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EXtREme 21

Going Beyond in Post-Millennial North American Literature and Culture

Edited by Izabella Kimak and Julia Nikiel

American Studies Center

INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES
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Warsaw 2021

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Julia Nikiel and Izabella Kimak

Narrating the New Age of EXtREmes

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The year 2021 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the Canadian writer and visual artist Douglas Coupland's debut novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). The book made Coupland the involuntary voice of a generation. What it also did, however, was set the course for Coupland's future literary and artistic inquiries into the world's increasing permeation with ever-accelerating change. When *Generation X* was first published—Coupland reminiscences—history seemed to be "finally emerging from locked-in syndrome. The Soviet Union was over. Liberal capitalism was triumphing. Music changed completely. It became a cliché that every other advertising montage showed someone sledge-hammering the Berlin Wall" ("Douglas Coupland on Generation X"). The world, in other words, was gaining on velocity. Over the next three decades, history was overtaken by change. Exponential in nature, the change has not only transformed the very fabric of reality but also drastically shortened the distance between what is and what will be, leading to the emergence of what Coupland calls "the extreme present" or "the superfuture." The sense of the growing amalgamation between the present and the future has informed most, if not all, of Coupland's fiction published since 1991. Still, it took time and a cohort of like-minded individuals for the concept of the extreme present to fully form.

In March 2015, together with his two friends, Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist, and with the help of the graphic designer Wayne Daly, Coupland published *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*. In the book—which the authors themselves characterize as a graphic speculative remaking or a twenty-first-century update of Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium Is the Message* (1967) —the trio focus on the multiple ways in which late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century technological developments have both rewired time-space and influenced human perception and experience thereof (Coupland et al. "A Book"). The extreme present, Coupland et al. argue, denotes contemporary individuals' sense of inhabiting the future yet being unable to keep pace with time and time-related change, both of which seem to only "procelerate," i.e. "acceleratingly accelerate" (*The Age* 51).

While to a large extent (dis)missed by the general public, *The Age of Earthquakes* has attracted a considerable following in the art world. In 2017, November Paynter, both an avid fan of the book and the Artistic Director at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Toronto, Canada, invited Coupland, Basar, and Obrist to curate an exhibition based on the book's subject matter. "Kind of imagine what it would be like to walk through it—to walk through the book," she told them (qtd. in Collins). While the trio accepted the invitation, it was not that book that they chose to turn into an exhibition. Displayed first at MOCA (September 2019-January 2020), and then—in an extended form—at Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (January-August 2021), "The Age of You" combined the trio's provocative koans and dicta with the visual and audio works of over seventy contributors (photographers, visual artists, designers, filmmakers, and musicians), and served as a prequel to Coupland, Basar, and Obrist's next collaborative literary endeavor, i.e. *The Extreme Self: Age of You*, published in late June 2021.

The Extreme Self expands on the ideas put forward in *The Age of Earthquakes*. Using what Coupland et al. call "the digital vernacular of memes" ("A Book"), the book posits human personhood as the dubious pivot of the extreme present: central to the scene yet—pardon us—fracked, i.e. reduced to a resource and opened to extraction and manipulation. The advancement and gravity of the human self's predicament was revealed in 2016, i.e. the year of no return. Once the extent of Cambridge Analytica's complicity in Donald Trump and the Brexit campaigns was exposed, people's relationship to data could no longer be seen as innocent (Basar qtd. in Munz). The fact that data ran the world was old news. Yet—Coupland et al. insist—"if 'data is the new oil', then 2016 was the equivalent of a global oil spill that can't be reversed" ("A Book"). The global society's realization of the ease with which information can be procured, instrumentalized, and weaponized to alter the progression of history has spilled onto every aspect of reality and further radicalized the world which by then was already losing its grip on the idea of being moderate and was, instead, increasingly flouncing between extremes. Enter the Age of You.

The inspiration behind *The Extreme Self* is the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, and specifically Hobsbawm's 1994 book *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991.* Each of the chapters in *The Extreme Self* "update[s Hobsbawm's] concerns about the 20th century to the 21st century" (Basar qtd. in Munz), and—at the speed of a screen scroll and in the format of a Twitter/Instagram feed—articulates the seismicity of the extreme transformation the global world is undergoing. "The Age of You," Coupland et al. argue, "is the new Age of Extremes" (*The Extreme Self* 46-47). It is the age of not only the extreme self but also extreme space (is there really a difference between the tangible and the virtual anymore?), extreme time (real time, no time, what day of the week is it?), extreme nature (is the plague nature's checkmate? does Coronacene herald the demise of the almighty human?), extreme knowledge (or ignorance, for that matter), extreme emotions (engineered by algorithms; wait, what? you honestly though they were real? LOL), extreme lies (we meant post-truth, sorry), extreme ambiguity (are there still any binaries?), extreme power (the leaders we democratically give voice to take away *our* voice—how did *that* happen?), extreme entitlement (we're so worth it), extreme inequality (… divide, the health divide, the digital divide, the gender divide, the education divide, the access divide, the clean water divide, the you-name-it divide), extreme nationalism (there's us and there's those from "the shithole countries"), extreme (in)visibility (Dear Shoshana, please tell me who's looking, and why don't they ever stop? Yours, Prudie), extreme authorship (copyright is dead, long live brainsourcing!), extreme networkedness (the data, the metadata, the linking, the embedding, the reposting, #the_all-powerful_hashtag), extreme work (face it, you're dispensable: Grammarly writes better than you do and Siri is more of a therapist than you'll ever be), extreme loneliness (is being in a crowd tantamount to being together?), extreme anger (hate wars, revenge porn, stalking, defaming, the comments section), extreme indifference (*shruggie*), extreme banality (truth be told, when the apocalypse arrived, all most of us did was hoard toilet paper and noodles). Extreme gibberish. Extreme everything.

The gibberishy and nauseating feel is central to the experience of the extreme present. What characterizes contemporaneity is not just the constant mutability and radicalization of virtually every sphere of life but, above all, the speed at which the change tsunami proceeds. "We're not built for so much change so quickly," Coupland et al. assert (*The Extreme Self* 59). The incongruity between the human mind and the velocity and profoundness of the ongoing change causes what Shumon Basar calls "'Change Vertigo': that unsettling sense of drag where the future arrives at a faster pace than our psychological, emotional and political capabilities can cope with" ("Thirty"). Stripped of sexy phrasing, change vertigo amounts to the overpowering and unyielding anxiety most people experience in confrontation with contemporaneity. The pervasiveness of the feeling reverberates in current literary and cultural scholarship, the academia being, after all—or at least aspiring to be—the litmus paper of the *Zeitgeist*.

We all dabble in the now now. Not so long ago, courses in contemporary North-American literature or culture began after World War II. "Now," Chihaya et al. argue, "we are all engaged in the field of contemporary studies"; some of us have "even taught courses based entirely on texts published within the calendar year of the course" (1). What Chihaya et al. call "the discipline's new openness to the extreme present" is definitely a response to both the post-millennial outburst of artistic creativity and contemporary individuals' interest being increasingly limited to what they are directly enmeshed in. Still, it appears to stem as well from a form of academic FOMO, i.e. anxiety at falling behind the curve, failing to address issues while they are still contemporary or, worse yet, missing milestones as they happen (Chihaya et al 1-2).

At the same time, however, we wish to stress the fact that the frantic pace of change and the interconnectedness of the contemporary (virtual) world that we have delineated above do not by any means preclude a certain degree of situatedness as a vantage point from which an individual is experiencing the extremeness of the present moment. With the essays gathered in this special issue of the *Polish Journal for American Studies*, we would like to extend our scholarly gaze onto the various faces, so to speak, of the EXtREme 21 as experienced and articulated within the sphere of North-American cultural production. The twenty-first century has already offered plenty experiences of the extreme: from the pivotal event of the terroristic attacks of 9/11, with which the century infamously began for the US and the world at large, through the financial crisis of 2007-2008, Trump's presidency, the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, to the Covid-19 pandemic. These are only the most crucial events and phenomena that have exacerbated the twenty-first-century individual's sense of anxiety, alienation, unequal opportunities, and—especially recently—an increasing dependence on the virtual. What we wish to present to the readers is a sort of scholarly assemblage, if you will, with individual authors offering a closer look at one particular aspect or context of the extreme (North-American) present, all of them contributing at the same time to the overall picture of agitation, fear, and a sense of overwhelming isolation inherent in the experience of the present moment.

The profound solitude of the contemporary individual is the subject matter of Vanesa Menéndez Cuesta's article titled "T@pped into the W3rldWideWeb: C0nfiguring [Net(I)Ana(S)]," which constitutes a captivating analysis of the phenomenon termed by the author *Alt [C]Lit* poetry. Through her close reading of several poems by writers associated with the movement, Cuesta argues that contemporary experience of alienation and disembodiment characteristic of the virtual world is to a large extent conditioned by the urban milieu in which many of these young poets live and work.

Two following articles, in turn, address the literary articulations of very real threats to communal and individual safety in the form of terrorist activities. In her contribution titled "Going to Extremes: The Representation of Discrimination after 9/11 in Fiction" Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė presents an overview of the major features of 9/11 literature, focusing primarily on the phenomenon of anti-Arab violence in the wake of terrorist attacks. Her case study—Laila Halaby's 2007 novel *Once in a Promised Land*—provides an illustration of the claims made in the essay inasmuch as it presents both the collective and personal trauma of its Muslim American characters spawned by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

This is followed by Inna Sukhenko's article "Fictionalizing Nuclear Terrorism in US Nuclear Fiction: James Reich's *Bombshell*," in which the author discusses Reich's 2013 novel, arguing that the conflation of the factual and the fictional in the genre of nuclear fiction contributes to fostering readers' knowledge of the nuclear industry and its agenda. Sukhenko also shows how Reich contextualizes the narrative of his young female terrorist within radical feminism's crusade against male-ruled nuclear industry.

A yet another threat to individual and communal safety is posed by climate change and the possibility of climatic apocalypse. In her contribution "Managing Fear in a Risk Society: Pretrauma and Extreme Future Scenarios in Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*," Anna Gilarek analyzes the culture of fear as delineated in Nathaniel Rich's cli-fi novel *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013). The novel's focus, Gilarek argues, is to a large extent pre-apocalyptic, as it investigates the pretrauma contemporary people experience as a result of environmental risks. Foregrounding the protagonist's traumatic responses to future, as yet unrealized events, the novel demonstrates the ruthlessness with which capitalism both preys on contemporary people's anxiety and commodifies risk.

The subsequent three essays in this issue show the experience of the present moment as conditioned by an individual's situatedness, understood in terms of sex, race, social class, and the like. First, in his article titled "Becoming Horse—Capitalism and the Human Identity: An Analysis of Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*," Mateusz Myszka focuses on the descriptions of horse-humans in Boots Riley's 2018 film. Reading the creation of the hybrids as a metaphor for modern class relations, Myszka draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" to comment on capital's instrumentalization of technology and point to the ways in which hybridization assists the reconstruction of subjectivity and channels revolutionary change.

Aleksandra Różalska in her "Transgressing the Controlling Images of African-American Women? Performing Black Womanhood in Contemporary American Television Series," in turn, analyzes the portrayal of black womanhood in two TV series, *Scandal* and *How to Get Away With Murder*. Różalska is interested in particular in how these television productions address the prevailing stereotypes of black women, including the mammy, the Jezebel, and the angry black woman.

Finally, Izabella Kimak and Zbigniew Mazur in their essay "Race, Violence, and the City: Chicago's Black Urbanity in Contemporary American Film and Literature" treat the city of Chicago as a useful model for the articulation of fossilized race relations in the contemporary US. Analyzing three recent films—*Native Son* (2019), *Widows* (2018), and *The Hate U Give* (2018)—Kimak and Mazur argue that the continuing division of American urban areas into clearly demarcated racial zones inevitably leads to outbreaks of violence, police brutality against Blacks being a case in point.

The concluding essay of this issue, Jovana Vujanov's "The Emptiness of Hardcore: Consuming Violence in *Hotline: Miami*," is a case study of one more articulation of violence. Examining the indie game *Hotline: Miami* (2012), Vujanov shows how with the use of what she calls "the ludification of excess," the game both comments on gamified violence and highlights the problematics and ethereality of (media) consumption.

On a final note, as we are writing these words, the twenty-first century's extremeness shows no signs of abating. The Covid-19 pandemic is still ravaging the world, laying bare both the inequalities between various countries and systemic inequalities within individual states. The latter is especially clear in the case of the US, where—as Sonali Deraniyagala argues in her review of Lawrence Wright's recent book *The Plague Year: America in the Time of Covid* (2021)—

> [d]isasters are… unequally destructive.... Black people and Latinos contracted the virus at a rate three times greater than whites, partly reflecting the ways economic need could lead to greater exposure. Children from low-income households experienced a 60 percent drop in math learning. There was barely a change for those from better-off homes.

Race and social class are not the only factors that have had a bearing on individuals' experience of the pandemic; gender is another one. If, as we have argued above, the academia can function as the litmus paper for the society at large, it is telling that" [w]omen academics have faced disproportionate work-life balance challenges during the pandemic and are more likely to have reduced their research hours than men" (King and Frederickson 1). These arguments corroborate the point that we have made above: that one's situatedness heavily affects one's individual perception and experience of the various (extreme) phenomena that make the twenty-first century what it is. It remains to be seen what other extremes the world will have to face in the decades to come.

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Vanesa Menéndez Cuesta

T@pped into the W3rldWideWeb: C0nfigur-ing [Net(I)Ana(S)]

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which loneliness has become the epitome of contemporary human condition for the Millennial generation, together with its impact on the psychological and emotional side of human expression and the urban landscape, as expressed through art and the virtual. Modern megacities are shaping and configuring what we nowadays understand as art. In the case of *Alt [C]Lit* poets, whether it is New York City or Los Angeles, the US urban landscape has a great influence on how these young authors have configured their poetic production: their experiences and referents belong to these cities. In this paper, I would like to discuss how spaces, especially urban spaces, have generated physical isolation and have transitioned into a mental landscape, to which the virtual contributes to increase anxious alienation that manifests itself through the body and the configuration of human subjectivities. Therefore, I will analyze hypermodern identity/ies that result from the urban landscape of megalopolises, the manner in which the virtual has generated online communities and has contributed to (hyper)sexualization, and the way in which Zafra's concept of *netianas* can be applied in order to analyze the paradoxical position of loneliness and early-adulthood through the *Alt [C]Lit* poetry and other related-literary and visual production.

Keywords: overexposure, online identities, loneliness, non-places, visual culture, *Alt [C]Lit* poetry

Humanity seems to be currently going through an extended existential crisis. The hypermodern individual has internalized the naturalization of precariousness and consumption in every aspect of their daily lives, submitting to the dominion of technology and becoming subordinate to constant productivity. This obsession with productivity and availability contributes to making no time for leisure and to a disconnection from the constant performance of tasks for capitalistic production, blurring the boundaries between work and consumption, which affects people's exhausted bodies and anxious minds. Le Breton argues that these exigencies are more focused on the adaptation of the individual to the current times: the times which demand a high level of flexibility and efficiency and which require an urgent need for speed, promoting competitiveness, amongst others (*Desaparecer* 4). These are the circumstances that surround the individual, instead of those which would allow her to focus more on her personal growth or her development as an individual.

There is a need, even an urge, for disconnection in the hyper-connected society we live in now: Le Breton states that the hypermodern individual is characterized by a paradoxical disconnection that lingers between a longing for the presence of others as well as a need for keeping a physical distance from them (*Desaparecer* 4). There is no doubt that authors such as Le Breton and Byung Chul Han speak about the *burnout syndrome* to describe the current mood that de-humanizes the individual in order to turn her into an exhausted and de-motived machine, too tired to fight or rebel against her current condition. Han agrees in this respect with Le Breton: the external pressure to excel creates a sense of distrust about the external world and leads the individual to look for a refuge inside themselves, which results in the "drilling and the emptying of the self" (Han 13). Hence, the virtual becomes a psychological, and even emotional, shelter for those who are too tired of living in a hostile and demanding real world. How has the city become a place of loneliness and bodily alienation? Is the virtual the next promised land for the tired and exhausted hopeless generation?

In *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing offers an interesting analysis of the history of loneliness in New York by exploring the lives of some of the most famous twentieth-century artists who lived and worked there. Through the art of Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, Henry Darger and David Wojnarowicz, Laing reflects on how big cities have influenced the way these artists have employed art in order to explore and to express their alienation from society:

> Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired. *Unhappy*, as the dictionary has it, *as a result of being without the companionship of others*. Hardly any wonder, then, that it can reach its apotheosis in a crowd. (Laing 4, emphasis in the original)

As a form of disconnection, the modern architecture that configures big megapolises like New York, loneliness has become a state of being rather than an option. Laing makes an interesting comment on this issue by analyzing Hopper's "Nighthawks" (1942): she describes the diner as "an urban aquarium, a glass cell" (21), as if the characters from the painting were trapped inside the glass structure of the diner that shows no exit to the exterior. Also, it is interesting to note that there is little, if any, interaction between the characters depicted in Hopper's painting. This is the kind of urban landscape in which you can visualize Sarah Jean Alexander, Gabby Bess, Ana Carrete, Mira Gonzalez or Melissa Broder, working on their writing in any crowded café in Manhattan or Los Angeles, alone in their virtual bubbles, disconnected and absorbed in an online dimension. It is not hard to imagine these *Alt [C]Lit* poets hiding their faces behind the shining screen, self-centered, composing or browsing the web as if reality did not exist.

In *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett explores the evolution of urban spaces from ancient Greek to the contemporary, most modern megapolis, specifically New York. In his analysis, he focuses on the interaction between bodies and spaces. In particular, he points out how the mobility of the body is connected to the dissociation of the individual from her surroundings:

> The physical condition of the travelling body reinforces this sense of disconnection from space. Sheer velocity makes it hard to focus one's attention on the passing scene…. Thus the new geography reinforces the world in narcotic terms; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography. (Sennett 18)

In this sense, Augé's concept of non-places can be useful for the analysis of urban spaces as places for transit-movement: by using de Certeau's concept of space as a "frequented place, an intersection of moving bodies," Augé argues that "it is the pedestrians who transform a street (geometrically defined as a place by town planners) into a space" (Augé 79). It seems that both Sennett and Augé apply de Certeau's theory of the body and space in order to explain the interactions between individuals and places through the materialization of corporeal movement that is produced within a space. It is as if the mind potentially disengages from the tedious and repetitive process of spatial movement that becomes a transition or displacement from one location to another.

Now, it seems evident that being and not being is connected to this idea of commuting as a moment of disengaging from one's own body, while putting one's mind in the next thing one plans to do, as is the case of Gabby Bess in her poem "BAD BITCH"[1] from *Alone With Other People* (2013):

> We mapped out every conceivable route through the
> subways of New York
> in our search to find Jay Z to show him our poetry (189)

As it is evident, Bess's goal is not "mapp[ing] out every conceivable route through the subways of New Yok" (189) as a way of exploring the underground tunnels of the city, but it becomes rather the means through which to succeed in meeting her idol, Jay Z, and to validate her poems. Transportation is not about enjoying the ride, but is rather the medium through which to get to the finish line, paradoxically not moving but still getting one's body to a different place. The subway as a space makes the individual disengage temporarily from her immediate medium, becoming a passive body from which the mind dissociates through daydreaming or thinking about something else. This view is supported by Augé, who identifies the means of human transportation in big cities as "non-places," that is as "installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods" (34): this is what he has denominated as "spatial overabundance," one of the three figures of excess that Augé identifies as characteristic of "supermodernity" (40-41).

In Ana Carrete's "Cute taxi driver" from her poetry zine *make-believe love-making* (2012), the car and the taxi become two different spaces where abandonment and attraction take place through the absence or presence of transiting from one place to another: the absence of an ex-partner is evoked in the line "your car wasn't there anymore," and the sense of abandonment is reinforced in "you left without me" (Carrete 16). In the next stanza, the speaker's coping with this overwhelming emotion is expressed in "I vomited on the sidewalk," and her hesitation about having a breakup closure in "I texted goodbye" (16). Then, she immediately forgets about it, "but saved it as a draft," after finding out that life goes on and new opportunities arise in front her, as in "the taxi driver flirted with me / later" (16). The sequence that Carrete makes in the poem clearly presents a parallelism between how these "non-places," so overlooked in our daily experiences, interestingly mark emotional attachment and condition our emotional states without being noticed: these spaces of transition show one's inner landscape as an urbanely-conditioned individual.

