blank pages, but involved, as Thomas Jefferson conceded, repetition, recombination, and synopsis of previous writings:

This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c. The historical documents which you [Henry Lee] mention as in your possession, ought all to be found, and I am persuaded you will find, to be corroborative of the facts and principles advanced in that Declaration. (*Writings* 1501)

Jefferson’s insistence that the Declaration was neither an original, nor a perfect copy strongly suggests a reading of this text as performance, as a repetition with a difference that borrows from previous texts and adapts them to the framework of “the American mind.” However, the Declaration of Independence also needs to be understood as performance in the literal sense of the word. As Jay Fliegelman explains in *Declaring Independence*, Jefferson was an anxious orator, who lacked stage presence and dreaded to speak in front of an audience. Much to his regret, his task as chairman of the drafting committee included the reading of the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress on June 28, 1776. Whether or not Jefferson rose to the task is not recorded, but the surviving parts of his rough draft evince that he spent considerable time on preparing his oration (cf. Fliegelman 4-5). Jefferson’s draft is full of diachronic accents that signal rhetorical pauses, which “express both text and speaker,” as they “mark sense,

create rhythm, [and] are accompanied by infinitely various changes in tone” (Fliegelman 13). As Fliegelman concludes, Jefferson’s “emphatical pauses call attention to the fact that the Declaration was written to be read aloud” and its public readings “made the Declaration an event rather than a document” (25). The orators, who formally and publicly proclaimed independence in the name of all Americans, gave the Declaration a voice and an embodied presence. It is safe to assume that the orations’ purpose was to produce an experience of simultaneity among the audience, who was supposed to declare its own, individual independence through the body of the orator and thus become American in both body and mind.

Fliegelman’s assessment of the Declaration of Independence as an event rather than a document must not be restricted to its first public readings in 1776. I think that Fliegelman points to an intrinsic quality of the Declaration, which can be traced in virtually all its reiterations and places performance (as a theoretical concept *and* in the form of actual performances) at the center of American culture. Public recitals of the Declaration of Independence on the occasion of Fourth-of-July-celebrations, for instance, are good examples of the “eventfulness” of the Declaration. Very often, such recitals will entail the orator dressing up in ‘authentic’ eighteenth-century garment and reading his words off a piece of parchment, which adds to the theatricality and staged-ness that dominates these live reenactments and that is inherent to the Declaration. John Adams, for instance, complained that the Declaration of Independence did not paint an authentic picture of the American Revolution but was merely “a theatrical show” and that “Jefferson ran away with all the stage-effect of that ... and the glory of it (qtd in Schutz 139).<sup>15</sup> However, as Looby notes, Adams also acknowledged the historical efficacy of this “theatrical show” and thus came very close to “identifying the performative force—the Derridean *coup*—of rhetorical action” in the Declaration (25). The terms Adams uses, though, express both contempt and admiration for Jefferson. “Was there ever a *coup de théâtre* that had so great an effect as Jefferson’s penmanship of the Declaration of Independence?” Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush (qtd in Schutz, 43), suggesting that the Declaration’s words were part of an elaborate stage-act and served a propagandistic, ideological

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<sup>15</sup> See also Fliegelman, 93-94 and Looby, 24-25.

purpose, that is, the promotion of the idea of a United States and of the idea of America.

### **On The Streets of Philadelphia**

In John Adams's statement, performance and performativity conflate; they are expressive of the tension between theatricality and authenticity, myth and reality that is inherent in the nation's founding moment and in all its reiterations. I want to take Adams's words literally and highlight selected performances of the Declaration of Independence on the 'stage' of Philadelphia. I concur with Adams's assessment that the Declaration has a certain stage-effect, which has been repeatedly utilized to reinscribe the "unalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" into the fabric of American culture. Consider, for instance, the "DOI Road Trip" which *Declare Yourself* founder Norman Lear launched in 2001 and which bears testament to the Declaration's show-factor. Lear is the owner of one of the twenty-five surviving Dunlap broadsides of the Declaration of Independence, which he sent on a road trip through the United States in order to bring the ideals of American democracy back to people's consciousness and encourage them to participate in civic activism, as he explains on the *Declare Yourself* website:

When I first looked at the Declaration of Independence, my eyes welled up. I thought – this is our nation's birth certificate, the people's document, and it should visit Americans, rather than sit somewhere on a wall waiting for Americans to come to it, as a reminder of the freedoms we all cherish. (Lear, n.p.)

The DOI Road Trip was not merely an exhibition of the Declaration in the schools and town halls of small-town America, but rather a series of elaborately staged performances. As a short documentary of the DOI Road Trip shows, the Declaration toured the nation in a huge truck, which had a stylized American flag and an excerpt of the Declaration painted on its bodywork.<sup>16</sup> In every town, the truck was greeted by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of cheering, flag-waving people, and marching bands were playing as the Declaration was taken out of its case and put onto display by two guards. Adams's words resonate in the DOI Road Trip, which aptly demonstrates the Declaration's ability to draw masses of people and captivate Americans across generational, racial, and social lines.

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<sup>16</sup> The full video can be accessed at <[www.declareyourself/multimedia/multimedia.html](http://www.declareyourself/multimedia/multimedia.html)>.

Similar to public recitals of the Declaration of Independence, the various appearances of Lear's broadside in small-town America designate a continuous symbolic re-birth of the nation in performance. Each unveiling of the Declaration in front of an audience is a metaphorical re-enactment of the founding moment, a reiteration of the foundational scenario of declaring independence and establishing "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as the pillars of American democracy. Consequently, when I speak of "performances of the Declaration," I do not only mean its verbatim recitals, but rather the re-enactment of an idealistic vision of America. Accordingly, Philadelphia does not only serve as a setting in these performances, but becomes a trope for the American promise and the site on which national fantasies are played out.

The bicentennial of the United States in 1976 constituted an especially fertile ground as far as the promotion of national fantasies and the American promise is concerned. Quite naturally, that year saw an outpour of cultural products that dealt with the mythical birth of the United States and the ideals on which the nation was founded in more or less critical ways. Coming so shortly after the Vietnam War, the bicentennial furthermore provided an opportunity to renew a shaken nation's belief in their country. The recurrence to the origins of the nation, the recollection of the myths that had held the U.S. together, and the contemplation of the vision the forefathers had shared, enabled a disillusioned society to regain their faith in America, into all its ideals and promises.

The feature-film *Rocky* is a paradigmatic example of this sentiment. Starring Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa, "an overripe boxer with a heart of gold" (Shor 1), this movie plays with the myth of the American Dream and the fantasy of America as the Land of Opportunity. *Rocky's* central theme, I suggest, is the "pursuit of happiness," one of the three supposedly unalienable rights which Rocky, as the film's personification of the American Dream comes to embody. The film is set in an ethnic, working-class Philadelphia neighborhood where people lead dead-end lives, with Rocky being representative of the working-class underdog left behind by U.S. prosperity. Rocky missed his chance to become a professional boxer and now makes a living by collecting money for the "local loan shark" (Shor 1). However, at the occasion of the bicentennial celebrations in Philadelphia, Rocky gets his chance to shine. The heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers), whom Ira Shor describes as "a tasteless caricature of



Muhammad Ali” (ibid),<sup>17</sup> and his manager stage a patriotic spectacle as a national demonstration that even after two-hundred years, America is still the Land of Opportunity. From a catalogue of semi-professional boxers, Creed picks Rocky Balboa, the Italian Stallion, because of his colorful name. After some hesitation, Rocky accepts Creed’s offer, and this is when the movie turns more and more into a fable and Rocky’s character becomes more and more symbolic. Rocky’s doubts and anxieties are that of the average working-class man: fear of failure, injured pride, need for recognition, and the resentment to assign to somebody else’s rules dominate Rocky’s character. In training for his big fight, however, Rocky rises above himself, finds his courage and inner strength, and earns dignity and respect. The film ends with Rocky going the whole distance but ultimately losing the fight to Creed, whose victory goes unnoticed next to the personal triumph of Rocky, Philadelphia’s new working-class hero. Rocky realizes his American Dream by “going from disgrace to dignity in a magical moment” (Shor 1), thus proving to himself that he is not just “one neighborhood bum.” He may not win the fight against Creed, but he wins pride, dignity, courage, and—needless to say—the girl, proving that America is still the Land of Opportunity for those who work hard, (learn to) believe in themselves, and do not shy away from a challenge.

In *Rocky*, Philadelphia figures not merely as a setting, but it plays an important part, as it were, which is laden with symbolism. The first scenes paint a rather grim picture of Philadelphia. We see Rocky fighting a small-time boxer in a dark shack; we see him collecting money for the loan shark at the cold harborfront; we see him walking the streets of Philadelphia at night. The scenery is always dark, chilly, and unfriendly. Rocky’s life lacks warmth and human interaction; he makes various attempts at persuading Adrian, his best friend’s sister, to go on a date with him, but he never succeeds and always ends up home alone, conversing with his pet turtles. Halfway through the movie, the scenery changes. Rocky accepts Creed’s offer, Adrian accepts Rocky’s invitation, and Rocky takes up his training to be fit for both challenges. His fitness program includes a morning run through

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<sup>17</sup> The characterization of Creed is very problematic for primarily two reasons. First, it oscillates somewhere between the stereotype of the noble savage and the black brute. In contrast to Rocky, Creed is portrayed as educated, articulate, well-dressed, confident, and financially successful. In the ring, however, he is a merciless competitor, fierce and determined—the Master of Disaster, as his nickname suggests. Second, the film completely disregards socioeconomic facts about the life of African Americans in the United States. All African Americans in *Rocky* are financially well off and enjoy the good life, while Rocky and his Italo-American community live in poverty (cf. Martin 129).

the streets of Philadelphia—out of Rocky’s shabby neighborhood to City Hall and the Museum of Art. His run up the Museum’s steps at dawn is a powerful metaphor for the Everyman/underdog rising to the challenge. The iconic shot of Rocky facing the Philadelphia skyline and lifting his arms in triumph the day before his big fight marks Rocky’s personal victory (see fig. 4). However, this iconic shot also reiterates the scenario of the nation’s founding, I suggest. Standing on top of the stairs in front of the museum and looking down on Philadelphia with his fists clenched, Rocky makes his claim to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the unalienable rights he was supposedly born with. The break of day with the sun illuminating the dark city of Philadelphia signifies the beginning of a new chapter in Rocky’s life, but it also signifies the re-birth of America, as through Rocky the ideals upon which the nation was founded are imbued with life. The performative act in which Rocky lifts his arms in triumph and declares himself a winner can be read as his ‘signature’ on the Declaration of Independence, as it were. Having gained new faith in the idea of America, in the promise of opportunity and happiness, Rocky subscribes himself to that idea and re-affirms his Americanness on top of the steps, overlooking Philadelphia.



Fig. 4: Rocky lifting his arms in triumph (still from *Rocky*)



Fig. 5: Apollo Creed in his Uncle Sam outfit (still from *Rocky*)

The sentiment of America’s re-birth is intensified in the final scenes of the movie, which show the fight between Rocky and Apollo Creed. Creed enters the ring dressed as George Washington on a wagon that is modeled after the famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Leutze. In the ring, Creed then takes off his attire only to display an Uncle Sam costume (see fig. 5), which he was wearing underneath his coat. Against the background of a cheering audience, he endlessly repeats Uncle Sam’s signature slogan “I want YOU,”

addressing first the audience and then his competitor, Rocky. The fight we watch is thus not Rocky versus Apollo Creed, but Everyman versus Uncle Sam—a *faux* Uncle Sam, that is, because Creed’s appearance clearly parodies this American icon. Creed’s Uncle Sam embodies the tension between the myth of equal opportunity and the reality of ethnic minorities; he stands for the American Dream deferred, for the American promise unattainable for some, for the disillusionment that comes with the realization that some people are more equal than others. Rocky, then, fights to prove that the idea of America is still alive and real.<sup>18</sup> The fight ends, as I have mentioned before, in favor of Creed, but Rocky, who has managed to stay on his feet, is celebrated by the crowd as the champion of hearts.

Exactly three decades after Rocky’s pursuit of happiness, the Hollywood blockbuster *National Treasure* (2004), it seems to me, revolved around the right to “liberty,” which Nicholas Cage embodies in his performance as Benjamin Franklin Gates. *National Treasure* plays heavily on the mythical origin of the United States and re-enacts, as it were, the Revolutionary War and the nation’s founding on a small scale. The film’s plot is quickly told: as his grandfather and his father before him, Ben Gates has dedicated all his life to finding a monumental treasure which the Freemasons smuggled out of Europe and into the new world to protect it from the hands of greedy kings and tyrants. When the Revolutionary War broke out, the Masons (who included, for instance, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Paul Revere) hid the treasure from the British and devised a series of maps and clues to its location. The first clue to the treasure’s location was passed on to an ancestor of Ben’s, and the film’s main action sets in with Ben and his search-team following that clue. Sure enough, the clue they have only leads them to another clue, which suggests that there is an invisible treasure map on the back of the Declaration of Independence. Ben’s British search-partner Ian (Sean Bean) proposes that they steal the map, to which Ben vehemently protests. A fight ensues—Ian threatens to kill Ben and his sidekick Riley (Justin Bartha), a computer-wiz, but has to realize that Ben’s expertise might still come in handy; thus the race between Ben and Ian begins, as Ian is determined to steal the Declaration with the help of his ‘teammates’ (who are all British), while Ben and Riley are determined to stop them. The person in charge of the Declaration, Dr.

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<sup>18</sup> Joel W. Martin notes the racism that resonates in the final scenes: “Creed may symbolically stand for the civil rights movement, a movement that serves in this film as a synecdoche of the 1960s; by beating him, the European American community can ritually exorcise cultural anomie and displace economic anxieties” (132).

Abigail Chase (Diane Kruger), unwillingly joins Ben and Riley after a series of mishaps and complications ensuing the Declaration's theft.

The parallels between Ben and Ian's race for the treasure and the American Revolution are almost too obvious and laden with clichés for *National Treasure* to be still amusing and enjoyable to watch. The Brits are numerically superior and better equipped (as regards technology and weapons) than the Americans. However, the Americans compensate this disadvantage with wit and courage, and manage to steal the Declaration before the Brits can get their hands on it. It is interesting to note the double logic on which the film operates here: Ian's plans of stealing the Declaration are regarded to be criminal and immoral, whereas Ben has, of course, only the best and noblest intentions. Ben justifies his actions with a sentence from the Declaration ("But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."), reiterating this sentence as if he wanted to obtain permission from the Founding Fathers—or from the Declaration itself—to steal it. Moreover, Ben's quoting from the Declaration is a performative act in which Ben, as the representative for all Americans, declares independence from Ian/the British once more. Ben, who firmly believes in the Declaration's words, severs his ties with Ian once and for all and takes on the mission of protecting the Declaration, democracy, and America. Or, as Eric Lott sarcastically puts it, "a patriot devotes himself, in the name of the holy writ of American liberty, to the discovery of an originally Middle Eastern treasure lode with a dogged faith that his personal interests jibe perfectly with those of the nation, and that those of the nation jibe perfectly with all the globe's citizens" (112).

Ben's mission in the name of American liberty naturally leads him from the National Archives in Washington to Liberty Hall in Philadelphia, where he expects to find another clue to the location of the treasure. The moment he unrolls the Declaration inside Liberty Hall to have a look at the mysterious map on the back constitutes yet another reiteration of the foundational scenario of declaring independence. Although Ian is close on his heels, Ben pauses for a moment and states, with pathos resonating in his voice, "The last time it was here...it was being signed." By bringing the Declaration back to the place where it was signed and

actively recalling the original moment of its signing, Ben, who figures as the representative American and the embodiment of the Founding Fathers at the same time, revives the spirit of 1776 and symbolically re-signs the Declaration. This performative re-birth of the nation opens Ben's eyes to the real treasure 'hidden' in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the immaterial goods underwriting America's promise.<sup>19</sup> Ever the ardent patriot, Ben sees himself confirmed in his conviction that being an American is the greatest privilege of all and American democracy is the true treasure he needs to defend and protect.

Sure enough, Ben succeeds all down the line: he finds the treasure, he gets the girl (Abigail Chase, that is, whose primary purpose is that of being conquered by Ben), and he is celebrated as a national hero because he saved the Declaration and all its treasures from the hands of the villainous Brits. Liberty has been saved and restored by and through Benjamin Franklin Gates, in whose body the ghosts of the Founding Fathers meet the representative Everyman to re-create the modal American in performance. Metaphorically speaking, the ghosts of the Founding Fathers also haunt another movie, albeit in a less positive sense. Jonathan Demme's drama *Philadelphia* (1993) grapples with the third supposedly unalienable right, "life," but unlike *Rocky* and *National Treasure* it ends on a disillusioning note that raises the question as to who is granted access to these rights in the first place.

Set in the 'City of Brotherly Love' and the mythic cradle of American democracy, *Philadelphia* is precisely about these two things: 'brotherly love' (in a not-so platonic sense) and equal rights. *Philadelphia* tells the story of Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), a young successful lawyer who is fired from his job because he is gay and has AIDS. Andy finds a defense counsel in Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), a personal injury lawyer he knows from a previous case. Andy and Joe form an odd couple. The former—rich, gay, and white—could not be more different from the middle-class, conservative, black Miller. The film is not so much about AIDS and homosexuality, then, as it is about homophobia and the

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<sup>19</sup> Ben's re-reading of the Declaration as the real national treasure clearly struck a chord with the American imaginary. The official website of the U.S. National Archives, for instance, features a section on the Declaration of Independence and treasure hunts since the release of *National Treasure*. In reference to the film, the header to this section reads: "The Declaration of Independence: Our National Treasure," which seems to prove that its underlying message was picked up by the film's audience. See <<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/treasure/index.html>> for the National Archives section on the Declaration of Independence and *National Treasure*.

discrimination of all minorities. The only thing that connects Joe and Andy is their experience of being discriminated against because they both belong to a minority. In the course of the film, Joe, bearing strong homophobic sentiments himself, comes to realize that there is a difference between equal rights and personal beliefs and that one's personal beliefs do not justify discrimination. As he tells the jury in his final address: "I feel like you do [about homosexuals], but it's against the law [to discriminate against them]." Joe's passionate argumentation convinces the jury that Andy has been discriminated against because of his sexuality and his disease, which violates his constitutional rights. However, Andy dies shortly after trial, his personal tragedy overshadowing his victory at court.

*Philadelphia* is a very ambivalent movie. It is simple in terms of its plot and the depth of its characters, but complex in terms of its treatment of homosexuality, AIDS, and race. *Philadelphia* was the first major Hollywood movie which dealt with AIDS and homophobia, and thus can be called nothing short of groundbreaking and revolutionary. It has been heavily criticized, however, for its almost clinical portrayal of gay relationships and the 'straightening' of Andy's character.<sup>20</sup> Along similar lines, *Philadelphia*, it is often said, is the "first major non-action Hollywood movie in which a black man personifies mainstream America" (Taubin 24)—but then again one is tempted to ask how "mainstream" Joe Miller really is. Joe's only motivation for representing Andy in court is his empathy for people who are discriminated against because of their minority status. Joe, too, is both clearly marked as 'other' in this movie but, at the same time, he is 'whitened' (he is a lawyer, middle-class, educated), so that a white audience is able to identify with him. I find the ambivalence in the two protagonists' portrayal particularly interesting because it seems to reflect the ambivalence inherent in America. American democracy is grounded in the fundamental belief that "all men are created equal" and that they were endowed by their creator with the "unalienable

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<sup>20</sup> See Corber, "Normalizing the Gay Body," for an excellent analysis of the representation of male homosexuality in *Philadelphia*. Corber convincingly argues that "for heterosexual spectators to identify with Andy, he must first be desexualized" (116). As Corber notes, the less Andy participates in gay subcultural life, the more "normal" and, indeed, *human* he appears to be. A flashback during the trial indicates that Andy's infection with the HI-virus comes from an anonymous sexual encounter at a gay movie theater. The direct link that is established here between the transmission of HIV and anonymous sex pathologizes homosexuality and gay subcultures. "Since Andy contracted HIV during his brief participation in gay culture," Corber argues, "his illness emerges as symbolic punishment for his deviation from heteronormative values and expectations" (117). Herein lies the film's ambivalence as regards homosexuality: while it is implied that homosexuality in itself is nothing bad, giving in to same-sex desire and living one's sexuality may end in painful death.

rights” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” However, just as Rocky, Andy and Joe have to experience that some people are more equal than others, that their lives are considered to be less valuable than those of straight white men, and that this devaluation deems their supposedly unalienable rights unattainable. The predominant battle in *Philadelphia* is thus, as Richard C. Cante states, “the narrative quest of the other marked male professional, be he black, gay, or diseased, to assimilate. In other words, the quilting struggle here becomes the impossible struggle to legitimately find one's way into the Law of the (Founding) Fathers, or into the realm of representation itself” (243).

There is indeed not much brotherly love in this Philadelphia—too wide is the gap between straight and gay, black and white, rich and poor. Already the film's very first sequence indicates that there is a vast difference between the ideals upon which America was imagined and the realities of the lives of many American citizens. *Philadelphia*'s opening captures this ambivalence perfectly by taking us on a trip through the streets of Philadelphia. A helicopter shot of the city lets the spectator fly toward the downtown skyline and move over the top of Benjamin Franklin Bridge, City Hall, and the bronze statue of William Penn. What follows are shots of poor black people in inner Philadelphia, wealthy white suburbanites, construction sites, and children playing games. The camera's movement finally stops when it discovers a homeless person sleeping on a sidewalk, in a pile of leaves. Philadelphia is thus established as a diverse, multicultural city; here, the mythical America that *National Treasure*, for instance, glorifies stands in stark contrast to the sobering reality one encounters on the camera's stroll through the city.

*Philadelphia* constantly negotiates between American myths and realities; it seeks to redeem the American ideals of democracy, but it has to concede that this is impossible. The film constantly and vehemently calls attention to the symbolic significance of its setting. Recall, for instance, the scene in which Joe answers a reporter's question as to whether homosexuals deserve special treatment with a recourse to the Declaration: “We're standing here in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, birthplace of freedom, where the Founding Fathers authored the Declaration of Independence, and I don't recall that glorious document saying anything about all *straight* men are created equal, but I believe it says all *men* are created equal.” Such invocations of America's utopian promises, Corber explains,

“exploit gay men’s desire to inhabit an unmarked body, a desire implanted in them by their lack of unencumbered access to the public sphere” (125). However, the costs of Andy and Joe’s marked bodies assuming the unmarked identity are enormous. The generic, abstract citizen constructed by the discourse of US citizenship as non-corporeal and transcendental is actually white, straight, and middle-class. Andy’s de-sexualization guarantees him equality and access to abstract citizenship (and thus to Americanness) for a brief moment. On his dying bed, however, he is forcibly called into his homosexual identity again. His scant body, his bald head, and his oxygen mask are signs of Andy’s impending death, a death caused by AIDS, a death caused by homosexuality. The ending of *Philadelphia* leaves a bitter aftertaste: The jury can easily grant Andy the same rights as straight citizens, it seems, because his sexuality will take its toll anyway.<sup>21</sup> Or, as Charles I. Nero observes, there is “no space for a living gay protagonist. ... Andy will die at the end, even if he wins the case” (62).

If Andy is denied the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness because of his sexually deviant body, then the same applies to Joe’s racially marked body. As I mentioned before, Joe and Andy’s relationship is solely based on Joe’s identification with Andy. Similar to Andy, Joe can only gain access to abstract citizenship if he renounces his African American heritage and disavows the specificity of his body. Joe’s status as a national citizen is thus fragile and precarious, as he lives under the permanent threat of being called into the subject position of ‘black’ and losing his citizen status. The impossibility of gaining permanent access to abstract citizenship is reflected in the lyrics to *Philadelphia*’s title song. “I walked a thousand miles / Just to slip this skin,” Bruce Springsteen sings in “Streets of Philadelphia,” alluding to the continuous attempts “flawed citizens”<sup>22</sup> like Andy and Joe undertake to assimilate, but which repeatedly fail.

Springsteen’s song underlines this constant tension between the protagonists’ desire to feel connected to Philadelphia, America, and Americanness and the radical alienation they feel, as if, in fact, they did not exist at all. His lyrics speak from the position of the marginalized and marked subject, who is not recognized

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<sup>21</sup> For more on queerness and its relation to death in *Philadelphia* see Edelman, *No Future* 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> Here, I borrow from Ariella Azoulay, who introduces the notion of the “flawed citizen” in her book *The Civil Contract of Photography*. She defines the flawed citizen as one who belongs “to a differential system of citizenship that discriminates...on the basis of differences in religion, gender, race, class, ethnicity, or language. Flawed citizens are more exposed than proper citizens to hazards, and risks and their vulnerability is systemic” (36).



or even apprehended as a proper citizen and thus unable to make sense of his-/herself: “I was bruised and battered and I couldn’t tell / What I felt / I was unrecognizable to myself / I saw my reflection in a window / I didn’t know / My own face.” The first verse closes with an implicit plea for recognition, and an appeal to also regard the life of the ‘flawed citizen’ a life worth living and worth saving: “Oh brother are you gonna leave me / Wastin’ away / On the streets of Philadelphia?” The plea for recognition remains unheard, however. The “I” in this song can feel him-/herself fading away, probably following the “the voices of friends vanished and gone” s/he can hear when walking through the city’s avenues. Flawed citizens like Joe and Andy, Springsteen’s song suggests, eventually turn into ghosts. As their lives are not worth living or worth protecting, they are also not worth remembering—and if they are not remembered, did they ever really exist? Their material bodies vanished, they come back as disembodied voices to haunt American culture and constitute a spectral narrative that troubles dominant notions of Americanness.

### **The Ghost of Barack Obama: Spectrality and Acts of Conjunction**

I began this chapter with Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech, in which he quotes from the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution to remind his fellow citizens that the project which the Founding Fathers inaugurated is still unfinished. Indeed, the contrast between the ideals propagated in the Preamble and the picture of America that, for instance, “Streets of Philadelphia” paints for us could not be more pronounced. The “more perfect union” the Founding Fathers envisioned is clearly a long way from the isolation, loneliness, and darkness Springsteen describes in his song. But if the lives of homosexuals, blacks, and other minorities are not as valuable as those of the generic U.S. citizen, as *Philadelphia* seems to suggest, if they are denied access to Americanness, what do we make of such a prominent public figure as Barack Obama? What happens to our imaginings of America, once America is represented by a black man?

Barack Obama’s inauguration as 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States on January 21, 2009, was, beyond a doubt, a landmark moment in American history. The presidency of Barack Obama is a challenge to U.S. identity politics, the significance of blackness, and the significance of color lines in general (cf. Hollinger 1033). Already during the election campaign, the press did not grow tired of depicting Obama as ‘post-ethnic’ or ‘post-racial’—an assessment which

was primarily based on Obama's "self-presentation with minimal references to his color" and on the "willingness of millions of white voters to respond to Obama" (Hollinger 1033).<sup>23</sup> To be post-ethnic, according to David Hollinger, is not to be colorblind or to deny the existence of racism, but to "reject the idea that descent is destiny" (1034).<sup>24</sup> To paraphrase, equality for American citizens all across the color lines can only become a reality if one's recognition as a citizen is no longer determined by one's skin color. Recognition and the definition of 'proper' citizens are undoubtedly the key issues in this context, which I will return to at a later point in this chapter. Suffice it to say now that the Obama phenomenon signifies a breakthrough in identity politics in the United States. As the son of a black immigrant and a white American, Barack Obama "presents a compelling invitation to explore the limits of blackness ... but also of whiteness," and destabilizes the color lines in an unprecedented manner (Hollinger 1037). Whether Obama's presidency leads America into a post-ethnic age or not is a question historians and political scientists will have to answer. My primary interest lies in the ghostly spectrality of Obama's speech in Philadelphia, which is also tied to questions of race and racism but moves into an entirely different direction.

My understanding of ghostly spectrality relies heavily on Derrida's notion of the "specter" as it can be found in *Specters of Marx*. A specter, Derrida suggests, is "always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (*Specters* 11). The revenant is, paradoxically enough, both a repetition and an original apparition: "he comes back, so to speak, for the first time," as Derrida explains (*Specters* 4). However, he also comes back for the *last* time, since

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<sup>23</sup> David Hollinger cites Obama's success in the primary elections and caucuses in Indiana and Montana, two heavily white states, as examples of Obama's acceptance among white voters. In the November 2008 election, Obama carried Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia, which have a strong Republican tradition (cf. 1033).

<sup>24</sup> In *Postethnic America*, Hollinger sketches out the definition of postethnicity in more detail. "Postethnicity," he states, "prefers voluntarily to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as a part of the normal life of a democratic society" (116). Identity formation, he forcefully argues, should be self-determined and autonomic: "Individuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever nondescent communities are available and appealing to them" (ibid). In theory, the notion of 'identity' would ultimately be replaced by the notion of 'affiliation,' which he claims to be more productive and inclusive. Multiculturalism, he explains, favors the term "identity," which Hollinger finds to be "more psychological than social" and thus tends to "hide the extent to which the achievement of an identity is a social process by which a person becomes affiliated with one or more acculturating cohorts" (6). In contrast to postethnicity, multiculturalism has, for this reason, "not been ethnic enough" (7). Our age, Hollinger is convinced, is "an age not of identities but of affiliations," which is not to say that people do not have identities, but rather that "the identities people assume are acquired largely through affiliation, however prescribed or chosen" (ibid).

“the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*” (*Specters* 10). Each and every appearance of the specter is a repetition yet an original, is a first and a last appearance at the same time. Signifying an always-already unrealized and unrealizable ontology, Derrida concludes, the specter represents the inherent instability of reality and the fleeting modality of materiality. As Frederic Jameson explains,

Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. (“Letter” 39)

The specter is a deconstructive figure that is neither absent nor present, neither dead nor alive. Consequently, the priority of material existence and presence is supplanted by an existence that is inherently incomplete and indefinable. Ontology, in other words, is replaced by its quasi-homonym “hauntology,” which denotes an impossible state of being—impossible, because there is no materiality, no presence, no tangible proof of actual existence. As Tom Lewis explains, the specter thus not merely represents the instability of reality, but furthermore “represents the ghostly embodiment of a fear and panic” that is provoked by intimations of that impossibility (140). “Recognition of the flawed or incomplete nature of being,” Lewis continues, “can trigger emotional reactions aimed at denying or exorcizing such a recognition” (ibid).

Barack Obama’s delivery of the “Race Speech” is a hauntological performance, as it denotes an instance in which the specters that haunt American culture find material, embodied existence and trouble dominant notions of Americanness. Obama explicitly addresses the contradiction inscribed in American culture, that is, the exclusion of African Americans from a vision of a more perfect union which promises life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to *all*. If the systematic silencing of African American voices has rendered them virtually non-existent as contributors to American culture, and if, in the American imaginary, the president is constructed as a white man, can Barack Obama then actually be a ‘real’ American president—or: a real *American* president? His seemingly impossible state of existence illustrates in a very poignant manner that the ideals propagated in the Constitution have never correlated with the realities of

the daily lives of all U.S. citizens.<sup>25</sup> In Barack Obama, the specters of American culture find a manifestation, or material presence; they return for the first time, their demand for recognition as part of American culture finding a voice. Obama's presence forces his audience to acknowledge the systematic exclusion of African Americans from hegemonic American culture and unearths a subdued, spectral narrative that had not managed to take material form on such a large scale before.<sup>26</sup> Coming to life in Obama's performance, these ghosts and specters that haunt the American consciousness leave a trace and may alter "future phantoms,

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, the discrepancy between the words of the Constitution and the realities of U.S. citizens has been pointed out by numerous politicians before Barack Obama. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, to name only two prominent figures, addressed this problem in various political speeches. Clinton, for instance, acknowledged in a speech on race relations in 1995 that for "tens of millions of Americans" being listened to and being heard "has never been a reality," because black Americans were not given the same opportunities as white Americans. Clinton encourages his citizens to clean America of racism and close the gap between black and white that has so long divided the country. However, Clinton's sense of history is tainted; treating racial diversity as a relatively new phenomenon, Clinton contributes to the erasure of African American voices from the nation's narrative. "Long before we were so diverse," he says, "our nation's motto was 'E Pluribus Unum'—out of many, we are one," which completely ignores the fact that African Americans have *always* been a presence in the United States and racial diversity has therefore always existed. In his speech on the African American History month in 2007, George W. Bush also called on all citizens to make the promises of equality and opportunity attainable for everyone, regardless of their skin color. Similar to Clinton, Bush acknowledges the hardships African Americans had to endure, but his perspective on history is somewhat skewed. In his speech, Bush subsumes generations of slaves under the label "the children of Africa," whose "first real hope of freedom" came when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. He then skips 100 years of American history and mentions the "heroes of the civil rights movement," who "continued the struggle for freedom" and whose courage "opened up the promise for millions of our citizens." I find Bush's choice of words extremely interesting and disturbing at the same time: the phrase "children of Africa" trivializes the toil of slavery and reaffirms racial stereotypes. Seemingly unable to help themselves, "Africa's children" had to wait for a white man to single-handedly save them from their lot. By the 1960s, Bush's words suggest, African Americans had found a way to help themselves and brought forth their own heroes. However, his words further imply that only with the civil rights movement did African Americans transform from mere inhabitants to citizens of the United States. While the purpose of Bush's speech was to honor the achievements of African Americans, it actually diminishes their accomplishments, contributes to their marginalization, and denies them a part in the narrative of America.

<sup>26</sup> To grasp the significance of Obama's victory, one only needs to consider the first reactions of African Americans after election night. Many African Americans expressed their pride to be Americans and stated that they had a new-found trust and belief in the idea of America. The *Newsweek* edition published immediately after Obama's election features a letter of an African American mother to her little son, which is representative of the meaning that Obama has for black Americans: "When you are older, we will talk about how African-American children, like their parents and grandparents, have struggled to overcome the feeling that no matter how hard they study and work and try, there are barriers—some visible, others hidden but still there—that block their way. The feeling that we can rise, but only so far. I did not want you to grow up believing that bitter remnants of the past could hold power over your future. I wanted to be able to tell you that it wasn't true—that you could be anything you wanted to be. But I couldn't quite believe it myself. Now I do. With Obama's election, I can mean it when I tell you that the world is available to you. ... No election can wipe away racism, ... [but] it is easier today than it was yesterday to see that racism, once a barrier, is now more like a hurdle" (Kelley 33). Film stars and athletes may have demonstrated that African Americans can be successful and partake of the American Dream, but only with Obama's victory did true racial equality suddenly seem possible.

future fantasies ... and at times ... cultural repertoires" (Taylor, D., *Archive* 143).<sup>27</sup> Barack Obama's deliverance of "A More Perfect Union" does precisely that. It changes the way and the scope in which American presidents will be envisioned and desired in the future. At the same time, it also alters the cultural repertoire of America, as the performance of a black president is added as an imaginable and legitimate enactment of the American president. Through the figure of Barack Obama, the notion of 'black president' is resignified and turned from and impossible into a possible existence, while the specters become agents, active participants in American culture.

The relation between spectrality and performance is rather complex and difficult to pin down. As an apparition that is both a repetition and a singular event, Derrida's specter could by all means be regarded as the 'embodiment' of performance, as the specter and performance are both defined along similar lines. I use 'embodiment' for lack of a better word; as the specter is never wholly present, nor material, it actually cannot be said to embody anything. In fact, the specter cannot even 'be'—it can always only 'almost-be.' The specter, I thus want to suggest, is not the manifestation of performance, but of 'almost-performance.' It is the manifestation of (seemingly) impossible existences, such as the existence of a black U.S. president, for instance, or that of a gay cowboy, which demonstrate the limits and the instability of our constructions of reality. When Morgan Freeman played president Tim Beck in the Hollywood blockbuster *Deep Impact* in 1998, cynics remarked that the somewhat absurd plotline of a meteor destroying Earth had greater chances of becoming reality than that of a black man serving the nation's highest office. Or, put differently: even those viewers who missed the beginning of the film would have immediately realized that they were only

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor defines the repertoire as follows: "The repertoire ... enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically 'a treasury, an inventory,' also allows for individual agency, referring also to 'the finder, the discoverer,' and meaning 'to find out.'" (*Archive* 20). She identifies four central characteristics that the repertoire bears. First, the repertoire "requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being part of the transmission" (ibid). Second, it "both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning," that is, the embodiment of (institutionalized) knowledge changes over time, but its meaning may remain the same (ibid). Third, the repertoire "allows ... scholars to trace traditions and influences," offering "an alternative perspective on historical processes ..." (ibid). As performances reproduce themselves through their very own patterns and codes, it follows that fourth, "the repertoire ... is mediated" (*Archive* 21). The selection process and transmission takes place in—and contributes to the constitution of—specific systems of representation. Embodied acts, Taylor argues, thus "reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next" (ibid).

watching a movie and tragedy was not really impending when they saw Morgan Freeman as president on their screen, because the impossibility of a black president was deeply anchored in people's minds. A black president is an impossible existence not because there were no black wo/men who might have been willing and able to run for office, but rather because there is no black wo/man on any dollar bill. In other words, in the American cultural imaginary, African Americans typically do not figure as presidents. Most people will have a very specific image in their minds of what a president should look like, and they will probably rather think along the lines of a George Washington than a Frederick Douglass. Imaginings of Obama as a second, a black George

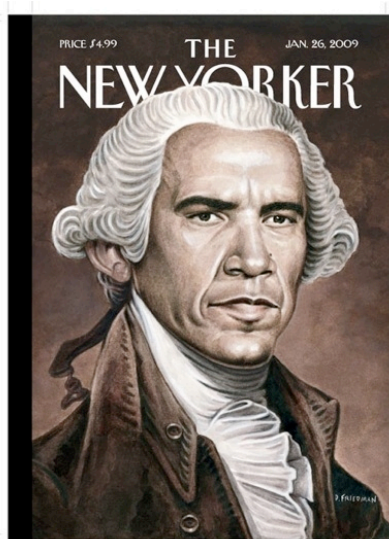


Fig. 6: *The New Yorker* cover, 23 January, 2009.

Washington, as one could find it on the cover of the inauguration-issue of *The New Yorker* (fig. 6), illustrate the process of resignification, while they also make visible the ghosts that haunt American culture. The Obama-fication of Washington's iconic portrait aligns Obama with the first president, suggesting that Obama is a 'first,' too: he is the first black president, but also the first president of a symbolically re-founded America and a signifier of change. Moreover, imagining Obama as a reincarnation of Washington contributes to a cultural legitimization of Obama as

president. However, the cover of *The New Yorker* also leaves us with a feeling of being haunted by the specter of slavery, by the ghosts of politically and culturally dispossessed black Americans, and by the lost voices that have been systematically silenced in narratives of American culture. Barack Obama, then, figures as the host of America's specters, as he draws attention to the incompleteness of a particular construction of 'reality' that privileges whiteness as the default racial category in the American cultural imaginary. In other words, Obama 'exceeds' his own corporeality to provide the specters of America with an embodied existence that grants them materiality and visibility.

The spectrality of Obama's performance resides in the singularity of this particular event. One may compare Obama to a Derridean specter in that he, too, "comes back for the first time." Obama 'comes back,' because, one might say, he is

the spiritual descendant of great African Americans leaders like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or Jesse Jackson—an impression which is strengthened by his allusions to the Civil Rights movement. However, Obama comes back “for the first time,” because he delivered his speech as the first African American to have a real chance of becoming president, which he then eventually did.<sup>28</sup> This historic event cannot be repeated; to use Derrida’s terms, Obama is both the first and the last first African American president in U.S. history. The historic quality of Obama’s election as president, then, is determined precisely by the seeming impossibility of a black president. Consequently, the moment of impossibility-turned-into-reality produces chaos, as its imagery cannot be related to anything known and familiar. This moment produces a different and somewhat odd version of America that diverges significantly from the common narrative, according to which the president is supposed to be a white man. I want to stress that this moment of impossibility-turned-into-reality is a moment of confrontation and recognition, in the sense that it forces one to face the instability of ‘reality’ and the exclusionary practices that are at work in the construction of cultural imaginaries. It demands the acknowledgment of an alternative narrative that does not emerge *ex nihilo*, but that has rather always run parallel to the dominant narrative. In instances such as Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech, this subdued, spectral narrative gains momentum and redefines the hegemonic narrative by investing available symbols with new significations, thus provoking redefinitions of ‘Americanness.’

I propose to read Obama’s delivery of “A More Perfect Union” as an instance of disruptive ghosting, that is, as a manifestation and embodied visualization of that which has long been kept invisible and whose sudden visibility interrupts ‘normal’ narratives of American culture, provoking reconsiderations and redefinitions of the meaning of ‘Americanness.’ My understanding of performance is rooted in the principle of ghosting and on the relationship between visibility and invisibility, appearance and disappearance. In this sense, my view of performance recalls that of Phelan; however, while Phelan considers the defining feature of all performance that it is live and unrecordable—hence disappears without a trace—I concur with Diana Taylor that performance makes visible in the ‘now’ that which is always already there and has indeed always been there: the scenarios, the

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<sup>28</sup> Barack Obama was the seventh African American to run for president. He was preceded by Shirley Chisholm (1972), Jesse Jackson (1984 and 1988), Lenora Fulani (1988 and 1994), Alan Keyes (1996 and 2000), Al Sharpton (2004), and Carol Moseley Brown (2004).

patterns and cultural codes that structure dominant imaginings of America, and the ghosts that haunt these imaginings. “These specters,” Taylor writes, “alter future phantoms, future fantasies” (*Archive* 143). Performances *do* leave a trace as they reproduce, and at times alter, cultural repertoires through invocational practice, through making visible “not just the live, but the powerful army of the always already living” (*ibid*).

Central to both performance and the notion of spectrality is their situatedness in the now, their coming to life in an ephemeral instant that we cannot hold on to. As Taylor argues, the “power of seeing through performance is the recognition that we’ve seen it all before—the fantasies that shape our sense of self, of community, that organize our scenarios of interaction, conflict, and resolution” (*ibid*). Put differently, the power of performance lies in its ability to evoke a sense of *déjà-vu*, a feeling that the present moment has already been seen, experienced, lived. Performance is always haunted and, just as the Derridean specter, always begins by coming back. The use of performance as an epistemological tool thus invites reconsiderations of historiography, sequential time, and the weight of the past. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida asks whether the comings and goings of the specter are “ordered according to the linear succession of a before and an after, between a present-past, a present-present, and a present-future, between a ‘real time’ and a ‘deferred time’” (48). If there is something like spectrality and, one might add, if there is something like performance, the “reassuring order of presents” and the neat borders between present, actual ‘reality’ of the present, and absence or non-presence collapse, as the “*spectrality effect*,” as Derrida calls it, undoes the opposition between an effective presence and an absence, between past present and future present, focusing instead on a politics of conjuration (*ibid*).

The French noun ‘conjuration’ articulates two seemingly conflicting meanings, as Derrida points out. It signifies ‘conjuration’ (its English homonym), on the one hand, and ‘conjurement,’ on the other. The English ‘conjuration’ may denote either “the conspiracy ... of those who promise solemnly ... by swearing together an oath to struggle against a superior power” or the “magical incantation destined to *evoke*, to bring forth with the voice, to *convoke* a charm or spirit” (*Specters* 50). ‘Conjurement,’ by contrast, refers to the “magical exorcism that ... tends to expulse the evil spirit which would have been called up or evoked” (*Specters* 58). A politics of conjuration is thus a process of negotiation between magical



incantations and a magical exorcism that unfolds through the power of the performative. Both incantation and exorcism are rhetorically dependent on declarations, certifications, and authoritative claims, in order to achieve the desired effect and be in effect. In the very moment of their articulation, declarations posit truths, that is, they are true *for* that particular moment *in* that particular moment. What makes declarations and certifications particularly effective is, therefore, their singularity and their situatedness in the now: declarations put importance on a particular moment which can be reactivated and reiterated but never repeated in exactly the same way.

We may conceive of Obama's delivery of "A More Perfect Union" as a conjuration that evokes the specter of slavery but also exorcises it through a recourse to the American Dream and mythical imaginings of America. The invocation of the specter of slavery, which haunts Obama's performance, conflicts with normative narratives of American culture and disrupts modern formulations of ontology, teleology, and epistemology, provoking reconceptualizations of what constitutes 'proper' Americanness. The spectrality effect of this conjuration, the specter's presence yet absence, its visibility yet invisibility, lets the comforting sequential order of present, past, and future crumble and shifts our focus to the very moment of articulation, to the ephemeral 'now.' Considering how important the now is to all performance, it is surprising how seldom it has been theorized and put at the center of performance studies. David Román's study *Performance in America* is perhaps the only thorough analysis of a notion which he calls the "contemporary" and which he understands to be at the guiding principle performance.

Already at the outset of his book, Román poses the important question "What might be gained by placing performance at the center of current national inquires and debates?" (*Performance* 1). Román seeks to answer this question by "thinking about performance as a practice that both shapes and informs ... the 'contemporary.'" (ibid). Román defines the contemporary as "a critical temporality that engages the past without being held captive to it and that instantiates the present without defining a future" (ibid). The question of the contemporary is "almost by definition a problem of representation," because as soon as the present moment finds representation it is marked by the passage of time (Docherty 50). According to Román, discussions on the notion of the contemporary are most

fruitful when they are connected to the performing arts, as the nowness of performance is, in fact, a manifestation of the contemporary. Both the contemporary and performance cannot be pinned down within a space/time continuum, as they take place in a present moment in time, “in which an audience imagines itself within a fluid and nearly suspended temporal condition” (Román, *Performance* 11). In other words, the contemporary unhinges teleological time and establishes a connection between past, present, and future that is dynamic and open to ‘circular’ forms of exchange.<sup>29</sup> By ‘circular’ exchange I mean that both the past and the future are linked to the contemporary and define it, while they are being defined by it at the same time. Contemporary performances draw from the past and shape the future without being anchored to it; the exchange that is taking place among a provisional collective (artists and audience) within a particular moment and particular space allows for unforeseen revisions of the past as well as unexpected visions of the future. The significance of contemporary performance, as Román argues, “need not be based in either tradition or futurity,” but lies in its capacity of marking its own historical moment (*Performance* 15).

In contrast to Román, I am not exclusively interested in the relation between the contemporary and the performing arts, but I want to focus on processes of temporal and spatial exchange on a broader level, which includes literary, filmic, and visual texts. By understanding performance as a genre which “allows for alternative mappings” that enables scholars of American studies to “rethink [...] their object of study” (Taylor, D., “Remapping” 1417), it is possible to analyze texts which are usually perceived as generically different under the same aspects. Of interest to me are the processes of exchange between text and imaginary in the moment of the now, the versions of America that are performed and created in that exchange, and especially the disruptive moments of spectrality that expose American culture as inherently fraught with tension. ‘Normal’ Americanness is an ideological construct that has been designed to signify whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, middle-class, and Protestantism, and it has been haunted by the specters which do not fulfill one or more of these criteria; as the following chapters

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<sup>29</sup> Feminist theorists, such as Robyn Wiegman, have already successfully deconstructed the concept of teleological time, which “covets the ideas of origins and succession” (810). The model of teleological time builds on the “generational legacy” paradigm (Roof 71), which assumes a reproductive logic and conceives of the present as permanently indebted to the past. I find these scholars’ efforts to divest the notion of time from causality and linearity very intriguing because it establishes the present moment as a time in its own right without falling captive to presentism and becoming ahistorical.

will show, however, the cultural works that have been invested with hegemonic imaginings of ‘normal’ Americanness conjure the very specters that their ideologically motivated readings relentlessly sought to exorcise. After all, the mere fact that there is a need for the vehement disarticulation of, for example, blackness, femininity, and homosexuality from ‘normal’ Americanness indicates that there *are* articulations of Americanness that include—or at least bear the traces of—these disavowed categories.

Performance may enable us to unearth those articulation as, according to Román, the processes of temporal exchange in performance allow new social formations to emerge—social formations, which “constitute a counterpublic” that breaks with normative structures of being and belonging (*Performance* 2). Performance thus “critically reinvents what is meant by ‘America’” in the moment of the contemporary, which “both carries and reinvents particular performances and moments from the past” (ibid). While I agree with Román’s assessment that performance reinvents our understanding of ‘America,’ I do not think that this is necessarily done by or through a counterpublic. Román does not further explain how he would define a ‘counterpublic.’ My understanding of the term is based on definitions by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner. Fraser speaks of “subaltern counterpublics,” by which she means “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (“Public Sphere” 122-23). Warner adds to Fraser’s definition that “a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (“Public” 86). However, those strangers are not addressed as “just anybody,” but they are “socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse” (ibid).<sup>30</sup> In both Fraser and Warner’s understanding, a subaltern, inferior status is (re-) inscribed into the term ‘counterpublic,’ which reinforces the exclusion of subordinated social groups from mainstream culture. Much more effective than the formation of counterdiscourses are modifications of mainstream culture by way of which these social groups become included in American culture on its imaginary level. These modifications

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<sup>30</sup> Warner cites gay and queer counterpublics as examples to illustrate the mechanisms of a counterpublic. While “ordinary people,” Warner explains, “are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would want to participate in this [counterpublic] kind of talk or be present in this [counterpublic] kind of scene,” the counterpublic constitutes a safe space free from “heteronormative speech protocols” in which individual stigmatization is transposed by a conflict between “modes of publicness” (“Public” 86-87).

come down to us in the form of reinvestments of common cultural codes and symbols with new significations. Through Barack Obama, the notion of ‘president,’ for instance, is invested with new meaning, which alters American culture on a large scale. In the case of Obama, American culture is faced with a shift in meaning that is too powerful to be ignored or pushed to the margins and vehemently demands a renegotiation of what ‘America/n’ means—a renegotiation of whose contributions to American culture are valued, of what constitutes the ‘norm,’ and of who is a ‘proper’ and who is a ‘flawed’ American.

To read Barack Obama’s “Race Speech” as a haunted performance and an instance of conjuration is to draw critical attention to the unsettling moment of chaos that is produced when Americanness is performed with a difference and resists patterned forms of interpretation. Such performances run counter to one’s expectations and disrupt totalizing, restrictive notions of American culture. However, I want to stress that the disruptions caused by the spectrality effect are not by definition destructive. On the contrary, I propose that, by granting visibility to the mis- and non-representation of marginalized groups in the American cultural imaginary, these moments are more often than not productive and dynamic instances which unearth long silenced voices and send out a plea for inclusion. This plea can be articulated very vehemently and forcefully, as in the case of Barack Obama. In other instances, this plea for inclusion may quickly fall into oblivion. Nevertheless, the conjurations that disrupt hegemonic narratives of American culture leave their traces just as any other performance and continue to haunt the American cultural landscape.

All conjurations, and the disruptive spectrality they entail, can only appear within the temporal frame of the contemporary, as they emerge out of the dynamics between past and present in the ephemeral act of performance. Since every contemporary performance is always already embedded in a history of past performances, the contemporary, as Román states, engages in ongoing dialogues with, for instance, cultural memory, the theatrical past, and literary history (cf. *Performance* 12-13). Román continues by arguing that he wants to challenge “the presumption that the contemporary is obligated to recognize the past or gesture to the future” (*Performance* 15). Taking cue from queer theory, he proposes a questioning of all systems of normativity and suggests that the contemporary “should be evaluated primarily in terms of how it serves its immediate audience”

(ibid). This is the point where my agenda diverges from Román's in a significant and crucial way. Similar to Román, I am, too, indebted to the critical output of queer theory and I acknowledge queer theory's endeavor to inquire all systems of normativity. However, I hold queer theory's main venture to be the transcendence of binary oppositions and categorical thinking, in favor of a thinking in continuums with smooth, fluent transitions between different states of being. Accordingly, the radical potential of the contemporary, especially when it produces a haunting effect, must be in the transcendence of teleological temporality and the attempt to establish a system of circular temporality that is characterized by simultaneity rather than linear succession. It is in the fleeting moment of the now that the past meets the future and, for a split-second, the linear procession of time is interrupted. As Román has so rightly pointed out, all contemporary performances are rooted in an archive of past performances, but they would also be impossible without an imaginable future.<sup>51</sup> While I agree with Román that the contemporary should be understood and analyzed as a temporality in its own right, I do not believe that evaluating it primarily in terms of its immediate effect and purpose would do it justice. I think that the power of the contemporary gets enhanced by its function as the nexus where past, present, and future merge, as past performances come to life in the form of impulses, movements, flashes of memory in the contemporary performance which, at the same time, shows possibilities of future performances. Contemporary performances thus leave their imprint on the past and the future and give direction to imaginings of Americanness.

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<sup>51</sup> Román does not further explain what constitutes the archive, or how he would define this term in the first place. Taylor, on the other hand, provides a very comprehensive definition of the archive, which she understands to be the complement of the repertoire. "‘Archival’ memory," she writes, "exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change. Archive ... etymologically refers to ‘a public building,’ ‘a place where records are kept.’ ... [It] also means a beginning, the first place [...] We might conclude that the archival, from beginning, sustains power" (*Archive* 19). Taylor stresses that the archive is a dynamic process rather than a static site: "[a]rchival memory works across distance, over time and space [...] What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied. ... Insofar as it constitutes materials that seem to endure, the archive exceeds the live" (ibid). As archival memory is institutionalized knowledge, there are, as Taylor points out, several myths attending it: "One is that it is unmediated, that objects located there might mean something outside the framing of the archival impetus itself. What makes an object archival is the process whereby it is selected, classified, and presented for analysis. Another myth is that the archive resists change, corruptibility, and political manipulation. Individual things ... might mysteriously appear in or disappear from the archive" (ibid).

It is important to note at this point that the possible future performances foreshadowed in the contemporary do not necessarily have to present us with something fundamentally new, nor do they have to depict idealistic and utopian futures. But the glimpses at future performances, which the contemporary offers, *always* transform the archive they derive from, be it in small or radical ways. Contemporary performances transcend the linearity of time, because in the fleeting moment of the now there is a vivid, *reciprocal* exchange between past and present, which follows neither the normative principles of legitimated traditions, nor those of a “reproductive futurism” (Edelman, *No Future* 2). Rather, this exchange aims at establishing a dialogue in which past and present are reflected through one another and, as a consequence, open up a wide variety of possible readings of a given culture.<sup>32</sup> Or, to quote Wendy Brown, such a mode of temporality “honors and redeems the past without recourse to *Geist* (or any other logic of history) and ... is also responsive to imagined future generations, even offering them a certain promise and guarantee without pretending that it can orchestrate their relations” (148). A mode of temporality that privileges the contemporary demonstrates that culture, and American culture in this particular case, is always subject to re-definition and re-signification; it demonstrates that the past is not a static archive we draw from, but that our understanding and interpretation of the past changes according to our imaginings of the future.

As the specter is both a site of rupture and renewal, moments of spectrality offer chaos and disruption as much as they offer promise and hope; they expose dominant discourses of ‘America’ as highly ambivalent and contradictory but they also offer a glimpse at different, more inclusive imaginings of America. The key, Derrida suggests according to Brown, is to learn to live with the specters, “with the things that shape the present, rendering it as always permeated by an elsewhere but in a fashion that is inconsistent, ephemeral, and hence not fully

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<sup>32</sup> Connerton sheds some more light on the exchange between past and present, distant and recent memories: “What binds together recent memories is not the fact that they are contiguous in time but rather the fact that they form part of a whole ensemble of thoughts common to a group. ... Exactly the same applies when we want to recall more distant memories. ... There is no difference, in this respect, between recent and distant memories” (Connerton 37). To speak of associations by resemblance or of associations by contiguity is thus futile, Connerton argues, because it is primarily shared interests and thoughts that make retention of memory possible. “It is not because thoughts are similar that we can evoke them,” he states, “it is rather because the same group is interested in those memories, and is able to evoke them, that they are assembled together in our minds” (Connerton 37). It thus seems more apt to speak of collective memories as shared mental maps that are constructed in the reflection of past and present through one another, in order to promote specific ideas and interests.

mappable” (Brown 145). Performances of America that go against the grain and resist hegemonic protocols of re-enactment conjure the specters of America; they are not necessarily the product of a counterdiscourse or a counterpublic, but they rather result out of an attempt to unmask and de-ideologize ‘normal’ Americanness in order to become a more inclusive, more democratic term. In other words, such performances let us access the spectral narrative of American culture and let us perform a re-reading of America, in which we might discover a ‘new’ America that has, in fact, always been there. Indeed, we have always known of the existence of its spectral narrative, but it is only through the act of conjuration that the ghosts finally become visible.

Learning to live with ghosts means learning to live with the in-between, with the unspecific and incoherent. It means living without rigid systems and structures, without a sense of absolute completion. Living with ghosts means “learning to live with this unmasterable, unrecognizable, and irreducible character of the past’s bearing on the present,” as Brown concludes, “and hence with the unmasterable and irreducible character of the present as well” (146). To permit and even exploit ghosts to function as a deconstructive device, she continues, means “living with the permanent disruption of the usual oppositions that render our world coherent—between the material and the ideal, the past and the present, the real and the fictive, the true and the false” (ibid). Ghosts reside in the realm of the imaginary, at the nexus of myth and ‘reality,’ and they come to us in the same fleeting, unforeseeable manner that characterizes the cultural imaginary, which may be reshaped and altered by the traces these ghosts leave, by the ways in which “past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present,” by the ways in which they “claim us, and how they haunt, plague, and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future” (Brown 150). In the effect of spectrality, one thus cannot so much locate tendencies to oppose hegemonic discourses as tendencies to complement those discourses by revising familiar concepts and opening them up to resignification, so that the existence of a black president, for instance, is not perceived as ‘odd’ or ‘different’ but as ‘normal’ and ‘ordinary.’ These resignifications, then, take place in the interplay of ‘America,’ the cultural imaginary, and performance.

## ACT II

### WILL THE REAL AMERICAN PLEASE STAND UP! AMERICANNES (DIS)EMBODIED

Listen to the States asserting: 'The hour has struck! Americans shall be American. The U.S.A. is now grown up artistically. It is time we ceased to hang on to the skirts of Europe, or to behave like schoolboys let loose from European schoolmasters.' All right, Americans, let's see you set about it. ... Where *is* this new bird called the true American?

—D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, n.p.



## Interlude — Pop Goes The Canon

‘Will The Real American Please Stand Up!’ is the first of two acts which appeals to Berlant’s “modal American,” the *normal* citizen, to show face. In order to unmask the modal American, I want to approach him from three perspectives, by putting three foundational scenarios on stage in this first act. In these scenarios, Ralph W. Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau, and Walt Whitman are brought into dialogue with *Finding Nemo*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Spider-Man*. These discussions, in turn, will shed light on the constitution of individualism, citizenship, and subjectivity as (dis-)embodied in the modal American. The “modal American,” according to Berlant, is a blueprint, or a norm against which all variations are measured. The modal American is clearly envisioned as male, white, and heterosexual, but, as these categories are unmarked, his Americanness is perceived as universal and disembodied.<sup>1</sup> “The white, male body is the relay to legitimation,” Berlant writes, “but even more than that, the power to suppress that body, to cover its tracks and its traces, is the sign of real authority, according to constitutional fashion” (“National” 176). However, as my analysis of the three foundational scenarios will show, the modal American has always been an imperfect blueprint through which in palimpsestic fashion a spectral Americanness shines through. Sometimes, in covering his own traces, the traces of repressed ‘others’ are uncovered.

The advantages of using the term ‘scenario’ as a paradigm for understanding the performative construction of Americanness in literature and culture and for teasing out its subdued narratives are manifold. Following Diana Taylor, I suggest that first of all, a ‘scenario’ is always closely related to a ‘scene,’ which denotes intentionality and indicates conscious strategies of display, stylized codes of behavior, and a certain degree of theatricality. A ‘scenario’ is, in other words, the

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway speaks of the privilege of the Western white man of inhabiting an unmarked body, while the bodies of others have been ever more precisely marked: “From the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the great historical constructions of gender, race, and class were embedded in the organically marked bodies of woman, the colonized or enslaved, and worker. Those inhabiting these marked bodies have been symbolically other to the fictive rational self of universal, and so unmarked, species man, a coherent subject” (210). Haraway’s argument implies a connection between the unmarked and the disembodied, and the marked and the embodied. As Sally Robinson explains, “to be unmarked means to be invisible—not in the sense of ‘hidden from history’ but, rather, as the self-evident standard against which all differences are measured: hidden *by* history” (1).

theoretical complement of a 'scene.' The scene provides the set-up for the scenario; it is the environment whose boundaries assign the possibilities of the action. The scene can thus be compared to the archive, while the scenario figures as the repertoire, as an embodied performance that might adhere to or subvert the patterns laid out by the scene/archive.

Second, the scenario "requires us to wrestle with the social construction of bodies in particular contexts" (Taylor, D., *Archive* 29). Whether we speak of an act of performance or of performativity, the term 'scenario' subsumes actors assuming a role and social actors following regulated patterns, pointing towards the tensions and frictions that emerge between plot, character, and embodiment. Out of these tensions, Taylor proposes "some of the most remarkable instances of parody and resistance" develop (*Archive* 30).

Third, scenarios follow fixed frames and are therefore repeatable and transferable. They even consciously reference each other by the way certain situations are framed or gestures and words are used. As Taylor points out, "they are passed on and remain remarkably coherent paradigms of seemingly unchanging attitudes and values" (*Archive* 31). At the same time, they always adapt to current, contemporary conditions and thus refer to rather specific repertoires of cultural imaginings, rather than to broad social structures.

Fourth, the scenario is not primarily mimetic, but rather works through reactivation of past situations. It conjures up cultural myths and assumptions and constitutes once-againness, or twice-behaved behavior, rather than duplication (cf. *Archive* 30-32). The consideration of scenarios alongside narratives thus enables us to "analyze the live and the scripted, the citational practices that characterize both, how traditions get constituted and contested" (*Archive* 32-33). Specific practices can be historicized and scrutinized more thoroughly through scenarios, which let us recognize the many different ways in which social knowledge is constituted and transmitted through the archive and the repertoire.

Foundational scenarios, as the following sections will show, allow us to discern recurring cultural patterns that have come to signify Americanness and that enable the constitution of something like a 'modal American' in the first place. On the other hand, foundational scenarios also give room to resistance to these patterns, to reversals and resignifications, seeking to recognize 'America' in all its complexities and contradictions. My attempt to unravel the complexities of

'America' takes issue with a particular tradition in which the works of the writers of the American Renaissance have been received, but also with the way in which these writers have stylized themselves. The publication of Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* in 1941 lay foundation to the first clearly identifiable school of American Studies, generally known as the 'myth and symbol school.'<sup>2</sup> In the face of a crisis of American identity that emerged with the nation's involvement in World War II, the myth and symbol school sought to define what was essentially 'American' about America and found the alleged essence of Americanness in the literature of the mid-nineteenth century. Particularly the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman lend themselves to such an undertaking, as all three writers display a remarkable awareness of the lack of a unified national identity and a national cultural tradition, on the one hand, and of the foundational role they could play in changing that situation, on the other.

In the early nineteenth century, when the writers of the American Renaissance were born, the United States was merely a quarter-century old and "less a 'nation' than a project," as Buell remarks (*Emerson* 11). The union was still very fragile, as it was confronted with enormous interior political and economical challenges while it sought to affirm cultural and intellectual independence from Europe at the same time. There was, in other words, fertile breeding ground for intellectuals and writers to develop and partake of a tradition of American thought, but until the mid-nineteenth century, when the threat of secession became immanent, the American intelligentsia seemed to lack a clear structure or common agenda. However, in the years preceding the Civil War, the Revolutionary mythos, which had produced citizens whose primary dogma was opposition, "was turned into a means of cultural association, and made it necessary for Americans to reflect upon cultural principles they could agree upon" (Pease, *Compacts* x). Additional developments and movements, such as industrialization, urbanization, rising immigration, the advance of the Western frontier, and revolutions in transportation let the "spirit of independence and technological amelioration" pervade the air (McLoughlin 19).

The writers of the American Renaissance, Pease argues, distanced themselves from the "Revolutionary mythos" as well as from America's pre-Revolutionary past and devised "visionary compacts" in their writings, which "sanctioned terms

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950) and "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" are oftentimes regarded as the first important programmatic statements of the myth and symbol school.

of agreement from the nation's past—capable of bringing together the nation's citizens in the present" (Pease, *Compacts* x). These writers wrote in order to "overcome a division of cultural realms" and "establish an American public sphere in which all citizens could enter into the decision-making process," thus contributing significantly to the formation of a body politic (*Compacts* 45).<sup>5</sup> Their visionary compacts were essentially drafts for a new social compact in America, which should return the nation to its founding principles and thereby restore it (cf. *Compacts* 46-47). Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman shared the sense that America's promise had not yet been fulfilled and that America's true potential had not yet been discovered. By reiterating and seeking to fulfill these promises in their writings, they negotiated the meanings of 'America' and being 'an American' and were later said to have thus declared America's "literary independence" (Ziff, *Democracy* xi).

The past decades have seen enormous revisions of the theories of the myth and symbol school, as well as revisions of the canon<sup>4</sup> of American literature that has

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<sup>5</sup> Emerson's writings of the late 1830s and the 1840s are especially haunted by the political situation Emerson observed during the New York elections in 1834. Robert D. Richardson calls 1834 Emerson's "year of wonders," as this year marked his growth as a poet, his move to Concord, and the slow but steady lessening of his problem of vocation (170). This year is also of interest because it reveals Emerson's political engagement with Jacksonian America and his considerations on dynamic cultural resistance, which he developed in his writings (cf. Fuller, *Ghosts* 7). Disappointed by the politics of both parties, Emerson saw himself forced to reassess American politics within his specific, personal framework as intellectual/writer/lecturer. To reach an audience and advance his transcendental conception of the self, he needed to appropriate the language of democracy and subvert governmental power by offering an alternative version of society. More than with political processes, Emerson was thus concerned with the representation of politics and of political ideas (cf. Fuller, *Ghosts* 12-13). Giles Gunn described Emerson's position as a "symbolic revisioning" of America (*Grain* 236), in which "to reenvision [sic] America critically is not at all to remove this process from the realm of symbols but to reconceive the nature of the symbolic realm itself and of the potentially critical as well as expressive, if not to say ethical, processes that go inside it" (*Grain* 221). Sacvan Bercovitch argues along the same lines, noting that "Emerson's hopes for the nation were never higher than during the 1830s and 1840s" (*Puritan* 158)—a hope which is rooted in the "living, prospective titanic American nature" and "America's ineffable power" (Porte, "Problem" 97-98). In 1837, when he composed "The American Scholar" and the nation was faced with a financial crash, Emerson sought the possibility of progress and national development in the threatening social rifts and crises. As Fuller notes, Emerson saw the rise of the Democratic party as "ultimately contributing to an empowering individuality that might one day render political machinations unnecessary" (*Ghosts* 19).

<sup>4</sup> The term 'canon' is a highly problematic term and under permanent scrutiny, as the formation of any canon necessarily engages practices of exclusion and hierarchization. In his influential study *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom suggests that canonical authors were "authoritative in our culture" and excelled in "sublimity and their representative nature" (*Canon* 1-2). The question is, however: representative of whom? For the longest time the canon was dominated by white male authors and adequate representations of a nation as diverse as the U.S. were hard—if not impossible—to come by. The last decades saw wide revisions of the canon, to include more female, ethnic, or gay and lesbian writers, who have contributed to the rich landscape of American literature. The *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, for instance, took on a precursory role in the collection of texts that had previously been excluded from the canon and in the production of a more inclusive, pluralistic canon. I emphatically reject conceptions of the canon that perpetuate

emerged out of the myth and symbol school. The theories of American culture put forth by the myth and symbol school have been criticized as “holistic and totalizing” and suppressing the cultural diversity of the United States (Fluck/Claviez ix).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the “exceptionalist-inspired focus on American ideals and uniqueness of American identity” essential to their theories ignored bitter realities such as racism, sexism, or homophobia (ibid). Or, as Leo Marx puts it, the myth and symbol scholars “helped to establish a new canon of ‘classic’ American literature consisting almost exclusively of the work of dead white Protestant males” (“Recovering” 121). Furthermore, the search for a “unique American identity or the meaning of a ‘mythic’ America” reinforces the “artificial boundaries of the nation-state” (Fluck/Claviez x). A common agenda of all these revisions is the decentering of white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant experience from American culture—or, the deconstruction of the modal American.