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[1] The titles and the poems are reproduced in this essay respecting the author's original use or lack of capitalization.

It seems that young people today escape from the alienating hostility of big cities to look for some reassurance or relief through virtual reality and other social media. Disconnecting from the body helps to relieve the pain that loneliness causes by projecting oneself virtually, literally disintegrating into bits. Merleau-Ponty explained in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) how virtual subjectivities dissociate from their bodies in an attempt to regain the control that has been lost in the real world, through the simulation of self-spectacle:

> The virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is… he inhabits the spectacle. The spatial tilts and takes up its new position. It is, then, a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world. Being projected, in the absence of anchoring points, by the attitude of my body alone… when my actual body is at one with the virtual body required by the spectacle, and the actual spectacle with the setting which my body throws around it. (291-292)

Post-modernity has become the battleground of what seems to be a conflict between image, or immaterial idealization, and the body, or fleshly embodiment. According to Le Breton, the centrality of the body relies on its social symbolism that seems to tie up together at the same time that it constitutes one as an individual (*Antropología* 7). The social rupture of the individual with the other collectivities, which has also led her to abandon other moral and spiritual constructs, has left her with a sense of vast emptiness that is filled with constant activity as an attempt to cope with the existential void of nothingness. This radical division between individual and the collective is manifested in the extreme reclusiveness of *hikikomoris*, but it has also become a standardized symptom of the individualism that characterizes our times: the 'Me/Selfie culture' has become a norm that affects not only Millennials, but also other individuals across the generations that coexist now.

This obsessive reinversion of the external self through physical corporality is a problem that Melissa Broder explores in her book *So Sad Today* (2016), as it forms part of her reflections on her addiction to the online world in the chapter "I took the Internet Addiction Quiz and I won." The following fragment from Broder's work explores the interactions between subjectivity and the body through virtual media:

> Reality was never my first choice. I like that I can be somebody else on the Internet. I like that I can present one facet of myself and embody that. I don't have to live in a body on the Internet. It's so much easier to present an illusion of oneself than to contain multitudes. Illusion is easier than flesh. I like that other people can be a hologram version of themselves on the Internet, too. I like tweets and nudes, romantic emails, avatars and dick pics. I like that get to fill in blanks. Who are you? I'll decide. (*So Sad Today* 76)

In this fragment, Broder expresses the appeal of the Internet for her: the transformational power of online identity/ies. This view is close to what Zafra called N*et(i)Ana(s)*: a generation of "posthuman and immaterial" women, an "alternative theoretical figuration of the Internet subject" that transgresses "the frontiers of gender, class and race" by raising "new questions on ways of being and relat[ing] to the online universe" (23).[2] What Zafra tries to explain is that the virtual has opened the door, at least theoretically, for exploring subjectivity and finding ways of subverting realities through new languages available on the net. These new forms of construction of the immaterial are directly connected to the production of "desire," "meaning," "affection and emotivity," according to Zafra (148). Broder seems to express her distress about reality; in order to cope with it, she uses the Internet as a way to escape from those parts of her current existence that she does not like: "The Internet has given me the dopamine, attention, amplification, connection, and escape I seek…. The Internet has enhanced my taste for isolation. It has increased my solipsism and made me even more incapable of coping with reality" (76).

Broder's fear of reality is expressed in the poem "In want of rescue from the real" from her last book of poetry *Last Sext*:

> Fantasies die so dry
> Still I held on
> Because the real is arctic
> …
> And I am scared of death
> And I am scared of life (11)

The "fantasies" that "die so dry" in the poem refer to the "illusion" from the fragment of *So Sad Today*. The poetic voice argues that "the real is arctic" (Broder, *Last* 11): reality represents an extremely cold world while "fantasies" are ephemeral and leave her emptier each time ("die so dry") (11). It is interesting to note the synesthetic metaphors implied in each element of the opposition, "fantasies" versus "the real," as described in terms of sensations: one is "dry" while the other is "arctic." It seems that what the speaker finds relieving about fantasies is that, despite their futility, she does not have the sense of being living or dying in a real sense, as it is described in the closing lines: "And I am scared of death / And I am scared of life" (Broder, *Last* 11). As Broder claims in *So Sad Today,* the addictive power of the Internet relies on its infinite sense of "potential" and the fact that one loses contact with the real, with the materiality of corporeal sense of time and space: "There is something about the Internet that, even when it sucks, holds infinite potential all times" (88). As Broder claims, everything is possible in the online sphere. For Broder, the online space allows her to transcend the limitations of real corporeality, in a Cartesian fantasy that prioritizes the immaterial mind over the material body.

Hence, the Internet has become the epitome of social placebo: a fake supply of social interaction that is as volatile, flaky, and uncompromised that we are still not really certain about its future consequences, and how radically it is going to change the social fabric in the long term. What was once imagination is now supplied by the Internet in a way that passivizes, and even damages, one's creative potential to project mental images rather than being constantly exposed to the stimulation of the visual.

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[2] *NETIANA: SUJETO POSTHUMANO* e inmaterial que n(h)ace en Internet. Figuración teorética alternativa del sujeto en red. Ficción política que rebasa las fronteras de género, clase y raza y que sugiere nuevas preguntas sobre las formas de ser y de relacionarnos en el universo on line (Zafra 23, my translation in the main text).

As it is evident, the communication has been de-materialized as the body has been disembodied. As she keeps living, as Lipovetsky describes, as “glued to the screen and connected to net” (271), the body is left behind as a carcass that merely contains this highly virtualized subjectivity, a mind that is sucked into the addictive tentacle-like-threads of the online world wide web. In *El Hombre Postorgánico*, Sibilia speaks about the *post-organic man* as the new humanistic ideal to transcend this fleshly prison(cell), a similar vision to the one that is also mentioned in Plato’s *Phaedo*: that the soul is imprisoned inside the body, just like the body has now become another limitation for the virtual possibilities of the hypermodern wo/man. Finally, the soul, that is our subjectivity, has found a way to get rid of, at least momentarily, the burden of corporeal existence by means of the virtual. This is what Sibilia argues in the following extract:

> These biotechnological projects understand life as information, as a code that can and has to be manipulated and improved with instrumental digital help. As it happens in the “angelic” tendencies of the cyberculture and tele-informatics, with their proposals of the immortal mind through artificial intelligence and the overcoming of the physical space through the virtualization of the bodies in the data network. (*El Hombre,* 118)[3]

As she explains further, the quest for the hypermodern wo/man is a search for the “ethereal and eternal ‘essence’” by employing “artificial intelligence and biotechnologies” that contribute to “cut[ting] off life by separating it from the body” (118). It is what Deleuze and Guattari defined as the “body without organs”: “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole” (151). This form of disembodying the mind, our subjectivity, from its fleshly carcass corresponds to the accelerating form of identity construction through identities produced online.

There are some examples of this form of dissociation from the body in the poems by Mira Gonzalez from her first published book of poetry *I will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together* (2013). What is fascinating about these poems is the way Gonzalez expresses physical experiences of a detached, almost scientific, interaction between two individuals: as if dissecting the sensations through the language of the specific and the unemotional. The following fragment belongs to “I just need you to know exactly what I want without me having to say anything”:

> do you remember that dream I had
> where my fingers touched your fingers
> and we came to understand that our hands were capable of
> expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies
> could you just put your mouth on my mouth next time you talk
> I have been trained through operant conditioning

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[3] Esos proyectos [biotecnológicos] comprenden la vida como información, como un código que puede y debe ser manipulado y corregido con ayuda del instrumental digital. Como ocurre en las tendencias “angélicas” de la cibercultura y la teleinformática, con sus propuestas de inmortalidad de la mente mediante la inteligencia artificial y de superación del espacio físico a través de la virtualización de los cuerpos en las redes de datos (Sibilia, *El Hombre Postorgánico* 118). All quotes from Sibilia in the main text in my translation.

to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus
now I feel comfort because your brain
is encased in a skull a few miles away from here (17)

The memory that this poem deals with is triggered by the physical contact made possible by "my fingers touch[ing] your fingers" (17), as the poetic voice expresses her concern, and even astonishment, about how "our hands were capable of / expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies" (17): what she is describing is the power of bodily performance to communicate emotions. What is also interesting to note is how reluctant she still is to totally engage in such experience, as it is expressed in the lines: "I have been trained through operant conditioning / to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus" (17). The learning process that is mentioned in the poem is what is also known as *instrumental conditioning*, mostly consisting of modifying a certain behavior by reinforcement or punishment. In Gonzalez's case, her resistance to let her emotions overflow her goes hand in hand with the acceptance of punishment and the rejection of traditional romantic clichés in intimate interactions. This is what makes her avoidant since she finds "comfort because your brain / is encased in a skull a few miles away from here" (17). Somehow, it seems as if the poetic voice is relieved that the connection is not at a mental level, and the other person is not able to perceive the way she is thinking about that particular situation. But at the same time, the voice of the poem seems to find the idea of seducing her counterpart, of having a "loving" effect on the Other appealing:

now look at my face and tell me
that my physical presence in the world
has caused you to experience extreme disequilibrium
are you able to confirm my existence
in a strictly biological sense (17)

The chemical effects of love and affection on the body are clearly expressed in the lines "to experience extreme disequilibrium / are you able to confirm my existence in a strictly biological sense" (17): is she referring to experiencing emotions as a medium to re-connect with her physical body in a physiological sense?

Gonzalez's poem brings to mind a poem by Sarah Jean Alexander, "Human adults," from *Wildlives* (66-67), in particular due to its employment of biological metaphors in order to express a set of emotions related to affection, attachment, and love:

I want to tap on your skull from the outside:
Is anyone alive in there?
Is anyone alive anywhere, really?
I want to put my ear against the hair on your head
and hear the *ahhhhh* of a low, distant voice. (66, emphasis in the original)

Contrary to the indifference and lack of concern for the Other's well-being presented in Gonzalez's poem, the perspective offered by Alexander differs in the sense that there is an interest in getting to know what the other person might be thinking, by "tap[ping] on your skull from outside" (66). As Gonzalez also does, Alexander acknowledges that despite physical connection made possible by means of touch or direct physical contact, the ability to enter another person's thoughts is almost impossible, even frustrating, as it shows in her insistent rhetorical questions: "*Is anyone alive in there? / Is anyone alive anywhere, really?* (66). Later, her longing for a reaction from the other person is expressed through the onomatopoeia "*ahhhhh*" (66-67), which is repeated two more times throughout the poem. The lines from the onomatopoeia are clearly related to the myth of Echo: the nymph who fell in love with the self-absorbed Narcissus and was unable to express her desire for him. Like Echo, Alexander's poetic voice unsuccessfully attempts to communicate with her love interest: "I am whispering *ahhhh* / and waiting for you to hear" (67). She recognizes her own humiliating situation by describing her way of loving as "between stupid fast love / and not being able to see" (66). Hence, the poem by Alexander speaks from the point of view of unrequited love whereas Gonzalez sides with the unrequiting part.

Last, but not least, in Mira Gonzalez's "I will inevitably ruin our relationship," the poetic voice of the poem again describes her struggles to engage emotionally through bodily contact as a way to both dissociate from her own body and to disconnect from the Other(s):

> I had this specific shitty feeling
> I closed my eyes and thought about virtual particles
> that cease to exist when they are not observed
> the momentum of a virtual particle is uncertain according to the
> uncertainty principle
> it is also uncertain whether or not I existed while I was kissing you (31)

In the fragment presented above, the "virtual particles" stand as a metaphor for visibility and perception: this is evident when the poetic voice relates the existence of these particular objects through the perception of vision: "I closed my eyes when they are not observed / that cease to exist when they are not observed" (31). It seems that the hypermodern motto of the current times is to be seen in order to be. This is what in her book *La intimidad como espectáculo* (2008) Sibilia calls "the tyrannies of visibility," which consist of constant public exposure of the self, mainly through the social media, that leads towards "a mere exacerbation of certain narcissism, voyeurism and exhibitionism, always latent" (105).[4] As the Argentinian anthropologist suggests, one has "to *appear* in order to *be*" (Sibilia 130, emphasis in the original), which directly links one's existence with the performativity of "appearances, the spectacle and visibility" (Sibilia 130). This form of performativity also seems to be validated by "other people's eyes and, above all, the coveted trophy of *being seen*" (Sibilia 130, emphasis in the original). In Gonzalez's poem, the gaze of others does not only determine one's existence, but also one's gaze determines one's own existence in the world: as she closes her own eyes while kissing, she "is also uncertain whether or not… [she] existed," which is "this specific shitty feeling" (Gonzalez 31) the poetic voice mentions at the beginning of the poem: she compares herself to the "virtual particles / that cease to exist when they are not observed" (31), as the virtual bodies that disappear in front of our voyeuristic eyes when the screen shuts off.

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[4] …una mera exacerbación de cierto narcisismo, voyeurismo y exhibicionismo siempre latentes (Sibilia, *La intimidad* 105).

As I have presented through this analysis, illustrated by the poetry of Millennial authors such as Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete and Gonzalez, corporeality and subjectivity are highly conditioned by our relationship to the urban landscape we inhabit as well as to the social media we daily use to connect beyond our physical limits. To conclude, I would like to propose the following set of questions in order to further research the challenges that the virtual is posing to contemporary society as well as to the individuals that configure it: Is our subjectivity really independent from its corporeal representation in the Internet era? How is the paradox of duality being reworked and problematized as one's identity formation is conditioned by performativity and the influence of online networks? In which new ways femininity is challenged and reinforced by these new technologies of the virtual?

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Going to Extremes: Post-9/11 Discrimination in Fiction

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to discuss the representation of discrimination and polarization of the American society after the events of 9/11 in Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). The novel presents the point of view of "the Other" and focuses on the analysis of the antagonistic processes in the American society and their outcomes in the lives of ordinary citizens, accused of being "the Other." The article examines the deterioration of beliefs and values and the "death" of the American Dream. Based on the fundamental theory of Trauma Studies, the article discusses the issues of personal and collective trauma and their representation in Laila Halaby's novel. Collective traumas may unify or polarize the society—both aspects have had negative outcomes in the USA. Increased patriotism and solidarity were particularly prominent during the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and resulted in the discrimination and polarization of the society, the anger being directed at Muslim communities. The first days of the aftermath marked the start of antagonism on different levels: despite being US citizens, representatives of the Muslim communities experienced harsh reactions in their neighborhoods, jobs, social spheres, etc. For many of those "on the other side" these processes meant the end of their normal lives and dreams. The article examines both the informational and empathic approach used by the author of the novel to disclose irreparable processes that may happen in any society.

Keywords: contemporary American fiction, September 11, discrimination, American society

September 11, 2001 started a new period in literature and history: even current events have a tendency to be viewed through the prism of 9/11. The article discusses the consequences of the tragic events of 9/11 for the Arab community in the United States of America, as described in Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Immediately after the event, the world was torn by "cultural and ethnic animosities" (Conway 114). On that day, the world entered the era of moral and/or physical executions: designs for punishing the evil forces have been continuously elaborated, elements of binary opposition and segregation appeared in many societies, and instead of demonstrating any attempts to understand, discuss or explain, the extremism of Islamic fundamentalists was echoed in the form of the so-called "western extremism"—that is, demonization of Islam and Muslim traditions. As A. G. Noorani observes, "the Spectre of Islam continues to haunt very many in the media, in academia, in the arts and in scholarship, [and] few care to free themselves from its thrall" (23). Consequently, many contemporary authors have chosen this issue as a challenge: some tended to politicize their novels, while others expressed their wish to personalize the tragic event by placing the tragedy of the country within the boundaries of a single social unit, the family, and the microcosm of each person.

Laila Halaby was born in Beirut, Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother.[1] She grew up in Arizona but due to her family's extensive traveling, she had to spend time on the East and West Coasts, in the Midwest, Jordan, and Italy.

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[1] My America: Laila Halaby | The American Writers Museum (Accessed 23 July 2020).

Laila Halaby has written two novels, *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), and a collection of poems *My Name on His Tongue* (2012). She received the PEN/Beyond Margins Award for *West of the Jordan* (2003), and *Once in a Promised Land* appeared in the Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection. In addition to fiction and poetry, Laila Halaby also writes stories for children.[2]

Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* tells a story of Salwa and Jassim, a Jordanian immigrant couple in Tucson, Arizona. The traumatic experience of 9/11 does not leave Salwa and Jassim unaffected, and the couple directly experience the negative aspects of the changing attitudes towards Arabs in the United States of America. Moreover, both protagonists are affected by separate personal traumatic events, when Salwa loses her baby due to miscarriage and Jassim kills a boy in a car accident. These incidents result not only in the deteriorating relationship between the two, but also irrevocably change the protagonists' lives.

This article will begin with a discussion of significant processes in the American society during the aftermath period and an examination of the society's polarization. Attitudes to Muslims, instigated reactions against them and binary thinking are central issues in this discussion. Further, features of 9/11 literature will be briefly surveyed to ground the analysis of the aftermath period as described in Laila Halaby's novel.

The Ever-Lasting Trauma of the Country

The trauma that the United States of America experienced on September 11, 2001 made a strong impact on the world community. Christopher Bigsby states that "America's primary response was bewilderment" (5). The tragic events of this day and a difficult aftermath period have altered almost all the spheres of life, making everyone divide their lives into before and after. The United States of America and the world entered the era of binary opposition: Us versus the Other. People wanted to find an immediate coherent explanation of the catastrophe, which, according to Jeremy Green, in literature resulted in the form of "tragic realism" (94). After the 9/11 attacks the US government and the President's administration established different agencies and organizations, the main purpose of which was to fight against terrorism. According to Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, the immediate aftermath period inspired the renewed mythological system and patriotism (32). However, often the ambiguity of political actions frightened the society, resulting in psychological instability and social disintegration. Political situation is directly related to social stability in the country. Frank Furedi states that people "continue to live in a culture concerned with a multitude of fears. Anxiety about terror competes with fear of crime, incivility, global warming and various other routine, ambient worries" (1). Before the September 11 attacks, Islam was an accepted religion as many others in the United States; however, during the aftermath period, Muslims were often treated as enemies, murderers and terrorists. This situation resulted in the seclusion of ethnic communities in many countries, especially Muslim communities. The American society was confused and bewildered—an obvious consequence of the lack of information. Despite the fact that the mass media contributed to the representation of the tragic events, the society could not comprehend the scope and consequences of the catastrophe. The trauma of the country has become the trauma of the whole world, becoming the ever-lasting stigmatic phenomenon.

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[2] Laila Halaby — Winner of the PEN/Beyond Margins Award (Accessed 23 July 2020).

Immediately after the event the country stepped onto the devastating road of estrangement. As Akbar S. Ahmed states, many religious figures around President George W. Bush emphasized "the Christian nature of the USA… attacking Islam" and calling it "a very wicked and evil religion" (141-142). According to Ahmed, such hysterical attacks reinforced "already existing stereotypes of Muslims" because "to many Americans the religion of Islam simply meant terrorism or extremism" (142). Gradually, "Islam and Muslims became a matter of public discourse in America" (Elaasar 1). Thus, the world entered the dangerous period of Islamophobia and binary thinking. A term "Islamophobia" had existed in different societies for several decades; however, after the 9/11 attacks it resulted in various forms of stereotypes and prejudices. A. G. Noorani defines Islamophobia as a "dread or hatred of Islam and of Muslims, [which] is an ingredient of all sections of the media, and is prevalent in all sections of society" (41). Noorani describes it as "a malaise" of the contemporary times, pointing to dangers of fundamentalism, which "banishes reason from religion and compassion from faith" (65). As the country started quickly rolling down the road of "Islamophobia," "the sense of frustration that Muslims felt in seeing themselves portrayed negatively" increased (Ahmed 142-144). Such confrontation of the society members resulted in what Frank Furedi calls "a culture concerned with a multitude of fears" (1). Ahmed points out the fact that "this problem has become even more acute after September 11," continuing "to cause misunderstandings on both sides"; he raises a question of building mutual understanding between the West and Islam, explaining the necessity of "the intellectual discourse [which had been earlier] framed in the context of the 'war on terrorism'" (144). This is, probably, the main reason why some authors have chosen to explain the causes and outcomes of terrorism to the readers, helping them to recover from the tragedy, and, at the same time, aiding the audience in crossing the bridge between the two opposed camps. Such 9/11 narratives, in which Muslim portraiture is central, question the notion of the polarity between "Us" and "Them" as a construct by denouncing clichés and cultural taboos, which becomes a significant endeavor in consolidating the identity of the American society, including the Muslim-Americans' traumatic post-9/11 experiences. Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* explores the personal trauma and examines traumatic experience caused by discrimination and social marginality. In this way, the author represents the stand of many Muslim-Americans and their personal and collective trauma of discrimination during the aftermath period and later.

Main Features of Post-9/11 Literature

In literature the post-9/11 period begins right after the September 11 events. This period is painful for the entire world because terrorism has become a world-wide problem. Emory Elliott rightly points out the fact that "American literature in the twenty-first century will be influenced by the events of that terrible day and by the ways that the United States government responded" (446). Many critics agree that after the

9/11 events a new era of modern literature commenced. For example, in the article "Postmodernism and Islam: Where To After September 11," Akbar S. Ahmed notices that "ideas and practice of multicultural harmony, eclecticism and juxtapositions… were halted in their tracks on 11 September 2001" (140). The critic points out "the symbolism of the attack on the heart of the financial center of the Western world" and "the strike on the Pentagon, the heart of the military might of America," drawing a shocking conclusion: "postmodernism lay buried in the rubble on that fateful day" (140). Although the latter idea may be considered rather controversial, such an opinion may demonstrate the significance of the event. On the other hand, Ahmed's statement that "[i]n many important ways September the 11th was the day the new century began" (140) is true: the tragic event initiated many irreversible changes in the American society and culture. According to Catherine Morley, "the September 11 terrorist attacks engendered a new form of narrative realism, a form of realism born of a frustration with the limits of language as an affective and representative tool" (295). On the other hand, readers expect to read about how Americans identify themselves and how they understand "the Other."

Authors of 9/11 fiction seek to present the reality of post-9/11 America without embellishment, so that the reader is given a possibility of analyzing the causes of 9/11 attacks, comprehending the magnitude of the tragedy or even identifying with the victims. As Catherine Morley rightly points out, "writers integrate an emphasis on the visual image within their fictions thereby offering a heightened version of realism in order to accurately portray the realities of post 9/11 socio-cultural and personal landscapes" (293). Emphasizing the significance of personal surroundings, the authors discuss human consciousness, moral values and attitude towards life and death. People are not afraid of death but of obscurity that leads to it. Attitude to death is expressed through two different perspectives. The first is the death of innocent people, who had appeared in the wrong place and time. In this case, the authors focus on the emotional state of the victims' relatives, their thoughts and explanations, and "flashbulb memories" (Rader 1). The second aspect is the death of terrorists, their reasons for choosing such destiny and their contemplations and/or preparations for the act of terrorism. The destructive binary thinking is represented through different paradigms: "Life and Death," "Us and Them," and also "Then/Before and Now." Karine Ancellin observes that "[t]hese novels offer visions of the past which are alive and lingering, while the present remains difficult to settle into" and the future is still obscure (8).

One of the features of 9/11 literature is the writer's attempt to disclose a global conflict which arises from deepening social and cultural contrasts. Authors often try to reveal the distinction between two different cultures, between obedience and faith as opposed to American modernism and consumerism. A great number of novelists disclose the conflict between the American way of living and Islamic culture, religion, and jihad.

The theme of self-destruction often dominates in the 9/11 novels: confusion, felt in the society, is transferred into the novel. The main character is sad and disappointed in the society and its moral values. Often the protagonist is lonely, misunderstood, seeking to answer all their inner questions; s/he is different from the rest of society. Consequently, the inner conflict leads to self-destruction, which happens in various forms and, finally, is represented in the overall tragedy. The main character (for example, the survivor) may be described not as a victim but as a real hero, who succeeded in living through or rescued others.

The 9/11 fiction often includes criticism of the consumerist society and the overpowering role of the mass media. The novelists discuss social inequality, the lack of morality and harsh real-life situations. Thus, the aim of a 9/11 novel is to reveal the tragedy not only of one character, but of any culture or phenomenon in general. The images of the falling Towers and then the absence of these buildings build up the imagination of the society and determine the possible attitudes to future events. The absence of the Twin Towers was replaced, as E. Ann Kaplan states, by "other images—of burning people jumping out of the Towers, of firemen rushing to rescue people… of the huge cloud of smoke" (13). These images are depicted in the recollections of witnesses and the relatives of the victims who died during the attacks. Direct representations of the 9/11 attacks often appear in the novels; these representations echo TV reports and documentaries: for example, as Catherine Morley points out, "[m]any writers describe their impotence in terms of their being frozen in front of the television screen or, in the case of the New York writers, from some city vantage point" (295). The petrifaction watching the latest news is a frequent feature of 9/11 fiction.

The personalization of 9/11 events builds up a sense of truthfulness and reliability. Readers encounter narratives about losses and tragedies that are similar to their own. Alienation, doubts, disappointment or tense family relationships, antagonistic processes in the Muslim communities and society are all significant features of 9/11 literature. In 9/11 novels writers seek to reveal different types of family members: responsible, detached, wandering, asking, considering, unprepared for the challenges of the reality or questioning the altered circumstances. Family relationships are often stressful: family members lack communicative skills, feeling lonely and spiritually wounded.

The language and style of 9/11 novels may itself represent a particular feature: many writers have chosen the main character's point of view, so that "the language deals obliquely with 9/11 through the precise attention to the laws of grammar and language in a monologue.... Scrutinizing every verb tense and grammatical configuration, the narrator is preoccupied with life, death, existence" (Morley 300). The language in the 9/11 novel emphasizes the importance of each detail; it becomes a necessity to portray the tragic day and its aftermath as accurately as possible. The stylistic means contain a strikingly realistic aspect, allowing the readers to acknowledge the terrifying realistic paradigm of "Before" and "After."

The Aftermath: The Tragedy of Loss in Laila Halaby's Novel *Once in a Promised Land*

The plot of the novel begins on September 11, 2001, the day when the terrorist attacks in New York City, Arlington, and Pennsylvania occur. Even though the personal traumas which the main characters, Salwa and Jassim, have to deal with are not directly caused by 9/11, Halaby constructs the plot in such a way that this event becomes the beginning of all their struggles and problems. 9/11 undoubtedly affects

Salwa and Jassim psychologically; moreover, they experience the consequences of the changing attitudes towards Arab and Muslim people in the American society. Thus, 9/11 becomes the turning point when the lives of both characters change significantly.

Before 9/11, the protagonists of the novel had led balanced and comfortable lives. During their nine years in the United States of America, Salwa and Jassim have been able to attain luxury, which is reflected in the house and other possessions they own. The house in the quiet and beautiful district, a "glinty Mercedes," and "leather shoes" indicate their wealthy and secure life. This shows that Salwa and Jassim have been accepted into the American society, managed to find well-paid jobs, and assimilated into the American way of life (Halaby 22-23). An almost idyllic picture of the family life suggests predictability and stability which are created by Jassim's status in the American society before 9/11. The tragic day marks the point when both of the protagonists start losing control of their lives. Already in the prologue of the novel titled "Before," Halaby emphasizes the significance of this event for Salwa and Jassim:

> Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center.
>
> Nothing and everything. (Halaby VII-VIII)

The chosen title of the prologue, "Before," emphasizes the contrasted periods in the lives of the main characters. Discussing this contrast and its representation in fiction, Arthur G. Neal rightly notices that this "was a day when the world changed" and that the "distinction between 'before and after' became ingrained in the consciousness of Americans" (180). Similarly, Halaby implies that before 9/11, Salwa and Jassim were not exceptional; they were just like millions of other immigrants living in the United States of America. Moreover, the author also emphasizes the inevitability of Salwa and Jassim being blamed for what happened in New York City. Even though they both have no connection to the terrorists who are responsible for the 9/11 attacks, due to the fact that Salwa and Jassim are of the same ethnicity and religion, they cannot avoid the backlash and animosity which follows the event. 9/11 also signifies the end of calm and peaceful life for Salwa and Jassim. This is how Halaby constructs the beginning of the aftermath for Jassim: "Today, a day that changed everything, Jassim cleared his mind, forced away thoughts of work, of preoccupations, and relaxed for the last time for many years to come, letting his thoughts go where they wished" (Halaby 5). The statement proves that the day has had tragic outcomes for all the members of the American society, including Arab and Muslim communities. Before the attacks, Jassim and Salwa's life was secure and balanced, while immediately later on that day the life of the couple changes dramatically. Their peaceful environment and life in the American Dream suddenly deteriorate. Therefore, 9/11 serves as a turning point which starts a new period of struggles, and whose consequences will haunt the protagonists throughout the novel.

Halaby depicts the American society's initial reactions to 9/11, using both informational and empathic approaches as outlined by Laurie Vickroy (183-185). Alongside some information on the events, Halaby supplies the reader with subtle interpretation and discussion of the outcomes, focusing on empathic discussion of the change of life of the protagonists. As Arthur G. Neal notices, the events caused panic and fear in the American society (180). In the novel the emotional reaction of American people makes a strong impact on the main character's feelings:

> Today Jassim was glad to be alone, to unwind from a chaotic day of too many phone calls, one emergency staff meeting, one emergency consultation. Since Tuesday, [September 11] his usually predictable job had been the focus of panicked people anticipating bombs and poison in their water supply. Demanding fluidity in service. Pleading for security. (Halaby 24)

American people start feeling vulnerable, and this results in panic and overreaction. Furthermore, Jassim's job becomes unpredictable; the normal routine is disturbed by the terrified people anticipating more catastrophes. If previously no one had seen Jassim's work (he is a hydrologist, working in a company dealing with the supply of water) as potentially dangerous, after 9/11, people's panic results in their seeing threats everywhere; therefore, the fact that Jassim is an Arab only worsens the situation in his job. FBI starts an unsubstantiated investigation in search of domestic terrorists, a process which eventually results in Jassim's victimization. Therefore, the loss of his job marks a gradual downfall from the peak of the American Dream.

9/11 has not only resulted in panic and fear, but it has also dramatically increased the American society's hostility and animosity towards Arab and Muslim people. In the novel, both of the protagonists experience the changing attitudes towards their community. Just before the attacks, in the Fitness Bar, Jassim meets Jack Franks, a patriotic American who can be interpreted as the symbolic representation of the American society. During their conversation, Jack shares his experiences: "I went to Jordan once.... Followed my daughter there. She married a Jordanian. Not one like you, though. This one was from the sticks—or the sand, as the case was" (Halaby 6). It can be noticed that even before the 9/11 attacks, Jack considers native Jordanians to be inferior; thus, a certain degree of disdain can be felt in his words. However, it should be noted that Jack excludes Jassim from other Jordanians. Such an opinion signifies that Jassim is perceived as "better," and he is considered to be part of the more superior and advanced American society. Therefore, in the pre-9/11 period, Jassim is an accepted and respected person, and his ethnicity is not associated with danger or terrorism by ordinary American people.

The events of 9/11 change this prevailing neutral attitude, so that, gradually, Jassim and Salwa become excluded from the American society. A few days after the 9/11 attacks, Salwa and Jassim are shopping in the mall when two shop assistants call security because Jassim appears suspicious to them. In one of the girls' explanation, an obvious fear and even a shade of accusation can be felt:

> "He just scared me." Salwa saw that her [the shop assistant's] eyes were enormous. "He just stood there and stared for a really long time, like he was high or something. And then I remembered all the stuff that's been going on." Here the girl stopped and looked at her [Salwa] as though she were checking to make sure her reference was understood.
>
> The words slid into Salwa's understanding, narrowing and sharpening her anger.

> “I see. You thought he might want to blow up the mall in his Ferragamo shoes.” (Halaby 30)

The shop assistants’ reaction points to countless post-9/11 situations when all Arab-Americans were treated as potential threats. Even though Jassim was not doing anything particularly suspicious, except for looking at a motorcycle, the fact that he was an Arab provoked the fear of the two girls. Moreover, the shop assistant’s reference to the 9/11 attacks clearly shows that all Arab people are associated with and even blamed for the event. If in the pre-9/11 period Jassim’s wealth meant that he was considered to be of a higher social status, after the attacks, he is treated as a terrorist, and his wealthy appearance does not separate him from the extremists. Consequently, Salwa and Jassim’s ethnicity becomes a sign of danger and a reason for distrust.

In addition to suspicion and fear, the American society soon begins to express the feelings of hatred and hostility. When Salwa is driving home, she turns on the radio and hears the outburst of an American person: “A man’s voice blared out: ‘Is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us” (Halaby 56). The American society panics and even turns into a paranoid entity; additionally, this panic and paranoia are strongly accompanied by anger and animosity towards Arab and Muslim people. In the above quotation, the man states that the American society is full of Arab terrorists and that Muslim people are dangerous and are waiting to cause more damage. Such a statement suggests that the American society acknowledges Arabs and Muslims as enemies. The man also pronounces the word “Muslims” in a peculiar way in order to emphasize their threatening nature and to express his loathing of them. Furthermore, he mentions the name of Jesus Christ, which can be interpreted as an attempt to emphasize the difference and distance between American and Muslim cultures and religions. Thus, the events of 9/11 significantly worsen the attitudes towards Arab and Muslim people as well as create a tense situation within the society.

Even though both of the protagonists are affected by the increased hostility to a similar extent, their reactions to the American society’s response are considerably different. At first, in spite of the palpable tension, Jassim tries to understand the American society and remain calm: “this is new for Americans. They don’t know what to do, and they are unexposed to the rest of the world.... Just be patient, habibti [darling]. This will pass” (Halaby 58). Jassim still has faith in American people, feels sympathy for them, and tries to remain optimistic. However, soon Jassim’s situation seems to gradually get worse, and, consequently, he becomes a target and is seen as an enemy not only of the American society, but of the government as well. An engineer and a hydrologist, Jassim does not expect any problems in his job: his status has been stable for many years; he is a respected professional in his field and maintains an excellent relationship with the administration of the company. Therefore, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) starts an ungrounded investigation on Jassim (as he works in the company that supplies the city with water), he ultimately gives way to his emotions:

> Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered voice: *with or against.* But was he not *with? I understand American society*, he wanted to scream. *I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here*. (Halaby 234, emphasis in the original)

Jassim feels disappointed that despite his solidarity and cooperation the American society and the government refuse to see him as an innocent person. Moreover, it can be observed that although Jassim still wants to consider himself as part of the United States of America, he starts feeling hopeless and is unable to fight against the government's policy. As a consequence, Jassim's trust in this country disappears, and the feeling of injustice finally fills its place.

In contrast to Jassim's attempt to remain calm and reasonable in the beginning, his wife's, Salwa's, reaction can be described as more intense and open. Soon after the attacks, she expresses her concern about the possible impact on the Arab community: "Salwa had talked to her friend Randa several times as well, babbling about how horrible it was and how she feared for the repercussion toward Arabs in this country" (Halaby 21). Salwa's worry indicates that she evaluates the situation more realistically than Jassim does and expects the up-coming revenge on Muslim people. However, Salwa's anxiety suggests that due to Muslims' apprehensions about America's backlash against them, her community has also started to feel vulnerable. Salwa does not try to remain optimistic like her husband: instead, she starts to lose her trust in American people and already intuitively knows the problems which will await them in the future.

In addition, the retaliation towards Arabs and those who are associated with them enrages Salwa and she cannot hide her strong emotions. Salwa reacts to a murder of an innocent Sikh particularly sensitively: "Salwa's outrage and sadness was immense. 'What does a Sikh have to do with anything? People are stupid. *Stupid and macho*,' she finished in English" (Halaby 21, emphasis in the original). Salwa's response signifies that she is angry, and the fact that the polarization of the society after 9/11 provokes even more bloodshed makes her extremely sad. Salwa also calls Americans "stupid and macho," which implies the fact that she starts losing her respect for American people and sees them as a potential threat to her and Jassim's safety. Salwa expresses her feelings openly and is much more preoccupied with her and her husband's lives than Jassim.

Salwa and Jassim's encounters with the hostile reactions of the American society are not the only post-9/11 effects which they experience. The event has social and psychological consequences which directly affect the lives of both protagonists. When the FBI starts the investigation on Jassim, his boss Marcus, who is on Jassim's side at first, reveals that their interest in him is influenced by Jassim's co-workers Bella and Lisa:

> after September 11, Bella and Lisa were both really angry. They wanted to get revenge and they wanted to be involved in that revenge.... It didn't take long before they landed on you. Bella called FBI on you a couple of days after it happened, told them you were a rich Arab with access to the city's water supply and you didn't seem very upset by what had happened. (Halaby 271)

Anger and hatred which start dominating in the post-9/11 American society become a serious threat to his social position. Jassim's co-workers turn against him, and the environment in which he previously had been respected and felt safe suddenly becomes filled with vengeful feelings and discrimination. Moreover, the fact that Jassim is an Arab has direct consequences on the firm in which Jassim works: "Marcus hung up the phone. Never in his life had he felt so torn. This was his third call from clients who no longer wanted Jassim working for them" (Halaby 268). Thus, the aftermath of 9/11 becomes uncontrollable and has a direct impact not only on Jassim himself, but also on the people he is related to: Jassim's boss and friend Marcus and his firm. As a result, Jassim eventually loses his job, and his social status as well as his life-style are endangered.

In addition, 9/11 undoubtedly affects Jassim psychologically. The routine activities which were previously part of his daily life are disturbed by the images of the events. Although he still does not realize it, Jassim's mind unconsciously questions the present situation and poses doubts about the future of his life in the host country, the United States of America. These doubts will become more prominent when Jassim will be dealing with his personal trauma; however, it should be noted that 9/11 can be interpreted as the beginning of a realization that this host country could no longer be considered to be his true home. The impact of 9/11 on Salwa is similar to Jassim's situation. She also experiences problems in her work when a client refuses to be serviced by her:

> The woman continued to stare at her as though Salwa's face were interrupting her thoughts....
>
> "Where are you from?" asked the woman.
>
> "I am Palestinian from Jordan."
>
> The woman continued to look at her. Chewed it over. Spat it back out....
>
> "I think I'd like to work with someone else." (Halaby 113-14)

The distrust and hostility towards Arabs have resulted in discrimination processes which spread in the post-9/11 period. In the above quote, the woman's reaction shows that cooperation and mutual understanding between Americans and Muslims have become problematic: in the above example, the woman humiliates Salwa with her rejection. Gradually, Salwa starts seeing the United States of America from a different perspective; American people's animosity towards her community changes her perception of the American society: "Who do you think wants to blow things up? This is all made up, *hocus pocus*. It's a big fat excuse to cause more problems back home" (Halaby 58, emphasis in the original). Salwa implies that the American government might be using 9/11 as a pretext to expand their political power in the Middle East, and such a possibility increases her disapproval and, at the same time, suggests that she accuses Americans of an attempt to create a conflict situation in other parts of the world. Consequently, such an opinion results in Salwa's gradual withdrawal from the American society.

After the attacks, Salwa starts seeing her life differently: "thoughts bustled through her brain, scrutinizing the life she was living. *Denying reality. That's what I've been doing. Killing time, not living*" (Halaby 5, emphasis in the original). Such contemplation indicates that Salwa starts realizing that her life in the United States has not been as idyllic as she had thought or imagined. She has a feeling that all the years spent in her host country were only an illusion of a happy and balanced life, and that she has been missing something all the time.

Additionally, the American society's post-9/11 treatment of Arabs and Muslims results in Salwa's evaluation of the differences between her and American culture:

> [Salwa was] struck by how readily people shared intimate secrets with others but how emotionally distant they seemed, how they didn't connect the way people at home did.... In the past month that distance had been stronger, an aftereffect of what had happened in New York and Washington, like cars sprouting American flags from their windows, antennas to God, electric fences willing her to leave. (Halaby 54)

The fact that American people cannot offer her the same attachment as in Jordan only emphasizes an increasing distance and polarization. Furthermore, in Salwa's mind, hatred expressed towards her, Jassim, and the whole Muslim community starts to turn into a request or demand to leave the United States of America. The patriotism, which is influenced by the national trauma and occupies the country after the attacks, does not provoke the feeling of solidarity for Salwa; on the contrary, she feels estranged and unwanted. Thus, 9/11 significantly changes Salwa's perception of her life in the United States. Eventually, Salwa's miscarriage considerably alters her life. This event affects the protagonist psychologically by engendering extreme sadness which is gradually replaced by the feeling of emptiness and demotivation. Salwa's loss symbolizes the collapse of her American Dream; however, this helps her see the real world she lives in and evaluate herself and her priorities differently.