My dissertation contributes to the revisions of totalizing and singular theories of American culture by taking issue with the signifier ‘America/n’ and imaginings of a ‘mythic’ America that have retained their power because of their frequent, relentless re-enactments in popular cultural productions. The theories of the myth and symbol school undoubtedly have many shortcomings, but the circulation of American myths and symbols has far from ceased and being an American is still very much synonymous with being an unmarked white male (cf. Babb 2). Also, the notion that the writers of the American Renaissance were the ‘founding fathers’ of a specifically American literary and cultural tradition continues to be expressed in contemporary scholarship. In his book *The American Classics* (2005) Denis Donoghue, for instance, writes that the “canon of American literature is

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hierarchies; in my usage of the term, I share Aleida Assmann’s critical perspective on the canon as a “small number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated in ever-new presentations and performances” (100). The process of canonization, according to Assmann, is that of a sanctification: “to endow texts, persons, artifacts, and monuments with a sanctified status is to set them off from the rest as charged with the highest meaning and value” (ibid). Elements of the canon, she argues, are consequently marked by selection, value, and duration. “Selection presupposes decisions and power struggles,” she writes, “duration in cultural memory is the central aim of the procedure. . . . The canon is not built up anew by each generation; on the contrary, it outlives the generations who have to encounter and reinterpret it anew according to their time” (ibid). Whenever I use the term ‘canon’ I do so critically, always questioning the ideological mechanisms that are at work in the formation of a canon.

<sup>5</sup> See also Leo Marx, who states that the conception and practice of American Studies prior to the Vietnam War was “an essentially holistic, affirmative, nationalistic project primarily aimed at identifying and documenting the distinctive features of the culture and society chiefly created by white European settlers in the territory now comprising the U.S.” (“Recovering” 121).

Emersonian. If you start with Emerson, you soon come to Thoreau, Whitman, and Hawthorne. Hawthorne leads to Melville by kinship and difference" (*Classics* 20).

Donoghue attributes "classic" status to *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Walden*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, because these are works that "have survived, for more than a hundred years, many dispositions," among them "neglect, contempt, indifference, willful readings, excess of praise, hyperbole" (Donoghue, *Classics* 10). The same can certainly be said of many other works in American literature, so why single out these five books? Donoghue's answer is simple: "they make available to readers ... a shared cultural experience" (*Classics* 19). The foundation of this allegedly shared cultural experience is, according to Donoghue, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who may not be a classic writer himself but who "is most of the context" of the five books Donoghue discusses (*Classics* 21). It is "some version of [Emersonian] individualism," he suggests, that drives the five works which he defines as classics of American literature and that leads him to argue that the canon of American literature is Emersonian (*Classics* 20). The lineage from Emerson to Melville that Donoghue describes in his book had already been observed by Matthiessen in *American Renaissance*, where he wrote that "Emerson's theory of expression was that on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted by being forced to react against its philosophical assumptions" (xii). Donoghue does not stand alone in his reiteration of Matthiessen, which shows that, in spite of all revisions of the canon, the significant role the Renaissance writers played in the formation of a national literature and culture is seldom questioned.

Donald Pease sets out to revise Matthiessen's position on the American Renaissance by putting Matthiessen into his own cultural context. When *American Renaissance* was published, the U.S. had just entered World War II and needed a coherent national tradition and self-representation. Matthiessen "hoped to supply America with a national tradition" and for the sake of cultural consensus he "silenced not only his own potentially disruptive political opinions but those of the politicians and orators he simply excluded from the American Renaissance" (Pease, *Compacts* 246-247). While Matthiessen's endeavor has to be viewed critically, Pease nevertheless stresses the important role Emerson and the other Renaissance writers had in the creation of a distinctly and discreetly defined American culture, at a time when the young nation faced the possibility of a civil

war. The writers of the American Renaissance, Pease writes, “wished to avoid a civil war by returning America to agreed-upon relations, thereby restoring to America a common life all Americans could share” (*Compacts* x).

In my argument, I thus go back to both Matthiessen’s claim that the writers of the American Renaissance were the first to articulate an ‘original’ Americanness and to these writers’ own attempts to put American literature on the map by defining what distinguished America from European cultures. My juxtapositions of the allegedly ‘original’ Americanness put forward in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman with three Hollywood blockbusters track the traces of these writers in contemporary pop culture and demonstrate how imaginings of a ‘mythic’ America are perpetuated by virtue of reiteration. However, my readings also show that the Americanness articulated by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman is far from clear-cut, unfaltering, and unambiguous. The reiterations of the scenarios of the Emersonian scholar, the Thoreauvian hermit, and the Whitmanian poet in *Finding Nemo*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Spider-Man* tease out patterned forms of hegemonic Americanness, which sustains its hegemonic status precisely through its reiteration. However, the juxtapositions of these texts also make visible the inherent instability of the signifiers ‘America’ and ‘American.’ The repeated citations of cultural patterns expose precisely what it is excluded from them, gets repressed, and does not find representation in imaginings of a ‘mythic’ America.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the effect of that repeated citation is the displacement of the supposed origin as origin, without offering an alternative origin or a more comprehensive image of Americanness. Rather, my juxtaposed readings suggest that the meaning of ‘America/n’ has always been contested and is inherently contradictory and ambiguous; it has always been displaced, haunted by repressed presences, threatened by disintegration but also open to subversion, resistance, and resignification. America, then, constitutes itself in the realm of the imaginary,

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<sup>6</sup> One might argue that Walt Whitman alone, who is widely acknowledged to have been a homosexual, troubles constructions of hegemonic Americanness along the unmarked categories of white, male, and heterosexual. Two points are worth noting in this regard: first of all, the term ‘homosexuality’ as we use it today was only coined in the late 1860s, and was established as the dominant descriptor for same-sex desire as late as 1914 (cf. Hirschfeld 10). It is therefore very unlikely that Whitman ever referred to himself as a homosexual, as that self-descriptor would not have been available to him. In any case, fact is that *Leaves of Grass* contains several scenes which describe same-sex desires—desires, which we would now call ‘homosexual’ or at least ‘homoerotic.’ However, as Betsy Erkkila and others have pointed out, in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman employs episodes of homoerotic desire primarily as metaphors for the threat of national disintegration, hence as something potentially dangerous and destructive. His poems thus seem to support rather than challenge the construction of the ideal American as a white and heterosexual male. See Erkkila, *Whitman* 104-108.

and as the imaginary materializes and becomes 'real' in fiction and film, it both determines and challenges our perceptions of 'reality.'



## Act II. Scenario 1.

### A Fish Called Emerson: The American Scholar and *Finding Nemo*

What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded? ... The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”  
187

**Dory:** [*singing*] Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming. What do we do? We swim, swim.

**Marlin:** Dory, no singing.

**Dory:** [*continuing*] Ha, ha, ha, ha, ho. I love to swim. When you want to swim you want to swim.

—*Finding Nemo*

Emerson and his writings are quickly associated with the constitution of an American national identity and an American culture. Lawrence Buell calls Emerson a “national icon” (*Emerson* 3) and, alluding to one of his masterpieces, suggests that Emerson is one of American culture’s most “Representative Men” (“Introduction” 1). Harold Bloom argues that “[t]he mind of Emerson is the mind of America” and that his work is the “American Religion” (*Agon* 145). With reference to Bloom and Stanley Cavell, Joel Porte writes that Emerson is America’s “ghostly father” and “philosophical founder,” who cannot be divorced from the formation of a national identity and the consolidation of an American culture (“Refounding” 117). Larzer Ziff puts Emerson at the “very center of the American intellectual tradition,” at the juncture point of “Puritanism and revolutionary republicanism,” of “idealism and individualism” (“Introduction” 7). Richard Poirier even claims that “Emerson in many respects *is* American literature,” calling him the “storehouse” of the themes and images that recur in American literature and culture (*World* 69).

As a national icon, as Buell has it, Emerson would clearly signify Americanness and his essays, one could infer, would seem to be expressive of a particularly American mindset. Indeed, as Buell points out, the name ‘Emerson’ has become “a symbol or icon for ‘American’ values,” and it was the persona

'Emerson' rather than his writing that was canonized (*Emerson* 9).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Poirier's description of Emerson as the storehouse of particularly American themes and images hints at the pivotal position attributed to Emerson within the American cultural imaginary. Poirier's words recall Fluck's definition of the cultural imaginary as the "Fundus" [fund, pool] of images, affects, and desires whose circulation stimulates and fuels our sense of reality. I consequently suggest that the persona 'Emerson' not only is but also produces the storehouse of Americanness. The distinction between Emerson as philosopher, lecturer, and writer and 'Emerson' as a concept and trademark is an important one to make. Michel Foucault uses the term "author-function" to describe the two poles between which the name of an author oscillates: the designation, which refers to the person, and the description, which refers to the ideas and concepts commonly associated with the name (cf. Foucault, "Author" 121-123).<sup>2</sup> It is only because of the constant circulation of ideas and notions associated with Emerson in American culture that 'Emerson' could achieve and maintain his status as 'storehouse.' In other words, there is nothing inherently American in 'Emerson' but his Americanness is rather an effect of frequent recurrences to 'Emerson'—be they explicit or subtle—in American cultural productions. At the same time, then, the persona 'Emerson' also defines Americanness and fills the storehouse of Americanness with the 'American' values he is said to be a symbol of.

In order to trace the Americanness in the writings of Emerson, I will discuss two of his most prominent essays, "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance," which I will subsequently juxtapose with the animated feature film *Finding Nemo* (2003). This juxtaposition will lay bare patterned performances of 'America' in Emerson's texts and their reactivation in *Finding Nemo*. Emerson's essays are highly performative pieces of writing, which both describe and create the ideal American individual. This individual finds embodiment in the figure of the scholar, whose enactment of the typically and distinctly 'American' individual, in turn,

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to also acknowledge Emerson's significance in the formation of American (literary) studies as an academic discipline. As Randall Fuller remarks, "The American Scholar" has been a "foundational text in American literary studies since the nineteenth century" (*Ghosts*, 18), and can be regarded as *the* disciplinary ur-text which "has haunted generations of Americanists" (*Ghosts*, 20). Not only the canon of American literature, but also its scholarship is Emersonian, for Emerson "emerged as American literary scholarship's originary figure as well as its chief proponent" (*Ghosts*, 162, n.28).

<sup>2</sup> Designation and description, Foucault argues, "are not isomorphous and do not function in the same way" ("Author" 122). The proper name, as a signifier, can have either the signified of the designation or the signified of the ideas/concepts. In both cases, the relation between signifier and signified, between the name and what it either designates or describes, is completely arbitrary.

constitutes a foundational scenario. In *Finding Nemo*, this foundational scenario is transferred into a contemporary frame, its reiteration demonstrating the constitution and contestation of the cultural imaginary. Put differently, *Nemo* is not a duplication of Emerson's essays—rather, it can be read as a repetition of stylized modes of behavior and codified structures, which reactivate a past performance, conjure up cultural myths, and thus transmit social knowledge.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, all (foundational) scenarios are very much tied to the context of their production and therefore cannot be divorced from their setups, which determine the possibilities or boundaries within which the action can develop. In other words, while foundational scenarios produce national fantasies that endure over time, they also have a localized meaning. This two-sidedness of the scenario demands a permanent negotiation between the universal and the specific and bears the potential for internal subversion, as the localized meaning may not always concur completely with the national fantasy. The encounter of 'Emerson' with *Finding Nemo* is a case in point: although both follow regulated, patterned performances, their specific contexts of production do not correlate, which leads to a moment of disruption in the American cultural imaginary. This disruptive moment unearths the specters of American performances, which mark the inherent instability of 'reality' and instigate new, or simply different imaginings of 'America' and 'Americanness.'

### **Intellectual Independence: "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance"**

"Where *is* this new bird called the true American?" D.H. Lawrence asks in the Foreword to his *Studies in Classic American Literature* with an unmistakable tone of mockery (n.p.). Wondering whether the true American even exists, Lawrence muses that it is "[n]o good chasing him over all the old continents, of course. But equally no good *asserting* him merely" (n.p.). Lamenting that the true American is well-hidden from the "naked European eye," Lawrence suggests to "look for him under the American bushes," that is, in "old American literature" (n.p.). While Lawrence apparently had to turn every stone twice in order to find the "true American," others would readily identify Emerson's figure of the 'scholar' as the embodiment of the 'true,' 'real,' or 'modal' American.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I use the terms 'true,' 'real,' and 'modal' as if they were easily exchangeable, and while they all point towards the same phenomenon—that of a prototypical American—they do so from different sites of enunciation, which are important to distinguish. 'True' presupposes some absolute truth, a

The figure of the scholar runs through Emerson's essay like a red thread and was, from the mid-1830s on, also Emerson's self-descriptor. His definition of the 'scholar' was remarkably consistent throughout his oeuvre: the scholar was an independent thinker, a critical thinker and reader, who had the ability to grasp and articulate the nature and needs of his time, thus exercising his leadership qualities (cf. Buell, *Emerson* 40-41). The scholar finds his most prominent manifestation in Emerson's famous essay "The American Scholar," his oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837. Emerson's contemporary Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed that "The American Scholar" was "our intellectual Declaration of Independence" (115), which suggests that the nation had arrived at a state of intellectual maturity and had discovered its cultural identity, of which the scholar is representative.<sup>4</sup> The intellectual founding of the nation that Emerson performs in his oration inevitably asserts Emerson's scholar as the prototype of the ideal American individual. The question which then arises is: what is 'American' about the American scholar? Emerson does not point out the uniquely American characteristics of the scholar, which created a tension between him and some of his contemporaries "who understood the scholar as the American everyman, fully committed to democratic principles and social justice" (Sacks 30). Political radical Orestes Brownson, for instance, urged Emerson to emphasize the scholar's specifically American qualities, when he wrote that "American scholars we shall have; but only in proportion as the scholar weds himself to American principles and becomes the interpreter of American life" (25). But what are

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transcendental essence, which is not particularly useful from a constructionist point of view. 'Modal,' in contrast, shows awareness of the constructedness of *the* prototypical American and the categorical, exclusive reasoning that guides his construction. 'Real,' then, adds the level of embodiment and materiality; it points towards the need to anchor abstract categories in live (and fictional) bodies in order to veil the constructedness of the prototype and arrive at a sense of apparent 'naturalness' and 'normalcy.' To return to D.H. Lawrence: merely asserting the American is not enough, but he also needs to find a particular embodied materiality in order to be recognizable as American. As 'modal' and 'real' are, from an analytical point of view, more productive terms than 'true,' I will henceforth refrain from using the latter in my analysis.

<sup>4</sup> In his essay "Emerson's Problem of Vocation," Henry Nash Smith notes that it has become "customary to interpret 'The American Scholar' as a statement of literary nationalism" ("Vocation" 63). However, in the context of "Emerson's prolonged struggle with the problem of vocation," the nationalistic aspect of the oration seems of diminished importance, as the "fiction of the Scholar" was merely a phase in Emerson's struggle of affirming "the creed of self-reliance" (ibid). In a series of lecture notes he composed for the Seminar in American Studies at Salzburg years after the publication of *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen, on the other hand, suggested: "[Emerson] set himself to the problem of articulating what it meant to be an American scholar, an American poet. He set himself to create an American consciousness" (qtd. in Fuller, "Aesthetics" 374). Fairly recently, Paul Giles also emphasized the national aspect of "The American Scholar" when he remarked that, put into the context of transnational American Studies, Emerson "chooses to focus on national characteristics and their implications" in "The American Scholar" and "so many of his other works" (68).

*American* principles? “America,” to Emerson, represented an “ideal polity,” an “idea” that still lacked concrete form (Porte, “Refounding” 128). Instead of assuming that the American scholar merely represents a pre-existing Americanness that can be easily discerned, I therefore suggest to focus on the Americanness the scholar *produces* and embodies.

In the right state, Emerson explains, the scholar is “*Man Thinking*,” in the degenerate state he is “a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of another man’s thinking” (“Scholar” 85; italics in the original). Emerson’s description of the scholar as Man Thinking identifies rationality as the most valuable faculty and emphasizes the importance of intellectual independence. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson thus presents a plan for individual intellectual transcendence, implying that Man Thinking is always man disembodied. As Buell notes, Emerson “constantly imagined [the scholar] as male,” but as the masculine subject is conceptualized as non-corporeal in modern Western thought, the scholar can figure as a seemingly disembodied ideal (*Emerson* 19).<sup>5</sup> “In any case, no matter where we turn in Emerson’s world,” Kateb writes, “we find the intellect elevated above the manual, the physical, the practical, the non-verbal or the mental that serves any of these” (*Self-Reliance* 36). Indeed, the physical is not considered in “The American Scholar”; the body figures merely as a metaphor, which Emerson draws in order to illustrate the rotten state of society: “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” (“Scholar” 84). Mourning the loss of the primordial state in which all humans were morally and intellectually fully integrated and lamenting the division of society into specialized identities (farmer, priest, tradesman, mechanic, etc.), Emerson calls upon the scholar to restore to the original condition, that is, “Man Thinking.” In Emersonian diction, “Man” is the ideal form, as Joseph N. Riddel persuasively argues; he is a hypotyposis, the symbol of God, “the poetic origin

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<sup>5</sup> As Christopher Beach remarks, “Emerson was hardly a spokesman for the direct representation of the body in literature” (162). One of the most famous representations of the ideal Emersonian individual, a caricature by Christopher Cranch called “The Transparent Eyeball,” powerfully underlines Beach’s point. Cranch’s drawing shows a body—definitely male, judging from its attire—bearing a huge eyeball instead of a head, with no arms or neck but very long legs and bare feet, gazing into the infinite sky. Cranch’s caricature displays the emphasis Emerson put on observing and being one with nature. In this drawing, the body is rendered insignificant—lacking diverse body parts it is incomplete, but that is not important, as it is not necessary to possess a complete, functioning body in order to experience one’s self as one with God’s creation (cf. Grossman 156). The issues of universality and (dis-)embodiment will be dealt with in more detail in “Act II. Scenario 3: S(w)inging the Self.”

itself, ... the genitive center, which urges its own elaboration or reading" (*Letters* 61). The American scholar, the Man Thinking Emerson envisions, thus cannot verify his own or his nation's identity, as Brownson would have liked to see, but he is rather both origin and creator of those identities.

Emerson points out three main influences that determine the American scholar and that can thus be regarded as the cornerstones of an American national identity, if one follows the assumption that the scholar becomes symbolic origin/inventor of Americanness. The first and most important is that of nature, second is the mind of the past, and third is action turned into insight. By "nature" Emerson means natural law and its implicit connection to reason: "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim," as the truths of nature run parallel to man's moral sensibilities ("Scholar" 87). The mind of the Past—be it in the form of literature, art, or institutions—should inspire the scholar to maintain an "active soul," as the soul active "sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates" ("Scholar" 89). In this action, Emerson proclaims, "it is genius ... the sound estate of every man" (*ibid.*). The scholar must not be tied to the past and wallow in nostalgia, but create from past utterances of genius his own future and be genius. Finally, he should convert action and experience into thought, in order to gain wisdom and insight into his own soul. "The world—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*," as Emerson states, "lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself" ("Scholar" 92). His words clearly determine action and experience as essential, but rank thought and personal insight as superior.

Emerson's seminal essay "Self-Reliance" (1841) can be read as a complement to "The American Scholar," as it picks up precisely these themes and develops them further, leading Emerson to finally establish self-reliance as the scholar's most important and valuable character trait.<sup>6</sup> The first epigraph to "Self-Reliance" is the Latin proverb "Ne te quaesiveris extra" ("Do not seek yourself outside yourself"), which is a subsumption of the three influences on the scholar that Emerson describes in "The American Scholar" and determines the direction into which the essay's argument is headed. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson's earlier emphases on reason and insight are transformed into the maxim "Trust thyself," arguably the highest principle in Emerson's ethical thought and "now considered

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<sup>6</sup> See Bottorff, for instance, who states that "The American Scholar" contains "a statement of it [self-reliance] second in importance only to 'Self-Reliance' itself" (207).

one of the classic formulations of American individualism” (Buell, “Introduction” 1). However, to classify self-reliance as a doctrine of individualism would simplify Emerson’s essay and understate the depth of his thoughts and considerations on this matter. As Buell remarks, Emerson “was forever reopening and reformulating” his idea of individualism, “looping away and back again, convinced that the spirit of the idea dictated that no final statement was possible” (*Emerson* 2).<sup>7</sup> This observation leads Buell to the conclusion that Emerson “was a kind of performance artist” who would express himself most authentically by means of imagination and improvisation (*ibid.*).

To pin down self-reliance proves to be a rather difficult task, but grasping this concept is necessary to fully understand Emersonian thought. George Kateb provides one of the most condensed and comprehensible descriptions of self-reliance, which I find to serve well as a working-definition: “[Self-reliance] is the steady effort of thinking one’s thoughts and thinking them through. It is intellectual independence, reactive and responsive self-expression. Here, rather than in worldly appearance or enactment, we find the greater possibility of a more sustained independence” (Kateb, *Self-Reliance* 31). While self-reliance thus certainly appeals to individualism, it should not be equated with selfishness and egotism, for our individualistic drives are always kept in check by our “moral sense” and “universal mind.” Drawn to models of conduct that “deemphasized conscious choice in favor of attention to an inner voice,” Emerson understands one’s moral sense as a source of creative energy and demands that we “act according to how the moral law of our being directs us” (Buell, *Emerson* 73-74). Kateb calls Emersonian self-reliance a “democratic individuality” which acknowledges the potential and capacities of all individuals and turns against a liberal-capitalist, “possessive,” individualism (*Ocean* 97). A self-reliant individual enters the commitments of social life on an imaginative level, in other words, and thus partakes of social relations while retaining his/her independence and individuality at the same time.

Emerson’s conception of self-reliance interweaves four major influences, Buell notes, namely Protestant spirituality (the transactions between God and the individual soul), romanticism (intuitive apprehension of Truth by virtue of higher

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<sup>7</sup> Buell and other Emerson critics have noted that “Self-Reliance” abounds in paradoxes and seeming contradictions. For a detailed analysis of the art of paradox, or paradox as a rhetorical tool in “Self-Reliance,” see William K. Bottorff, “Whatever Inly Rejoices Me,” esp. 207-213.

Reason), the idea of self-culture (moral-spiritual-intellectual-cultural improvement), and republican-democratic political theory (self-transformative capacity of the individual).<sup>8</sup> Self-reliance is not reducible to any of these dimensions, but points in all of these four directions, which is why it is more fruitful to think of it as a practice, or way of life, rather than as a character trait.<sup>9</sup>

“At its best,” Kateb, writes, “self-reliance is nothing but an intellectual method, a method of truth” (*Self-Reliance* 4). Truth is the ultimate goal self-reliance points to, and it can be accessed through personal insight, an active soul, and nature—in short, through what Emerson defined as the three influences on the scholar’s mind. Indeed, Emerson seems to suggest that self-reliance is the guiding principle according to which particularly the scholar should organize his life. The three influences Emerson elaborated on in “The American Scholar” should enable the scholar to trust himself, form his own opinions, and follow his own convictions with “unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrightened innocence” (“Self-Reliance” 178). Society, Emerson believes, corrupts and imprisons man:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of each and every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. (ibid)

To Emerson, it is clear that the inevitable consequence of social pressure is one’s retreat from society, which enables one to disengage from the influence of others’ opinions and save the integrity of one’s mind. “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist,” he vehemently demands (ibid). Conformity and imitation are anathema to Emerson, as they inhibit man from performing genuine actions and, subsequently, from becoming genius. “Imitation is suicide,” Emerson warns his readers and notes that “we but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents” (“Self-Reliance” 176). To Emerson, nothing ranks higher than one’s nature—a matter on which he finds very clear, direct words: “[If] I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil. No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature” (“Self-Reliance” 179).

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<sup>8</sup> For more details on the sources of self-reliance theory, see Buell, *Emerson* 60-63.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Buell, *Emerson* 63. See also Kateb, *Self-Reliance*, who states: “Though I believe that self-reliance in its highest Emersonian form is a method of intellect, it presents itself memorably as a principle for the conduct of a whole life” (17).



It proves Emerson's stalwart self-trust that he regards his natural impulses to be more sacred than social customs and traditions. "What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?" is Emerson's rhetorical question which leads him to the observation that "[w]hat I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think" (179-180). Emerson identifies one's past actions and one's memory as the two factors that confine the development of self-reliance. The societal pressure to be consistent in one's thoughts and actions induces men to neglect their nature and deny the divine power within themselves. "But why should you keep your head over your shoulders," Emerson asks, "Why drag about this corpse of your memory...?" ("Self-Reliance" 183). Man can find happiness, strength and fulfillment only when he refrains from worshipping the past. "[M]an postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past," Emerson bemoans the common state of men. "He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time," he emphasizes at his essay's climactic point (189). Inconsistency, he argues, is easier to bear than the violation of one's nature. Men who contradict themselves might be misunderstood, but at least their actions are honest and natural. "Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity will explain nothing," Emerson encourages his readers to follow their individual inclinations ("Self-Reliance" 184). Man has reached the ideal state of being when he believes his own thought and finds Truth in it: "to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius" ("Self-Reliance" 175).<sup>10</sup> As long as individualism is rooted in self-reliance, in other words, it is to the benefit of society, because the ultimate goal is access to a higher universal Truth and not the pursuit of personal interests.

Emerson's conception of the self and the role of the individual are crucial for understanding his notion of self-reliance and deserve some elaboration. At first glance, the Emersonian self seems to be a paradox: to be sure, the whole idea of self-reliance presupposes a preconceived "self" already "there to be relied upon, already defined by language" (Poirier, *Renewal* 30); however, at various points in

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<sup>10</sup> Emerson's words echo Immanuel Kant's command "handle nach einer Maxime, die zugleich als allgemeines Gesetz gelten kann" (23). Indeed, the radicalism in Emerson's beliefs becomes most obvious when contrasted with Kant's notion of the categorical imperative. As David Jacobson points out, "what is peculiar and what is characteristic" about Emerson's idea of self-reliance is "its claim that radical freedom shall issue of necessity in universal value, that the hyperbolically private shall issue in a universal sense" (555). For a thorough analysis of the parallels between Emersonian self-reliance and Kant's categorical imperative, see Jacobson, esp. 555-559.

the essay Emerson unmistakably argues that experience causes one's self to change and even to develop into completely new directions:

Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? ... With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. ("Self-Reliance" 183)

How can these two conceptions of the self be negotiated? David J. Hodge suggests that in Emersonian thought, the self is always consubstantial, which means that one is already one's self but does not believe that this is the case. Self-reliance, then, serves as "an oracle of private faith" that repeats the maxim "trust thyself" like a gospel, until one discovers the self that had always been there (Hodge 302). I would like to take Hodge's argument a step further and propose that the key to resolving Emerson's seemingly contradictory approaches to the notion of 'self' is performativity, which can account for both the constant development and the reliability of the self.

As Emerson has it, the self needs to be firmly rooted in the now and needs to act according to its momentary inclinations and instincts. It re-consolidates itself with every action it takes, redefining rather than contradicting its previous state of being. This is not to say that the self is without substance and not firm enough to be relied on. It simply means that the self has no singular moment of origination and, consequently, no self-contained core; the 'self' one needs to rely on is thus an abstract concept, an empty signifier, which constitutes itself and is filled with meaning through performative acts. Hodge enumerates the inventory of names Emerson assigns to the thing commonly called 'self,' wondering whether all these terms are synonyms of or circumscriptions for 'self': character, conscience, constitution, spontaneous impression, genius, soul, spirit, reason, right, power, law, original, aboriginal, originality, instinct, intuition, thought, mind, heart, sense, gleam of light, (human) nature, consciousness, and I (cf. Hodge 309-310). I would argue that they are neither one nor the other—I suggest that they are all expressions and constituents of 'self' and that at times, depending on situation and circumstance, one of these concepts shifts into focus and figures as the self that self-reliance is rooted in. For Emerson, the negotiation of seemingly irreconcilable subject positions is testament to the power of the individual, who consolidates his/her subjectivity out of contradiction.

If the self is constituted performatively and is based on contradiction, then it is obvious why self-reliance is such a difficult term to pin down. As Buell notes, Emerson's unique writing style captures the evolution of self-reliance and, on the other hand, produces and asserts it:

Emerson believed in principle that writing, listening, reading were key arenas for developing Self-Reliance, which could not be achieved by remaining at the level of conventional linear expression. His compressed, metaphorical prose was intended both to perform self-reliant thinking and provoke it. So too his fondness for shifts of focus, intuitive leaps, self-corrective backtracking. (Buell, *Emerson* 68)<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Emerson's prose does not conform to conventions but aims at mirroring the process of negotiating contradictory subject positions and of attaining self-reliance. In enacting self-reliance through his writing, Emerson himself performs the double role of author and scholar; as writer, he describes the idea(l) of self-reliance, as scholar he practices, performs, and embodies it. Emerson's writing is thus an act of performativity, as the figure of the self-reliant scholar is both created and asserted in Emerson's essays. Furthermore, Emerson's self-fashioning as a scholar can be seen as an act of performance. In the symbolic persona 'Emerson,' these different layers of Emerson merge; the 'Emerson' that is reactivated and performed again in American culture is, therefore, a mythical, idealized, and universalized individual upon which national fantasies can be projected. Detached from the historical figure of Emerson, the persona 'Emerson' as a symbol of the ideal American individual thus becomes a quasi-synonym for Americanness. The nonconforming scholar, in turn, who declares his (intellectual) independence and asserts his self-reliance, denotes a foundational scenario which actually produces and constructs the Americanness that seems to be inherent in Emerson's ideal individual.

As repeatable and transferable cultural patterns, foundational scenarios need to be understood as schemata that are regulated, yet flexible enough to adapt to many different frameworks. This phenomenon allows Harold Bloom, for instance, to read John McCain and Barack Obama as two variations of the self-reliant Emersonian individual. Traces of the scholar can be found in speeches and public appearances of both McCain and Obama, but each of them foregrounds

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<sup>11</sup> Cyrus Patell makes a similar point in his essay on Emerson and individualism. "Cultural conflicts and contradictions," he explains, "are thus subsumed contained, and resolved by the individual, a process embodied by Emerson's essays, which create rhetorical force through the use of contradiction as style" (459).

(respectively neglects) different aspects of the Emersonian individual, so that we are left with two versions of the self-reliant individual which follow the same pattern but differ in that pattern's permutation into 'reality' (cf. "Out of Panic"). Bloom's interpretation of the presidential campaign suggests that foundational scenarios rest on associations that a particular cultural pattern triggers and on the ability to establish a relation between two texts (in the broadest sense of the word). They are quotations and as such inevitably fragments and displacements which distort and redefine the 'primary' utterance by reinscribing it into a different cultural context.

### **The American Dilemma**

As I mentioned above, "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar" complement one another, as at his best, the scholar is a fully self-reliant individual in the Emersonian sense of the word. The scholar is synonymous with the intellectually independent individual, who asserts his independence through self-reliance and comes to embody an idealistic version of 'America,' which stands in stark contrast to the Jacksonian society Emerson lived in (cf. Bercovitch, *Assent* 319). Emerson's oration thus provides an entirely new interpretation of what it means to be an *American* scholar: his scholar is a "figure of dissent, the representative/adversarial American Self" who does not blindly conform to social norms and conventions (Bercovitch, *Assent* 319). The American scholar is always a man in-the-making, an eternal ideal, who is characterized by fresh insight and constant reinvention of the self (cf. Sacks 30). Stanley Cavell refers to the American scholar as "Emerson's vision of our not yet thinking," as a man that does not yet exist but is direly needed" (*Etudes* 145). I readily subscribe to Cavell's argument, but I also want to emphasize that Emerson's vision of the scholar can never find its absolute completion, as his identity is first and foremost marked by innovation and the permanent re-definition of his self. The scholar's duties, Emerson explains, "are such as become Man Thinking," which is clearly a task that can never be completed, but rather a principle that demands continuous renewal ("Scholar" 95).

Underlying the identity of the American scholar is thus a predicament which Riddel identifies as the fundamental dilemma of all things 'American':

*American* is synonymous with *beginner*, and a beginner is one who, if he is not to be condemned to repeat the past, is bound to reinterpret it and thus to recreate his own time. ... He is committed, that is, to the paradoxical role of

depriving himself of all his myths in his effort to discover a primary myth—an idea coincident with things, where his new beginning will not be repetition. (Riddel, *Bell* 44)

The particularly ‘American’ problem is, to paraphrase Riddel and to use Emerson’s terms, to reinstate an “original relation to the universe,” so that the denominator ‘American’ will denote neither a mere repetition nor a derivation of an already established tradition. The ‘American’ problem is thus a problem of beginnings, which “must be begun over and over again, but never in quite the same way” (Kronick/Bauerlein 1). It then becomes clear that ‘America’ is not discovered and cannot be adequately described or represented by the figure of the scholar; rather, ‘America’ is invented and always in the process of reinventing itself.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Kronick and Bauerlein argue, “[as] ‘orphans of the west,’ American writers must invent their origins in an anticipatory gesture of fulfillment, a gesture that never resolves itself, since it originates in a critical doubling of the self-identical being of self-reflexive consciousness” (8).

The first step in the formulation of an American ‘origin’ must consequently lie in a moment of effacement and projection, that is, in the repudiation of all inherited and imposed structures. America has to detach itself from the traditions of the Old World, which it achieves through “a certain kind of performance, a certain kind of thinking against the grain that will be the American signature” (Riddel, *Letters* 23). However, American thought cannot and does not merely emerge from the self-canceling of the structures it rejects, as *American* thought can only be recognized as such by virtue of an irreducible ‘other,’ which Riddel locates in quotation—or in performativity, to use a different term:

[The] ‘American’ literature I am talking about is no more than a vaguely apprehended ‘other,’ but a futural other, to which the actual literary text we have and study are kinds of prefaces or notes toward; prologues written both after and before the fact, before the letter. They are necessarily written, then, in the old received letter, in the old words and forms, and are in a sense quotations of them. But they are no less, by a kind of ironic reinscription, quotations of the future, of their own potential otherness. (Riddel, *Letters* 21)

Riddel’s remarks on ‘America’ and ‘American’ literature as yet unrealized ideals that are performatively constituted, supplement Cavell’s observations on the

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<sup>12</sup> As Kronick and Bauerlein point out, Riddel even goes so far to suggest that “the writing that is ‘American’ cannot be ‘literature,’ since it is already a translation without an ur-text or original. There has not yet been an ‘American’ literature” (Kronick/Bauerlein 7). American literature, according to Riddel, has always been something to come, “a letter never yet written, a metaleptic letter” (*Letters* 21).

American scholar as the vision of an ideal American that does not yet exist. In the above passage, Riddel points to a major dilemma all American cultural productions find themselves in: If all language is quotation, then where is there an opportunity, a loophole for cultural productions to express originality? Derrida provides some insights into this matter, when he speaks of the “invention of oneself as other,” a notion that comes close to Riddel’s “quotation” (*Psyche* 9). According to Derrida, invention presupposes “originality, originarity, generation, engendering, genealogy,” but it also breaks with tradition, brings disorder into established structures, and “allows the coming of what is new in a ‘first time ever’” (*Psyche* 5). Similarly, Poirier locates the opportunity for originality precisely in quotation, when he argues that originality manifests itself “in an instinctive antagonism to ‘quotation,’ in disruption, variation, and tropings of it” (*Renewal* 141).

Original American cultural production is only possible, in other words, by virtue of quotation, and both Derrida and Poirier identify the break with already established structures as a necessary criterion for originality. As I noted before, Derridean specters produce instances of disruptive ghosting, which haunt and disturb patterned interpretations. These instances are, then, by definition moments that produce ‘originality’ in the sense of Derrida and Poirier. Returning to Butler’s argument that the gap between reiterations opens up the possibility for new significations that go beyond the term’s usual meanings, I further propose that in this line of reasoning, the moment of resignification can be regarded as an instance of absolute originality, as the possibility of resignification always contains a space for resistance to hegemonic power and a subversive transformation of normative cultural structures. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler theorizes the performative moment, arguing that the performative moment may be characterized by the singularity of the act, but it can never be a singular moment because it is ritualized. It is thus rather “condensed historicity,” as it “exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance” (*Speech* 3). As the past is a matter of subjective perception and as the future cannot be narrated with any certainty, the “failure to achieve a totalized form in any of its given instances” is an integral part of any illocutionary, performative act (*ibid*). In the spectrality effect of performance and in acts of conjuration, that failure which always looms in the background becomes manifest

and opens the way for a wide array of signifying possibilities. As moments of performativity that describe disruptive acts of reiteration, the conjurations of cultural specters alters both past *and* future invocations, thus instigating a reinvention, as it were, of the hegemonic narrative out of which they emerge.

I argue that the reactivation of the mythical 'Emerson' and his scholar in *Finding Nemo* produces a spectrality effect and conjures America's spectral narrative. While *Nemo* reiterates the foundational scenario of the ideal American, the specificities of its plot and characters, as well as its critical reception, suggest that *Finding Nemo* resists and subverts patterned forms of Americanness. The foundational scenario as it occurs in *Finding Nemo* is restored behavior, a repetition with a difference, a quotation that relocates concepts associated with Emerson within another medium and another cultural context. American literature and culture, as Riddel argues, is "poised upon that 'economy' ... of the transformative moment when one language is displacing another, a new literature retracing and rewriting the old" (*Letters* 120). I suggest that *Finding Nemo* is such a text which retraces and rewrites the old, attempting to produce its own moment of originality. Put differently, *Finding Nemo* reiterates the pattern of idealized Americanness but quotes it with a difference, reinventing the meaning of 'America/nness' in performance. The agenda of *Finding Nemo* and Emerson's American scholar, I propose, intersects most prominently at three interrelated points, namely the privileging of the present moment, the development of self-reliance within the framework of the contemporary, and the problematizing of origins and beginnings. While *Finding Nemo* and Emerson's essays follow the same cultural pattern, they articulate this pattern from different sites of enunciation, leaving us with two conflicting variations of the very same foundational scenario. The tension and frictions that emerge out of the confrontation of these texts create a moment of chaos in which normative regulatory practices are disrupted and the fragile nature of 'America' becomes apparent.

### **Originality and Spectrality: 'Emerson' Meets *Nemo***

When *Finding Nemo* was released in 2003, it was an immediate success. *Nemo* superseded *The Lion King* as the Disney's Company all-time top-grossing film at the box office, received the Academy Award for the best animated feature film of that year, and received critical attention from scholars in Cultural Studies, Film Studies, and Gender Studies, probably because of its unusual storyline and its

intriguing characters. Many of the scholarly discussions of *Finding Nemo* revolve around the film's portrayal of unconventional family/kinship structures and unconventional ways of perceiving one's subjectivity and one's role within social structures, which are aspects I will also address in my analysis. However, I will devote particular attention to the film's treatment of memory, forgetting, and perceptions of time, as these factors seem to be crucial in teasing out the relation between *Finding Nemo* and the performance of America.

*Finding Nemo* is an "odd little feature" which tells the story of a clown-fish family that is tragically ripped apart by a hungry Barracuda in the first few minutes of the film (Halberstam, "Boys" 111). The mother fish perishes together with almost all of her eggs, leaving behind her henceforth very anxious partner, Marlin, and one offspring, Nemo. The film then cuts to Nemo's first day at school: Marlin, still traumatized by the Barracuda-attack, has become an overprotective father to Nemo. Marlin is paranoid about his son's safety not only because Nemo is his only family left, but also because Nemo is slightly disabled (he has a small fin on one side) and—so Marlin believes—thus cannot take proper care of himself. Nemo, however, grows tired of his father's nervous and hysterical attempts to guard him from all dangers of the ocean and, in a moment of rebellion that should prove his capability, he swims off into the open sea, only to be caught by a diver and placed into a fishtank in a dentist's office. Marlin immediately begins a frantic, mad search for his missing son, which leads him all the way to Sydney, Australia. On his way through the ocean, Marlin repeatedly finds himself in dangerous, life-threatening situations from which he can only escape by overcoming his own fears and by accepting the help of Dory, a quirky blue fish he crosses paths with shortly after Nemo's abduction. Eventually, Nemo can free himself from the dentist's fishtank and is reunited with his father, but the dramatic events have, of course, changed their little family and strengthened the bond between father and son.

*Finding Nemo* is rich in unusual characters, reaching from vegetarian sharks<sup>15</sup> to a fish with germophobia, and a lobster that displays compulsive behavior. Most critical attention, however, has been devoted to Marlin's gender identity and Dory's short-term memory loss. After his partner is killed, Marlin assumes a role

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<sup>15</sup> In an intertextual reference, the leader of the sharks is a Great White by the name of 'Bruce.' In Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, 'Bruce' was the nickname used to refer to the mechanical Great White shark. Marlin and Dory's flight scene from the sharks references the final scenes *Jaws*: in both films, a tank filled with compressed air causes an explosion, which kills the shark in *Jaws* and causes a major confusion in *Finding Nemo* that lets Marlin and Dory escape.



that has traditionally been associated with femininity: he becomes a clucking hen, is overprotective and at times hysterical. “The ocean is not safe,” is Marlin’s mantra, and he projects his paranoia and deep-seated fear of the open ocean onto his son. Before they leave the protected environment of their home, we see him and Nemo perform the ritual of swimming in and out of their anemone several times, in order to make sure there are no dangerous, preying creatures in the vicinity. This short scene is indicative of Marlin’s many anxieties which inhibit him, but also his son, from experiencing the world around him and, ultimately, from experiencing himself.

Interestingly enough, the lack of a mother—or rather, the lack of mothers in general—is at no point addressed in the film, and also Marlin’s loss of a female partner is not much of an issue, even though her death means the breakdown of their family unit. With her death and that of their unborn children, the future—Marlin’s future and his legacy—momentarily comes to a halt, until he discovers one egg that has survived. Nemo symbolizes futurity and Marlin’s hope that he will live on in his son and in his son’s offspring. “The future,” as Lee Edelman has famously argued, is literally “kid stuff,” as only reproduction, that is, the production of children, secures the future of mankind (*No Future* 1). The legitimacy of relationships, but also political and social recognition, is thus tied to one’s willingness to reproduce, to “fight for the children” and thus for the future (cf. Edelman, *No Future* 3). When reproductivity and a traditional family structure are threatened in *Finding Nemo*, Marlin adapts to the situation by performing both the role of a father and a mother, constantly shifting between his two roles as the situation demands and thus blurring gender boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

The most thorough interpretation of Dory comes from Judith Halberstam, whose publications on *Finding Nemo* have set the tone of this film’s critical reception within the study of popular culture. Because of her short-term memory loss, Dory has an “odd sense of time,” as Halberstam explains, which “scrambles all temporal interactions” and adds a layer to the narrative which probably strikes most viewers as humorous and absurd (“Boys” 112). When she explains her problem to Marlin, for instance, Dory tells him that short-term memory loss runs in the family, but then again she comments that she cannot remember her family—so how can she be sure? Dory is forever “exile[d] in the present tense” (ibid), as

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<sup>14</sup> For more details on Marlin’s gender-bending, see, for instance, Brydon (esp. 138-140).

her subjectivity does not bear any ties to the past, that is, her familial heritage, and none of her actions are geared towards the future or towards a goal she wants to achieve. In other words, Dory breaks with linear time and is located within a time/space continuum that rather moves in circles, as to her the only valuable and meaningful moment is the contemporary.<sup>15</sup>

Halberstam likens Dory's situatedness in time to the concept of "queer time" as it emerged in the 1990s out of the AIDS crisis, which severely diminished the horizons of possibility for the gay community and placed an emphasis on the here and now (cf. Halberstam, *Queer 2*). Queer time has therefore frequently been aligned with consumption, risk, disease, and death, as opposed to a 'straight' time that is associated with the promise of futurity and longevity.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, another facet of queer time, as Halberstam remarks, which is all too often overlooked: Queer time is also about "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (*Queer 2*). Dory embodies that potentiality, as her subjectivity and her perception of the world around her are structured "according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death," which generates an alternative temporality that may not be *re*productive but is productive nonetheless (ibid).

In *Finding Nemo*, Halberstam argues, queer time is encoded in Dory's forgetfulness—or, to put it differently, Dory's forgetfulness allows to explore the productive potential of a non-linear, presentist conception of time. Dory lacks memory, knowledge of the past, and an awareness of her embeddedness within a social structure, which usually situate an individual within time and space. Dory's situatedness within time and space, in contrast, is determined by her forgetfulness. As Joseph Roach argues, forgetting is the flipside of memory, because "memory is a process that depends crucially upon forgetting," (*Cities 2*). What is more, memory is generally aligned with knowledge and power, whereas forgetting is synonymous with failure and inferiority. While memory is productive, because it

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<sup>15</sup> As Elizabeth Grosz points out, philosophy has so far concentrated on two forms of temporality, "one linear, progressive, continuing, even, regulated, and teleological (perhaps best represented by Hegel); the other circular, repetitive, and thus infinite (perhaps best represented by Nietzsche). The first form is best represented by a line, which can be divided into infinite units...; the second, by a circle, which is capable of being traversed infinitely, in repetitions that are in some ways different, and in other ways the same" (Grosz 98). *Finding Nemo* mirrors a Nietzschean conception of temporality rather than a Hegelian in what Halberstam terms "queer time."

<sup>16</sup> For more details on this point see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and Lee Edelman, *No Future*, esp. 1-31.

constantly reproduces the past and thus shapes present and future, forgetting (similar to queer time) symbolizes the death of futurity and is essentially destructive.

*Finding Nemo* challenges this conception of the memory/forgetting dyad and explores the positive potential of forgetting. Forgetting, as Marlin has to concede towards the end of the film, when he believes Nemo to be dead, can indeed be a blessing. Still haunted by the memories of the deadly Barracuda attack, he cannot bear the thought of a future without his son. His deep desire to forget in order to be able to imagine a future recalls Nietzsche's argument that there can be "kein Glück, keine Heiterkeit, keine Hoffnung, [kein] Stolz, keine *Gegenwart* ... ohne Vergesslichkeit" (292; italics in the original). Dory, in contrast, is not burdened by memories or haunted by her past. Past and future are of no relevance to her, as her existence is firmly rooted in the now and is, in fact, a constant process of re-negotiating her own identity and her relations with everyone she encounters. Put differently, time, in its conventional conception, cannot adequately describe Dory's specific situatedness. The present is, because of its ephemeral and fleeting character, essentially a non-time that only exists in passing and seemingly lacks meaning if severed from past and future, if divorced from origin and telos. Dory's "ephemeral sense of knowledge and her continuous sense of a lack of context" necessitate an investment in the moment and an adaptability to new situations in order to be able to make meaning (Halberstam, "Boys" 112). A running joke in *Finding Nemo* is that Dory cannot remember Nemo's name and constantly makes up new names, such as "Fabio," "Harpo," or "Elmo," to refer to Marlin's son. Those instances of re-naming Nemo are significant, I propose, because they illustrate the process of meaning making in Dory's queer time and space. To Dory, "Nemo" is an empty signifier, a name that has as much (or little) meaning to her as "Fabio," "Harpo," and "Elmo." Unlike Marlin, who has past recollections of his son and imagines that they will share a future, Dory cannot put Nemo into any context that exceeds the present moment. Whether she is looking for "Harpo" or "Nemo" does not make any difference to her, if not to say that it is completely irrelevant. Dory finds herself in a new situation in virtually every moment of every day, and her subjectivity can therefore 'only' be reflective of her momentary state of being in a specific context. Similarly, all her actions can only be motivated by

momentary inclinations. When she wants to swim, she swims, but there is no goal beyond that action which she might seek to achieve.

*Finding Nemo* makes a point out of portraying Marlin and Dory as polar opposites as far as their self-perception and their approach to organizing their respective lives is concerned. Marlin is burdened by his past, his memories of the Barracuda attack, and cultural norms on which all his decisions are based. Dory, by contrast, is an unencumbered individual that exists outside of all ‘normal’ social structures because of her forgetfulness. Dory’s existence is firmly rooted in the moment of the now, which the film approaches as something positive and productive. The opposition of Marlin and Dory mirrors Emerson’s argument that only individuals who live wholly from within lead fulfilled lives, as self-satisfaction and happiness can only unfold within Marlin when he begins to follow his instincts and his intuition. Emerson’s call to ever live in a new day thus resonates strongly in *Finding Nemo*, whose underlying message is to thoroughly enjoy the moment and seize the day. *Finding Nemo*, I consequently suggest, explores the potential of the contemporary—the critical temporality that is inextricably linked to performance. It is important to distinguish between two different levels of the contemporary which are at play in *Finding Nemo*: first, the representation of the contemporary as a temporal space within the diegetic world; second, the film as a contemporary performance of Americanness.

As Román defines the contemporary, its power lies in its immediacy and its detachment from tradition and futurity, from teleological models of cultural production that would value the contemporary “only as the product of already legitimate cultural traditions or as the potential ideal for an imagined future” (*Performance* 15). Román’s definition of the contemporary bears resemblance to Halberstam’s remarks on queer time, and indeed, Román explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to queer theory and queer conceptions of time in his theorization of the contemporary (cf. *Performance* 15). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the contemporary can furthermore be linked with Derrida’s conceptions of spectrality and conjuration, which also privilege the now. Derrida’s discussion of spectrality revolves very much around a mediation on the putative end of history and the question as to how a post-progressive historical discourse may look like. The central inquiry of Derrida’s endeavor, as Brown summarizes it, is “what discourse of history provides a way of conceiving the relationship between past,

present, and future without setting its compass points through or against a discourse of progress” (144). A post-progressive conception of history inevitably seems to follow the logics of haunting as at the presumed end of history, history would probably come back in the form of a haunt—and with it all that which was “confused or misnamed in the past,” which remains “unclear in meaning” (Brown 152). The logics of haunting thus operates on the level of memory and forgetting: to haunt means to keep something present, to remind of its existence, while to be haunted means being moved by something one cannot quite recall or has tried to forget. Whether haunting takes shape in the form of achievement or failure, it always unsettles the line between past and present, the linear order of temporality, and sets focus on immediacy, impulses, and an open-endedness of meaning.

*Finding Nemo's* Dory can be read as Román's theory turned into practice, guided by the logics of haunting. All of Dory's actions are motivated by transient states of being and inclinations, that is, by affects, intuition, spontaneity, or instinct. Dory constantly adjusts and reformulates her subjectivity according to her present situation, which makes her identity multi-layered, virtually undefinable, and solely reflective of her momentary state of being. Dory thus asserts and embodies a major principle of self-reliance, which, according to Kateb, “is the idea that a person's movement through life should be restless, unfixed, an unceasing creation and abandonment of channels and positions” (*Self-Reliance* 153). One's identity, in other words, “should be fluid, not easily defined by others or by oneself” and one's life should be one of “perpetual self-finding and self-loss” (ibid). Dory's existence is just that: an endless cycle of inventing/finding her self only to immediately forget/lose herself again. Dory is haunted by herself, as it were, she continuously begins by coming back and while she has a distinct sense of a past, she cannot quite grasp it, let alone make sense of the impulses that touch her—on the contrary, they tend to disturb and disorient her.

Through the character of Dory, I argue, *Finding Nemo* retraces a central quality of the American scholar, but articulates this quality from a different vantage point than Emerson did in his essays. As Emerson conceptualizes him, the American scholar ought to live in the present so that his inner divinity can unfold and is not inhibited by past actions and experiences. As Kateb points out, Emerson vehemently seeks to elevate the present moment over past and future and establish it as the most productive temporal space, in which individuals can fully develop

themselves. Emerson's words, Kateb argues, are "an incitement to seize the day and to live or act in defiance of the knowledge that time without beginning precedes one's existence, and time without end will roll on after one's death" (*Self-Reliance* 27). By living in the now, following his nature, and expressing his true convictions, man can find happiness and fulfillment, and Emerson encourages his readers to rather contradict themselves or oppose popular opinion than let themselves be constrained by consistency and conformity. Dory's particular situation of being exiled in the present differs considerably from Emerson's situation and reasons for advocating a life firmly tied to the present moment. However, in its very own way, *Finding Nemo* also makes a case for the contemporary as the temporality in which the individual can express itself most immediately, most naturally, and most honestly. Emerson's argument that living fundamentally in the now, uninhibited by memories and the past, fosters self-reliance and strengthens self-trust resonates strongly in *Finding Nemo*. Towards the end of the film, for instance, when Marlin insists they part ways, Dory remarks that no one has ever stuck with her as long as Marlin. This somewhat casual remark points toward a major change in Dory. For her, this is an unusual statement to make, because normally she is not capable of remembering how long she has been with anyone. Dory's certainty that Marlin has stuck with her longer than anyone else does not stem from memory, I argue, but rather from an absolute self-trust (which she displays at various points in the film) that makes her certain without exactly knowing why. Shortly after Marlin has left her, Dory meets Nemo, who has just escaped from the fishtank and is now looking for his father. Dory has, of course, long forgotten Marlin and their search for Nemo, but she is still visibly distressed. She is crying because she feels that she has lost someone, even though she has no recollection of who that 'someone' might be. "I don't know where I am! I don't know what's going on, I think I lost somebody but I, I can't remember," she explains to Nemo, her statement being based solely on her instincts or an 'inner voice.'

Dory displays a similar moment of absolute self-trust in an earlier scene—one of the film's key scenes—in which Marlin finally abandons all his fears and anxieties. In this scene, Marlin and Dory get swallowed by a whale, a

circumstance which they interpret in two completely different ways.<sup>17</sup> While Marlin is sure that they will end up in the whale's stomach, Dory is positive that everything will be fine. Hanging onto the whale's tongue, Dory, who claims that she speaks and understands 'Whale' language, tells Marlin to let himself fall into the whale's throat. "Everything's gonna be alright," she exclaims. "How do you know," Marlin shouts, to which she happily replies, "I don't!" Dory does not have any memories on the basis of which she could make an informed decision on whether or not she should let herself fall. All she has are her instinct, her intuition, and her unfailing self-trust. Contrary to his better knowledge but following his intuition, Marlin lets himself fall into the whale's throat and, getting spewed right into the harbor of Sydney, he realizes that he was right to trust in Dory and to rely on his instincts.

However, the example of Dory also demonstrates what happens when the contemporary is not only valued as a productive temporal space that enables self-fulfillment and the development of self-reliance but is, in fact, one's only accessible temporal space. Traditional systems of identification and belonging do not apply in the construction of Dory's subjectivity, and they certainly do not suffice to describe her situatedness within (or rather without) social structures, as all relationships she engages in are only temporary and of significance solely in the here and now. Dory can in many ways be likened to an orphan, as she has no recollection of her parents or of her origins, and no sense of a home or of belonging. Dory is, quite literally, the odd one out: while all other characters are shown within their respective family units, she is by herself and does not belong with anybody. Even though she accompanies Marlin on his quest and gets attached to him, her lack of memory and her constant forgetting who Marlin and Nemo are hinder her from becoming fully integrated into their family unit. Through Dory's "anti-familial" way of being, Halberstam proposes, *Finding Nemo* tries to "reinvent kinship, identity, and collectivity" by imagining legitimate and valuable existences outside traditional social and familial structures ("Boys" 111-112). Dory is clearly marked as different, but in the film's general attempt to sketch a pluralistic society in which difference is perceived as enriching and inspiring, Dory's seeming flaws are turned into assets. Dory's inability to remember her own origin problematizes the significance of concepts like

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<sup>17</sup> Marlin teasingly calls the whale 'Moby,' which is, of course, a reference to Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* (1851).

'origin/ality' and 'beginnings' in the constitution of individual as well as collective identities. Questions concerning origin and originality have been especially pressing in the context of the construction of 'America,' and both *Finding Nemo* and Emerson's essays constitute attempts to produce original Americanness.

As I pointed out earlier, Joseph Riddel identifies the problem of beginnings and originality as a particularly 'American' problem, because of America's struggle to reinstate an origin that is not merely a repetition of Old World structures. To be an American, Riddel suggests with reference to Wallace Stevens' considerations on American poetry, means "to invent and not to discover, to perform and not imitate, and hence to produce the scene rather than repeat what was 'in the script'" (Riddel, *Letters* 99). To be an American means to be a beginner, to reinterpret the past, and to invent one's own origin. 'America' and 'American' are always anticipatory ideals, 'texts' without an origin, translations or displacements of a past that is elsewhere and can therefore only be performed and interpreted (cf. Riddel, *Letters* 100). As a man who is always in-the-making and always in the process of re-formulating his self, the Emersonian scholar—the *American* scholar—is a 'beginner' in the Riddelian sense: he is bound to reinterpret and relocate the past in order to define his own time. In other words, he has to repudiate all 'old' myths, so that he can discover a primary myth, that is, his origin and an original America (cf. *Bell* 44). The American scholar thus embodies the whole nation metonymically and functions as a site of projection for "common thoughts, aspirations, and feelings" (Gunn, *Otherness* 132). The American scholar is part of a general tendency in American culture to "conceive of the nation on an analogue of the individual and therefore to view the expression of the nation's self-conscious life, its culture, as a result of a single, or at least uniform, intelligence and will" (*ibid*). In order to solidify his fragile status as the mythical origin of Americanness, then, the American scholar has to become the subject of quotation and reinscription. He must be detached from the specificities of his own creation and transformed into an abstract concept, a cultural pattern of idealized Americanness that can be re-enacted and translated into a new framework.

Emerson, Riddel argues, was aware of the fact that America is always a quotation and his call for an American originality is haunted by the seeming impossibility to produce an original American voice. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson chastised his contemporaries for worshipping and imitating the past, instead of



appreciating the riches around them and trying to establish an original Americanness:

Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant. ... And why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also. ("Self-Reliance" 198-199)

These words recall his earlier considerations on originality in "Nature," in which he lamented the prevailing retrospection in America, but had to concede at the same time that his own writing could easily fall into the trap of being merely a retrospective re-writing of past poetic and philosophic thought. Emerson, as any American writer, finds himself "in a kind of double bind: needing first to invent that which could then be represented," that is, an original Americanness (Riddel, *Letters* 72). His way out of this dilemma is twofold: first, he places his focus on the individual rather than on the collective and imagines the American's original relation to the universe as a transformational moment, in which man, God, and nature, are facing one another and are united yet opposed. He returns to the primordial, to the origin within the individual rather than assuming an 'external' origin elsewhere in the past. Second, he observes that an American, upon entering York Minister or St. Peter's in Rome, will be surprised "by the feeling that these structures are imitations also, — faint copies of an invisible archetype" (Emerson, "Nature" 75). He realizes, in other words, that copy and original are indistinguishable and that the origin is, in fact, a quotation itself, a non-origin.

In a later essay, "Quotation and Originality" (1859), Emerson finds his clearest words on the possibilities for original production, which resides in the interplay between appropriation and misappropriation, a creative quoting that displaces the past and reinscribes it within a contemporary context. "The profound apprehension of the Present is Genius, which makes the Past forgotten," Emerson emphasizes the significance of a focus on the present in the production of originality ("Quotation" 201). In order for the "original" or "new" to be recognizable, the force of creativity or "the divine," as Emerson calls it, needs to be posited in a way that "makes the Past forgotten." Originality does not exist *a priori*, but is the product of active forgetting; "[a]ll minds quote" (178), thus "the

originals are not original” and true Genius is he who forgets that he is quoting, Emerson proposes (“Quotation” 180).

Originality is produced by the loss of our “sempiternal memory,” which, Emerson believes, is something we all yearn for. “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why,” which would allow us to draw a “new circle” in the endless cycle of nature, where every end is a beginning and every thing repeats itself in different form (Emerson, “Circles” 238). In Emerson’s vision of the ideal scholar, in “Man Thinking,” originality finds its most fertile breeding ground. While “*imitation* is the hallmark of the degenerate scholar, ... *originality*, the consciously formulated objective of Emerson’s ... utterance, is the unmistakable sign of Man Thinking,” who thus becomes the poetic origin of “Americanness,” as it were (Sealts Jr. 194). However, if originality presupposes the loss of memory, that is, the loss of something that pre-existed it, then originality is, more accurately, the appropriation of quotation. Originality is the act of presenting something *as if it were* new—an activity that involves “not only the breaking with the precursor ... but reinscription” (Riddel, *Letters* 51).<sup>18</sup>

*Finding Nemo* reinscribes the pattern of the ideal American into Dory’s framework of an eternal present, playing with the scholar’s function as the mythical origin of Americanness. For Dory, any given moment serves as fictional origin, because to her, every moment is ‘new’ and a beginning. Dory’s existence, to put it very bluntly, is a series of beginnings and Dory herself is, in that sense, always a beginner. It is the notion of anticipation, of an always already displaced identity, which likens Dory to the scholar and makes her a particularly ‘American’ character: Dory articulates a subjectivity that is always in the making, but never fully realized. However, while Emerson imagined his scholar to be a figure of dissent, a man who repudiates the past and dares to walk the untrodden path, Dory is a figure of difference, an individual whose lack of memory leaves her virtually no other option but to invent her own origin. This aspect makes Dory’s reiteration a very peculiar performance of idealized Americanness. As a visibly

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<sup>18</sup> See also Gunn, who argues that “writers cannot be said to contribute to the formation of an American mind simply by adding new contents to it ... [T]o contribute to the formation of the mind, whether our own individual mind or some larger collective mentality, they must do something more: they must teach us new ways to think and feel about such material” (*Otherness* 143-144).

'marked' character performing the pattern of the ideal American, Dory claims 'normal,' that is, seemingly unmarked, disembodied, and universal Americanness from a position of 'otherness'—from a position which actually automatically denies her access to precisely that 'normal' Americanness she claims. By employing Dory's forgetfulness as a metaphor for difference and otherness, *Finding Nemo* thus draws attention to the exclusionary practices that at work in the construction of Americanness. It suggests that Americanness is a highly contested term whose inherent instability allows those who are excluded from its dominant imaginings to appropriate and redefine it.

In an act of "creative quoting," to use Riddel's terms, *Finding Nemo* not only reiterates and reinscribes, but also adds a new dimension to the cultural pattern of the ideal American, thus reinventing the meaning of 'Americanness' in performance. Both *Finding Nemo* and 'Emerson' enact the foundational scenario of an original Americanness as embodied by a distinctly 'American' individual. While the cultural pattern of the prototypical American individual has been invested with national fantasies of a shared and common Americanness as embodied by a normal, modal American, *Finding Nemo's* performance of the foundational scenario does not comply with those fantasies. *Finding Nemo* does not merely reproduce the cultural pattern of the ideal American, but, proceeding "by a double strategy of imitation and distortion" which lets this film appear both "conative and performative, representational and parodic," it constitutes and contests this pattern at the same time, shedding light on spectral Americanness that haunts Emerson's American scholar (Riddel, *Letters* 25).

By performing Americanness from the vantage point of a character visibly marked as 'other,' *Finding Nemo* produces a similar sensation of oddness as Barack Obama did with his "Race Speech." As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Obama's seemingly impossible state of existence (that of a black American president) challenges America's cultural repertoire as in his materiality, the specters that haunt American culture find material, embodied existence and trouble dominant notions of Americanness. Similar to Obama, *Finding Nemo* troubles the re-affirmation of hegemonic Americanness by claiming and articulating Americanness from the position of 'otherness,' thus breaking patterned interpretations of 'normal' Americanness. *Finding Nemo's* troubling of Americanness becomes visible most clearly in the film's juxtaposition with

Emerson's essays. This juxtaposition highlights a moment of ghosting, which emerges out of the confrontation of two conflicting variations of the very same foundational scenario. The juxtaposition of 'Emerson' and *Nemo* demonstrates the failure of 'Americanness' to achieve totalized form and maintain a stable meaning, which opens the way for its resignification. In making the 'other' visible and giving it a voice, the boundaries of legitimate articulations of 'American/ness' are challenged, giving way to a "logic of haunting" in which there is "permanent open-endedness of meaning and limits of mastery" (Brown 152).

Furthermore, the articulations of Americanness in *Finding Nemo* and Emerson's essays point towards a tension that has always been inherent in the pattern of the ideal American. While he was envisioned by Emerson to express an original Americanness and has been repeatedly performed in order to consolidate that Americanness as normative, Emerson's scholar also already articulated his Americanness from a position of difference, as it were. Emerson's scholar had to position himself against the traditions of the Old World and mark himself as different from his European forerunners in order for him to be recognizable as particularly 'American.' Any attempt to consolidate a unified Americanness has therefore been doomed from the start, as the term 'American' has always signified difference and is "always already overtaken by the relays and delays that divert from its destination," is always already still to come (Kronick/Bauerlein 2). 'America' is affiliated with transformation and displacement, rather than with totalizing truths and meanings. It is always already overtaken by those marked as different, who claim 'Americanness' as their own, appropriating and redefining it, condemning 'America' to a state of permanent anticipation.

## Act II. Scenario 2.

### From Walden Pond to *Jurassic Park*: The Re(dis)covery of America

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...

—Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* 135

**Malcolm:** If there's one thing the history of evolution has taught us, it's that life will not be contained. Life breaks free. It expands to new territories. It crashes through barriers. Painfully, maybe even dangerously ... life finds a way.

—*Jurassic Park*

“No truer American existed than Thoreau,” Emerson said of his friend and disciple in the eulogy he delivered at Thoreau’s funeral in 1862 (“Thoreau” 398). Emerson measured Thoreau’s Americanness in his friend’s “preference of his country and condition” as well as his “aversation from English and European manners and tastes,” which almost reached contempt (*ibid*). Thoreau was fatigued by reports of his contemporaries’ trips to Great Britain and could not relate to their admiration of Europe. He regarded Great Britain, and Europe in general, to be cultures of imitation, built upon the ashes of previous civilizations. What Thoreau sought, Emerson said, “was the most energetic nature,” which could only be found in New England and the American West, not in London (“Thoreau” 399). “Eastward I go only by force, westward I go free,” Thoreau famously exclaimed in “Walking,” which was first delivered as a lecture in 1851 and published posthumously in 1862 (“Walking” 1810). Thoreau thought that only in wildness and nature man can find absolute freedom, and he found it hard to believe that “fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom” can be discovered “behind the eastern horizon” (*ibid*). Mankind has always, “progress[ed] from east to west,” he argues, which is why the nation’s future is to be found westward, in

wilderness and wildness (ibid).<sup>1</sup> It is there that man can establish an original relation to the universe, as Emerson has it, and be a 'real' American.<sup>2</sup>

Recent criticism on Thoreau has very much focused on his writings on and relationship with nature, which established Thoreau as an early environmentalist and eco-critic.<sup>3</sup> While I am also interested in the role that nature and wilderness play in Thoreau's writings, I want to approach these issues from a different perspective. Rather than evaluate Thoreau's contribution to the American conservation movement, I want to explore the intricacies between wilderness as a cultural concept, individualism, and 'real' Americanness in his masterpiece *Walden*. My juxtaposition of *Walden* with Stephen Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*<sup>4</sup> will show that the ideal American individual as envisioned by Thoreau is always in a limbo-state, located somewhere in-between nature and culture and haunted by the ghosts it needs to repress in order to reaffirm its own subjectivity. By reading *Jurassic Park* with *Walden*, I aim to show that in the act of "fronting nature," to use Thoreau's terms, original Americanness is simultaneously found and lost, is both affirmed and undermined, which reveals the fragility and uncertainty inherent in being a 'real' American.

As Roderick F. Nash notes, the concept of wilderness made America uniquely 'American,' because it "had no counterpart in the Old World" and could thus serve

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<sup>1</sup> As Jane Bennett explains, the wildness "of anything consists in its capacity to inspire extraordinary experience, startling metaphors, unsettling thoughts. ... Wildness is the unexplored, unexpected, and inexplicably foreign dimension of anything. It is more easily 'fronted' out of doors, but it resides even within the self" (19). The difference between "wildness" and "wilderness" is simply that "wildness" is a "spiritual state arising from the relationship between a person and nature," whereas "wilderness" describes "land or water unused at present by people and thus a physical state of nature" (Botkin 121). Wildness and wilderness are two distinct concepts, yet they often conflate. See Laura Dassow Walls's article "Believing in Nature" for details.

<sup>2</sup> See also Sherman Paul, who, in discussing Thoreau's indebtedness to Emerson's philosophy, writes: "Interpreting nature, turning into consciousness, this was genius, here was a new frontier for originality" (7).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Laura Dassow Walls's *Seeing New Worlds* (1995), David Mazel's *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000), Daniel Botkin's *No Man's Garden* (2001), Andrew McMurry's *Environmental Renaissance* (2003), the collections *Thoreau's Sense of Place* (2000), edited by Richard Schneider and *More Day to Dawn* (2007), edited by Sandra Harbert Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls, articles by William Howarth (1994), Philip Cafaro (2002), and Daniel J. Phillipon (2004), to name only a few publications.