9/11 has brought an unconscious understanding to both Jassim and Salwa that the United States of America is slowly ceasing to be their home. Although during the first months after the 9/11 attacks Jassim tries to ignore the American society's backlash against him and Arab and Muslim communities, he can no longer deny the harsh reality. The protagonist's trauma uncovers his desire for safety and predictability, thus raising doubts about the life in his dream country and evoking longing for his true home in Jordan. In this way, 9/11 relates to both protagonists' tragedies; consequently, the national trauma results in the personal traumas of the main characters, destroying safety, stability, dreams, and relationships. In the novel, Salwa has to deal with the trauma of loss when she miscarries her baby. Moreover, Salwa's trauma results not only in the psychological problems and the deteriorating relationship with her husband, but also in the adultery with her co-worker Jake. Meanwhile, Jassim kills a boy named Evan in a car accident, and, although he was not able to avoid the accident and is declared innocent, Jassim is traumatized by this event and no longer manages to control his life. The relationship with his wife is also affected, and Jassim searches for comfort in a new relationship with a waitress called Penny.

Even though all three traumatic events—9/11, Salwa's miscarriage, and Jassim's car accident—are separate incidents, there exists a clear connection between these tragedies. This connection is reflected in the fact that Tuesday (September 11) becomes the day when both protagonists experience the biggest disturbances of their lives: the 9/11 attacks occur, Salwa tells her husband about her miscarriage, and Jassim kills a boy in a car accident. It can be noticed that the order and peace which is broken on September 11th is never regained, and the tragic events in New York City, Arlington, and Pennsylvania start a sequence of events which work as a cause-effect chain and increasingly complicate the lives of the main characters. Hence, 9/11 can be treated as a symbolic event because the fall of the Twin Towers is followed by the fall of Salwa and Jassim's lives.

The aftermath reactions and split of the American society result in a deep uncrossable chasm between the main characters, Jassim and Salwa. Predictability, stability, and peaceful order which dominated in their lives before the attacks are gradually replaced by hostility, maltreatment, discrimination, and a sense of insecurity. In addition, 9/11 has social and psychological consequences for both of the protagonists. Hatred, suspicion, and desire for revenge on "the Other," which spread in the post-9/11 American society, have a strong impact on the lives of the main characters.

Conclusion

The traumatic events of September 11, 2001, have been widely represented in 9/11 literature that contains both direct and indirect references to the events of the day. The issues described in the analysis of Laila Halaby's novel *Once in A Promised Land* point to the overall egocentrism of the American society, described in many ways and forms in contemporary fiction. Alongside the themes of terrorism, moral and physical destruction or the degradation of the American society, Laila Halaby elaborates on the social divide and antagonism which started in the aftermath and critically views the possibilities for mutual understanding. The novel may be interpreted as an example of a text showing how the American society can emerge into the chain of discriminating reactions towards "the Other." Taking up both the informational and empathic approaches to describe the personal traumas of the main characters, Laila Halaby portrays the polarization of the American society, an indelible process, which has had on-going consequences.

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Fictionalizing Nuclear Terrorism in US Nuclear Fiction: James Reich's *Bombshell*

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Abstract: This paper studies the phenomenon of fictionalizing terrorism as a literary response to the violence paradigm within nuclear narrative from the perspective of nuclear awareness formation as a critical thinking product about the nuclear energy related issues within the Nuclear Anthropocene. Focusing on James Reich's *Bombshell* (2013), the paper goes beyond literary critical analysis of exploring the ways of fictionalizing the sociopolitical and psychic motives and ideas behind an act of terrorism. The paper highlights the factual component of the literary figurations of terrorism and terrorist activities in nuclear fiction, which is regarded here not only as a factor of weakening the apocalyptic rhetoric of nuclear narrative by transforming its "fabulously textual" nature, but mainly as a trigger of shaping public awareness and knowledge management on nuclear history and nuclear industry with a view to considering the possible patters of nuclear terrorism within the contemporary nuclear agenda.

Keywords: nuclear fiction, nuclear narrative, terrorist narrative, nuclear terrorism, nuclear awareness, James Reich, *Bombshell*.

> "Fiction holds more promise for the understanding of the terrorist phenomenon than political science but some words of caution are nevertheless required" (Laqueur 15)

Introduction

In Frank and Gruber's *Literature and Terrorism* (2014), the literary aspects of narrativizing terrorism and fictionalizing "terror" are regarded as a specific contribution of fiction to the understanding of terrorism due to said fiction's "capacity to narrativize terrorism" (Frank and Gruber 15). Such an approach to the interconnection between terrorism and literature in the literary studies perspective (Frank and Gruber 12-14) falls within the umbrella term of Critical Terrorism Studies, exploring the approaches to studying terrorism and terror-related issues as a social and political construct.

In his research on the singularity of "terrorist narrative," first mentioned in his *Spelling It Out: Narrative Typologies of Terror* (2004), Anthony Kubiak distinguishes three types of "terrorist narratives": "the writing of terrorist groups themselves, in which groups formulate their political, religious or ideological agenda, call for the violence, and prepare the individual members for the execution of terrorist acts," "narratives about terrorism: those including fictional explorations of terrorism, critical studies of such fiction, as well as other academic literature, related to the topic of terrorism," and "those forms of writing that we might, in the spirit of our excess, describe as narrative terrorism: attempts to destabilize narrativity itself—disrupting linearity, temporality, plot, character or whatever conventions may be regarded as essential to the production of stories, memories, dramas, or histories" (Kubiak 295-297).

With reference to Kubiak's typology of terror-related narratives, this paper focuses on studying a narrative about terrorism, a variant of "a terrorist novel" (Blessington 116), by referring to the fictional exploration of the causes, motivations and aftermath of the terrorist attacks in nuclear fiction. According to Laqueur, terrorist fiction does not provide a comprehensive coverage of the terrorist's causes and motivations, as well as psychological understanding, but can represent a set of common patterns of the terrorist attacks and terrorists' behaviors in their fictional figurations. A "great deal can be learned about terrorism from contemporary fiction, provided these books, plays and films… are not regarded as manuals for the study of terrorism, aspiring to photographic exactitude and universal applicability" (Laqueur 38).

On the other hand, the purpose of terrorist attacks is to challenge the established order of the society by affecting people's lives. If terrorism-related activities, including terrorist attacks, bring to life a literary work as a literary imagining of such events, this step implies that terrorism inevitably influences the readers as well as writers via a literary response to the terrorist events—"it compels that literary creation to challenge the established order" (Banica 538) via fictionalizing terrorism.

This paper goes beyond literary critical analysis of exploring the ways of fictionalizing the motives and ideas behind the sociopolitical, emotional and psychic reasons for acts of terrorism and studying the ways of literary figurations of terrorism and terrorist activities in fiction. It rather aims to cover other aspects of terrorist fiction, or nuclear fiction in this case: the appeal to the factual component in the fictional considerations of terrorist activities via the introduction of local details reveals the global, internationalized nature of nuclear terrorism with a view to filling the gaps of the unknown spots of nuclear history of humanity and predicting possible patters of nuclear terrorism-related issues.

The paper emphasizes the aspect of fictionalizing terrorism, nuclear terrorism in particular, as a literary response to the violence paradigm within nuclear narrative, as a contribution to nuclear awareness (Barash), regarded as a critical thinking product about the nuclear history of humanity, the nature of nuclear energy, the nuclear industry, nuclear threats and nuclear culture ("Global Nuclear Awareness Program"). Such focus on researching contemporary nuclear fiction via studying the ways of fictionalizing nuclear terrorism encourages the perspective on nuclear fiction as an archive of the Nuclear Anthropocene which not only weakens the apocalyptic rhetoric of nuclear narrative but also triggers public awareness and education about the threats posed to humanity by nuclear terrorism-related issues within the multidisciplinary debates on nuclear power risks, challenges, and perspectives as a response of the contemporary society to the nuclear agenda.

James Reich: On Writing Experience

It is *Bombshell* (2013) by James Reich which is the focus of the current study. James Reich is a novelist, born in Stroud, England, in 1971, and a resident of the United States since 2009. He completed a Master's Degree in Ecopsychology at Naropa University, and teaches Creative Writing and Literature at the New Mexico School for the Arts. He is the former chair of Creative Writing and Literature Program at the

Santa Fe University of Art and Design. In his interview for *The Huffington Post* Reich comments on his youth as follows:

> I was politicized: 1984, living on Airstrip One, the C.N.D. and the Greenham Common protests, the anti-apartheid movement, Greenpeace, the miners' strike, and so forth. There's something vaudeville about it, so it's no wonder it winds up in rock opera or… black comedy. The things we do to ourselves! We're a suicidal crew with or without deities, but especially with them. (Browning)

He is the author of the novels *I, Judas* (2011), *Bombshell* (2013), *Mistah Kurtz! A Prelude to Heart of Darkness* (2016), *Soft Invasions* (2017), and *The Song My Enemies Sing* (2018), published by Anti-Oedipus Press and Soft Skull Press. Reich's name was mentioned in the New Wave of British science fiction, published by Bloomsbury Publishing's Decades series: The 1960s. His work has been published by *Salon*, *The Believer*, *The Rumpus*, *Entropy*, *Sensitive Skin*, *International Times*, as well as was included in Akashic's Noir series, Sensitive Skin's Selected Writing 2016-2018, and issues of *Deep Ends: The J.G. Ballard Anthology*.

In his interview given to *The Huffing Post*, James Reich identifies himself as "a working class English writer, [whose] living in the United States for the past five years has only amplified… [his] identification with—to borrow from Mark E. Smith—prole art threat" as well as mentions those influencing his writing style: "I find so much to admire in Christopher Hitchens… Brilliant as he was, there was plenty of the toff in Hitchens that I think endeared him to the American scene. For me, Jimmy Porter in Osborne's play, and his descendent Jimmy Cooper in Quadrophenia are as vital to me as Hamlet" (Browning).

James Reich is also an experimental/post-punk musician, his film work includes improvised guitar soundtracks for independent productions, notably by Todd Verow and Jon Moritsugu and Amy Davis. He is also the founder and publishing editor of Stalking Horse Press (Meisler). He is married to his creative partner Hannah Levbarg, with whom he formed the band Venus Bogardus, named after a character created by lesbian pulp fiction pioneer Ann Bannon.

Narrating Nuclear Terror in Reich's *Bombshell*

Published after *I, Judas* (2011), his novel *Bombshell* (2013) is the second to be published by Soft Skull Press. Literary critics vary in their reception of this piece: from "a cautionary tale well told, offered up by a passionate and supremely gifted new author" (McNeill) and "a visionary story, beautiful language and an unforgettable, emotionally resilient and iron-tough heroine, in this politically charged, indelibly smart, wild and electrifying powerhouse of a book" (Rapp), to a tendency to consider the novel as "a feminist anti-nuclear thriller" (Browning), which is "a counterculture tale of revenge" (Lippincott) and "a combustible and commercial step forward by one of our most creative and intellectual writers" (Review of *Bombshell*), who "explodes nuclear tourism and genre archetypes" (Stallings).

Residing in New Mexico influenced Reich's perspective on the region, which he defines as a "cradle of the Bomb" (Stallings) in one of his interviews, explaining his reference to nuclear energy-related ideas: "Finding myself in New Mexico… is a kind of necessary existential perversity… I love New Mexico, but in terms of *Bombshell*, that violent fury that Cash [the novel's protagonist] brings against the nuclear industry is, in essence, my own" (Stallings). This perspective allows the writer to represent the contemporary nuclear agenda through the narrativization of his own experience under the influence of the nuclear image of the region, famous for nuclear localities and their role in the nuclear history of the country.

The storyline of Reich's *Bombshell* covers a trip of the novel's protagonist—Varyushka Cash, a 25-year-old woman, born in the vicinity of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, located in the former Soviet Ukraine, three weeks before the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, and now dying of thyroid cancer—across the United States from the Trinity bomb site, New Mexico ("Trinity Site") to the Hudson River, New York. She is chased by Robert Dresner, a CIA agent, after her failed attempt to explode the White Sands National Monument at the Trinity site, declared as a U.S. National Park, and her being charged by the police for domestic terrorism actions. Cash intends to get to the Indian Point nuclear power plant on the bank of the Hudson River to make an attempt to explode it as part of her personal guerrilla war against nuclear energy and nuclear industry in particular.

By her message, left at the site of her unsuccessful terrorist attack at the Trinity site, Cash gives her chasers a chance to clarify the features of her personality: "What we know, from the manifesto at the original scene, is that the terrorist is a self-identified alien, a non-citizen, probably a Communist, about twenty-five, an anti-nuclear militant" (Reich 55). The reason for her obsession with the nuclear energy field and nuclear-related issues, including the nuclear history of humanity, the US nuclear legacy and nuclear industry, can be explained by the impact of the nuclear on her personal life. In introducing the protagonist's biographical details the writer underlines her close connection to nuclear history by commenting on the protagonist's childhood: "Cash had been stolen away from the land of the Soviets almost twenty-five years ago. She ached for her dead abandoned city, for her transplanted youth" (Reich 19). The unclear moments of her birth and her childhood make the protagonist relate her birth with the nuclear industry which, in her opinion, can clarify her family story and encourage her own search for identity: "she took the infant identity bracelet that had been hers at the hospital in Pripyat from its hanging place around her neck, with the shard of radioactive trinitite that was almost the same green hue as the statuesque woman in the fog" (Reich 167). Cash tries to strike a balance between referring to her mysterious Soviet birth—"nightmarish images of her own birth had come to her more frequently" (Reich 7)—and looking for her place in the American society:

> It was for only a matter of days after her birth, under the glittering smoke and contamination of Pripyat, that she had ever been a Russian-Ukrainian girl named Varyushka. Her name was derived from varvara, meaning "foreigner," and "barbarian." She had been cut off. (Reich 19)

Kristen Valentine, a literary critic, comments on the title of Reich's novel by reading the meaning of bombshell as referring to an explosive, a shocker, or a femme fatale, and highlighting that James Reich's *Bombshell* is "a fierce tirade of a novel that happens to be about all three" (Valentine), where Cash, a Soviet-born American feminist terrorist, is becoming extremely enthusiastic in launching her violent struggle against the US nuclear industry.

Reich's *Bombshell* and Feminism

Defined as a feminist nuclear thriller (Review of *Bombshell*), Reich's *Bombshell* emphasizes the issues of nuclear terrorism by involving its readers in the field of anti-nuclear activities with references to the Manhattan Project, the Trinity site obelisk, feminism, Valerie Solanas, the Cold war, the Sex war, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Chernobyl, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jane Fonda, Helene Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Yoko Ono, etc., which all together appear as an amalgamation of feminism-based anti-nuclear actions. It is Valerie Solanas and her 1965 *SCUM Manifesto* (its title an acronym for *Society for Cutting Up Men*), accusing men of corrupting all human institutions and encouraging the idea of annihilating all men "so as to get away from any form of sexual subservience" (Solomon) that shaped the ideological background for "a former stripper and member of a now-disbanded radical feminist gang" (DePascal) in her anti-nuclear terroristic activities.

Reich provides the background of Cash's terrorist plans by stressing the feminism-slanted environment of her youth, with its struggle against the men-ruled society which "could not afford an intellectual class of women" (Reich 21). In Cash's case, these feminist ideas, stemming from her fascination with Valerie Solanas's SCUM, "which is based on mutation and violence" (Reich 41), coincide with Cash's huge desire to fight against her sickness, visible in her intention "to remake her flesh, to violate the soft atomic code of her skin" (Reich 41). Against the background of searching for her identity and struggling for her health, Varyushka Cash finds nuclear industry to be the embodiment of contemporary evil and her own enemy by announcing "the opening of her war on the nuclear industry—Cash told herself that she was performing acts of corrective sabotage" (Reich 19).

Summarizing brief details of her unclear birth, the teenager's encounters with the US nuclear legacy and her approaching death of thyroid cancer, Cash is becoming strong in her anti-nuclear steps: "Whenever she thought of the past, the nodes of history came with a neat, perverse rhythm. The clean succession and collisions of dates informed her that her assault on the nuclear industry was inevitable, fatal" (Reich 20). Resulting from the combination of her search for identity and her feminist ideas, the realization of the frames of her further actions encourages Cash's dedication for her personal anti-nuclear terrorist movement: "Now she would haunt the atomic industry even as it haunted her" (Reich 93). In Cash's view, it is "the sons of the nuclear industry" (Reich 110) who not only murdered the Earth and continue to devastate the world but who also stole her childhood, her health, her history, her identity and caused her current alienation:

> She thought of the men who had worked on the Manhattan Project, developing the most devastating weapon in history. How could they work, suspending what nightmares must have troubled them? These men razed Hiroshima, Nagasaki, sent waves of death over Japan, and set their glittering sword of Damocles over

> every city of the world, forever…. The site of her birth had become a place of terror that teenage boys visited in video games. She was a shadow, an alien remnant, as though she had exploded like a monster from that new womb that men had made. (Reich 19-20)

It is the men-ruled nuclear industry, causing "a virtuality of her blood and skin" (Reich 20), that should be the aim of her war of terror—"a glare that men cannot meet directly" (Reich 21).

The cross point of Cash's search for identity and her anger towards the men-ruled nuclear industry can be represented in her attitude to Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb. In her attempt to match the flashing memories of her early childhood and her parents, Cash constantly refers to Oppenheimer's image: "She tried to envision her father, as he must have been in the Soviet Union before she was born. She did not know his name. She did not know her mother's name. Absent any photographs, she thought of her father as resembling Robert Oppenheimer" (Reich 19). Oppenheimer's image appears to be the materialization of Cash's anxiety and excitement for her father, who was involved in the Soviet nuclear industry program: "Superimposed over footage of unspeakable missile arrays, she saw Oppenheimer's face in a strobe light, forming a rictus of disingenuous astonishment with his hair shining under the glare of television studio lamps" (Reich 19). But the failure of her attempts to envision her father, to find out her roots and to balance her personal search for identity results in the transformation of Oppenheimer's image into the image of the Destructive man:

> Cash recalled that when Robert Oppenheimer observed the first evil flowering of the atomic bomb over the New Mexico desert, he had at that moment taken for himself the person of Shiva, the Lord of Destruction. Sitting and drinking beneath the stars, Cash envisioned Oppenheimer running a hand across his unshaven jaw, flicking sweat into the sand from his death-tainted fingertips. (Reich 19)

Amalgamating Oppenheimer's image and her father's work at the Chernobyl NPP before the Chernobyl disaster, the novel's protagonist Varyushka Cash distinguishes the frames of her identity within her Soviet nuclear past and her American nuclear future. Such an amalgamation of the entire image of her father, together with further transformations of Cash's personal perspective on her father's place within the nuclear energy field, are getting to be a factor shaping the background for her radical feminist position and anti-nuclear activity: "Men watched the rising of twin tides, feminism and communism, with profound anxiety. These two socializing instabilities threatened their privileges—a pair of precipitous dominoes, terrorizing them with psychic enslavement and physical impotence" (Reich 19). The cross point of Cash's personal search and the societal nuclear agenda is implicated in Reich's novel as Cash's feminism-based terrorist activities, aimed at the men-ruled nuclear industry, which makes men the main agents of nuclear history, nuclear industry in particular, and the technology-driven society.

On the Factual Component in Fictionalizing Nuclear Terrorism

The literary reconsideration of nuclear terrorist activities in nuclear fiction is not only a significant contribution to critical terrorism studies but also a factor of transformation for nuclear narrative, which, according to Tamara Hundorova, while "being a textual category," appeals mainly "not to reality, but to literature" (*Післячорнобильська бібліотека* 13, translation mine). With reference to the amalgamation of the factual and the fictional as a distinguishing feature of nuclear fiction, where "factual narrative is referential whereas fictional narrative has no reference" (Schaeffer 99), the introduction of the factual component into the fictional representation of nuclear-related events, regarded as a way of fictionalizing nuclear terrorism, diminishes the distinction between "the fact" and "the imagined event/virtual construction" (Derrida 20-31). Such poststructuralist perspective on the fact/fiction dichotomy outlines the problems of interaction of the factual and the fictional in fictional writing, where the factual component is used as a reference for an artistic interpretation of true events. Such an introduction of the factual component (real locations, dates, names, organizations, realia, etc.) into fictional works, on the one hand, creates the emotional and cognitive framing of the storyline, but on the other hand, it blurs the difference between "the fact" and "the imaged" by "the entry of virtuality into the real world," according to Tamara Hundorova (*Транзитна культура* 384, translation mine).