<sup>4</sup> Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* is based on Michael Crichton's 1991 bestseller of the same title. Together with renowned screenwriter David Koepp, Crichton also co-wrote the film's screenplay. When he began to work on *Jurassic Park*, Crichton started out by writing a screenplay, which he then turned into a novel, only to end up turning it back into a screenplay. In other words, *Jurassic Park* was originally intended for the big screen, which is one of the reasons why I choose to work on the film rather than the book. The second reason is the film's huge commercial success, especially within the U.S. More than half of the \$600 million the film grossed in the first three months after its release were made in domestic sales alone, which is truly remarkable and makes the film "one of the most influential documents of United States popular culture" (DeTora 3). For more details on *Jurassic Park*'s commercial success see, for instance, Lauter 108-109.

as a “cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem” (67). With the rise of nationalist thinking and the strong demand for a uniquely American cultural tradition in the early nineteenth century, he suggests, came the understanding that “it was in the *wildness* of its nature that [the] country was unmatched” (Nash 69). Original American thought and behavior could thus be developed and explored most effectively in the confrontation with the raw, untouched landscapes of the American continent. In *Walden*, Thoreau employs this understanding as a figurative tool to describe American individualism and sketch a parable of cultural renewal.<sup>5</sup> Thoreau encouraged his readers to be “the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher of your own streams and oceans” and to explore their “own higher latitudes” (*Walden* 369). Going into wild nature was highly conducive to an individual’s inward journey but, as Thoreau stressed, the essential frontier was not so much to be found in a particular location than “wherever man *fronts* a fact” (*A Week* 249).

I suggest that Spielberg’s blockbuster *Jurassic Park* reiterates the cultural pattern of fronting nature and, similar to *Walden*, can be read as a parable on the renewal of culture. Quoting Thoreau’s *Walden*, *Jurassic Park* enacts the foundational scenario of self-discovery and of the re(dis)covery of America in wild nature. Wilderness, in *Jurassic Park*, is located elsewhere, outside of U.S. territory, as the whole continent has been civilized and primordial, untamed wilderness does not exist there anymore.<sup>6</sup> While the Jurassic Park first seems to be a recovered paradise and perfectly idyllic place, nature there soon turns out to be hostile, hazardous, and horrid, as the park’s dinosaurs turn against their creators. In reading *Jurassic Park* with Thoreau, we can also see, however, that the horrors of the park are very much an intensification of cultural conflicts and paradoxes one can already find in *Walden*. The task of the rediscovery of America, which Thoreau had set for himself and which is reiterated in *Jurassic Park*, proves to be a difficult one: America is and has always been built on shaky grounds, as the consolidation

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<sup>5</sup> As R.W.B. Lewis explains, Thoreau’s trouble with conventions and traditions was that they stemmed from the “Old Word” and had been superimposed upon the American continent, and wild nature in particular. These traditions thus “had to be washed away, like sin, so that the natural could reveal itself again and could be permitted to create its own organic conventions” (22).

<sup>6</sup> I regard *Jurassic Park* better suited for a juxtaposition with *Walden* than other films that revolve around the confrontation of man with primordial nature, such as *King Kong* (1933 and 2005), for instance, because it seems to be the only film of its kind in which the protagonists, similar to *Walden*’s narrator, deliberately seek the recovery of and reconciliation with nature. What distinguishes *Jurassic Park* is the artificial creation of a primordial nature and the conscious intention to technologically recover pure wilderness, while in films such as *King Kong* the protagonists encounter a preexisting primordial nature against which they have to persist.

of 'real' Americanness has always depended on practices of exclusion and the systematic repression of anything 'other.' However, the specters of the repressed leave their traces and come back to haunt America—sometimes forcefully, as in *Jurassic Park*, sometimes quietly, as in *Walden*.

### Fronting Nature: Thoreau and the American Type

Both intellectually and personally, Thoreau was indebted to Emerson, with whom he maintained a long and vibrant but also troubled friendship. Just as Emerson, so was Thoreau educated at Harvard College, from where he graduated in 1837, the year in which Emerson delivered "The American Scholar" before Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society.<sup>7</sup> In that very same year, Thoreau became acquainted with Emerson and started to keep a journal upon Emerson's urging, thus "signing the bond of his apprenticeship" and asserting self-culture as his new vocation (Paul 51). He attended discussions of the Transcendental Club at Emerson's house in Concord and after he closed down the private school he had set up with his brother John, he moved into Emerson's house, where he worked as a handyman for two years. In 1843, he moved to Staten Island to tutor the children of Emerson's brother, but returned to Concord after only seven months. On July 4, 1845, he moved into a shack beside Walden Pond, which he had built on Emerson's land, and stayed there for two years, keeping a journal in which he recorded the life of nature.

Thoreau, as his two-year hermitage at Walden Pond already suggests, was an eccentric and difficult character. Emerson was annoyed by his truculence, complained about his inability to be polite and make conversation, and regarded him to be "an unambitious fellow, self-indulgent and vain" (Donoghue, *America* 43). Thoreau, in turn, resented having a master and grew weary of Emerson's patronage. As he wrote in his *Journal*: "Talked, or tried to talk with R.W.E. Lost my time—nay, almost my identity" (V, 575). His reputation as Emerson's young disciple evidently bothered Thoreau, and he was indeed long read as an extension of Emersonian thought rather than as an intellectual and philosopher in his own right. Emerson himself wrote after Thoreau's death that "[in] reading him, I find

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<sup>7</sup> Sherman Paul even speculates that Thoreau "had undoubtedly heard among other commencement week addresses Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa oration" (1-2). Philip Cafaro, on the other hand, writes that "Thoreau probably wasn't there to hear Emerson's talk. He had attended the main graduation ceremonies the previous day and even gave a short speech of his own on 'The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times'" (9).



the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, & illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality” (Emerson, *Journals* 264). While Emerson seemed to take pride in his influence on Thoreau, others evaluated Thoreau’s closeness to Emerson in less favorable terms. In an essay written in 1887, Henry James interprets Thoreau as Emersonian ideas turned into practice, arguing that Thoreau “took upon himself to be, in the concrete, the sort of person that Emerson’s ‘scholar’ was in the abstract” and that *Walden* reads “like a translation of Emerson into the sounds of the field and forest” (*Essays* 265).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, James Russell Lowell refers to Thoreau’s writings as “strawberries” gathered from Emerson’s garden and suggests that Thoreau’s imagination was receptive rather than active (Lowell 222).

James’s and Lowell’s respective judgments of Thoreau’s work are prime examples of an often-made attempt to track down Thoreau in his own writings and the failure to read texts like *Walden* as pieces of performance. James evidently confused author and narrating ‘I’ and read Thoreau’s texts as autobiographical pieces of writing, which makes it difficult, of course, to see more in Thoreau than merely an extension of Emerson. But especially as regards *Walden*, a purely autobiographical reading does not lead far. While *Walden* is based on the journal Thoreau kept to document his life in the woods, Thoreau carefully revised his manuscript in the seven years that lay between his experiment and the publication of his book, condensed his two-year experience into one year and fashioned the narrator as an Adamic figure, who “is a witness to a truly new world ... not the visible world around Walden Pond, but an inner world which the Walden experience allowed him to explore” (Lewis, R.W.B. 21).<sup>9</sup> *Walden* paints the picture

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<sup>8</sup> James’s words are echoed by Mark van Doren, who called Thoreau “a specific Emerson,” whose philosophical position was “almost identical with Emerson’s” (qtd. in Porte, *Conflict* 4). James’s appreciation of Thoreau’s work clearly had its limits; in his book on Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1879, James already found quite direct words in passing his judgment on Thoreau, when he wrote that “[w]hatever question there may be of his talent, there can be none, I think, of his genius. It was a slim and crooked one; but it was eminently personal. He was imperfect, unfinished, inartistic; ... [He] must always be mentioned after those Americans—Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Lowell, Motley—who have written originally. He was Emerson’s moral man made flesh...” (James, *Hawthorne* 76).

<sup>9</sup> For details on the writing process of *Walden*, see *The Making of Walden* by J. Lyndon Shanley. As Shanley explains, Thoreau started writing *Walden* in early 1846, by compiling “the material which lay everywhere in his journals” (19) using entries he had written at various times between 1840 and 1845. For the successive three drafts of his manuscript he returned to his journals and “assembled notes on a topic by tearing pages out of his journals” (23). Version IV of the *Walden* manuscript contains material from his journals for 1850, 1851, and early 1852. The final version of *Walden* was sent to the printer in March 1854, after Thoreau had finished his last revisions to the manuscript (cf. Shanley 32).

of a man withdrawing from a modernity which he experiences as superficial and materialistic, entering into a union with nature for an experience of self-discovery. The withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape is the central motif of the pastoral, a literary tradition that has been thoroughly studied by Leo Marx in his seminal work *The Machine in the Garden*. *Walden*, Marx suggests, may be read as “the report of an experiment in transcendental pastoralism” (*Machine* 242). It consists of twenty chapters “neatly paired in oppositions,” as Nina Baym observes (3): reading and sounds, solitude and visitors, the bean-field and the village, the ponds and Baker Farm, higher laws and brute neighbors. The chapters are arranged in seasonal sequence, beginning with his move to Walden Pond in summer and ending with the arrival of spring. This pattern, as Baym explains, “aligned his stay with myths of death and rebirth, allowing him to identify his narrative ... with a psychic journey from joy (summer) through depression and despair (winter) into renewal (spring)” (3). The narrating ‘I’ in *Walden* can be termed a “stylized Thoreau”—a Thoreau who fashions himself as the ideal American individual—who documents his inward journey and quest for individual freedom through the metaphor of nature and the cycle of the seasons.

If Emerson’s “The American Scholar” was the nation’s intellectual Declaration of Independence, then *Walden* denotes a single man’s individual Declaration of Independence, his search for ultimate personal, intellectual, and political emancipation. I read *Walden* neither as “Thoreau’s” escape from society nor as “a fable of the renewal of life” (Paul 293), but as a fable of the renewal of *culture*, as a negotiation of the meanings of freedom and independence and Thoreau’s attempt to define “an American type” (Golemba 174), and construct “a program for Americans” (Ziff, *Democracy* 197).<sup>10</sup> I concur with Henry Golemba that *Walden* is “a deliberate public act,” a public performance in which Thoreau sets up the narrating ‘I’ as the prototypical American who “articulates an American experience” (Golemba 175).<sup>11</sup> The supposedly particularly *American* experience is the experiment of self-discovery which Thoreau articulates in his dual function as author and narrator; it is the focus on an individual’s “self-refashioning” and

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<sup>10</sup> See also Joan Burbick, for instance, who states that “*Walden* is more a fable of the renewal of culture than a ‘fable of the renewal of life’” (61).

<sup>11</sup> In *Consciousness and Culture*, Joel Porte suggests that it is precisely Thoreau’s experiment of self-discovery that makes *Walden* “so American a book” (149). For “besides being sociable,” Americans are also “a withdrawing, self-scrutinizing people,” Porte writes (149). On *Walden* as a popular performance act, see also David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, especially pp. 98-100.

“remaking of origin within [itself],” which serves as metonymy for the “self-re-originating” of American society and culture and arguably deems *Walden* a very ‘American’ text (Garber, *Inscribing* 192-193). As Larzer Ziff points out, however, Thoreau believed that his writings and the example of his life would serve as a general lesson on how to keep balance between being part of a community and pursuing one’s private interests—a lesson, ultimately, on how to make an American nation (cf. *Democracy* 197).

As a text that makes a point about the condition of American society by concentrating on the individual and individualism, *Walden* stands exemplary of “a new obsession” one could detect in American culture (Cafaro 179). Individualism was an entirely new phenomenon, coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in order to describe “a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth” (620). That novel idea, which Tocqueville witnessed evolve in American culture, was democracy. Tocqueville predicted that this new social idea would find expression in literature and the arts: “man himself ... will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry among these nations” (595). While *Walden* is often read as an individual’s escape from society, I suggest that Thoreau as narrator encounters society in his solitude and that the book thus documents an ongoing negotiation of the individual’s position in and relationship to society.

Thoreau moved into his hut at Walden on Independence Day 1845; “by accident,” as he says, but the symbolism of choosing that particular day cannot be denied (*Walden* 128). Why it was “by accident” is not clear. Maybe he wanted to mock America’s idea of independence—after all, he “did not think much of America,” as he told Walt Whitman (*Correspondence* 445)—or maybe he saw his experiment as an reenactment of the first Puritan settlements rather than a second Declaration of Independence, and therefore found the Fourth of July the wrong day to take up the abode (cf. Cavell *Senses* 8).<sup>12</sup> Be that as it may, Thoreau’s choice

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<sup>12</sup> See also Bob Pepperman Taylor, who writes that “[t]he Revolution, with its heroes, principles, noble deeds, and ideals, is the story we like to tell of our founding. But Thoreau floats by the remains of this event, and ... return[s] to the theme of settlement of New England by Europeans” (20). Thoreau, Taylor argues, wanted to discover earlier times, “when the fate of the new civilization was still unsettled, when white settlements were themselves new, untested, and unsure of their futures” (ibid). By returning to pre-Revolutionary times, to the early Puritan settlements in Massachusetts, Thoreau hoped to rediscover an original, primordial American spirit. Puritan conceptions of “wilderness” have, of course, influenced Thoreauvian thought. To the Puritans, wilderness “suggested danger, but also a culturally, socially, and religiously clean slate”—an understanding that clearly resonates in Thoreau’s writings (Gersdorf 160). As Perry Miller outlined in his seminal *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), the Puritans conceived of their project in the New World as an “errand into the wilderness” and believed they could reform Christianity by

to move to Walden on that particular day bestows his private declaration of independence with additional symbolic value. While his fellow citizens reminisced the nation's original founding, Thoreau moved into the wilderness of New England in order to symbolically found his self and find the origin within himself, thus making the case for a different and maybe "more authentic and humanly satisfying" understanding of independence (Taylor, B. 76). Thoreau thus sets up his narrator-persona as the archetypal American and mythical origin of Americanness, locating original 'Americanness' in the act of fronting nature.

To Thoreau, "fronting nature" meant "being up at the edge against something" (Garber, *Imagination* 46); it refers to the things one did when faced with essential wildness. As Jane Bennett explains, to front wildness "is not to explore it, for that implies a relationship of depth," and even "to confront" is an inappropriate synonym, "not simply because this is too aggressive a stance but because aggression itself is too engaged, as the *con* ... suggests" (35). "Fronting" nature is to be face to face with the frontiers of one's horizon, one's body, the limits of one's existence:

The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact, though that fact be his neighbor, there is an unsettled wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, further still, between him and *it*. (*A Week* 249; italics in the original)

'Fronting' is Thoreau's coping strategy to resolve the tensions between the individual and society, between its inner nature and the nature of its environment. It is the primary reason for taking up his experiment of living in solitude and his sole motivation: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately," he writes, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what I had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (*Walden* 135). By fronting the essential fact of life, Thoreau believed, he could live a deeper, more meaningful life and integrate his body, mind, and soul to a complete whole. A life determined by the act of fronting is a life led in the liminal space between integration and dissolution, coherence and discontinuity, originality and imitation. The American landscape with its "palpable and immediate presence of

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setting up a model of God's kingdom in America. "Wilderness, an edited version of pure nature from which the Puritan mind erased indigenous as well as colonial inscriptions, was the raw material out of which as morally just, socially hierarchical community was to be wrought" (Gersdorf 163). Thoreau's wilderness was similarly an "edited version" of nature, a slate cleaned from all European and Native American traces.

the frontier, of a pervasive wildness whose boundaries are coterminous with our own," is the ideal metaphor to express and explore the liminality of such a life (Garber, *Imagination* 57).

As Buell has pointed out somewhat ironically in *The Environmental Imagination*, "Thoreau was not really *that* interested in nature as such; nature was a screen for something else" (*Environment* 11).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, to Thoreau nature—and particularly the act of fronting nature—served as the screen for double discovery, that is, the discovery of his self and the discovery of America—the discovery of his self as an American self. Any American, Cavell asserts,

is apt to respond to ... the knowledge that America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident; and to the obsession with freedom, and with building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them; and to the presentiment that this unparalleled opportunity has been lost forever. (*Senses* 9)

Has it really been lost forever? *Walden* is Thoreau's attempt to excavate America, to discover it anew and do everything 'right' this time around, because he knows that his personal fate is tied to that of the nation. "If America was found and lost again once, as most of us believe, then why not twice?" Thoreau writes in the later *Cape Cod* (1023). Indeed, why not even three, four, or *n*th times? Thoreau wants to "restore the aboriginal and permanent America to America" and, by "rediscovering it and repossessing it," explore the full potential of America and of himself as an American (Paul 354). Thoreau's act of fronting nature as *Walden's* narrator constitutes a foundational scenario, a cultural pattern that has been reiterated both figuratively and physically ever since the publication of *Walden*, in order to rediscover America and to redeem it through its continuous regeneration.<sup>14</sup>

The restoration of America is interwoven with the act of recrafting the self and both are best expressed in *con*frontation with nature, as to Thoreau, nature is the only sphere that ostensibly has not been corrupted by men and the developments of modernity. In the wildness of American wilderness, a new man—a 'new Adam'—can evolve in ways that European men can never evolve, as Thoreau explains:

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<sup>13</sup> Buell's argument is a widespread view. Nash, for instance, writes: "The crucial environment was within. Wilderness was ultimately significant to Thoreau for its beneficial effect on thought. Much of Thoreau's writing was only superficially about the natural world. ... [He] turned to it repeatedly as a figurative tool" (89). See also P.M. Hicks, who said that "his [Thoreau's] object was never scientific knowledge, nor, for that matter, was nature his true subject" (72).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Nina Baym, who writes that "Thoreau's gesture [of withdrawing from society] has been imitated by countless thousands across the nation" ("Introduction" 1).

I believe that adam [sic] in paradise was not so favorably situated on the whole as is the backwoodsman in America—You all know how miserable the former turned out—or was turned out—but there is some consolation at least in the fact that it yet remains to be seen how the western Adam[,] Adam in the wilderness[,] will turn out— (*Journal II*, 182)

By comparing America and the American man with Adam and the ‘founding’ of mankind, Thoreau associates America with myths of origin and originality. He thus participates in the formation of an idealized America and in the affirmation of ‘real’ Americanness rather than merely describing a condition, and, as he acknowledged in his journals and other writings, he was well aware of his contribution to American myth making (cf. Bennett 115-116).

Thoreau’s recourse to Adam constitutes a symbolical return of the American man to a state of innocence and yet unexplored potential. Thoreau shakes off the toils of modernity, industrialization, and rising capitalism, which deny man “to be anything but a machine” and keep him in chains (*Walden* 48). Man is his own slave-driver, Thoreau observes and calls for man’s self-emancipation and a newfound appreciation of the essential facts of life. Society has been corrupted and dazzled by the advances of a materialistic, industrial era which has transformed men into commodities and reduced them in their divinity.<sup>15</sup> By taking up his humble abode at Walden Pond, Thoreau turns back the clock and enters a world that is free of standardization and competition in the marketplace, free of human exploitation and objectification, free of conformity and submission to institutions. Thoreau describes a wide range of common activities, such as reading, fishing, watching the sunset, observing birds, hoeing beans, and laying bricks, which become charged with possibility and unexplored potential as Thoreau performs these activities. They connect ‘inside’ with ‘outside’ by forming a path through the self into nature and, as Cafaro argues, teach *Walden’s* readers to find “the great, unsuspected possibilities in ordinary life” (Cafaro 23).

The hard facts Thoreau provides his readers with and his account of the mundane tasks he had to perform create a seemingly realistic setting. However, myth and ‘reality’ constantly conflate in *Walden*, and America is thus rediscovered and constituted along the porous line that separates the two. Marx argues that *Walden* is a distinctively American version of the romantic pastoral, as it is set

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<sup>15</sup> R.W.B. Lewis compares *Walden* to Plato’s cave allegory, suggesting that “Thoreau, in *Walden*, is a man who has come back down into the cave to tell the residents there that they are really in chains, suffering fantastic punishments they have imposed on themselves, seeing by a light that is reflected and derivative” (21).

somewhere between Massachusetts and a utopian land of fantasy where myth blends with reality. Thoreau's hut stands at the center of that symbolic landscape, where the village of Concord borders to a truly fabulous wilderness (cf. Marx, *Machine* 245). But, as Marx is quick to point out, although the book "resembles the classic pastoral in form and feeling, its facts and images are drawn from the circumstances of life in nineteenth-century America" (*Machine* 246-247). *Walden* is written against the backdrop of a cultural malady which Thoreau diagnoses in the opening chapter "Economy." Thoreau had the acute sense that he had to "improve the nick of time" by defying the pointless, routinized existence which the market mechanisms imposed upon his fellow citizens (*Walden* 56). He discovered a "pattern of acquiescence, a dehumanizing reversal of ends and means" in the behavior of his fellow townsmen, which he locates in their economy—in "a system within which they work endlessly, not to reach a goal of their personal choosing but to satisfy the demands of the market mechanism" (Marx, *Machine* 247).

In "Economy," Thoreau notes the all-pervasiveness of technology and industrialization, and he is aware of the fact that capitalism is not merely an economic system but a mode of perception, a system that renegotiates values and meanings. Capitalism is a new culture which creates new forms of dependencies and limits man in his freedom:

Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. (*Walden* 48).

By taking up his abode at Walden Pond and leading a self-sufficient life, Thoreau confronts these new developments by distancing himself from society, thus reclaiming his freedom and independence: "I was more independent than any farmer in Concord," he writes, "for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius ... every moment" (*Walden* 99). A look at his Concord neighbors only shows him that they "have been toiling twenty, thirty, or forty years, that they may become the real owners of their farms, which commonly they have inherited with encumbrances, or else bought with hired money ... but commonly that have not paid for them yet" (*Walden* 75). Caught in a web of interdependencies determined by monetary relations, Thoreau's neighbors are prone to break down morally, distance themselves from nature, and put

convenience and commercial interest above their individuality and their personal independence.

The greater parts of *Walden's* subsequent episodes at the pond celebrate self-sufficiency and the delights of nature. Nature has “a kind of literal authority precisely because she is not one of men’s institutions,” as Walter Benn Michaels suggests (138). Nature the capacity to supply “values which are real” and give life a deeper meaning (ibid), as Thoreau notes one beautiful summer day as he sits “rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness,” happy that, unlike the days of his fellow townsmen in Concord, his days are not “bearing the stamp of any heathen deity,” that is, the stamp of money (*Walden* 157). Thoreau finds amusement and entertainment in observing nature, in listening to its sounds and learning its language. In these pastoral interludes, he creates his own culture, as it were, by radically severing his ties from the materialistic and economic expectations of a capitalist culture.<sup>16</sup> In that way, Thoreau redefines the vision of “the only true America” as “that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these [tea, and coffee, and meat], and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses” (*Walden* 252), thus insisting on an alternative understanding of America and of being an American that is not so much tied to the inhabitation of a geographical space as it is to a national cultural imaginary that transcends space and time. The struggle over the parameters that constitute ‘America’ demonstrates that “America is, above all, a rhetorical figure, defined by its excessive performance, and constituted by the logic that establishes not only its geographical but its metaphysical borders” (Wiegman, *Anatomies* 173).

### **Killing Time**

Similar to Emerson, who pondered over temporality and encouraged his contemporaries to live wholly in the present, Thoreau takes issue with time and the temporal order in many of his writings. It was especially his brother’s death in 1842, which made him contemplate the sense of temporal order and led him to ask, “Why does not God make some mistake to show to us that time is a delusion?”

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<sup>16</sup> Even though *Walden* constitutes his attempt to counter the dominating principles of nineteenth-century American culture, Thoreau is all but a counter-cultural hero, as Bennett argues, but rather “an exemplary embodiment of traditional American values. ... For the idea is that his struggle against conformity conforms to the noble American spirit of ‘initiative’ and ‘defiance’” (83).



(*Journal I*, 105). This question contains the wish to live above time, to kill time and incorporate it within himself, in order to escape the experience and reality of the passing of time, as H. Daniel Peck argues. "I am time and the world," Thoreau writes, "In me are summer and winter, village life and commercial routine, pestilence and famine and refreshing breezes, joy and sadness, life and death" (*Journal I*, 105). But at the same time, his question reveals his perplexity at the fact that, although his world came to a halt, time continues to pass as if nothing had happened. By killing time, he has to realize, he inevitably kills the self and the world, for their being and their relation to one another is fundamentally determined by temporal order (cf. Peck 5-6).

While his journal entry following his brother's death is characterized by grief and despair, Thoreau's considerations on time in *Walden* are not so much influenced by the immediacy of loss. Although his wish to transcend time is still prevalent, it is in this case motivated by a strong desire to preserve the present moment and create an eternal, perfect 'now.' Thoreau tries, very consciously, to craft a picture of the world that will stand the test of time, as he admits in "Where I Lived." "It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue," he writes, "but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere of the medium through which we look, which morally we can do" (*Walden* 134). If carefully carved and painted, Thoreau's picture of Walden will overcome the "corrosion of time," similar to the Greek classics that he so admires (*Walden* 148). True works of art, such as *Walden*, which preserve the world of which they are composed, cannot be touched by time, as time "is but the stream I go a-fishing in," Thoreau asserts. "I drink it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains," he states with a notably more positive stance towards the temporal order (*Walden* 142). In *Walden*, Thoreau does not mean to kill time by trying to escape it; rather, he makes an attempt at defying time by leaving a mark and putting down his experience to work for the benefit of the generations to come.

As Thoreau observes, the nature of time and change is illusionary: to compose "a perfect work [in which] time does not enter" is an impossible task, because time always enters at some point. In "Sounds," Thoreau is "reminded of the lapse of time" by the whistle of the railroad (*Walden* 157), which also interrupts the idyll of "The Ponds" with its "ear-rending neigh" (*Walden* 240). In "Spring," the railroad is

replaced as a timekeeper by nature and the progress of the seasons, which measure time and change according to a different beat and demonstrate that the passing of time is always relative and never absolute. Consequently, the present moment is the temporality that truly matters and needs to be seized, as it is the only time that can be experienced as 'real.' The immersion in nature, Thoreau sensed, requires one to live fundamentally in the present moment—to live deliberately—as natural time is a metaphysical category, an eternal cycle, which is experienced immediately and in unmediated form. Echoing Emerson, Thoreau, as Lewis explains, “prescribes ... the total renunciation of the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable, the well-worn paths of conduct, and the total immersion in nature” as the path of the visionary hero (21). Quite similar to Emerson, who encouraged his readers to let go of the corpse that is the past, Thoreau recommends to burn away all ties to the past and to “cast off [the past] like dead skin” (ibid). Every night and day, every change from winter to spring, contains a symbolic death and rebirth; time as measured by nature is thus an endless cycle with no definite beginning nor end, is both eternal and always only now, the present moment:<sup>17</sup>

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and never will be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. (*Walden* 141)

Thoreau perceives of time as a circle, which reminds of Emerson's considerations of time in his essay “Circles”; unlike the porous Emersonian figures that are ever-expanding and limitless, however, Thoreau's circle is unitary and given a boundary, “one that coincides with consciousness itself” (Peck 46). In Thoreau's conceptualization of time, then, “memory and anticipation” become virtually inseparable as they merge into “a single timeless dimension of experience” (Peck 47). Both memory and anticipation can only exist in the present: memory lets something become present (again), just as anticipation brings imaginings of the future into the present. Time, it follows, could only be captured (or killed) if one lived in an ever-present present and if the experience of that present could be

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<sup>17</sup> On this point, see also Alfred I. Tauber, 25-29. Tauber also offers a comparison of Thoreau's notion of time with Augustine's vision of time as he describes it in *Confessions*, arguing that Thoreau and Augustine share similar understandings of time's passing, the illusion of temporality, and the elusiveness of time.

arrested, which is, of course, an impossible undertaking. But as “we cannot afford not to live in the present,” as Thoreau argues in “Walking,” the next-best thing to arresting experience is the appreciation of and total immersion in nature, where death is always followed by rebirth, and time, although it cannot be held, can be re-experienced to some degree, albeit re-experienced with a difference (“Walking” 1823). There is some consolation in such a conception of time, as it seems to promise that in fronting nature, the past can be restored, re-lived, and (if necessary) revised, rectifying the maladies of the contemporary state of society and culture. Thoreau’s awareness of his ‘presentness’ and his wish to live deliberately, then, revolves around the project to “live fully in the present,” on the one hand, and “attempt to capture that present in acts of recollection,” on the other (Tauber 40).

As I briefly mentioned before, Thoreau himself sought to re-live the experience of early settlers in his experiment at Walden Pond and to restore the ‘original’ promises of America by rediscovering and repossessing it. In turn, Thoreau’s attempt of redeeming America through its regeneration in the act of fronting nature has been reiterated in American literary and cultural production—most notably, I suggest, in Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*.<sup>18</sup> ‘Nature’ is the key concept in both *Jurassic Park* and *Walden*, but its representation in the two texts seems to be located on oppositional ends: it seems to be deathly and dangerous in the former, peaceful and pure in the latter text. However, I argue that *Jurassic Park* can be read as an extrapolation of *Walden*, taking up Thoreau’s considerations on economy, capitalism, and nature and adapting them to the socio-cultural situation of its time. In other words, *Jurassic Park* shows us what has become of the concerns Thoreau voiced in *Walden*, which suggests that there is something very Thoreauvian about this film, if not to say something very ‘American.’ *Jurassic Park*

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<sup>18</sup> Thoreau’s considerations on citizenship, individualism, and nature have been adapted and reworked in a wide variety of cultural productions. To mention but a few examples which have been read as reworkings of Thoreauvian thought: in *Hollywood’s Indian*, Peter C. Rollins reads *Dances With Wolves* with *Walden*, which strikes him as “a case study of the limits of how far a Harvard man can ‘go Indian’” (156-157). Günther Beck identifies a strong affinity between Thoreau and *The Simpsons*, suggesting that Lisa Simpson is a Thoreauvian individualist, while Donna M. Campbell calls the Douglas Sirk classic *All That Heaven Allows* a “Walden in the Suburbs” (29). Thomas Schaub identifies “numerous and specific” echoes of *Walden* in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (156), and Michael Cowan sees parallels between Holden Caulfield of *Catcher in the Rye* and Thoreau’s narrator persona, as going to the woods to live in solitude is one of Holden’s recurring fantasies. Just why traces of Thoreauvian thought can be found in so many different cultural texts and contexts is not easy to determine. Bennett suggests that “Thoreau and *Walden* have been elevated to the status of floating signifiers, whose possibility of meaning exceeds any specific referent or singular theme,” and this is a view I wholeheartedly share (84).

reiterates the foundational scenario of rediscovering America in the act of fronting nature; it is a parable of cultural renewal and destruction, a metaphor for a paradise found and lost.

### **The Dinosaur in the Garden: *Jurassic Park* and the Re(dis)covery of Nature**

*Jurassic Park* spins a tale of escape from a world pervaded by technology, mass production, and consumerism. The film is set on Isla Nublar (“cloudy island”), a small (fictional) island west of Costa Rica, where billionaire and philanthropist John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) and his team of scientists have built a nature theme park of cloned dinosaurs. Threatened with legal action over the accidental death of an employee, Hammond invites paleontologist Alan Grant (Sam Neill), paleobotanist Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), and chaos theorist Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) to inspect the park before its official opening and confirm that all measures have been taken to ensure the public’s safety. Hammond’s two grandchildren and a corporate lawyer also join the three scientists on their guided tour through the park. Along the way, their electric tour cars break down due to sabotage on the park’s security system engineered by a rival company. To make matters even worse, a tropical storm is fast approaching the island, which makes an immediate evacuation impossible. The dinosaurs, including dangerous raptors, are set loose and Hammond’s visitors and team need to escape the island under peril before it’s too late. While most of Hammond’s employees are killed by the dinosaurs, Hammond himself, Alan, Ellie, Ian, and the children are rescued by a helicopter after the storm has settled.

At first glance, *Jurassic Park* seems to be a typical action movie with one-dimensional characters, a plot bordering to the absurd, and a lot of special effects. Although all of these stereotypes may certainly apply to *Jurassic Park*, on a deeper level this film captures a familiar problem—a ‘Thoreauvian problem,’ one might say. At its heart, *Jurassic Park* is a film about economy and morality, about the proliferation of technology, and about a nostalgic attempt to restore a long lost past and closeness with nature. *Jurassic Park*, I want to suggest, carries on Thoreau’s legacy of fronting nature, thereby rediscovering America and the ideal American once more. However, the natural world recovered in *Jurassic Park* turns out to be vastly different from the wilderness Thoreau encounters at Walden Pond, and the version of America thus rediscovered invites reconsiderations on America as it is rediscovered in *Walden*.

*Jurassic Park* is a film about America, as I argue, but it is notably not set on U.S. territory. As I mentioned above, Hammond constructed his adventure park on Isla Nublar just off the Costa Rican coastline, a foreign and exotic place, where, in contrast to the U.S., primordial encounters with nature are still possible. Within the national boundaries of the United States, untamed wilderness is hard to find; the frontier has long been closed, the continent settled and ‘civilized,’ and while Thoreau only had to walk westwards to find absolute freedom and discover America, in *Jurassic Park* America can only be discovered by means of displacement. As Anne Brigham suggests, *Jurassic Park* combines “a vulnerability to obsolescence with a fear that we are no longer discoverers, unable to produce anything new or authentic” (par.10). In an America marked by hyperreality and simulation, ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ Americanness can only find expression elsewhere. In other words, new frontiers need to be imagined where, in the confrontation with absolute wild(er)ness, moments of originality in a Thoreauvian sense can be produced. As Frederick Garber argues, for American intellectuals like Thoreau, “the edge where wildness starts was a crucial demarcating principle in their country’s social and moral geography” and an essential factor in their imaginings of America (*Imagination* 59). To define the particularities of the American experience, Thoreau set West against East, America against Europe, present against past, interior against exterior, and imagined America as a place where wildness was proximate, “just below the thin surface of American civilization and American skins” (*Imagination* 65). In *Jurassic Park*, wildness is still just below the skin—it is still a quality that resides within the self, it is still the unexplored, unexpected, and inexplicably foreign dimension in anything, but it cannot translate into the American landscape anymore, as in material terms, America lost that ‘edge’ where civilization ends and wilderness begins. In the imaginary, however, the frontier still exists and needs to be transposed into other spaces and places outside U.S. borders—be they ‘real’ or imagined—for wildness to find embodied presence.

Situating its story in the “third world” and “eliminating the subjects identified with that space” to follow the adventures of white, upper/middle-class Americans, *Jurassic Park* takes us “behind the scenes of Western capitalist production” and American imperialism (Brigham par.41). The clear segregation between capitalist production located in the ‘third world’ and its consumption by the ‘first world,’

which the film's set-up implies, already breaks down in the opening scene, when we witness the accidental death of a park employee, who is attacked by a dinosaur in the process of unloading it and putting it into its new enclosure. There is a systematic crisis within consumption on Isla Nublar, as the consumers are consumed and the social-economic order is turned topsy-turvy. As a technologically engineered species, the film's dinosaurs represent the result of a "disembodying proliferation of electronic technologies" whose biggest threat is, ironically enough, the return of a pre-modern, pre-industrial world (Bukatman 62). Their unrestrained presence becomes symbol of a "particularly contemporary sense of haunting: that provoked by the loss of traditional bodily and locational references," which can only be overcome in the restoration of the intact, coherent, and assertive white male body (Vidler 10).

The vulnerability of body, which is invoked in this initial scene of the devouring of the park worker, is powerfully contrasted with the representation the white (male) American body in next sequences, which introduce the main protagonists and document their encounter with the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park. Alan Grant and Ellie Sattler's first scene in the movie takes place at an excavation site in Montana, where they examine dinosaur skeletons, trying to figure out how those raptors died. Quite in contrast to the abundant wilderness on Isla Nublar, wilderness in the sense of untamed nature has ceased to exist on U.S. territory, as is quickly established. The dinosaur skeleton serves as a metaphor for the loss of wilderness, I suggest, and for man's alienation from nature due to the effects of capitalism, consumerism, and the proliferation of technology—all the factors which Thoreau had already identified as the maladies of modern societies. Nature is dead and has become a subject of science, something to be studied and analyzed rather than experienced, as the first scenes with Alan and Ellie imply. On the other hand, the environment in Montana is safe, controllable and predictable. The deserted landscapes of Montana and the dinosaur skeletons do not pose any threat to the authority and superiority of the white Americans. Alan and Ellie are portrayed as external to, or above nature; in their actions are order, control, and structure, because they are carried out rationally, with the aids of technology and strictly following the logics of a profit-oriented, capitalist system.

The excavation-scene in Montana is powerfully contrasted with the scene of Alan and Ellie's arrival on Isla Nublar. The camera follows the helicopter as it

makes its way through the island's lush greens to an astounding waterfall, where Hammond's helicopter landing platform is the only visible sign of civilization. Hammond, Alan, and Ellie immediately board two jeeps together with Ian Malcolm and the lawyer of Hammond's investors to take a ride through the park. The iron security gate they have to pass seems to be the only reminder that this park is man-made and that the 'wilderness' they encounter is facilitated and controlled by men and machines. As they enter the park, Alan and Ellie are in awe of the nature that surrounds them: a seemingly very pure, primordial nature has been restored in Jurassic Park, where extinct animals have been brought back to life and extinct plants flourish again. In utter disbelief that what they see is indeed true, Alan and Ellie get out of the jeep to get a closer look at the brachiosaur crossing their way. This is a significant moment, as it symbolizes Alan and Ellie's immersion in nature; they deliberately leave the safe environment of the car, as the jeep creates an ostensibly unnatural barrier between them and the wilderness, thus symbolically leaving behind their familiar, mechanical, technology-dominated world, desiring to *experience* nature rather than merely *study* it. By stepping out of the orderly world of technology and machinery, Alan and Ellie deliberately enter a world ruled by chaos and chance which threatens to unsettle their very existence.

As chaos becomes the ruling principle, Alan and Ellie find themselves in a state of uncertainty and unpredictability where their usual logics do not apply, forcing them to find new means of making meaning of what is happening with them and around them. Their liminal state of existence within the boundaries of the park produces a tension, then, or an ambivalence between inside and outside, their state of being and their environment, 'first world' and 'third world.' In order to resolve these tensions, Alan and Ellie fall back on a familiar coping strategy, I suggest, and that is fronting. Fronting, in its Thoreauvian sense, does not follow logical patterns or any structural order, but is an act of introspection that one performs whenever one faces "the elements of essential wildness" (Garber, *Imagination* 46). Coming face to face with the outgrowths of capitalism and technological intervention, Alan and Ellie reach the limits of their horizon and need to redefine and reassess their culture, questioning the values and principles according to which they, and society at large, organize their lives. In this sense, *Jurassic Park* is also fable of the renewal of culture, as its protagonists attempt to

restore the aboriginal, primordial, essentially innocent America to America and thus redeem American culture through its re(dis)covery.

Both Alan and Ellie cite Thoreau's acts of fronting wildness, but it is undoubtedly Alan, in particular, who then takes on the part of the Thoreauvian individual. As the film progresses, Ellie returns to the park's control room after having aided a sick dinosaur, where she is later joined by Ian, who is sidelined in the group's violent encounter with the T-Rex and taken back to the park's headquarters. Observing the developments in the park on their monitors, Hammond, Ellie, Ian, and the park's technicians want to regain control over the park by trying to restore the security system, thus putting all their hopes into the power of technology again. Alan, by contrast remains in the park's wilderness and is literally face to face with the limits of his own existence, as he has no weapons or gadgets he can rely on and protect himself with. Beyond a doubt, Alan fronts nature in ways very different from Thoreau. His is a struggle for survival against an technologically engineered nature which threatens to devour him, while Thoreau aims for harmony and balance between his inner nature and his natural environment. However, through their acts of fronting they both come to embody traditional American values in rather exemplary ways and thereby restore the 'American' spirit of self-reliance, nonconformity, and initiative.

As an "individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever await[s] him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources," Alan bears all characteristics that Lewis has identified in the archetypal figure of the "American Adam" (5). Alan is indeed a classic Adamic character, who finds himself in a seemingly paradisiacal setting, an ostensibly perfect and pure wilderness that should restore a primordial state of harmony between man and nature. He is, in that sense, very similar to *Walden's* narrator: he is a witness to a new world, a visionary hero who puts his experiences to the benefit of mankind. His fight for survival in the park has taught him the dangers of excessive greed and commercialism. He realizes that nature can never be contained—"Life finds a way," as Ian puts it—and man's arrogance and determination to intervene in and dominate over nature inevitably lead into disaster. His own actions are putting man at risk, *Jurassic Park* suggests, and only when he comes face to face with the threat of his own disintegration, he returns to trusting his bare instincts and relying on own resources. The fear of disintegration



is not merely an expression of the fear of being devoured, however, but points to a deep-seated ontological doubt, to the imminent loss of the “boundariness” which characterizes “whites and men (especially)” (Dyer, “White” 51).<sup>19</sup> Reason, order, and boundedness are, according to Dyer, “white” values that need a contrast—an awareness of “boundlessness”—as a screen, so as to affirm their moral superiority. The fear of the inability to control one’s own body and the bodies of those whose exploitation is fundamental to the functioning of capitalist systems lies at the heart of the construction of whiteness and permeates *Jurassic Park*, which reveals the story of the “hysterical boundedness of the white [and male] body” (“White” 63). Being devoured by the dinosaurs constitutes the most primal threat to boundedness, but the intact white male American body, that is, Alan’s body, reasserts itself as the superior body in control.

Paul Lauter’s reading of *Jurassic Park* as offering a “paradigm on colonialism” complements an analysis of the film through the lens of theories on whiteness (Lauter 106). Lauter takes us back to the beginning of the film, when the white Americans are taken into the park—land appropriated from its “invisible” native inhabitants—by a chopper, “that familiar tool of third world repression” (ibid). They also leave the island the very same way, the helicopter literally rescuing them from this sinister place, but it is again only the white Americans who are taken out. The fate of those left behind, the ethnic park workers, genetic engineers, or native peoples remains unknown and is rendered insignificant. Most likely, Lauter speculates, they are “little except prey to the dinos,” whose own fate is not less cruel. All nature in Hammond’s *Jurassic Park*, including the dinosaurs, is reduced to a “consumer spectacle,” where science is practiced “according to the principles of profit rather than knowledge” and nature becomes the product of man-made technological intervention (Stern 355). The dinosaurs are, as Lauter argues, “the visible products of technocolonialization,” artificially created monsters formed out of “banal stuff,” which threaten their creators and consume “the ordinary folk”

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<sup>19</sup> The importance of boundaries and the necessity to draw a line between oneself and others in order to be able to constitute one’s subjectivity is also briefly addressed in *Walden*’s chapter on “Solitude,” where Thoreau writes: “My nearest neighbor is a mile distant, and no house is visible from any place but the hill-tops within half a mile of my own. I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland on the other. ... I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself” (*Walden* 175). In the next chapter, “Visitors,” Thoreau continues: “Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral ground, between them,” because the best in us is “that in each of us which is without, or above, being spoken to,” and it can be heard only when we keep bodily distance to our neighbors (*Walden* 186).

who helped to make and raise them (Lauter 107). *Jurassic Park* thus thrives on the theme of repression on the one hand, and, on a more economic and socio-political level, it condemns science and technology gotten out of control.

'Wilderness' in the park is an inherently paradoxical concept, as its very possibility of existence relies on the very principles that actually run counter to general conceptions of the 'wild': taming and technology. From the very beginning it is made clear that the park's nature has its clear physical boundaries, which are demarcated by iron gates and electric fences. Moreover, everything that lives and grows within this fenced-in territory has been created by human hands and shaped by technological equipment. Hammond's dinosaurs were cloned out of DNA extracts from dinosaur blood preserved within mosquitoes fossilized in amber and bred in a laboratory. All dinosaurs are designed to be females, so as to be able to completely control the population of the park. However, their strands of frog DNA, which are used to fill the holes in the dinosaur DNA, enable the dinosaurs to change their gender and procreate.<sup>20</sup> Wilderness in Hammond's park might thus be untamable but it is hardly untamed. The question whether or not man can ever completely control nature is a key issue in *Jurassic Park*, which it tackles by engaging in broader debates on ethics, morality, and the intricacies between science and capitalism. With *Jurassic Park*, Michael Chrichton explicitly wanted to warn about the dangers "of the commercialization of genetic engineering" (Shay 4), which is why he decided set the story in a theme park, a place that is by definition designed in the interest of commercialism. As Chrichton explains, "[t]he

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<sup>20</sup> Quite a lot of critical attention has been devoted to the dinosaurs' gender and to the film's reproduction of stereotypical associations between femininity and monstrosity, horror, consumption, and castration anxieties. As Brigham, for instance, observes, "these monstrous females represent consumption" and adopt "practices of insatiable devouring and reproduction in the wild that thwart the goals of capitalism and patriarchal order" (par.11). Similarly, DeTora notes that the monstrous female dinosaurs constantly overpower the men who try to take action against them, symbolically castrating them (cf. 16). Laurie Briggs and Jodi I. Kelber-Kaye analyze *Jurassic Park* as a cultural depiction of debates about genetic engineering and argue that the film takes an essentialist and conservative anti-feminist stance, as genetic reproduction is represented as "unnatural" and dangerous. *Jurassic Park*, they suggest, calls for a return to natural modes of mothering, thus valorizing the traditional nuclear family as the only "good" and "safe" form of reproduction (cf. 94-95). Gordon, Brigham, and DeTora also note the promotion of traditional family values in *Jurassic Park*. Gordon notes that like most Spielberg films, *Jurassic Park* is all about the contemporary American family and endorses traditional family values, thus diverging significantly from Chrichton's novel (208). In a similar vein, Brigham argues that *Jurassic Park* is a film about "the crisis and restoration of the nuclear family" and reasserts the "need for a hierarchy topped by a male (re)producer" (par.3; par.34). DeTora suggests, interestingly enough, that "the insertion of the nuclear family into the experiential milieu of genetics [is] the original problem that creates monsters," as the park is explicitly designed as a family-friendly amusement park (14). As the film progresses, DeTora argues, it becomes clear that the nuclear family cannot save the park, but must rather be saved from it.

fact that these dinosaurs are made for a park, it seemed to me, emphasized rather nicely the idea that all this amazing technology is being used for essentially commercial and frivolous purposes” (Shay 4).<sup>21</sup> *Jurassic Park* suggests that in a capitalist system, virtually *anything* can be turned into a commodity, which is bad because it breeds immorality, arrogance, and disaster.

As many critics have observed, Chrichton’s novel is much more pessimistic in its treatment of commercial greed and capitalism than the movie. In the novel, John Hammond is the chief villain, an egomaniac who does not have any love for his grandchildren and only cares for his money. He is killed, in the end, by ravenous dinosaurs, “an appropriate fate,” as Gordon wittily notes (210). In the film, his character is softened, and he is changed from a greedy villain into a “kindly, jolly, grandfatherly eccentric ... He loves his grandchildren and he loves his dinosaurs so much that he is present at all their births as a sort of male midwife” (ibid). Spielberg’s Hammond is essentially a good guy—misguided by his naïveté and overestimation of the latest technological advancements, but not evil. In the film, the greediness of Chrichton’s Hammond is displaced onto two characters, the “bloodsucking” corporate lawyer and the filthy computer nerd who is paid by Hammond’s rivals to sabotage the park. Both of them suffer violent and humiliating deaths, which are almost poetic justice: the former is devoured by a T-Rex as he hides in a bathroom, the latter is eaten in his own car, amidst junk food and garbage, by a cunning dilophosaur. Their deaths are horrible and hilarious

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<sup>21</sup> As *Jurassic Park* is itself caught up in commercialism and an elaborate merchandise machinery, its criticism of capitalism and commercialism appears somewhat ironic, as screenwriter David Koepp notes: “Here I was writing about those greedy people who are creating a fabulous theme park just so they can exploit all these dinosaurs and make silly little films and sell stupid plastic plates and things. And I’m writing for a company that’s eventually going to put this in their theme parks and make these silly little films and sell stupid plastic plates. I was really chasing my tail there for a while trying to find out what was virtuous in this whole scenario—and eventually gave up” (Shay 56). See also Philip M. Taylor, who writes that *Jurassic Park* “had an unprecedented marketing campaign (including a tie-in with McDonald’s), with more than a thousand products being licensed officially” (141). Andrew Gordon suggests that *Jurassic Park*’s critique of the “exploitation of technology in the interest of commercial greed” is an “uncomfortably self-reflexive and hypocritical” one (209), while Constance Balides argues that the movie’s presentation of merchandise displays the “lustre of capital itself” (160). Upon the release of *Jurassic Park II: The Lost World* in 1997, Spielberg said self-mockingly, “I liken myself to the hunters that go after the animals [in *The Lost World*]. They’ll do anything for the money, and so will we” (Biskind 201). It is also noteworthy that the Universal Studios theme park in Hollywood opened a “*Jurassic Park Ride*” in 1996, shortly before the release of *The Lost World*, in which visitors take a boat tour through the Park and are eventually ‘attacked’ by dinosaurs. The ride ends right in front of the gift shop filled with *Jurassic Park* merchandise, through which all visitors must exit. This stresses the film’s compliancy with capitalist ideology, but it also testifies to the impression *Jurassic Park* seems to have left on the American cultural landscape. In Hollywood, the film is reenacted dozens of times a day, perpetuating the cultural patterns upon which it relies and re-affirming their central status in the American imaginary.

spectacles at the same time and bear a certain irony, as they are consumed in a landscape of capitalist consumption by the very creatures that seemed to promise them a life of riches. “We can charge anything we want,” the lawyer exclaims when he first sees the dinosaurs, “and people will pay it!” Hammond replies that he does not want to overcharge, because he wants his park to be accessible to everyone, but it is made very clear that Hammond’s noble wish to restore nature and recover the past is ultimately subject to the structures of capitalism. In other words, both the creation of the park and its execution are permeated by commercial interest, the pleasures of consumption, and the principles of profit.

In seeking to recover an idyllic state of nature in a world penetrated by technology and following the rules of capitalism, *Jurassic Park* reverts, in many respects, a common motif which Leo Marx has called “the Machine in the Garden.” According to Marx, “the Machine in the Garden” describes instances, in which the appearance of technology disrupts the pastoral and becomes a reminder of industrialization, the destruction of nature, and the alienation of man from wilderness. Thoreau’s *Walden* features several “Machine in the Garden” episodes, most notably in his chapter on “Sounds.” In this chapter, Thoreau’s efforts to escape capitalism and industrialization are intermittently interrupted by the “rattle of railroad cars,” which deliver goods to the neighboring village (*Walden* 160). It is the railroad that keeps Thoreau “related to society,” as he puts it, but it also serves as his reminder of the dominant position that technology and capital enjoy in his culture (*ibid*). The whistle of the locomotive informs him of the “restless city merchants” and “adventurous country traders” arriving, of the groceries and portions being delivered and paid for, and of the cotton, cloth, and books that are being sold to his neighbors (*Walden* 161). Thoreau is fully aware of the railroad’s power in restructuring culture and of the historic significance which an extension of the nation’s railway system might have. Calling the train a “traveling demigod” and “cloud-compeller” which moves with such velocity and determination that there is no stopping its triumph, Thoreau’s only modest wish is that men may use the railroad for noble, heroic, and innocent ends (*Walden* 161-162).

Thoreau’s wish is, needless to say, as forlorn as Hammond’s intention to clone dinosaurs solely for educational purposes. In *Jurassic Park*, we are confronted with precisely that version of American culture that Thoreau so dreaded, that is, a culture dominated by capital, technology, and egotism. Hammond’s attempt to

restore a pastoral idyll constitutes an attempt to bring the Garden back into the Machine. In *Jurassic Park*, it is not technology that disrupts nature but nature is rather interspersed into technology; nature is created, maintained, and controlled through technological intervention. Put differently, the problem is that the Garden can only be recovered by employing technology, which creates an irresolvable paradox, as its existence depends on the very means it actually refutes. Thoreau's 'fear' that capitalism was too powerful a system and technological advancements too lucrative to be kept in check is affirmed in *Jurassic Park*, which depicts the excesses of capitalism and commercial interest. As Marx suggests, the image of the railroad "figures as an ambiguity at the heart of *Walden*":

Man-made power, the machine with its fire, smoke and thunder, is juxtaposed to the waters of Walden, remarkable for their depth and purity and a matchless, indescribable color—now light blue, now green, almost always pellucid. The iron horse moves across the surface of the earth; the pond invites the eye below the surface. The contrast embodies both the hope and the fear aroused by the impending climax of America's encounter with wild nature. (*Machine* 251)

The sound of the railroad expresses a tension within Thoreau himself. Although he is aware of the dangers of technological progress and vilifies technology, because it distracts his attention from his (presumably more important) concerns regarding nature, the electric atmosphere, the punctuality and precision, and the order and efficiency of the railroad also elate him. Furthermore, he is impressed by the adventurousness and confidence of the men who operate the train and venture into new territories. The railroad symbolizes change and "progress," it becomes the "agent and type of an irreversible process," that is, "the implacable advance of history," from which there is no escape (Marx, *Machine* 252).

The dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* fulfill the same function, I propose, as the railroad in *Walden*: they symbolize an ambiguity that is at the heart of this film. The dinosaurs stand for a primordial state of nature and absolute wilderness, on the one hand. They are an expression of the desire which Thoreau called "killing time," that is, to discover America anew and repossess it. On the other hand, the dinosaurs are also symbols of the excesses of capitalism and a technological 'progress' that is irreversible and unstoppable. Moreover, they represent that what is repressed, what is 'other' and boundless, what is not depicted and given room in the film but haunts it—they hint at "the ghost in the machine," at those presences which have been systematically written out of hegemonic culture but have left

their traces (Lauter 106). In a world governed by chaos, *Jurassic Park* implies, the specters of hegemonic culture find articulation; or, to use Ian's words, "life finds a way." In a system where order does not apply and conventional logics are unhinged, the workings of that system are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and its initial conditions can never be fully understood. Only the slightest anomalies in the initial stages can have enormous repercussions, which proves Ian's assumption that "life will not be contained. Life breaks free. It expands to new territories. It crashes through barriers." As DeTora proposes, *Jurassic Park* "contain[s] monsters that push the boundaries of identity, shifting shapes seemingly at will and evoking the threat of universal anomaly/amorphousness" (7). The crashing of barriers and blurring of boundaries, then, enables the boundless "other" to claim valid existence and articulate itself as a constitutive element of the hegemonic culture. The dinosaur, I consequently suggest, figures as an ambiguity that is and has always been at the heart of American culture: the loss of an innocence that has never existed in the first place.

In *Jurassic Park*, the case is pretty clear: the Garden strikes back and devours the Machine, thus destroying the images of a peaceful and idyllic resort that Hammond had painted at the outset of the movie. The good and noble Americans reassert themselves as superior and in control, but their innocence is forever lost. They flee from Isla Nublar, well aware that the island's dangerous inhabitants will continue to kill, continue to procreate, and continue to pose a threat. As not even their state-of-the-art technology can help them to keep the dinosaurs in check, all Alan, Ellie, and the others can do is escape and abandon the dinosaurs to their own fate. They choose repression as the answer to their problem—the film ends with Alan gazing out of the helicopter, his eyes following a pelican flying peacefully just above the surface of the ocean, as if to restore our faith in the existence of a truly innocent nature. However, the presence of the dinosaurs will continue to haunt them, as a brief shot of Hammond indicates: He turns his walking stick in his hands, his eyes focused on the fossilized mosquito in its amber knob, and seems to contemplate the events on the island and his part in them.

Similarly, a second look at *Walden* reveals that its ostensible peacefulness and idyll is a product of repression and exclusion. Pastorals such as *Walden* are, as Peck notes, "always defined by what they exclude and by the tensions or 'interruptions' they exhibit in the act of excluding" (131-132). The idealization of a

pure and innocent nature depends upon the disavowal of everything that might interrupt the ideal, which indeed makes repression a defining generic convention of the pastoral. The list of tensions and interruptions in *Walden* is indeed long: Thoreau's peacefulness at Walden is threatened by visions of the future (the railroad), on the one hand, and the specters of the past (Native Americans), on the other. "So is your pastoral life whirled past and away," Thoreau concedes as the presence of the machine forces itself onto the site, and succumbs to the machine: "But the bell rings and I must go off the track and let the cars go by" (*Walden* 167). As he ponders over the changes the railroad brings about, it is clear to Thoreau that pastoralism, in its literal sense, is doomed, as not even Walden Pond can provide a refuge anymore. But also in its figurative sense, the pastoral has never stood a chance. As Louise Westling, for instance, observes, Thoreau's Walden Pond "was no wilderness landscape but instead a colonized space from which Indians and most wildlife had already been removed" (Westling 148). Thoreau acknowledges the presence of that which has been systematically written out of the landscape, thus "destabilizing the ideal he seems to present" (*ibid*). He indicates that Walden has already been destroyed in his lifetime, as the pond of his boyhood, which used to be "completely surrounded by thick and lofty pine and oak woods," is now circled by cleared shores and is employed as a quarry for ice and lumber (*Walden* 239). *Walden* thus constitutes an attempt to negotiate between the landscapes of colonial exploitation and an imagined Garden of Eden, between a state of sinfulness and a state of innocence, between the realities of imperialism and the myths of a glorious past.

Thoreau, as Westling suggests, "understood and tried to accept the necessary violence involved in human survival," which contradicts, to some degree, the horror which "our decaying materiality" triggered in him (Westling 149). Thoreau shows an awareness of the terror which the settling of the continent by white Americans entailed, but he also makes it a point that, for better or worse, their collective fates are played out in the context of the nation's founding, settlement, and expansion and from that there is no escape. Just as the progress that comes with industrialization cannot be stopped, Thoreau regarded the claiming of the continent by white settlers an inevitable development. As Bob Taylor suggests, to Thoreau, "the future of society in America lies with the white settlers. The native Indian represents one American life that is no longer realistically available within

the context of our social and political realities" (47). Thoreau's ideal America is the America at the frontier, because is more authentic and less corrupted than the America of the cities and commercial centers. The frontier symbolizes independence, simplicity, self-sufficiency, freedom, and naturalness, and to Thoreau, the white settlers embodied all these values which he so admired. However, concept of the frontier also problematizes the discrepancy between American ideals and immediate realities; living on the frontier means living on the limen, leading "a sort of border life" ("Walking" 1822) where myth collides with reality most forcefully and the idea of America must be renegotiated at every turn.

In Thoreau's struggle to navigate between reality, history, and myth, the American landscape proves to be a very unstable archive of texts, symbols, and figures as the traces of native presences disrupt all idealized narratives of America. As Burbick observes, "perception and its concomitant paradoxes, as well as conflicting stories about the American past, were woven throughout Thoreau's writings," undermining the project of consolidating a collective national identity (9). Thoreau concerned himself with the Natives most openly and most thoroughly in *A Week*, which Taylor reads as a meditation on the realities of the American founding and its consequences on the white settler and the Indian.<sup>22</sup> Thoreau details the violence and hostility between settlers and Natives and, succumbing to the limitations of human freedom and agency, comes to the conclusion that their respective forms of life are simply incompatible. Put differently, the encounter between settlers and Natives need not be consciously and overtly hostile for the consequences to be harmful. As Thoreau notes, the white "buys the Indian's moccasins and baskets, then buys his hunting-grounds, and at length forgets where he is buried and ploughs up his bones" (*A Week* 44). Thoreau acknowledges that the Indians' entire cultural and social order is destabilized through its contact with the white settlers' commercial structures and notions of property ownership. The inevitable consequence, as Taylor concludes, is annihilation and, in a second step, the loss of memory: "When the Indians die, we do not even remember, or care to remember, where they are buried" (Taylor, B. 21).

Taylor's observation recalls the argument I have made above on deliberate acts of forgetting in *Jurassic Park*. When the film's protagonists leave the island,

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<sup>22</sup> See Taylor's chapter on "Founding" for a detailed reading of *A Week* as performing America's "real" founding (15-34).



they decide to forget the horrors of the park, which is morally 'okay,' because, it is implied, those who are left behind do not matter and we do not have to care about their fate. The repression of the 'other' lies not only at the heart of *Jurassic Park* and *A Week*, however, but also of *Walden*. In contrast to *A Week*, in which Thoreau describes the atrocities of the conflict between settlers and Indians, Natives are notably absent in *Walden*, except for a brief encounter with an Indian which Thoreau recalls in "Economy":

Not long since, a strolling Indian went to sell baskets at the house of a well-known lawyer in my neighborhood. "Do you wish to buy any baskets?" he asked. "No, we do not want any," was the reply. "What!" exclaimed the Indian as he went out the gate, "do you mean to starve us?" Having seen the industrious white neighbors so well off ... he had said to himself; I will go into business; I will weave baskets; it is a thing which I can do. ... He had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so... (*Walden* 61)

Again, Thoreau diagnoses different understandings of economic transaction as the problem between the whites and the Natives. He continues by recounting his own efforts in basket-weaving and doing business, but chooses not to address the Indian's fear that the incompatibility of doing business with each other might end in his starvation and death (and in that of his people). However, in "The Bean-Field," the presence of the dead (starved?) Indians comes back to haunt him: when he hoes his bean-field, it suddenly occurs to him that he "disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens" (*Walden* 204). It is the ashes of the Indians' lost culture on which Thoreau cultivates his beans, but the ruins of their culture are so far removed from him that there is nothing for his imagination to work with—he cannot reconstruct the long lost past underneath his feet, so he immediately abandons the thought and returns to contemplating his present situation.

Thoreau's *Walden* is not a new Garden of Eden, nor is it as horrid and horrifying a place as Hammond's *Jurassic Park*. It is an ambiguous place, which is located at the intersection of memory and forgetting, myth and reality, authenticity and reconfiguration. The America which Thoreau discovers in his acts of fronting emerges at the very same nodal points. Faced with the understanding that America has not yet been 'really' or 'fully' discovered, Thoreau anticipates America sometimes hopefully, sometimes defensively, as he realizes that America is built on shaky grounds: it is a concept that has not yet consolidated any fixed meaning, but

whose meaning permanently needs to be renegotiated. The ambiguity of America is symbolized in the ambiguity of Walden Pond itself, which, Thoreau says, is located in the liminal space “between the earth and the heavens,” a position that allows it to oscillate between both qualities (*Walden* 223). The true mystery of the pond, however, is its bottom: “There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond,” Thoreau writes, “which certainly have no foundation for themselves” (*Walden* 333). His own soundings proved that it was “exactly one hundred and two feet” deep, which is a “remarkable depth,” he admits and concedes that “[w]hile men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless” (*Walden* 335).<sup>23</sup> Thoreau is thankful for the pond’s depth and purity for a symbol, but there is certainly more to Walden Pond’s bottom(lessness) than its symbolic value, as Walter Benn Michaels explains: “On the one hand, it isn’t enough that the pond is revealed to have a ‘tight bottom,’ or that it turns out symbolically ‘deep and pure’; it must be imagined as bottomless to encourage men’s belief in the ‘infinite’” (135). On the other hand, it is only the pond’s imagined, delusory bottomlessness that makes it a good symbol of the infinite, which renders its exact depth of secondary importance.

To imagine the pond bottomless might also be better than to imagine what lies at its bottom. Thoreau explains that as legend has it, there used to be a hill at the pond’s location, on top of which the Indians used to hold their pow-wow. Allegedly, the Indians used too much profanity and thus the hill shook one day and suddenly sank, turning into a pond. Only one old squaw survived, and as she went by the name “Walden,” the pond was named after her (cf. *Walden* 229). If we consider the legend of the pond’s genesis, then the question “Walden, is it you?” which Thoreau poses as he stands at the pond’s shore and looks at what is reflected on its surface, conveys a sense of ambiguity and oddity. I believe that in this moment, Thoreau does not merely admire the pond’s purity and serenity, but tacitly recognizes Walden, the Native woman, as the ‘other’ within himself. He apprehends that oddly enough, he cannot exist, cannot constitute his self, without the ‘other.’<sup>24</sup> With imagining the presence of the Natives and their dead bodies,

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<sup>23</sup> For detailed readings of the pond’s symbolism, see “Walden Pond as Symbol” by Melvin E. Lyon, or the more recent article “Sounding Walden Pond” by Michael Poetzsch.

<sup>24</sup> In *Thoreau’s Redemptive Imagination*, Garber argues that the pond is a mirror of Thoreau’s self, when he says that in *Walden*, “the two deep centers are his [Thoreau’s] own and the pond’s. And though he will sometimes think of himself as an omphalos he is also extremely sensitive to the multifaceted relationships between his own centered self and the enclosure of water just out there beyond where he sits. ... To stare into it is also to stare into oneself” (*Imagination* 7).

which are lost in the pond's infinite bottom, comes the recognition that America and Americanness consolidate themselves by means of exclusion and repression. The 'real' American, *Walden* ultimately implies, is he who fronts, but even more he who forgets; the American is he who sees the muddy bottom, but imagines the infinite bottomlessness.

## Act II. Scenario 3.

### S(w)inging the Self: Whitman, *Spider-Man*, and the Body Politic

**Peter Parker:** Who am I? You sure you  
wanna know?

—*Spider-Man*

You will hardly know who I am or what I  
mean

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 86

According to R.W.B. Lewis, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* can be understood as a sequel to Thoreau's *Walden*. "*Leaves of Grass* tells us what life was made of, what it felt like, what it included, and what it lacked for the individual who began at that moment, so to speak, where the rebirth ritual of *Walden* leaves off," Lewis states, arguing that the "liberated, innocent, solitary, forward-thrusting personality" Whitman sketches in his poems constitutes the "fullest portrayal of the new world's representative man as a new, American Adam" (28). In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman, who called himself a "chanter of Adamic songs" in the 1860 collection *Children of Adam* (PP<sup>1</sup> 264), celebrates novelty in America and tries to find new ways of articulating new American experiences. His ambition to describe and create something new has led his friend John Burroughs to state that "Whitman appears as the Adamic man reborn here in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (qtd in Lewis, R.W.B. 41), which clearly locates original Americanness in Whitman.

America/nness and Whitman have often been conflated in the reception of Whitman's poetry. In a 1909 essay originally entitled "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," Ezra Pound, for instance, says of Whitman, "He *is* America. His crudity is an exceeding stench, but it *is* America" (8).<sup>2</sup> Pound's valuation of Whitman and America is not necessarily favorable, as he suggests that both the nation and its poet are somewhat raw and insipid. What is of greater interest to me than Pound's opinion on Whitman and America, however, is his proposition that Whitman *is* America, that is, that Whitman embodies and incorporates America. Whitman thus joins the ranks of Emerson and Thoreau who, as I have pointed out

<sup>1</sup> All references to direct and indirect quotations taken from Whitman's collection *Poetry and Prose* will be abbreviated to *PP*.

<sup>2</sup> Pound's essay was originally published from manuscript by Herbert Bergman in *American Literature* in 1955. I am quoting from a transcription of the manuscript by Roy Harvey Pearce, who published this essay under the title "Walt Whitman" in his anthology *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays*.

in the previous sections, are oftentimes regarded to embody 'real' Americanness. However, Whitman's embodiment of America is of a different quality than that of his two contemporaries, I want to suggest. While Emerson and Thoreau articulated an ostensibly particularly American character and experience through the figures of the Emersonian scholar and the Thoreauvian hermit, Whitman's embodiment needs to be located quite literally in Whitman's body, respectively in that of his lyrical 'I.'

When the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, the book did not include the author's name on the title page, but instead featured an engraving that showed a man (presumably the poet) in work clothes and a jaunty hat, the left hand in his pocket and the right on his hip.<sup>3</sup> Only halfway through the book's first, longest, and best-known poem, which was later given the title "Song of Myself," the author seems to reveal his identity: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughest, a kosmos" (*LG*<sup>4</sup> 48). In reference to this line, the poem carried the title "A Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1856. Whitman's curious self-descriptor for his literary persona suggests that Whitman conceived of the 'self' he creates in "Song of Myself" as an all-encompassing and democratic self that embodies and speaks for all Americans.<sup>5</sup> The body takes center stage in this particular poem as it mirrors the consolidation and developments of the nation, thus serving as a metaphor for American democracy and for the state of American society.

In a very literal sense, then, America is a body politic, and the figure of the body is central to our understanding and imaginings of the American nation. But whose body is the American body? A juxtaposition of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" with the first part of the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002), the film adaptation of the enormously successful *Spider-Man* comic book series by Marvel Comics, will shed some light on the (dis)embodiment of the signifier 'American.' *Spider-Man*

<sup>3</sup> John Burroughs suggests that in this frontispiece, Whitman resembles the Adamic archetype. "There was a look about him [Whitman]," he recalled, "hard to describe, and which I have seen in no other face,—a gray, brooding, elemental look, like the granite rock, something primitive and Adamic that might have belonged to the first man" (qtd in Lewis 47).

<sup>4</sup> All references to direct and indirect quotations from *Leaves of Grass* (first edition) will be abbreviated to *LG*.