Reich's *Bombshell* is a work of fiction, as the writer comments in his novel, clarifying that "names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental" (Reich ix). Nevertheless, his novel is abundant in factual details of the nuclear history of humanity, since the discovery of radioactivity, through the US nuclear past during the Cold War and its competition against the Soviet atomic science, resulting in the nuclear weapons race, till the current agenda of U.S. nuclear policy, as evidenced by the subsequent extracts:

> Many of you in Washington, California, Arizona, Nebraska, Kansas, Texas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maryland, New Jersey, and Connecticut are oblivious to the fact that you are playing the same game of Russian roulette with 104 aging nuclear reactors. You are betting on death chambers. Their disposal tanks and containment shafts are overflowing. Let's not be sentimental, New York: an incident at Fitzpatrick, Indian Point, Nine Mile Point, or Ginna would make 9/11 look like the snuffing of two birthday candles. (Reich 24)

> …she found herself only an hour's walk away, south through Greenwich Village to Trinity Place, and the offices of the Winters Corporation. She began to feel the thousands of miles between Chernobyl and Manhattan unraveling behind her. (Reich 127)

> As night fell, Cash rode her motorcycle north to Los Alamos. Her lips curled as she tracked through the dire names high on the ominous mesa skirted by Omega Road and split by Trinity Drive and decorated with the quaintly referential

> Manhattan Loop. Nearby lay Oppenheimer Drive, Bikini Road, and Eniwetok Drive. (Reich 43)

These and other examples of introducing factual information on the US nuclear history into a fictional reconsideration of nuclear-related facts within Reich's *Bombshell* can demonstrate that the fictional and the factual components are so amalgamated in nuclear fiction that the factual component is getting to be the base for making the nuclear narrative a fictional one, resulting in the process of fictionalizing facts, where the factual component is a background for fictional storytelling, where literary techniques can twist factual information (Murthy 24) and erase the border between the factual and the fictional in the readers' perception of nuclear-related facts, with the possible risk of transforming a fictional narrative into a non-fictional one.

The factual component here is reconsidered by the writer by covering the nuclear past through the perspective of the protagonists' feelings and thoughts, with an attempt to digest the contemporary nuclear agenda from the position of the political, social and ecological dimensions. In their amalgamation, such components of emotionally colored "factual" parts in a personal (even individual) perception represent not only the historical and material context of the events but also provide the coverage of social and cultural components and clarify the public opinion on the nuclear event in its full picture. On the other hand, with its factual component as the background for fictionalizing nuclear history, the novel can be regarded as an archive of facts on the nuclear past and the nuclear present, as well as a tool for providing basic nuclear literacy information (e.g., nuclear technology, nuclear policy, nuclear risk behavior, etc.) for further construction of future nuclear scenarios.

Conclusion

Narrativizing terrorism in fiction can be regarded as a literary response of the contemporary society to the problem of terror, especially when nuclear terrorist issues are a subject of literary reconsideration in nuclear fiction. The literary analysis of James Reich's *Bombshell* from the perspective of nuclear awareness formation presupposes the function of nuclear fiction with its fictionalization of the factual as a means of nuclear knowledge management towards framing the basic competences of nuclear literacy as well as energy literacy in general. Through unveiling the causes and motivations of nuclear terrorist activities and through depicting the features of the protagonist's psychological portrait, such an approach to literary figurations of feminism-based nuclear terrorism as present in Reich's novel does not challenge the established order of the society, but contributes to the readers' literacy on the nuclear history of humanity within the Nuclear Anthropocene. Via researching the factors that shape the terrorism-slanted behavior of the novel's protagonist the novel provides the readers with an abundant range of factual information about the nature of nuclear energy, the risks, advantages, and challenges of nuclear industry, the US nuclear history, the Cold War, nuclear risk management, and the components of nuclear culture. Contrary to the approach of studying terrorist fiction from the perspective of "literary terrorism" (Kubiak 295), such a critical approach to the literary imaginings of nuclear terrorism in the aspect of fictionalizing the factual from the position of knowledge management contributes to the readers' nuclear awareness formation as critical thinking skills in considering nuclear terrorism-related issues from the global agenda of energy humanities.

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Anna Gilarek

Managing Fear in a Risk Society: Pretrauma and Extreme Future Scenarios in Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*

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Abstract: An example of near-future climate fiction, Nathaniel Rich's 2013 novel *Odds Against Tomorrow* envisions a catastrophic, global warming-related flooding of the New York City area. Despite the novel's (post)apocalyptic focus, a large part of it can be in fact perceived as pre-apocalyptic, inasmuch as it explores people's traumatic responses to potential future disasters, even before they actually happen. The aim of the article is to analyze the novel's depiction of the culture of fear, which has permeated the modern society as a consequence of it becoming what Ulrich Beck famously termed a "risk society." In a risk society, human industrial and technological activity produces a series of hazards, including global risks such as anthropogenic climate change. In the novel, Rich shows how financial capitalism commodifies these risks by capitalizing on people's fears and their need for some degree of risk management. Finally, the paper looks at the text as a cli-fi novel and thus as a literary response to the pretrauma caused by environmental risks.

Keywords: climate fiction, climate change, risk society, the culture of fear

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The present-day reality has frequently been described as dominated by fear related to various hazards connected with modernity. The moderns experience continuous anxiety about present and future risks, both real and imagined. The preoccupation with fear, risk, and potential danger is seen by many as characteristic of post-millennial reality, and it finds reflection in a growing fascination with fictional catastrophic scenarios which can be found, among others, in dystopian and apocalyptic novels. One of such texts is Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013), which is the subject of analysis in this article. It is a near-future climate fiction novel which envisions a global warming-related flooding of the New York City area. Despite the novel's (post)apocalyptic focus, a large part of it can be in fact perceived as pre-apocalyptic, as it explores people's traumatic responses to potential future disasters, even before they actually happen, thus turning the novel into a literary study of fear and pretraumatic stress.

Drawing on sociological and philosophical studies of fear and risk, the article analyzes the novel's depiction of the culture of fear, which has permeated the modern society as a consequence of the perceived omnipresence of hazards and uncertainties effectuated by the industrial and technological progress that characterizes risk societies. The analysis focuses on the protagonist's paranoid personality and explores his pretraumatic response to potential future catastrophes, externalized in an obsession with extreme disaster scenarios.

The Culture of Fear and the Risk Society

As one of the primary emotions, fear has always accompanied mankind, ensuring its evolutionary survival by triggering quick responses to threats. With the onset of the modern era, people began to believe that civilizational progress would usher in a time of security and freedom from fear (Bauman 1). However, the opposite turned out to be true and, paradoxically, despite living in a world of medical and technological advances, heightened security, and state protection, the moderns have come to perceive reality as increasingly more frightening (Lynch 155).

Consequently, since the turn of the millennium, the society has been repeatedly described as a "culture of fear." The concept was introduced by Frank Furedi in his 1997 study *Culture of Fear: Risk Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*. In the study, Furedi points to the modern society's increasing loss of confidence and growing preoccupation with potential challenges to safety. In a culture of fear, there exists a constant and potentially contagious sense of anxiety about possible negative developments, and fear becomes a lens through which individuals' perception of reality is filtered. According to both Furedi and Lars Svendsen, this attitude dominates in the Euro-American culture, despite the relative security of the modern society in comparison to previous historical eras (Lynch 157). Desh Subba even posits that we live in "an extreme fear age" (45), in which various fears have accumulated to an alarming degree and new fears continue to emerge. This recognition of the multiplicity of fears corresponds with Furedi's statement that "fear today has a free-floating dynamic and can attach itself to a variety of phenomena" (4). It follows, then, that nowadays only the presence of fear remains constant, whereas its objects continually shift. Such a perception of fear ties in with Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity," which continually flows, undulates, and reinvents itself. What is more, the kind of anxiety that is experienced by the moderns in this everchanging reality may often seem to be disassociated from any target or intentional object. As Bauman writes,

> fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause; when it haunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen. (1)

Such "liquid fear"—unspecified and unfocused—exists even when there seems to be no immediate threat or danger that could trigger it. Such a fear stems from an awareness of potential rather than actual dangers and from a speculative approach to the future in which these dangers might (or might not) materialize. Bauman labels this type of fear "derivative fear," or "second-degree fear" (2). It is characterized by the general feelings of vulnerability and insecurity that are perceived to be relatively constant: Bauman sees this attitude as a "steady frame of mind" (3). This corresponds to Lars Svendsen's characterization of modern anxiety, which he sees as constantly present in the background, influencing the manner in which we interpret the surrounding reality; he calls this "low-intensity fear" (46). This perpetual tension that both Bauman and Svendsen describe stems from the belief in the many dangers that lurk within the uncertainty of the future. The anxiety thus generated alters individuals' perception of the world, leading them to detect even more potential dangers. Hence, such derivative fear "acquires a self-propelling capacity" (Bauman 2), creating a vicious circle of fear.

Based on all of the above interpretations it may be posited that fear has undergone a transformation from a primary emotion that is instinctual and primal, to a secondary emotion that is constructed, learned, and perpetuated. Furedi even states that fear goes beyond being a mere emotion and becomes a new paradigm of experiencing and interpreting reality:

> Fear is not simply a reaction to a specific danger, but a cultural metaphor for interpreting life. It is not hope but fear that excites and shapes the cultural imagination of the early twenty-first century…. It has become a cultural idiom through which we signal a sense of growing unease about our place in the world. (vii)

Thus understood, fear may become a cultural trope and a means of expressing and navigating the uncertainties of the modern reality.

Furedi perceives a connection between "the growth of anxiety and fear of modernity and the growth of the 'risk society' within Euro-American culture" (Lynch 158). The "risk society," a well-known concept introduced by Ulrich Beck[1], is characteristic of what Beck calls "new modernity" or "second modernity," which he considers to be affected by "side effects of successful modernization" (*World* 87). In a risk society, human industrial and technological activity has produced a series of hazards, which Beck labels "new risks" or "manufactured uncertainties" ("Revisited" 216). What turns the modern era into a risk society is the unprecedented scale on which these risks are produced, as well as the fact that they are man-made and cannot be predicted, accurately assessed, or insured against (Sørensen and Christiansen 10, 16). These risks are deterriorialized and democratic, as anyone can be equally affected, regardless of race, gender, social class, or nationality (Svendsen 50). Such globalization of risk causes Beck to talk about "a global community of threats" (*World* 8), which points to the manner in which fear and the perception of pervasive risk have permeated individual perceptions of reality on a cultural scale, leading to the solidification of the culture of fear.

Despite the prevalence of anxiety in the modern era, the assessment of its role in human life is far from unequivocal: fear can be construed in two contradictory ways – positivist and negativist. According to the first stance, fear is mostly a motivating factor that provides an impulse for action and transformation. Fear positivism is primarily advocated by Desh Subba, who underlines that, when used properly, fear plays a significant role in inspiring progress (145). Fear positivism remains in a dichotomous relation to fear negativism, according to which fear is likely to become an impediment to growth and self-realization. Most importantly, fear can be weaponized and used as a tool for control, manipulation, and exploitation for financial and political profit. All in all, fear eschews clear-cut interpretations. Both attractive and repellent, addictive and undesirable, potentially beneficial and highly destructive, fear manifests its paradoxical nature through the interplay of these polar opposites.

Pretrauma and Cultural Transmediations of Fear

Both the sense of fear and the perception of risk are future-oriented, as they involve negative projections of probable future events (Svendsen 38). Beck situates risk in a suspended position between the present and the future, as he talks about "this peculiar reality status of 'no-longer-but-not-yet'—no longer trust/security, not yet destruction/disaster" ("Revisited" 213). Thus, risk scenarios inevitably entail feelings of tension, uneasiness, and apprehension about events to come, which also affect the individuals' response to the present. As a result, the future replaces past events and the historical perspective as the frame of reference for and the primary factor determining the present (Lynch 162). Still, while it is certainly true that the moderns are much more forward-looking than previous generations, there does exist a connection between past experiences and the perception of future risk. An often-quoted example is the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, which fractured the American sense of security and severely distorted Americans' perception of risk and the degree of danger in their everyday lives (Furedi 4; Svendsen 55; Kaplan 3). It can therefore be stated that past traumas translate into future traumas.

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[1] See *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1986), and *World at Risk* (2007).

The fact that the future can be as traumatic as the past can lead to "Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome," which, in contrast to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, describes the psychological response to future-related trauma (Kaplan xix). Thus, modern anxiety may be referred to as pretrauma – psychological torment related to constant anguish about the future materialization of present risks. One of the strategies that can be used to work through pretrauma and to channel the feelings of anxiety is to "confront coming disasters in fictional transmediations" (Bruhn 229). Due to the fact that potential future disasters lack materialization in the present, they require "some form of narrativization, visualization, or mediatization" (Mehnert 129). Hence the popularity of fictional catastrophic scenarios which prefigure various cataclysms. According to E. Ann Kaplan, these manifestations of pretrauma have become pervasive in all the media, and can be seen as an important element of the modern culture (xix). While it can be argued that it is pretrauma in the first place that induces such visions, Kaplan also believes that the visions further pretraumatize the public. The latter pretruama, however, may be viewed from the positivist perspective, as it can bring about a modification in the audiences' attitudes. Disaster stories may also be seen as a form of preparation for the inevitable (Bruhn 230). These perceptions coincide with what Beck concludes about risk comprehension: full understanding of risks is only possible through mediations, both scientific and popular. Beck sees dramatization of risk as a tool that can be used to politicize risks and stir the public from stagnation ("Revisited" 214).

Climate fiction novels like *Odds Against Tomorrow* can be analyzed in terms of their usefulness for the purpose of such dramatization, as they contextualize climate change, shaping the readers' environmental imagination and providing a visualization of the potential materialization of climate-related risks. However, apart from simulating potential scenarios, climate fiction reflects current concerns and anxieties. In fact, it can be considered a literary response to the pretrauma caused by environmental risks. It both utilizes the readers' already existing fears and projects future horrors. By inducing fear in readers—pretruamatizing them—climate fiction sensitizes them to critical issues in the present and facilitates their perception of the social and psychological dimensions of both climate change and its consequences.

Managing Pretrauma in *Odds Against Tomorrow*

Odds Against Tomorrow is categorized as a climate-fiction novel, i.e. one that features the effects of anthropogenic climate change. It is, however, an example of a variety of cli-fi in which the problems of global warming and the environment seem to be secondary themes and serve as a backdrop to the main plot. This is confirmed by Rich's comment that it is not a novelist's obligation "to write about global warming or geopolitics or economic despair … [but] about what these things do to the human heart—write about the modern condition, essentially" (qtd. in Evancie). Rich further elaborates that he sees the emergence of climate fiction as a direct response to the changing conditions of modernity: "a new type of reality … which is that we're headed toward something terrifying and large and transformative. And it's the novelist's job to try to understand, what is that doing to us?" (qtd. in Evancie). Rich's focus in the novel is thus not on climate change specifically, but on our response to environmental disaster and, even more to the point, the mere risk of such a disaster, as well as to other new risks that exist within the risk society. In other words, Rich is looking at the effects of pretrauma related to unspecified but intuited future terrors. It is fear of the future and the way it is experienced both globally and, especially, individually, that is in the forefront of the novel.

The novel's protagonist, Mitchell Zukor, is a risk analyst whose job is to predict worst-case scenarios in order to scare his clients into hiring his company's services of limiting corporate liability should these predictions materialize. Mitchell's professional success is closely related to his fear-mongering talent, which results from his own obsessive anxiety about various catastrophic developments. For Mitchell, imagining catastrophic future scenarios has turned into a combination of an unconventional hobby and a method of dealing with his anxiety: worst-case scenarios "opened wormholes to a sublime realm of fantasy and chaos. Worst-case scenarios, he said, were for him games of logic. How vast a nightmare could he imagine, and to what level of precision? What was possible? What should we be afraid of?" (3). Even though he claims to treat his predictions as a mere mental challenge, his display of bravado is evidently false. His compulsive bouts of calculating risks have all the tell-tale signs of panic attacks: "late in the evening he raced out of his bedroom with a panic, cheeks flushed, eyes haunted. He flipped on his desk lamp, pounded numbers into his calculator, and scrawled equations and odds rations. It was a near-nightly ritual" (3). Mitchell attempts to use math to defuse his fear: by distracting himself, but also by discarding his anxiety by means of rationality and science. He studies precedents and statistical data to determine the balance of probabilities and convince himself that a given tragic scenario is not likely to transpire.

Mitchell falls victim to Bauman's derivative fear—his anxiety is relatively constant and it spirals into a vicious cycle. For instance, fear causes him to take anxiety medication, and it is also fear that leads him to discontinue using it: he dreads the possible side effects to his brain. Like any other person suffering from anxiety disorders, Mitchell looks for ways to ease his angst; only in his case the medicine is also his poison. The belief in the tranquilizing effects of envisioning extreme scenarios is an illusion: in reality they "fill… him with very real terror" (3). And yet, like any other sedatives might, they become indispensable to him, which testifies to the addictive character of fear, an aspect which has been indicated by Bauman (129). Bauman highlights the paradoxification of fear in a liquid society, in which it becomes both desirable and harmful. This dichotomy can be said to mirror the analogous distinction between fear positivism and fear negativism.

Mitchell embodies both of these two paradoxes, as the fear he propels and perpetuates within himself is both overwhelming and motivating; he finds his research into disasters simultaneously frightening and thrilling:

> The bad news brought a rush of excitement; it fortified, too. It reached an intimate part of him. It didn't merely feed his fears, it also fed his fascinations.… He went further afield, into doomsday prophecy and eschatology.… He read Nostradamus, Malthus, Alvin Toffler. He read Prophets and he read Revelation…. Mitchell loved Revelation. The Christians were excellent worst-case scenarists. (70-71)

The delight with which Mitchell both absorbs and generates end-of-days imagery is not uncharacteristic—fear can indeed be attractive, judging by the general appeal of apocalyptic fiction and film, or even sensational news reports. In fact, an analysis of the language used in the novel in reference to fear when applying Mitchell's narrative perspective indicates that fear animates him: on a free night he anticipates "a nice long evening of panic" (44), reading about gloomy prophecies is "tremendous fun" (70), the details of his horrific extreme scenarios are "delicious" (73), and the facts he learns from disaster research are "thrilling" (69). Unable to break free from fear, Mitchell convinces himself that fear can be exciting and productive.

Still, Mitchell's eagerness to immerse himself in fear-inspiring thoughts results in an increase in pretraumatic stress response, which is connected with the omnipresence of Beck's manufactured uncertainties. The list of possible future complications that leave Mitchell pretraumatized is long and ever-expanding: terrorism, public health scares, nuclear plant explosions, electric grid crash, the collapse of industrial agriculture, massive blackout, electromagnetic pulse radiation, and so on, *ad infinitum*. The protagonist experiences "liquid fear," which is constant and mostly unspecified, with its objects continually shifting, as the risk society provides a plethora of possible complications. He admits to being stuck in a loop of fear: "the more I learn, the more I find there is to fear" (63). There is a connection between a greater awareness of the negative consequences of human activities and the sense of fear. Contrary to the famous Emersonian claim that "fear always springs from ignorance," Beck believes that in a risk society the opposite is true (Lynch 164; Svendsen 66). With the development of science, our understanding of various potentially disastrous phenomena grows, as does the awareness of human agency behind many Anthropocenic risks, leading to heightened anxiety.

Although the awareness of new risks increases, the risks cannot be precisely predicted or prevented, and Mitchell is acutely aware of this fact: "the worst scenarios were always the ones you didn't anticipate, at least not until too late" (23). Though such a realization might lead to a paralyzing sense of powerlessness, Mitchell does try to take precautions: his door is equipped with four locks and a biometric panel, and he keeps substantial amounts of money in his freezer for fear of ATM malfunctions. He clearly aims at creating a sense of security – a symptom of what Bauman calls "a securitarian obsession" of the moderns, which is, according to Bauman, an example of another fear-related paradox—the growing sense of insecurity seems to clash with the advanced safety arrangements of modern societies (129). Whether or not these arrangements are effective, they are not sufficient to eliminate the general sense of threat.

Endemic to the risk society, the pretraumatic sense of being surrounded by potential future dangers is further exacerbated by past traumas, especially those experienced on the global level. Kaplan refers to such collective traumas as "border events" and gives examples of 9/11, hurricane Katrina, and hurricane Sandy, all of which have profoundly impacted Americans—in social, political, cultural, and psychological terms (xvi). In *Odds Against Tomorrow*, such an event is the Seattle Earthquake, which destroys the whole of Seattle while Mitchell is in college, undoubtedly leaving an indelible mark on both his psyche and that of his whole generation, which is later dubbed "Generation Seattle" (11). This past trauma contributes to Mitchell's perception of the world as unstable and dangerous: "Awfulness can happen at any time. That's what's so awful" (65).

This attitude is in sync with Mitchell's job, in which fear is used as a business strategy: "It's essential, in this line of work, to frighten clients. To convey a sense of implacable doom" (31). Mitchell is adept at selling fear due to his intimate understanding of fear and the mechanisms which govern it. Part of the allure of the job also comes from the selfish sense of comfort he acquires when catalyzing other people's fears: "During consultations his clients nervously swiveled in their chairs as he guided them through scenes from Hell. It felt good to spread the darkness around. Misery liked company" (71). Among his clients, fear begins to operate as a secondary emotion—it is not an instinctive reaction to immediate danger, but the constructed outcome of Mitchell's skillful apocalyptic narration. The effectiveness of his fear-mongering is additionally enhanced by the infectiousness of anxiety in a culture of fear. People are already fear-conditioned by the proliferation of bad news in the media and they are vulnerable to tricks which further intensify their anxieties. Seeing his clients' eager response to his ghastly visions, Mitchell understands the contagious nature of fear: "A feeling was building. An urban malaria, a future-affected anxiety disorder. Whatever kind of disease it was, it had become infectious" (51). He correctly diagnoses society with pretrauma—a sense of unease about the future, which affects people like a disease.

The disease also increasingly affects himself, as Mitchell's job is clearly taking a toll on him. Mitchell continues to have anxiety attacks, which he visualizes as cockroaches crawling inside his stomach; he suffers from hair loss, fatigue, nausea, and exhaustion, which are said to be caused by the excessive presence of fear in his life. He is described as having "the subtracted look of an automaton or mannequin" (83), which strongly implies that centering his professional and private existence around fear has drained the life out of him. The reader can also infer Mitchell's uneasy relation with fear from his nearly obsessive fascination with a college acquaintance—Elsa Bruner—whom Mitchell describes as a "walking worst-case scenario" (10) due to a rare heart condition which can kill her at any moment. Mitchell expects Elsa to be at least as paranoid as he is, and yet Elsa enjoys life and is not afraid to do things which he would regard as risky, considering her condition. Mitchell seems to be jealous of Elsa's bravery and maintains correspondence with her, hoping to discover her secret. Always rational, Mitchell suspects Elsa of employing "a larger philosophical strategy" (82) and he plans to appropriate it for his own use.

Despite all his rationalism and constant preoccupation with disaster research and risk prediction, Mitchell fails to foresee the greatest disaster of his lifetime—hurricane Tammy, which completely floods Manhattan and devastates large parts of New York state. The flooding is a man-made disaster related to global warming—Tammy was preceded by a heatwave and a drought of unprecedented proportions, which made the ground unable to absorb water. Mitchell does sense the approaching cataclysm but is unable to specify its exact nature. His failure in imagination with regard to Tammy may be seen as a corollary of it being an example of Beck's manufactured uncertainty—unpredictable and incalculable by its very nature. Moreover, according to research into anxiety and environmental risks, people have a propensity to dismiss the latter as unlikely and remote (Bader et al. 68). Mitchell's analytical mind seems to fall victim to this widespread tendency. He studies and speculates about whole catalogs of potential risks which could certainly be categorized as Beck's manufactured uncertainties, and yet climate change issues appear to be last on his mind. Considering his vigilance with regard to present threats, his disregard for factual evidence is perplexing. He observes the erratic behavior of animals, and he notes the unusual heat and its consequences. He does realize that anomalous weather causes an increase in the collective sense of pre-traumatic stress: "anxiety was in the air. No longer was it free-floating, it had coalesced, settling into something heavier, tangible—a sludge of anxiety. You had to wade through it on the way to work; it sucked you down from underfoot, like quicksand" (107-108). There is no doubt the society is experiencing some sort of pretrauma on a global level. Mitchell, however, focuses mostly on the benefits his company can reap from this global anxiety: "The coverage of the heat wave and the drought, however exaggerated, seemed to contribute to the anxiety that had settled like a poisonous cloud over the country after Seattle. This worked to FutureWorld's advantage. Nothing better prepared for future fears than present anxieties" (75). Mitchell's perspective reveals an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of fear—he correctly assesses the role of the media in spreading anxiety, as well as the temporal nuances of pretraumatic stress, namely that it is induced by the perception of the present as threatening. He remains oblivious, however, of the scope of the approaching disaster until the last moments before it happens.

This proves that cataclysms like Tammy cannot be predicted due to their unprecedented character and the consequent lack of data to extrapolate from: "Like all major catastrophes, it surpassed the limits of imagination. And what was human imagination, after all, but the reconfiguration of past events?" (234). Past traumas fail to prepare one for the future, when each disaster is more traumatic than the previous one. Mitchell is forced to admit that even his sophisticated calculations and his talent for statistical analysis fail when confronted with the volatility of the risk society: "Natural disasters have been trending upward for the last three decades … it will get worse, but by how much, I have no idea, our expectations are constantly being surpassed. The scales need to be recalibrated" (235).

Paradoxically, the traumatic experience of surviving Tammy does not deepen Mitchell's paranoia. On the contrary, he feels that the enormity of the superstorm handicapped his apocalyptic imagination; it also convinced him that the future of the world is so bleak that there is no point in trying to predict it: "Now when he thought about the future, all he found was blankness. There would be no long term" (237). He thus seems to have acquired a fatalistic perspective which, though pessimistic, at least makes fear redundant: submitting oneself to anxiety is pointless when disasters are both certain and unavoidable. He begins to doubt the purpose of human efforts to control the complications which he had tried so hard to predict: "The message was: disorder always won in the end. The idea that man could order the world to his own design was the most pitiful fairy tale ever told" (236).

His newly acquired fatalism undermines his hitherto unshakeable faith in rationalism. In fact, the first signs of this mental shift can be seen earlier: shortly before Tammy, he makes an impulse purchase—a work of art in the form of a fully functional canoe, which later saves his life during the flood. The artistic school which produced the canoe expressed a praise of spontaneity in their artistic manifesto: "Rationality has made a mess of this world…. We want to trust our impulses more" (98). Mitchell's spontaneous act is probably subconsciously triggered by the fact that Elsa always scribbles a drawing of a canoe in her letters. The canoe can thus be read as a symbol of freedom from fear—which is what Elsa represents to Mitchell. Eventually, he, as well, seems to have gained an immunity to pretrauma, having realized that "living in fear [is] no kind of life" (187).

At the novel's conclusion, Mitchell quits futurism and starts an eco-friendly venture. By his own admission it is the first time in his life when he is doing something without thinking it through. This may mean that he has relinquished his attempts at control, having realized their pointlessness in an unpredictable world of incalculable risks. Paradoxically, then, irrationality may be the only rational response to the erratic reality of a risk society. And yet the novel offers no simple solutions to the problem of either global or individual pretrauma. Throughout the novel, Mitchell struggles, though with little success, to manage his fear, first by immersion in the reality of omnipresent risk and by pragmatic risk assessment, and later by trying to abandon rationality altogether and reconciling with the inevitability of disasters. Although he seems to have accepted the ubiquity of risks, he becomes an eccentric recluse, as if to shelter himself from the knowledge about the rise of Anthropocenic risks, which threaten to rekindle both his sense of fear and his apocalyptic imagination.

An analysis of the novel's depiction of fear reveals a negativist approach to pretrauma: the protagonist's obsession with extreme worst-case scenarios is devoid of any positive aspects. It has a deleterious effect on his mental and physical health, leading him to seek methods of reducing his pretraumatic stress response to the risks posed by modernity. Moreover, his compulsive preoccupation with preventive measures and extreme scenarios neither helps to assuage his fear nor works to prevent catastrophes. What is more, the only manner in which fear is used effectively in the novel is for exploitation and manipulation, as the protagonist's fear is easily transferred onto other people. Rich shows fear as omnipresent, infectious, and destructive, aptly portraying the culture of fear, in which fear becomes the dominant mode of processing and assessing reality. The novel depicts Beck's new risks as triggers for pretrauma in a risk society, susceptible to instilling anxiety over potential catastrophic complications, which can be neither accurately predicted, nor prevented.

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Mateusz Myszka

Becoming Horse—Capitalism and the Human Identity: An Analysis of Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to dissect the phenomenon of capitalist labor in the US as depicted in Boots Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). The primary focus of the article is the film's rendering of the creation of horse humans which the article reads as a metaphor for class relations in the modern society. First, the article analyzes the film's plot in the context of the cultural assumptions and beliefs connected with the figure of the horse. Next, it draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" in order to unveil the revolutionary potential possibly latent in hybridization. Finally, after commenting on the ways in which capitalism weaponizes technological development, the article inscribes the notion of hybridization into the nature-culture dichotomy.

Keywords: Riley, capitalism, hybrids, becoming-animal

The aim of the article is to explore the depiction of capitalist labor in Boots Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). In the course of this paper, I discuss the means by which the film represents its ideas, paying particular attention to the emergence of *equisapiens*, the horse-human hybrids the film introduces. The first part of the article explores the cultural significance of the said animal and establishes it as a point of reference for the film's interpretation. Secondly, the article draws on the notion of becoming-animal as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in order to analyze the philosophical meaning of being transformed into an animal—the forced hybridization is treated as a potential metaphor for the process of becoming, which might eventually culminate in the process of becoming-revolutionary. In the third part of the article, I am concerned with the way in which the film under analysis both plays with posthumanist theories and underlines the possible threat stemming from technological development. The discussion is broadened by referencing the connections between technological progress and human bodily enhancements. Finally, the article focuses on inscribing the process of hybridization into the dichotomy of nature and culture. The process of hybridization—even if involuntary—is shown as potentially empowering and leading to the creation of new subjectivity, free from the limitations imposed by the capitalist paradigm.

First, it needs to be noted that the figure of the director is an important point of reference shaping the interpretation of the film. Boots Riley is a self-declared communist. Consequently, *Sorry to Bother You* may be treated as a political manifesto, which filters the critique of the capitalist system through the known political sensibilities of its author. Thus, in general, the film strives to stand on the side of the underprivileged and the excluded. The worldview of the director renders the paradigm of class struggle as one of utmost importance.

The film presents the story of a young black man Cassius "Cash" Green (Lakeith Stanfield), who begins his work as a telemarketer in the Regal View company.

Soon, an older colleague (Danny Glover) teaches the main character to use his "white voice" in order to communicate with predominately white clients. At the same time, the employees organize a general strike. Cash is promoted, becomes a premium caller, and betrays his peers by refusing to participate in the strike. His job is to organize contracts for the WorryFree company, which offers people life-long employment with no payment but in food and lodging. After being invited to a party organized by the WorryFree CEO, Steve Lift (Armie Hammer), Cash learns that the company intends to go one step further: Lift has already started to change people into half-human and half-horse hybrids, created in order to provide extra-efficient physical labor. Cash is offered to become a hybrid as well; he would work as a faux leader of the *equisapiens,* i.e. the horse humans community. Cash refuses, and instead reveals his boss' plans to the public. Since the public is not moved, he goes one step further and crafts a plan to liberate the hybrids. Eventually, he learns that he too has been changed into a hybrid, despite his wishes. In the last scene, we see him leading a potentially revolutionary movement entering Lift's mansion.

The film's critique of capitalism is signaled already by the main character's name—Cassius "Cash" Green. The main character can be seen as an embodied manifestation of capital: his everyday moniker means "money" and his last name is connected to the color of dollar bills. Thus, it is the financial aspect of life that seems to determine the film's plotline. The main character's entire journey—from rags to riches and the other way round—takes place in the realm of the economy. His continuous ascent up the social ladder cannot be reconciled with other aspects of life. Economic advancement leads to ethical deterioration: in order to earn huge amounts of money, the main character unwittingly decides to participate in the reinstation of slavery in its modern form.

The color green appears as well when Cash learns about the creation of the *equisapiens*. The discovery happens by mistake, when instead of the jade door Cash opens the olive door and thus enters the wrong room, in which he finds the suffering hybrids. This is the moment which begins the process of Cash's eventual internal change. Faced with the atrocity committed by Steve Lift, Cash begins to question his own deeds. Thus, the meaning of the color green loses its unequivocality and its different shades come to indicate potential paths one may take. Certainly, the interpretation of the color in financial terms remains a possibility. Nonetheless, the color can be interpreted as well as a symbolic cultural representation of hope, realized in the final scene which shows the commencement of a revolution. What is more, the color can be interpreted also as part of the collocation "being green," with such interpretation underlining the character's naïveté. The character's actions stem not from rational decisions but from his naïve belief in the capitalist paradigm, which is omnipresent in the modern culture and thus shapes everyone's subjectivity.

Becoming Animal—The Cultural Significance of the Horse

The overbearing theme of the film may be described as a satirical critique of the capitalist society. The director's aim is to start with satirical comedy on working in telemarketing and later swiftly change genre conventions toward a mixture of science fiction and horror. The use of genre conventions as a tool for depicting the modern society is one of the characteristic features of the 2010s renaissance of arthouse horror films.[1] Moreover, the film's storyline, hinged on a person's transformation into an animal, points to a number of cultural influences. First, the metamorphosis may suggest a connection with the Cronenbergian body horror, with Cronenberg's *Fly* (1986) providing the most obvious analogy. The human body becomes the source of terror as it undergoes physical changes which reveal the incongruous and overlooked aspects of the flesh and expose the animalism hidden within humanity. When their bodily experience degrades, humans are confined to a purely biological existence.

In other words, human form is not given to humans unconditionally. The dualistic nature of the body may be interpreted through the binary dynamics of "bare life/political existence*, zoe/bios*, exclusion/inclusion," which, according to Giorgio Agamben, describes the fundamental division within the Western societies (8). Political life may be removed from humans, for everyone lives in a state of constant risk of losing certain aspects of their existence: humans may be deprived of their social rights and demoted to life understood merely in biological terms. The emergence of bare life, Agamben argues, is facilitated by capitalism: "today's democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life" (180). In a world governed by the principle of financial gain, political existence is deemed redundant by the social elite. The free market weaponizes the processes characteristic of totalitarian regimes; physical violence is replaced with economic violence and human rights are once again at risk of being nullified.

A proper analysis of the dehumanizing transformation requires referencing Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) and the figure of Gregor Samsa. The twentieth century, according to George Steiner, "has raised the distinct possibility of a reversal of evolution, of a systematic turnabout towards bestialization. It is this which makes of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* the key fable of modernity" (6). Dehumanization, which found its most striking development in the Nazi death camps, has never been removed from the realm of possibilities.[2] Modern capitalism uses similar practices while utilizing human life. While the means of control are much more nuanced, the treatment of humans as biological workforce is still in place. In the fictional world of *Sorry to Bother You*, being transformed into an animal re-emerges as a symbol of the human condition and gains on factuality due to technological developments enabling the creation of human-animal hybrids.

Deciphering the semantic content of the film requires referencing the cultural meaning of the figure of the horse. On the most literal level, the function of the horse as a domesticated animal has always been connected to physical labor. In the past, horses were used to cultivate the soil or lead carriages. Therefore, the metamorphosis which humans undergo in the film reduces them in fact to live tools, completely deprived of independent subjectivity. Their primary function is to serve their owners, enabling them to receive a steady income at their cost. This mechanism repeats the mechanism of slavery—a comparison often made in the film itself—which is based on dehumanizing particular social groups and depriving them of their rights.

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[1] Among the most critically acclaimed examples of this movement one may mention, among others, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), or Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018).

[2] See e.g. Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, 1991.

The capitalist system repeats the mechanism of dehumanization characteristic to slavery. The transformation humanity undergoes under capitalism appears to result not only in individuals being stripped of their human traits but also in a general qualitative redefinition of the working class as a separate species—no longer *homo sapiens* but *equisapiens*. The rights of horse humans are neither included nor protected by the legal system, i.e. they become Agambenian bare life. In the capitalist society, sentient, non-human beings, such as horse-human hybrids or robots, are subject to exploitation, since the rights gained in the bygone centuries included only humans in their formulation.

The horse may refer us also to the historical beginnings of the modern world and the Industrial Revolution. After the first engines were invented and replaced horses as a means of transportation, the term "horsepower" began to denote the capability of machines to replace the organic labor of animals. What Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* shows is the potential reversal of that process fueled by capitalist labor relations: in the presented scenario the economy reverts to one based on organic work, only this time horsepower is replaced by *equisapiens* power. This association transpires in the scene in which Cash begins to work as a power caller and is told that the company sells "gunpower" and "manpower." Only later does it become clear that the latter term is used in a literal manner, with reference not to what modern corporations call "human resources" but to the actual use of humans as a source of power. What is more, the association is confirmed by the film's symmetrical structure—Cash's story both begins and ends in the same place, with him living in a garage sublet from his uncle. He is deprived of any actual dwelling and is forced to occupy a place destined for cars—machines whose power is measured in horsepower units.

Furthermore, there is a number of specific cultural meanings associated with the horse as an animal. First, in Christianity, the figure of the horse evokes the Riders of the Apocalypse as described in the Book of Revelation (ESV Bible, Rev. 6.1-8). Drawing on that, one could suggest that the emergence of posthuman horse humans is a sign of the end of times. This reading, in turn, would lead to the redefinition of the socio-economic order not as a historical phenomenon but as a metaphysical state which is nearing its end: its final demise is imminent. Led by the riders, the horses do not bring the apocalypse by themselves; they are subjugated to the capitalist moguls, whose greed may result in the eventual demise of humanity. However, the Christian apocalypse has a dual meaning. While the reading featuring the Riders of the Apocalypse comments on the ongoing destruction of the modern world, the apocalypse can also mean revelation. The aim of the film is to transcend the depiction of potential destruction and reveal what is usually hidden. The storyline regarding horse humans is clearly fantastical, yet its function is to hyperbolize actual interhuman relationships. What the film endeavors to impress upon its audience is that the world we inhabit is not so far removed from the world based on slavery, dehumanization, and exploitation.

The role of horses in bringing apocalyptic revelation is explored also in the famed story regarding Nietzsche's descent into madness which followed his witnessing a battered horse. We may interpret the horse as a symbol of subjective, down to earth apocalypse. In this case, the horse appears as a Christ-like symbol of suffering which, when recognized by the subject, soon becomes unbearable. The suffering may lead to the complete rejection of the world which from that point on appears unjust and repulsive. The horse thus joins other animals—e.g. the biblical lamb or Robert Bresson's donkey in *Au Hasard Balthasar* (1966)—in becoming a symbol of undeserved suffering, and issues a call for action.

Actual depictions of humans as horses date back to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Riley reverses the classical depiction of horses as creatures superior to humans. In the fictional world of Swift's novel, horses can form a society that transcends the one created by humans. In the film, horse people are not offered a chance to organize themselves. From the very onset of their existence, they are strictly controlled by their creator, who plans to provide them with a false leader. Their microsociety is meant to serve the accumulation of capital. In the final scene of the film, we witness a moment which may signal the beginning of a revolution. Led by the transformed protagonist, the *equisapiens* storm the lodgings of the WorryFree's CEO. The film hints that the storming may result in much more than the overthrowing of a single exploiter: it may also initiate universal social change. What this seems to amount to is a call to arms issued by Riley the socialist. Horse humans—exploited and abused by humans—can overthrow the existing socio-economic system and establish a new one, which would be superior in its inclusiveness.