<sup>5</sup> All following remarks on *Leaves of Grass* and "Song of Myself" will—unless indicated otherwise—relate to the first edition of the book. An excellent source for critical readings of Whitman's democratic vision and his treatment of the American experience in a later (the third) edition is, for instance, Robin P. Hoople's essay "Chants Democratic and Native American." Published at the brink of the Civil War, the 1860 edition, Hoople argues, constantly swings between optimism and pessimism, features the American poet-hero but also a range of apocalyptic figures, and thus "reflects the explosive tensions in Whitman's political surroundings" (Hoople 195).

and “Song of Myself” both employ the body as a metaphor for the American democratic system and locate the rebirth of America not in wilderness but in the body. In that way, the individual bodies of Whitman’s self and of Spider-Man become American bodies—become America, even—which claim to be inclusive and representative of the whole nation. The conflation of the American body politic with the body personal is where the agenda of *Spider-Man*, namely the localization of Americanness in the individual body and the construction of a particularly American body, parallels that of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

As Harold Aspiz explains, the body politic metaphor “implied that biological laws were applicable to national development” (“Body Politic” 105). More specifically, the body personal was seen as a microcosm that functioned analogous to the body politic, a concept which “linked man’s view of the state to his most personal and indestructible source of identity, his body” (Barker-Benfield 208). In Whitman’s poems, the American body politic really becomes a body, namely the poet’s body, and his body becomes America. America, the body politic, and the body conflate in Whitman’s 1860 poem “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” for instance, in which he asserts that only by the voices of the “native and grand” bards “can these States be / fused into the compact organism of a Nation” (*PP* 474). It is not “by paper and seal, or by compulsion” that a union is formed, but men are held together by that which “aggregates all in a living principle, / as the hold of the limbs of the body or the fibres of plants” (*ibid*). Whitman’s poetic self is in the vanguard of the grand American poets who lead the nation into the future, as the poem makes clear: “O America, because you build for mankind, I build for you ... I lead them who plan, with decision and science, / Lead the presence with friendly hand into the future” (*ibid*). In the poem’s final sections, the bounds between body and body politic break completely as America and Whitman’s poetic self merge into one. “America isolated yet embodying all, what is it finally except myself? / These States, what are they except myself?” (482) Whitman asks and links “his real body and his mythic body to the collective” (Aspiz, “Body Politic” 114).

In contrast to poems such as “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” Whitman’s epic “Song of Myself” is, as Malcolm Cowley states, “hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, political democracy, [or] contemporary progress” (xiv). I would like to challenge Cowley’s assertion and argue that “Song of Myself” is very much concerned with American nationalism and democracy—perhaps on a less

overt level than some of his other poems, "Song of Myself" is clearly written against a national crisis, against the threat of secession, and against the failure of American democracy. It is, then, on the "level of sex and the body that the poem tests the democratic theory of America," as Betsy Erkkila explains (*Whitman* 105), and it is in the analogy between body and nation that *Spider-Man*, I suggest, intersects with "Song of Myself."

### **Containing Multitudes: Whitman's Democratic Self**

It has been argued that the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was composed as an answer to Emerson's essay "The Poet" (1845), which expressed the nation's need to have its own original and unique poet to write about American virtues and vices. Matthiessen states in his *American Renaissance* that "Whitman set out more deliberately than any of his contemporaries to create the kind of hero whom Emerson had foreshadowed in his varying guises of the Scholar and the Poet" (650), and, more recently, David Reynolds has said of Emerson's famous 1855 congratulatory letter to Whitman that "[i]f Lincoln's Gettysburg Address remade America ... Emerson's letter came close to making Whitman" (*America* 342). Both Matthiessen and Reynolds reiterate Emerson's precedence and primacy: Whitman follows in Emerson's footsteps, is student to Emerson's master, is not only influenced but created by Emerson. In an exchange with John Trowbridge, Whitman tries to distance himself from Emerson's influence: "I asked him if he thought he would have come to himself without that [Emerson's] help," Trowbridge recalls, "He said 'Yes, but it would have taken longer ... I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil'" (166).

The degree of Emerson's influence on Whitman can hardly be measured and the question as to whether Thoreau or Whitman proves to be the "more satisfactory revision of Emersonian transcendentalism," to use Rowe's words, cannot be adequately answered ("Body Poetry" 169). Rather than engage in such discussions, I want to analyze Whitman's poetry and Whitman's persona as standing in line with Emerson and Thoreau's work in trying to sketch the ideal American individual and establish an original American cultural tradition. I read Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as complementing one another; Emerson's essay "The Poet" articulates a lack, namely that of an original American bard, which Whitman has subsequently compensated by fashioning himself not only as the *poet* Emerson had called for, but even more so as a specifically *American* poet who

discovers and develops “a native, vernacular poetic idiom congenial to the liberated self and in accordance with New World realities” (Bauerlein 1). In an anonymous self-review of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman exclaimed, “An American bard at last!” (“Poems” 205) which is both a response to Emerson’s lament that he was “look[ing] in vain” for the poet he described in his essay (“The Poet” 281), and a self-stylization as America’s first original poet, as a source of ‘real’ Americanness.

According to Emerson, the poet is the literary counterpart to the intellectual scholar. Poets are “liberating gods,” he explains, who “are free and ... make free” by stimulating new thought and expressing the needs of their time (“The Poet” 277). The poet is representative, Emerson states; he stands for the “complete man,” is isolated and removed from his contemporaries by his art, but in his art all men are drawn together (“The Poet” 260). The poet is the inventor and origin of a culture’s vernacular, as he is the “Namer or Language-maker” and the source of true expression (“The Poet” 271). While Emerson oftentimes referred to himself as a ‘scholar,’ which suggests that he identified himself at least to some extent with the figure he had sketched in “The American Scholar,” the embodiment of the figure of the poet presented a problem to him. “We have yet had no genius in America,” he says, “which knew the value of our incomparable materials,” arguing that the “barbarism and materialism” of America rest on the same foundations as the wonders of ancient Europe and deserve to be immortalized:

Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. (“The Poet” 281)

Emerson finds himself incapable of “fix[ing] the idea of the poet,” which is why he calls out to his fellow countrymen to bring forth a poet who can express the nature of America and who shall, as a reward, find beauty and the “holy ideal” in the world around him and become the lord of America’s land, air, and sea (“The Poet” 282; 284).

“Doubt not, O poet, but persist,” Emerson appeals to the American bard he envisions and awaits, “Say ‘It is in me, and shall out’” (“The Poet” 283). With *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman followed this particular call and let it out—‘it’ being the American voice that articulates ‘original’ American thought. After all, the “best way to promulge Native American models and literature,” Whitman notes, “is to



supply such forcible and superb specimens of the same that they will ... put foreign models in the second class" (*Notebooks* 1588). Whitman's own poetic project ties into the larger project of establishing an American national literature that would be different from others. As Whitman formulates it in his notebooks,

American literature must become distinct from all others.— American writers must become national, idiomatic, free from the genteel laws.— America herself appears (she does not appear at all hitherto) in the spirit and the form of her poems, and all other literary works. (*Notebooks* 1586)

If America can articulate its difference, as Whitman suggests, by declaring itself "free from genteel laws," then American poetry would be marked by its "lack of (high) cultural distinction, and would participate in the idiomatic register of daily life (the sociolect) rather than the literary register of the educated elite" (Beach 3). According to Whitman, the aesthetics of American poetry should mirror the simplicity and groundedness of the common people; it should articulate the life of the masses.<sup>6</sup> "America needs her own poems," he writes, "freer, more muscular, comprehending more, and unspeakably grander" (*Notebooks* 1587). Clearly referring to Emerson, Whitman stated in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass* that "the United States are themselves the greatest poem," suggesting that there is something profoundly beautiful and true about the nation (*LG* 5). Whitman locates the "genius of the United States" not in its institutions, its upper-class elite, or its nature, but "in the common people" and their attachment to freedom, their freshness and self-esteem, as well as their elegance of soul and good temper (*LG* 6). "These [virtues] too," he makes clear, "are unrhymed poetry. It awaits gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it" (*ibid*).

To be sure, Whitman gave these virtues gigantic and generous treatment which, as Betsy Erkkila remarks, distinguishes him considerably from Emerson and the Concord circle. Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman did not retreat from society and flee into nature, but he lived and worked in New York City, and it was out of the pulsating life of the city that he emerged as a poet. Whitman's democratic poetics, "his attempt to crate a democratic language, form, content, and myth commensurate with the experimental politics of America, to embody in his poetic persona America's unique identity, and to engage the reader as an active

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<sup>6</sup> See also Andrew Lawson, who writes that Whitman "wants a 'renovated speech in America,' a speech distinct from the 'etiquette of the saloons,' from occasions which are for 'a coterie, a bon soir, or two'" (380).

participant in the republican politics of his poem” may be better understood in relation to the “body of political and aesthetic thought” that came out of the Revolutionary War rather than in relation to Emerson and Transcendentalism (Erkkila, *Whitman* 69).<sup>7</sup> Whitman may have followed Emerson’s call, but his understanding of a poet’s job and duty clearly differed from that of his master. The American poets, Whitman says, “are the voice and exposition of liberty. They out of ages are worthy the grand idea ... to them it is confined and they must sustain it” (*LG* 15). They spread the “American lesson” of liberty and equality that was passed on by the revolutionary fathers and devise an American vernacular<sup>8</sup> that is a “language of resistance,” the “dialect of common sense,” “passionate” but at the same time marked by “composure and goodwill” (*LG* 23-24).

‘Original’ American art, Whitman suggests in *Leaves of Grass*, has its roots in the revolutionary period; by seeking to “reconcile politics and poetry, activism and art, revolutionary ideology and a revolutionary creation,” Whitman tries to create a particularly American literature that emerges out of the primary principles and virtues of the Revolution and the subsequent founding of the United States (Erkkila, *Whitman* 71).<sup>9</sup> The poet, then, becomes the site of this negotiation and

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Aspiz argues that *Leaves of Grass* is Whitman’s “constantly retouched self-portrait,” his poetic persona being “sometimes ... a plausible extension of Whitman’s flesh-and-blood self, sometimes a barely recognizable shadow of physical reality, and sometimes the product of pure invention or the deliberate thwarting of fact” (*Body* 3).

<sup>8</sup> As Jonathan Arac explains, the term “vernacular” was not part of nineteenth-century discussions of popular language in the United States, nor is it discussed in Matthiessen’s groundbreaking *American Renaissance*. “So far as I can tell,” Arac writes, “the term begins to play its current role in the early postwar period, functioning among the founding premises for the institutionalization of literary American Studies” (“Vernacular” 44). Together with Mark Twain, Whitman inaugurated the “intrusion of the vernacular into consciously literary usage,” as Henry Nash Smith puts it in his 1948 essay “The Widening of Horizons” (650). Leo Marx further developed this claim a decade later in “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature.” Matthiessen’s study on the American Renaissance shifted the focus from a vernacular culture to American Romanticism. Winfried Fluck offers two possible explanations for this shift: “One [reason] is that the vernacular tradition, in its often crude irreverence, was not a very sophisticated form of culture and hence ... not very well suited to counter the reservations of skeptical Ivy League English-departments. ... The American Renaissance writers, on the other hand, were far better suited to meet the aesthetic criteria derived from modernism” (“American Culture” 66).

<sup>9</sup> In his essay “Whitman and the Founding Fathers,” Daniel Aaron examines in detail the influence of the Revolutionary War and its most significant figures on Whitman’s life and work. According to Aaron, the Declaration of Independence was to Whitman “the spirit itself, the adhesive that held together the United States, and it was ‘holy’” (49). The young Whitman, “an ardent Jacksonian Democrat,” as Aaron notes, “reserved special veneration” for George Washington, whom he admired for his pure and upright character. Whitman never dedicated a whole poem or prose work to the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence, but, Aaron remarks, he explicitly declares himself the heir of the Founding Fathers in the preface of *Leaves of Grass* and justifies his boast by stating that “Washington made free the body of America. ... Here comes one who will make free the American soul” (qtd in Aaron 51). Whitman fashions himself as one of the Founding Fathers of American literature, with *Leaves of Grass* being his “Declaration of Independence and his Emancipation Proclamation all in one” (Aaron 53). See also Erkkila, who

reconciliation, the embodied voice that forms a direct and unmediated link between the country and its citizens, between the democratic system and the “soul of the nation” (*LG* 24).<sup>10</sup> For Whitman to record and display a society in all its variation and heterogeneity, it seems that he must compose a work possessing a correspondent variation and heterogeneity, wherein each poem represents some aspect of America, of American culture, and of the American self. Whitman closes his introduction to *Leaves of Grass* with the observation that the “proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it,” suggesting that personal and political, individual and collective, private and public conflate in the poet (*ibid*). Put differently, Whitman conceives of the American poet not merely as an artist who expresses his individuality, but as the embodiment of the masses. That is to say the poet is more than just the spokesperson of the common people, he *is* the common people—he is, like the Union, *e pluribus unum*.

I read *Leaves of Grass* as a work that is engaged in and with the political dynamics and developments of its time and in which Whitman creates a poetic persona who is, as Erkkilä puts it, “at once a model of democratic character and a figure of democratic union” (*Whitman* 93). The task of the poet is to create that democratic union he represents. The poet should enable every citizen to identify with the poem that is America and to recognize the United States as the outward manifestation of his own inner life. Fashioning himself as an orator who speaks America into existence, the poet encourages all Americans to experience America as if it were “a manifestation of their shared inner life” and of “the wishes the people hold in common” (Pease, *Compacts* 130). In this way, the self and America become one and the same thing, as Whitman’s readers identify with the poetic self and articulate a shared, nationalist identity through him. As Scott MacPhail states, the lyric is “the private and individual voice, defined in opposition to an epic of public and transcendent language, and Whitman’s achievement is the fusion of these genres” (136). Whitman’s poetry operates by overlaying generic conventions of lyrical poetry onto the epic poem, which seeks to reproduce national identities. The personal connection of the reader with the poet is thus translated—“via the

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states that “Whitman early began to develop a sense of identity that was inextricably bound up with the political identity of America” (“Empire” 55).

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see also Scott MacPhail, who writes that “the representative authority of the American nation is guaranteed through the voicing of an identity that is all of us. The cohesive totality of the nation is effected through Whitman’s lyric nationalism by equating national identity with a lyric voice that can be assumed by all Americans” (136).

generically transformative power of Walt Whitman"—into the realm of a communal identification which lets the readers find "themselves, and something called 'America'" in Whitman's poems (ibid).

*Leaves of Grass* gave expression to the contemporary conviction that mankind was off to a fresh start in America; thus, it is both climax and beginning, or "the climax of a long effort to begin" (Lewis, R.W.B. 45). America and the United States are re-born in *Leaves of Grass*, as it were, which was written and published when the state of the nation was fragile and its fate uncertain, as the rift between North and South became insurmountable. Whitman's poet functions as a unifying figure in which the drama of the nation's identity is reflected and negotiated and the self is put at the very center of American myths of origin. The struggle over identity is most pronounced in "Song of Myself," which is "rooted in the political drama of a nation in crisis" (Erkkila, "Empire" 56). The nation's crisis is the result of a number of controversies over issues such as wage labor, women's rights, industrialization, immigration, slavery and abolition, Westward expansion, and the position of the individual in relation to the state. This larger national political conflict is symbolically enacted, Erkkila explains, in the poet's conflict "between pride and sympathy, individualism and equality, nature and the city, the body and the soul" ("Empire" 56).

"Song of Myself" is a complex poem that oscillates between being a biography, a sermon, a poetic meditation, and a manifesto. As the other eleven poems in *Leaves of Grass*, so does "Song of Myself" defy the rules of rhythm and rhyme, meter, and stanza division. It breaks down the distinction between poetry and prose, as Whitman's verse rolls freely and irregularly across the page without paying attention to conventions of meter and rhyme. In both form and content, Whitman's poems thus constitute a literary revolution which, Whitman realized, a truly democratic American literature would necessarily require. With "Song of Myself," Whitman attempts to capture this true spirit of American democracy on many levels. "Song of Myself" is composed of vignettes that catalogue the American life and the never-ending search for the boundaries of the self. It explores the possibilities of communion between individuals and tries to sketch an individual that both encompasses and is indistinguishable from the universe. The poetic persona Whitman creates in "Song of Myself" is a heterogeneous self which gives shape to the spirit of the masses and embodies the equality and liberty that is

pivotal to American democracy. “Song of Myself” is Whitman’s celebration of the masses and of the masses reflected in the individual in particular. Whitman advocated the intensification of an individual’s impulsive life, because in the multiple demands incited by one’s inner impulses Whitman located a “potentially multiple individuality” (Pease, *Compacts* 110)—a collective or mass within the individual—which Whitman later developed into his concept of the “body electric.”<sup>11</sup>

The body electric, as Pease explains, “was for Whitman the democratic equivalent of what Renaissance theorists referred to as the king’s second body” (*Compacts* 110). The notion of the king’s two bodies seeks to resolve the paradox of divine kingship and immortality amid the inevitability of physical death and decay. As Joseph Roach explains, the king’s two bodies refer to the king’s *body natural* and his *body politic*, which “asserts the divinely authorized continuity of human institutions while recognizing their inherent fragility” (*Cities* 38). The king’s body politic incorporates “the virtues of permanence, immutability, and transferability” which “provided the physical rationale for the institution of kingship” (*Compacts* 110). Similarly, Whitman’s notion of the body electric forms a physical basis for associations of and identifications with urban life while suggesting a correspondence between individual impulses and the democratic masses. As Pease explains, “[l]ike the multiple impulses surging up in a person, urban crowds are transitory sources of energy. For Whitman, crowds extinguish differences among persons” (*ibid*).

Whitman’s poetic persona is, similar to the institution of the king, an effigy in Roach’s terms. According to Roach, an effigy is inextricably linked to performance, as it fills the vacancy created by the absence of an original by means of surrogation, that is, by providing a satisfactory alternate. Effigies can be fashioned from cloth, wood, or other inanimate material; however, there are also more elusive effigies made from flesh, which come down to us in performances and “provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates” (Roach, *Cities* 36). The ritualized public announcement “The King is dead. Long live the king!” is probably one of the most prominent methods of perpetuation, a “symbolic immutability” which solidifies the

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<sup>11</sup> Whitman anticipates the notion of the “body electric” in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* but does not fully develop it until the editions published after the Civil War. The fifth poem of *Leaves of Grass*, “I Sing the Body Electric,” did not receive its title and its ultimate title line until 1867 (cf. Loving 202).

institution of the king by immortalizing the king's second body, the enduring body politic (Roach, *Cities* 38). Other living effigies, who "consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step" are, for instance, actors, dancers, orators, celebrities, statesmen, and priests (Roach, *Cities* 36). Whitman's poet, I suggest, is also such an effigy which is made by performance and functions as a surrogate for an absent original, namely for that of a 'real' American. The principle of surrogation operates in Whitman's poet, I argue, as his performance in "Song of Myself"—that is, his conscious self-fashioning as a democratic self—creates a powerful sense of identification and affiliation.

Whitman himself clearly declares that the poet's body is a mirror image of the body of the republic, when he states in the introduction to *Leaves of Grass* that "a bard is to be commensurate with a people" (*LG* 6). To underline this argument, Whitman conceives of the poet in spatial terms, as the incarnation of the country's "geography and natural life and rivers and lakes," suggesting that the poet, similar to the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, "stretches ... north to south" and "spans ... from east to west and reflects what is between them [the oceans]" (*LG* 7). In the opening lines of "Song of Myself," Whitman takes up the notion of the poet functioning as a symbolic figure that takes in every corner of the country and embraces all people:

I celebrate myself  
And what I assume you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (*LG* 25)

Right at the beginning of the poem, the body of Whitman's poet is declared to be permeable and infinitely receptive, breaking all physical boundaries and incorporating his fellow countrymen by literally sharing his body with them. While the poem's first line isolates the individual, its second and third line link the poet/'I' with the reader/'you' and engage the reader in the action of the poem, which revolves around the creation of a democratic self/nation (cf. Erkkilä, *Whitman* 95). The poem continues to oscillate between the two poles of 'I' and 'you,' which are "the bounds of an agonistic arena in which the poet commands, questions, mocks, challenges, wrestles, fondles, and instructs his reader, finally sending him or her back into the world bearing the seeds of democratic potency" (Erkkilä, *Whitman* 95). With the opening lines, Whitman recovers what Jean-

Jacques Rousseau termed the “common self” which is constructed through social relations while at the same time sustaining them. The common self describes that part of our experience as individuals which at times instigates each of us to identify ourselves as members of an imagined community that shares an enduring joint purpose. As Pease states, “[w]e develop this common self in shared experiences, like national celebrations, where ‘we’ celebrate the power of our founding principles to continue motivating us. These celebrations make explicit what is otherwise ‘tacitly held in common’—the motives all of us share” (*Compacts* 116). Speaking from the platform of the common self, which is grounded in a set of shared presumptions, Whitman can impersonate “a voice of conviction” in his poetry, which enables him to insist “that each individual must feel a ‘fusing relation’ with the nation en masse” and allows him to stylize himself as the nation’s bard (*ibid*).

The shared presumptions on which Whitman relies relate back to the nation’s founding and to the values that were inscribed into the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The American republic is based on the theory that all men are created equal, and *Leaves of Grass* evolves from the assumption that this is really true. As Daniel Hoffman explains, Whitman’s understanding of equality goes beyond mere political rights: “Equality is known, is apprehended, is felt... Completely to know, to believe in, to feel that all persons are equal changes the way one apprehends reality” (2). The inclusiveness of Whitman’s poetic self is based on this understanding of equality, as his self is “elusive, never stopping for long in any one guise, always shifting from one shape to another” (Hoffman 5). Whitman negotiates between individual and collective by constructing a shape-shifting, universal self that “contain[s] multitudes” and rejoices in its boundlessness:

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then ... I contradict myself;  
I am large ... I contain multitudes. (*LG* 85)

These lines are a clear reference to Emerson’s preference of self-contradiction over conformity, which Whitman applies to his democratic, shape-shifting self. He does not contradict himself because he follows his spontaneity and instinct, but because his multiplicity makes him virtually ungraspable. He moves through a liminal

space in which he touches upon different subject-positions without his identity ever solidifying; his body is a fluid system, a “kosmos” that cannot be contained.

In “Song of Myself,” the poet’s multiple identities are produced performatively, through “declarations of the poet’s presence” which “claim to produce actual presences,” thus fusing word and body (Nathanson 7). The poems of *Leaves of Grass*, but “Song of Myself” in particular, abound in declarations regarding body and soul, materiality and spirituality, the physical and its transcendence, multiplicity and singularity, myth and reality, spatiality and fragmentation, which Whitman attempts to reconcile, or rather short-circuit, in the poet’s presence. In other words, the declarations announcing the poet’s presence also produce that very presence, as the polarities Whitman negotiates agglomerate within a space that is defined by and indistinguishable from the poet’s existence (cf. Nathanson 6-7). When the poet announces, “I celebrate myself,” he speaks himself into existence and in this declaration performatively produces the self he intends to celebrate. The poet is thus cosubstantial with language, cannot exist outside language, and is able to reproduce himself at his own will. The self in the poem is always “a performer of speech acts, an enunciator” and draws attention to the “obvious performative dimension of Whitman’s poetry” and to the importance of speech acts in the consolidation of individual as well as collective identities (Durand 168).

Whitman acknowledges the necessity of speech for his project of creating a democratic self, as language is his only tool for establishing a connection between himself and the masses of strangers, and for relating their experiences:

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,  
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.  
Speech is the twin of my vision....it is unequal to measure itself. (*LG* 50)

Here again, body and word conflate, as the voice becomes an extension of the poet’s body, reaching even those corners which his physical body cannot touch. Speech, Whitman suggests, is just as good as vision—declarations, acts of speaking something into existence, construct ‘reality’ as much as apprehension, as seeing something and taking notice of its existence. Speech, as Durand points out, is “always in excess,” as it never ends and is always “caught up in the logic of trace, repetition, and difference” (168-169). Just as his body, so is also the poet’s voice inclusive and democratic, as it announces a utopian vision, or articulates a



performative utopia. The poet speaks not only himself into existence but also the masses he incorporates, as their presence needs to be apprehended and articulated in order for them to truly exist within himself. “What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?” Whitman wonders, pointing towards the mutual dependence of ‘I’ and ‘you,’ self and other, which cannot consolidate without one another (*LG* 43). “You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you,” he asserts later in the poem and thus answers, as it were, his previous question (*LG* 70). “You,” Whitman states with quite some determination, can only exist through its apprehension by the poet; indeed, there is no presence of ‘you’ beyond the presence and outside of the boundaries of ‘I.’ In Whitman’s trope of the American body politic, his real body and his mythic/poetic body are thus linked “to the collective and individual men and women in America’s evolving future,” creating a utopian vision of a truly egalitarian body of citizens that is organized according to the nation’s founding principles (Aspiz, “Body Politic” 114).

If the ‘realness’ of that American nation Whitman sketches lies in the presence of a unified and unifying self which the lyric voice claims itself to be, then to be “properly American” is, as Peter Coviello suggests, “to feel oneself related in a quite intimate way to a world of people not proximate or even known” (87). Put differently, the ‘proper’ America would be an imaginary construct, a network made up of imaginary relations, generated by a seemingly authentic national voice in a seemingly unmediated way. While Whitman generates several different imaginings of ‘America’ in his poetry and prose, it is the version of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that has come to be seen as the ‘real’ America and that has canonized Whitman as the ‘founding father’ of American poetry (cf. MacPhail 137-138). To locate Whitman’s Americanness in his body, respectively in that of his poetic self, creates a sort of paradox: the location of Americanness in the body presupposes that the body is somewhat stable, unchangeable, and a self-enclosed entity. Whitman’s poetic self, however, claims to be open-ended, multifarious, and virtually ungraspable, which would suggest that America, too, is open-ended, multifarious, and virtually ungraspable. This, in turn, would mean that America cannot be located in a specific body but rather emerges between bodies, at the nodal points of both real and imaginary relations and the intersection of ‘reality’ and myth.

“[I]s there a way of employing Whitman ... to effect something other than an affirmation of a singular, coherent, and unchanging American identity?” MacPhail asks towards the end of his essay, but leaves this question unanswered (153). MacPhail is troubled by the paradox that resides in Whitman’s supposed embodiment of America; his discomfort, however, arises from the presumption that America is a relatively stable signifier whose meaning can either *be* affirmed by Whitman (as the poetic self) or *not*. Instead of reiterating those binaries and oppositions, I want to take a step back and return to Whitman’s declaration that he is the “American bard at last” and “Walt Whitman, an American, a kosmos.” By referring to himself as a “kosmos,” Whitman conceives of his own body in spatial and spiritual terms. “Divine am I, inside and out,” he asserts, suggesting that men are incarnations of gods (*LG* 49). However, as Lewis points out, many of Whitman’s “poetic statements are conversions of religious allusion: the new miracles were acts of the senses” and spiritual phrases were secularized (43). “I believe in the flesh and the appetites,” Whitman’s poetic self announces the divinity of the carnal, sexual, and sensual; the aroma of his arm-pits was “finer than prayer” and the head “more than churches, bibles, and all creeds” (*LG* 49).

The complete recovery of the nation’s ideal state is thus linked to acts of truly new, Adamic creation, to the seemingly natural and primordial, that is, to the body and, more specifically, to Whitman’s body as the common, democratic, all-encompassing body: “If I worship one thing more than another,” Whitman writes, “it shall be the spread of my own body” (*LG* 49). Whitman’s perception of his body as spread out allows him to stretch into every corner and incorporate the entire nation. By understanding his body in spatial terms and imagining it as a live map of America, his body is not randomly and chaotically connected to others, but they are joined together in an orderly and organized fashion and figuratively form one collective body—a body politic.

### **Space and the City**

The constitutive and mutual relation between bodies and space, particularly the urban space, is a central issue in both Whitman’s poetry and in *Spider-Man*. The significance of space in Whitman’s work has already been pointed out by Lewis, who reads Whitman not only as the prototypical American Adam, but also as an exemplary “hero in space” (49). Lewis’ usage of the term *space* is twofold: first, “the hero seems to take his start outside time, or on the very outer edges of it, so that

his location is essentially in space alone” and secondly, “his initial habitat is space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility” (91). As far as Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is concerned, I readily subscribe to Lewis’s understanding of space as an area of total possibility, but I would like to challenge his notion of space as “the unbounded.” It is not space that is unbounded, I suggest, but rather the poet’s body, which constantly traverses space and transgresses boundaries. Space, Whitman’s “grid-like imagining of America” (MacPhail 133), grounds his otherwise elusive body, and makes it graspable and representable. Whitman hailed from the urban space,<sup>12</sup> wrote from the streets of Manhattan, and in his poems the city becomes a

conjunction of thoroughfare, promenade, and marketplace: a place of passage, movement of people, goods, and useful knowledge, and a place of display and spectacle, of things in the guise of goods in shop windows and of persons in the guise of exchangeable social identities. (Trachtenberg 163)

The city’s static grid provides a frame in which Whitman’s body can be situated; however, his body, as it constantly shifts shapes, transforms, and transmutes, transgresses the strictness of the grid and engages in fluid transactions. Whitman’s city is thus a place of conversion and alteration, an “area of total possibility,” in which “all forms of distinction—including that between the poet and the masses who inhabit the city—can be swept away by the poet’s active involvement in the continual flow of urban life, a flux of social, personal, and physical existence” (Beach 113). Put differently, the city figures as a site of cultural reflection and well as of cultural production: it is the expression of the bodies that inhabit them, and it produces those very same bodies at the same time.

Grid-like structures, common to U.S.-American cities, are “one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality,” as Grosz points out (104). The city figures as a frame for the body which provides the coordinates for the body’s social, sexual, representational, and discursive situatedness. Or, as Grosz puts it, the city “provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies” (ibid). Grosz takes issue with corporeality and the constitution of ‘real’ individual bodies and subjectivities; however, her

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Beach, who writes that “Walt Whitman is the only major nineteenth-century American poet whose life and work are commonly associated with the city. ... Whitman’s relationship to the city may have been an ambivalent one, but at least he was willing to engage the growing reality of urban existence, and the corresponding discourse of urbanization, in a way that other American poets were not” (102-103).

observations concerning imaginary relations between individuals and collectives are applicable to both Whitman and *Spider-Man*. In both cases, the body needs to be grounded in space and conceived of as a spatial structure in order to enable an imagining of the body personal as the body politic.

The city, as Grosz explains, is a “complex and interactive network that links together, often in an unintegrated and ad hoc way, a number of disparate social activities, processes, relations, with a number of architectural, geographical, civic, and public relations” (105). The city is a space that is both permanent and ever-changing; its coordinates remain the same, but it is always in flow, its social relations always shift, and its face thus never remains the same. The notion of the body politic, Grosz proposes, establishes a parallelism between body and state, on the one hand, but also between body and the social order of the city. While the state, “as a legal entity, raises political questions of sovereignty,” the city is a “cultural entity” and a “point of transit” that lacks the “stasis and systematicity” of the state (106-107). The problem with analogies between the body and the state or the city is, as Grosz explains, the “implicitly masculine coding of the body politic, which ... uses the male to represent the human” (106). Furthermore, this conception of the body politic relies on the opposition of nature (coded as passive and feminine) and culture (coded as productive and male), with the body politic being “an artificial construct that replaces the primacy of the natural body” (ibid). Also, such a conception of the body politic justifies form of “ideal” government through processes of naturalization, which presumes an “organized, cohesive, integrated body, regulated by reason, as its ideal model” (Grosz 107). Put differently, the body politic is a normative structure, which ‘punishes’ bodies outside of its regulations by not apprehending them as ‘proper’ national bodies. Whitman’s presentation of the body of his poetic self as synonymous with the body politic is consequently problematic, as it assumes the poet’s body as the norm against which all the citizens he claims to embody are measured.

Whitman’s claim for total embodiment of all citizens is inherently paradoxical, as his rhetorical incorporation of the masses is crushed by the weight of his white male body. Whitman’s poet thus embodies an exclusively white and male America, and he inscribes whiteness and maleness into ‘real’ Americanness. I read *Spider-Man* as a ‘sequel’ to *Leaves of Grass*, because it is caught up in a similar problem of aiming at inclusiveness and being faced with the impossibility of achieving this

aim. If Whitman's poet is an effigy that functions as a surrogate for an absent original, 'real' American, then Spider-Man, I propose, can be read as a reincorporation of Whitman's persona, or as the post-modern successor of the poet. Just as Whitman's poet, so does Spider-Man attempt to fill the vacancy created by the absence of a 'real' American but this project is bound to fail as, like all effigies, he attempts to fill the gap left by an original that has never existed in the first place.

### Hero Without A Face: *Spider-Man* and the American Body

The 2002 blockbuster *Spider-Man* is the first part of a trilogy that is based on the Marvel comic book series *The Amazing Spider-Man*.<sup>13</sup> As the greater part of the film tells the genesis of Spider-Man, the story sets in on the day that Peter Parker, the school-nerd and science-geek, gets bitten by a genetically mutated spider on a school field trip. When he wakes up the following day, he discovers that he has superhuman abilities: he is incredibly strong, can cling to surfaces, yarn spider-webs, and has a "spider-sense" which provides a sort of early warning detection system linked with his superhuman kinesthetic. Peter, an orphan who grows up with his aunt and uncle,<sup>14</sup> is initially overwhelmed by his newly discovered powers, but quickly puts them to use: he wants to buy a car to impress Mary Jane Watson, on whom he has a secret crush, and thus signs up for a wrestling match which is endowed with three-thousand dollars. However, after his uncle is murdered at the hands of a criminal whom Peter failed to stop, he swears to use his powers to fight the evil that killed his uncle. At the same time, the scientist and businessman Norman Osborn develops an alternate personality, the Green Goblin, after he has

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<sup>13</sup> *Spider-Man 2* was released in 2004 and *Spider-Man 3* in 2007. All three films were directed by Sam Raimi and starred Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man/Peter Parker. I focus on the first part of the trilogy as Spider-Man's Americanness is most pronounced in the first installment. *Spider-Man* was one of the first movies that was released after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and, as one of the most immanent reactions to this national crisis, abounds in references to national myths and symbols. I choose to focus on the *Spider-Man* feature film rather than on the comic book series mostly for simplicity's sake. The *Spider-Man* comics have been published since 1962 and would have confronted me with an unmanageable vastness of material.

<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that the three most famous American superheroes—Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man—are all orphans and that their stories are very much driven by the loss and lack of their parents. Evidently, the orphan myth resonates with American culture; as Danny Fingeroth points out, "the idea, so emphasized and mythologized in American popular culture is: we are all alone. We fight our own battles, make our own rules, defy those who would destroy us. We are alone to succeed or fail, to triumph or succumb. We make our own destinies" (70-71). The notion of Americans as orphans of the West, who must invent their own origins and beginnings, is not only a very prevalent motif of early American writing but still very prominent in contemporary American popular culture. See Fingeroth, esp. 63-78 for details on the orphan myth in comic books.

been exposed to an experimental nerve gas. After graduating from high school and moving to New York City, Peter must juggle his new job at a local newspaper, his battle against the evil Goblin, and his fight against his best friend Harry Osborn, Norman's son, to win the heart of Mary Jane. While Spider-Man triumphs over the Goblin, Peter has to give up Mary Jane, as he realizes that his secret double identity inevitably marks him a lonesome hero.

What immediately distinguishes the story of *Spider-Man* from that of other superheroes such as Superman and Batman is its New York City setting. While Superman and Batman fight criminals in the fictional cities "Metropolis" and "Gotham City," which are blends of typical American cities, *Spider-Man* is unmistakably set in contemporary Manhattan, which significantly shapes the story. Various shots of Ground Zero testify to the attacks on the World Trade Center that had only happened seven months prior to the film's release.<sup>15</sup> In the film's final editing after 9/11, director Sam Raimi added scenes that should demonstrate the city's—and by extension the nation's—unity in the face of this crisis. In one of the final fights between Spider-Man and the Goblin, feisty New Yorkers support Spider-Man by tossing objects at the Goblin as he threatens to kill a cable car full of children and Mary Jane. Raimi wanted to "give something to the city" ("*Spider-Man*" n.p.) and pay tribute to its spirit by having one of the avenging locals declare, "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us." This declaration was bound to resonate with the entire nation, as it captured a prevalent sentiment of national solidarity and unity at that time. The film ends with Spider-Man holding on to an unmistakable symbol of patriotism, the Stars and Stripes, on top of the Empire State Building, which is yet another allusion to 9/11 and underlines the film's messages on heroism and American values. "There is a gestalt about New York now," producer Laura Ziskin explains the film's ending, "*Ich bin ein New Yorker*. This is our nod to that" ("*Spider-Man*" n.p.).

*Spider-Man* is an immediate reaction to a nation coping with an unprecedented crisis and captures the sentiment of a nation at the brink of war. Amidst this tragedy and turbulence, Spider-Man functions as a unifying figure similar to Whitman's poet. Dressed in a red and blue bodysuit that has white spider-webs stitched onto it, Spider-Man wears the nation's colors, which signals that he is a

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<sup>15</sup> The original *Spider-Man* teaser trailer and poster still featured the World Trade Center. After the attacks, Sony decided to pull the trailer and recall the posters. The original trailer can be accessed on YouTube, at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-r7qymfa0Q>>.

symbol of Americanness and a markedly *American* superhero.<sup>16</sup> Spider-Man is the incarnation of the American flag, as it were, and dons the national colors like a second skin. His body is unmistakably an American body—he is, it is suggested, a ‘real’ American from head to toe. Similar to the poet’s body, his body personal becomes the body politic, a democratic and inclusive body in which every man and woman can share. Despite his superhuman powers, he fashions himself as the guy next door who is just like everybody else in the city by dubbing himself the “friendly neighborhood Spider-Man”: he clearly perceives himself as part of the community, as a good neighbor who helps out people in need, and not as someone who is superior because of his powers. His alter ego Peter Parker enhances and underlines Spider-Man’s guy-next-door qualities. As Peter, he is indeed an ordinary, regular college student, who does not attract any attention and blends well into the masses of New York. He is not wealthy like *Batman*’s Bruce Wayne, or somewhat removed from society like *Superman*’s Clark Kent, but he is an average young man, who is integrated in his community. Danny Fingeroth points out that this is the key element of Peter Parker’s character: “we know that, if we had superpowers, we would probably act like Peter Parker. How *he* feels is how *we* would feel” (146).

As Spider-Man, Peter becomes representative of the masses he usually blends into. Spider-Man’s body(suit) not only signifies his Americanness, but also emphasizes his inclusive and democratic qualities. When Spider-Man first appears in New York, there is confusion over who and what exactly he might be. In a mockumentary montage, the citizens of New York voice their opinion on the city’s new hero: “They think he’s human. They think he’s a man. Could be a woman,” a female New Yorker speculates, while a man asserts that “this is not a man. My brother saw him build a nest in the Lincoln Center Fountain.” Spider-Man’s mask ostensibly hides his race, sex, age, and even his species, which seems to promise the greatest possible potential for identification—as a hero without a face, Spider-Man seems to be able to avert Whitman’s dilemma of being unable to escape his body personal. However, even if we disregard the double identity of Spider-

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<sup>16</sup> Spider-Man thus stands in contrast to Batman, who is dressed in black to emphasize his indebtedness to the Gothic tradition, but also to Superman. Although Superman’s red-and-blue costume is reminiscent of the American flag, his being an alien from the planet Krypton essentially marks him as different and non-American. Spider-Man’s alter ego Peter Parker and Batman’s alter ego Bruce Wayne are both regular American men who put their newly discovered powers and talents to the benefit of society. This fundamentally distinguishes them from Superman, who has always had superhuman strength and x-ray sight, normal powers for a Kryptonian.



Fig. 7: Still from *Spider-Man*

Man/Peter Parker, which already precludes any potential reading of Spider-Man as non-white or non-male, his maleness is certainly difficult to transcend, as not only his name but also his physique suggest that Spider-Man is indeed a man. His whiteness can easily be decoded, too, as the predominance of white characters in the film implies Spider-Man's own whiteness. Black, Latino/a, and Asian American characters only appear in supporting or cameo roles which have no impact on the development of the plot.

In other words, Spider-Man moves within an exclusively white milieu, which automatically renders him white, too. Other clear hints at Spider-Man's race are the romantic scenes between him and Mary Jane, whose own visible whiteness strongly suggests the whiteness of her love interest.<sup>17</sup> To the viewer, finally, the repeated scenes of Spider-Man's unmasking as he transforms into his alter ego forcefully inscribe whiteness and maleness onto the 'American' body (see fig. 7). In these scenes, the national colors merge with whiteness and maleness, signaling that the 'proper citizen' body is that of a young and able white man. In aligning the national colors with a white, male body, *Spider-Man* reaffirms "the implicit whiteness and maleness of the original American citizen" which is "protected by national identity" (Berlant, "National" 176).

In the disguise of Spider-Man, Peter Parker's normal white and male body personal becomes the body politic, the representative body of the nation. Similar to Whitman's poet, Spider-Man assumes his representativeness by celebrating "the spread of [his] own body" and thus connecting himself to his fellow citizens. The film features several scenes in which Spider-Man swings himself from skyscraper to skyscraper, claiming the space below him by unsettling its rules. Just as Whitman's body constantly transgresses the grid of the city, so does Spider-Man traverse its rigid structures and claim it as an area of passage and possibility. As Kenneth M. Price points out, "fluidity and receptiveness were requirements of

<sup>17</sup> Interracial on-screen relationships may have received more visibility in Hollywood, but they still tend to cause controversy as they break with Hollywood conventions. As Susan Courtney explains, interracial relationships threaten the boundaries of race and culture and destabilize hierarchies that depend upon those boundaries. In mainstream blockbusters such as *Spider-Man*, one can therefore expect that on-screen couples would be of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. See Courtney, esp. 142-190, for details.



national realization” for Whitman,<sup>18</sup> which he tried to achieve through the defamiliarization and unsettling of existing cultural patterns (30). The city’s grid functions as a point of reference, as a frame within which the body can safely move, but it ultimately needs to be resisted to. The grid promotes uniformity and conformity, while its resistance promises individuality and self-expression. Both the Whitmanian poet and Spider-Man cannot be divorced from their location in (the urban) space, which links them to the otherwise unrelated bodies of the masses, but they both constitute themselves in the traversing of space.

Whitman’s body politic emerges at the interface of the poet’s body personal and his spatial position, which has its beginning in the “ward and city I live in,” as Whitman puts it (*LG* 28), from where it reaches across the entire nation and traverses the structured grid of the city. It is in these transgressions that the ‘real’ American, or Adamic hero as Lewis has it, forms himself. As Lewis suggests quoting from Whitman, the American Adam is discovered in “surrounded, detached, in *measureless oceans* of space” (91), which invests his spatial position with sadness and loneliness, with a ceaseless yearning, venturing, and seeking that characterizes a wide range of fictional American heroes.<sup>19</sup> The position of the American Adam is a liminal and transgressive one, as “measureless oceans of space” provide no fixed point of reference to which he can relate, yet his *detachment* presupposes a prior *attachment* that has been dissolved. The simple, elemental loneliness of the American Adam which, as Lewis claims, Whitman captures perfectly in *Leaves of Grass*, radiates the innocence of a self-made man, who creates not only a new world but also a new self and realizes that he is fully responsible for his own being and doing. “Solitary in a wide, flat space ... without a friend or lover near,” this is how the Adamic hero begins to make himself, isolated and confronted with emptiness (Whitman, *PP* 250). As Lewis observes, Whitman finds a revealing parallel in the hero in space and the behavior of a “noiseless, patient spider”:

A noiseless, patient spider  
I mark’d where, on a little promontory, it stood out, isolated,

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<sup>18</sup> See also Michael Moon, who notes that fluidity is central to Whitman’s understanding of the body. The “kosmos,” Moon writes, is Whitman’s “idealized version of the (male) body as a potentially thoroughly ‘fluid’ system” (16).

<sup>19</sup> Lewis reads Natty Bumppo from James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Deerslayer* (1841) as the first “hero in space.” In *The American Adam*, he further discusses Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837) and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) as Cooper’s forerunners that anticipate the “hero in space” motif. See Lewis 90-109.

Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,  
 It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
 Ever unreeling them — ever tirelessly speeding them. (*PP* 564)

“Out of itself” the spider spans a void with a silken thread and creates its ‘home,’ just as the Adamic hero needs to start from himself to create a new world and a home: “The given individual experience was no longer a complex of human, racial, and familial relationships; it was a self in a vacant, vast surrounding. Each simple separate person must forge his own framework anew” (Lewis, R.W.B. 50). Similar to a spider, which, when its web is destroyed, has no primary conditions to go back to but always starts anew and spans yet another void, so is the American Adam always going forth, creating the world he inhabits as he is moving forward.

Going forth and starting over again, always beginning anew and creating a new world—these are not only the driving forces of Whitman’s poetic self, but also those of Spider-Man, whose relentless belief in a better and brighter tomorrow helps him overcome all setbacks (cf. Fingeroth 149). Moreover, elemental loneliness and isolation are central to Spider-Man’s character; indeed, towards the end of the film he realizes that he can only be Spider-Man if he is and stays alone.<sup>20</sup> Any loving or romantic relationships would put his loved ones into danger, but they would also put emphasis on his individuality and make him less of a universal symbol of Americanness. Spider-Man only works as an inclusive and integrating figure if he remains as abstract and ‘faceless’ as possible. Any particularities of his character only make him “[gain] an identity at the cost of ceasing to be universally representative” (Cowley xxxiii), whereas solitude and isolation keep his character on an abstract and indefinite level, enabling seemingly boundless identification with him and the projection of one’s desires onto him. The story of Spider-Man/Peter Parker is essentially that of a young man coming of age and taking responsibility for his actions. Peter’s process of understanding that he alone is fully responsible for the choices he makes forms the film’s moralizing arch: “With great power comes great responsibility,” his uncle tells him shortly before he dies, and this piece of wisdom is henceforth Peter’s guiding principle which he attempts to live up to. Even though he may be lonely and isolated, Peter/Spider-

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<sup>20</sup> As Donald Palumbo puts it, “a crushing, encyclopedic alienation” is Spider-Man’s “most prominent trait” and the driving force of his story (68). His superpowers make him an outcast and a loner and force him to keep his double identity a secret, which constantly collides with the ‘normal’ needs and desires he displays as Peter Parker. Palumbo reads Spider-Man as an existentialist hero, who realizes that the only way to make meaning of his situation is to both accept and combat the absurdity he encounters.

Man is not detached from the world around him, as his moral conscience and his sense of responsibility make him “bother,” as he puts it, about the “teeming masses” in the city. Or, as Fingerroth puts it, in *Spider-Man* “it’s all about values” (154).

“We are who we choose to be,” the Goblin reminds Spider-Man at the film’s climactic point as to emphasize one’s agency in the constitution of one’s self. Whitman’s analogy between the Adamic hero and the noiseless, patient spider thus finds an interesting incarnation in Spider-Man, who literally constitutes himself in the void, in the non-spaces within which he fills by flinging his threads and building bridges between previously unrelated fixtures. He spans these voids out of himself in acts of self-exploration, out of which he creates a new world and a new self—a heroic and fundamentally good self, that is. The flipside of the coin is, of course, that we are also who we are apprehended to be. In *Leaves of Grass* and in *Spider-Man* the individual self is used to discuss and create a collective, but without that collective the individual would cease to exist. Price cites the “perhaps shortest poem in the English language,” composed by boxer Muhammad Ali, to illustrate the double bind between individual and collective: “Me we” (Price 36). The one only makes sense in its relation to the other, which yet again undermines Whitman’s assertion that he can “comprehensively and unproblematically be the nation’s body” (ibid).

Whitman’s counter-strategy to this fundamental dilemma is laid out in the very first line of “Song of Myself,” in the poet’s announcement that “what I shall assume you shall assume” (*LG* 25). This declaration has a “commanding and imperial” tone, as Erkkila remarks, which seems more like an order than a friendly invitation:

like the American republic in its expansion westward, what the American poet represents and assumes *shall* represent the assumptions and perspective of everybody. The poet really does speak for everybody, and, in his speech, nobody else gets heard. (“Empire” 62)

It is a matter of interpretation whether Whitman’s poet is a democratic or totalitarian self or perhaps even both. In his attempt to embody everyone as an individual, the poet is pluralistic yet singular, open-ended yet closed, disembodied yet embodied. He certainly is a breaker of bounds, the poet of men and women, farmers and factory workers, prostitutes and slaves, rich and poor. As Price suggests, Whitman’s poetics “relied heavily on passing,” that is, on the creation of

a “shape-changing, identity-shifting, gender-crossing protean self” in *Leaves of Grass* (Price 5). Whitman’s passing can be understood in both racial and sexual terms as “performative transformations” in which an identity or narrative is consciously enacted (Price 90). Passing, as Price points out, involves claiming and appropriating cultural space and creating an identity, but it also entails leaving a cultural space and discarding another identity (cf. Price 90-91). The self swings between subject positions and becomes unreadable, as it were: “To be in any form, what is that?” Whitman asks (*LG* 53). As soon as a subject position is assumed, it is already discarded in favor of yet another subject position. The poet’s body is thus fundamentally fragmented, incomplete, and elusive; it is neither integral nor proper as it is constantly traversed and cannot serve as a stable basis of identity.<sup>21</sup> “Is this a touch? .... quivering me into a new identity” Whitman muses as he describes the sensation of shifting shapes and becoming one with the masses: “My flesh and body playing out lightning, to strike what is hardly different from myself” (*ibid*).

Peter/Spider-Man’s most obvious act of shape-shifting is his transformation from Peter into Spider-Man and vice versa. However, similar to Whitman’s poet, he, too, is a breaker of bounds. Although he does not rhetorically declare himself to be the embodiment of the masses as Whitman does, Spider-Man’s all-American attire and his self-perception as one of the masses render his body an all-encompassing and democratic one, as I argued earlier. His breaking of bounds and his transgressive qualities are visualized in his traversing of the grid of New York City. Holding on to his web as if it were a rope or a liana, Spider-Man swings himself from skyscraper to skyscraper, his movements completely dissolved from the clear-cut structures below him. Just as Whitman defies the strict rules of rhythm and meter by writing in free verse and thus setting up his own rules of poetry, Spider-Man sets up his own rules of moving around by defying the rules of the city’s grid. Cars and pedestrians follow the strict layout of the grid as they move along, but Spider-Man criss-crosses the grid as he pleases, thus figuratively covering the city with his web and claiming its space. He becomes one with the city and its people, while his body, at the same time, remains elusive and ungraspable. As he moves above the predictable and safe structure of the grid,

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<sup>21</sup> For more details on the traversing of the body and its internal fragmentation, see Nathanson, esp. 92-95.

literally caught between earth and sky, Spider-Man's body is permanently in a state of liminality, just as is the poet's body in *Leaves of Grass*.

As representations of the body politic, the liminality and fluidity of both the poet's and Spider-Man's body personal connect American democracy to notions of transgression and transformation. In the case of Whitman's poet the body politic, or American democracy, is equated with conceptions of sexual and racial passing. Particularly with the analogy between sexual liberation and democracy Whitman put his finger on a deep-seated fear of democracy in America, namely "that in its purest form, democracy would lead to a blurring of sexual bounds and thus the breakdown of social and bourgeois economy based on the management of the body and the polarization of male and female spheres" (Erkkila, "Introduction" 7-8). The sexually unruly body was perceived as a threat to the republic and scenes of masturbation or homosexual passion were indicative of the breakdown of the established order.<sup>22</sup> "If the individual were not capable of self-mastery," Erkkila explains, "and if the storms of (homo)sexual passion could usurp the constitution of the body and body politic, then the theory of America would be cankered at its source" (*Whitman* 105). Masturbation becomes Whitman's most prominent trope for disorder in the political sphere and the ground on which he can test the democratic theory of America. By demonstrating that the bodily balance can be restored after masturbation, which takes democracy to "the verge of the limit" (Whitman, *Forces* 10), Whitman "enacts poetically the principle of regulation in individual and cosmos that is at the base of his democratic faith" (Erkkila, *Whitman* 106). However, the unruly body remains a source of anxiety and disturbance; the body turns out to be the ideal site to naturalize the order of the republic and locate the ostensibly self-evident truths the founding fathers agreed on, but it proves to be a very unreliable site at that. The success of American democracy and of being a 'real' American citizen thus very much depend—quite literally—on the control over and mastery of one's body.

Control over and mastery of the body, respectively the loss thereof, are also central issues in *Spider-Man*. Although Spider-Man's body is not sexually unruly, loss of control and the vulnerability of the body are an important motif in all three *Spider-Man* installments. In the final showdown with the Goblin, Spider-Man is

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<sup>22</sup> Much criticism on Whitman's poetry has focused on his own sexuality. One of the most thorough studies of Whitman's sexual politics and poetics is Vivian R. Pollak's study *The Erotic Whitman* (2000).

taken to “the verge of the limit” as he is faced with death and the volatility of his body (Erkkila, *Whitman* 106). Spider-Man’s beaten and bloody body displays the fears of American democracy post-9/11: Spider-Man’s body is a body under threat, a vulnerable and perishable body, a body that—despite its superhuman powers—is in crisis. As Sally Robinson points out, “wounded white male bodies signal a crisis elsewhere, and one that is simultaneously caused and managed by narratives of crisis and the wounded bodies displayed within those narratives” (9). The type of hero that Peter Parker/Spider-Man is, mirrors in many ways the state of the nation right after the terrorist attacks and, at the same time, contributes to the articulation of a ‘new,’ post-9/11 masculinity. The pictures of policemen and firefighters trying to unearth the dead bodies buried underneath the rubble that circulated after the attacks pinpoint a conflicting notion of masculinity: traditional masculine notions of strength and toughness collide with pain, suffering, and emotionality. As Brenton J. Malin notes, “the September 11 hero is ... profoundly conflicted, eminently heroic and eminently vulnerable” and as such very well emulated by the figure of Spider-Man (146). The broken and defeated bodies of firefighters and policemen, who are commonly regarded as ‘hypermasculine’ men, stand as proof of the American nation’s vulnerability, while their heroic actions seem to point towards a strong and intact national unity. In addition to the scale of the attack, the feelings of shock and powerlessness felt by those who witnessed it came perhaps from the familiar location of the destruction. “The crimes of September 11th are indeed a historic turning point, but not because of its scale, rather because of the choice of target,” as Noam Chomsky notes (68). This was not some distant, foreign city under attack—this was New York City, the probably most iconic American city.

The attacks of September 11 and their aftermath resonate in the figure of Spider-Man, in whom ideal Americanness clashes with the threat of disintegration. The scenes of Spider-Man’s final showdown with the Goblin and the shots of his wounded body display a loss of control that is different yet similar to the episodes of masturbation and sexual liberation in “Song of Myself.” The poet’s body is a sexually unruly body that gives in to pleasure, while Spider-Man’s body is physically tortured. However, although the overall tone of “Song of Myself” is optimistic and celebratory, the poet finds himself “somehow ... stunned” (*LG* 68), at times, by moments of terror and anxiety and images of violence and death,

which haunt him and remind him of his own vulnerability: “The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love / The sickness of one of my folks—or of myself .... Or ill-doing ... / They come to me in days and nights and go from me again” (*LG* 28). He can detach himself from these experiences of destruction (“they are not the Me myself” [*LG* 28]), but he cannot completely free himself from them: “I am the man .... I suffered ... I was there,” he says as he enters a lengthy sequence of violence and war that lead to another crisis of self-mastery which is triggered by human suffering and a temporary loss of his self in the empathy for others (*LG* 62). He feels the “dull intermitted pain” (*LG* 67) of those who suffer in a sequence that is “laced with the sense of a self and of a nation besieged by its internal contradiction (Erkkila, *Whitman* 108). Whitman’s attempt to come to terms with the loss of self-mastery and the forces of empathy climaxes, then, in “The Sleepers.” In this poem, the ‘I’ moves through nightmare-episodes and, believing that he is possessed by Lucifer, faces murderous desires which may trigger his existential anxieties and feelings of sexual guilt. While he still confidently announced in “Song of Myself” that he was “deathless” (*LG* 43), he has to concede in “The Sleepers,” “my tap is death” (*LG* 111).

The pleasure of sexual unruliness, the images of death and destruction, and the pain of torture that Whitman’s poet and Spider-Man experience, all articulate moments of crisis, that is, the threat of the nation’s disintegration and the possible breakdown of the political and social order. Both experience moments of triumph but also have to face moments of injustice, suffering and pain. Implicit in the articulation of these moments of crisis is always another, more specific crisis, as Robinson suggests, namely “the forced *visibility* of the white and male norm, as white men experience the ‘marking’ that endangers their position as unmarked, and universalizing, norm” (55). The display of wounded white male bodies materializes the crisis of white masculinity and undermines the status of the white male body as normal and universal. Through its wounding, white masculinity becomes marked and fully embodied, which exposes the “lie of disembodied normativity so often attached to white masculinity” and renders the white, male body an unreliable signifier for ‘real’ Americanness (Robinson 9).

Whitman’s poetic self and Spider-Man both function as effigies for an ideal(ized) Americanness, as I have argued, who hold open the place of the ‘real’ and ‘original’ American. In that place that is being held open—in the state of

substitution—is a “breeding ground of anxieties and uncertainties about what the community should be,” Roach explains (*Cities* 39). The threat of disintegration (or, in positive terms, the potential for reinvention) is, in other words, essential to the construction of an imagined community and a collective/national identity. The performance of Americanness in *Leaves of Grass* and *Spider-Man* thus makes visible the “existence of social boundaries” and the “contingency of those boundaries on fictions of identity, their shoddy construction out of inchoate otherness, and, consequently, their anxiety-inducing instability” (Roach, *Cities* 39). In both texts, America is found(ed) directly on the surface of the body, where transfigured images of a deathless and superhuman body forcefully clash with an unruly, uncontrollable, vulnerable, angst-ridden body aware of its own precariousness. Out of this confrontation emerges America: a transfigured cultural space struggling with its own incompleteness, displacement, and fragmentation.



## ACT III

### AMERICAN IDOLS THE ANATOMY OF RACE AND GENDER

Race, exactly like sex, is taken as an “immediate given,” a “sensible given,” “physical features” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves neutral but marked by the social system) through a network of relationships in which they are perceived. (They are seen as *black*, therefore they *are* black; they are seen as *women*, therefore, they *are* women. But before being *seen* that way, they first had to be *made* that way.)

— Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 11-12.

## Interlude – Romancing the Ghost

In this act, I propose to approach *Moby-Dick's* Ishmael and *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester Prynne as American idols, as cultural projection-screens and archetypes, whose gestures and speech have continuously been emulated, adapted, and translated into new contexts. As idols, Ishmael and Hester are emptied of their specificities and divorced from the particular circumstances of their production, and they become cultural types which fulfill ideological purposes. Interpretations in the tradition of F.O. Matthiessen have long hailed Ishmael as a 'truly' American hero and embodied essence of Americanness, which endowed Ishmael with cultural significance and established him as a cultural stock-figure. These reductive readings of *Moby-Dick* are for the most part grounded in the contrasting of Ishmael with the mad, tyrannical Captain Ahab and Queequeg, a humble noble pagan and marked outcast on land and sea. Hester, herself a stigmatized social outcast, projects American culture in all its ambivalences and contradictions through her body, her gender, and her sexuality. In the two scenarios of this act, I read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* with and against Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* and I juxtapose Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with the Madonna of *Papa Don't Preach*, *Express Yourself*, and *Sex* in order to investigate the struggle over the inscription of race and gender into the body of the modal, 'normal' American.

This chapter, then, seeks to chart the anatomy of race and gender in the American cultural imaginary by tracing the ambivalence of 'idolatrous' performances of Americanness. I do not use the term 'idol' in its religious sense, as a symbol or an object of worship, but I rather take the term to describe an ideal form that transmits knowledge, that is, an appearance without substance that appears to purport 'authenticity' and to reveal seemingly unquestionable 'truths' of American culture. In her historicization of performance, Diana Taylor explains that in the age of colonialism in the Americas, two contradictory yet sustaining discourses on performance prevailed: first of all, performance was dismissed as an episteme and, secondly, indigenous religious belief was dismissed as idolatry. While the dismissal of performance suggests that performance was considered to be inept for the creation and transmission of knowledge, the second discourse conceded that knowledge *is* in fact transmitted through performance, but as that

knowledge was considered idolatrous and was inaccessible to the colonizers, performance itself had to be eradicated (cf. Taylor, D., *Archive* 33-34). 'American Idols' is, of course, neither concerned with colonial encounters nor with performances in the form of rites and rituals. I rather want to scrutinize two literary characters that have, in abstracted form, become fixtures in American cultural productions. I suggest that 'Ishmael' and 'Hester Prynne' have become cultural stock figures; however, as repeatable cultural types, the Ishmaelite and the Hesteresque figure are flat, one-dimensional, and complicit with hegemonic narratives of American culture. I aim at a more differentiated reading of Ishmael and Hester, in order to show that these two figures have actually always carried a lot of subversive potential which troubles any normative, coherent cultural narrative.

As 'Act II' has shown, 'America' is a precarious construct which is threatened by displacement and disintegration, built upon exclusion and repression, and condemned to a state of permanent anticipation, but which also bears the potential for unlimited reinvention and resignification. These ambivalent versions of America manifest themselves in the scenarios of the Emersonian scholar, the Thoreauvian hermit, and the Whitmanian poet, that is, in the disembodied embodiment of allegedly 'real' Americanness. The optimism and hopefulness with which Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman undertake their respective projects of an originally American expression and artistic creation find a direct, considerably more gloomy and brooding response in Herman Melville's monumental novel *Moby-Dick* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's gripping masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*.<sup>1</sup>

In her brilliant analysis of the Africanist presence in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Toni Morrison writes that the formative literature of the nation seemed "unable to extricate itself" from the "dark and abiding presence" looming in its texts, which suggests the "complicated and contradictory situation in which

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Fluck, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre*, where he writes: "Das transzendentalistische Denken leitete eine intellektuelle Reorientierung ein, die die Voraussetzung für einen Funktionswandel des amerikanischen Romans war, aber es beeinflusste diese Romane weder direkt, noch diente es ihnen als Vorbild. Die klassischen Texte des Transzendentalismus von Emerson, Thoreau und Whitman sind solche einer tendenziell grenzenlosen Selbstermächtigung des Individuums, das sich im Prozeß der imaginären Aneignung von Welt selbst zelebriert. Einem derartigen Monolog leistet der inhärent 'dialogische' Roman auch in seiner romantischen Version schon deshalb Widerstand, weil ein Handlungs- oder Wertekonflikt nur dann entstehen kann, wenn der Position und Perspektive verschiedener Charaktere Rechnung getragen wird. Der romantische Roman der *American Renaissance* kann somit gewiß nicht als transzendentalistisches Genre gelten. Vielmehr läßt sich sagen, daß die Gattung in einer Phase kultureller Reorientierung gerade für diejenigen interessant wurde, die eine gewisse Distanz zum Transzendentalismus suchten" (177).

American writers found themselves” (Morrison 33). The hopes, dreams, fears, and forces with which the young nation struggled are inscribed into the body of literature produced at that time. As Morrison states, “it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is” (Morrison 35). The nation’s literature, Morrison points out, forms and informs cultural identities and constructs imaginary ideals of Americanness, and the early literature of the United States was obviously involved in the “self-conscious but highly problematic construction” of the ideal American as “a new white man” (Morrison 39). Morrison reads Emerson’s “The American Scholar” as the strongest indicator for the deliberateness of this construction, which was inevitably grounded in and erected on racial and sexual difference. However, it is the gothic romance—but also the American romance in general—in which she sees the construction of the new white man as a strategy to counter the contradictions, anxieties, and complications the nation was faced with develop its full force. Romance, she points out, was the ideal fictional form for American writers, because “it had everything: nature as a subject matter, a system of symbolism, a thematics of the search for self-valorization and validation—above all, the opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities” (Morrison 37).

Nina Baym has argued that the romance was perhaps the most powerful and influential concept in modern American literary history and criticism. “It [romance] has been a concept indispensable for constructing a canon of major works,” she writes, and a “significant criterion for inclusion or exclusion” in the literary canon was, therefore, “membership in the romance category” (“Romance” 426). As Hawthorne and Melville are generally heralded as the two flag bearers of the American romance,<sup>2</sup> a few words on the concept and tradition of the ‘romance’ are due. The invention of the concept of ‘American romance’ dates back to the establishment of American Studies as a separate discipline. As I briefly outlined in the previous chapter, in the post-World War II period, the search for a specifically and uniquely American literary tradition resulted in the formation of the myth and symbol school and the institutionalization of a literary canon that was fuelled by the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and centered around the works of white male authors. In other words, these approaches to and interpretations of American

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Fluck, who calls Melville and Hawthorne the “most important flagbearers” of the romance tradition (cf. *Imaginäre* 191).

culture were either regionally or historically restrictive, or encompassed a very limited circle of writers. The concept of the American romance “solved this impasse in matters of cultural self-definition” and served as the foundation and justification of the study of American literature as a separate field (Fluck, “American Romance” 415). As Fluck points out, this solution to the search for a uniquely American tradition was, ironically enough, developed in an essay that lamented the shortcomings of American literature in comparison to the English novel, Lionel Trilling’s essay “Manners, Morals, and the Novel.” In this essay, Trilling defined the novel as a “perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world” and found in nineteenth-century European realism a model of what the novel should ideally be (212).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to European novelists, American writers, Trilling diagnosed with regret, do not depict social reality and the complexities of social life.

Trilling’s colleague Richard Chase turned precisely these shortcomings into the strengths and defining features of American literature. He vehemently challenges Trilling’s position by arguing that “it is not necessarily true that in so far as a novel departs from realism it is obscurantist and disqualified to make moral comments on the world” (xi). Quite to the contrary, the best American writers, he believes,

have found uses for romance far beyond the escapism, fantasy, and sentimentality often associated with it. They have found that in the very freedom of romance from the conditions of actuality there are certain potential virtues of the mind, which may be suggested by such words as rapidity, irony, abstraction, profundity. These qualities have made romance a suitable, ... an inevitable, vehicle for the intellectual and moral ideas of the American novelists. (Chase x)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Phillip Rahv shared Trilling’s view on the ideal novel, arguing that the authority of the novel depended upon “the principle of realism” which had taught writers of fiction “how to grasp and encompass the ordinary facts of existence” (138). According to Trilling, the problem with American literature was that “American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society” (212). To both Rahv and Trilling, Henry James was the only American writer who came close to that standard and could match himself with European novelists.

<sup>4</sup> Chase distinguishes between the ‘romance’ and the ‘novel’ as follows: “The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life. We come to see these people in their real complexity of temperament and motive. They are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past. ... The events that occur will usually be plausible... Historically, as it has often been said, the novel has served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class. By contrast the romance ... feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering, as it were, less resistance from reality. ... The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. ... Character itself becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, ... the plot we may expect to be highly colored.

The literature thus created is, according to Chase, “brilliant and original, if often unstable and fragmentary,” and the usual depreciation of the romance therefore not always justifiable and reasonable (x).<sup>5</sup> Chase’s claim of a unique American literary tradition furthered the institutionalization and legitimation of American literary studies, but this breakthrough had also its drawbacks, as Fluck explains. The representativeness of the romance for American literary history as a whole was limited and the intense focus on the romance-theory in the 1950s and 1960s led to an exclusion of other literary and cultural voices from the canon of American literature and from scholarship, which resulted in growing criticism and rejection of the concept of the American romance because of its ideological taints.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the many shortcomings and inadequacies of the romance as a critical term, as a *genre* the romance still holds “a special potential of fiction” worth of critical attention (Fluck, “American Romance” 421). Following Evan Carton, I suggest to reconceive the romance “as a specific and urgent kind of rhetorical performance, a self-consciously dialectical enactment of critical and philosophical concerns about the relation of words to things and the nature of the self” that “convert[s] limitation into power, or at least into potential” (1). Carton establishes a crucial link between the American romance and the American nation, a link which I will follow up in this chapter. Both the romance and America are fictions, inventions, performances, which move beyond ‘reality’ and call on our imagination—indeed, without the imaginary element both would not function. The

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Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility” (12-13).

<sup>5</sup> As Fluck summarizes Chase’s attitude towards the romance, for Chase it is the romance’s “characteristic reliance on unrealistic representational modes of excess and melodrama, its willful disregard for consistency in characterization and plotting, and its direct, forceful expression of imaginary desire which captures the conflicts—and thus the ‘realities’—of American society much more accurately than the smoothly controlled surface of the novel of manners and its realistic mode of representation. ... Chase converted the seemingly puerile into the culturally profound, a lack of formal unity into the bold expression of a vibrant, non-bourgeois culture of contradictions, and a lack of realism into a radical resistance to the middle way...” (“American Romance” 416). Fluck notes that Chase preferred to speak of the “romance-novel” rather than the romance pure, which emphasizes “a tendency of the romance to reconstitute itself through the novel, so that constant hybridization and a continuous mixture of forms are an essential part of his theory” (“American Romance” 422).