Finally, the film references as well the American mythologization of the horse as the symbol of freedom. Such mythologization has been present, first of all, in the Western genre. The trope of a lone ranger riding through the empty fields of the yet uninhabited frontier has left its mark on the collective American consciousness. Moreover, a sense of freedom is also what one immediately associates with the American wild horses. This association is based on a myth and dates back to the late nineteenth century. The American population of wild horses is an "industrial creation" (Norton Greene 165), as is not truly wild but feral. The horses descend from domestic horses reintroduced into nature by the colonizers after the original population became extinct 10,000 years ago. The myth establishes the horse as a symbol of wild nature, free from human influence. Even when over the years horses were reduced to a machine-like source of labor, Norton Greene observes, their descriptions still highlighted their aesthetic qualities, depicting them as both "functional and beautiful" (210). What the film shows is how modern horse humans meet the same fate: regardless of the language used to describe them, they are treated like machines.

The question of the *equisapiens*' subjectivity is of utmost importance. While the film clearly establishes that despite their animalistic appearance, the *equisapiens* are intellectually equal to humans, their cognitive abilities do not appear obvious to humans. In an interaction with one of the horse humans he releases, Cash starts to syllabize his sentences as if he were addressing someone incapable of understanding. His words are swiftly retorted—both characters, despite physical differences, come from the same city and speak the same language. Nonetheless, encountering such a liminal creature is a challenge, as one is required to recognize a fellow person (a neighbor) in the "other." Thus, the subjectivity of the *equisapien*s, even if selfexplanatory from their perspective, is a constant process of gaining (or fighting for) recognition. The struggle of the hybrids mirrors that of all the social groups which throughout history have been discriminated against and deprived of equal rights. The deprivation has often begun on the discursive level of dehumanizing and gatekeeping vocabulary. What Cash experiences is a confrontation with the "other" as elaborated on by Emanuel Levinas. Looking a horse human in the eye is a moment of ethical obligation understood as "the impossibility of indifference;" "the extreme urgency of this responsibility" cannot be measured (Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* 142). One must recognize a person in the "Other's" face: it is the face that "calls forth an enactment of … personal responsibility" (Arnett 67). It may be claimed, Levinas writes, that "the phenomenon of the face is not in its purest form" in the horse, since "in the animal, there are other phenomena. … But it also has a face" ("The Name of the Dog" 49). Hence, the ethical duty extends, to a certain degree, also to non-human entities.

Becoming-Animal—The Philosophical Meaning of a Transformation

The process of acquiring subjectivity by hybrid humans in *Sorry to Bother You* can be analyzed in the light of the philosophical notion of becoming-animal developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).[3] Before analyzing the "animal" part of the notion, the article will consider how the very notion of "becoming," i.e. the relational[4] process between the elements of the given whole ("assemblage" in Deleuzian vocabulary) relates to the situation of the characters in the film.

First, the process of becoming is necessarily experienced by groups which are either located on social margins or generally underprivileged, i.e. women, sexual minorities, people of color, etc. "There is no becoming-majoritarian," Deleuze and Guattari argue, "majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian" (106). The adjective "minoritarian" should be understood as opposite to the normative, abstract standard of human being as assumed, for instance, by the upper class, e.g. "adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language;" any "determination different from that of the constant," Deleuze and Guattari observe, should "be considered minoritarian, by nature and regardless of number" (105).

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[3] *A Thousand Plateaus* is chosen as the theoretical basis of the analysis that follows since—together with *Anti-Oedipus* (1972)—it presents the most comprehensive and influential representation of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical system. However, the notion of becoming was presented and developed also in earlier texts authored by Deleuze. For an in-depth analysis of the concept of becoming, see May, Todd. "When is a Deleuzian becoming?." *Continental Philosophy Review*, no. 36, 2003, pp. 139–153.

[4] In the opinion of Deleuze and Guattari, the relationship of elements is more important that the elements themselves. It is the very process of relationality that is at the center of their attention:

> line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived … a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination; A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both. (Deleuze and Guattari 293)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the process of becoming does not fit hierarchical schemata. To explain the state of becoming, the philosophers use the term "involution" instead of evolution: "the term we would prefer is 'involution,' on the condition that involution is in no way confused with regression. Becoming is involutionary, involution is creative" (Deleuze and Guattari 238). In this light, the process of becoming-animal as presented in the film is not to be interpreted in a hierarchical manner. The first step required for regaining subjectivity is to escape from the limiting paradigm of the capitalist worldview which structures the world vertically on the basis of wealth. The transformation appears to work on a micro-scale, as a psychological process experienced by the subject. Becoming hybrid is therefore not an experience of regression as it would be in the evolutionary paradigm, but it happens to be a process without any intrinsic value, neither positive nor negative. It is a process of regaining and reconstructing subjectivity, i.e. "[b]ecoming-minoritarian as the universal figure of consciousness" which "is called autonomy" (Deleuze and Guattari 106).

When it comes to the notion of becoming-animal specifically, the philosophers divide this process into three, non-exclusive types, rooted primarily in the psychoanalytical tradition (Deleuze and Guattari 240-41). The distinction between the types is based not on the animalistic object of the process but on the specificity of one's relation towards the said object. What Deleuze and Guattari are interested in is the ontology of relation: when analyzing Freud, James Urpeth contends, Deleuze and Guattari start "neither from little Hans nor from the horse, but from the more primordial *becoming-horse of little Hans*" (108). The first type of the animal is "the Oedipal animal," one that "invites us to regress" (Deleuze and Guattari 240). This kind of relation is based on subjective perception and is the most idiosyncratic one. What is more, in line with Freud's interpretation, it is also heavily intertwined in a familial relationship. The second type of animal Deleuze and Guattari mention in *A Thousand Plateaus* is "the State animal" (240), which corresponds with the Jungian theory on archetypes. According to the two philosophers, this kind of relationship with a symbolic animal is rooted in the subject's affiliation with the cultural archetypes which shape the subject's internal life. The Jungian animal is present in a vast array of myths, legends, beliefs, etc. Thus, this kind of relationship is more objectivized, as it transgresses the microscopic structure of a family and is based on a larger sociocultural structure.

It is, however, the third and the final type of animal that Deleuze and Guattari are most interested in: the so-called "demonic animal" (241). The demonic animal references the only type of relationship with an animal that actually enables and facilitates the process of becoming-animal. As the name suggests, in the case of a demonic animal we witness the phenomenon of supernatural possession. The relationship is not limited to relational self-positioning toward an external object, but it rather results in reciprocal flows between the external and the internal. The animal may become a spiritual, potentially unwanted intrusion which places itself in one's internal, psychological structure. The structure of the relationship is not fixed since the demonic animal is defined by its multiplicity and constant changeability: the demonic animal ignites the ever-changing relational dynamics.

Still, it needs to be underlined that the types of relationality with animals Deleuze and Guattari list are not mutually exclusive, which means that a subject may bond with an animal which is at the same time Freudian, Jungian, and demonic. In other words, a particular animal is capable of a tripartite concomitance of bonds. First, it may refer the subject to their individual, subjective "me," intertwined with their familial bonds. Secondly, it may evoke the sociocultural context based on fixed archetypes. And, finally, it may become a viral intrusion, which not only can have a potentially revolutionary effect but can also facilitate the process of becoming-animal.

The animalistic nature of the horse in Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* is not straightforward. Since the transformation occurs in a larger social context, it is rather difficult to think of the horse as a Freudian animal: while it certainly bears some subjectivized meaning to certain *equisapiens*, it cannot be treated as a universal key for analyzing the processes they undergo. At the same time, the Jungian animal is certainly at play—being changed into a horse-human hybrid necessarily evokes a set of sociocultural archetypes and symbols associated with the animal. Even though individuals might not consciously assert the network of meanings referred to in the previous part of the article, the meanings are still culturally recognized and are bound to be acquired in the process of acculturation.

What seems most interesting to explore is the demonic nature of the horse part of the hybrid. Since the demonic animal is the only one capable of igniting the process of becoming-animal, one may wonder how this processual change occurs. The process of becoming-animal is always communal, i.e. it "involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity" (Deleuze and Guattari 239).As becoming can be multifarious in nature—Deleuze and Guattari mention, among others, becoming-child, becoming-woman, becoming-molecular, or becoming-imperceptible (248)—the process of becoming-animal can be translated onto many contexts, e.g. political, and can thus also initiate the process of becoming-revolutionary (292). It is this form of becoming that is apparent in *Sorry to Bother You*. The transition from becoming-animal to becoming revolutionary realizes Irving Goh's statement that "in becoming-animal, one is also presented the possibility to create an adjacent space where life is free(d) from the capture of striating State politics" (55). The change experienced by the underprivileged is certainly marginal in nature: the final revolutionary movement is an uprising of the minority desperate to overthrow the existing system of social relations. In that way, the process of becoming emerges as a minoritarian revolutionary outburst of non-normative subjects.

The process of becoming may be interpreted as a unique opportunity to fight oppression and gain subjectivity in the process. Since the process of becoming-animal is based on involution, such reframing of the experienced situation—as it rejects the notions of progress and regression—removes the humiliation culturally associated with being changed into an animal. Thus, the demonic horse provides a framework for producing new, dynamic subjectivity. It also conquers the limitations imposed by the Jungian horse, which, in line with the traditional symbols and archetypes, would most likely treat the literal metamorphosis into an animal as a situation of degrading imprisonment.

When the film's storyline is read metaphorically, it seems that the process of becoming is shown as a solution for creating a society that is more just and fair. The dynamics of becoming-animal is based on rejecting the evolutionary stratifications governing the mindset rooted in the capitalist paradigm. The involution enables one to stop thinking about their class position in terms of humiliating degradation. The never-ending process of becoming rejects fixed social positions and allows for revolutionary change. Horse humans eventually reject the symbolic framework in which an animal is necessarily positioned below the human and begin to strive to establish new social frameworks, based on interconnectedness and social justice.

Becoming Post-Human—the Threats of Technology

Another focus of *Sorry to Bother You* is the adverse effect that technological developments have on the modern society. Riley considers the influence of technology on class relations. The social elite, the film demonstrates, weaponizes science in order to solidify and strengthen their superior position. Potentially beneficial achievements—i.e. the technological enhancement of the human body—eventually lead to the creation of horse-human hybrids, which in the course of the film are not only objectified but also used and abused. In this section, the weaponization of science will be analyzed with reference to definitional frontiers of humanity: the borders between human, animal, and posthuman, as well as between nature and culture.

Technological development poses questions regarding the borders of human subjectivity. When analyzing what it means to be human, boundaries are of essence. What comes to mind is the human-animal border and the assumption that with language, culture, or social structures, *homo sapiens* has surpassed its predecessors and constitutes a new, qualitatively different entity. On the other hand, we should consider a postulated new entity capable of surpassing humans, e.g. a technologically enhanced humanoid. The humanoid is usually understood in strictly hierarchical terms, i.e. according to the evolutionary paradigm, that is as the end effect of a process moving from rudimentary forms of organic life, through humans and, eventually, to superior post-humans. However, this linearity is rather simplistic. One can hardly think about biological progress as a singular process with teleological orientation aimed at perfecting human qualities. What is more, reaching the next stage of development does not necessarily imply that the previous stages are lost. The organism's gains pile up: while new ones appear, the old ones are never nullified. The development of the human rational mind did not result in the removal of human biological traits, which still tend to express themselves in abrupt eruptions of primordial atavisms. Thus, the belief in the linearity of progress seems doubtful at best. Nothing is lost and the borders of humanity are never fixed. Both transgression and the regression toward a different form of existence can be described as ever-present possibilities, immanent to the human condition.

The transformation presented in *Sorry to Bother You* shows that the two types of borders, i.e. human-animal and human-posthuman, are not mutually exclusive. Technological development may be in fact interpreted as identical with human regression into an animal. The borders of the transformation humanity undergoes are not easily demarcated. Moreover, the transformation seems inherently dualistic. The changes to human nature may be at the same time positive and negative, enriching and impoverishing, for they are largely rooted in what Jacques Derrida refers to as the dialectics of *pharmakon*, that is "this philter, which acts both as remedy and poison" and "can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent" (70). The changes function as both medicine and poison. It can be thus said that Riley's film reveals the danger inherent to technological development. Technology—theoretically oriented toward enhancing the quality of human life—hides in its very nature a potential threat of making people miserable.

The discourse regarding the progress and regress of human form may pertain to larger social structures as well. It may be discussed in relation to, for instance, political systems. While human societies develop, they are always at risk of falling back into previous forms of governance; the threat of an authoritarian regime always looms around the corner. Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* explores the processes described above with reference to slavery. The practice, although widely regarded as barbaric and anachronistic, has never been actually lost as a possible social structure, since the more primitive stages of humanity never disappear and may resurface at any given point in history. *Sorry to Bother You* presents the reemergence of slavery as facilitated by the modern capitalist system. Capitalists weaponize the development of technologies and utilize them in order to reinstate social relations fully based on discrimination, violence, and exclusion. The props on the stage have changed but the core of the plot remains the same.

The process of crossing the borders of humanity is bound to evoke transhumanism, and it seems that Riley's work is in dialogue with this kind of criticism. The film shows how striving for transhumanist subjectivity may potentially backfire and lead to the regressive hybridization of humans. Technological alterations to human bodies may end up as stimuli strengthening and broadening class divisions within the society. For instance, certain bodily alterations may become exclusive commodities, accessible to a narrow group of millionaires, while some modifications may be imposed on the underprivileged by means of economic violence. The technology of creating horse humans is the example of the latter: the only aim capitalists have is to multiply economic gains to the point of disregarding the majority of the society and forcefully transforming them into hybrids. The capitalist force may be defined, to quote from Shoshana Zuboff, as "instrumentarian power," i.e. the quasi-totalitarian form of governance based on data collection, which is meant "to reduce human persons to the mere animal condition of behavior shorn of reflective meaning" (358).

The emergence of horse-human hybrids appears to be rooted in the binary dynamics of nature and culture. This dichotomy can be read in two ways and necessitates posing two symmetrical questions, regarding, first, the passage from the human (culture) to the animalistic (nature) and, secondly, the reverse transformation. At its core, the former is based on the process of naturalization. When the human, understood as an entity belonging primarily to the realm of culture, is removed from their native sphere, he or she is deprived of the possibility of change. In the case of *Sorry to Bother You,* the entire process is intertwined with class interdependencies since it is just the underprivileged working class that is transformed into hybrids. Once the underprivileged are pushed towards nature, their entire existence changes its ontic status. The hybrids' existence can thus no longer be interpreted constructively. The way any animal behaves is largely predetermined by its connate instinctive drives and desires. The behavior of the horse is considered to stem not from its environmental surrounding but rather from the mere fact of it being a horse, a representative of a particular species with predetermined set of characteristics. Thus, when capitalism relegates humans to the role of animals—whether discursively or literally—their social position is naturalized. Their belonging to the working class is then tautologically justified by the very fact of belonging—it is only natural that these animalized people are at the bottom of the social ladder, since that is where they are. The impossibility of changing one's internal characteristics precludes any social movement. Thus, the imposed movement from culture to nature results in humans being deprived of the rights typically associated with the realm of culture and regulated by law or legislation.

The other vector leading towards hybridity includes the movement away from nature and towards culture. In this situation, existence transcends its biological limitations and influences the superphysical sphere. The lower class of the society may be described discursively as anchored in biology. The exploiters may see their lives as reduced to pandering to physical needs like food or shelter. Unable to transcend their physical needs, the lower class are precluded from moving forward, for instance, into politics. The emergence of hybridity is thus tantamount to the moment when the embodied experience of the underprivileged enters the sphere of politics and gains its cultural representation. Their predicament is no longer natural but culturally mediated and can trigger potentially revolutionary change, as happens in the last scene of the film.

The consequences of the binary dynamics of nature and culture structure the predicament of the *equisapiens*. On the one hand, their transformation deprives them of humanity and reduces their existence to a purely biological fact. On the other, their new situation is paradoxically a means of emancipation that can fuel a revolution. The *equisapiens*, to quote from Agamben, are like "the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither" (105). In the end, they function outside the fixed system of labels—their posthuman condition is similar to Donna Haraway's cyborg, free from "seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (150). The emergence of *equisapiens* testifies to how the threats posed by technology can be used in a revolutionary and empowering manner: they can help both overthrow the fixed social order and forge a new, anarchic "nonidentity;" i.e. a form of "micropolitics" (Bruns 713) leading to a brand-new social structure.

Conclusion

Boots Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You* uses artistic mediation to comment on the current social relations in the United States. In its critique of the capitalist system, the film can be read as a negative manifesto: while it does not present a new world, its critique of the current one is so potent that is justifies a revolution. The discussed contexts—i.e. the cultural meaning of the horse, the process of becoming-animal, and the threat of technological development—show various aspects of this critique. In addition to providing a noteworthy example of artistic activism, *Sorry to Bother You* offers a nuanced representation of the ongoing class structure in the United States.

On the other hand, the film's focus on ambiguity may be seen as a positive manifesto of emancipation. While traumatic and humiliating, social exclusion, which the film represents through the metaphor of forced hybridization, always carries within itself a possibility of revolution. Riley imagines a fictionalized version of our world in which the logic of capitalism is pushed to its limits. Bound to succumb to its internal contradictions, discussed throughout Marxist theory, such a world will necessarily occasion its own demise. As maintained by the accelerationist approach, capitalism's demise may only be achieved by fostering its potentially self-destructive logic. Thus, despite its grim depiction of reality, Riley's film seems hopeful: the world based on equality is bound to emerge. Eventually.

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Transgressing the Controlling Images of African-American Women? Performing Black Womanhood in Contemporary American Television Series

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Abstract: Drawing from intersectionality theories and black feminist critiques of white, masculinist, and racist discourses still prevailing in the American popular culture of the twenty-first century, this article looks critically at contemporary images of African-American women in the selected television series. For at least four decades critics of American popular culture have been pointing to, on the one hand, the dominant stereotypes of African-American women (the so-called controlling images, to use the expression coined by Patricia Hill Collins) resulting from slavery, racial segregation, white racism and sexism as well as, on the other hand, to significant marginalization or invisibility of black women in mainstream film and television productions. In this context, the article analyzes two contemporary television shows casting African-American women as leading characters (e.g., *Scandal*, 2012-2018 and *How To Get Away With Murder,* 2014-2020) to see whether these narratives are novel in portraying black women's experiences or, rather, they inscribe themselves in the assimilationist and post-racial ways of representation.

Keywords: African-American women, Shonda Rhimes, TV series, black feminism, intersectionality, racism

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Introduction

For at least four decades the critics of American popular culture have been pointing to, on the one hand, dominant stereotypes of African-American women (the so-called controlling images, to use the expression coined by Patricia Hill Collins) resulting from slavery, racial segregation, white racism and sexism, as well as, on the other hand, to significant marginalization or invisibility of black women in mainstream film and television productions. The latter phenomenon was put in a larger context of diversity in Hollywood (or lack thereof) by Viola Davis during the Emmy ceremony in 2015, when she accepted the award for best drama actress: "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. So here's to … people who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black" ("Viola Davis's Emmy Speech"). Both critics and viewers have expressed frustration and exhaustion with the lack of interesting, multidimensional, diverse, complex, psychologically authentic, and socially important roles for black women that would transgress the schematic and degrading controlling images of, e.g., the welfare queen or the Jezebel stereotype. Hence, contemporary American shows, such as *Scandal* (ABC 2012-2018), starring Kerry Washington, or *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC 2014-date), with Viola Davis (both written by an African-American screenplay writer, Shonda Rhimes), have generally been well received by audiences and welcomed by critics. Both television series and their leading heroines have been acclaimed not only for their unusual portrayals of black womanhood, but also for universal (pop)feminist[1] claims that they try to make.

Drawing from intersectionality theories and black feminist critiques of white, masculinist, and racist discourses still prevailing in American popular culture of the twenty-first century (e.g., bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Jacqueline Bobo), in this article I look critically at contemporary images of African-American women in the selected television series. The question I want to pose is whether these narratives are novel in portraying black women's experiences or, rather, whether they inscribe themselves in assimilationist and post-racial ways of representation. In particular, I will have a closer look at Viola Davis's acclaimed role of Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*, which I want to perceive as a regeneration of African-American female subjectivity.