<sup>6</sup> For details on the academic debates over the romance-theory and over the usefulness of the concept of romance in literary criticism, see Fluck, “American Romance” 416-418. For critical discussions and revisions of literary theory centered around the concept of American romance, see, for instance, Robert Merrill, “Another Look at the American Romance” (1981); William C. Spengemann, *A Mirror For Americanists* (1989); Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood” (1981); Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance* (1985); George Dekker, “The Genealogy of American Romance” (1989); William Ellis, *The Theory of American Romance* (1989); Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance* (1989); John McWilliams, “The Rationale for ‘The American Romance’” (1990); Emily Miller Budick, *Engendering Romance* (1994).

urgent need to convert limitation into power is inherent to the American nation just as it is to the romance. The anxiety that the nation was formed ‘merely’ through a performative act and constituted itself in the realm of the imaginary needed to be transformed into its greatest potential: by imagining the ideal reality and willing that reality into being in daily action, that is, by reiterating ‘Americanness,’ America’s fragile and precarious existence could be strengthened.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the ideal romance was, according to Henry James, informed by the desire to attain “the dream of an intenser experience” and stood for the things “that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of thought and desire” (James, “Preface” 32). Quite clearly, James’s words refer to the imaginary, the agglomerate of diffuse and untranslatable images, associations, and feelings which needs fiction to be expressed coherently and comprehensibly. In other words, the imaginary is the component which turns limitation into potential; it is the part of romance which can never be fully known and articulated as it can manifest itself in virtually unlimited form.

As Iser has persuasively argued, fiction is the medium that provides the imaginary with a tangible, comprehensible *gestalt* and is thus the intermediate between the imaginary and the ‘real.’ The interplay between fictional and imaginary is crucial to an understanding of how cultural reality is shaped and perpetuated. “In its boundary-crossing capacity,” Iser explains, “fictionality is first and foremost an extension of humankind which, like all operations of consciousness, is nothing but a pointer toward something other than itself” (*Prospecting* 283). In other words, fictionality is empty, “void of any content,” and needs to be filled with meaning (*ibid*). This void becomes the playground of the imaginary, because what is unspeakable and ungraspable can only become manifest through ideation. “Without the imaginary, fictionality remains empty, and without fictionality, the imaginary would remain diffuse,” Iser summarizes the interdependency of the two terms and concludes that “[o]ut of their interplay emerges the staging of what is unavailable to us” (*ibid*).

Iser suggests that this staging might be a necessary alternative to what we are, which leads to the question why, despite our awareness of their illusionary character, we cannot and do not cease to create cultural images and imaginary worlds. He proposes that “the staging itself must not lead to closure, but must

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<sup>7</sup> On this point, see also Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance* 2-4.

remain open-ended, if its spell is not to be broken" (*Prospecting* 284). Put differently, these stagings are possibilities of cultural self-definition and cultural articulation in which the boundaries between the 'real' and fantasy, or 'authenticity' and myth, are at best porous and vague. As a genre in which, as Fluck puts it, "an 'other world' of desires and imaginary self-empowerment" constantly clashes with "the commonplace world of actuality," the romance is particularly suited as a stage on which national fantasies can be played out ("American Romance" 422). The romance can take many forms—gothic, metaphysical, heroic, historical—but it is always preoccupied with the search for something desirable, however not yet accessible. As Gillian Beer puts it, the romance "gives repetitive form to the particular desire of a community, and especially to those desires which cannot find controlled expression within society" (13).

In this chapter, I am not so much interested in the aesthetics of the American romance or in its generic attributes, but rather in its capacity as a stage on which national fantasies can be articulated and dramas of cultural self-definition can be performed. In the following sections, I regard Ishmael's participation in the hunt for the white whale and Hester Prynne's ostracization from the Puritan community as foundational scenarios that express the anxieties of the young nation in a controlled and comprehensible manner. The abstraction of 'Ishmael' and 'Hester Prynne' into American idols and the reiteration of these two cultural types in *Jaws* and Madonna's music videos adds new configurations to conversations on national/cultural identity and opens a productive, open-ended dialogue on the meanings of 'America,' in which the past comes to meet with the present, the idols with their opaque shadows, and America with its ghosts. Ghosts are reminders that past and present are never discrete and separable; they belong to the domain of legitimacy, (mis-)recognition, and cultural (non-)representation. Put differently, the ghostly is always linked to something inaccessible that seeks articulation, as Derrida explains with the metaphor of the crypt as "the vault of desire" and occupies the middle ground between past and present, fictive and real, authentic and mythical ("Fors" xvii). Above all, then, ghosts express a demand—they come back to haunt a culture because something has been left unfinished.



### Act III. Scenario 1.

#### The Shark Has Pretty Teeth: Straight White Masculinity and Ethnic Ventriloquism in *Moby-Dick* and *Jaws*

What's your name again?

—*Jaws*, opening line

Call me Ishmael.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, first sentence

If one were to trust D.H. Lawrence, Herman Melville was “a modern Viking” (139). Unable to accept or belong to humanity, Melville escaped to the sea, Lawrence muses, and became its “greatest seer and poet” (ibid). Lawrence’s assessment of Melville’s work, in particular regarding *Moby-Dick*, oscillates between contempt and admiration: on the one hand, he asserts that nobody “can be more clownish, more clumsy, and more sententiously in bad taste, than Herman Melville, even in a great book like *Moby-Dick*” (153-154). Lawrence calls Melville a “rather tiresome New Englander” without a sense of humor, jokingly lamenting that Melville is “so hopelessly *au grand sérieux*, you feel like saying: Good God, what does it matter? If life is a tragedy, or a farce, or a disaster, or anything else, what do I care!” (ibid) On the other hand, Lawrence praises Melville as “a deep, great artist” and a “real American,” in the sense that he always “felt his audience in front of him” and wrote for a particularly *American* readership (ibid).

Clearly affected by the works of Emerson and Thoreau, Melville reflected on the role of the American writer in his writings, which are marked by a robust yet hopeful tone. “Let America ... prize and cherish her writers; yea, let her glorify them. ... And while she has good kith and kin of her own ... let her not lavish her embraces upon the household of an alien” Melville encourages his fellow countrymen (“Mosses” 119). American literature could only establish itself, Melville suggested, if American writers tried to convey particularly American sentiments and if their originality were recognized and appreciated by their countrymen. As Melville calls on all Americans, “let America praise mediocrity even, in her own children, before she praises ... the best excellence in the children of any other land” (ibid). It would be better and nobler to fail in originality than to succeed in the imitation of British or French writers, Melville argued, for greatness can never be achieved through imitation. “[N]o American writer should write like an Englishman or a Frenchman” Melville reiterates Emerson’s firm

beliefs, “let him write like a man, for then he will be sure to write like an American” (“Mosses” 120). The establishment and validation of a discrete American literature was of utmost importance, as Melville makes clear: “While we are rapidly preparing for that political supremacy among the nations which prophetically awaits us at the close of the present century, in a literary point of view, we are deplorably unprepared for it” (ibid). Melville believed that the most pressing task of American writers was to put American literature on the cultural map of the world. He feared that if American originality were not fostered in due time, America might never reach the cultural and literary superiority it would actually be capable of.

Considering Melville’s intensive engagement with the establishment of a national literature, it seems almost a cruel twist of fate that the book which is now considered his masterpiece virtually disappeared from the American literary landscape soon after its publication. Melville thought of *Moby-Dick* as “a great effort completed” and “hungered to have it recognized” by his countrymen as a valuable contribution to American literature (Brodhead, “Introduction” 16). Even though its reviews were not entirely unfavorable, the general public interest in *Moby-Dick* was very limited. When the book went out of print in 1887, it had sold merely 3180 copies; two thirds of those copies had been sold immediately after its first publication in 1851 (cf. Barbour 47). As Richard Brodhead aptly summarizes the early reception history of *Moby-Dick*, “reports of nineteenth-century readings of *Moby-Dick* after 1851 are so rare as to be collector’s items. ... Undiscussed and unread, *Moby-Dick* became, for sixty years after it was published, something like a nonexistent book” (“Introduction” 17).

*Moby-Dick* evidently failed to attract a wide readership, despite—or maybe because of—its intensive engagement with historical changes and shifts in American politics and culture. When Melville began to work on *Moby-Dick*, the fears of disunion were immanent, the crisis over slavery had reached a climax, and the contradictions between the ideals of 1776 and the realities of 1850 were undeniable.<sup>1</sup> *Moby-Dick* is not merely a response to and reflection of the crisis the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Michael Paul Rogin, who writes that John Quincy Adams saw “the year 1848’ in America as the culmination and defeat of ‘the year 1776,’” as “internal stresses” threatened the “external triumph of American nationalism” and those stresses “revolved around slavery” (*Genealogy* 103). As Rogin continues, slavery “always stood in contradiction to the ideals of 1776” and the Mexican War “made that contradiction a threat not simply to the Declaration of Independence but to American institutions as well” (ibid).

United States was faced with in the mid-nineteenth century, but it is deeply enmeshed in this crisis (cf. Rogin, *Genealogy* 107). While it is not necessarily a novel *about* America, *Moby-Dick* articulates and critically examines some of the most pressing issues of its time, which strongly calls for a reading of the novel as a piece of cultural criticism. However, I concur with Rogin that one should be careful not to politicize *Moby-Dick* and read it merely as a political allegory of its time.<sup>2</sup> On a much broader level, *Moby-Dick* is a text that grapples with the notion of identity, is concerned with moments of crisis and disintegration, and offers imaginings of alternative social structures. Therefore, it seems much more significant to explore what *Moby-Dick* can tell us about national identity and national fantasies—and to explore how *Moby-Dick* challenges and problematizes a singular and totalizing national identity. The primary focus of my approach to the novel lies on its representation of racial difference and on its challenge to whiteness as the ‘normal’ racial category in American culture. Valerie Babb explains that, as the nation “was cemented to the identity of a single created race,” whiteness became “synonymous with Americanness” and thus came to set the standard for ‘real’ Americanness (93). Like all racial categories, whiteness is not merely a classification of physical attributes and appearances, but an ideological construct. In the United States emerged “the consensus of a single white race that, in principle, elides religious, socioeconomic, and gender differences among individual whites to create a hegemonically privileged race category,” thus rendering whiteness the racial norm (Babb 10).

In the following section, I will read *Moby-Dick* as a theatrical play of cultural possibility and national self-definition. More precisely, I will read *Moby-Dick* not as a novel about American culture, politics, or society, but rather as an experiment in sketching viable alternatives to established cultural and social structures and in contesting coherent narratives of democracy and citizenship by recovering deviant bodies and uncovering dissonant memories. I approach *Moby-Dick* as a text that is—from its very first to its very last paragraph—centered around questions of identity: questions of racial difference, questions of sexuality, questions of individuality and collectivity, of ‘self’ and society. I also regard *Moby-Dick* as a text that provides more questions than answers, as a text that does not reveal any

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<sup>2</sup> In “Cultures of Criticism” Fluck also argues that “neo-historicist suggestions of an anxiety over slavery or European revolutions or an affinity to the ideology of *Manifest Destiny*” are “helpful for understanding certain parts and aspects of the book, but not its structure itself”—and, I may add, not its impact and influence on later cultural productions (216).

fundamental ‘truths’ about America but rather constitutes an inconclusive performance of national fantasies that ends in uncertainty and doubt. I juxtapose *Moby-Dick* with the blockbuster *Jaws*, a film that not only reactivates plot patterns of Melville’s novel but that is, moreover, similarly obsessed with questions of identity. I read *Jaws* as an attempt to bring the questions *Moby-Dick* had left unanswered to a satisfying conclusion and to reinstall cultural stability and a sense of security.

In both *Moby-Dick* and *Jaws* it is primarily race, but also sexuality, that proves to be the source of doubt and anxiety and that puts identity—both individual and collective—in crisis. Ishmael has repeatedly been stylized as the “canonical (idealized) essence of the American nation” in Cold-War-receptions of *Moby-Dick* that were informed by Matthiessen’s work, that is, as a cultural figure that seems to transmit and embody ‘authentic’ Americanness and to articulate popular national fantasies (Spanos 34). In Ishmael, this approach implies, America finds a representative type, an ideal form that complies with the compulsion for a coherent national narrative and with monolithic definitions of Americanness. I aim at a more differentiated reading of Ishmael, while also taking into account the cultural impact of those earlier readings which had established the Ishmaelite figure as a sovereign American and as an ideal form of Americanness. Revisionist readings like mine show that, as Ishmael’s narrative begins and ends in fundamental doubt and uncertainty as regards his (racial) identity, he is visibly unsuitable as the embodiment of an ideal, ‘normal’ Americanness that is synonymous with whiteness. In *Jaws*, Martin Brody emerges as the cultural repetition of the Ishmaelite figure, that is, as an Ishmael with a difference. Brody struggles to resolve the doubt and uncertainty with which the Ishmaelite figure is burdened and tries to restore ‘normalcy’ by violently manufacturing himself as the embodiment of that very normalcy. I will show that in the juxtaposition of *Jaws* with *Moby-Dick*, the impossibility of that project becomes evident: the Ishmaelite figure bears an unmistakably ethnic tinge which cannot be easily eradicated and which problematizes the normalcy of whiteness. Ishmael offers an alternative vision of cultural self-definition, a vision that translates racial and ethnic ambiguity into multiculturalism<sup>3</sup> and that conceives of uncertainty as possibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a reading of *Moby-Dick* as a multicultural novel may yield fruitful results in the revision of the American literary canon and the reimagining of the American Renaissance. With his study *Ruthless Democracy*, Timothy Powell, for instance, has contributed to re-readings of canonical texts

### Mapping the Other: Race, Sexuality, and the Language of Democracy

*Moby-Dick* begins with the problem of identity: “Call me Ishmael,” the narrator invites the reader, prompting a series of questions (*MD*<sup>4</sup> 3). Who is the narrator? Where does he come from? What is his story? And, most importantly, what is his name? ‘Ishmael’ may or may not be a pseudonym, a mask the narrator deliberately puts on for the purpose of his performance—this question remains unanswered and unresolved. The rhetorical gesture of announcing his name to the reader, the performative act of declaring himself to be henceforth called Ishmael, places the focus of the ensuing narrative on cultural dislocation and displacement. As Spanos remarks, Ishmael’s story “will be told ... from the decentered horizontal perspective of engaged, explorative, and uncertain being-in-the-world: as an act of Repetition” that puts “*Ishmael* as proper name, as identity, under erasure” (76). The relationship between naming and identity is radically put into question in this “twilight narrative,” which refuses to confirm an authorial certainty and to establish a reliable narrator (Spanos 79).<sup>5</sup> Quite to the contrary, the narrator functions as “an inquiring subject who is himself the object of inquiry, a ‘constitutor’ who is himself the ‘constituted,’ as it were, the seer, who is himself the seen” (Spanos 76).

Ishmael’s highly formal self-chosen name signifies his sense of his place in and his relation to the world. Ishmael bestows upon himself a Biblical name of ambiguous, double-edged connotations, that is, the name of an outcast who is also the fulfillment of a divine promise, thus emphasizing his own exiled position and

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through the lens of multiculturalism, showing how meanings of ‘America,’ ‘American literature,’ and ‘American identity’ can be expanded and redefined if the texts of the American Renaissance are placed within a multicultural context. While I do not completely agree with the conclusions Powell draws in his reading of *Moby-Dick*, I find his conception of multiculturalism very insightful and helpful for my own purposes. Powell distinguishes ‘multiculturalism’ from ‘liberal pluralism,’ as pluralism “maintains that the nation can acknowledge its ethnic differences and yet retain its central coherence through ideological consensus about what it means to be an ‘American.’” (8). Pluralism, in other words, relies on the presumption that public space can be culturally neutral and equally claimed by everyone. That is to say that ‘difference’ is visible and can be expressed, but pluralism does not necessarily challenge social inequalities and unequal distribution of power. However, Powell also warns of a co-optation of multiculturalism by state and corporations in an attempt to mask inequality by celebrating difference. The primary goal of multicultural readings of the American Renaissance, Powell suggests, must be to “recover lost cultural voices and to allow those voices to speak freely on the page,” which I, too, find a goal worth striving for.

<sup>4</sup> All references to direct and indirect quotations taken from *Moby-Dick* will be abbreviated to *MD*.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see also Russ Castronovo, who argues that at the very moment that “Ishmael issues an authorial announcement of his own identity, we take his statement as a warning that we need beware a possible deception from a narrator telling a tale under an assumed name. Lacking any textual foundation ... Ishmael can inscribe his own being only as a moment of doubt and suspicion” (72).

invoking the boundary between individual and society or self and other (cf. Porter 73).<sup>6</sup> Refusing to reveal his ‘real’ identity, Ishmael remains a stranger in his deliberate distancing and linguistic playfulness on which he builds his elaborate narrative performance. Fluck identifies self-irony, playful distancing, and mock-mediation as essential elements of Ishmael’s voice from the novel’s very beginning, to which I want to add theatricality and performance. If the narrator’s flow of associations, his speculations and rhetorical linkages take us on a “*tour de force* of linguistic self-expansion,” as Fluck has it (“Cultures” 209), then I suggest to read *Moby-Dick* as an elaborate theatrical piece and linguistic performance, in which virtually the whole world becomes Ishmael’s—and Melville’s—stage. Ishmael’s self-expansion and self-authorization are only effects of the very self-creation he undertakes by announcing himself to be Ishmael and of his creation of the world in which he situates his narrative. Ishmael’s story is a linguistic play and experiment as much as it is a show act, a self-stylization and an exercise in the inexhaustibility and boundlessness of the imagination. Ishmael’s fantasy, flow of associations, and linguistic experiments strengthen his authority and empowerment, as Fluck explains, but the boundlessness of his linkages also undermine his own imperial claims as creator, tying self-enhancement close to self-deconstruction (cf. “Cultures” 209).

The close relation between self-enhancement and self-deconstruction becomes most evident in Ishmael’s moving along and across various kinds of borders and in the vagueness that lies at the heart of his story. Throughout his narrative, he systematically crosses and blurs the boundaries between self and other, outcast and society, and land and sea as he proceeds to dwell in uncertainty and imprecision when he evasively declares that “[s]ome years ago—never mind how long ago precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore,” he decided to “sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (*MD* 3). Ishmael’s defensiveness and avoidance of precise dates and concrete beginnings of his story are conspicuous; he presents “himself as motiveless and his journey as without direction” in a gesture of theatrical casualness and nonchalance which is followed by a similarly theatrical gesture of self-destructive violence (Bellis 103). His explanation for why he went to sea culminates in his dramatic claim that the sea was his remedy against suicide, his

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<sup>6</sup> On the relevance and meaning of ‘Ishmael’ as a Biblical name see, for instance, also Spanos 77-78, and Brodtkorb 123-125.

“substitute for pistol and ball,” and, to his best knowledge, “almost all men ... cherish nearly the same feelings towards the ocean” (*MD* 3).

Ishmael is thus in the peculiar position of speaking both from the margins (as a self-declared outcast) and from the center (as a representative of “almost all men”), undermining the very boundaries from which he speaks. As Carolyn Porter has argued, in his constant crossing and blurring of boundaries, Ishmael’s voice “takes up residence *at* the boundary, occupying the marginal space between the familiar and the unknown that he creates and expands by traversing it, over and over again” (Porter 80). Ishmael’s narrative voice is, in other words, located at the boundary of self and other, normality and difference, and—finally—land and sea. Ishmael explains man’s affinity for the sea with the story of Narcissus, who

because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to us all. (*MD* 5)

Gazing into the water, observer and observed are not divided but the subject and its object of reflection are doubled and reflected in each other. As Ishmael puts it, “meditation and water are wedded,” that is, forever joined in difference and in the knowledge that their complete unification is impossible (*MD* 4). Eye to eye with the sea, Ishmael thus suggests, he can gain deeper self-knowledge because he can see his self reflected in and through an ‘other’ that lies beneath the watery surface. The meaninglessness Ishmael experiences in life on land disappears at sea, where his life is more intense, more exciting, and more fulfilling. The sea, he muses, is “magic,” full of “charm,” and even “holy” (*MD* 5); it is indefinitely open, indefinitely deep, and therefore entirely mysterious and indefinitely interpretable. In this way, Ishmael mirrors the sea, for his complex address in the novel’s very first sentence seems to short-circuit the congealing of any final and unified meaning and renders his identity provisional.<sup>7</sup> Fluck has identified Melville’s constant play with different roles as an “expressive individualism” that “may instill a new compulsiveness ... in pursuit of a constant reinvention of the self” (“Cultures” 216). As Fluck describes it, expressive individualism is tightly connected to the possibility of self-realization and an experience of cultural difference, that is, with the individual’s articulation of its particularity and otherness that resists cultural

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<sup>7</sup> On this point, see also Porter, who writes that Ishmael is “capable of soaking up an infinite number of voices and squeezing out their discourse into a pool as large as the ocean he sails” (100).

conventions and normative discipline. Fiction provides the stage and the setting for the self-dramatization that expressive individualism entails, but, what is even more, it serves as the ideal testing ground to process cultural options and explore the possibilities of playful cultural performances, as Fluck points out:

The typical texts of this expressive individualism are therefore potentially interminable, the stories they tell remain open-ended, their narrative mode is one of ironic distance, self-irony, and self-disclosure, their ideal that of a fluid, protean self which is always on the run from becoming imprisoned in that most fateful of disasters that can happen to any progressive person today, a stable identity. ("Cultures" 217)

With Ishmael, Melville created a character who exemplifies the culture of expressive individualism, whose fluid and flexible self relishes in the sheer inexhaustibility of options for self-fashioning, self-expansion, and self-dramatization. Ishmael's fluidity and flexibility are underlined by his rhetorical gesture of naming himself and submitting himself to the law of the sea, which serves the purpose to "loosen our attachment to the ground beneath our feet," so as to situate us eventually in a position where "the normal attributes of land and sea have been inverted" and the land is regarded as inaccessible and treacherous (Porter 74-75). There is, in other words, nothing to rely on, nothing to be taken at face value, but only loose association and thriving imagination. To submit to the law of the sea and to seek safety and truth in the essentially unsafe and ever-changing realm of landlessness is "to trade certainty for doubt and thus to find ourselves, like Ishmael, compelled not only to wander but to wonder" (Porter 75). By crossing the boundary from land to sea and accepting the indefiniteness and openness of the ocean, all "categories of difference that order our apprehension of the world" are blurred and the world is bleached "into a sinister and maddening whiteness" where truth and order cannot rely on fixed oppositions but emerge from the questioning of precisely those fixed categories and binary oppositions that regulate life on land (ibid). 'Truth' and 'reality' are much rather a matter of perspective: they are both categories which cannot be defined in objective and absolute terms, but both are manufactured, always only provisional, and to a certain degree performative. Truth and reality are as indefinitely open and deep as the sea, and Ishmael's theatrical performance is the level of truth on which the narrative develops, is the only reality we have access to.

I suggest to read Ishmael's performative self-creation and his creation of 'reality' as an experiment in creating not a different world but in creating the



world differently. As Spanos has pointed out, “Melville’s matter in *Moby-Dick* is the narrative of the American Adam and ... his intervention therein is activated by a profound disillusionment in the hopeful potentialities of America ... [A] disillusionment grounded in the social and political realities of what is metaleptically called the ‘antebellum’ American experience” (144). Melville’s disillusionment and his desire to recover the hopeful potentialities of America can be traced in Ishmael’s project of creating the world differently, according to his vision and imagination. I thus concur with Fluck that Ishmael does not escape society by going to sea, but reconstitutes it on a new basis. “Ishmael retreats from the spleen of his own individuality,” Fluck writes, “into the democratic community of harpooners and sailors which presents something like an early multicultural utopia of a democratic, dehierarchized brotherhood” (“Cultures” 210). At sea, the order of the land is canceled out and different laws operate, laws that enable a utopian democratic order across racial and cultural faultlines.

Significantly, the order of the sea which Melville envisions through Ishmael is a *brotherhood*, an entirely male order that inextricably links the freedom and self-discovery which the sea promises with masculinity. The land, Jennifer M. Wing states, “is associated with women, domesticity, and civic responsibility while the sea represents an escapist voyage for men that leads them on a journey of self-discovery outside of a mundane reality” (111). Melville’s failure to create a developed female character in *Moby-Dick* has often been noted;<sup>8</sup> indeed, when Melville composed his novel, he seems to have not so much written for an *American* readership, but rather for a *male* American readership. He was convinced that “women have small taste for the sea,” as he wrote in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s wife, Sophia,<sup>9</sup> and he explicitly cautioned his friend Sarah

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<sup>8</sup> Joyce W. Warren, for instance, scolds Melville for surpassing “even Cooper in his failure to grant personhood to women: Melville hardly portrays women at all” (115). Women, she continues, are merely hazy memories and beautiful pieces of furniture that serve a decorative function but have no significance to the story. See also, Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy* (1983), David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (1989), and Emily Miller Budick, *Engendering the Romance* (1994) for discussions of *Moby-Dick* embedded in the re-organization of and discourse on gender in the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>9</sup> Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne entertained a very close relationship in 1950 to 1951, when they lived only a few miles apart from each other in Western Massachusetts. The climactic point of their friendship was certainly the publication of *Moby-Dick*, which Melville dedicated to Hawthorne in “admiration for his genius.” Many critics have suggested that the relationship between Hawthorne and Melville was homoerotically charged, if not even homosexual. See, for instance, Leland S. Person, *Aesthetic Headaches* (1988); David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (1989); James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville’s Pierre* (1993); Joseph Adamson, *Melville, Shame, and the Evil Eye* (1997); Brenda Wineapple, “Hawthorne and

Morewood not to read his novel: “Don’t you buy it—don’t you read it when it does come out, because it is by no means a sort of book for you” (*Letters* 138). He advised his Morewood to warn “all gentle and fastidious people” that “a Polar wind” blows through *Moby-Dick* and that his book is “not a piece of fine feminine ... silk” but woven of rougher, more masculine material such as “ships’ cables & hawsers” (*ibid.*).

Ostensibly written for a male audience, *Moby-Dick* is a novel “so outrageously masculine that we scarcely allow ourselves to do justice to its full scope of masculinism,” as Brodhead argues (“Introduction” 9). *Moby-Dick* is not only “outrageously masculine” for its exclusion of female characters but also for its perpetuation of gender stereotypes created by a patriarchal society and for its strict separation of spheres: women inhabit the land, the dangerous and treacherous realm of ‘reality,’ and are denied access to the freedom and liberation of the sea, the utopian and exclusively male realm (cf. Wing 116). At sea, male bonding structures the social order, but even in the absence of women, this bonding cannot escape sexual difference, as it depends upon an ‘other’ against which it can establish and define itself. In the absence of female characters, Melville’s male social order constitutes itself through the evocation of the feminine space of otherness, perpetuating the male position of power within the hegemony. In “Melville’s Geography of Gender,” Robyn Wiegman explores the interrelations between American democracy and representations of male bonding in Melville’s work, arguing that

Melville’s critique of the ideological structures fashioning the fraternity occupies an important moment in nineteenth-century American cultural production, foregrounding as it does the tensions within a social order fond of portraying itself as the standard of democracy for the world. This standard is contingent ... on diffusing cultural hierarchies of difference *among men*—a diffusion often achieved by casting the bond in seemingly uncivilized realms where the oppressive system of culture can be suspended. (Wiegman, “Gender” 735)

The most stable feature of the male bond is gender, as Wiegman states, which diffuses differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class and crafts a notion of masculinity that seems to be internally cohesive and universal. This diffusion of

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Melville; Or the Ambiguities” (2008); Robert Milder, “The Ugly Socrates: Melville, Hawthorne, and the Variety of Homoerotic Experience” (2008). For accounts of Hawthorne’s influence on the production of *Moby-Dick*, see, for instance, Hyatt H. Waggoner, *The Presence of Hawthorne* (1979) and Robert Sattelmayer, “Shanties of Chapters and Essays’: Rewriting *Moby-Dick*” (2008).

difference is, however, very much an *illusion*, because in *Moby-Dick*, masculinity is not only defined through the lens of sexual difference but very much so through race and sexuality. Male bonding has by definition a strong homoerotic element, which often borders on the sexual in *Moby-Dick*—most prominently, perhaps, in the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, a Polynesian pagan. Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg epitomizes the utopian democratic order Ishmael finds on board of the *Pequod* and significantly shapes his process of self-creation.

Ishmael first encounters Queequeg in the Spouter-Inn in New Bedford, where he seeks shelter for the night after having traveled all the way from New York to the shores of Massachusetts, determined to sign on a whaling ship. As all the inn's beds are occupied, Ishmael takes up the proposition of the landlord to share a bed with a harpooner, whom the landlord simply describes as "a dark complexioned chap" that, alluding to Queequeg's cannibalism, "eats nothing but steaks, and he likes 'em rare" (*MD* 16). Ishmael is suspicious and hesitant to share a bed with this stranger, but then reasons that he was in no danger, for "should we sleep together, he must undress and get into bed before I did" and that he might be "cherishing unwarrantable prejudices against this unknown harpooner" (*MD* 16-17). Despite the landlord's allusions to Queequeg's skin color and his "cannibal business," Ishmael is obtuse regarding the harpooner's racial identity and continues to be so even after he first catches sight of him. When he sees Queequeg's "dark, purplish, yellow" face, which he makes out to be "here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares," Ishmael supposes that "he's been in a fight, got dreadfully cut, and here he is, just from the surgeon" (*MD* 23). When he finally understands that Queequeg's black squares are not "sticking-plasters," but rather "stains of one sort or another," he takes Queequeg for a "white man ... who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them" (*ibid*). Under the misapprehension that Queequeg is a white man gone native, Ishmael scolds himself for his prejudices, moralizing that a man "can be honest in any kind of skin," but still wonders how Queequeg could have acquired such an "unearthly complexion" (*ibid*).

The comical effect of Ishmael and Queequeg's initial encounter arises not only from Ishmael's failure to perceive Queequeg's racial difference when he believes the harpooner to have fallen victim to savages, but also from his own unintentional blurring and crossing of racial boundaries in his actions. When he learns that he

will have to share a bed with Queequeg, he frantically searches the room for any clues that might reveal something about the identity of the harpooner and puts on the exotic vest Queequeg has left behind. He compares the vest to “a large door mat, ornamented at the edges with little tinkling tags something like the stained porcupine quills round an Indian moccasin” and likens its fit to “South American ponchos” (*MD* 22).<sup>10</sup> As Matthew Frankel explains, the apparel of the ‘dark complexioned’ stranger “signals a pastiche of racial and ethnic codes within the narrative’s broader epistemological drama”—codes, however, that Ishmael cannot decipher. After “prancing about the room for a bit,” Frankel continues, “Ishmael checks himself just before this nervous romp turns unwittingly into racial mimicry” (129). Just before the logic of performance would have him ‘blackening up,’ Ishmael stops his quasi-minstrelsy and, as he sees his reflection in a “bit of glass stuck against the wall” and finds himself caught in the confusion his mirror-image produces, he quickly takes off the vest (*MD* 22). In this scene, Ishmael comes closest to performing as black and embodying racial otherness—a performance which comes back to haunt him aboard the *Pequod*,<sup>11</sup> the whaleship he and Queequeg sign on.

Only when Queequeg undresses in front of him does Ishmael realize that the harpooner “must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaleman in the South Seas,” for Queequeg does not only bear black marks on his face but also on his back and his legs were marked “as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms” (*MD* 24). Queequeg’s precise racial identity is difficult to determine; he is a South Sea Islander with Native American traits,<sup>12</sup> apparently a Moslem (he celebrates Ramadan) yet also an

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<sup>10</sup> These descriptions later merge in Ishmael’s characterization of whale skin as an “Indian poncho” (*MD* 334), which alludes to a racialization and ethnification of whales in *Moby-Dick*.

<sup>11</sup> The whaleship’s name notably foreshadows its fate and suggests that the whale-hunt has been doomed from its very beginning. Melville introduces the ship with the information that “*Pequod*, you will no doubt remember, was the name of a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes” (*MD* 77). Melville’s choice of words betrays the fact that the Pequot tribe was exterminated in a gruesome massacre in 1637, and did not fall victim to a process of natural selection. By paralleling the fate of the Pequot tribe with that of the *Pequod* crew and Ahab, in particular, Melville establishes a kinship between the Native Americans and the captain, which confuses clear definitions of ‘victim’ and ‘culprit’ and simply renders all of them doomed subjects of a predestined narrative (cf. Dimock 116-118).

<sup>12</sup> Yukiko Oshima points out that Queequeg’s Native American characteristics are oftentimes neglected, arguing that he performs Native Americanness through various Native symbols and practices, such as his tomahawk or the ritual of smoking a peace pipe with Ishmael. Furthermore, Oshima explains, among “the three nonwhite harpooners, Queequeg is depicted closer to Native American Tashtego than to African Daggoo in terms of their eating and in their professional abilities” (245).

African “heathen,” as Ishmael concludes when he catches sight of Queequeg’s “Congo idol” (ibid). As Robert K. Martin remarks, Queequeg is a “composite nonwhite figure” that illustrates the “links between the deconstruction of the Indian, the enslavement of the black, and the colonization of all nonwhite peoples” and stands as “representative of all darker races subjugated by Western belief in progress and civilization” (79). Ishmael’s apparent confusion over Queequeg’s—and his own—racial identity finds comic relief when Queequeg joins Ishmael in bed and, astonished to find another man there, threatens Ishmael with his tomahawk. It is in this second look Ishmael takes on Queequeg that he apprehends the latter’s humanness: “What’s all this fuss I was making about, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am: he has as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him” (*MD* 26). Concluding that Queequeg was a rather “clean, comely looking cannibal” and that it was better to “sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian,” Ishmael and the harpooner go back to bed (ibid).

When Ishmael wakes up in Queequeg’s arms the next morning, however, he is again struck by a strange sensation. Queequeg embraces Ishmael “in the most loving and affectionate manner” so that, as Ishmael remarks, “you had almost thought I had been his wife” (*MD* 28). Queequeg’s “bridegroom clasp” reminds Ishmael of a similar circumstance during a sixteen-hour confinement in his bed as a punishment by his stepmother, when he woke up in the middle of the night and felt a “supernatural hand” placed in his: “My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the [supernatural] hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside” (*MD* 29). Similar to the supernatural hand of his childhood memory, Queequeg’s arm, even though not evoking any fear, arouses an inexplicable feeling of strangeness in Ishmael. Ishmael’s likening of the two events suggests that the earlier event, in which he was touched by a hand that grew out of nothingness and absolute strangeness, contains the essence of the later event, in which he feels the touch of a stranger.<sup>13</sup> As Paul Brodtkorb explains with regard to this scene, “if it is the characteristic of

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<sup>13</sup> Harry Levine also offers an interesting interpretation of this episode. As Levine points out, Ishmael recalls that his stepmother punished him for attempting to climb up the chimney and that, without her intervention, his childish prank “would have had the effect of blackening Ishmael” (169). Waking up wrapped in the blackness of Queequeg’s arms, Ishmael’s childhood flirtation with blackness comes full circle and finds its completion, which Ishmael seems to find comforting: “I turned in, and never slept better in my life,” he recounts (*MD* 27).

the strange to be only relatively explicable, it is characteristic of nothingness to resist any explanation whatsoever” (111). Queequeg suddenly gives shape and form to the supernatural hand that traumatized Ishmael; in Queequeg, the nothingness can take concrete form and the absolute strangeness becomes a strangeness in degree. According to Brodtkorb, nothingness, “the void, absence, non-meaning, nonform, noncoherence—this is what secretly underlies the present experience of Queequeg’s arm concealed beneath the present’s merely relative strangeness,” and strange nothingness is also what Ishmael experiences as both fascinating and threatening (ibid). Just as the supernatural hand, this scene implies, Queequeg stirs up the ‘other’ within Ishmael; or, put differently, Queequeg is suggested to be the earthly manifestation of a specter that haunts Ishmael’s subconscious<sup>14</sup>—not a frightening specter, to be sure, but unsettling, nevertheless, as he reminds Ishmael of the disturbing ghosts of his childhood.

The interracial ‘marriage’ between Ishmael and Queequeg, which they consummate in a pagan ritual of smoking the pipe and embracing each other in their second night at the Inn, suggests that the two are complementary: Queequeg, the racial ‘other,’ is the embodiment of Ishmael’s internalized fears, the otherness within himself. However, as Martin is quick to point out, their marriage is much more than that. On a broader level, it is “at once a violation of cultural and racial expectations and a violation of sexual expectations,” a transgression of cultural norms that provides invaluable insights into the politics of race and sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century (79). Martin detects “radical social potential” in the relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael, because he believes that the depiction of “nonaggressive male-bonded couples” has the power to contest and even defeat patriarchy (70).<sup>15</sup> Male friendship and the display of same-sex

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<sup>14</sup> I take cue here from Wendy Stallard Flory, who suggests that “Queequeg can easily be seen as the embodiment of a psychological dimension of both Ishmael and Melville-as-Ishmael” (96).

<sup>15</sup> Robyn Wiegman and Benjamin DeMott contest Martin’s interpretation, arguing that narratives of interracial male bonding in American literature, film, and television are essentially conservative and regressive, insofar as they substitute an “image of democratic fraternity” for “the historical contestations between black and white men” (Wiegman, *Anatomies* 118). By showing us “a land where whites are unafraid of blacks, where blacks ask for and need nothing from whites ... and where the revealed sameness of the races creates shared ecstatic highs” (DeMott 15), such narratives implicitly reassure their white audiences that “[r]ace problems belong to the passing moment. Race problems do not involve group interests and conflicts developed over centuries. Race problems are being smoothed into nothingness, gradually, inexorably, by goodwill, affection, points of light” (DeMott 11-12). Wiegman and DeMott both acknowledge that there *is* a radical democratic potential in narratives of interracial relationships, but both see that potential compromised by the narratives’ ability to make us believe that goodwill can overcome powerful ideologies and conflicts that have developed over centuries.

affection are used deliberately to construct an alternative to dominant patterns of love and relationships, which finds its initiation on land and blossoms on board of the *Pequod*. That is to say, the relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael is one aspect of *Moby-Dick's* greater political venture of pinpointing the discrepancy between the egalitarian discourse of American democracy and the realities of nineteenth-century American culture by putting gestures of otherness and deviance from the norm at the center of Ishmael's world-making process.

Melville accomplishes this political venture through the installation of a "double-voiced discourse" which appropriates authorized, hegemonic discourse and parodies that discourse at the same time, thus troubling the validity and legitimacy of the language Ishmael speaks (Porter 94). By giving voice to the 'other' while ostensibly speaking the culturally legitimate language, Ishmael not only crosses and blurs boundaries but, furthermore, establishes his authority as creator and world-maker. Through his parodic appropriations Ishmael usurps, absorbs, and disperses authority. Authority, just like truth and reality, is never absolute and to a certain degree always determined by ideology and (cultural) politics; therefore, its power can be effectively undermined through the diffusing effect of parody and the subsequent collapse of all preconceived socio-cultural hierarchies.

In her seminal study *Shadow over the Promised Land*, Carolyn Karcher has argued that "slavery and racism" were "pressing concerns of his [Melville's] that he kept bringing up in his antebellum novels and tales," in some of which they constituted "crucial themes," most notably in *Moby-Dick* (3).<sup>16</sup> Melville places Ishmael in a world where the socio-cultural hierarchies of race, sexuality, and class can no longer explain identity, which Ishmael's interracial homoerotic encounter with Queequeg aptly demonstrates. The negotiation of Ishmael's identity, in other words, is complicated by the deconstruction of social structures and the destabilization of a clearly definable center where meaning could be fixed. Rather, meaning—and identity—must be "continuously constructed and reconstructed in the midst of ceaseless semantic flux" (Powell 153). Ishmael's narrative is thus not only a performance of self-creation but, at the same time, also a performance of

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<sup>16</sup> In *Subversive Genealogy*, Rogin understands Melville as "a recorder and interpreter of American society," who was "particularly sensitive to the American crisis [of bourgeois society]" in the middle of the nineteenth century (xi). This crisis, Rogin states, "entered politics by way of slavery and race rather than class," and therefore Melville's preoccupation with these problems hardly comes as a surprise (ibid).

(self-)deconstruction, up to a point where all certainty and stability are lost in the bottomless depths of the sea and meaning has to be sought elsewhere. The confrontation between the “destructive whiteness of the whale” and the “remarkable diversity of the *Pequod*’s crew” dramatizes the constant re-negotiation and re-construction of identity and meaning in *Moby-Dick* (ibid), shifting discussions over citizenship, democracy, and nationalism from land to sea, where cultural and racial diversity can be articulated and re-negotiated under different conditions. The *Pequod* can thus be read as a metaphor for an alternative democracy, that is, as a multicultural utopia in which men of different races, ethnicities, cultures, and creeds join into a dehierarchized fraternity.<sup>17</sup> Even though an equation of the *Pequod* with the American nation is limiting and misleading, it is still worthwhile to read it as an alternative to American democracy and to put its utopian vision into the context of the conflict between the nation’s increasing multicultural diversity and its imaginings of the default U.S. citizens as a white man. Situating the utopian reconstitution of society in *Moby-Dick* within the cultural context of the novel’s production sheds light on normative national identity, racial inequality, and power relations in nineteenth-century American culture.

“More than any other issue,” John Bryant writes, “race is the crucial defining element of the American democratic experiment because it has us ask questions that probe the foundations of being, freedom, and equality” (12). More than any other scenery, the *Pequod* provides an ideal stage to act out an alternative to, or an ideal version of, the American democratic experiment and to reflect on national conflicts in a safe environment far away from U.S. territory and from the cultural norms and social structures that govern it. The *Pequod* is a testing ground for the dramatization of the nation’s conflicts and its potential resolutions, arranged and directed by Melville as part of his exploration of the potential of fiction to construct imaginary worlds and to further his own self-development.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> See also Fluck, “Cultures” 210. For concrete comparisons of the *Pequod* with nineteenth-century American culture and the American nation see, for instance, Rogin, who writes that the *Pequod* “brings with it the interracial society, the structure of authority, and the industrial apparatus of nineteenth-century America” (*Genealogy* 108), or Martin, who states that the *Pequod* “can be understood in many ways as the American nation—as we have seen, pursuing profit and power under the guise of morality” (88). I believe that an equation of the *Pequod* with the American nation limits the scale of *Moby-Dick*’s utopian vision which is not restricted to American democracy but rather sketches a universal ideal of an egalitarian community.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see Richard Brodhead, who argues that with *Mardi*, Melville began to explore new possibilities of fiction: “The act of writing, Melville here came to believe, could have more



performance quality of *Moby-Dick* is thus deeply entwined with Melville's very particular approach to authorship and literature and his self-fashioning as 'world-maker.' As Wai-Chee Dimock states, authorship was "almost exclusively an exercise in freedom" to Melville, "an attempt to proclaim the self's sovereignty over and against the world's" (7). As Melville elaborates on the role of the author in a letter to John Murray, authorship must free itself from the "dull and common places" and indulge in its own "play of freedom and invention" (*Letters* 70), in order to bring forth "those deep far-away things in [itself]," as he states in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (116). To him, the art of authorship is the art of escape and the quest for Truth, for "in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands" and can only be found elsewhere ("Mosses" 117). 'Elsewhere,' for Melville, is the sea, the incontrollable—but also uncorrupted—'other' to the well-ordered land: "You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in," he writes, suggesting that Truth has a spatial dimension and that one needs a big stage to deliver it properly (118).

The absolute Truth Melville speaks of is, of course, a permanently displaced ideal that can never be fully obtained but only claimed through performative acts. As Melville explained to Hawthorne, visible truth is the "apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not ... the man who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature" (qtd in Dimock 7). Only individuals who can call themselves 'imperial selves' in consciousness and conduct can access Truth; that is, individuals who are at once sovereign and unassailable like empires, their selfhood constituted like a national polity. As Dimock explains, in the context of Melville, "the mutuality between self and nation produces an individual who, being empirelike, can finally have at his disposal the 'sea-room' that Truth demands" (8). There is a circular logic at work here: If the imperial self is at once autonomous and empirelike, then it is in every sense an emperor whose word is Truth. The imperial self has access to Truth, then, because it has the authority to create and determine the essence of Truth. Furthermore, the imperial self articulates its individualism in

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interesting aims than to tell stories or rehearse experience. More energetically pursued, writing could be a means of self-development. ("Introduction" 13). See also Fluck, who, relying on Brodhead, has suggested to conceive of Melville's literary ambitions as an exercise in self-empowerment by means of fiction. "Melville set out to explore the potential of literature to rhetorically construct imaginary worlds," Fluck writes, "and, in the process, to appropriate whole libraries of geographical, philosophical and literary knowledge in order to put himself in the center of this new universe of texts" ("Cultures" 208).

imperial terms, that is, it articulates not only Truth but also its own sovereignty, both in terms of laying claim to autonomy and freedom as well as to dominion and self-expansion. Unadulterated truth is thus surrendered to autonomy, power, and authority, and secured within the hegemonic discourses of a given culture—or, as Foucault would say, truth cannot exist in isolation from culture, but is always discursive.

Melville's claim to freedom and quest for truth in his fiction, Dimock suggests, resonated strongly with the language of antebellum expansionist discourse and Thomas Jefferson's praise of America as an "empire for liberty" (qtd in Dimock 9). Truth (or the quest for Truth), it follows, is translated into geographical expanse and embodied by a corporeal self that stands as *pars pro toto* for the whole nation. Seemingly antagonistic terms, 'empire' and 'liberty' are instrumentally conjoined in the discourse of expansionism, as Dimock pinpoints: "If the former stands to safeguard the latter, the latter, in turn, serves to justify the former. Indeed, the conjunction of the two, of freedom and dominion, gives America its sovereign place in history—its Manifest Destiny, as advocates so aptly call it" (9).<sup>19</sup> The logic of Manifest Destiny, "as a powerful account of national and individual destiny, an account that conferred on both the nation and the self a sense of corporeal autonomy in space, and teleological ascendancy in time," does not only shape Melville's authorial enterprise but has also found its way into the visions of American democracy he sketches in *Moby-Dick* (11). The notion of Manifest Destiny is defined by a spatialization of time, for in order to be 'manifest,' America's future must become 'destiny' and thus mapped spatially, so that it becomes immanent, providential, and legible. *Moby-Dick*, Dimock suggests, "demonstrates just this spatialized economy" (15), as its meditation on American democracy and nationalism is entrenched in the depiction of American identity embodied by the *Pequod* and its erratic voyage from Nantucket to the Azores, down the South American coast, around the Cape of Good Hope, through the China Sea and the Pacific. However, rather than examine *Moby-Dick's* affinity to Manifest Destiny, I want to focus on the spatialization and embodiment of Truth.

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<sup>19</sup> The notion of Manifest Destiny was coined by John L. O'Sullivan in 1845 to promote the annexation of Texas, and it was quickly adopted as a slogan by promoters of the seizure of Oregon. O'Sullivan, an ardent literary nationalist and political expansionist, wrote in the *Democratic Review* that America had a 'manifest destiny' to spread its free institutions across the continent and he demanded the extension of American sovereignty to the Pacific (cf. Rogin, *Genealogy* 72-73).

The quest for Truth and the claim for empire conflate in the totalitarian rule of the *Pequod's* Captain Ahab. Ahab is probably *Moby-Dick's* most complex character: an enigmatic, powerful man, driven by vengeance and the mad desire to kill the White Whale that has taken one of his legs, Ahab is characterized by his crew as both “a swearing good man” and a “grand, ungodly, god-like” tyrant (*MD* 88).<sup>20</sup> Aboard the *Pequod*, the ‘problem’ with Ahab is that he poses a threat to democracy and egalitarianism. “A view of the book as a new democratic utopia,” Fluck argues, “finds its limits in the strong presence of Ahab,” whose rule on board is absolute and who deliberately jeopardizes the lives of his crew (“Cultures” 210). There is no doubt that Ahab is the leader on the whaleship, seeing how his sheer presence, burning with “an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable willfulness” mesmerizes Ishmael and the crew (*MD* 135). Ahab’s stature and posture thus does justice to his name, for, as Captain Peleg explains to Ishmael, “*he's Ahab ... and Ahab of old ... was a crowned king!*” (*MD* 88). Ahab shares Ishmael’s fate of bearing an Old Testament name, namely that of a “wicked king” who died a bloody and gruesome death, Ishmael remarks to Peleg (*ibid*). Peleg warns Ishmael to “never say that on board the *Pequod*. Never say it anywhere. Captain Ahab did not name himself,” nor was the name chosen by his father, but rather arbitrarily given to him by “his crazy, widowed mother” in a “foolish, ignorant whim” (*ibid*). Or is it Ishmael who names Ahab ‘Ahab’ to emphasize that the captain is fatefully doomed? Ahab is characterized by a certain artificiality: he is a compound of texts, an intertextual amalgamation of literary figures, and a role-player, whose “unmistakable element of allegorical and theatrical excess ... signals that his tragedy is staged (occasionally in an almost literal sense),” and it is this theatrical gesture which leaves a lasting impression and underlines the dimension of performance in *Moby-Dick* (Fluck, “Cultures” 212).<sup>21</sup>

Ahab’s crisis of identity is severe and dominates his actions, as his ultimate goal is not only to slay the whale that dismembered him but, furthermore, to escape his fateful name. “Is Ahab, Ahab?” the captain asks himself in an erratic

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<sup>20</sup> David Reynolds states that Ahab is “simultaneously the towering immoral reformer striking through the mask, the ungodly, godlike oxymoronic oppressor, the justified criminal taking revenge against a being that has injured him, and the attractively devilish sea captain of Dark Adventure fiction” (551). Reynolds suggests to therefore read Ahab as a mythical character of the same quality as Faust, King Lear, Hamlet, and Prometheus—as a man who sets out on a quest for truth that ultimately proves to be self-destructive and unsuccessful.

<sup>21</sup> On the theatrical dimension of Ahab, see also Dieter Schulz, esp. 325.

monologue, in which he reflects upon the source of his obsession and surrenders to a higher power that, he believes, dictates his actions. “What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time,” Ahab wonders, placing himself in the position of a powerless subject that follows the rule of an omnipotent “lord and master” (*MD* 592). Subscribing himself to the will of God, Ahab conjoins his name with the Bible, fate, and prophesy, rendering himself revoked of all agency and unable to escape the position of the doomed, victimized son: “Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” Ahab asks himself, “[How] can this small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I” (*ibid*).

The “best hope for a doomed man,” as Dimock puts it, are thoughts of anguish and vengeance—and of those thoughts Ahab has plenty (130). Ahab believes in vengeance as a form of poetic justice, because for him, dismemberer and dismembered are metaphysically connected. To satisfy his vengeance, in other words, he would need to inflict pain on the one that caused him pain, which is a model of retribution that “entails not the spatial containment of victim and victimizer, but the temporal reversal of positions between the two” (Dimock 129). The point of Ahab’s undertaking is, in short, to trade places with the whale in time and move from the position of the victim to the victimizer. Ahab claims time as his ally, which works in his interest and will eventually lead him to his goal:

Nor, at the time, had it failed to enter his monomaniac mind, that all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe; and he too plainly seemed to see, that as the most poisonous reptile of the marsh perpetuates his kind as inevitably as the sweetest songster of the grove; so, equally with every felicity, all miserable events do naturally beget their like. ... [S]ome guilty mortal miseries shall still fertilely beget to themselves an eternally progressive progeny of griefs beyond the grave. (*MD* 505-506).

The ‘genealogy’ of vengeance Melville establishes affirms Ahab’s sense of victimization and injury and relativizes the magnitude of his undertaking: Ahab may die, but the wrong that has been done to him will never die out, because it will “beget” an “eternally progressive progeny of griefs beyond the grave.” While he will eventually perish, his vengeance satisfied or not, his position will remain and someone else will take his place. As Dimock summarizes the problem, “Ahab’s

'genealogy' represents an apparent tautology that refuses to be one," as his "syntax of vengeance ... turns out to be anything but circular" (130). Quite to the contrary, it activates "a temporal process, a process of reversals at once inevitable and interminable" (ibid). To contain Ahab and keep his vengeance under control, Melville employs another tautology of five simple words: "Ahab is for ever Ahab" (*MD* 611). Those are Ahab's own words, spoken defiantly on the second day of his chase for Moby Dick, as if he had to discursively counter the impending sense of his own mortality.

The fact that Ahab says the words "Ahab is for ever Ahab" to himself is symptomatic of Ahab's tendency to speak in monologues and talk primarily to himself. As Porter points out, "Ahab comes to us as a man incapable of dialogue, for conversation as a social medium requires at least the equality of a shared discourse, even if not of a shared social status, and Ahab shares neither" (103). When he talks to himself, in his own speech, Ahab is fully present, possessed by his own language "exhibit[ing] no discursive boundaries" that would contain his ranting (ibid). The only containment he knows is the simple "Ahab is for ever Ahab." This sentence constructs a logic of individualism that begins and ends with the self, in which Ahab is completely characterized, defined, and doomed by his name. In an instance of *nomen est omen*, Ahab's words suggest that he cannot be anything outside the signification of his name—he can only be the slain king, a personification of the name he bears, a signifier of his own fate. To be Ahab is to know always already know one's ending, because the ending is synonymous with the beginning and nothing more than a reenactment of what has previously been. Ahab's hope for change is therefore futile—his doom inscribed in his name and predestined, and time is not his ally but his enemy, as his narrative of doom is a timeless, eternal design that will repeat itself "for ever" (cf. Dimock 131-132).

Just as Ishmael's evasive and imprecise language mirrors the provisionality and continuous transfiguration of his identity, Ahab's mad rhetoric of victimization and anguish contains the terror and grandeur of his complex character. Ahab's language is caught "between the wound to the body and the wound to the soul" that he suffered from the whale, on the one hand, and from his fateful name, on the other (Peretz 55). At times, Ahab loses control over his language which, "exposed to the wound of the whale's address, collapses into a series of almost inarticulate *cries and shouts*" that create a fierce tension between

“his language as embodying the drive to hunt the whale and his language as a shattering and pathos laden cry or wail” (ibid). However, in this tension ostensibly lies the power and potency of Ahab’s language: the famous quarter-deck scene, which is often referenced to illustrate Ahab’s rhetoric of persuasion, is probably the scene in which the tension in Ahab’s language is most fully realized. In this scene, Ahab “conflates the rationality of the social contract with the demonic dynamism of religious communion to mold the crew to his purpose,” Castronovo writes, and thus manifests his power through skillful oratory (92). While Castronovo moves on to read this scene as an American story of progress that ignores resistance and transgression, I believe that Pease’s reading of the quarter-deck scene as a scene of “cultural persuasion” is more useful for shedding light on the dynamics between the captain and his crew, democratic principles on board, and interracial relations on the *Pequod*. According to Pease, Ahab tries to “resolve the conflict between his purposes and their [the crew’s] everyday activities” by releasing them from his motive of vengeance and the motive of financial profit, placing the crew in a realm where they function as his tools (*Compacts* 242). The crew, in other words, has lost control over themselves and their actions; they do not understand the real motives for their actions, but they are filled with enthusiasm and inspiration to complete the task of killing Moby Dick.

Ahab’s oratory and his performance as the shamanic commander of the *Pequod* furthermore poses questions concerning racial otherness and blackness, in particular. In the quarter-deck scene, Ahab’s “ritual orchestrations” continuously invoke his pagan harpooners’ racial otherness—“yet, because it is ritual, this invocation reduces their being to only a symbolic dimension” (Castronovo 92-93). The particularities of Queequeg, Daggoo, and Tashtego are forfeited for the purpose of Ahab’s ritual and they become mere players in his greater scheme of killing the whale, tools he can employ to reach his goal if he can keep them under his spell. Ishmael tries to resist that spell, even though he has to concede that also his “shouts had gone up with the rest” and that he participated in Ahab’s feud (*MD* 194). However, Ishmael quickly articulates his dissent from Ahab through a manipulation of the narrative, which lets him dive deeper into the relation between whiteness and blackness. In contrast to Ahab, to whom his crew are merely flat and symbolic figures, Ishmael is keen on finding the human essence in Queequeg and on recounting the particularities of his friend. In contrast to Ahab, to whom

the white whale is the manifestation of all evil, Ishmael's fascination with the strange and unknown animates him to concern himself more closely with difference and categorization, which results in a meticulous dissection of the anatomy of the whale. Furthermore, Ishmael's pseudo-scientific dissection of the whale in the novel's "Cetology section" is a wonderful parody on the hierarchization of race and ethnicity, and a witty meditation on the constructedness of whiteness and blackness.

### **The Blackness of the Whale**

Ishmael's desire to explore racial difference is set in motion by Queequeg and the night they spend at the Spouter-Inn, which lets him reconsider the appropriateness of the terms 'savage' and 'un/civilized,' for Ishmael catches himself "watching all his toilet motions" as if Queequeg were an animal in a zoo, while Queequeg offers Ishmael privacy and leaves the room in "civility and consideration" (*MD* 30). Ishmael concludes that the 'savage' may be more 'civilized' than he is, musing that "the truth is, these savages have an innate sense of delicacy, say what you will; it is marvelous how essentially polite they are" (*ibid*). The difference between him and Queequeg, Ishmael seems to discover, is one in degree and not in kind, because he finds that a white man is hardly "anything more dignified than a white-washed negro" (*MD* 66), and that difference cannot be explained in absolutes of 'black' and 'white.' This insight of his culminates in his contemplation of Queequeg's perfect, noble head, which reminds him of George Washington's, and in his observation that "Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed" (*MD* 56). Both the 'dark savage' and the founding father, Ishmael suggests, exhibit a phrenologically excellent head and thus the same cranial capacity to conceive of ideals like democracy, freedom, and fraternity.<sup>22</sup> This ironic subversion of America's narrative, Castonovo argues, emerges "not only out of the gap between truth and national authority, but out of the seams of that authority itself" (87). American national authority is reaffirmed in the celebration of Washington's physiognomic excellence, but "takes on a subversive, if not murderous, intent toward the patriarchal myths, legacies, and

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<sup>22</sup> Harold Aspiz remarks that phrenology "was a quasi-scientific cure-all that refracted the popular spirit of democratic optimism. Some prominent Americans in the middle of the nineteenth century were lured by its appeal" ("Phrenologizing" 21). The most popular preacher of the day, for instance, Henry Ward Beecher, "acclaimed phrenology as the great American secular faith, providing the infallible index to human worth and facilitating the scientific creation of a better race of men" (*ibid*).

institutions that undergirded the nation” in the likening of Washington to Queequeg, to his “cultural opposite” (ibid).

Queequeg provides the impetus for Ishmael’s redemption by demonstrating their equality in body and mind. His good heart and his humanity indicate “the fallacious nature of racist biological classification,” which motivates Ishmael to employ his “double-voiced discourse to appropriate and subvert ethnology’s authority” (Castronovo 88). Through Queequeg, who is visibly ‘other’ in the American mind, Ishmael begins to examine the cultural norms and dominant discourses of his time, ultimately parodying and undermining those discourses in his discussion of the classificatory system of cetology. In his system of discrimination he contemplates to follow Linnaeus’s System of Nature and “separate the whales from the fish,” but then, calling upon “holy Jonah” to back him, decides to rather “take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish” and proceeds to carefully divide his ‘scientific’ study into books, folios, chapters, and subheadings, thus wittily mirroring biological classification in textual classification (*MD* 147-148).<sup>23</sup> Ishmael assumes an authoritative position from which he discriminates between different kinds of whales, mixing ‘scientific’ with parodic language in his assessments and thus undermining the very position he speaks from. Of the humpback, for instance, he writes: “He is the most gamesome and light-hearted of the whales, making more gay foam and white water generally than any other of them” (*MD* 152). The Fin-Back is a “very shy” whale (*MD* 151), he asserts, while the Black Fish, or “Hyena Whale,” carries “an everlasting Mephistophelean grin” (*MD* 153). Ishmael measures the whale’s worth in the quality and quantity of the oil it produces, arguing that the Right Whale’s oil, for example, is “an inferior article in commerce” (*MD* 150), while the Hyena Whale may “yield ... upwards of thirty gallons of oil” (*MD* 154). With his deliberately ridiculous and untenable hypotheses, Ishmael puts the authority that permits classifications between different types of whales—and different types of humans—into question and mocks the uselessness of science to disclose the truth about men and beasts.

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<sup>23</sup> Mark K. Burns argues that Ishmael’s choice to label his categories with “the names of different types of books, with chapters as in a book being used for the subdivisions within each category” underscores the “arbitrary nature” of his system of classification” (202). As Burns explains, the “literariness of these categories stresses the constructed, artificial, even fictive nature of the divisions that Ishmael will establish: he is forced to borrow a classification system from a completely different field because there is no system inherent within the body of the whale itself” (ibid).



Ishmael's performance as amateur naturalist is one of several different perspectives from which he inquires into the "ungraspable phantom of life" that is "the key to us all," that is, the locus of absolute Truth (*MD* 5). Ishmael never arrives at a final answer; the cetology chapter primarily serves to point out the futility of the endeavor of establishing a system of classification, implying that "the process of classification ... becomes an artificial, arbitrary, subjective exercise in hopelessness" (Burns 203). Ishmael's project of dissecting the whale remains necessarily unfinished, as he is aware that he can only provide a partial map of the vast terrain the whale covers and that the attempt to establish an "accurate, objective, meaningful order among things is always a necessarily flawed enterprise" (*ibid*). The project of classification is man-made and thus by definition slippery and flawed, Melville suggests via Ishmael, who finally arrives at an entirely un-scientific understanding of the whale. He turns the whale into a "synecdoche for life's deepest mystery" (Wilson 233), suggesting that life, truth, and the whale share an indefiniteness and an inexhaustibility that renders them essentially unrepresentable: while some "portrait[s]", or interpretations of the whale, "may hit the mark much nearer than another," the whale "must remain unpainted to the last," Ishmael claims, for the whale is defined by his being ungraspable, mysterious, and unfathomable (*MD* 289).

The chapter on cetology teaches a lesson in the difficulty—if not impossibility—of establishing firm and objective systems of classification in general. If the classification of whales "is a nonobjective process in spite of whales' external or anatomical differences and similarities," then, it is implied, "the classification of human beings into races proves equally problematic and nonexact in spite of our own apparent differences and similarities" (Burns 204). While the encounter with Queequeg encourages Ishmael to reflect on blackness and the opposition of 'savagery' and 'civilization,' the hunt for Moby Dick leads him to philosophize on the meaning of whiteness and on his own position in the faulty system of racial classification. As Ishmael remarks in "Cetology," "blackness is the rule among almost all whales," the norm against which all variations are measured (*MD* 153). Moby Dick, the white whale, is consequently the exception from the rule, a whale that is marked as radically different because of his color, and—if one is to believe the *Pequod's* monomaniac captain—his ghastly whiteness already signifies that he is a dangerous, monstrous, and ferocious beast.

“What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid,” Ishmael states at the beginning of “The Whiteness of the Whale” (*MD* 204), in which he tries to look beyond the “uncommon magnitude and malignity” that has been attributed to Moby Dick and the “terror he bred” because of his enormous size (*MD* 194-195). It has been speculated among whale-hunters that Moby Dick was not only ubiquitous, but immortal, Ishmael reports—a whale that could not be killed, for no spear in the world could harm him. Although Ishmael quickly refutes these “supernatural surmisings,” he acknowledges that

there was enough in the earthly make and incontestable character of the monster to strike the imagination with unwonted power. For, it was not so much his uncommon bulk that so much distinguished him from other sperm whales, but ... a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidal white hump. These were his prominent features; the tokens, whereby, even in the limitless, uncharted seas, he revealed his identity, at long distance, to those who knew him. (*MD* 198-199)

To Ahab, Moby Dick represents a bodily wound which he ‘repaired’ with a prosthetic leg made of whalebone ivory, but which can only be healed, he believes, with the White Whale’s death. Ishmael, however, focuses on the whale’s color and addresses Moby Dick as horrifying and appalling whiteness which induces panic and unspeakable terror. Ishmael is evidently surprised that the whale’s whiteness should appall him as much as it does, considering that “in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own” (*MD* 204). In spite of all associations of whiteness with purity, sublimity, and innocence, Ishmael finds “an elusive something” lurking in the “innermost idea of that hue,” which heightens panic and terror, especially if the whiteness is coupled with a terrible object (*MD* 205). After enumerating a long list of such ‘terrible objects,’ Ishmael has still not arrived at a conclusion as to *why precisely* he finds the whale’s whiteness appalling: “But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul” (*MD* 211-212).

Similar to his investigations in “Cetology,” Ishmael again arrives at a dead end, but this time he loses his orientation. The whale’s whiteness, Ishmael’s remark suggests, is an “overwhelming and enigmatic event that calls for the vocabulary of power,” but the introduction of that vocabulary results in “the collapse of his ability to speak and make sense, to be the master and author of a coherent story,” Peretz explains (69). Ishmael’s inability to comprehend the whiteness of the whale

results in long, seemingly endless sentences, in which he “breathlessly looks for and fails to find a meaningful place to rest, such respite continually postponed by his uneasy feeling that every suggestion he makes there still is something missing which, if found, would finally account for the full significance of whiteness and leave him satisfied and in peace” (ibid). All his attempts to isolate a fixed meaning he can assign to whiteness fail miserably, until he finally questions meaning altogether: “Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows...?” (*MD* 212).

Ishmael’s remarks visibly contain a paradox: on the one hand, he suggests that whiteness lacks meaning, represents blankness and the exhaustion of any possibility of meaning; on the other hand, whiteness triggers an excess or explosion of meaning, signifies the very origin of meaning, as it were. “The meaning itself is the whiteness, the blankness, the emptiness,” as Brodtkorb argues, suggesting that precisely because it is essentially nothing, whiteness can be made to be everything (118). The problem with the whale’s whiteness is that it is an ‘ungraspable phantom,’ that it is both a formless and incomprehensible being and the locus of an excess of meaning. However, if Ishmael wants to make sense of his participation in the erratic hunt for the whale, he needs to find a way to describe its whiteness, to contain it within language and within the limitations of his narrative.<sup>24</sup> Ishmael apprehends the whale as his double, or rather his self outside his self; that is to say, his examination of the whale inevitably entails an examination of himself and a reflection upon his own whiteness from an internal yet external position. Peretz makes a similar point when he argues that Ishmael perceives the whale’s whiteness as unsettling because it “marks him as white, and monstrous, riddle to himself and has to do with who he is” (73). His encounter with the White Whale and the power its whiteness resonates encourages a deep self-reflection that culminates in the loss of a stable identity, of the ability to even say his name, as he discovers that his whiteness is a riddle he cannot solve and that

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<sup>24</sup> See also Jürgen Peper: “Als solcher [metaphysischer Gegenstand] ist der Weiße Wal unbegreifbar vieldeutig, zeitlich unendlich und räumlich unfassbar ubiquitär” (61). In her analysis of the relation between the whale, individualism, and freedom, Wai-Chee Dimock suggests that *Moby Dick* defies the unworthy reader, will “always resist the reader, it will triumph over him, because its transcendent freedom is also a transcendent illegibility: it cannot be read, because it refers to nothing other than itself” (113).

it renders him an empty, formless, and blank being. When the *Pequod* finally crosses Moby Dick's way, the whale escapes Ahab's attempt to kill his dismemberer, the ship sinks, and everyone except Ishmael perishes in the ocean. As the hunt for the whale remains unsuccessful, the riddle of its whiteness—and of Ishmael's whiteness—can never be solved and Ishmael will forever be haunted by the ungraspable and unfathomable phantom.

Toni Morrison has famously argued that *Moby-Dick* testifies to Melville's "recognition of the moment in America when whiteness became ideology," when the question of race became an open wound and national trauma (personified by Ahab) and the institutionalization of whiteness as the norm and ideal pushed America into an irresolvable identity crisis ("Unspeakable 15). The point Morrison makes is worth stressing: "Melville is not exploring white *people*, but whiteness idealized," she argues ("Unspeakable" 16), referencing a passage from "The Whiteness of the Whale" in which Melville writes that "symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul" (*MD* 208). It is whiteness in its idealized form that *Moby-Dick* struggles with and cannot come to terms with because, Ishmael senses, its idealization and idolization can only be upheld through installing a fear of the 'other,' through a powerful ideology, and through mechanisms of exclusion. "Though in many of its aspects this visible [colored] world seems formed in love, the invisible [colorless, white] spheres were formed in fright," Ishmael concludes in his meditations on the whale's whiteness (*MD* 211).

Indeed, Morrison argues, the "necessity for whiteness as privileged 'natural' state, the invention of it, was ... formed in fright," because slavery weighed heavy on the dominant consciousness and caused a social and political rift that threatened to disintegrate the young nation in whose greatness Melville so ardently believed ("Unspeakable" 16). In his essay on the question of race in *Moby-Dick*, Frank V. Bernard reads Melville's novel as deeply entrenched in contemporary discussions on slavery and the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which declared that all runaway slaves be brought to their masters and was passed as part of the Compromise between North and South that quieted down the nation's internal conflicts. The hunt for Moby Dick, Bernard suggests, is Melville's metaphor for fugitive slaves and the violence done to whales reflect the violence

committed against slaves. In Bernard's reading, "the hated white whale suggests a black who can pass for white," a creature whose whiteness is uncanny and unsettling because it is not only blank and empty but also slippery and, as such, indicative of the instability inherent in the conjunction of whiteness and cultural hegemony (392). Rather than conceive of the whale as a creature that passes, I suggest to read it as an exaggeration of whiteness, that is, as a creature performing whiteface. The whale's ghastliness and 'unnatural' hue suggests that its whiteness is a stylized and artificial one, a mask 'painted' onto the whale's body in a gesture of cross-racial performance. In the play of whiteface, whiteness is rendered doubly non-sensical: because of the incongruence between body and mask it is illegible and incomprehensible; and, because the functionalizing of whiteness fails to achieve authenticity, what is performed is a fiction of whiteness that puts the very notion of authenticity into question. In other words, through the fictionalization of whiteness, whiteface troubles the invisibility of whiteness as a racial category and its hegemonic power.<sup>25</sup>

*Moby-Dick's* radical potential lies in its deliberate confusion and questioning of racial difference and white hegemony, that is, in its episodes of racial passing, blackening up, and assuming an ethnic voice, which scramble the social and cultural hierarchies that structured nineteenth-century American society. In this sense, *Moby-Dick* can be read as a piece of cultural criticism that grapples with the incoherencies and inconsistencies of American democracy. While racial subordination and white supremacy formed the American nation, "a paradox lies at the heart of the racial basis of the formation of the United States," Rogin argues ("Two Declarations" 6). Not only did the development of a distinctive national identity derive from the colonialization of Native land and black labor, but also from intimate encounters and interracial relationships between white people and people of color, which means that the transgression of racial boundaries is and has always been symptomatic of Americanness. The black whale masking itself as

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<sup>25</sup>As George Lipsitz analyzes in "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness," its invisibility is precisely the problem of whiteness. Whiteness is privileged in Western culture precisely *because* it is invisible, not particular, and not distinctive, which means (in the case of American culture) that "unless otherwise specified, 'Americans' means whites" (369). "Whiteness is everywhere in American culture, but it is very hard to see," Lipsitz states, because as "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (ibid). As Richard Dyer observes, whiteness generally escapes the radar when we talk about issues of race and ethnicity—'race' is a term that is quickly attributed to non-white peoples, but hardly ever to whites. As long as white people are not raced, that is, racially apprehended and named, they will function as the norm: "Other people are raced, we are just people" (*White* 1).

white, Ishmael's blackening up in Queequeg's clothes, and Queequeg's voice being enunciated by the racially unmarked Ishmael are all instances in which Americanness is not constructed *against*, but *through* racial difference and through blackness, in particular.

In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria uses the long history of Native American impersonation to pose broad questions of race and nation, suggesting that "blackness, in a range of cultural guises, has been an essential precondition for American whiteness" (5). Formless, blank, and empty, whiteness needs blackness in order to constitute itself, which becomes clear in Ishmael's repeated flirtations with blackness and the many moments in which he pauses to watch Queequeg and reflect upon their similarities and differences. The scene in which Ishmael puts on Queequeg's vest to embody the 'savage' alludes to the theatrical practice of blackface minstrelsy, a very popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century that served to "constitute national identity out of [the blacks'] subjugation," Rogin writes and continues: "White supremacy, white over black and red, was the content of this national culture; its form was black over white, blacking up [sic], and Indianization" ("Two Declarations" 1). Cultural self-expression and the articulation of Americanness assumed an ethnic voice; or, to put it differently, American self-definition *against* the racial other was preceded by American self-definition *as* the 'other.' This self-expression as 'other' is closely tied to a functionalizing of ethnicity that entails a gesture of self-critique and a negotiation of what it means to be American.<sup>26</sup>

Rogin establishes blackface as an artistic expression that is constitutive to American culture and national identity—a view which Eric Lott and others share, pointing out that blackface caricatured blacks and borrowed from black cultural material for the dissemination of whiteness.<sup>27</sup> The assuming of ethnic significance,

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<sup>26</sup> My argumentation relies Mita Banerjee's reading of the Boston Tea Party as an instance of 'redface' which takes the form of self-critique of the colonists' continued allegiance to the British crown. Through the assuming of an ethnic voice and ethnic garb, the colonists' resistance entailed a self-expression through ethnicity, that is, an early articulation of Americanness through redface. See Banerjee 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> See Lott's influential study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995). On the self-definition of America through a racial 'other,' see also Tischleder, who, in her reading of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), argues that the reproduction of black stereotypes has always been present in the white American imagination: "Der 'Beweis' der zivilisatorischen Untauglichkeit der Schwarzen, den diese Stereotypen führen, legitimiert und begründet auch nach der Aufhebung der Sklaverei die *whiteness* nationaler Identität ... In diesem Sinne ist *Birth of a Nation* lediglich ein besonders eklatantes Beispiel für die Art und Weise, wie das weiße Amerika schwarze Körper imaginiert und inszeniert, um sich selbst zu erfinden" (112). As Tischleder points out, *Birth of the Nation* is a prime example of black and white symbolism: "[Alles]

as Mita Banerjee states, “never evolved into an exploration of white – ethnic relations and hence into a self-exploration of whiteness *in ethnic terms* in the literal sense of this idea” (12-13). Ethnicity was rather turned into an instrument and made available for white functionalizing and the furthering of white idea(l)s. This functionalizing can only get into gear if the assuming of ethnic face met no resistance and ‘authentic’ blackness could be substituted with a black strategy, a *playing* black that is haunted by ethnic blackness. For the “non-sense” of blackface minstrelsy to be credible, Lott has argued, the African American had to be deprived of the power to take the stage and claim black minstrelsy for himself (18). Blackface, in other words, depends on the erasure of the referent ‘black’ in order to be made functional for American cultural self-definition. The black can disappear because he is given body and voice by the white performer who acts and speaks both *as* and *for* the ‘other.’

*Moby-Dick* complicates the notion of blackface, I suggest, in a gesture of what Banerjee has termed “ethnic ventriloquism.” While blackface minstrelsy depends on the unity of the subject and an ‘ethnic essence’ that can be assumed and caricatured, ethnic ventriloquism upsets this unity and works through the split between body and voice, Banerjee suggests: “By assuming an ethnic voice, the white subject creates a situation in which it is un-identical with itself. Ethnic ventriloquism represents the strategy of a white subject looking at itself through—presumably—ethnic eyes” (16). In *Moby-Dick*, the voices of Queequeg and the other ethnic characters are distorted as they can speak only through Ishmael who, in turn, is prompted to reflect upon himself and upon dominant cultural notions of race and ethnicity without jeopardizing the privileges of his whiteness. Ishmael’s introspection reaches a first climax when he wears Queequeg’s vest and, examining his reflection in the mirror, gazes at himself through the eyes of the ‘other.’ Queequeg only enters the novel after Ishmael’s blackening up; when Ishmael wears his friend’s vest, this is not an act of impersonating or performing as Queequeg, but rather a strategic functionalizing of ethnicity that provides deeper insights into Ishmael’s *own* racial identity than into the identity of his roommate. Ethnic ventriloquism is thus one of the shapes the culture of expressive individualism takes in *Moby-Dick*: blackening up is one of the many masks Ishmael puts on for the purpose of self-dramatization and the articulation of cultural

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Unzivilisierte, Sexuelle, Anarchische und betont Körperliche [wird] mit einem *blackface* versehen ..., während das Bild der Nation in Weiß gemalt wird” (111).

difference. By assuming an ethnic voice and embodying an alternative to dominant culture, as Ishmael does in this episode, dominant culture can be reflected upon, criticized, and reformed. The brief episode of blackening up is a kind of catalyst that triggers Ishmael's further considerations of racial difference and alternative democracies aboard the *Pequod*.

If the appropriation of an ethnic voice leads to introspection, ('white') self-knowledge, and self-critique, as Banerjee stresses throughout her study, then *Moby-Dick* can be said to end in Ishmael's recognition of the horrors of whiteness. The destructive forces of whiteness can only be escaped through the white narrator's approximation to ethnicity or a deliberate de-whitening, that is, through a blurring of racial difference which entails a democratization and the collapse of racial hierarchies. Ethnic ventriloquism does not *per se* subvert the hegemonic position of whiteness, but it makes visible an ethnic tinge, an inherent ambivalence, through which normative culture can be rethought and re-evaluated. As Banerjee points out, the underlying presumption of ethnic ventriloquism is that of a congruence between the 'ethnic' voice coming out of a white body and the one that a black body would have produced had it been able to. It is not so much that the ethnic subject is 'forbidden' to speak but rather, as Banerjee explains, that ethnic ventriloquism rests on the claim "that white articulation of ethnic meaning is rhetorical fulfillment: The white subject says what the ethnic subject would have said, but so much better" (17).

In *Jaws*, the ethnic subject has been displaced into oblivion. In this "middle-class *Moby-Dick*," as Biskind has called it (1), we encounter a male triad similar to the Ishmael-Queequeg-Ahab constellation of the *Pequod*, only that Brody, Hooper, and Quint are all ethnically white and that their whiteness does not seem threatened by an ethnic 'other.' Nevertheless, I argue, there is a subdued 'black threat' in this movie. As Jonathan Lemkin has argued, *Jaws* draws "can only toy with beliefs and anxieties we already have" and that "prowl unceasingly beneath the seemingly calm surface of consciousness" (11). I suggest that *Jaws* seeks to resolve the questions that have been left unresolved in *Moby-Dick* by finishing what Ishmael and the crew of the *Pequod* failed to do: kill the beast. Similar to *Moby Dick*, the killer shark in *Jaws* can be read as an ethnic other wearing a white mask, as a dark and ungraspable presence that lurks beneath the surface of the ocean and breaks through to unsettle hegemonic culture. The only way to undercut this



disruption and keep the dominant cultural structure intact is to kill the shark and restore the illusion of an idyllic, unified America. However, no one knows what other threatening, horrifying creatures reside in the depths of the ocean, waiting to rise to the surface. Therefore, the only sensible thing to do is, according to Brody, to stay out of the water.

### **The Shark's Teeth: Devouring Straight White Masculinity in *Jaws***

Similar to *Moby-Dick*, *Jaws* begins with the problem of identity. "What's your name again?" Tom Cassidy breathlessly asks a young woman he met at a nightly beach party as they run towards the ocean to take a swim. While she undresses and takes a leap into the water, the drunken Tom stumbles and passes out on the beach. In what is certainly one of the most famous scenes in movie history, Chrissie (so the young woman's name) is attacked in the water by what we presume to be a shark—we do not see her attacker on the screen—while Tom, unable to move, fails to enter the water and rescue her.<sup>28</sup> This kind of failure, Andrew Gordon suggests, "seems to affect all the men in *Jaws*," a film in which American masculinity finds itself in a moment of crisis (32). This crisis of masculinity is symbolized by the shark or, more precisely, by its devouring teeth. "You can be swallowed by a whale and still live. But the shark's jaws are the physical gates to the next world," Quirke writes (83). "The shark has pretty teeth," as Bertolt Brecht's Mack the Knife already observed, but when "he shows them pearly white," their perfect whiteness signify terror and death.<sup>29</sup>

Right from its very first scene, *Jaws* establishes itself as a film that struggles with nescience, doubt, and insecurity; it is a film that is driven by questions and

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<sup>28</sup> In terms of cinematic achievement, the opening sequence of *Jaws* has often been compared to the shower scene in *Psycho*. Gordon writes that "just as the shower scene in *Psycho* made people afraid to take showers, so *Jaws* made them afraid to swim in the ocean. ... Like the shower scene in *Psycho*, the opening of *Jaws* instills a sense of tension and dread so that I constantly anticipate danger" (33). The technique Spielberg uses to achieve this effect is radically different from Hitchcock's, however. While Hitchcock uses a staccato montage, which literally seems to cut the screen like a knife, leaving only fragmented images through which the viewer can imagine the attack, Spielberg uses long takes with virtually no camera movement. It is the victim that moves, as she is dragged back and forth, left and right, the camera capturing her agonized face. The viewer only sees what is happening above the water, and the scene is therefore "horrifying not only because of the woman's facial expressions, cries for help, and screams of pain but also because of the gruesome things I cannot see and *imagine* happening underwater" (34).

<sup>29</sup> "The Ballad of Mack the Knife" was composed by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht for their musical drama *Threepenny Opera*, which premiered in Berlin in 1928. The song's original German lyrics have been translated into English several times; I am quoting from the Blitzstein translation (1954), which has been used for recordings of the song by Louis Armstrong and Bobby Darin, and which is probably the best known English version of "Mack the Knife."

lack of knowledge rather than ascertainment and declarative statements. What's the girl's name? How did she die? Who will catch the shark that killed her? How can the shark be killed? Will the ocean ever be safe again? Will America ever be safe again?

In its essence, *Jaws* is a fable of man versus monster from the sea, a film with “mythic overtones in a tradition going back to the Bible (Leviathan, Jonah and the whale), *Beowulf*, and *Moby-Dick* (Gordon 29). The film is set on Amity Island, a fictional place off the Massachusetts coast that resembles Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket but that is ‘more American’ than either of those ‘real’ places.<sup>50</sup> As Jonathan Lemkin argues, *Jaws* is a film about America—“perhaps an America that does not exist and that never did, but one that the audience recognizes nonetheless” (4). Amity Island is a composition of elements from a variety of familiar American landscapes, which are brought together to form an ideal and mythic whole. In the process of that fusion of different elements “lies the power of the film evoke a place that everyone in the audience recognizes as ‘America’” (ibid). The setting is a typical American coastal town, an idyllic landscape that only exists in the American cultural imaginary: It is a depiction of the rural ideal and, in that sense, “the truest America. It is also a creation of nostalgia, a *pure* American community which is nothing less than mythic” (ibid). Antonia Quirke has called Amity Island a “deodorised” place that creates a longing for a grand, long-lost past that has never existed in the first place (27)—it is a simulacrum in the sense of Baudrillard, a faithful copy that has no original. The idyllic landscape of Amity island cracks when the shark appears and penetrates the smooth surface of the beachfront, leaving the inhabitants of Amity in a state of chaos and confusion. How can this ferocious creature be stopped, or at least kept under control, if the ocean is a place that bears so many unknown and invisible dangers?

Chief Brody's initial approach is to keep the beaches safe and prohibit swimming until the situation is under control, seeking to demarcate rather than

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<sup>50</sup> *Jaws* was shot on Martha's Vineyard, whose harbor and fishing village have become popular tourist spots ever since the film's release. In 2005, Martha's Vineyard celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Jaws* in a three-day “JawsFest,” which included a screening of the film, a *Jaws* character lookalike contest, and a scavenger hunt to allow visitors to reenact the spirit of the film. Furthermore, a replica of the film's mechanical shark, “Bruce-the-Loose,” was exhibited throughout the festival. See LaRose and Schweitzer for details. For the daily *Jaws* experience, one can relive the scariest moments of the film at the Universal Studios in Orlando, where the “*Jaws* Water Ride” takes visitors on a boat tour of a replica of Amity Harbor (and a replica of the harbor on Martha's Vineyard), which turns into a harrowing chase between the boat and the shark. The ride was opened in 1990 and ever since then, *Jaws* has been reenacted numerous times, which testifies to the impact the film has had on American culture.

cross boundaries. Brody is the film's heroic redeemer, the "paternal savior" whose task it is to save civilization and destroy the monster (Kolker 287). Robert Torrey reads *Jaws* as a product of an American culture scarred by the atrocities of the Vietnam War, proposing that the shark is "a representative of distinctive anxieties associated with the end of the Vietnam era" (32). Put differently, *Jaws* articulates a moment of national crisis and terror, in which America depends upon a mythic hero like Brody to restore family and community and to triumph over its evil specter. Similar to *Moby Dick*, the shark thus functions as a catalyst that triggers Brody's self-reflection and the reconstitution of his identity in the face of terror and potential disintegration. Ultimately, Brody emerges as an Ishmaelite survivor-figure and the hero who restores peace, security, and stability—both on an individual and on a cultural level. In the juxtaposition of *Moby-Dick* with *Jaws*, I propose that the similarities of the shark to the whale and of the respective protagonists to one another can be function as cultural elements that facilitate the recognition of a recurrent foundational scenario and sheds light on the ways in which social and cultural knowledge is transmitted.

Chief Brody is an Ishmaelite figure in the sense that he is not a likely hero: insecure and almost fragile, he is struggling to integrate himself into the clearly demarcated community of Amity Island, where he is visibly dis-, if not mis-placed. Brody and his family have relocated to the Massachusetts coast from New York, which means that he has, coincidentally, traveled the same distance as Ishmael to face the ungraspable phantom beneath the sea, in the process of which he gains deeper self-knowledge and develops into a rougher, stereotypically 'more masculine' man. Brody is a novice to hunting sharks, just as Ishmael is a novice to whaling, and for both of them their initiation into the hunting business signifies an initiation into 'real' masculinity as the most essential part of their journey of introspection. The development of Brody's character is mirrored in the steady crumbling, and finally breakdown, of the boundary between land and sea. There is hardly anything Brody dislikes more than water, and he takes it as an ironic twist of fate that he, of all people, should have ended up on an island, surrounded by water, where he seems to be more of a visitor or tourist than a permanent inhabitant. However, as he wittily remarks, "it's only an island if you look at it from the water." To Brody, as his comment suggests, land and sea are clearly separated, two realms whose boundaries he does not intend to transgress. Already

feeling completely displaced and incompetent on the piece of land where he now lives, the endless ocean is even less controllable and even further beyond his rule; to him, the sea does not signify freedom and liberation but anxiety and insecurity.

The clearly demarcated border between land and sea begins to crumble, however, when the shark attacks Chrissie. The torn off limbs of the young woman are washed onto the beach, which signifies the shark's invasion of the land—the space where Brody had presumed himself to be safe—and testifies to the permeability of the boundary between land and sea.<sup>31</sup> As Thomas Frenzt and Janice Rushing point out, this aspect denotes an important difference between the shark and the white whale, its mythic predecessor:

As the symbol of the unconquered continent, the whale was a reclusive rogue who did not initiate the carnage it wreaked upon Ahab and its crew. Like the New World and its inhabitants, it attacked in response to being attacked. By contrast, as a symbol of the conquered continent, the shark erupts from its normal habitat to seek out the perpetrators of social injustice. Although also a rogue, the Great White, in an ironic transmutation of old Ahab, relentlessly revenges the 'wound' perpetrated on the land. (24)

The 'wound' the shark revenges are, on the one hand, "repressed capitalist anxieties" and "economic exploitation" (ibid), but also the vast discrepancies between the ideal, idyllic America Spielberg brilliantly encapsulated and preserved in Amity and the realities of a disastrous war and the national trauma America was faced with at that time.

The discrepancy between myth and reality is captured nicely in Martin Brody, who left the dangerous, corrupted, criminal New York to settle down with his young family in the simple, innocent, paradisiacal Amity. However, Brody has merely exchanged one wilderness for the other, as Lemkin remarks, "he has bartered away the city for the sea. And the sea threatens to take away all he has gained" (8). Once Brody is aware of the fact that Chrissie was attacked by a murderous shark, he tries to gain control over the situation by seeking full control over 'his' territory: he wants to close the beach for swimming, to which the mayor objects (it is, after all, the Fourth-of-July-weekend and Amity packed with tourists),<sup>32</sup> so he decides to patrol the beach and *watch* the ocean for any suspicious

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<sup>31</sup> Similar to the later Spielberg blockbuster *Jurassic Park*, *Jaws* seems to follow a pattern of nature strikes back. In both films Spielberg suggests that mankind has lost a deeper connection to nature and, driven solely by capitalist interests, exploits nature for profit. The inevitable result of this tension is a gruesome fight over life and death between man and nature.

<sup>32</sup> Torry has commented on the significance of the shark threatening to disrupt the Fourth of July celebrations: within the film, the holiday is "an economically crucial event for the island's tourist

movement. I emphasize the word ‘watch,’ because there is a notable passivity in the actions of Brody and the island officials which stands in stark contrast to the active hunt for the shark Brody will participate in later in the movie. On the island, the mayor of Amity pushes Brody into a ‘let’s-wait-and-see’ mentality with which he reluctantly, but nonetheless, complies.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, Brody wants the shark to be caught and killed, but he does not see himself in the position of the hunter and the hero of Amity, too deep-seated are his anxieties and his fear of the water.

The shattering of Amity’s idyll and the shark’s traversing of boundaries continues as a little boy, a local fisherman, and a male tourist fall victim to the hungry killer. Brody is aware that the situation is out of control, that he has lost ground and that the chaotic terror the shark causes cannot be contained. Later in the movie, he asks whether or not it is true that most shark attacks happen in three feet of water, less than ten feet from the beach. Really, his question is, “Can we, with our feet on the land, on our own turf, in view of our children and wives, be taken by a monster?” (Quirke 40). The disturbing and unsettling answer, he knows, is yes. His powerlessness and inability to protect the community of Amity and his family as part of that community emphasizes Brody’s vulnerability and puts his manhood at stake. Brody’s authority as police chief, husband, and father is undermined by the power the shark has assumed and that it exerts on land through the anguish and suffering of the community and victims’ families. After the little boy, Alex Kintner is killed, for example, Mrs. Kintner publicly slaps Brody and blames him for her son’s death, coldly telling him “my boy is dead and there is nothing you can do about it.” Her words suggest that there is an element in the film that “cannot be resolved, or absolved, by catharsis,” a trouble “which cannot be cured by the resolution of the story” (Quirke 36). Furthermore, Mrs.

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economy,” he writes, by which the film implies that the national holiday has become a hollow and shallow capitalist machinery and that financial interests are put before the public’s safety (32). The significance of the Fourth of July for the film as a product, Torry argues, must be evaluated in light of the film’s historical context. Released at the close of the Vietnam War and just a year shy of the United States’ Bicentennial, “*Jaws*’ fundamental purpose is a therapeutic intervention upon the social and political malaise that darkened the national mood in the period of that particularly significant (if ill-timed) anniversary of the American republic” (ibid).

<sup>33</sup> Brody’s passivity and compliance can best be observed in the aftermath of Chrissie’s death. When the medical examiner informs Brody that Chrissie was killed by a shark, Brody informs the mayor of his plan to close the beach. When the mayor pressures the medical examiner to reverse his diagnosis and attribute Chrissie’s death to a boating accident, Brody goes along with the explanation in spite of his better knowledge. Only after the shark attacks again, Brody hires the ichthyologist Matt Hooper to examine Chrissie’s remains and confirm that it was indeed a shark that killed her.

Kintner's words make Brody painfully aware of his own passivity and lack of manliness, pushing him to finally take action and find a permanent solution to the shark-problem. The shark's victims are dead and this fact cannot be reversed; all Brody can do in the face of this public humiliation by the irate Mrs. Kintner is to 'man up,' kill the shark, and reinstall normality in Amity.

In this wild scenario of chaos and confusion, Matt Hooper, the ichthyologist he has hired to re-examine Chrissie's remains, becomes his closest friend and confidante. Brody's relationship with his wife is marked by long silences and pauses, and by a sense that his lack of manliness disqualifies him as a good husband and father. In his friendship with Hooper, he does not experience these feelings of inadequacy and failure, as in their relation he does not have to be 'the man,' the tough and courageous protector. I suggest that the function Hooper fulfills in *Jaws* is in some ways similar to that of Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*, even though as a wealthy white man, Hooper certainly does not physically, socially, or culturally resemble Queequeg in any way. In *Jaws*, the marker of difference among men is class, not race, and ironically enough, in the blue-collar environment of Amity, Hooper is markedly 'different' because he is of upper-class background. He is not taken seriously as a shark expert—as a man in touch with nature—by Amity's fishermen because of his bookish ways, his high-tech research equipment, and his cultivated manners. In other words, both Queequeg and Hooper are, in the broadest sense, displaced and misplaced individuals, characters who enter the narrative because they have been hired to do a job that forces them to push the limits of their abilities. However, their primary function is a completely different one: both further the protagonists' introspection and self-reflection. Moreover, both of them share an intimate relationship with the heroic protagonist, which is established and consummated on land after a rather problematic first encounter but which fully blossoms at sea and provides a glimpse into viable alternatives to hegemonic patterns of love and friendship.

When they first meet at the Amity harbor, Brody does not apprehend Hooper as the scientist he hired to examine Chrissie and orders him around, then completely ignores him. Hooper "does not spring from the days of British navy tar, nor the tattooed merchant marine" (Lemkin 9); he is not a rogue shark-hunter, but a man who "loves sharks," as he says to Ellen Brody, a modern Jacques Cousteau who "is more likely to hunt animals with a camera than a gun, to study

them than to kill them” (Frentz/Rushing 30). Only when Hooper follows Brody into the harbor office, forces Brody to take notice of him, and then introduces himself, does Brody recognize in him the man he has been waiting for, and he greets him “as a brother,” with a handshake “long and exuberant enough to feel like a hug, a gesture so warm, so welcome amidst the farcical recklessness of the harbour crowd” (Quirke 33). In other words, it is only upon the second look they take at each other that they apprehend each other as men who are both unlikely heroes but who may, precisely *because* they are both underdogs, form the “ultimate partnership” and celebrate a “joint triumph over Leviathan” (Jameson, “Reification” 142). Their partnership is consummated the very same night at Brody’s house, when the two men bond over a bottle of wine and shop talk about sharks, and at the harbor, when they examine a shark that is presumed to be *the* killer shark. Brody’s wife Ellen stands clearly outside the bond these two men share: she admits that she does not know how to talk to her husband anymore, which, by contrast, comes easy to Hooper, and she is excluded from their nightly trip to the harbor, a trip which seals the two men’s tight bond.

The reason Brody distances himself from his wife but takes an instant liking to Hooper is, I suggest, that Hooper (unlike Ellen) can explain the inexplicable to Brody, can rationalize his fears, and offer him solutions to his problems. The scenes at Brody’s house and at the harbor are reminiscent of the cetology section in *Moby-Dick*, only that here it is Hooper who performs the dissection of the beast—and not just metaphorically, but literally. While cutting the shark open and clearing out its stomach, Hooper explains to Brody what he is doing and what the remains in the shark’s digestive tract tell him, thus offering Brody a chance to rationalize and to grasp the shark, which he has henceforth experienced as a cunning, uncontrollable menace, in scientific terms in order to arrive at a sound explanation for the events that have taken place on Amity Island. Moreover, examining the shark and *understanding* its anatomy, its drives and instincts furthers Brody’s self-knowledge, as looking at the shark through Hooper’s eyes offers him a strategy to critically examine himself and to cope with his irrational fear of the water. After this bonding ritual, Hooper manages to talk Brody into getting on his boat and setting out to look for the shark. Notably, this is the first time Brody traverses the boundary between land and sea and invades the territory of the shark. This is a turning point in the movie: for the first time, Brody is ready to take

action and strike back, but he can only do so if he assumes—or at least approximates—Hooper’s position of rationality.

The film makes clear, however, that Hooper may be an excellent researcher and intellectual negotiator of the sea, who “may play an important role in the eradication of the shark,” but that he will “not take a major role in its demise” (Lemkin 9). The only man who can fight the shark “on its own terms, in its own environment” is Quint (ibid). The success of the shark hunt depends crucially on the expertise of the “Captain Ahab of this *Moby-Dick*,” as Rubey puts it (21);<sup>34</sup> Quint is the only character who negotiates the environment of the sea from within, who absorbs the untamable forces of the sea and fights its primitiveness with his own primitiveness. In contrast to Brody, Quint is ‘a real man,’ a rough fisherman, a tough WWII-veteran, and a macho who likes to tell dirty, misogynist jokes (ibid). Ellen Brody is afraid of Quint, as afraid as she is of the killer shark and she dislikes the idea of her husband being on Quint’s boat and under Quint’s rule even more than that of him hunting the shark.<sup>35</sup> Ellen experiences Quint’s manliness as menacing; unlike Brody, Quint is secure in his masculinity, but his masculinity “seems to derive from his rejection of the system,” as Frenzt and Rushing explain: “Like other men in contemporary America who find themselves at the bottom of social hierarchy, Quint avoids the inevitable emasculation of that position by divorcing himself from its source” (28). Similar to the shark he seeks to catch and kill, Quint is a rogue, a lone hunter who is alienated from social structures and companionship.

Quint’s rejection of the social order renders him a potential threat to the system, as he is not out to kill the shark for the benefit of the people of Amity, but in order to satisfy his feelings of vengeance and revenge. Quint hates sharks just as Ahab hates *Moby Dick*, and similar to his cultural predecessor he is a character of excessive and aggressive masculinity, a monomaniac driven by an irrational obsession which results from an earlier wound that has never healed. In *Jaws*’ most famous male-bonding scene aboard the *Orca*, Quint recounts the chilling story of

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<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Biskind calls Quint the “true spiritual heir of Ahab,” an “anachronism, a composite of the last vestiges of ruthless Yankee self-reliance, traces of working class pride, and a touch of New England transcendental madness” (26).

<sup>35</sup> Ellen Brody is portrayed as a stereotypically dutiful wife and mother, who upholds the tenets of civilized society and exists “only to be scared,” as Rubey sarcastically notes (21). *Jaws* proposes a strict separation of spheres that mirrors that of *Moby-Dick*: women are associated with the land, with domesticity, hearth and home while men venture into the outdoors, where they find freedom and establish close ties of male companionship.



the sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis by a Japanese submarine after the Americans had delivered the atomic bomb. When the ship sank, sharks attacked the helpless men and killed roughly two thirds of them. Quint survived physically unharmed, but has been driven by a fierce desire for revenge ever since then. The ferocious, marauding Great White is in his mind firmly linked to the “diabolic enemy sub and the voracious shark pack that actually devoured many survivors from the Indianapolis” (Willson 33). Back then, the sharks did what in ‘normal’ scenes of warfare the human enemy does, that is, eliminate survivors. Quint’s story thus associates the shark with the Japanese enemy and with a racial ‘other.’ As Torry so aptly puts it, Quint’s life “has been spent in the attempt to reenact and in reenacting, to surmount through reversal the horror and despair he experienced during the three days of shark attacks that claimed the majority of his comrades” (34). His attempt to master the trauma of the shark attack is, therefore, also an attempt to master the gruesome experience of war and mass destruction, as in his mind sharks are inextricably linked to racially charged enemy images and warfare.

Similar to Ahab, Quint believes that a reversal of the positions of victimizer and victimized will entail justice and liberate him from the pain he suffers. His story visibly disturbs Hooper and Brody, who suddenly realize that for Quint, the hunt for the shark is part of a greater scheme of things, in which they are merely Quint’s players, his aids and apprentices. In Quint, Hooper and Brody confront a force whose will to destruction is as dedicated as that of the shark they hunt, and which cannot be compromised. In contrast to the captain of the *Pequod*, the captain of the *Orca* does not need rhetorical versatility in order to persuade his crew to follow his command. Quint uses violence and raw aggression to ensure that his mission will be carried out as planned. When Brody, in the manner of the *Pequod*’s Starbuck, threatens to mutiny and call the Coast Guard for support and a bigger boat, Quint smashes the radio with a baseball bat as if to say that this is *his* mission, *his* revenge, *his* shark.

Quint’s recalling of the U.S.S. Indianapolis is preceded by a male bonding ritual, in which Quint and Hooper compare their scars in order to prove their manliness and seamanship to one another. Hooper matches scars with Quint arm for arm, leg for leg, while Brody is almost ashamed to realize that his body completely unharmed except for an appendix scar. Exercising their “marine machismo,” Quint and Hooper drink to their courage and to their scarred legs

(recalling the leg Ahab lost), while Brody, “afraid of the water and barely able to swim,” stands beside as the “third man out” (Biskind 26). In the comparison with his two companions, Brody’s masculinity is again threatened: Quint hates sharks and kills them, Hooper loves sharks and studies them, but Brody is *afraid* of them, even gets hysterical at times—and ‘fear’ and ‘hysteria’ are concepts that seem to be alien to his two friends. The bond between Hooper and Brody, then, mutates into a triangular relationship aboard the *Orca*, as Brody becomes “the domesticated husband excluded from a latent love affair between Quint and Hooper” and is reunited with Hooper only after Quint’s death and after having proven himself to be a worthy seaman, too (ibid).

The relationship of the three men aboard the *Orca* resembles, in many ways, the intimate male-to-male relationships aboard the *Pequod* and reiterate Melville’s utopian vision of an exclusively male social order. In his relationship with Queequeg, Ishmael is careful to “deemphasize its pallocentricity and opens the possibility ... of a loving maleness not centered in the phallus ... but in the communion of each man’s ‘immaculate manliness’” (Person, “Cassock” 15). The maleness aboard the *Orca* is not centered in the phallus either, but rather in scar tissue and the abstract concepts (courage, endurance, toughness) the scars signify. Manliness is not neither negotiated through sexual difference nor through homosexual *acts*, but rather through “male interest,” as Henning Bech has called it, which implies homosexual/homoerotic attraction but cannot be equated with an identification as homosexual (44). As Bech argues, “being or wanting to be a man implies an interested relation from man to man. This male interest includes the pleasures of mirroring and comparing, as well as of companionship and apprenticeship” (ibid). In both *Moby-Dick* and *Jaws*, masculinity is constructed in a strategic negation of the phallus, in the form of male interest, while the phallus is displaced onto the weapons (harpoons, spears, and guns) the shark- and whale-hunters use to penetrate their prey. In Melville’s alternative, non-phallogentric constructions of maleness, masculine identity is depicted as fluctuating and as “essentially unstable and fluid like the sea” (Person, “Cassock” 4). As Martin suggests, Ishmael has to choose “between the two poles of Queequeg and Ahab” and thus between a ‘soft’ and an aggressive manliness (71), while Person argues that Ishmael “successfully resists the temptation to ‘invest’ or identify himself with

any single masculinity" (Person, "Cassock" 19).<sup>36</sup> Brody finds himself in a similar dilemma, fitting neither into the masculine niche occupied by Quint, who has dropped out of the social system, nor into the one occupied by Hooper, the upper-class intellectual. Unable to invest into either of these two versions of manliness, Brody needs to craft his own masculinity, a masculinity that does not deconstruct the two poles represented by Quint and Hooper but that allows him to synthesize them.

As they sit in the cabin of the *Orca*, drink, and reminisce their scars and past adventures, they hear a strange and eerie sound which Hooper identifies as the sounding of the whale. The three men nostalgically look out of the window as if, through spotting the whale, they could be transported into a long-lost past when men and nature were still in balance and not destroying each other. Or maybe it is the ghost of Moby Dick that calls on them to remind them that their fight is not over yet, for in that very moment, the shark attacks the *Orca* full throttle, causing a leakage in the boat's body. The three of them instantly know that this is the showdown and, in the face of death, Brody shows fierce determination. This is not Quint's shark, it is *his* shark, the manifestation of his irrational fears, of the inexplicable and ungraspable otherness within himself. Brody thus crafts his masculinity not through an investment in either Quint's or Hooper's masculinity, but he constructs it through the creature in which all his deepest fears and anxieties are bundled up and receive concrete form.

Jane Caputi has famously read the shark as a symbol of femininity, as the "Terrible Mother" that dismembers and devours its victims in a "full-blown male nightmare" (29). The shark's teeth, she argues, can be read as a *vagina dentate*, as "vaginal jaws" or the "fishy vulva of the human female" that represents the male fear of castration and emasculation (33). While Caputi's interpretation of the shark is certainly tenable and, for the most part, convincing, I propose to read the shark not only as a symbol of femininity but also of the racial 'other,' as a metaphor for blackness and for racial passing. The whiteness of the shark is as

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<sup>36</sup> Person cites the chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand" as an example for Ishmael's investment in masculinity. Ishmael's ecstatic feelings in this chapter "do not result from a simple reinvestment of energy in homoerotic communion with other men. Ishmael may be eroticized *in* the masculine during this scene, but his eroticism is not limited *to* the masculine, or the phallic. ... Ishmael seeks a masculinity capable of diversified investitures" ("Cassock" 19). Sperm, in this chapter, becomes a "fluid medium for male communion" ("Cassock" 21), and the common squeezing of the sperm becomes a bonding ritual which, one could argue, has been roughly translated into drinking bouts aboard the *Orca* in *Jaws*.

mysterious and ambiguous as the whiteness of the whale. The shark's whiteness does not signify purity and innocence, but terror and death, which renders it a creature as ghastly and appalling as the white whale. Interestingly enough, even though its name—Great White—announces whiteness, only its underside is white while its dorsal area is of a grayish or brownish hue, which produces a camouflage effect that enables the shark to blend into its environment. The shark, it follows, is a creature both white and colored at the same time, foregrounding whatever shade promises safety and invisibility at any given time. It is a creature that has perfected the act of passing, as it continuously traverses from white to colored and back to white again. The question that arises, then, is whether the shark is a white passing as colored, or a colored creature passing as white. The inability to determine its 'original' color and the trajectory of its passing produces horror and insecurity; the whiteness of the shark is as ghastly and terrifying as that of the whale, artificial like mask. Similar to Moby Dick's whiteness, the whiteness of the shark is not legible and comprehensible, the fluidity its color threatening white hegemony and destabilizing its privilege as the norm that organizes the social order.

The shark's ambiguous color serves, I propose, as a mirror image for the crew of the *Orca*. The Orca, or called 'Killer Whale,' is almost entirely black with white markings on its head and underside and, interestingly enough, it is the only natural enemy of the Great White shark. Similar to the Great White shark, the Orca is ambiguously colored, but the Orca's coloring is disruptive, as its color pattern contradicts its body shape. In short, the Orca's coloring makes its body illegible. Just as the *Pequod's* crew came to share the fate of the Pequot tribe, the crew of the *Orca* does justice to their boat's name in its conflicting and contradictory embodiment of whiteness. In *Jaws*, it is Quint (and not the Ishmaelite Brody) who philosophizes about the shark, particularly about its eyes, in black-and-white oppositions:<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes that shark, he looks right into you. Right into your eyes. You know the thing about a shark, he's got lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eye. When he comes at ya, doesn't seem to be livin'. Until he bites ya and those black eyes roll over white. And then, ah then you hear that terrible high pitch screamin' and the ocean turns red and spite of all the poundin' and the hollerin' they all come in and rip you to pieces.

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<sup>37</sup> See also Joseph Andriano, who argues that the "horror of the color white" in Quint's monologue "evokes 'the whiteness of the whale' in *Moby-Dick*" (26).

Quint's association of the shark's black eyes with 'lifelessness' suggests that the shark is a black ghost that only comes to life when it consumes the life of another. In that very moment of consumption and rebirth, its eyes turn white, which signifies that the lifeless, black being needs to *become* white—or at least *pass* as white—to be apprehensible as alive, as a 'full' and 'complete' being. The whiteness of the shark is uncanny and terrifying because it is not 'authentic' and not a reliable signifier; its whiteness is transmutable, slippery, and obscure and blurs the boundaries of racial difference, hinting at the fictional character of race that makes it untenable as "a meaningful criterion" for determining difference (Gates 4).<sup>38</sup>

In both *Jaws* and *Moby-Dick* whiteness signifies death and destruction, because whiteness appropriated and usurped by an ethnic presence deconstructs 'natural' and hence 'naturally' privileged whiteness. In the case of Quint, who is still traumatized by the sharks that killed his fellow crew of the U.S.S. Indianapolis off the Japanese coast, the shark they hunt now serves as a substitute for the sharks he was not able to kill back then. Quint's projection of the Japanese enemy onto the murderous sharks of the U.S.S. Indianapolis is thus extended to the white shark, whose whiteness becomes nothing but a mask painted on the ethnic face of the enemy. While, as a symbol of femininity, the shark poses a threat to masculinity, as a performer of whiteface it also fundamentally unsettles racial difference and the opposition of whiteness and blackness, in effect undermining the normative status of hegemonic white masculinity. Furthermore, the homoerotic relations evoked among the crew of the *Orca* trouble hegemonic *straight* white masculinity.

In order to re-affirm straight white masculinity as a tenant of American culture, the shark needs to be killed by the man whose identity is most visibly threatened by the monster. With Quint consumed by the shark and Hooper, having barely escaped its devouring teeth, hiding somewhere in the depths of the ocean, Brody is the only one who can destroy it and reinstall 'normalcy' on Amity Island.<sup>39</sup> Brody apprehends the shark as the symbol of his lacking manliness and

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<sup>38</sup> Similar to Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, Gates argues that the application of 'race' as a marker of difference is completely arbitrary but that race has always been "an invisible quantity, a persistent yet implicit presence" (5).

<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that both Quint and Ahab die in reunion with their nemesis, which underlines the metaphysical connection of victim and victimizer that both of them have felt ever since they had been wounded. While Quint is devoured by the shark and thus becomes one with it, Ahab dies as he darts his harpoon, gets caught by the line around the neck, is "shot out of the boat" and drowns attached to the white whale (*MD* 623).

as a threat to his whiteness, as a reflection of his anxieties and of the 'ungraspable phantom' he cannot comprehend or put into words. Looking at himself through the shark's lifeless black eyes as if he looked into the mirror, Brody is reminded of his own lifelessness, his powerlessness, and of the lingering blackness he needs to exorcise. If shark's eyes "roll over white" and perfect its white disguise, it is too late; it is his own eyes that need to 'roll over' and mask any possible traces of otherness. In a gesture of ethnic ventriloquism, Brody thus functionalizes the whiteness of the shark and usurps its position in order to confirm and affirm his own whiteness. However, as I argued earlier, the functionalizing of whiteness always already points toward the artificiality of that whiteness and toward the failure to achieve authenticity. Brody can always only perform a fiction of whiteness, that is, he can only approximate an ideal, no matter how violently he tries to eradicate his own racial ambiguities through the erasure of the shark and its lingering blackness. As the shark kills Quint and proceeds to reduce the *Orca* to a sinking raft, Brody throws a tank of compressed air into its mouth, takes a good aim at the tank, and shoots. The shark explodes, its bits and pieces falling back into the sea. Killed by a tank full of 'nothingness,' the remains of the monster descend into the endlessness of the sea and the shark itself turns into 'nothingness'—it disappears from the face of the earth as if it had never existed and all that may remain are a few scars on Brody's ostensibly perfect white body, which signify that he is a survivor, a man come to life through the consumption of the life of an 'other.'

"I used to hate the water," Brody says to Hooper as they make their way back to the shore on a raft they fashioned from the remains of the *Orca* and buoyancy barrels. "I can't understand why," Hooper ironically rebuts, echoing Ishmael's conclusion to "The Whiteness of the Whale": "And of all these [ghastly] things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (*MD* 212). The crucial difference between *Jaws* and *Moby-Dick* is, of course, that the fiery hunt for the white whale is unsuccessful, as the whale survives, while the Great White shark is eradicated and with it, Brody hopes in vain, all the lingering elements that threaten hegemonic white masculinity. Ishmael does not experience that same sense of closure, as the whale escapes and with it Ishmael's chance to affirm and solidify his whiteness and his masculinity. However, Brody's sense of closure is nothing but treacherous and misleading, as he remains trapped in the illusion that

whiteness can authenticate itself if it erases blackness. Brody's hunt for the shark is based on the presumption that blackness and whiteness are reliable markers of identity that be disavowed and repudiated, or appropriated and embodied. Ishmael, by contrast, has to concede that difference is never absolute: after the *Pequod* sinks and everybody but him has drowned, he, a white man, is born anew through blackness. As he recalls in the epilogue,

When I reached [the closing vortex], it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion did I revolve. Till, gaining that vital center, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, vowing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. (*MD* 625)

Ishmael is reborn from the "button-like black bubble" that disgorges the strange coffin Queequeg had built when he was convinced he was dying of fever. When he recovered from his illness, Queequeg used the coffin as a chest for belongings and as an emblem for his will to live, before it was then converted into a lifebuoy to replace one that had been lost. Ahab comments on the coffin's metamorphosis with prophetic words: "A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver!" (*MD* 575). Of all the ship's crew and belongings, only Ishmael and the coffin survive—Queequeg's coffin, into which Queequeg had carved a map of the "twisted tattooing on his body" (*MD* 524). As Ishmael learns, "those hieroglyphic marks" actually comprise "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth," and yet, tellingly, Ishmael has to admit that he cannot read the "grotesque figures" and thus cannot access the truths they tell (*ibid.*).<sup>40</sup> Just as the white whale bears illegible "hieroglyphic marks on his head" and is an unsolvable riddle to Ishmael, "Queequeg in his own proper person is a riddle to unfold" and a mirror image of the whale (*ibid.*).

Ishmael confronts the mystery of the whale by trying to appropriate the whale's bodily integrity, for the purpose of which he turns his own body into a text. For lack of any other medium on which he could record the "valuable statistics" of the measurements of the Sperm Whale's skeleton, Ishmael had them tattooed onto his right arm (*MD* 492). "But as I was crowded for space," Ishmael

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<sup>40</sup> On this point, see also Jürgen Peper, who argues that Ahab suffers at the thought "daß jeder Mensch die ewige Wahrheit mit sich herumträgt wie Queequeg seine Tätowierungen, ohne doch Zugang zu ihr finden zu können" (57).

recalls, “and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing—at least, what untattooed parts might remain—I did not trouble myself with the odd inches; nor, indeed, should inches at all enter into a congenial admeasurement of the whale” (ibid). Ishmael never returns to telling the reader more about the poem he was composing, but one could speculate that he was working on a poem of himself, the narrative of *Moby-Dick*, and his very own narrative of America.

Ishmael’s attempt to confront the mystery of Queequeg is centered on his friend’s mark, which is tattooed on Queequeg’s body, carved into the lid of the coffin, and with which Queequeg signed onto the *Pequod*. Queequeg’s mark is the only undecipherable sign included in his narrative, “a queer round figure” neither Ishmael, nor the crew of the *Pequod*, nor the reader can make sense of. To Ishmael, the mark symbolizes the “cultural misapprehension” Queequeg is subject to; it signifies Queequeg’s very own unintelligibility (Frankel 135). As Powell suggests, the hieroglyphs on the coffin, including his mark, “encode Queequeg’s interpretation of the whiteness of the whale,” and if Ishmael learns to read those signs, he will understand not only Queequeg, but also the whale and finally himself (176). As long as no one can decode the tattoos and the markings on the coffin, they remain non-sense, that is, a set of empty signs which are inscribed on an empty surface and which wait to be imbued with meaning to tell Queequeg’s story in his own words. However, Queequeg’s tattooed body will never resurface “whole and complete to allow its codex to be deciphered in its entirety, glorious and direct,” so that Ishmael’s faulty and limited memory will remain the only source of information (Bruce-Novoa n.p.).

Ishmael’s remembrances of Queequeg are characterized by nostalgia for the lost friend and his marked body that “that both sustains and drives Ishmael ... in search of his lost, native other” (Bruce-Novoa n.p.). When Ishmael remarks that he wishes his body to remain a blank for the poem he is composing, his prospect for further and more extensive body art recalls his admiration of Queequeg’s whole-body ornaments, Matthew Frankel suggests, “thereby revealing a desire to revisit in corporeal terms the ‘living contour’ of his departed friend” (Frankel 138). Ishmael seeks to compensate the lack of Queequeg’s own voice (or *his* own act of ethnic ventriloquism), “by approximating as best he can what it would be like to live in Queequeg’s skin” (Frankel 139). At first unwilling and then unable to read



the body of his companion, Ishmael may, of course, forever exclude him from the privileges of the “white man[’s] ideal mastery over every dusky tribe,” should he consider to approximate Queequeg’s black body (*MD* 204). Ishmael’s approximation to Queequeg’s body will inevitably also entail an approximation to the whale’s body, however, so that the very same tattoos would cover all, Ishmael, Queequeg and the whale. Bearing the same tattoos, all boundaries between them dissolve: the three of them are revealed to be complimentary, they all carry the Truth on their bodies but cannot access it as they are and remain unsolvable riddles to one another.

While Ishmael seeks to negotiate the otherness within himself by paralleling himself with Queequeg and the white whale and thus constitutes his subjectivity through the repeated blurring and crossing of the boundary between blackness and whiteness, Chief Brody is an Ishmaelite figure who seeks to repudiate all traces of blackness and otherness his body might contain. Ishmael’s ambivalent racial identity echoes in characters like Brody, who reiterate the foundational scenario of Ishmael’s hunt and his introspective journey. However, Ishmael’s lingering blackness has been disarticulated in *Jaws*, where blackness is projected on the murderous shark and inextricably linked with danger, death, and destruction. *Jaws* depicts a straight white masculinity in crisis—attacked by its specters, unwilling to acknowledge the arbitrariness and the fictions upon which its hegemonic status is based, but determined to reaffirm its privileged position. However, even if the shark explodes into nothingness, the ghost of Moby Dick still haunts the landscape of America while somewhere, on the bottom of the ocean, sits the wreckage of the *Pequod* to testify to a different narrative of America. This alternative narrative is inscribed on the lifebuoy-coffin and declares America a riddle that can never be deciphered, it is a narrative that can never be completed but only approximated for as long as Queequeg’s mark cannot be translated.

### Act III. Scenario 2.

#### Ghostly Femininity: Parody and Dissent in *The Scarlet Letter* and Madonna

She [Hester Prynne] might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

I wouldn't have turned out the way I was if I didn't have all those old-fashioned values to rebel against

—Madonna, *Nightline* interview with Forrest Sawyer

If one had to summarize the life and achievements of Nathaniel Hawthorne in one sentence, D.H. Lawrence has the following suggestion to provide: “Nathaniel Hawthorne writes romance” (89). But, Lawrence qualifies his assertion, Hawthorne does not write the usual kind of romance “where rain never wets your feet and gnats never bite your nose and it’s always daisytime,” even though, he jokingly adds, “nobody has muddy boots in *The Scarlet Letter* either” (ibid). *The Scarlet Letter* is not a pleasant and light romance, but, as Lawrence describes it, “an earthly story with a hellish meaning” that must have emerged out of the depths of Hawthorne’s dark and demonic side (ibid), he ponders: “That blue-eyed darling Nathaniel knew disagreeable things in his inner soul. ... Always the same. The deliberate consciousness of Americans so fair and smooth-spoken, and the under-consciousness so devilish” (ibid).

Lawrence’s portrayal of Hawthorne is certainly to be taken with a pinch of salt, but the image of Hawthorne as a dark, gloomy, and brooding writer pervades the critical reception and analysis of his work. In an 1850 review of *The Scarlet Letter*, literary critic E.P. Whipple praised Hawthorne’s novel but warned readers that they will “hardly be prepared for a novel of so much tragic interest and tragic power, so deep in thought and condensed in style, as is here presented to them” (Whipple 161). The characters, Whipple writes, are realized with “almost morbid intensity” and surely, by way of the protagonists’ sufferings, a “portion of the pain of the author’s own heart is communicated to the reader” (ibid). Similarly, in an

early essay on Hawthorne,<sup>1</sup> his friend and contemporary Herman Melville expresses his admiration for Hawthorne's genius and the haunting darkness of his tales, which, Melville believed, could not have been produced by technical skills alone, but must have come from a deeper place:

They [the tales] argue such a depth of tenderness, such a boundless sympathy with all forms of being, such an omnipresent love, that we must needs say that this Hawthorne is here almost alone in his generation—at least, in the artistic manifestations of these things. ... Such touches as these ... furnish clues by which we enter a little way into the intricate, profound heart where they originated. ... All over him, Hawthorne's melancholy rests like an Indian summer... (Melville, "Mosses" 114-115)

In Hawthorne, Melville ascertained, America had finally found a native voice, an original American writer, whose tales are "deep as Dante" ("Mosses" 123) and who carries within him "the largest brain with the largest heart" ("Mosses" 125). According to Melville, it was Hawthorne's combination of intellect and morality that let him excel and that made him a fit mouthpiece for the articulation of 'true' Americanness. Reiterating Emerson's conviction that imitation is suicide, Melville reminds his fellow citizens that "it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation," and recommends that his countrymen read Hawthorne, an "unimitating, and perhaps, in his way, inimitable man," a true American in flesh and blood ("Mosses" 124-125).

In his essay on Hawthorne, Melville put the finger on the prevalent problem of the American literary market in early and mid-nineteenth century. During Hawthorne's lifetime, only few writers managed to make a living through their art, as it was cheaper for publishers to reprint books from abroad than to pay royalties to their national authors.<sup>2</sup> Writers of fiction would usually earn additional money through the publication of journalistic pieces or by working 'regular' jobs on the side, just as Hawthorne, for instance, held appointments at the customs houses in Boston and in Salem, and at the U.S. consulate in Liverpool. Hawthorne's first longer piece of fiction was *The Scarlet Letter*, which at once elevated him "to the position of the nation's foremost man of letters" among a small circle of influential

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<sup>1</sup> It is not entirely clear whether or not Melville had written this essay before he met Hawthorne for the first time in Stockbridge on August 5, 1850. Cf. Crowley 111.

<sup>2</sup> For details on the history of the book and publishing practices in nineteenth-century America, see, for instance: William Charvat's *Literary Publishing in America*; Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*; Meredith McGill's *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*; Volume 2 of the series *A History of the Book in America*, edited by Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley; *Reading in America*, a collection of essays edited by Cathy Davidson.

critics and established him as one of the major American writers (Baym, *Reading* xxi). Although *The Scarlet Letter* was all but a financial success,<sup>3</sup> it has remained in print constantly since its first publication and, over time, became recognized as the “quintessential American novel” and the “fountainhead of a truly American literature” (Baym, *Reading* xxv).<sup>4</sup>

*The Scarlet Letter*'s quintessential Americanness has been attributed to various factors, such as the novel's treatment of Puritanism, social and communal authority, or individualism, which all are, as Baym claims, “themes at the center of American history and American thought” (*Reading* xx). Brook Thomas locates the novel's Americanness in its “various efforts to begin anew” (439), starting with reflections on the Puritan's fresh beginnings in the New World and leading to Hester's desperate plea to Dimmesdale to “leave this wreck and ruin here ... Meddle no more with it! Begin anew!” (*SL*<sup>5</sup> 172). All of these supposedly American themes converge in the figure of Hester Prynne, the novel's protagonist and, one could certainly argue, one of the most emblematic American heroines ever created. Berlant calls Hester the “public embodiment of the proto-National Symbolic,” the body in whom national fantasies of utopianism and possibility converge with national anxieties of a lacking sense of collective identity and moral responsibility (*Anatomy* 110). Hester is the manifestation of *The Scarlet Letter*'s burning question whether or not it is possible to return to a state of innocence once innocence has been lost. If, as Bercovitch puts it, “together with adultery, the [American] Revolution is the novel's fundamental donnée,” which “vindicates the

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<sup>3</sup> As Baym states, *The Scarlet Letter* did not sell much over roughly 13,500 copies between its first publication in 1850 and Hawthorne's death in 1864. Hawthorne probably earned around \$1,500 in royalties, which cannot be regarded a significant success (cf. *Reading* xxii).

<sup>4</sup> See also Buell, who is convinced that if Americanists had to vote “as to the first indisputable Anglo-American classic,” *The Scarlet Letter* “would almost surely win” and will therefore “surely continue to be a key reference point for U.S. literary history” (“Hawthorne” 71). Even though *The Scarlet Letter* and its central status in U.S. literary history—along with Hawthorne's status as a canonical writer—have been viewed very critically, as in Jane Tompkins's argument that Hawthorne's critical acclaim is an artifact of a “dynastic cultural elite” that did not take the popularity and commercial success of “scribbling women” such as Susan Warner seriously (Tompkins 30). Tompkins uses the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne as an example to illustrate how critical reputation “could never be anything but a political matter” and was very much dependent on a writer's circle of friends and associates (4). Tompkins encourages us to therefore question the status of ‘classics’ and the principle of a ‘literary canon,’ as “the literary works that now make up the canon do so because the groups that have an investment in them are culturally the most influential” and not because those works are necessarily qualitatively ‘better’ than those which did not make the cut (5). Nevertheless, *The Scarlet Letter* is still regarded “the inaugural text of the indigenous canon” by some (Gilmore 84), and according to others it “comes closest to rendering a myth of national origins” (Buell, “Hawthorne” 71).

<sup>5</sup> All references to direct and indirect quotations taken from *The Scarlet Letter* will be abbreviated to *SL*.

role of process in an adulterated world" (*Office* 45), and the nostalgia for a pre-Revolutionary past is part of the novel's cultural work, it seems obvious to read Hester as an embodiment of American culture, or, to be more precise, as a body that contains and projects America's contradictions and ambivalences. The pressing question then is, whether or not, in an adulterated world, America can redeem its innocence. National shame is one of the novel's main subjects; as Budick suggests, *The Scarlet Letter* is a text "of [American] culture—the original primal sin or scene of [America's] birth into consciousness" ("Primal Sin" 169). In this vein, I suggest to approach Hester Prynne as an American idol, as a cultural type whose very own 'otherness' as a stigmatized outcast with no legitimate sphere of existence sheds light on systematic exclusionary practices at work in the construction of hegemonic notions of Americanness.

At the same time, I am interested in the traces and remains of Hester in American popular culture, that is, in the cultural work which the figure Hester Prynne performs in contemporary American culture. As Jamie Barlowe argues, "no woman has been viewed as more continuously desirable" in fiction and culture than one who, "like Hester Prynne, is beautiful, strong, silent, and (hetero)sexualized" (18). Hester is subversive enough to break all sexual codes, Barlowe points out, but ultimately she will "regulate, control, and punish herself" for it (*ibid.*). As an abstract and culturally repeatable type, Hester Prynne's legacy is that of a woman who is "good/bad, desirable because she is physically beautiful and sexually transgressive, but also in need of warning/punishment" (*ibid.*). Hester-esque figures abound in American culture and one of these modern incarnations of Hester Prynne, I argue, is American singer and pop culture phenomenon Madonna—in particular, the Madonna of the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. So far, this phase was arguably the most polarizing, provocative, and artistically most defining phase of her career. Beginning with the release of the single "Papa Don't Preach" (1986), Madonna delivered some of her most controversial records and performances in these years, including the singles "Express Yourself" (1989) and "Justify My Love" (1990), culminating in the publication of the book *Sex* in 1992. In this phase of her career more than in any other, Madonna tapped into the cultural dichotomy of good woman vs. bad woman, fashioning herself as desirable, sexual, and transgressive while seeking

cultural legitimation and validation by claiming places and spaces beyond the scaffold and the isolated woods for the Hester Prynnes of American culture.

**“Ghosts Might Enter Here”: Through “The Custom-House” Into *The Scarlet Letter***

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is prefaced by “The Custom-House,” an introductory sketch which provides the frame for the narrative that follows. The nameless narrator, the Salem customs house’s surveyor (who is presumed to be Hawthorne himself), discovers a pile of documents in the unoccupied second story of his building, which is bundled with a scarlet, gold-embroidered piece of cloth in the shape of the letter ‘A.’ The narrator Hawthorne holds the badge briefly to his chest, but drops it because he experiences “a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat,” as if the letter were of “red-hot iron” (*SL* 32). He then proceeds to read the manuscript by former surveyor Jonathan Pue, who wrote an account of events that had taken place in the seventeenth century, that is, in Puritan times. Hawthorne decides to write a fictional narrative based on the manuscript by Surveyor Pue, but he finds himself unable to complete this task while working at the customs house, where he is surrounded by uninspiring men. When a new president is elected and he loses his appointment, he begins to write his romance, which is *The Scarlet Letter* that follows his introductory.

“The Custom-House” establishes the desire of Hawthorne as narrator to contribute to American culture: the introduction is his reflection on the nation’s grievances and his response to the nation’s faulty memory, lack of responsibility, and unconsciousness.<sup>6</sup> Before I discuss Hester and *The Scarlet Letter* in detail, it will therefore be helpful to pass through the “The Custom-House” and inquire into Hawthorne’s role as narrator as well as into Hawthorne’s engagement with the ghosts of America’s Puritan past. The purpose of “The Custom-House” is two-fold, as Hawthorne explains. First of all, it explains how the story of Hester Prynne came into his possession and it should offer “proofs of the authenticity” of that very same narrative (*SL* 8). The “true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public,” Hawthorne declares, is a “desire to put myself into my true position of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Michael T. Gilmore, who writes that *The Scarlet Letter*, including “The Custom-House,” “hints, indeed, at a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the nature of contemporary American society. For the America of Hawthorne’s day—the America of which he writes in “The Custom-House”—has obviously not realized—indeed it has betrayed—the hopes of Hester and the minister” (113).

editor, or very little more," of the documents he had acquired from Surveyor Pue (ibid). As many critics have remarked, this declaration is highly loaded, seeing that Hawthorne later revokes his assertion that he is merely a mediator to some degree, when he writes that in some places "I have allowed myself ... nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts have been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the *authenticity* of the outline" (SL 33; italics mine). To vouch for the story's authenticity while at the same time admitting to having altered and amended it is a remarkable statement to make. Hawthorne's seemingly contradictory attitude towards his own position as narrator and "writer of story-books" (SL 13) points, as Magnus Ullén has noted, to the second purpose of "The Custom-House": "he [Hawthorne] is anxious to define a space in culture in which his occupation will not be sneered at but will be recognized as performing a vital task for the well-being of the community" (94). Being in a room with the ghosts of his Puritan ancestors, Hawthorne feels the scorn and contempt they would have had for a man of his profession and exerts his authority as storyteller by deliberately blurring fact and fiction. "The Custom-House" thus serves to legitimize and empower Hawthorne just as much as it introduces the narrative that follows in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne's agenda with the Puritans is quite complex and multilayered; in both "The Custom-House" and *The Scarlet Letter*, he re-discovers America's pre-Revolutionary past and reflects on the ambivalence of the Revolutionary mythos.<sup>7</sup> As Pease explains, the "Revolutionary mythos urged American citizens to reorganize their time as replicas of the Revolutionary moment," but the mythos also "produced a transitory quality for events taking place in the present" (Pease, *Compacts* 52). Everyday events seemed ordinary and uninspired, and Hawthorne felt that America lacked a sense of shared cultural responsibility and civic duty. Returning to a pre-Revolutionary past, he found in the Puritans "an alternative set of founding fathers" whose yet "unrealized vision of community" he used to "address his age with a common task" (Pease, *Compacts* 53). Hawthorne's primary

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<sup>7</sup> The dilemma with the Revolution was, as Pease explains, that Hawthorne's contemporaries reduced the past to a mythos, "thereby translating it into an abstract ideal, exempt from the need for continual development. As the nation's already realized ideal, the Revolutionary past emptied living value out of all other events in the nation's time and could not inspire later generations of citizens to new goals. It eradicated the need for any developing sense of national purpose. Defined as what had already fulfilled all that America need ever want, the mythos of the Revolution occupied two simultaneous temporal locations: the ideal past as well as the fulfilled future" (Pease, *Compacts* 53).

aim was therefore not to rewrite history and replace the Revolutionary mythos with another narrative, but rather to recover the enabling sense of continuing a collective process that had not been concluded in the past. However, it is not so much Hawthorne who returns to the Puritan past than it is his Puritan ancestors who return to the present and install a sense of actuality and duty in Hawthorne. As Carton points out, Hawthorne “establishes a relationship between his ancestors and himself that involves reciprocal definition, a bond that imposes mutual constraints and offers mutual liberation” (155). The significance of his existence depends on the recognition and remembrance by his Puritan ancestors, who “remind him of the life he shares with their past, a life which he *ought* to continue” (Pease, *Compacts* 57).

Hawthorne’s present time is disconnected from the Puritan past, but in Hawthorne the Puritans find a remnant from their past and an image in their likening. As Hawthorne reflects on himself, he notes that “strong traits of their [the Puritan’s] nature have intertwined themselves with mine” and he realizes the striking parallels between his own life and that of his ancestors (*SL* 13). The Puritans, as Pease argues, “disclose to him what it means to be without the time necessary to realize a life” and after that disclosure he understands “that he is as discontinuous with his present age, and as unrealized in his person, as are his ancestors” (Pease, *Compacts* 58). To Hawthorne, America is a culture without memory, a culture that represses its past, and it is up to him to apprehend and preserve his Puritan ancestors in his consciousness, so that they do not vanish completely from the nation’s narrative. Apprehension, Hawthorne discovers, is the only way to ensure enduring and valorized existence. This is not only true for his Puritan ancestors but also for himself: their respective apprehension is a mutual and reciprocal exchange, “his ancestors derive their presence, and their possibility of redemption, from him as he derives his from them” (Carton 156).

The institution of the customs house can be read as a metaphor for American history, as the space where the symbolic sphere of the “official” American narrative converges with the counter-memory of Puritan history. Upon approaching the customs house, one is immediately confronted with “the banner of the republic” which ornaments this “post of Uncle Sam’s government” (*SL* 8). Over the building’s entrance, Hawthorne recalls, “hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast and, if I



recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw" (*SL* 8-9). The customs house is thus laden with quintessential American iconography, the American flag and the national bird, the eagle.<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne experiences the flag and especially the eagle as threatening and deceiving. He describes the eagle as "unhappy fowl" which appears "by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief" (*SL* 9). Hawthorne assumes that many of his fellow citizens are seeking shelter under the wings of the eagle, "imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow," when in fact, he asserts, "she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods, and sooner or later, —oftener soon than late—, is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows" (*ibid*). National symbols such as the eagle seduce Hawthorne into believing that there is a national consciousness and state responsibility and he counters the power and omnipresence of that icon by downplaying its symbolic force and defamiliarizing it. Claiming that he cannot quite recollect the statue—this unmistakable "sign of imperial power" and "federal immortality" (Berlant, *Anatomy* 170)—Hawthorne alludes to the arbitrariness of national symbols and, by extension, to the arbitrariness of the nation's origins. As Berlant argues, "The Custom-House" can therefore be read as "a study in the geanalogy of national identity" and Hawthorne as its "experimental 'subject,'" who depicts "the various logics of modern American citizenship" on his own and on others' bodies (*Anatomy* 165). Similar to the eagle, which seems to offer shelter but at the same time seems ready to attack, Americanness contains both a promise and a threat: the potential to create something uniquely and originally 'American' conflicts with the need to transcend Americanness and establish a universal appeal in order for American culture to hold its own and legitimize itself.

In the struggle over the Americanness of American culture, the abstract body of the citizen serves as "America's permanent archive, a palimpsest that carries the (dis)figurations of the many 'moments' past and present that converge on the modern subject" as Berlant explains (*Anatomy* 166). It is through the projection and magnification of the citizen's individual struggle to negotiate between past, present, and the politics of everyday life that the utopian promise of America can be reinstalled and the subject liberated from the limits of its existence *qua*

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<sup>8</sup> Berlant notes that the eagle was constituted as national bird at the Continental Congress in 1782, at the formal inception of the United States (cf. *Anatomy* 169).

national identity.<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne finds it impossible, however, to reflect upon his life, national identity, and the state of American culture from his present position, so he decides to approach America through the scarlet letter he found in the customs house, hoping that such an approach would shed light on the construction of cultural memory and citizenship in his present day. To Hawthorne, the room lit by moonlight as described in “The Custom-House” becomes the emblematic conceptual space of the romance, the literary form his reflections take. Hawthorne describes how by moonlight, children’s toys and trivial things are invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness, and how, consequently, the familiar room becomes a “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (*SL* 35). The boundary between Actual and Imaginary are fluid and porous, but the two categories do not conflate completely—it is necessary that they remain distinct from each other, so that there can be a passageway from one to the other and a gap for symbolism and interpretation (cf. Ullén 12). “Ghosts might enter here,” in this exchange between Actual and Imaginary, as Hawthorne states, but “without affrighting us,” because in this neutral territory it is the task of the romancer to interpret the return of the specters and invest them with meaning (*SL* 35).

One of these ghosts that enters the indefinable realm where Actual and Imaginary meet is Hester Prynne, the bearer of the scarlet letter Hawthorne discovered in the customs house and the protagonist of the romance he decided to write upon the termination of his appointment. The opening scene of *The Scarlet Letter* has been regarded the “paradigm dramatic image in American literature,” with which “New World fiction arrived at its first fulfillment” (Lewis 111). Hawthorne’s romance begins in seventeenth-century Boston, which was then a Puritan settlement. Hester Prynne is led from the town prison with her infant daughter, Pearl, in her arms and the scarlet letter ‘A,’ which signifies adultery, on her breast. Hester is married to an older scholar, but her husband, who sent her ahead to America, never arrived in Boston. The consensus is that he has been lost

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<sup>9</sup> Berlant makes the argument that “local, practical, bodily, and familial experience and knowledge” limit a subject’s existence and horizon, while national identity breaks with local affiliations and genealogical ties, promising the subject a place in a greater and grander scheme of things (*Anatomy* 166). For Hawthorne, national identity was a path of rescue out of a burdened family history; as is well known, Hawthorne’s great-great-grandfather John Hathorn was one of the judges who oversaw the Salem Witch Trials in the late seventeenth century.

at sea. Alone in the New World, Hester has had a secret affair with the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, who is the biological father of her child. However, she refuses to disclose her lover's identity to the public of Boston, and the scarlet letter, along with her public shaming, is the punishment for her sin and her secrecy. Unbeknownst to Dimmesdale and the townspeople, Hester's husband is among the spectators to witness her shame. Under the name Roger Chillingworth he becomes known to the community as a reputable physician specializing in alternative medicine and, obsessed with the desire to take revenge against the man who stole Hester from him, he befriends the sickly Dimmesdale and plots an elaborate scheme to bring the young minister down.

The focal point of the novel is, true to its title, the scarlet 'A' on Hester's breast, a symbol which "both demands and defies interpretation" (Pringle 31). While Hester has to wear the 'A' for her sin of adultery, the word adultery is never once mentioned in the novel, which opens the way for a plethora of possible significations and an intense struggle over the letter's meaning. In the opening scene, Hawthorne introduces the 'A' as a mark imposed on Hester by the authorities; the letter marks her as a sinner, renders her and her daughter's existence shameful, and discloses her sexual transgressions. Hester takes her punishment in stride and faces the crowd on the market place with courage, moving along "with a burning blush and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed" (*SL* 50). As she walks through the crowd, she appears "lady-like," has "a figure of perfect elegance," is characterized "by a certain state of dignity," and, most significantly, her shining beauty seems to make "a halo out of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped" (*ibid*). Both a sinner and a saint, as the opening scene suggests, Hester complicates the cultural codes of Puritan society and pushes the boundaries of the fixity of meaning. By refusing to name the father of her child, Hester resists the label of "adulteress" and "exploit[s] a weakness in the punitive, politically imposed emblem her community uses to discipline her" (Pringle 33).

Michael Pringle compares Hester's strategy of gaining political power and agency to Thoreau's model of civil disobedience, where action becomes symbolic and, equally, the symbol can turn into a form of action (cf. 33-34). The 'A,' in other words, can be used to exert power *over* Hester, but it can also be employed *by* Hester to resist that power. To speak and name Dimmesdale, that is, to share

the stigma and public scrutiny, would “validate the signification the magistrates put on the *A*,” as Pringle explains (36). If Hester disclosed her lover’s identity, she would publicly admit to being an ‘adulteress’ and a sinner according to the magistrates’ definition and would have to concede that her actions had been wrong and shameful. By choosing silence, Hester protects Dimmesdale but also her daughter and herself: her silence allows her to dissociate the letter from the magistrates and endow it with new meaning. “The very core of the Puritan experiment,” Pringle points out, “depends on the ability to fix the play of interpretation through access to grace, and hence to God,” as the ultimate authority (33). By denying the magistrates the power of labeling her, Hester causes a “rupture in the source of their power” and appropriates the ‘A,’ taking sole ownership of its meaning (Pringle 36). In Hester’s appropriation, the letter can take on indefinite significations, but this shift in meaning constitutes a crucial “loss of control and poses a serious threat to the entire structure’s grounding” (Pringle 33). After initially signifying Adultery, it the meaning of the letter slips off into Angel and Able, but could also very well be a hint at the identity of her lover, Arthur. Modern readers have added that the letter may signify Alienation, Ambiguity, Allegory, Art/ist, and America—in short, almost Anything.

The scarlet letter is a symbol whose signification proves to be very slippery, but, as Allan Smith emphasizes, it is precisely its essential blankness and emptiness which makes it such an enduring and powerful symbol (cf. 11). The elasticity of the scarlet ‘A’ undermines the structure of the Puritan system from within as it unhinges the fixture of meaning upon which the order of the Puritans crucially depends. As Derrida has famously argued, “the structurality of structure” necessarily posits a center: “The function of this center [is] not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure [will] limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure” (*Writing* 278). Those invested in a system, in other words, seek the closure of semantic play and indeterminacy. However, this closure is closely related to repression, on the one hand, and to the possibility of rupture, on the other. Derrida’s argument entails the proposition that the very invocation of this ‘center’ to secure meaning risks putting that seemingly fixed center back into semantic play. The ensuing moment of rupture can, as Pringle points out, “produce a crisis of emptiness,

where the center is shown to be nonexistent, and therefore must be refixed, or supplemented (replaced), in some altered form” (34). To guarantee meaning and fix a center requires power and violence, as the opening scene of *The Scarlet Letter* shows, in which the magistrates hope that Hester’s public shaming will put order back in place. In the novel’s opening scene, the scaffold, as a machine of social discipline, functions as a catalyst for the production and sustenance of a collective identity. Regarded to be an “effectual agent in the promotion of good citizenship,” the scaffold becomes a space of transformation in which the relation of subjects to the state, the law, and the public are redefined (*SL* 52). The operation of the scaffold demonstrates the productivity of Puritan law and “casts the technology of Puritan discipline ... as the fundamental fact of the Puritan public sphere” (Berlant, *Anatomy* 59). Or, as Berlant succinctly puts it: “the law makes things possible” (*ibid*).

Hester’s forced mark elaborates the complex relationship between individual agency and social/cultural discipline. It is a symbol of cultural and political hierarchization and subordination, of objectification and the politics of looking, and—in Hester’s case—also of rebellion and resistance. The letter on her breast forces Hester to tolerate the public’s “eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom” (*SL* 53). The positioning of the letter on her breast is significant, as Jennifer Putzi points out, because “it sanctions the gaze of others, a gaze that would not be permitted had Hester not transgressed” (5). The scarlet letter thus renders Hester’s body a public spectacle, even more so as she is forced to stand on the scaffold precisely *to be looked at*. Hester’s body or, more accurately, woman’s body is exhibited before the assembled townspeople as the emblem and manifestation of sin. But even after she steps down from the scaffold, Hester cannot avoid to be observed and gazed at:

If she entered a church ... it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse. ... [Children] pursued her at a distance with shrill cries, and the utterance of a word that had no distinct purport to their own minds, but was none the less terrible to her ... Another peculiar torture was felt in the gaze of a new eye. When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter, — and none ever failed to do so, — they branded it afresh into Hester’s soul; ... From first to last, in short, Hester Prynne had always the dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token... (*SL* 77)

In observing and commenting on the fallen woman, the townspeople draw an invisible line between their community and Hester, marking her already marked

body for the second time. In order to resist this subjugation, Hester accepts her punishment but appropriates the scarlet letter to make it *hers*, that is, to imbue it with her own meaning. The struggle over the meaning of the letter is one of the novel's central agendas from its very outset. As Hester makes her way to the scaffold, the letter on her breast attracts attention not only for its mere presence, but, oddly enough, for its beauty and the artistry with which it had been attached to her clothing. Hester's 'A' is made of "fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread," sewn with enormous skillfulness, showing Hester's "fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy (*SL* 50). Hester turns the letter, the symbol of her sin, into a work of art, which is a "fundamentally amoral" act, as the letter thus becomes "sheerly decorative, delighting in itself for its own sake" (Baym, "Authority" 218). The letter will set Hester apart from the rest of her community as it is, but by making it beautiful and decorative, she makes the letter her own and denies the its intended social meaning. Hester's embellished letter becomes the "representation of an extravagant, excessive femininity," an 'other' femininity that "cannot be fully controlled within the terms of phallic law" and "unsettles orders of patriarchal logic" (Benstock 399). The Puritan women who gossip about her see through Hester's appropriation of the letter:

She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain ... but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment? (*SL* 51)

The goodwives of Boston interpret Hester's letter as an assertion of her pride and a silent defiance of authority—yet another sinful act, which goes unnoticed by the magistrates, however. The embroidered letter confuses the Puritan representational codes as the scarlet 'A,' which should signify sexual fall, "escapes by way of Hester's needle the interpretative code it would enforce, opening itself to a wholly other logic" (Benstock 397). It turns femininity and female sexuality into a spectacle, putting everything Puritan law tries to repress center-stage. The scaffold thus literally becomes Hester's stage, her arena of public dissent. Hester's action is an unmistakable act of rebellion in a society whose primary principle is consent: socialization or, in Hester's case, re-socialization is not achieved through conformity but through consent, which means that Hester's total self (past, present, future, private, public, thought, action) would have to accept the

authority and power of the 'A' for her re-integration into society to be complete (cf. Bercovitch, *Office* xiii).

Hester's subversive appropriation of the scarlet letter poses a problem to the Puritan social order, as it singles Hester out and "inclos[es] her in a sphere by herself" (*SL* 51), endowing her with a singularity that is not socially sanctioned and can therefore not be socially contained. Hester is eventually released from prison but must continue to wear the scarlet letter until she reveals her lover's identity. Together with her daughter, she moves into a cottage at the outskirts of town where, isolated and cut off from her community, she quite literally lives in a sphere by herself. It is in Hester's sphere, in "the dim wood" far away from social conventions and Puritan law, that Hester and Dimmesdale finally meet and speak to each other for the first time in seven years. Hester appears like a shadow or specter to Dimmesdale and Hester, too, questions Dimmesdale's actual bodily existence, for "so strangely did they meet ... that it was like the first encounter, in the world beyond the grave, of two spirits who had been intimately connected in their former life" (*SL* 165). In the safe realm of the woods, which are not subject to the Puritan order, Dimmesdale can voice his despair and his feelings of guilt for having deceived the community, and Hester finds the courage to reveal that Roger Chillingworth, who has become Dimmesdale's confidant, is her estranged husband and cannot be trusted. Hester's revelation interrupts the peacefulness of her encounter with Dimmesdale, as the minister is concerned that Chillingworth might disclose their secret to the community. Through his fear of public exposure, Puritan law and the rhetoric of convention intrude the formerly neutral territory of the forest. Hester attempts to redeem the freedom the forest provides by taking off the scarlet letter as a gesture of disavowal of everything the community had imposed on her. She suggests to Dimmesdale that they leave Boston and start a new life together, free from all repression and shame, and her discarding of the letter signifies her complete rejection of public opinion and social conventions: "Let us not look back," she pleads, "the past is gone! ... With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as if it had never been!" (*SL* 176).

For a moment, the "wild heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illuminated by higher truth" is restored and it seems as if Hester and Dimmesdale may transcend their sin after all (*SL* 177). However, when Hester calls Pearl to join them, the child refuses to because she does not recognize

her mother without the scarlet letter on her breast. Only when Hester puts the 'A' back on her dress Pearl is appeased and joins them, which underlines the tight connection between Pearl's existence and the letter. Casting off the 'A' means repudiating Pearl, "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (*SL* 90), and reiterating Dimmesdale's failure to apprehend their daughter.<sup>10</sup> To the reader of *The Scarlet Letter* and to Pearl, Hester first appears with the 'A' already stitched on her breast, that is to say, Pearl has been "born into the world of the letter," as Budick puts it, and, one should add, into the law of the letter ("Primal Sin" 176). Pearl's identification with the letter is deep: the embroidered 'A' is the first object she consciously sees and it triggers a curious smile and "odd expression of the eyes" from her whenever it crosses her. She behaves as though "the only thing for which she had been sent into the world was to make out its hidden import," when she fashions her own 'A' out of eel-grass, replacing the 'hellfired' red with a 'natural' green and thus suggesting a natural relationship between herself and the letter. However, eel-grass is in itself an ambivalent symbol, as it is fresh and green but also hints at the presence of serpents and is therefore implicitly satanic (cf. Smith, A. 14). The green letter thus emphasizes Pearl's ambiguous position between 'natural' and social existence, her oscillation between two poles that undercuts the formation of an identity outside of the law of the letter. At the same time, as a child born out of wedlock, Pearl's status within Puritan society is precarious and the apprehension of her existence is crucially dependent on the ambiguity of the scarlet letter. Pearl serves as the letter's agent, as the letter's human form, who reflects her mother's deed. She thus functions as the reminder of Hester's sin, as a kind of "other self" or shadow to Hester, but at the same time, Hawthorne assures us, she is "worthy to have been brought forth in Eden," as she had a "native grace" and radiating beauty about her (*SL* 80). As long as Hester wears the 'A,' she publicly defies the brand of adultery, thus refusing to confirm that Pearl is the product of sin, and at the same time she privately acknowledges Pearl as the object of her Affection, whose existence might be precarious but also worthwhile.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Emily Budick, who argues that in order "to deny what the letter has come to mean, Hester denies the letter itself," but that, consequently, Hester "repeats the major gesture of patriarchal society. She denies the origins of her daughter in the uncertainties of sexual union and replicates another principal pattern of action in the story: the failure of Pearl's two fathers [her biological father, Dimmesdale, and her father by law, Chillingworth] to acknowledge their daughter" (*Engendering* 23).



One of the novel's driving questions is how Pearl, the scarlet letter in flesh and blood, can be liberated from the force of the letter and integrated into the Puritan social order. After all, in "giving her existence," the narrator reminds us, "a great law had been broken" (*SL* 81). How can her being, in which Hester's threat to the Puritan order becomes manifest, be apprehended, legitimized, and valorized? Pearl's redemption is, furthermore, closely linked to Hester's status within the Puritan social order. If Pearl can be redeemed, so can be Hester, for Pearl is not only the human manifestation of the scarlet letter, but also the abstraction and extension of a part of Hester's character, namely that part which is reduced to the 'A.' This notion is emphasized by Hawthorne's characterization of Pearl "in language which echoes that of Hester's embroidery," as Kalfopoulou observes (*Ideology* 21). As Hawthorne describes her, Pearl is a being "whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder[,] or with an order peculiar to themselves" (*SL* 81).

If Pearl is in 'disorder,' the question is how she and Hester can be brought into 'order,' how they can be legitimized without posing a threat to the system. Hawthorne offers two different solutions to Hester's and Pearl's respective positions in the Puritan social order. After both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth have died, Hester and Pearl leave Boston; years later, Hester returns to the New World without her daughter to live in her old cottage. New England, Hawthorne stresses, was her home, the place where she had met sorrow but would still find her penitence: "She had returned, therefore, and resumed—of her free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it—resumed the symbol of which we have related such a dark tale" (*SL* 227). As Budick explains, Hester's resumption of the letter is "an act of taking responsibility, of making a conscious choice to accept the law of the land" ("Primal Sin" 174), and of reintegrating herself into the collectivity to which she had previously resisted when the letter was imposed on her by the magistrates. Budick suggests that Hester acknowledges the collectivity of culture, "in which we are all, whether we like it or not, implicated, even if we are ostensible victims" ("Primal Sin" 175). In other words, Hester cannot free herself from the restrictions of the Puritan order by discarding the 'A,' but she needs to "transform remembrances of social wrongs past (and evidence of a present social injustice) into a vision of future *self*-realization" (Bercovitch, *Office* 121). There is an Emersonian quality to this

interpretation of the novel's conclusion, as Bercovitch points out, that is, the belief that self-realization, individual growth, and the resistance to institutional control will entail social change.<sup>11</sup> *The Scarlet Letter* thus functions as a form of social utopia, which sketches a mediation between individual and society that is productive for both sides: Hester's process of individual growth impacts and redefines society, as she has challenged its system of meaning, and into this 'new' social order she can integrate herself, it is suggested, without having to sacrifice her individuality (cf. Fluck, *Imaginäre* 213).

Pearl's fate takes quite a different route than Hester's. The problem of Pearl's existence is resolved in two steps: first, by the acknowledgement of both her biological and her legal father and second, by her leaving Boston together with her mother. Towards the end of the narrative, a sick and weak Dimmesdale reveals to the townspeople of Boston that he is Hester's secret lover and Pearl's father, and, after having admitted to his sin, he collapses and dies in Hester's arms. Before he dies, however, he addresses Pearl and, for the first time, acknowledges her as his daughter. Contrary to the scene in the forest, when Pearl refused to come close to Dimmesdale, she now kisses her father and, with Dimmesdale's apprehension, she finally becomes fully human: "A spell was broken. ... [A]s her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, not for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (*SL* 222). The reconciliation between father and daughter also fulfills Pearl's "errand as a messenger of anguish" toward Hester (*ibid*). When Pearl's legal father, Roger Chillingworth, dies within the same year, he leaves a substantial estate in Boston and in England to Pearl, which marks her second instance of paternal apprehension and humanization. It is an ironic twist of fate that Pearl only finds paternal recognition and valorization in the moment of her fathers' deaths. As the novel suggests, Pearl's humanity—and humanity in an authorial society at large—is thus "not (as the Puritans would see it) rooted in evil, but ... rooted in loss," that is, the loss of a father she never had in the first place (Baym, *Reading* 59). In other words, Pearl can achieve complete humanization only by freeing herself from the

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<sup>11</sup> In *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, Bercovitch writes that for Emerson, America was "alternately the facts of 'actual individualism' and the ideal of spiritual fulfillment, a state of symbolic tension that appeared sometimes as sheer antagonism, sometimes as probational conflict, and whose divergent meanings Emerson embodied in his consummate figure of dissent, the representative/adversarial American Self. The complexities of that figure are also those of Hester's sainted individualism. Essentially, Emerson shared the radical skepticism about institutions that Hester voices midway through the novel" (135).

presumption that her origin is constitutive of her identity. It is not Hester who must discard the 'A,' but her daughter.

Paradoxically enough, Pearl disappears as a character from the story at the very moment her humanization is realized. She leaves Boston together with Hester and her exact Pearl's fate remains a matter of speculation—investigations later conducted by Surveyor Pue and one of his successors indicate that, according to the gossiping Puritans, Pearl had stayed in Europe, happily married but still maintaining a loving relationship with her mother. Pearl's humanization, it is suggested, again denies her a legitimate sphere of existence in Puritan Boston. In Europe, where social structures are already well-established and do not depend on the dogmatic adherence to rules and conventions in order to protect and maintain their existence, Pearl can achieve her individualization and finally be fully human; conversely, by 'discarding' Pearl, the last remnant of the scarlet 'A,' Hester's resocialization into Puritan society can be completed. However, Pearl looms large in American culture as a ghostly figure that cannot find cultural representation or articulation and continues to haunt later generations of Americans, including Hawthorne as he narrates Pearl's story out from the customs house.

Pearl is indeed a strong presence in the customs house and the affinities between Hawthorne and her are, as Budick indicates, nothing short of striking. Both Pearl and Hawthorne are, according to their ancestors' rules and conventions, "degenerate," "worthless," and "disgraceful" (*SL* 13). As a writer and artistic soul, Hawthorne is not "a legitimate son of the revenue system, dyed in the wool, or rather, born in the purple," which are the words with which he describes the old Inspector, the "father of the Custom-House" and a man much better suited for this type of work thanks to his "animal nature, the moderate proportion of intellect, and the very trifling admixture of moral and spiritual ingredients," as Hawthorne ironically puts it (*SL* 18-19). Similar to Pearl, Hawthorne is the illegitimate child of the customs house, "perhaps even the noninheriting female child, of the unaffiliated, unmarried mother," (Budick, *Engendering* 30), whose story is haunted by a question posed by the Puritan ghosts: "What is he?" (*SL* 13). This question echoes the inquiry which sets off *The Scarlet Letter*, namely whose child is Pearl, and what exactly is she, devil or angel? Where does she come from and where does she belong? Hawthorne is plagued by similar questions of social inheritance, recognition, and naming (cf. Budick, *Engendering* 30). When he takes

up the scarlet letter, the burning sensation he feels is expressive of his affiliation with Pearl and just as she tried to discover the letter's meaning, he wants to discover its relevance for himself. Surrounded by his Puritan ancestors, Hawthorne is unsure about his rightful place within his culture and he wants to understand "how he himself is implicated in what is not so much a primal scene or an original sin as his very birth into his very own culture" (Budick, "Primal Sin" 182).

Hawthorne realizes his indebtedness to his Puritan ancestry, to his origins, without which he and his art would not be. *The Scarlet Letter* is, then, Hawthorne's story of the founding of a culture, of a collective project that connects past, present, and future generations who assume responsibility for one another and are willing to work through the sins and crimes of their culture (cf. Budick, "Primal Sin" 183). The scarlet 'A' symbolizes Hawthorne's connectedness to previous generations and the obligation he has toward the generations to come; it reminds him that culture is always and necessarily unfinished and that his rightful place within his culture is determined by the responsibility he takes upon himself and by the contribution he makes to realize its full potential. While Hawthorne still harbors utopian national fantasies, he seeks to "identify and devise spaces *within* the system, national 'heterotopias,' within which he might maintain a critical edge" without furthering unproductive internal antagonism (Berlant, *Anatomy* 34). He achieves to create that space, Berlant argues, by distorting and defamiliarizing the "ideal intelligibility of national-utopia," by constantly making "illegible the American landscape," and thus confronting America with its own shortcomings (ibid). In order for national identity and American culture to be productive and legitimate, the cultural imaginary must imprint in the subject a relation to the present that feels authentic and real—a relation that acknowledges one's indebtedness to the past but does not keep the subject prisoner to it—and Hawthorne himself finds that relation in the scarlet letter.

### **The Silence of the 'A': Parody and Différance**

The discovery of the scarlet letter in the customs house initiates a dialogue between Hawthorne's present and past in the neutral territory where 'reality' and imaginary meet, in an attempt to trace "the national-utopianism of the body and the body politic in two ideologically (but not territorially) disjunct moments" (Berlant, *Anatomy* 7). In *The Scarlet Letter*, discourses of nationalism and practices

of nationhood are confronted with an exploration of the productive potential of dissent and an attempt to break the frame of cultural and national hegemony, and this confrontation makes visible that America's "modes of power and practice" are "continuously constructed in difference from and competition with other political and social formations" (Berlant, *Anatomy* 9). Put differently, *The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne's examination of the citizen-subject and of citizenship, which Berlant defines as an "overdetermined juncture of experience and power in Hawthorne's work" (ibid); *The Scarlet Letter* is a meditation on the construction of the citizen-body and is deeply concerned with political agency in American culture.

"I am a citizen of somewhere else," Hawthorne remarks as he closes the introductory "The Custom-House," meaning that he thinks himself only a 'foreigner' or 'tourist' in the customs house and that he truly belongs in the literary realm of inspiration and imagination (*SL* 43). The interesting aspect of Hawthorne's statement lies in the implication that his identification as a citizen of *somewhere else* implies a clearly defined *here* to which he cannot relate, an 'America' which seems foreign and strange to him. In other words, the validity of his statement depends on the existence of an intelligible and definable national culture in which he can choose to either participate or not. Moreover, his ability to 'choose' his citizenship presupposes that citizenship is readily available to him. Hester, too, is a citizen of somewhere else, but hardly out of her own will: pushed to the outskirts of her town, she is quite literally forced to live 'somewhere else,' in a realm different and distant from her fellow townspeople. The choice in how far she can participate in her culture is made for her by the Puritan magistrates, who mark her body as transgressive and dissenting, to which Hester replies with yet another form of dissent. As Bercovitch suggests, the scarlet letter can thus be interpreted as "an adversarial representation of cultural process, whose radical office lies in its capacity to be nourished by the structures it resists" (*Office* 154). Out of the struggle over the letter's meaning and purpose emerges something like a field of 'negative productivity,' a sphere in which dissent and defamiliarization prove to be creative and efficient powers that encourage critical examinations of citizenship and nationhood.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is at the center of this field of negative productivity. As Kalfopoulou argues, she "becomes an archetype of how the Puritan social order of Salem determined the choices available for affirming

identity,” and her “dissenting self will be reinstated into the social fabric only to prove that socialization is enacted by the consenting individual” (*Ideology* 3). The sin of adultery forces the magistrates to face the fact that there is something outside the Puritan order which can be punished but cannot be controlled. The authorities’ loss of control and their inability to determine Hester’s identity is emphasized in the novel’s opening scene, when the Reverend Mr. Wilson tries to coerce Hester to name her secret lover by insinuating that her cooperation “may avail to take the scarlet letter off [her] breast” (*SL* 63). Hester’s response is controversial and confrontational: “Never ... it is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off” (*ibid*). By subverting her sentence, Carton argues, Hester “makes herself the battleground of social and personal authority, of determinate and indeterminate meaning, of letter and spirit” (195). Her response to Wilson, he suggests, “out-allegorizes the Puritan magistrates” (*ibid*), because if they reduce her to the letter on her breast by identifying her as “the figure, the body, the reality of sin” (*SL* 72), she in turn “abstracts and displaces the material sign of their allegorical interpretation” (Carton 196).

Her appropriation and re-interpretation of the letter does not liberate Hester from Puritan law, but it engages her in the play of re-signification, of difference and deferral of meaning, by which personal identity and social order resist to and nourish each other. Kalfopoulou reads Hester’s adultery and resistance to the social consensus as an enactment of *différance*,<sup>12</sup> as a “play of differences” which produces effects and moments of crisis that threaten authority (Derrida, “Différance” 11). As Kalfopoulou explains, Derrida’s emphasis on the deconstructive potential of *différance* allows the pinpointing of ways “in which the rhetoric of consensus in American culture has been informed by a ‘fixing’ of active dissent ... in the same way Derrida demonstrates how linguistic, semantic structures work to contain the radical agency of innate *différance*” (*Ideology* 3, n.2). In Derrida’s terms, *différance* poses a continuous threat to symbolic and cultural fixity as it is produced by the system but cannot be controlled by it. As adulteress and mother, fallen and yet angelic woman, Hester embodies a set of contradictions

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<sup>12</sup> *Différance* is homophonous with the word ‘différence,’ and plays on the double meaning of the French word *différer*, which signifies both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer.’ *Différance* gestures at the two primal features involved in the production of textual meaning. First, it indicates that words and signs can never fully express what they mean, but that meaning is forever ‘deferred’ through an endless chain of signifiers and second, it draws attention to the mechanisms which differentiate elements from one another and engender binary oppositions or hierarchies that strengthen meaning itself (cf. Derrida, “Différance” 3-27).

which render her a threat to the Puritan social order. Taken “out of the ordinary relations with humanity” by the scarlet ‘A,’ which “inclos[es] her in a sphere by herself” (*SL* 51), Hester defies unequivocal interpretation; her many contradictory roles are really a Derridean play of differences, which are housed “by what Bercovitch calls ‘the office’ of the scarlet letter, the symbol which contains her *différance*” (Kalfopoulou, *Ideology* 4).

Differences, following Derrida, are produced—or deferred—by *différance*, which invites the question as to what or who defers and, conversely, what or who differs. As soon as we accept the form and syntax of those questions (“what/who is?” “what/who is that?”), Derrida argues, “we would have to conclude that *différance* has been derived, has happened, is to be mastered and governed on the basis of the point of a present being” (“Différance” 12). This being, he continues, “could be some thing, a form, a state, a power in the world to which all kinds of names might be given” (*ibid*). If this being were a ‘who,’ a subject, “one would conclude implicitly that this present being, for example a being present to itself, as consciousness, eventually would come to defer or to differ” (*ibid*). In the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, we have both a ‘what’ and a ‘who’ that suggest *différance* has happened: the letter ‘A’ and its metaphysical presence, Pearl. As I pointed out before, the question “Whose child is Pearl?” which is a variation of the question “Who or what is Pearl?” is one of the novel’s central inquiries, which suggests, in Derridean reasoning, that Pearl carries the name of *différance*—she is the being whose presence demands the mastering of *différance*.<sup>15</sup> And indeed, both the scarlet ‘A’ and Pearl come to defer and differ, as they cannot be controlled by the very system that has produced them.

As Derrida explains, any event is determined by the structure within which it is articulated, that is, it is made possible by prior structures already inscribed in the system within which the event is produced. His notion of *différance* delineates what escapes pre-determined structures, as *différance* “has no name in our language,” it is “unnameable [sic]” and “unceasingly dislocates itself in differing and deferring substitutions” (“Différance” 26). Essentially, *différance* is

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<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Hawthorne as narrator of “The Custom-House” and *The Scarlet Letter* is the present being of *différance*, as the question of his Puritan ancestors concerning his precise identity (“What is he?”) indicates. Hawthorne’s *différance* lies in his profession, on the one hand, which makes him a “degenerate fellow” in his ancestors’ eyes and ‘threatens’ the family honor (*SL* 13). On the other hand, his *différance* becomes visible in the ‘silent w’ he has inserted in his last name in order to differentiate himself from his Puritan ancestors and the shameful part John Hathorne, in particular, played in the Salem Witch Trials.

ungraspable and undiscoverable, simply because there is no meaning to be grasped or discovered. Hester's difference, symbolized by the letter on her breast, denotes *différance*, as her singularity undermines the fixity and determinacy of the Puritan social order and cannot be integrated into a cohesive cultural structure. At the same time, her difference cannot be properly articulated; it is marked by discursive absence of any cultural representation, because dissident passion and social dissent are not culturally legitimate and, therefore, Hester's passion and her actions cannot be represented within the structure of available cultural codes. The letter 'A' defines the essence of Hester's *différance*, as that which "dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself," that is, as that which is always in process and cannot be contained (Derrida, "Différance" 24).

Derrida aligns *différance* with silence, not only because it is unnamable and marked by discursive absence as a concept, but also because the word itself only achieves its desired effect because of the 'silence' of the *a*, which makes it homophonous with 'difference.' He compares the silence of the *a* to a tomb, to a secret and discrete site that does not even resonate, because in speech the *a* will never announce itself and give away the intended meaning (cf. "Différance" 3). In speech, in other words, *différance* may never be recognized as such, may be misheard for 'difference,' but of course, as Derrida so succinctly puts it, "one can always act as if it made no difference" ("Différance" 3). It may be a coincidence that both Derrida and Hawthorne are playing on silence in relation to the letter *a/A*, but it is certainly curious that Hester's *différance*, the ungraspable and uncontainable part of her self, is defined by an 'A' on her breast, whose intended meaning is virtually silenced by the flood of new significations it is endowed with. Indeed, Hester acts as if it made no difference whether she has to wear the 'A' or not, she does not intend to break her silence as regards the identity of Pearl's father. Again, the 'A' becomes associated with silence, as it symbolizes Hester's "silenced singularity," her choice to rather bear the mark than to speak (Kalfopoulou, *Ideology* 3). Silence, in her case, does not contain consent and mutual agreement, but is really a strategy of differing and deferring which dislocates the rigidity of the Puritan order and expresses "the effects of difference," that is, the impossibility to pin down both the letter and its bearer in absolute terms (Derrida, "Différance" 9). Hester's silence thus creates a 'space' in which, paradoxically



enough, the elements which remain unnamed by the established, hegemonic order find expression without being properly articulated.

The only form in which the unnamable and unspeakable can find some sort of articulation is through the scarlet letter on Hester's breast. As Hawthorne notes, the artistic embroidery of her letter was "of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond that which was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony" (*SL* 50). Hester's apparel, "in accordance" with the community's taste on the one hand, yet violating its rules, "exhibits the mingled compliance and transgression of parody," which Carton identifies as a central element of the poetics of the American romance (195). As Carton suggests, the rhetoric of parody "is the achievement of romance as well as its characteristic method," fulfilling a "double role that reflects the ambivalent value and function of language in romance's enterprise" (117). Characteristic of parody is its complexity and dialectic mode, which lets it enact "the simultaneous exercise and subversive exposure of imaginative power, the interweaving of claim and disclaimer, self-absorption and critical self-consciousness" (*ibid.*). According to Carton, parody "is the mode in which romance performs and by which it constantly exploits the possibilities of its doubleness," as it is capable of encompassing antithetical meanings and can thus convey a sense of authenticity while being committed to critically detached imitation at the same time (119).<sup>14</sup>

Literally, 'parody' is a countersong or a song sung beside a serious poem (cf. O'Hara 49), which suggests that parody is not by nature contrastive and subversive but may just as well be in accordance with its target-text. Nevertheless, parody has a strong affinity with deconstruction; even more, as Robert Phiddian proposes, parody is "the secret sharer of deconstruction" (679), because they are

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<sup>14</sup> Doubleness characterizes both the American romance and parody, which is defined by Linda Hutcheon as a "bitextual synthesis" (33), as a text always targeting "another form of coded discourse" (16). Hutcheon takes cue from Ziva Ben-Porat, who defines parody as an "alleged representation, usually comic, of a literary text or other artistic object—i.e. a representation of a 'modelled reality,' which is itself already a particular representation of an original 'reality.' The parodic representations expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices *through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message*" (247, italics mine). However, also Mikhail Bakhtin had already defined parody as an instance in which "two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects" (*Imagination* 76). Bakhtin differentiates between 'high' and 'low' discourse, suggesting that the 'high' is always parodied by the 'low,' which results in an "intentional dialogized hybrid" (*ibid.*). The differentiation between 'high' and 'low' is, of course, quite problematic because of its implicit hierarchization, but Bakhtin's argument that model- and counter-discourse cross each other is a notion still essential to the theory of parody.

structurally alike and can be historically linked.<sup>15</sup> As Phiddian continues, to “use deconstruction with parodies is to commit deconstruction *with* consenting texts rather than *against* victim texts, because parodies are already thematically and structurally about the play of absence, presence, and rhetorical illusion” (ibid). Arguing that deconstruction essentially understands all writing as parody, he even goes so far as to suggest that parody and deconstruction are secretly the same thing:

It is clear that deconstruction, especially as Derrida practices it, nests in the structure of the texts and ideas it criticizes, as a cuckoo infiltrates and takes over the nests of other birds. It operates from inside the arguments of metaphysical texts and systems such as structuralism and phenomenology, showing how they cannot totalize the visions they proclaim, and precisely where they double and collapse. It is not primary thought, always secondary, always “borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure.” And this is precisely what parody does too. (Phiddian 681)

In *The Scarlet Letter*, parody resides in Hester’s appropriation of the ‘A,’ with which she does not attack the Puritan order from ‘the outside,’ but by inhabiting and borrowing from the structure she attempts to resist.<sup>16</sup> The parodic employment of the scarlet letter is bounded by the textuality within which it occurs; it does not “break out on its own into the zones of pure representation and originality” and does not claim to represent a full, self-contained presence (Phiddian 684). Hester’s deconstructive parodic play with the scarlet letter only makes sense within the system of Puritan cultural codes and can only operate in dialogue with that system. Hutcheon identifies this paradox as the driving mechanism of all parody: the transgressions of parody are ultimately authorized by the very same system it wants to subvert. “Even in mocking,” Hutcheon concludes, “parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence” (75). The point of parody is not to destroy the system on which it relies, but to create a space of critical distance, that is, to produce a moment of difference and of deferral of meaning.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Phiddian: “Parody as artistic practice and deconstruction as hermeneutic method are structurally enough alike to mesh, and they are linked historically as well, for deconstruction is a major member of the body of theory that has developed in connection with the pervasively parodic concerns of modernism and postmodernism” (679).

<sup>16</sup> Ullén hints at Hester’s oscillation between the two poles of norm and resistance when he writes that “as long as Hester wears the letter she entertains a kind of middle position, halfway between the allegorical constrictions of society and the symbolic freedom of the individual. In other words, while being the means whereby she makes manifest her departure from the norms of society, the letter is nevertheless at the same time her principal bond to this society” (116).

It is hardly surprising that Phiddian therefore calls parody “a play of *différance*” (684), arguing that in its parodic form, *différance* proves to be extremely productive. Parodies, Phiddian suggest, “displace, distort, differ, and defer,” so that the process of meaning-making constantly oscillates between the two poles of the model discourse and the parody (686). Each text constantly displaces the other, making it impossible to arrive at a full understanding of either and rendering every consolidation of meaning provisional and subject to immediate redefinition. Parody thus functions as a supplement that infiltrates and enriches a pre-existing discourse from its very own margins, “giving it what it lacks (its own implicit critique), giving it what it deserves (a vision of its own absurdity), and taking its place (decentering it and overcoming it)” (Phiddian 689). In other words, parody performs the impossible, the ungraspable, and the unspeakable, for which Hester’s embroidered ‘A’ is a case in point. Through Hester’s specific individual appropriation, the scarlet letter displaces, distorts, differs, and defers, infiltrating and challenging the model discourse from within in a Derridean play of *différance*. The scarlet letter on Hester’s breast criticizes the hypocrisy of the Puritan social order, makes visible everything that is repressed and suppressed in that system (passion, emotion, sexuality, artistry,...), and offers a counter-discourse which may fail to decenter the dominant discourse completely, but at least provides a viable alternative for meaning-making and the constitution of subjectivity.<sup>17</sup>

As Berlant proposes, the task of representing the interests of Hester’s counter-discourse “in a language and space other than that of the public sphere is given to ‘the body,’ the material vehicle through which individuals become subjects of the law” (*Anatomy* 99). In the body, as the locus of social control, private and public merge; Hester’s private body is ‘publicized’ in its shaming and its bearing of the law, and, furthermore, it becomes subject to the play of the public’s imagination, anxieties, and fantasies. Hester’s body upsets the Puritans and their social/cultural structure and, precisely because of the repressive social and cultural prescriptions the female body is subjected to, it functions as a most effective vehicle of female

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<sup>17</sup> See also Berlant, who uses the terms “official memory” and “counter-memory” to refer what I have called “dominant discourse” and “counter-discourse.” As she argues, “‘official’ memory involves the reproduction of the discourses that represent the dominant, hegemonic formations of the public sphere,” but people like Hester Prynne “seem also to possess a ‘counter-memory.’ Counter-memory, and the historical narratives that represent it, does not oppose official memory but exists alongside it, recording information about the dominant culture without situating it as the only important site of activity and meaning” (*Anatomy* 98).

dissent and transgression. I suggest that Hester's body becomes emblematic for the constant negotiation of femininity/female sexuality/the female body and the concept of 'normal,' 'proper' citizenship, on the one hand, and for the struggle over hegemonic Americanness, on the other. 'Hester Prynne' has signifying power that extends beyond the content and context of *The Scarlet Letter*. I suggest that the signifier 'Hester Prynne' has become an American idol, that is, has been abstracted into a cultural figure or repeatable type that stands for the constant clash between national shame, or America's fundamental loss of innocence, and national fantasies, or utopian promises of an inclusive social order. In this sense, 'Hester Prynne' is a *spectral* American idol, a figure whose oscillation between good and bad, purity and transgression, innocence and dissent renders her illegible according to existing cultural codes and condemns her to a ghostly existence in the shadows of the 'normal' and 'proper' citizenry. Put differently, 'Hester Prynne' is synonymous with a ghostly femininity that unsettles and disrupts the social order from within, producing a moment of crisis that threatens authority and dominant, normative discourse.

In *Woman and Nature*, Susan Griffin celebrates the kind of woman that, to her, is a cultural icon and idol:

We heard of this woman who was out of control. We heard that she was led by her feelings. That her emotions were violent. That she was impetuous. That she violated tradition and overrode convention. ... We say we have listened to her voice, asking, "Of what materials can that heart be composed which can melt when insulted and instead of revolting at injustice, kiss the rod?" ... And from what is dark and deep within us, we say, tyranny revolts us; we will not kiss the rod. (Griffin 182-183)

Griffin's words may certainly describe Hester Prynne, who is, as we have seen, a woman notoriously out of control, vehemently rejecting the rule of the patriarchal magistrates, and continuously disobeying Puritan regulations and conventions in her actions. Feminist critic bell hooks, however, seems to have quite different associations when she reads Griffin. In a 1993 article on feminism and popular culture, hooks quotes this passage from Griffin to refer to America's biggest pop culture phenomenon at that time: Madonna.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in a particular phase of her career, the irreconcilability between Madonna's performances and what was culturally acceptable bears remarkable similarities to Hester's irresolvable conflict

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<sup>18</sup> See bell hook's column "Desperately Seeking Madonna, the Feminist" in *On the Issues* 26 (Spring 1993): 5-6. She also quoted this passage from Griffin in her contribution to the collection *Madonnarama*, which appeared in the same year.

between herself and society, her individuality and the social order. I will therefore juxtapose this particular Madonna<sup>19</sup> with *The Scarlet Letter*, focusing on how she reenacts the cultural pattern of American idol Hester Prynne in the video clips to her songs “Papa Don’t Preach,” and “Express Yourself.” This controversial phase of Madonna’s career culminated in and ended with the release of the album *Erotica* in 1992 and its accompanying book *Sex*, which is the starting point of my analysis.

### **Ghostly Femininity: Madonna, Hester, and the Impossibility of Being**

*Sex* is the twentieth-century *Adultery*. What Hester’s secret affair was to the Puritan magistrates and her community, Madonna’s book, which includes a series provocative and highly suggestive photographs, was to the upholders of moral standards in the early 1990s. Released as an accompaniment of Madonna’s fifth studio album *Erotica* in late 1992, *Sex* is a coffee table book that most people would probably rather keep in their bedroom than on their coffee table. *Sex* features softcore pornographic photographs depicting stimulations of sexual acts, including, for instance, homosexual and sadomasochistic practices. In spite of the controversy which the release of *Sex* caused, it was a “publishing event of unprecedented proportions,” selling over a million copies worldwide within the first weeks of its release (Frank/Smith 8).<sup>20</sup>

The content of *Sex* was neither shocking nor surprising to those familiar with Madonna’s work. Richard Harrington wrote in his review of *Sex* and *Erotica* that the book was actually “boring” and would have been “a lot more shocking starring anyone else, but with Madonna it’s just another day at the orifice” (17). Madonna’s career, Harrington recalls, is after all built on “selling, celebrating, and satirizing sex,” on constantly “pushing the envelope of acceptable imagery” and

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<sup>19</sup> When I speak of Madonna, I refer to the external presentation of the artist, that is, to the stage-persona she has created for herself. This persona has evolved over time and has, at times, certainly contradicted itself, which is one of the reasons why I have chosen to limit my analysis to a certain phase of her career. Madonna’s multiple metamorphoses have often left critics and audience stunned and confused, as they made it impossible to formulate a coherent narrative about Madonna and to determine her viewpoint on political and ideological issues, such as feminism, religion, (homo)sexuality or, more recently, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. My interest, then, is not to find out truths about the ‘real’ Madonna, but I am interested in her self-stylization, in the persona she performs, and the images of herself which she projects in her music videos in the years between 1986 and 1992.

<sup>20</sup> As Frank and Smith note, the sales and profit margins of *Sex* “were said to be ‘astronomical—certainly they were, even by comparison to two other titles which made trade news and hit the bestseller lists in November 1992: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, buoyed by expectations for the release of the Spike Lee film, shipped only three hundred thousand copies in the first half of 1992; and Warner’s ‘instant’ Clinton picture book, scheduled for release just a year after the election, had a first printing of just one hundred thousand copies” (8).

taking the American public to the limits of its comfort zone, so that *Sex* blends in perfectly as part of an elaborate stage-act (ibid). At that time, the republic's comfort zone, as Lisa Frank and Paul Smith map it, lay somewhere in the vague terrain between *Sex* and the record "Cop Killer" (1992), a highly controversial song about racism and police brutality that stirred emotions nationwide and provoked police boycotts (cf. Frank/Smith 10).<sup>21</sup> To locate America's comfort zone somewhere between Madonna and Ice-T is to locate it somewhere between uncomfortable questions about female sexuality and race. The problem with Madonna and Ice-T is not so much the obscenity or excess for which they were publicly criticized, but the fact that they made a public spectacle out of something that may cause a moment of crisis and rupture in the socio-cultural order. The problem, in other words, is not one of im/morality but of ideology.

As Madonna has often proclaimed, her position is that "she wants to confront people with their long-held beliefs about sexuality, gender, and race" and, through her aggressive-transgressive sexuality, "help them overcome the Great Repression" (Harrington 18). Madonna launched her career and rose to worldwide fame in a decade in which conservatism had reached highpoint (the Reagan years, followed by George H.W. Bush), patriotism and traditional values of hard work and family responsibility were reaffirmed, and the feminist movement as well as the gay and lesbian rights movement experienced a fierce backlash.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, Madonna rise to fame coincided with a specific historical period marked by the emergence of the 'New Right' and its promotion of 'traditional' family values. As James E. Combs summarizes the position of women in American society during the Reagan era, archetypes of female heroism were "various images of mother and wife—the Girl Next Door, the Wise Mother, Betty Crocker, the Domestic Wife," that is, images traditionally associated with the

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<sup>21</sup> "Cop Killer" was recorded by the American band Body Count and is sung from the perspective of an individual who is outraged by police brutality and decides to kill police officers and thus serve justice. "Cop Killer" received negative reactions from the police force and from political figures such as then-President George H.W. Bush and Tipper Gore, who condemned the band for promoting violence and criminality (cf. Ice-T, *The Ice Opinion*). The band's lead rapper, Ice-T, referred to the song as a "protest record" and defended its violent lyrics by sarcastically noting that "I ain't never killed no cop. ... If you believe that I'm a cop killer, you believe David Bowie is an astronaut," in reference to Bowie's hit record "Space Oddity" (qtd. in McKinnon, n.p.). Ironically enough, Ice-T is today best-known for his performance as a policeman on the NBC series *Law & Order: SVU*.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Susan Faludie's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), James E. Combs' *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgic Myth in American Politics* (1993), Susan Jefford's *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Years* (1994), and Gregory L. Schneider's reader on *Conservatism in America Since 1950* (2003).

nuclear family that were, in essence, twentieth-century variations on the nineteenth-century cult of True Womanhood (57).<sup>25</sup> The cult of True Womanhood defined female roles and romanticized “heroic domesticity” rather than “heroic eroticism” as female ideals (ibid). In light of the conservative climate at that time, Madonna was fully aware of the outrage her sexual explicitness caused: “I guess half of me thought I was going to get away with it,” she said in her infamous interview with Forrest Sawyer after her video *Justify My Love* had been banned from MTV, “and the other half thought ... with the wave of censorship being, you know—and conservatism that is ... sort of sweeping over the nation, I thought that there was going to be a problem” (qtd in Sexton 279).

The controversy surrounding Madonna’s sexual explicitness is, perhaps, symptomatic of “the contradictions that besiege the core of an American value system that polices ‘deviant’ sexualities but sanctions the violence of war” (Schwichtenberg 129). Drawing attention to the contradictions and double standards prevalent in American society has always been a central element in Madonna’s music and visual art and a profitable vehicle for self-promotion. As Robert Miklitsch explains, from the early days of her career on, Madonna’s work “mobilized a series of popular signs that ran distinctly counter to the dominant political discourse of the time,” articulating a “*political* desire” through her body and sexuality (123). It is in this dual articulation of bodily politics and political bodies by means of social dissent, I suggest, that Madonna’s project follows the cultural pattern performed by Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*: Similar to her literary counterpart, she portrays herself as the “Madonna/whore complex made flesh and blood” (Robertson 123). Through her controversial art, Madonna figuratively puts herself on the scaffold and provokes her own punishment, which undoubtedly serves the purpose of self-marketing but has, nevertheless, a politically and socially relevant dimension. As John Fiske has pointed out, Madonna can be read as a prime example of a struggle over meaning that is characteristic of all of popular culture, and he understands her as “a site of

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<sup>25</sup> The cult of True Womanhood is a term Carroll Smith-Rosenberg uses to describe the conventional requirements of gendered behavior in nineteenth-century American culture. True Womanhood was formulated by the nineteenth-century bourgeois discourse and prescribed women behavior “overlaid with piety and purity and crowned with subservience,” the three tenets of proper female conduct (Smith-Rosenberg 13). However, as Baym has shown, many women embraced the discourse of sentimental domesticity, because “they had an oppressive sense of reality and its habit of disappointing expectations,” and they thought “that duty, discipline, self-control and sacrifice (within limits) ... were useful strategies for getting through a hard world” (*Fiction* 18)

semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young" (97). The prevailing perception of Madonna as a dissenting, yet desirable, young woman who pushes and transgresses boundaries and resists dominant discourses on sexuality and femininity renders her a Hester-esque figure, as negative productivity drives the struggle over the meaning of sexuality and femininity in her work.

Madonna's notorious interview with Sawyer echoes the scaffold-scene in *The Scarlet Letter* and testifies to Madonna's negative productivity. The interview has been interpreted as a "sexual inquisition," in the process of which Madonna was metaphorically put on a scaffold and had to justify herself in front of a patronizing, self-righteous representative of normalizing mainstream media and culture, according to whom morality could be defined in absolutes of good and evil, or proper and unspeakable (Schwichtenberg 130). In the general reception of the explicit visual material of *Sex, Justify My Love*, and other photographs and videos of Madonna, her body was rendered a public spectacle, that is, a commodity to be exhibited, consumed, and commented upon. In the interview, Sawyer repeatedly referred to limits and boundaries, asking Madonna variations of the question where she would draw the line between sanctified and depraved sexuality, and thus marked her as someone who has crossed into the dangerous zone of deviance and excess, that is, as someone who constitutes a potential threat to the established social order. The interview creates a strong opposition between the serious investigator and the conspicuous vamp, which Madonna deliberately employs in order to challenge sexual double standards and criticize the tabooing of sexuality in American mainstream culture (cf. Henderson 109-110). *Sex* and sex are Madonna's *différance*; sex is Madonna's scarlet letter, that is, the concept she appropriates for herself to oppose to the subjugation of conservative mainstream media and with which she displaces and distorts the model discourse from its very own margins, renegotiating the limits of 'proper' femininity and female sexuality.

In the conversation with Sawyer, Madonna repeatedly emphasizes that the exploration of sexuality in her videos is part of her artistic expression, a visual supplement to her music and lyrics. By linking her transgressions and subversions of the dominant social order to artistry, Madonna creates herself as an object of art and undermines conservative, patriarchal ideology by the same principle as Hester Prynne did in *The Scarlet Letter*. Both Hester and Madonna threaten the



establishment from within, by appropriating dominant, hegemonic signs and endowing them with new meaning, which they articulate through their artistry—an artistry that manifests itself in the staging of the female body. Hester articulates her dissent through her embroidery, the letter attached to her breast, which renders her body a spectacle and lets her invade masculine territory.<sup>24</sup> While Hester’s sexual transgressions are symbolized by the scarlet letter, Madonna’s articulation of dissent involves very explicit sexual and bodily transgressions. If the “purpose of patriarchy is the *ownership* of female sexuality”, then female sexuality is employed to execute power over women, but, as Madonna has repeatedly emphasized in interviews, she believes it can also be used by women to resist patriarchy (West 117).<sup>25</sup> The ‘early Madonna’ was able to evoke that sense of possibility and feminist vision, as bell hooks suggests, arguing that Madonna was “feminist in that she was daring to transgress sexist boundaries; ... daring in that she presented a complex non-static ever changing subjectivity” (hooks, “Power” 66-67). For young feminist women, Madonna was a symbol “of unrepressed female creativity and power—sexy, seductive, serious, and strong. She was the embodiment of that radical risk-taking part of my/our female self,” hooks continues to describe her in Hester-esque terms,<sup>26</sup> “that had to be repressed

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Amy Schrager Lang, who argues that in nineteenth-century America, “female art involves a transgression into the masculine territory as criminal as adultery. The female as object of art, on the other hand, is sanctified” (171). See also Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, who state that “women and all their activities are characterized as the antithesis of cultural creativity, making the notion of a woman artist a contradiction in terms” (8).

<sup>25</sup> Madonna’s feminism has been the subject of many heated discussions. Madonna seems convinced that the important question in the representation of female sexuality is always the question as to who is in control. When Sawyer interviews her about images of her in chains and crawling under a table, Madonna counters: “I have chained myself, okay? No—there wasn’t a man that put that chain on me. ... I was chained to my desires. ... I do everything by my own volition. I’m in charge, okay” (qtd in Sexton 282). Male-inflicted degradation of women is something she would never display, as she explains to Sawyer: “[V]iolence and humiliation and degradation ... That’s where I draw the line. That’s what I don’t want to see” (qtd. in Sexton 281). In response to this, *Mademoiselle* columnist B.G. Harrison wrote: “It is really not okay, okay? It makes me inexpressibly weary to have to say that the obvious—that the very worst self-degradation is that which we inflict upon ourselves” (82). Camille Paglia, on the other hand, calls Madonna “the future of feminism” (216), and Madonna’s own response to her feminist critics is that “people don’t think of me as a person who is not in charge of my career or my life, okay. And isn’t that what feminism is all about, you know, equality for men and women?” (qtd in Sexton 286).

<sup>26</sup> It should be mentioned at this point that literary scholarship and criticism on *The Scarlet Letter* has, in respect to the figure of Hester Prynne, frequently revolved around the question whether or not one could make a feminist argument for Hawthorne and his novel. Nina Baym has been on the forefront of critics who argue for Hawthorne as a feminist writer. Baym concedes that her readings of Hawthorne have been widely contested and overwhelmingly rejected, but she defends her position by pointing out that Hawthorne’s novels “make space for emancipated female rhetoric, place transgressing women at the center, insist on women’s equality with men, and deny the universal applicability of domestic ideals” (“Feminism” 124). Other critics are less gracious when it comes to evaluating Hawthorne’s treatment of women. Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett, for

daily for us to make it in the institutionalized world of the mainstream” (hooks “Power” 67).

Madonna’s resistance to the social consensus, as hooks points out, involves not only her reclamation of female sexuality but also her transmutable subjectivity, that is, the adaptability and transformability of ‘Madonna’ as an object of her own art. If sex, as I stated before, is an enactment of Madonna’s *différance*, then Madonna herself, the artist and the work of art that cannot be contained by the system out of which they have emerged, becomes the being that demands the mastering of *différance*. One could argue that the title of her 1987 single “Who’s That Girl” is programmatic, as Madonna constantly seems to displace herself and refuses to congeal to a cohesive, readable ‘text’ while, on the other hand, she struggles to articulate her difference within the cultural codes and structure available to her, as the repeated mis-readings of her music and her videos by mainstream media and cultural critics imply.<sup>27</sup> At that time, Madonna was “much loved or much hated,” as Fiske states (275), and triggered extreme reactions from audience and critics alike. She was likened to a social disease, was accused of being anti-Christian and anti-family, and has been called (among other things) a narcissist, a vampire, and a prostitute.<sup>28</sup> In a 1989 issue of the *Enquirer*, a poem dedicated to Madonna describes her as the “Girl of a Thousand Faces,” who embodies many conflicting and contradictory roles: “Bitch / Angel / Virgin / Whore / Stripper / Dame / Hussy” (qtd in Sexton 129). Indeed, her contradictions and incoherencies are the only coherent part of her pluralistic, multifaceted persona. Madonna enacts this multiplicity through the staging of her postmodern, disguised, transient, fleeting, and transformative body, which serves as the site on which her contradictions are negotiated.

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instance, observe that he was wary of “women with ‘tongues’ because he connected women’s public speech with sexual exposure and expression” (59), and Joyce W. Warren finds him to be condescending strong women, who “are never allowed to pursue what might seem to be the implications of their characters” (189). In the same vein, Jean Yellin states that *The Scarlet Letter* “seriously considers the new feminist definitions of womanhood and, rejecting them, replicates traditional imagery and endorses patriarchal notions” (126). While I agree with Baym that *The Scarlet Letter* revolves around a transgressing woman and challenges domestic ideals, I hesitate to call Hawthorne a feminist or to suggest that *The Scarlet Letter* has a feminist agenda, as the term ‘feminism’ implies a political consciousness and awareness of the structural discrimination of women, which can hardly be attributed to the novel.

<sup>27</sup> Santiago Fouz-Hernández and Freya Jarman-Ivens edited an entire volume of Madonna’s cultural transformations and continuous re-inventions, entitled *Madonna’s Drowned Worlds* (2004).

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Laurie Schulze, Anne Barton White, and Jane D. Brown, who provide an excellent overview over the audience construction of Madonna as cultural other. In *Guilty Pleasures*, Pamela Robertson also briefly surveys the negative criticism Madonna was subject to. See especially p.125.

Mass media worldwide have documented and corroborated the variable transformations of Madonna's image and, in doing so, they "cooperated in the construction of a vivid embodiment of the postmodernist principle of pastiche" (Curry 15).<sup>29</sup> As an essential part of Madonna's bigger project of subverting the hegemonic order, her pastiche has parodic potential and is primarily employed in order to deconstruct traditional notions of sex/gender and sexuality. Madonna's project of deconstruction is a tripartite endeavor, as Carla Freccero points out. First of all, Madonna "plays with the codes of femininity to undo dominant gender codes and to assert her own power and agency (and, by extension, that of women, in general), not by rejecting the feminine but by adopting it as masquerade; that is, by posing as feminine" (Freccero 170).<sup>30</sup> Put differently, Madonna operates *with* the patriarchal codes of femininity rather than position herself vehemently *against* those codes, displacing and distorting them through her resignification of 'normal' femininity. The second aspect of Madonna's project is her appropriation of subcultural elements in her art, which has made homosexual and ethnic gestures and cultural codes suitable for mainstream mass media circulation. Tightly connected to this is the third component, Madonna's self-representation as "doubly, if not triply, exiled: She has lost her homeland (as a second-generation immigrant), she is a woman, and she is motherless" (Freccero 170). In the appropriation of ethnic and gay subcultures and her self-mark(et)ing as an exiled person—as a "citizen of somewhere else," to use Hawthorne's words—Madonna deliberately places herself at the fringes of American culture and offers a counter-discourse to the hegemonic order that oscillates between controversy and mass-

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<sup>29</sup> As Fredric Jameson has famously defined it, pastiche is, "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask ... but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter ... Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" ("Postmodernism" 114).

<sup>30</sup> For the notion of femininity as masquerade, see Joan Riviere's classic article "Womanliness as a Masquerade," and Stephen Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy* (1986). In her groundbreaking article, Riviere, a psychoanalyst, notes that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution from men" (35). She argues that this is especially prevalent among women who work in male-dominated professions, where women disguise themselves as 'feminine,' that is, as disempowered. However, while Riviere argues that femininity is *used* as masquerade, she does not suggest that *all* femininity is an artifice. For an approach towards femininity and masquerade *qua* Bakhtin and the grotesque, see Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" (1986). Russo, Judith Butler (1990), and Mary Ann Doane (1982) have all argued for a reading of the mutable cultural underpinnings of femininity as an excess or exaggeration in which woman 'plays a part.' As Doane notes, "this type of masquerade [is] an excess of femininity," suggesting a reflexive, deliberate shift to the surface and a focus on theatricality (82).

marketability, which she articulates through her body, her gender, and her sexuality.

Madonna's *Express Yourself* video (1989) is probably the video which most explicitly uses the body as a prop that simulates an excess of female sexuality and engages in a provocative play with public fantasies of femininity. *Express Yourself* was directed by David Fincher and is set against the backdrop of Fritz Lang's masterpiece *Metropolis* (1926), its images referencing expressionist German cinema and 1920s industrialism. In this video, Madonna takes on the identity of an



Fig. 8: Madonna in drag.  
Still from *Express Yourself*

industrial entrepreneur and inhabits a world of sex and money. The video features underground shots of chained workers who sleep in the sewers, which alternate with shots of Madonna dancing seductively in her Art Deco penthouse. When Madonna enters the underground industrial world, she disrupts the men's work with her voice and her body, as she suddenly appears in a man's suit with a revealing corset underneath (see fig. 8). She dances aggressively, grabbing both her crotch and her breasts and playing with a variety of stereotypical gender-roles. *Express Yourself* is, then, a pastiche of cinematic imagery and star images (the 'female' Madonna clearly recalls Marlene Dietrich and the 'male' Madonna Michael Jackson) rather than a fierce social commentary; however, pornographic elements and the parodic representation of gender-roles infuse it with a political and socio-critical message. The parodic effect of the video in its entirety emerges out of the ironic inversions of the texts cited and out of the incongruities between the images and the song lyrics (cf. Curry 21). While the song's opening lines ("Come on girls / Do you believe in love?") suggest that it carries a rather innocent and sentimental message, the video emphasizes sexual gratification as a woman's ultimate goal in a relationship with a man. Madonna embodies a woman who emphatically demands sexual satisfaction and fantasizes of (sexual) superiority, power, and control over her male lover. As Curry notes, the erotic heterosexual scenes are contrasted with an "equally powerful gay iconography," when Madonna, in masculine attire, dances in front of the male workers (23). This homoerotic address envisions possibilities of alternative sexualities, blurs gender boundaries, and challenges gendered hierarchies of power

and dominance. The parody of traditional gender-roles thus arises from Madonna's deliberate gender play, that is, "the mix and match of styles that flirt with the signifiers of sexual difference, cut loose from their moorings," which underscores the artificiality of gender itself (Schwichtenberg 134). I read the exposure of the artificiality of gender in this video along similar lines as Hester Prynne's exposure of the constructedness of Puritan cultural codes, which she achieves through her appropriation of the scarlet letter. In *Express Yourself*, Madonna's gender play takes the shape of 'drag,' the "ebb and flow of disgendered and reingendered signifiers that are held in suspension" (ibid). Gender, in other words, is not completely denied or disavowed, but appropriated, displaced, and distorted by means of drag, in a gesture of deconstructive parody.

As Esther Newton has noted, in the case of female impersonators drag connotes a "double inversion" in which "appearance is an illusion": "Drag says 'my outside appearance is feminine but my essence inside [the body] is masculine.' At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion: 'My appearance outside [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence inside [myself] is feminine'" (103). In other words, drag displaces the notion of an 'authentic,' 'natural,' and 'original' gender, exposing gender as an imitation without an original through continuously shifting contingent, established signifiers. In its imitation of gender, drag reveals the imitative structure of gender and its contingency on cultural configurations and normative practices, suggesting that 'original' gender identity is always already an imitation (cf. Butler, *Gender* 174-175). This parodic play with gender is, of course, only intelligible within the very same sign system that drag attempts to subvert.<sup>51</sup> Drag is, therefore, a critical commentary rather than a destructive force, which causes a moment of rupture through difference and deferral. *Express Yourself* juxtaposes images of Madonna in exaggeratedly feminine burlesque costumes with images of her as a phallic woman in masculine attire. As Curry explains, Madonna masquerades "as a feminized male who incorporates an exaggeratedly masculine gesture (crotch clutching) into his performance," which parodies conventional representations of sexual assertiveness and gendered notions of power (Curry 24).

While the subversive potential of drag in its relation to the performativity of gender has been extensively discussed, another important effect of drag is often

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<sup>51</sup> As E. Ann Kaplan states, it therefore "entails deciding ... if Madonna subverts the patriarchal feminine by unmasking it or whether she ultimately reinscribes the patriarchal feminine by allowing her body to be recuperated for voyeurism" (156).

not stressed enough: drag not only displaces the ‘authenticity’ of gender identity, but, in much broader terms, undercuts the congealing of coherent bodies that can serve as instruments of power, domination, and subjection. If gesture, movement, style, posture, and looks are all loose signifiers that are constantly in process, then they construct a ‘provisional’ or ‘imaginary’ body out of their playful frictions, disjunctions, and conjunctions. Consequently, the identity thus stitched together is at best provisional and imaginary, an inherently fractured and fragmented structure that is always in flux. Drag makes the body and identity unreadable texts, or concepts that refuse fixed interpretation and definite meaning. The body in drag is a slippery terrain, a body that displaces the notion of an ‘original’ or a ‘center’ and undermines the closure of indeterminacy. Like a ghost, the body in drag hovers around in a web of conflicting signifiers, unable to congeal into solid and definite form, on the one hand, and escaping the rigidity of the established social structure, on the other. Similar to Hester’s embroidered scarlet letter, Madonna’s pin-striped man suit causes a moment of rupture and a crisis of emptiness, as gender “is fissured through a doubling back on femininity in a masculinity that is feminized” and the body is suggested to be re-read “as the intersection of converging differences” (Schwichtenberg 135). In this re-reading, subjectivity, power, and ideology, which converge in the body and are exercised through the body, cannot gain a foothold and, consequently, the body fails to serve as a stable locus of sex and gender but also of a number of other discrete notions such as sin, shame, transgression, law, collective identity, and social hierarchy.

In a Foucauldian reading of Madonna’s gender-bending, Melanie Morton proposes that Madonna’s display of sexuality can be regarded as politically subversive because “the intimate conduct and our very understanding of our personal identities are subject to the interests of state that require docile bodies for a governable populace” (220). To suggest that Madonna and her art constitutes a threat makes visible the connection between power and sex/gender, on the one hand, and between power, body, and citizenship, on the other. Just as Hester’s unruly body in *The Scarlet Letter* stirred national fantasies as well as anxieties, so does Madonna’s body constitute “a dream of and for the *polis*,” which screens the “collective and sometimes not so republican desires and fantasies that fuel the national Imaginary” (Miklitsch 109). If the modal, normative American, as Berlant has described him, is always implicitly white, male, heterosexual, and

disembodied, then these implicit categories and the cultural authority they enjoy are themselves protected by national identity and a 'natural' suppression of the body.<sup>32</sup> The privilege to suppress the body is, however, not attainable for the non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual subject and, consequently, those who blur, dissolve, and displace the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality find themselves in an indescribable and indeterminable realm of conflicting significations that cannot be encompassed by the hegemonic structure.

The cultural confusion over gender and sexual identity that Madonna performs in *Express Yourself* poses a similar problem to the socio-cultural order as Hester's appropriation of the 'A' did in *The Scarlet Letter*. Madonna's subversive appropriation of masculine gesture and her performance of feminized masculinity are not sanctioned by society and can thus also not be contained by it. Refusing to accept the boundaries of legitimate and valid female existences, Madonna, to use Hawthorne's terms, is enclosed in a sphere by herself, in a realm outside the rule of the patriarchal law. This sense of exile and self-containment, which runs like a red thread through Madonna's work at that time, is beautifully visualized in her *Papa Don't Preach* video, which was shot and released three years prior to *Express Yourself*, in 1986. *Papa Don't Preach* narrates the story of a young woman (Madonna), who confesses to her father that she is pregnant and wants to keep her child. She desperately seeks her father's approval, but for him her unwanted pregnancy is unacceptable.<sup>33</sup> When her father learns of her pregnancy, he temporarily breaks with her, but they soon reconcile and, the viewer assumes, he accepts the choice his daughter has made for herself.

*Papa Don't Preach* oscillates between liberal and conservative ideology, private and public, feminism and patriarchy, and female independence and the need for

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<sup>32</sup> For key studies that dissect masculine/Enlightenment citizenship, see, for instance: Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America" (1987); Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (1988); Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist History of the State* (1989); Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (1988); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (1988); Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of Universal Citizenship" (1989); Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* (1998); Gisela Bock and Susan James, eds. *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics, and Female Subjectivity* (1992).

<sup>33</sup> After the release of "Like A Virgin" in 1984, which already sparked heated discussions on pre-marital sex, public concern that teenagers might imitate Madonna escalated with the release of "Papa Don't Preach" in 1986. The song, the conservative corner warned, "sends a potent message to teenagers about the glamour of sex, pregnancy and childbearing" that will "encourage more teens to engage in sex prematurely" (Schulze et al. 21). With her critics failing to see the socio-critical message of the song, the accompanying *Papa Don't Preach* video was considered to be a commercial for teenage pregnancy that displayed romantic fantasies of single parenthood.

paternal approval. The video “explicitly addresses the abortion debate in the terms of the private/public divide,” as Amy Robinson argues, as Madonna’s character “glorifies parental consent” even as the public is staged as the “authoritative arena of speech and identity” (350). The video opens with an establishing shot of the New York skyline and the Statue of Liberty, followed by a number of staccato-shots of the harbor and the streets of Little Italy. We see New Yorkers of all colors and creeds dancing, talking, and walking down the street—one of them Madonna in the role of the pregnant teenager who is thus established as having grown up in and belonging to an ethnically mixed New York neighborhood.<sup>34</sup> Only thirty seconds into the video, after Madonna’s character has been put into her socio-cultural background, the music sets in and Madonna, dressed in black pants and a black bustier performs the song “Papa Don’t Preach” in an extra-diegetic setting, an empty black room. What follows are alternating sequences that narrate the relationship between Madonna’s character and her father, on the one hand, and the love story between her and her boyfriend, on the other. We see “the tender role inversions played out between father and daughter as he ages and she matures” and Madonna flirting and dancing with her boyfriend, a working-class mechanic (Robinson, A. 350). These sequences are interrupted by short scenes of Madonna singing and dancing in the black room, that is, “narrating” the video in the form of a voice-over.

*Papa Don’t Preach* sets up Madonna’s character as caught between two men who claim authority and control over her body. Indeed, as Amy Robinson argues, the alternation of father/daughter and boyfriend/girlfriend sequences suggests that “corporeal control” over the female is granted to “the private dominion of the beloved patriarch” (350). However, ‘Madonna’ executes her authorial command not in the diegetic world but in the extra-diegetic, isolated black room, where she has agency and the authority to speak for herself (see fig. 9). As she struggles to negotiate between the



Fig. 9: Stills from *Papa Don't Preach*

<sup>34</sup> The t-shirt Madonna wears in several shots, which reads “Italians Do It Better,” suggests that her character comes from an Italian-American, presumably catholic and conservative, background. This reference to her ethnic roots emphasizes her exile-status as a second-generation immigrant who finds herself in conflict with the severely patriarchal structure of the household led by her Italian-American father.



expectations of her father (functioning as *pars pro toto* of her socio-cultural environment) and her own desires, her unwanted pregnancy comes as a violation of social norms similar to that of Hester's adultery and constitutes an irreversible loss of innocence. As the video puts emphasis on the tight yet authoritative father/daughter relationship (underscored by the line "Papa I know you're going to be upset / 'cause I was always your little girl"), and her confession results in a highly emotional conflict, one can certainly argue that the crucial problem is not the pregnancy *per se*, but rather what her pregnancy connotes: a transgression of her father's (and society's) rules and disrespect to his authority. The impression that 'Madonna' is punished for her *dissent* rather than for its *consequences* is underscored by the visual 'disappearance' of her boyfriend as 'Madonna' confronts her father. Confession and punishment take place solely between father and daughter, between the patriarchal authority and the unruly subject who has broken out of the social order and struggles for re-integration. This scene follows the same pattern as Hester's public shaming and punishment, I suggest, as both women are left to carry the burden of the blame for their respective 'sins' and transgressions alone. Moreover, both of them, I argue, are not punished for the acts they committed, but for their continuous rebellion against the patriarchal law.

In the singing/dancing scenes in the black room, the viewer gets another view of 'Madonna': The room is neutral territory, which she can claim and appropriate for herself and, despite its "claustrophobic walls and floors," it provides her with a dancefloor on which she can execute a "highly controlled and conventional jazz choreography" that points to her high degree of self-control, her authorial command, and her *Autonomy* (Robinson, A. 350). The black room enables Madonna's self-empowerment and self-authorization; it is the realm in which she can safely resist the rule of her father and articulate her thoughts and desires. This room thus fulfills a similar purpose as the forest in *The Scarlet Letter*, which gives the reader "Another View of Hester," as Hawthorne aptly titled one of his novel's key chapters. Similar to Hester's forest, the black room is a space outside the patriarchal order, where 'Madonna' can articulate her passions and desires without being punished and denounced—it is an arena of possibility that enables 'Madonna' to re-negotiate her self outside the normative, oppressive social structures. In the safe space of the forest, Hester is able to turn her inner feelings, marked by repression and concealment, outward, into open rejection and defiance,

as she discards the scarlet 'A.' In the black room, 'Madonna' can openly disavow the oppressive rule of her father as she announces that she is determined to "keep [her] baby," all the while seeking confirmation of her father's love and approval, as the lines "What I need right now is some good advice" and "Don't you stop loving me, Daddy" suggest. Even though the forest and the black room offer a space of radical resistance, this form of resistance is only possible in the safe isolation of these two places and it significantly limits Hester's and Madonna's spheres of existence. In the forest, Hester can discard the scarlet letter, but she appears ghost-like to Dimmesdale, as if her isolation from society had robbed her of her humanness. Similarly, 'Madonna' can execute her authorial command in the black room, where she is cut off from society and leads a ghostly existence. As soon as she leaves the room, however, she depends on her father's apprehension to valorize her existence within the given social and cultural structures.

In "Another View of Hester," Lauren Berlant argues, Hawthorne imagines "the historical emergence of a *female* order of law," an order Berlant calls "Female Symbolic," since "it is a fantasy of how 'woman' would discipline social formations—states and bodies—in the absence of patriarchal law" (*Anatomy* 135). Hawthorne muses on the meaning of "woman" in this chapter and shifts the discussion of Hester from the level of sin and punishment to sex and gender. In this chapter, Hester conceives of the world from the point of view of "the whole race of womanhood" and sketches a rather simple social order, compared to the complex Puritan regulatory apparatus: Hester only wants for all women "to aspire what seems a fair and suitable position" (*SL* 144). For the installation of the Female Symbolic three steps need to be undertaken. The first step is that

the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified. ... [Finally,] woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. (*SL* 144)

What Hester imagines here is not a community of sentimentalism and love, but the imagination of a structural reform that might entail a re-construction of individual and collective consciousness (cf. Berlant, *Anatomy* 139). However, Hester's view is and remains a fantasy, as Berlant points out, for "men and women will be redeemed only after the material forms of social life originate from a new and unimaginable (or simply unrepresentable) source" (*Anatomy* 139). Put differently,

the unrepresentable and non-patriarchal converge in the female order, rendering the female law itself an impossibility, a fundamentally utopian discourse.

Hawthorne (as narrator) undermines Hester's radical visions by suggesting that in a less advanced society, her speculations would have been dismissed as demonic thoughts and would have denoted an even deadlier crime than her adultery. To him, her sketch of the feminine law is hardly more than an anti-patriarchal phantasm; he proceeds to delegitimize Hester's utopianism by addressing, interpreting, dissecting, and denigrating her body, suggesting that her proximity to the law and her radical visions had vaporized her femininity, as "the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away. ... Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar change" (*SL* 142). Her greatest fault, he suggests, is to have "turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought," which made her lose that "ethereal essence" that kept her intelligible as a woman (*SL* 144). Hester had un-womaned herself, Hawthorne suggests but contends that "she who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration" (*SL* 143). While T. Walter Herbert argues that Hester's transgressions into masculine territory render her a "manly woman" (164), I rather concur with Berlant that Hester emerges as "a not-woman who has ungendered herself by virtue of private political thoughts" (*Anatomy* 148). Herbert's description of Hester implies a reversal of conventional sex/gender roles which upholds binary oppositions, while Berlant makes an argument for radical parody. Hester is 'not-woman,' which is not to say that she is in any way 'man/ly'; Hester can be rather read as a figure in 'drag,' that is, as a figure that fundamentally subverts the notion of the body as a stable axis on which subjectivity, power, and ideology can be affixed.

The Hester we encounter in the forest is not-woman and not-man; her sex and gender are permanently displaced and fail to congeal, which make her unreadable in a culture whose social order and state apparatus crucially depends on gender hierarchy. Hester faces an existential dilemma quite similar to that of Madonna in drag, as her body and identity are provisional, undetermined, and imaginary. If Hester's vision of a Female Symbolic is inherently impossible, then Hester embodies the impossibility of being. As a woman who has broken the law and lost her womanhood, Hester "is described as having become ghostlike as a result of her

transgression,” the spectral embodiment of a subject that cannot come into being because it cannot be accommodated within the social order (Cottom 48). Hester’s transgressions made her “as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere,” Hawthorne contends and continues that she “stood apart from moral interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt” (*SL* 76). Hester’s sphere in the novel is the ghastly, terrifying terrain of indeterminacy, which stands in contrast to the benign, liberating ghostly spirit that Hawthorne appropriates for himself in *his* transgression of Puritan norms, namely the choice of his profession. Hawthorne’s own ghostliness is associated with freedom, as he is finally able to “roam, at will, in that broad and quiet field where all mankind may meet,” while Hester must confine herself to “those narrow paths where brethren from the same household must diverge from each other” (*SL* 41). In order to discipline Hester for her sexual transgressions that caused a moment of crisis in the male domain of the political public sphere, Hester’s sexuality needed to be demonized and pathologized. As Cottom explains, “Hester is doomed ... to be a ghost without the freedom that Hawthorne enjoys as a ghost, and thus to appear demonic whenever she tries to become free” (56). Hester’s singularity keeps being silenced by the Puritan social order, the scarlet ‘A’ on her breast quietly referring to the identity she cannot articulate.

If Hester’s transgressions have transformed her into a not-woman, then Madonna’s assertive sexuality has turned her into a cultural ‘other,’ a social disease that corrupts American culture from within. The three cultural manifestations of Madonna I have referred to in this chapter are excellent examples to illustrate this internal subversion: her performance as a pregnant teenager in *Papa Don’t Preach* was said to promote pre-marital sex and promiscuity; her gender-bending in *Express Yourself* not only challenged foundational ‘truths’ of sex and gender and pushed the boundaries of socially ‘acceptable’ femininity; her racy pictures in *Sex* undermined conservative family values and put the spotlight on sexual acts and practices that deviated from what was considered to be ‘normal’ and ‘proper.’ All these manifestations of Madonna are driven by fantasies of female empowerment, female authority, and a female law—by utopian imaginings of a social order in which cultural and political power are ‘naturally’ attainable for women.

Madonna's visions may resemble those of Hester, but they also diverge from the latter's in a crucial way: As Berlant points out, the "legitimation that would come from simply engaging with an usurping the traditionally male spheres seems not be of interest to Hester," while Madonna's claim for legitimation is entrenched in the engagement with and invasion of 'male' cultural territory (*Anatomy* 138). Madonna's plays out a wide array of gendered roles in her work, but she always plays those roles as a woman who sketches her own version of femininity—a version that playfully engages with but ultimately runs counter to the dominant culture. From *Like A Virgin* and *Papa Don't Preach* to *Express Yourself* and *Justify My Love*, Madonna "restores to consciousness versions of femininity that women and girls are forced to repress in order to get social approval" by trying to gain control over men and to assume the power-position (Layton 175). Her gender-bending and subversion of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity displaces gendered signs and symbols and endows them with new meaning, or at least confuses and distorts their 'original' meanings to such a degree that they do not become useful for determining an individual's position within the social order. As Lynne Layton argues, Madonna thus deconstructs "tired concepts and tired oppositions, oppositions that limit choice for women (and men) not only by allowing no combination of the two, or no third or fourth alternative, but by setting up one side of the opposition as good and the other as evil" (176). In Hester-esque fashion, Madonna defies this opposition by constantly oscillating between the positions of 'good' and 'bad,' girl, assuming both but refusing to be reduced to either.

Fantasy is a source of pleasure for both Hester Prynne and the Madonna of *Papa Don't Preach*, *Express Yourself*, and *Sex*. The utopian visions they share of a female order is and remains an inconceivable, unthinkable possibility of culture, for as much as both of them try to escape patriarchal law, they seek its recognition and approval and thus implicitly acknowledge its power. Hester's life is bound to that of her lover, the Reverend Dimmesdale, and her ultimate utopian vision is that of a future with him, far away from their repressive Puritan community. Her return to that community in the book's final chapter—however that community might have changed—marks her acceptance and subservience to the existing order and the complete relinquishing of a Female Symbolic. Similarly, Madonna seeks the approval of her 'father' in *Papa Don't Preach*, the apprehension of the male

workers and the entrepreneur in *Express Yourself*, and the endorsement of the mainstream media represented by Forrest Sawyer in the controversy around the release of *Sex*. The radical change in the social order that the Female Symbolic seems to promise is unattainable, and ghostly femininity continues to haunt the American mind. If Hawthorne is the tourist that meanders the American landscape, the national subject that can choose to be “a citizen of somewhere else,” then Hester Prynne, as a repeatable cultural type of American femininity, is the shadow he casts over that landscape, the ghost that cannot be cast off and that makes the American landscape utterly unintelligible.

## EPILOGUE

### THE SPECTERS OF AMERICA

America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements. ... The hologram is akin to the world of phantasy. It is a three-dimensional dream and you can enter it as you would a dream. Everything depends on the existence of the ray of light bearing the objects. If it is interrupted, all the effects are dispersed, and reality along with it. You do indeed get the impression that America is made up of a fantastic switching between similar elements, and that everything is held together by a thread of light ... scanning out American reality before our eyes. In America the spectral does not refer to phantoms or to dancing ghosts, but to the spectrum into which light disperses.

—Jean Baudrillard, *America* 29-30.

'America' has been a contested practice and an elaborate performance act ever since its inception. The founding of the nation *de novo* necessitated the consolidation of a national identity and a national culture, but only with the impending threat of a civil war and the increasing identity crisis of the first generation of American-born Americans did these demands become pressing. The works of some of these first-generation-writers—Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne—reflect this struggle for a national and cultural identity. From these authors' engagement with the contestation over the meaning of 'America' I have discerned foundational scenarios, that is, repeatable cultural patterns that both define and constitute Americanness. In the juxtaposition of the works of these authors with contemporary cultural texts and pop culture phenomena, the ambiguities and tensions inherent in the notion of Americanness becomes evident, as the reiteration of these foundational scenarios—their repetition with a difference—gives room to the spectral narrative that needs to be silenced and repressed in order to uphold dominant notions of reality.

In my analysis, I have focused on the moments in which these dominant notions break and the hegemonic narrative is forcefully interrupted. The first part of my readings dealt with the construction of 'real,' 'original' Americanness in terms of the formation of a subjectivity and a coherent cultural identity, both on an individual and a collective, national level. My reading of Emerson's essays "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance" with the animated film *Finding Nemo* has focused on Emerson's attempt of defining and describing the ideal American individual, on the one hand, and on his particular understanding of time and space, on the other. Non-conformity, intellectual independence from society, an active mind, and trust in one's own genius are the central qualities of Emerson's ideal individual, the 'original' American. In order to achieve this ideal state of being, Emerson advises his fellow citizens to live permanently in the now, where one is uninhibited by the weight of the past and the pressures of the future. However, if we follow Emerson's argument through, the inevitable consequence seems to be that the ideal, 'original' American individual—and the concept of 'America' at large—remain notions that can never congeal but continuously constitute themselves anew. To live forever in the now means always starting over again, being condemned to a state of continuous beginnings but seeing no end.



While the foundational scenario of Emerson's prototypical American individual has been invested with national fantasies of a shared and common Americanness as embodied by a normal, modal American, *Finding Nemo's* performance of this pattern does not conform to those dominant fantasies. Rather than merely reproduce the cultural pattern of the ideal American individual, *Finding Nemo* imitates, distorts, and reinscribes this pattern into a new framework, thus affirming and contesting this pattern at the same time. The performative and parodic effect generated by this gesture of reiteration sheds light on a spectral narrative of exclusionary practices and cultural forgetting that haunts Emerson's American scholar. As a fish that suffers from short-term memory loss, Dory, one of the film's central characters, lives in a permanent state of anticipation and beginnings; she is always already displaced and, similar to Emerson's scholar, permanently in the making and never fully realized. However, as a visibly 'marked' character and a figure of difference in the film's narrative, Dory appropriates the cultural pattern of ideal—normal and unmarked—Americanness from a position of 'otherness,' which causes a rupture in the dominant imaginings of Americanness. *Finding Nemo* troubles the re-affirmation of hegemonic Americanness by claiming and articulating Americanness from the position of 'otherness,' thus demonstrating the failure of 'Americanness' to achieve totalized form and maintain a stable meaning. On the other hand, America's inherent inability to congeal also provides the possibility for those who are excluded from its dominant imaginings to appropriate and redefine the meaning of America for themselves. In other words, America's elusiveness and state of permanent anticipation allows for fantasies of a more inclusive American culture that can accommodate even its specters.

My reading of Thoreau's *Walden* and *Jurassic Park* picks up on the notion that America is constructed through practices of forgetting and the repression of 'otherness.' Both *Walden* and *Jurassic Park* tell of a search for America—for a 'true' American spirit—which both seem to find in the liminal space of the frontier, that is, in wild and untouched nature. To Thoreau, wilderness symbolized Americanness, for wilderness did not exist in Europe as it did in America and was therefore something uniquely and originally American to him. It does not come as a surprise that his search for 'real' Americanness therefore led Thoreau into the wilderness of woods and the liminal space of the frontier, which separates

integration from dissolution, coherence from discontinuity, and originality from imitation. In the act of fronting nature, fronting himself, and fronting America, Thoreau wanted to rediscover and restore an aboriginal sense of what it means to be American. I have described Thoreau's act of fronting as a foundational scenario that has been reiterated in *Jurassic Park* and that reinscribes Thoreau's project of redeeming America into the framework of a Hollywood blockbuster.

'Nature' is the notion most central to both *Jurassic Park* and *Walden*, but its representations in the two texts are located on oppositional ends: while nature seems to be devouring and destructive in *Jurassic Park*, it is presented as a pastoral idyll in *Walden*. However, as I have shown, *Jurassic Park* can be read as an extrapolation of *Walden*: it recalls Thoreau's considerations on economy, capitalism, and nature but adapts them to the socio-cultural situation of the 1990s. Essentially, *Jurassic Park* is a film about the tensions between capitalism and morality, about technological achievement and human failure, and about a nostalgic attempt to restore a long lost past that has never really existed in the first place. *Jurassic Park* continues the Thoreauvian project of fronting nature, thereby rediscovering America and the ideal American individual once more. However, as the dinosaurs disturb the initial harmony and idyll of the park and the cruel natural world recovered in *Jurassic Park* turns out to be nothing like the peaceful wilderness Thoreau encounters at Walden Pond, the mechanisms of exclusion and repression that operate in *Walden* become all too evident. The idealization of a pure and innocent nature depends upon the disavowal of everything that might interrupt the ideal—the simple, free, independent, self-sufficient, and natural—America. Thoreau's *Walden*, I have shown, is neither a paradise nor is it horrifying and deadly as *Jurassic Park*. It is an ambiguous and ambivalent place located at the crossroads of memory and forgetting, myth and reality, authenticity and reconfiguration. It is at these crossroads that Thoreau's America constitutes itself as a notion that has not yet consolidated any fixed meaning, but whose meaning rather continuously needs to be renegotiated.

My analysis of Whitman's "Song of Myself" and its juxtaposition with *Spider-Man*, then, has zoomed in on the question of embodiment and the construction of an all-encompassing, democratic American body. Both "Song of Myself" and *Spider-Man* use the body as a metaphor for the American democratic system, suggesting that the re-birth of America is not to be located in wilderness but in the

body. Following this reasoning, the individual bodies of Whitman's self and of Spider-Man can be read as American bodies—or as the embodiment of America—as they claim to be inclusive and representative of the whole nation. *Spider-Man* parallels "Song of Myself" in its conflation of the American body politic with the body personal, that is, in the localization of Americanness in the individual body and the construction of a particularly American body. Whitman famously stylized himself as America's first and original poet, who articulated 'original' American thoughts in the name of all Americans. By fashioning himself as an orator who speaks America into existence, Whitman's poetic self and the nation conflate and become indistinguishable from one another which, I suggested, declares Whitman's poet an effigy that functions as a surrogate for an absent original, namely for that of a 'real' American.

Inherent in Whitman's embodiment of Americanness, respectively that of his poetic self, are an irresolvable paradox and a struggle over cultural identity: first of all, the location of Americanness in the body presupposes the body as a relatively stable and self-enclosed entity, which contradicts Whitman's own assertion of being open-ended, inclusive, and all-encompassing. Secondly, Whitman's representability and rhetorical incorporation of the masses is crushed by the weight of his white male body. In other words, Whitman's poet inscribes whiteness and maleness into 'real' Americanness—a strategic move which is perpetuated in *Spider-Man*. If Whitman's poet is an effigy that functions as a surrogate for an absent original, 'real' American, then Spider-Man can be understood as a reincorporation of Whitman's persona that similarly attempts to fill the vacancy created by the absence of a 'real' American. In other words, both Whitman's poetic self and Spider-Man function as effigies for an ideal(ized) Americanness that hold open the place of the 'real' and 'original' American. The lack of a 'real' American, however, breeds anxieties and uncertainties about imaginings of what the 'real' American *should* be. Americanness thus constitutes itself in the face of the permanent threat of disintegration, in the face of chaos and otherness, and in the confrontation with the spectral narrative that reminds the hegemonic narrative of America of its own precariousness.

The second part of my readings, then, turned to two classics of nineteenth-century American literature, *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, and examined the struggle over the inscription of race and gender into the 'normal' American body.

More specifically, I proposed to approach 'Ishmael' and 'Hester Prynne' as idols of American culture, that is, as cultural projection-screens and repeatable figures which have left their traces in subsequent cultural productions. The Ishmaelite and the Hesteresque figure can be traced throughout American (popular) culture; however, as repeatable types they are abstract, idealized forms that transmit cultural knowledge and comply with the compulsion for coherent narratives. In my chapter, I aim at a differentiated reading of Ishmael and Hester by fleshing out the subversive potential of these two figures which actually undermines all coherence and homogeneity.

*Moby-Dick* and *Jaws* both revolve around questions of identity, uncertainty, and doubt. I read *Moby-Dick* as a play of cultural possibility that problematizes singular and totalizing national and cultural identities. Focusing on the representation and articulation of racial difference, I argue that Ishmael's narrative is marked by fundamental doubt as regards his racial identity and ends in the complete collapse of the boundary between blackness and whiteness. In *Jaws*, Martin Brody functions as the reiteration of the Ishmaelite figure, as a character in which one can find traces of Ishmael's *Moby-Dick*. Throughout the film, Brody struggles to answer the questions *Moby-Dick* left unanswered and to put an end to the ambiguity with which the Ishmaelite figure is burdened. Brody tries to restore 'normalcy' in Amity by forcefully trying to establish himself as the embodiment of that normalcy, that is, as the default American man. My juxtaposition of *Jaws* with *Moby-Dick* has shown the impossibility of that endeavor, as the unmistakably ethnic tinge of the Ishmaelite figure cannot be eliminated and removed by killing a racially charged animal prey.

I have read both the white whale and the Great White shark as racially ambiguous and suggested that their whiteness is an 'artificial' whiteness, a mask that hides their ethnic face. The whiteface of the whale and the shark, I further pointed out, implies that whiteness fails to ever achieve authenticity and can only be articulated in fictionalized form, as fantasies of an ideal. By trying to usurp the shark's whiteness, Brody hopes to white-wash himself and the 'normal' American body. Ishmael, on the other hand, follows a different route: he tries to negotiate his identity by placing himself in line with the black harpooner Queequeg and the white whale, thus forming his identity through the repeated blurring and crossing of whiteness and blackness. Ishmael can only escape the destructive forces of the

whale's whiteness through his own approximation to ethnicity, which entails his deliberate de-whitening and the blurring of racial difference. Through the strategy of ethnic ventriloquism, the assuming of an ethnic voice, and the tattooing of his body to make it resemble Queequeg's and the whale's 'black' bodies, Ishmael blackens up and defies the social and cultural hierarchization of racial categories. However, Ishmael can only *approximate* and *resemble* the black body, but he cannot decipher and understand it. As my juxtaposition of *Jaws* with *Moby-Dick* has shown, the repudiation and disavowal of the otherness cannot eradicate the racial and ethnic specters that haunt coherent narratives of American culture. These specters yearn for articulation, for finding a voice that will tell their stories. For as long as their voices remain silenced, the meaning of 'America' will remain an irresolvable riddle.

The juxtaposition of Hester Prynne, the protagonist of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, with Madonna yielded similar results. As my analysis has shown, the constitution of hegemonic Americanness does not only crucially depend on the repudiation of ethnic and homoerotic tinges, but also on the repudiation of femininity, which *The Scarlet Letter* and Madonna's videos depict as deeply struggling with its stigmatization as a transgressive and sinful other. Hester is punished by the Puritan magistrates for her sexual transgressions, but she chooses to subvert the verdict by appropriating her sign of shame and thus resisting hegemonic power structures. Madonna, on the other hand, stylizes herself as sexually transgressive in order to provoke punishment by those in power. Much of the music and visual art she produced during the conservative Reagan era is characterized by unmistakable attempts to rebel against the restrictions women find themselves subjected to within a patriarchal social order.

Hester and Madonna threaten the dominant cultural order from within, by appropriating hegemonic signs and giving them new meaning, which they then articulate through the deliberate staging of their bodies as transgressive and threatening. Hester articulates her dissent through the letter attached to her breast, while Madonna's articulation of dissent involves very explicit sexual and bodily gestures. However, both Hester's rebellion against the Puritan magistrates and Madonna's resistance against conservative values and ideology can only take place within the framework of hegemonic culture. Put differently, the apprehension and cultural legitimation of their existence, as well as the recognition

of their autonomy and agency, can only be given to them by the very same agents against which they rebel. Their resistance against hegemonic culture and patriarchal power thus inevitably entails an affirmation of those very same structures, which deems their accommodation within 'normal' Americanness impossible.

Furthermore, Hester and Madonna's sexual and bodily transgressions, that is, their repeated blurring of traditional gender roles, make them illegible in a culture whose social order is crucially built on sexual difference. Hester and Madonna thus embody the impossibility of being: undetermined and unable to solidify into readable form, Hester and Madonna are ghostlike figures that cannot be accommodated into the dominant social order. The utopian visions they both share of a female order that may displace patriarchy remains an inconceivable fantasy, for as much as both of them try to resist the patriarchal law, they both need and yearn for its approval, thus acknowledging and validating its power. Hester and Madonna may be able disturb the narrative of America, but they are condemned to an existence in the shadows of the patriarchal authorities in power. At the same time, their rebellion and the resulting disturbance of hegemonic narratives of Americanness render America's solidification of meaning impossible.

### **America's Ghosts**

Common to all juxtaposed readings of this study is a tug of war for the meaning of 'America' and 'Americanness.' All my readings suggest that the concept of 'America' is by definition unfinished and unable to congeal into a homogenous entity, but that it is at the same time open to revision and to the appropriation of new significations. Consolidating itself in the realm of the imaginary, America is ephemeral and ungraspable—a fiction or a dream, as Baudrillard has suggested, that one has to enter and experience in order to understand it. Baudrillard's comparison of America to a giant hologram speaks to America's illusive and untenable nature. A hologram reflects an object that is not present; it is a fragile and permeable reconstruction whose existence is not one of material substance but of ephemeral performance and the repetition of patterns of light. If the patterns are disrupted, so is the illusion of 'reality' and consequently the illusion of 'America.' It is only a thread of light that holds America together, Baudrillard suggests, and, as I have shown throughout my study, this thread oftentimes

breaks, drawing our attention to the shadows and specters that the “giant hologram” casts over the cultural landscape.

Baudrillard asserts that in America, the spectral refers to “the spectrum into which light disperses” rather than to “phantoms and dancing ghosts,” but maybe the spectral refers to both—maybe the phantoms and ghosts of America dance precisely within “the spectrum into which light disperses.” As a hologram, America itself is spectral, that is, an obscure presence without substance that *is* and yet *is not*. It is a porous structure that can only obtain a sense of reality through simulation, through the careful manufacturing of ‘authenticity’ and through the “screenal succession of signs, images, and surfaces” (Smith, M.W. 113). Furthermore, Baudrillard’s words imply that America constitutes itself performatively: the whole of American culture can be found in each of its elements, he suggests, and it is through the “fantastic switching between similar elements,” through the repetition with a difference and recombination of default patterns that America emerges as a hologram. However, this dream-like hologram shows an idealized version of ‘America,’ an America that belongs to the world of fantasy and myth, whose existence is precarious and permanently under threat. Just like a hologram may be distorted if its surface of light is disturbed, the carefully manufactured construct of ‘America’ may crumble if its cultural patterns are disrupted by its specters, that is, by those who are tell a different tale of America.

While Baudrillard comes to the unfavorable conclusion that America is vastly superficial, one-dimensional, and devoid of aesthetic meaning, I interpret the likeness of America to a hologram not as a sign of flatness and banality, but rather as an expression of America’s permanent displacement and inability to congeal into solid, graspable form. To Baudrillard, the landscapes of the desert epitomize Americanness, as the desert “is a site where human signs disappear, leaving only the indifference of pure objects, neutrality, and dead images that characterize contemporary America” (Smith, M.W. 115). In America, Baudrillard finds, meaning, history, reality, and culture have all been horizontalized like the desert, have been flattened and neutralized. The desert is so fascinating, he argues, because “you are delivered from all depth there—a brilliant, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points” (*America* 124). America is like the

desert in the sense that everywhere one looks one finds America replicated over and over, the whole being reflected in all its elements. To Baudrillard, the 'desertification' of American culture is then a relay into meaninglessness and emptiness, where everything "appears in the postmodern light as the most unreal of substances—a perpetual reduplication and simulation of itself" (Smith, M.W. 116).

I find Baudrillard's comparison of America to the desert an intriguing and apt comparison, but I heavily disagree with the conclusions he draws. My study has aimed at showing that reduplication and repetition do not by definition signify banality and superficiality. If America is understood and approached as performance, then reduplication and repetition are the very essence of a culture that constantly re-constitutes itself through performative acts that both assert and define its meaning. It needs to be stressed that the theoretical paradigm of performance is not to be confused with 'putting on a show' or 'pretense.' Rather, performance presupposes that one's object of study is not a self-enclosed entity, but "a highly contested practice," a transformable and transmutable composition of bodily acts whose meaning is all but clear and unequivocal (Taylor, D. "Remapping" 1419). Put differently, reading America as performance suggests that knowledge is transmitted through ephemeral processes, through embodied (but seemingly disembodied) practices and the reiteration of hegemonic cultural patterns or 'foundational scenarios,' as I have called them. 'America' becomes meaningful in its enactment and through the reiteration of cultural patterns, that is, through the embedding of 'new' performances into "the preexisting cultural scene or scenario" (Taylor, D. "Remapping" 1420). America, it follows, is by no means shallow, empty, and devoid of meaning, as Baudrillard suggests, but rather a "powerful performative," an ideologically charged "act of passion or belief" whose sustenance crucially depends on the continuous reiteration of a vast pool of images, symbols, myths, and ideas that trigger associations with 'America' as they seem to convey a particular 'Americanness' (Taylor, D. "Remapping" 1421).

Consolidating itself through performative acts, America emerges as a meaningful concept at the crossroads of 'reality' and imaginary, where dominant Americanness is articulated through national fantasies and mythic national codes which are rooted in cultural/historical processes and inform lived 'reality,' but which are, nevertheless, idealized versions of an America that can never be fully



realized. The meaning of America, in other words, constitutes itself in the realm of the cultural imaginary which finds articulation through “images, stories, and legends [that are] shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (Taylor, C. 23). The cultural imaginary thus develops normative force, as it describes “the common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy”—a legitimacy which can only be achieved through cultural hierarchies and exclusionary practices (ibid). America, it follows, is meticulously constructed in the complex interplay of performative acts and the cultural imaginary: the images, myths, and ideas that feed into the cultural imaginary find embodied, material form in performative acts, which imbues the cultural imaginary with a sense of ‘reality’ and ‘truth.’ However, it is only their frequent re-articulation in American cultural production that inscribes a sense of ‘original’ Americanness into the elements that make up the American cultural imaginary in the first place.

In this study, I have been interested in the slippages within this elaborate system of constructing America and in the effect they might have on our understanding of America and Americanness, respectively. It is through the slippages and faults in the system that America reveals its depth, its transformability, and its complexity, proving that beneath the flatness and homogeneity of the desert surface may lie a vastly different and rich landscape that all too often remains invisible to the eye of the swift traveler. It is somewhat ironic that Baudrillard’s book in which he discusses the emptiness of the American landscape and the meaninglessness of American culture, opens with a frontispiece that is a perfect illustration of America’s complexities and that aptly demonstrates the powerful interplay of the cultural imaginary and performance in the struggle over a solidification of what ‘America’ actually means. The frontispiece’s central figure, the cowboy, has become an American cultural icon and a central figure of American national mythology. A staple figure that inhabits American literature and popular culture, the cowboy is a powerful “symbol of American courage, strength, capability, and masculinity,” the quintessential embodiment of ‘real’ Americanness—an idealized, entirely positive and desirable notion of Americanness, that is (Brower 47). Not only is the cowboy *the* quintessential American but the Western, which mythologizes the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the notion of the frontier, and individualism, has been regarded the “most sacred

of American genres” (Clarke 30) and the genre most “central to American popular culture” (Grant xix).

I also regard the cowboy to be the perfect embodiment of Americanness, however not because I see him as a cultural shrine of “sacred traditional values” (Spohrer 31) or as an emblem of “normative and hegemonic masculinity” (Needham 4), but rather because, upon a closer look, the cowboy proves to be a highly ambivalent figure in whom conflicting and very contradictory versions of Americanness become manifest. The cowboy exemplifies the tensions inherent in the meaning of ‘America/n’ and can be regarded as *the* cultural figure in whom all the struggles and contestations over ‘America’ that I have discussed in the previous sections conflate. Let me therefore, by way of a reprise, re-visit the cowboy as an icon of Americanness and conjure up some of America’s ghosts.

### **John Wayne Would Not Like This: Gay Cowboys and Iconic Americanness**

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler outlines an “archetypal relationship” that, as he puts it, “haunts the American psyche”:

two lonely men ... bend together over a carefully guarded fire in the virgin heart of the American wilderness; they have forsaken all others for the sake of the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love which binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilization. (192)

It is almost as if Fiedler’s words described a scene out of the immensely successful and immensely controversial feature film *Brokeback Mountain*, the “gay cowboy movie,” as it has frequently been referred to.<sup>1</sup> Even though Fiedler’s position on homosexuality and American culture is highly problematic, I quote him here because regardless of his interpretation and evaluation of the homoerotic and homosexual strain in American literature, his words still reflect an awareness of their prevalence and their significance in American culture.<sup>2</sup> When it was released

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, Wheeler W. Dixon wrote that Andy Warhol’s *Lonesome Cowboy* (1968) was the first and only gay movie of the Western genre (cf. 11). Whether or not the moniker “gay cowboy movie” aptly describes *Brokeback Mountain* divides critics and audiences alike. As Spohrer points out, calling *Brokeback Mountain* a “gay” film may be restrictive and misleading, as the film deals with the protagonists’ complex and painful struggle with their sexual identity and their desire to fit into their conservative social environment (cf. 28). For a comprehensive account of the discussions concerning the film’s ‘gayness,’ see Harry M. Benshoff, “A Straight Cowboy Movie” (2009).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Fiedler’s position on homosexuality and American culture, see Act III, Scenario 1 of this dissertation. The main problem with Fiedler’s position is the presumption on which he bases his study, namely “the failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love and his consequent obsession with death, incest, and innocent homosexuality” (...) Fiedler suggests that all heterosexual love is adult and mature while homosexual love is

in late 2005, Ang Lee's film version of Annie Proulx's short story caused quite a stir because of its open depiction of homosexuality and same-sex desire within the norms and codes of the Western. The Western is generally regarded as the paradigmatic American genre which has been so crucial to shaping and defining American national identity and the features of the 'real' American man. Within the dominant narrative of American culture, the Western idealizes "normative and hegemonic masculinity" as "stoic, conservative and, most of all, 'straight,'" as Gary Needham points out, and *Brokeback Mountain* clearly subverts and dismantles these conventional representations of the cowboy (4).

At stake here is, however, not only the subversion of the cowboy and the Western but, on a much larger scale, a re-vision and re-construction of the 'modal' American and dominant notions of 'real' Americanness. Fiedler's description of the American archetypal relationship does not refer to *Brokeback Mountain*, of course, but to James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales and the relationship between the white frontiersman Natty Bumppo and the noble Mohican chief Chingachgook.<sup>5</sup> According to D.H. Lawrence, these "two childless, womanless men, of opposite races" (64) have a relationship "deeper than the deeps of sex. Deeper than property, deeper than fatherhood, deeper than marriage, deeper than love" (59). Lawrence avoids a discussion of same-sex desire and erotics by elevating Natty and Chingachgook into a mythical sphere: the two of them are the "new nucleus of a new society," two men who recognize themselves in one another and complement each other, establishing a "new moral, a new landscape" and representing an original, "true myth of America" (60). In the liminal space of the wilderness and the frontier, these two men develop a closeness, a blind trust, and a deep affection for each other that may not be explicitly sexual but that bears a notable homoerotic tinge. If on reads Natty as the prototypical pioneer, trapper, and early cowboy figure—as the 'true' Westerner—then Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales reveal a strong homoerotic element in early myths about white American

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childish and innocent, and that American literature's obsession with homosexuality is only indicative of its own immaturity. Rather than view homosexual elements as proof for "failure," I understand them as proof for possibility: the prevalence of homosexual love in classic American literature testifies to the possibility of finding room within 'normal' and normative structures for alternative patterns and alternative modes of expression.

<sup>5</sup> The Leatherstocking Tales were published between 1823 and 1841 and comprise five novels: *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). The chronology of the novels' publication years does not correspond with the chronology of the events recounted in the individual novels. *The Deerslayer*, for instance, is set in the mid-eighteenth century while *The Prairie* is set in the early nineteenth century.

masculinity which has been reproduced in all subsequent performances of the Western hero. Or, to put it differently: paradoxically enough, homoeroticism is and has always been a central element of a national myth whose primary purpose was to inscribe straight white masculinity into dominant understandings of Americanness.

Upon the release of *Brokeback Mountain*, the strong link between the Western and homoeroticism gained an unprecedented cultural visibility and critical attention. Prior to *Brokeback Mountain*, the homoerotic element in the Western was critically discussed only in limited capacity and largely repressed by the audience—after all, Fiedler identified homoerotic relationships as a specter that haunts the American psyche.<sup>4</sup> Because of its enormous popularity and widespread media presence, *Brokeback Mountain* brought into public consciousness the fact that, as Buscombe puts it, “cowboy flicks were always a tad gay, or at the very least homosocial” (30) and that *Brokeback* was only “the latest in a long tradition of Westerns to explore the intense, unspoken physical bonds between its two male heroes” (34). Spohrer, following Buscombe’s argument, mentions the films *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) as two of the most prominent examples of canonic Westerns that depict visibly homoerotic relationships, to which Needham adds *Red River* (1948), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *Calamity Jane* (1953).<sup>5</sup> Because of its very overt display of homosexual desire, *Brokeback Mountain*’s entry into the canon of Westerns “profoundly destabilizes and upsets the canon,” Spohrer explains (30). As she further argues, it is important to note that the love story between Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* does not “necessarily retroactively [transform] all past Westerns into gay films; rather, it forces an interrogation of the male relationships that so define the Western genre” (ibid).

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<sup>4</sup> Significant publications on the homoerotic element in the Western genre include, among others, Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981); Dexter Westrum, “Jane Russell Doesn’t Figure” (1984); Corey K. Creekmur, “Acting Like a Man” (1999); Dan Jardine, “Sex and the Single Gun-Slinger” (2004); Sara G. Jones, “Vampires, Indians, and the Queer Fantastic” (2004); and Chris Packard, *Queer Cowboys* (2005), published shortly before the release of *Brokeback Mountain*.

<sup>5</sup> As Needham suggests, *Red River* is the “homoerotic Western *per excellence*” (61). *Red River* starred the closeted Montgomery Clift, who is introduced “gazing down towards John Wayne’s crotch while sucking on a piece of straw” (ibid). Clift’s softness and passivity is contrasted with Wayne’s rugged and arguably more ‘normal’ masculinity. Even though Wayne has come to be the “embodiment of what it ‘really’ means to be a man,” many of his films, interestingly enough, bear a notable homoerotic subtext and Wayne himself is being heralded as an icon of “gay camp” (Dyer, *Culture* 60). *Calamity Jane*, on a different note, stars Doris Day, herself an icon of gay American subculture.

I concur with Spohrer that *Brokeback Mountain*'s most profound impact is not on the future of the Western genre but on its past, that is, on the vast archive of performances that have so significantly shaped and defined the Americanness of American culture. By inscribing *Brokeback Mountain* into the Western genre and by identifying Jack and Ennis as cowboys, the film forces a revision of the archive it draws from and of all the cowboy scenarios it reiterates. Ultimately, *Brokeback Mountain* thus invites us to revisit popular Western films, on the one hand, and instigates a resignification of the cowboy as the emblematic American hero, on the other. One of the most public, most dense, but also most tongue-in-cheek revisions of the Western, as Spohrer notes, was presented at the 2006 Academy Awards, when *Brokeback Mountain* was nominated for best picture but eventually lost against the less controversial Paul Haggis film *Crash*.<sup>6</sup> At the awards, host Jon Stewart introduced a montage of popular American Westerns that served to illustrate the "unquestioned love" that Leslie Fielder already saw as inherent to the genre; this montage suggested that *Brokeback Mountain* was neither new nor groundbreaking, but simply made explicit what has always been part and parcel of the Western. As Spohrer notes, "such a public airing of the Western's past has implications that extend beyond genre and into culture, destabilizing cultural concepts such as American-ness and masculinity" (31). Or, as Stephen Holden writes in the *New York Times*, "this moving and majestic film would be a landmark if only because it is the first Hollywood movie to unmask the homoerotic strain in ... American culture" (n.p.), and in the *San Francisco Chronicle* Mick LaSalle states along the same lines that "the idea of two Marlboro men having sex in a tent is, in itself, an unexpected twist on a traditional image of American manhood" (n.p.).

Following Leigh Boucher and Laura Pinto, I propose that *Brokeback Mountain* was a cultural event that redefined identities, politics, and cultural hegemonies (cf. 313). *Brokeback Mountain*'s particular representation of cowboys and masculinity is

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<sup>6</sup> *Crash* is a star-studded episodic film that paints a dark and grim picture of racism and humanity in contemporary Los Angeles. Claudia Liebrand notes that the Academy's decision to award *Crash* with the Oscar for Best Picture led to heated media discussions in the US and worldwide: "Zweifellos, so der Tenor der meisten Artikel, sei *Crash* ein wichtiger, ein besonders guter Film; die Academy hab sich allerdings, indem sie sich entschieden habe, *Crash* vor *Brokeback Mountain* zu positionieren, auf die sichere, nicht-kontroverse Seite geschlagen" (6). As Liebrand summarizes the reaction of liberal media channels to *Brokeback*'s defeat, the Academy's decision was widely regarded as upsetting and as a clear signal that homosexuality still causes discomfort, especially when it shakes the foundations of American culture (cf. 6-7). As film critic Wesley Morris laconically comments *Crash*'s triumph: "The memo from Hollywood seems clear enough. Better to reward the movie about people who clean our closets than the one about the men who live in them" (n.p.).

so significant because it has the potential to renegotiate the meaning of Americanness by redrawing the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable, or sayable and unsayable, as Butler has it. The implications of this redrawing are very ‘real,’ as Butler notes:

How do drag, butch, femme, transgender, transsexual persons enter into the political field? They make us not only question what is real, and what ‘must’ be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted. (*Undoing* 29)

Through the embodiment of seemingly impossible and unlivable lives, the norm is questioned, exceeded, reworked, and the dominant notions of reality are ultimately altered. Possibility, Butler emphasizes, is not a luxury but “as crucial as bread” (ibid); thinking in possibilities means making room for “the critical promise of



Fig. 10: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Original Film Poster (1969)

fantasy” or, in other words, it means becoming aware of the limits of reality and finding ways to challenge those limits (ibid). Fantasy is not the opposite of reality, as Butler explains, but is its constitutive outside—fantasy is akin to the imaginary, is both part of and feeding reality: “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (ibid).

*Brokeback Mountain* does not only bring the elsewhere home, it shows that the elsewhere is constitutive of and has always been haunting home. Not only is the Western a “homoerotic genre because its investments are rooted in the visual pleasure of male display” but, furthermore, cultural representations of cowboys are “routinely couched in the dramatic relations between men and the confrontations and rivalries that operate between male pairings and groupings,” suggesting that homoerotic undercurrents are constitutive of the cultural figure of the cowboy (Needham 60). The cultural impact of *Brokeback Mountain* becomes visible in its revisionary power to bring the

homoerotics inherent to the Western genre and the cowboy figure to the fore. If



Fig. 11: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, DVD collector's edition (2006)

poster (Fig. 9) shows Butch and The Kid shooting and looting their way through the Wild West, performing cowboy-ness as they do what cowboys 'typically' do: "They're take trains, they're taking banks, and they're taking one piece of baggage," the poster advertises the film, reinforcing the image of the cowboy as a tough outlaw. The slightly homoerotic tagline "You've never met a pair like Butch

and The Kid," which dominates the upper part of the poster, is counterbalanced by the famous still of Butch and The Kid firing their guns as they try to escape from the cavalry in Bolivia, to where they had escaped.

incorporating them into the larger narrative of the 'cowboy myth.' The original 1969 film

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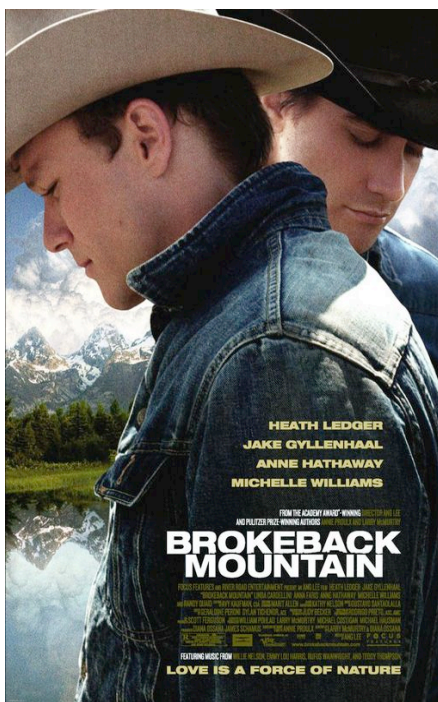


Fig. 12: *Brokeback Mountain*, Original Film Poster (2005)

Enter *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* post-*Brokeback Mountain*. The 2006 collector's edition DVD cover differs considerably from the original film poster in the arrangement of the film's protagonists and visibly imitates the *Brokeback Mountain* poster (see figs. 11 and 12). Not only does the DVD cover feature the by now iconic font used on the *Brokeback Mountain* poster, but, much more importantly, Butch and The Kid have transformed from the tough, gun-



swinging outlaws to soft, contemplative men. While the original poster is dominated by movement and action, depicting Butch and The Kid literally as partners in crime, the DVD cover emphasizes the strong emotional bond these two men share. The cover is marked by physical proximity and a somber and thoughtful tone which is underscored by the picture's softening shades of brown and beige. The bodies of Butch and The Kid are positioned in almost the same way as Ennis and Jack's and take up the entire frame—the small reference to Katharine Ross and the picture of her character, Etta, riding on Butch's bicycle have given way to a complete focus on the relationship of these two men, which is endowed with a depth and profundity the original poster does not convey.

On the *Brokeback Mountain* poster, the relationship of Jack and Ennis is similarly defined by emotional and physical proximity, rather than action. Coincidentally also set in Wyoming, albeit some 70 years later, *Brokeback Mountain* tells the story of two young ranch hands, who fall in love one summer and maintain a lifelong affair. Finding it impossible to be and live together because of the stigmatization of homosexuality and because of the violence that they have found gay men to experience, Jack and Ennis only give in to their desire when they meet on Brokeback Mountain. In their daily lives they keep up their roles as fathers, husbands, and devoted family men.

The *Brokeback Mountain* film poster captures the closeness yet distance between Jack and Ennis quite nicely. Their heads softly bent and their eyes directed to the ground, the two men do not show any visible affection for each other, but at the same time their two bodies seem to merge into one. The arrangement of their bodies against the backdrop of the mountain range recalls another iconic film poster, namely that of *Titanic* (1997; see fig. 13). The embrace between Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Rose (Kate Winslet) is only shyly suggested in the way Jake Gyllenhaal is positioned behind Heath Ledger, his body slightly twisted to the side as if it leaned against Ledger's. *Brokeback Mountain* resembles *Titanic* in the sense that both films



Fig. 13: *Titanic*, Original Film Poster (1997)



tell of a tragic love story and of relationships that seem unable to persist because of social and cultural constraints. It is only in the heterotopia of the mountain range and in the heterotopia constituted by the ship, respectively, that the rules of hegemonic culture are canceled out and the two unlikely couples can envision a different cultural order where their relationships are validated and legitimate.<sup>7</sup>

*Brokeback Mountain's* cultural impact is then twofold: it transposes the popular scenario of the 'star-crossed lovers' into a homosexual context, on the one hand, and associates same-sex relationships with notions like 'true' love, fate, and deep emotions. It thus counters widespread stereotypes of same-sex relationships as driven by narcissistic, hedonistic, and destructive desire and makes a claim for the universality of love. On the other hand, *Brokeback Mountain* revises the cultural image of the cowboy, as the example of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* suggests, by addressing the coveted homoerotic element in the Western genre explicitly and thus performing cowboy-ness (and, consequently, Americanness) with a difference. Let me briefly return to the original poster of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, specifically to its tagline: "You've never met a pair like Butch and The Kid" bears an unmistakably homoerotic undertone. Butch and The Kid are not only friends, they are partners and companions who stick together through thick and thin. Throughout the film, Etta is ambiguously referred to and used as their "cover." Although she is in a relationship with The Kid, she lets Butch "steal" her for a spin on his bicycle, which The Kid comments with a short "Take her. [*sigh*] Take her" to Butch. They exchange Etta like an object they both need to affirm their heterosexuality; both can project their (unspeakable) desires onto Etta, whom they are even taking with them to Bolivia "for cover," as the police are searching for a male pair and not for a woman.<sup>8</sup> As Liebrand observes, Butch and

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<sup>7</sup> I use the notion of the heterotopia in its Foucauldian sense. As Foucault writes in his essay "Of Other Spaces," heterotopias are "real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (24). For a discussion of the heterotopia in relation to *Brokeback Mountain*, see Liebrand 15-20.

<sup>8</sup> In her essay on buddy films, Susan Hayward evaluates the relationship between Butch, The Kid, and Etta as follows: "Traditionally buddy films are for the boys. That is, the narrative centers on the friendship between two male protagonists. ... Paul Newman and Robert Redford are the icons of this genre, often appearing together. This friendship is totally heterosexualized, there is no possible misreading since the heroes are always doing action-packed things together ... and a woman will be around even if very marginal to the narrative (she guarantees the heroes' heterosexuality, just in case)" (33). Hayward's excellent observation bears one little flaw: there *are*

The Kid form a couple much more endearing and intriguing than either Butch and Etta or The Kid and Etta; both men ambiguously claim throughout the film that they intend to become *straight*, that is, to quit their criminal activities and become righteous men (cf. 32). Their project to turn straight fails, of course—in every sense of the word. The film's final frame is the shot used in the film's original poster: Butch and The Kid try to escape from the Bolivian police, with Etta nowhere to be seen.

As Liebrand concludes her discussion of *Brokeback Mountain* vis-à-vis *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the American Western, which revolves primarily around the representation and construction of heroic masculinity, proves to be a genre that always already includes and even plays with precisely that which threatens the protagonists' straight masculinity (cf. 32). The Western operates with configurations of homosexuality and ambiguous subtexts, and Ang Lee's film easily ties into this tradition. However, *Brokeback Mountain* dares to speak the unspeakable, thus turning the entire genre and its obsession with masculinity topsy-turvy. *Brokeback Mountain* shows that when a seemingly unlivable, fantastic identity like that of the gay cowboy enters hegemonic culture as a livable and imaginable cultural figure, instead of continuing to haunt the American psyche as a specter, then this shift from 'unlivable' to 'livable' or 'unimaginable' to 'imaginable' inevitably entails a revision of what it means to be an American. As a renegade and social outlaw, the cowboy is a 'real' American, a "bowdlerized figure of Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideal American ... an American Adam" who embodies allegedly 'real' Americanness, that is, he embodies dominant notions of reality (Packard 3).<sup>9</sup> If new forms of cowboy-ness are made possible by way of fantasy, then new forms of Americanness are generated—or, at least, normative Americanness is questioned and destabilized as possibilities *beyond* the norm are posited. The claim to and articulation of Americanness from different vantage

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possible misreadings of the heroes' heterosexuality, otherwise Etta's character would not be necessary in the movie. Etta's only important role in the film is to shortcut any speculations regarding the male protagonists' relationship—which is, after all, the one relationship that forms the film's core and that the viewers are encouraged to empathize with.

<sup>9</sup> See also Patterson, who writes that the cowboy "not only serves to rationalize the actual historical process of American expansion, but also as a model of American manhood, as an example of the sorts of behavior supposedly necessary to be an American man" (107). The cowboy, Patterson continues, displays a certain array of abilities that men need in order to be able to survive in the American market economy, namely "independence, self-reliance and self-control, and [an] aggressive, competitive attitude toward most other men"—in short, qualities that "have been prescribed to men for two hundred years by the advocates of self-advancement toward the American Dream" (ibid).

points outside the ideality of the norm display the inherent instability of the notion of 'Americanness' and open it to processes of resignification.

*Brokeback Mountain* was revolutionary in that it gave voice to a narrative that had always lingered in the depths of the vast archive of Western films and literature and that had always existed in the shadows of dominant discourses on 'normal' Americanness. The Western genre and the cowboy, *Brokeback Mountain* shows, have always already borne their own deconstructive potential; or, put differently: dominant, hegemonic notions of reality are deconstructed through the articulation of a subdued, spectral narrative that is the constitutive outside of the hegemonic narrative of America. Through the imagining of new possibilities of livable lives the spectral narrative of America finds embodied existence and cultural legitimation, thus troubling hegemonic visions of American culture and exposing America's inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.

In a Derridean reading of the spectral, phantoms and ghosts "emblemize a postmetaphysical way of life," Brown writes, "a way of life saturated by elements ... that are not under our sway and that also cannot be harnessed to projects of reason, development, progress, or structure" (145-146). Ghosts wander freely, resist mastering and subjection through knowledge, power, action, place, or time. Ghosts come to us as effects, as traces of something that has been lost or that is purposefully repressed. When ghosts become specters, that is, carnal spirits or embodiments of the unlivable that transfer from the realm of the immaterial to materiality, they therefore cause a destabilizing moment of rupture in the structures and laws that determine the workings of hegemonic culture. American culture is haunted by what was misnamed, repressed, or went unrecognized; it is haunted by what remains unclear in its meaning, by the gestures, utterances, and movements that cannot be put into words but that yearn for articulation. These spectral narratives will never recede into the past but they will continue to disturb dominant, settled meanings and to challenge the logics and axioms on which American culture rests. They will continue to generate cultural renewal and possibility, and to bring the elsewhere closer to home. They will continue to redraw the American landscape and will allow us to sketch new fantasies of American culture. In the end, ghosts will keep the fiction of America alive.

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## ENGLISH ABSTRACT

“The Fiction of America” heeds Jean Baudrillard’s advice to enter the fiction of America and to enter America as fiction. It does so by conceiving of ‘America’ as performance, as a contested practice that constitutes itself through performative acts. More specifically, this dissertation investigates how the ‘Americanness’ of American culture constitutes itself in the interplay of the cultural imaginary and performance, that is, through the continuous reiteration of patterned cultural gestures and behavior, which I have called ‘foundational scenarios.’ Through juxtaposed readings of ‘classic’ American literature and late twentieth-century pop culture, this dissertation shows that the performance of the cultural imaginary constructs dominant, normative notions of ‘Americanness’ and the illusion of a homogenous, monolithic American culture. At the same time, however, the reiterations of foundational scenarios also bear the potential for deconstruction and for the resignification of hegemonic meanings. My juxtaposed readings reveal disruptive, spectral moments in the narrative of ‘America,’ which confront hegemonic American culture with its inherent inconsistencies and trouble a coherent ‘Americanness’ in the very moment of its articulation.

This dissertation is based on the presumption that institutionalized memory and national fantasies produce a notion of ‘Americanness’ that often appears to be disembodied, timeless, and universal. However, as its representations in American culture show, ‘Americanness’ is, of course, very much an embodied and culturally specific concept. Conceptualized along the unmarked categories ‘white,’ ‘straight,’ and ‘male,’ the cultural imaginary that structures the notion of American culture privileges an ‘American/ness’ constructed around those categories and that is perceived as ‘normal,’ while non-white, non-straight, and non-male voices that make their claim to Americanness are being systematically silenced. The lens of performance enables us to recognize those silenced voices that haunt hegemonic American culture and unveils a spectral narrative which instigates a resignification



of the meaning of 'America/n.' Based on the principles of repetition and difference, performance, in other words, always carries the potential to radicalize well-established, traditional readings and to resist hegemonic discourses.

Taking cue from the work of performance studies scholars Diana Taylor, David Román, and Joseph Roach and rooted in studies on the cultural imaginary by Winfried Fluck and Lauren Berlant, this study scrutinizes the interplay of performance and cultural imaginary in the formation of 'Americanness' and points out the tension and ambivalence that is inherent to such a formation. It does so by putting five 'foundational scenarios' on stage, which all contain a moment of disruption and destabilization that generates a different version and vision of America in performance. The first three of these scenarios focus on the constitution of an 'original' and 'authentic' Americanness and its embodiment by a 'real' American. In the confrontation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar" with the animated feature film *Finding Nemo*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* with the blockbuster *Jurassic Park* and Walt Whitman's epic poem "Song of Myself" with *Spider-Man*, it becomes evident that America is an ambiguous and ambivalent concept located at the crossroads of memory and forgetting, myth and reality, authenticity and reconfiguration. It is a notion that has not yet consolidated any fixed meaning, but whose meaning rather continuously needs to be renegotiated. On the other hand, it is precisely America's elusiveness and state of permanent anticipation which allows for fantasies of a more inclusive American culture and enables redefinitions of the meaning of 'America.' In the face of the recognition that the supposedly 'real'—straight, white, male—Americanness is an insufficient representation of Americanness which is subverted by a spectral narrative, hegemonic narratives of America are reminded of their own precariousness.

This state of precariousness can only be thwarted through normative practices and the forceful inscription of 'normal' Americanness into the 'real' American body. The last two 'foundational scenarios,' in which Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is juxtaposed with *Jaws* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with selected music videos by Madonna, engage in the struggle over the inscription of race and gender into the 'normal' American body. More specifically, this study proposes to approach 'Ishmael' and 'Hester Prynne' as idols of American culture, that is, as cultural projection-screens and repeatable figures which have left their traces in

subsequent cultural productions. The Ishmaelite and the Hesteresque figure can be traced throughout American (popular) culture; however, as repeatable types they are abstract, idealized forms that transmit cultural knowledge and comply with the compulsion for coherent narratives. This study has aimed at a differentiated reading of Ishmael and Hester by fleshing out the subversive potential of these two figures and demonstrating the significance of the spectral in the constitution of normative notions of 'Americanness': normative notions of 'Americanness' do not constitute themselves *against* but rather *through* its specters, which yearn for articulation.

Common to all juxtaposed readings of this study is a tug of war for the meaning of 'America' and 'Americanness.' All my readings suggest that the concept of 'America' is by definition unfinished and unable to congeal into a homogenous entity, but that it is at the same time open to revision and to the appropriation of new significations. Consolidating itself in the realm of the imaginary, 'America' is ephemeral and ungraspable—a fiction or a dream, as Baudrillard has suggested, that one has to enter and experience in order to understand it. The constitution of 'Americanness' is marked by moments of spectrality, by brief interruptions which are often perceived as threatening to hegemonic culture, but that also describe a condition of possibility, in the sense of Jacques Derrida, because they occur unexpectedly, do not follow the rules of any social contract or institutional power, and can thus freely transgress the laws and norms which govern hegemonic culture. These moments of spectrality will always continue to disturb dominant, settled meanings and to challenge the logics and axioms on which American culture rests. They will continue to generate cultural renewal and possibility, and to sketch new fantasies of American culture. 'America' depends upon those moments of spectrality, because in the end, its specters keep the fiction of America alive.

## DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

“The Fiction of America” folgt Jean Baudrillard’s Rat, sich der Fiktion Amerikas hinzugeben und Amerika als Fiktion zu betreten. Dies versucht die vorliegende Dissertation zu tun, indem sie ‘Amerika’ als *Performance* versteht, als umkämpfte Praktik, deren Bedeutung stets neu verhandelt wird und die sich fortwährend durch performative Handlungen und Akte konstituiert. Genauer gesagt beschäftigt sich diese Arbeit damit, wie sich das ‘Amerikanische’ der amerikanischen Kultur in der Wechselwirkung von Performanz und dem kulturellen Imaginären konstituiert, das heißt durch die stetige Reiteration schematischer kultureller Gesten und Verhaltensmuster, die ich als ‘foundational scenarios,’ als ‘Gründungsszenarien,’ bezeichnet habe. Durch das Nebeneinander- und Gegenlesen ‘klassischer’ amerikanischer Literatur und populärkultureller Phänomene des späteren zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts zeigt diese Dissertation, dass durch die Performanz des kulturellen Imaginären dominante und normative Bedeutungen des ‘Amerikanischen’ und die Illusion einer einheitlichen und monolithischen amerikanischen Kultur konstruiert werden; gleichzeitig aber liegt in der Reiteration der Gründungsszenarien auch dekonstruktivistisches Potential und die Möglichkeit der Resignifikation von hegemonialen Bedeutungen. Durch die Strategie des Gegenlesens tritt ein spektrales Störungsmoment zutage, durch welches die inhärenten Widersprüchlichkeiten hegemonialer Bedeutungen von ‘amerikanischer’ Kultur sichtbar werden. Normative und kohärente Narrative des ‘Amerikanischen’ werden somit bereits im Moment ihrer Artikulation untergraben und infrage gestellt.

Diese Dissertation gründet sich in der Annahme, dass institutionalisiertes Gedächtnis und nationale Fantasien Bedeutungen des ‘Amerikanischen’ produzieren, die generell entkörperlicht, zeitlos und universell erscheinen. Dieses ‘Amerikanische’ ist jedoch in Wirklichkeit ein ver-körperertes und kulturell spezifisches Konzept. Im kulturellen Imaginären nehmen Konstruktionen des

‘Amerikanischen,’ die sich entlang der nicht markierten Kategorien ‘weiß,’ ‘männlich’ und ‘heterosexuell’ konstituieren, eine privilegierte Position ein und werden als ‘normal’ wahrgenommen, während nicht-weißen, nicht-männlichen und nicht-heterosexuellen Stimmen systematisch Ausdruck und Artikulation verweigert werden. Das Prinzip der *Performance* ermöglicht es, diesen Stimmen, die durch die hegemonialen Narrative amerikanischer Kultur geistern, Körper und Raum zu geben, wodurch in Folge ein spektrales Narrativ zur Artikulation drängt, das wiederum eine Neuverhandlung der Bedeutung des ‘Amerikanischen’ nach sich zieht. Basierend auf dem Prinzip der Wiederholung und Differenz trägt *Performance* somit immer das Potential der Radikalisierung etablierter, traditioneller Lesearten und des Widerstandes gegen hegemoniale Diskurse in sich.

Diese Arbeit beruft sich einerseits auf Studien der Performance Studies von Diana Taylor, David Román und Joseph Roach, und andererseits auf Studien zum kulturellen Imaginären von Winfried Fluck und Lauren Berlant, um das Zusammenspiel von *Performance* und kulturellem Imaginärem in der Konstruktion des ‘Amerikanischen’ zu untersuchen und dessen inhärente Brüchigkeit aufzuzeigen. Dies versucht diese Arbeit zu zeigen, indem fünf ‘Gründungsszenarien’ aufgeführt werden, welche alle ein Moment der Unruhe und Destabilisierung aufweisen, durch das eine andere Version und Vision Amerikas mittels Performanz zum Vorschein tritt. Die ersten drei dieser Szenarien fokussieren auf die Konsolidierung eines ‘originellen’ und ‘authentischen’ Amerikanischen und seiner Verkörperung durch einen ‘echten’ Amerikaner. In der Konfrontation von Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The American Scholar” mit dem Animationsfilm *Finding Nemo*, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* mit dem Blockbuster *Jurassic Park* und Walt Whitman’s epischem Gedicht “Song of Myself” mit *Spider-Man* wird ersichtlich, dass ‘Amerika’ ein ambiges und ambivalentes Konzept ist, das an der Stelle der Verschränkung von Gedächtnis und Vergessen, Mythos und Realität, Authentizität und Re-Konfiguration entsteht. ‘Amerika’ ist ein Bedeutungsgefüge, das noch keine fixe, unumstößliche Bedeutung angenommen hat, sondern dessen Bedeutung vielmehr kontinuierlich neu verhandelt werden muss. Es ist daher auf der anderen Seite gerade diese undefinierbarkeit ‘Amerikas’ und seine Verhaftung in einem Stadium der permanenten Antizipation, die Fantasien einer offeneren, all umfassenden

amerikanischen Kultur und Neudefinitionen der Bedeutung 'Amerikas' ermöglichen. Angesichts der Erkenntnis, dass das vermeintlich 'echte,' das heißt weiße, männliche, heterosexuelle, 'Amerikanische' eine unzulängliche Repräsentation des Amerikanischen ist, welches durch ein spektrales Narrativ subvertiert wird, werden hegemoniale Narrative 'Amerikas' mit ihrer eigenen Prekarität konfrontiert.

Dieser Prekarität kann nur durch normative Praktiken und der zwanghaften Einschreibung des 'normalen' Amerikanischen in den 'echten' amerikanischen Körper entgegen gewirkt werden. Die letzten beiden 'Gründungsszenarien,' in denen Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* mit *Jaws* gelesen wird und Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* mit ausgewählten Musikvideos der Sängerin Madonna, setzen sich mit der Einschreibung von 'Rasse'/Ethnie und Gender in den 'normalen' amerikanischen Körper auseinander. Genauer gesagt schlägt diese Arbeit vor, 'Ishmael' und 'Hester Prynne' als Idole der amerikanischen Kultur zu verstehen, das heißt als kulturelle Projektionsflächen und wiederholbare Figuren, die ihre Spuren in späteren kulturellen Produktionen hinterlassen haben. Die Figur des 'Ishmael' und der 'Hester' sind als wiederholbare Typen abstrakte, idealisierte Formen, die kulturelles Wissen vermitteln und sich dem Zwang nach kohärenten Narrativen unterwerfen. Diese Arbeit versucht durch ein differenziertes Lesen von Ishmael und Hester das subversive Potential dieser Charaktere aufzudecken und die Signifikanz des Spektralen in der Konsolidierung normativer Bedeutungen des 'Amerikanischen' hervorstreichen. Normative Bedeutungen des 'Amerikanischen' konstituieren sich demnach nicht *gegenüber* dem Spektralen sondern *durch* das Spektrale, welches zur Artikulation drängt.

Ein Tauziehen um die Bedeutung 'Amerikas' und des 'Amerikanischen' ist allen 'Gründungsszenarien' gemein. Alle Szenarien lassen erkennen, dass 'Amerika' per Definitionem ein unfertiges Konzept ist, unfähig sich zu einer homogenen Einheit zusammen zu fügen. Es ist aber gleichzeitig auch offen für Revisionen und Aneignung neuer Signifikationen. 'Amerika' konsolidiert sich im Imaginären, ist vergänglich und ungreifbar, eine Fiktion oder ein Traum, wie Baudrillard meint, die man betreten und erfahren muss, um 'Amerika' zu verstehen. Die Konstitution des 'Amerikanischen' ist von Momenten der Spektralität gekennzeichnet, von Momenten der kurzen Unterbrechung, die oftmals als bedrohlich für die hegemoniale Kultur empfunden werden, die aber

auch einen Zustand der Möglichkeit nach Jacques Derrida beschreiben, da sie unerwartet auftreten, keinen Regeln des sozialen Kontrakts oder institutionalisierter Macht folgen und somit vollkommen frei die Gesetze und Normen brechen können, welche die hegemoniale Kultur regulieren. Diese Momente der Spektralität werden weiterhin an dominanten, etablierten Bedeutungen rütteln und die Prämissen, auf denen die amerikanische Kultur beruht, infrage stellen. Diese Momente werden weiterhin kulturelle Erneuerung und Möglichkeit generieren und neue Fantasien amerikanischer Kultur entwerfen. 'Amerika' hängt von diesen Momenten der Spektralität ab, da schlussendlich das Spektrale die Fiktion Amerikas am Leben erhält.

## PUBLICATIONS

Parts of my considerations on the cultural imaginary in Act I have been published as:

“Localizing Silicon Valley.” with Eugen Banauch and Astrid M. Fellner. *Contact Spaces of American Culture: Localizing Global Phenomena*. Ed. Petra Eckhard, Klaus Rieser, and Silvia Schultermandl. Münster & Wien: LIT-Verlag. (forthcoming 2011)

Parts of Act II, Scenario 1 have been published as:

“Losing Nemo, Finding Alternatives: Queer Theory and the Postmodern Subject.” *Landscapes of Postmodernity: Concepts and Paradigms of Critical Theory*. Ed. Petra Eckhard and Michael Fuchs. Münster & Wien: LIT-Verlag, 2010. 159-177.

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