The performative character of these racialized representations is of particular relevance. I examine in what ways these heroines are formed as racial subjects by referring to controlling images and their limiting modes of depicting African-American women. Race is performative as it is not understood only through skin color, but rather should be "seen to be a discursively generated set of meanings that attach to the skin—meanings that, through various technologies and techniques, come to regulate, discipline, and form subjects as raced" (Ehlers 14). I argue that Annalise Keating from *How To Get Away With Murder* and Olivia Pope from *Scandal* "are regularly categorized through a certain racial schema and then must reiterate the norms associated with their particular racial designations through bodily acts such as manners of speech, modes of dress and bodily gestures" (Pfeife n.p).

I think that the two characters challenge traditional invisibility of African-American women in the mainstream media narratives, however, in my view, their performances contest the reception of their experiences and behaviors only through their racialized identifications and their position within the dominant discourse as black women. They try to transgress their blackness in order not to be solely defined through certain race-related expectations, not to be disciplined and controlled by the dominant racial stereotypes.

Looking at African-American Women's Experiences from an Intersectional Perspective

Undoubtedly, looking at the history of American film and television, African Americans in general have been marginalized, discriminated against and represented stereotypically in all possible ways (Różalska, *One Hundred Years of Exclusion*, 55-63). However, as research conducted since the 1970s indicates, these are African-American women who have been mostly ignored, silenced and omitted in television narratives. Although the twenty-first century brought important television productions with strong and diverse female characters (such as *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, or *Girls*, to name just a few most popular in recent years), African-American women have still been largely invisible. As I will try to show, recently this situation has started to slowly change.

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[1] Kate Farhall explains popfeminism as follows: "Feminism has been rebranded and marketed to a younger, more pop culture oriented generation, with celebrity royalty such as Beyoncé leading the charge.… Yet the progressiveness of this iteration of feminism is tempered by its ongoing commitment to the objectification of women. Feminist research consistently shows the objectification of women and the pressure of feminine beauty ideals to be problematic and limiting to women. Consequently, the dual emphases of women's freedom and adherence to feminine beauty standards seemingly render this popular form of feminism, not only internally incoherent, but also counterproductive to women's equality" (95).

The presence of African-American women in television narratives needs to be approached from an intersectional perspective, acknowledging that black female experiences result from multiple axes of discrimination and the particular circumstances of their oppression. Since the 1970s black feminists have been criticizing white feminists for not including the voices of women of color and pointing to the overlapping processes of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, etc. that African-American women have to face.

The very term "intersectionality" was coined by an African-American scholar, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, in her article on women who were victims of domestic violence, wherein she justified the need to approach the problem with reference to the race and ethnicity of battered women because—as her research proved—their experiences significantly vary. Crenshaw draws attention to the fact that in many theoretical considerations various forms of discrimination are approached separately; that is why they fail to address those experiences that are influenced by various intersecting categories: "Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus, when the practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (357). Crenshaw underlines—similarly to other black feminist researchers such as bell hooks or Patricia Hill Collins—that women of color experience racism differently than men of color do and that they also suffer from sexism in a different way from white women, which in consequence leads to an inability to examine their positions and their marginalization. She uses intersectionality "to describe the location of women of color both within the overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism" (367). Such approach has a great potential to fill in the gap, because it focuses on intersections of different forms of discrimination: racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia and so forth.

Before Crenshaw's article, other activists and academics expressed the need to change perspective in investigating the socio-political situatedness of different women. Undoubtedly, one of the most influential texts that inspired feminist scholars was the manifesto by the Combahee River Collective—a group of black lesbian feminists—entitled "A Black Feminist Statement," which includes several assumptions that in my opinion provide important fundaments for the concept of intersectionality: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (232).

Other writers, such as Audre Lorde or bell hooks, criticized in their work the color-blindness of white feminism and its disregard for women's issues within their own communities. Lorde rightly contends that certain stereotypes concerning those who diverge from—as she puts it—"the mythical norm" are deeply ingrained in social consciousness and, for this reason, are maintained and reinforced by visual texts. According to Lorde,

> [s]omewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. (116)

These norms result in creating the sense of otherness, uncertainty and abnormality felt by certain people, which consequently results in an unequal division of power in society and the unprivileged groups' lack of impact on and access to social institutions, including the media. Thus, by devoting limited time and space to African-American women, the media reinforce their sense of powerlessness, marginalization or even absence.

bell hooks further problematizes the notion of the "mythical norm" by adding criticism of sexism and patriarchy within African-American community:

> When women write about race we usually situate our discussion within a framework where the focus is not centrally on race. We write and speak about race and gender, race and representation, etc. Cultural refusal to listen to and legitimize the power of women speaking about the politics of race and racism in America is a direct reflection of a long tradition of sexist and racist thinking which has always represented race and racism as male turf, as hard politics, a playing field where women do not really belong. Traditionally seen as a discourse between men just as feminism has been seen as the discourse of women, it presumes that there is only one gender when it comes to blackness so black women's voices do not count—how can they if our very existence is not acknowledged. (hooks, *Killing Rage* 1)

In other words, like many other black scholars, hooks questions the unity among women and claims that women are by no means a homogenous group experiencing gender discrimination within the white patriarchal system in the same way. She points to the need to reconceptualize the notion of sisterhood:

> Resolution of the conflict between black and white women cannot begin until all women acknowledge that a feminist movement which is both racist and classist is a mere sham, a cover-up for women's continued bondage to materialist patriarchal principles, and passive acceptance for the status quo…. The sisterhood cannot be forged by the mere saying of words. It is the outcome of continued growth and change. It is a goal to be reached, a process of becoming. The process begins with action, with the individual women's refusal to accept any set of myths, stereotypes, and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of her human experience; …that deny her capacity to bridge gaps created by racism, sexism, or classism. (hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 157)

A few years later, but in a similar spirit, Patricia Hill Collins' model of intersectionality aims at "reclaiming feminist intellectual traditions" (*Black Feminist Thought* 15) and reconceptualizing the politics of black feminist thought as a critical social theory by working "on the epistemological implications of thinking more fundamentally in intersectional terms about feminist theory and scientific research, that is, scientific knowledge and scientific practice" (Yekani 25). Hill Collins's research goes beyond intersectionality understood as interconnected ideas and experiences resulting from different social positioning as she is especially interested in how oppression affects black women. Therefore, she distinguishes between intersectionality and—what she calls—"the matrix of domination," with the former being closely interrelated with the latter:

> Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are structurally organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression. (*Black Feminist Thought* 18)

Hill Collins proposes "replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones," put forward earlier by the Combahee River Collective (*A Black Feminist Statement*), which, in her opinion, would present new possibilities of thinking about domination and exclusion: "The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought"). The matrix of domination, which permeates all spheres of life and social institutions, also affects popular culture and the media. Therefore, in the context of visual culture, Hill Collins underlines that intersectionality is crucial in investigating "controlling images" of black women in popular culture and the media. The concept of the matrix of oppressions is a means to deconstruct dichotomous divisions that have traditionally determined the representations of "Others" as well as the mythical norms that enlightened racism—which Hill Collins calls new racism (*Black Sexual Politics* n.p.)—rests upon.

In this context, Patricia Williams claims that "[t]he legacy of dehumanization of black people has been carried forward in such a variety of cultural contexts" (56) and this dehumanization of African Americans took many forms in popular culture and media texts. In particular, film and television have maintained a set of degrading images. Let me briefly examine the black feminist critical reflection on stereotypes of black womanhood.

Controlling Images

African-American women have been represented in television mainly through motherhood, sexuality, and troubled family and community. Oftentimes their images legitimize the racist patriarchal order and economic exploitation. Drawing from the concept of "controlling images" by Patricia Hill Collins, I will shortly refer to these dominant depictions and their cultural variations.

The first stereotype of the mammy—a devoted caretaker of white children in the idyllically represented South—dates back to slavery. It emerged as a justification of "the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 72). She accepts her position as a "privileged slave," never questions the dominant social order, and symbolizes "the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power" (72). Usually represented as asexual and de-sexed, she can become an ideal surrogate mother for white children as she is not attractive to white masters/men. As hooks emphasizes, this racist and sexist logic assumes that "Black women have been mothers without children" (*Black Looks* 119)—nannies that devote themselves entirely to white children, their needs and upbringing. Consequently, "the mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 73).

The second controlling image indicated by Hill Collins is that of a matriarch—in a way a reverse of the mammy—a black "bad" mother that neglects her children, family, marriage, and community. In the words of Hill Collins, "[w]hile the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes" (75), which are often female-headed by single mothers. Unlike the mammy in white environment, the matriarch, who spends a lot of time working outside of home, is considered responsible for social problems in black family and community: poverty, unemployment, lack of education, children drop-outs from school, emasculation of black men (who in consequence do not want to stay with them, or marry them), etc. In other words, she is "a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 75). Hardly ever is there a critical reflection on where, why, and in what conditions working-class African-American women perform domestic work as well as on the real reasons for black children's disadvantage: socio-political and economic inequalities, underfunded and low-quality public schools, employment discrimination, inferior housing, neglect on the part of the law enforcement to end violence, etc. (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 76). The matriarch serves as a warning to women of other ethnicities (also white) that "aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 77). Strong black women's subjectivity resulting from slavery and years of segregation and discrimination as well as differently performed gender roles in black communities in comparison to the traditional white family are in fact perceived as deviant and endangering the patriarchal order. They transgress the traditional family ideal and also, with the absence of the father figure/black man, they are perceived as evidence to cultural inferiority (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 77).

Both the stereotype of the mammy and of the matriarch put African-American women in an impossible position in reference to black family, but also in the context of traditional patriarchal white society:

> For Black women workers in service occupations requiring long hours and/or substantial emotional labor, becoming the ideal mammy means precious time and energy spent away from husbands and children. But being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women…. In essence, African-American women who must work encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes. (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 78)

Such self-excluding positions seem to characterize social expectations towards African-American women until today as reflected in some media narratives.

Two of the television series analyzed in this text—*Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*—echo this difficult role and presence of the mother in black family and the ambiguous position of the father in the leading protagonists' lives. Both Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating have uneasy, traumatic relations with their parents. Olivia's mother, always absent when she was a child, turns out to be a liar, a manipulator, and a terrorist. Annalise's mother finds it difficult to talk to her daughter about her hard childhood, the oppressive drinking father, and her uncle that abused Annalise sexually when she was a child. Both mothers, so different from each other, could be easily labeled bad mothers (Olivia's mom is a paid assassin, Annalise's mom is a conservative woman trying to protect the dysfunctional family); however, they are also strong female figures who protect their children at all cost (both are even capable of killing people that hurt their daughters).

The third controlling image, again connected to motherhood and sexuality, is the welfare mother (the welfare queen), who does not work, has a lot of children, and depends on welfare. This cliché grew in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s when black women started to use social benefits that had been previously denied to them. The discourse significantly shifted: under slavery, black women were supposed to reproduce to provide more unpaid workforce on plantations, but in the second half of the twentieth century, black women and their children have become a problem, a danger to the society (both due to their use of welfare and their reproduction) (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 79). In the logic of enslavism of the white supremacist anti-black capitalist society, it made perfect sense to use black women for reproduction of the enslaved population; however, with the changes after the Civil Rights movement and with the transition of an industrial society into a service society in the twentieth century, African Americans started to be perceived as "a surplus population," whose reproduction was no longer needed.[2] As Hill Collins claims,

> [t]he image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not White and middle class…. Like a matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled

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[2] For more about contemporary considerations on surplus populations in the context of race, see James A. Tyner, "Population Geography I: Surplus Populations," *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2013, pp. 701-711, and Michael McIntyre and Heidi J. Nast, "Bio(necro)polis: Marx, Surplus Populations, and the Spatial Dialectics of Reproduction and 'Race,'" *Antipode*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2011, pp.1465-1488.

> a bad mother…. While the matriarch's unavailability [at home] contributed to her children's poor socialization, the welfare mother's accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring. (*Black Feminist Thought* 79)

In cinema and television, such a stereotype has been often used—the images of lazy, unemployed, arrogant black women, often addicted to drugs and alcohol, were mainstreamed not only by white filmmakers but also by the black independent cinema of the 1990s. Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing* (1989) or *Jungle Fever* (1992) and John Singleton in *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) depicted women in such a way, partly blaming them for problems in black community and for having a bad influence on children (especially boys), which only supports what I have already considered above—that African-American women's experiences are marked not only by racism (often paired with classism), but also sexism on the part of both white and black patriarchal cultures (Różalska, *African-American Experience* 87-100).

Another popular stereotype of African-American woman is the black lady, which evokes a seemingly harmless image of a middle- or upper-class hardworking professional woman who is so focused on herself and devoted to her career, ambition, and work (often in white assimilated environment) that she does not have time for men, children, and family (being another version of the matriarch and the mammy, who is perhaps less feminine and less assertive than the black lady). They got their jobs through affirmative action, which in white patriarchal culture translates into taking up jobs that belong to someone else and, consequently, their achievements are questionable no matter how educated and accomplished they are (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 81). Their hard work and determined professionalism are often devalued and constantly questioned; therefore—as Olivia Pope's father rightly underlines on many occasions in *Scandal*— "You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have" ("It's Handled").

Both Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope to a certain extent could be read through the stereotype of the black lady—they are both strong personalities: professional, mouthy, punchy, assertive, hard-hitting, and so overwhelmingly intelligent that they sometimes scare people off with their cleverness. They are both single, in and out of different relationships and love affairs; they need affection, sex, acceptance and understanding but in the end they will always choose themselves over their partners as they are not willing to compromise.

Finally, I want to refer to the very popular image of Jezebel (the whore) that is strictly connected with black female sexuality, which is perceived as deviant, promiscuous, and dirty. As most of controlling images, this stereotype dates back to slavery when alleged sexual aggressiveness of black women (and men as well, differently though) was used to justify sexual exploitation, assaults and rapes as well as the need to control their sexuality. In contemporary American popular culture (both white and black), the modern versions of Jezebels are ever-present, for example, the "Black Bitch Barbie," "who welcomes glamorization and embraces the profitability associated with the racialization, sexualization, and subjugation of Black women's bodies" (LaVoulle and Ellison 65). Importantly, as black feminist critics underline, these stereotypical representations are not sufficiently questioned by African-American community, which seems to accept or even reinforce them, so that they are not merely constructs and fantasies of white men, but also “African-American men and women alike routinely do not challenge these and other portrayals of Black women as ‘hoochies’ within Black popular culture” (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 82).

Controlling Images and Their Consequences

Black feminists and activists have been examining and explaining the reasons why these controlling images still dominate in society and the media, pointing to the fact that “by meshing smoothly with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States” (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 84). First, they are used to “make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 69). In other words, they subjugate African-American women to the patriarchal system of oppression and are key in maintaining the intersecting axes of discrimination unquestioned and intact.

Secondly, as Hill Collins summarizes, “[t]aken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women’s sexuality and fertility” (*Black Feminist Thought* 84), therefore women are simply reduced to their biology and “natural” duties as if their biology was their destiny. Relegating black women to nature is part of the dichotomous logic that defines the Other in American society through binary oppositions that reflect unequal access to and enjoyment of power. What Stuart Hall calls “the spectacle of the Other” is an assumption that “people who are in any way significantly different from the majority—‘them’ rather than ‘us’—are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes—good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange and exotic” (Hall 268), male/female, black/white, culture/nature, reason/emotion, subject/object, superior/inferior (to add just a few).[3] Such a way of thinking puts African-American women in an inferior position and represents them as exotic, emotional, oversexualized, uneducated, less intelligent, ugly (especially when dark-skinned), etc. Consequently, these controlling images help the process of objectification that is central to oppositional thinking: “In binary thinking one element is objectified as the Other and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 70)—in other words, to be looked at and thus disciplined. Objectification of African-American women permits dehumanizing them, depriving them of their agency, marking them as different (because of, among others, their skin color and dominating white standards of beauty) and identifying them with passively understood nature, i.e. something that can be conquered, exploited, and controlled, as primitive and wild nature endangers the social order, the civilized culture represented by men. That is why "Black studies and feminist studies suggest that defining people of color as less human, animalistic, or more 'natural' denies African and Asian [together with Latin and Native] people's subjectivity and supports the political economy of domination that characterized slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, [and apartheid]" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 71).

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[3] See also: Dorota Golańska and Aleksandra Różalska, “Representation and Difference: Introduction to Feminist Approaches,” *Gender and Diversity: Representing Difference*, edited by Dorota Golańska and Aleksandra M. Różalska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2011, pp. 19-51.

In the context of cultural narratives, bell hooks rightly contends that "[a]s subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (*Talking Back* 42). As far as African-American female characters are concerned, the majority of American television series hardly ever put them at the center of narratives—they have been either completely absent, occasionally sidekicks, assimilated partners to white characters, or represented through controlling images—hardly ever at the center of narratives. Furthermore, we need to also remember about yet another aspect of African-American women's representations in film and television. In her famous book *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* bell hooks referred to the double discrimination of black women on screen: "Even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze" (119). In other words, African-American women in film and television narratives are neither to be identified with nor to be desired, as the object to be looked at by both white and black men are white women. The process of double discrimination and marginalization is particularly visible on their example.

Hence, it is not surprising that Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating—the two African-American female protagonists—have been on the one hand welcomed with acclaim and joy as they transgress certain myths and stereotypes so deeply ingrained in American culture. On the other hand, some critics and audiences have been watching these shows with some dose of suspicion and skepticism, sometimes accusing Shonda Rhimes of repeating rather than contesting old clichés and of "soaploitation"[4] (duCille 201).

In what follows, I want to have a look at some aspects of African-American women's representations in *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*, in particular at their contestation of the angry black woman's stereotype, the ways in which Kerry Washington plays with the legacy of the Jezebel image, and finally Viola Davis's revolutionary take on white beauty standards. All of these aspects to some extent show how these television series reflect real-life debates on racism and feminism in the US.

Transgressing the Angry Woman Image (Sapphire)

In her notorious *New York Times* review of *How To Get Away With Murder*, Alessandra Stanley writes:

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[4] The term "soaploitation" has been coined from the soap opera television genre and Blaxploitation films popular in the 1970s.

> As Annalise, Ms. Davis, 49, is sexual and even sexy, in a slightly menacing way, but the actress doesn't look at all like the typical star of a network drama. Ignoring the narrow beauty standards some African-American women are held to, Ms. Rhimes chose a performer who is older, darker-skinned and less classically beautiful than Ms. Washington, or for that matter Halle Berry…. Ms. Rhimes has embraced the trite but persistent caricature of the Angry Black Woman, recast it in her own image and made it enviable. She has almost single-handedly trampled a taboo even Michelle Obama couldn't break. (Stanley)

Evidently, some critics cannot help but read Keating's character through the stereotype of a strong, bold, mouthy woman (a combination of the matriarch and the black lady, sometimes also called Sapphire) who can deal on her own with all the problems and obstacles but whose anger (at family, job, friends, students, white men, etc.) is sometimes irrational and difficult to understand. One might argue that employing these stereotypes gives evidence to the persistence of controlling images and points to a limited understanding of black womanhood. The question is whether it is necessary to look at black female experiences through the same degrading and simplifying clichés I outlined above in order to show their persistent character. If the character was white, probably the critic would not use the expression "an angry white woman." Such a discourse points to the lack of progress in the fight against racism and sexism in the United States, decades after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

Meanwhile, it could be argued that anger is precisely what makes Annalise's character unique as it helps her solve cases and push the plot forward. Her character goes beyond the angry black woman stereotype. In fact, in contemporary American network television it is hard to find such a conflicted and hence interesting African-American female character. We see Annalise in different moments of her life—as a strong, bold, tough-minded and hard-hitting lawyer but also as a lost, traumatized, unhappy person who has to work really hard for the image that is required of her by her profession and the patriarchal white world she has to adjust to. Her life is complicated and full of secrets, and she has many flaws that make her a multidimensional and complex character—sometimes adorable, sometimes annoying. She has an alcohol problem, which in Season 4 almost results in her losing license; she is married to a cheating white husband who turns out to be a manipulator and murderer (Season 1); she is bisexual—she has an affair with a cop whose wife is terminally ill and maintains a romantic relationship with a woman; furthermore, she has many traumas of the past—she was sexually abused as a child and she loses her long-awaited baby in a car accident (Season 2).

At the same time, Annalise Keating is aware of her strength and worth, and although she doubts herself constantly, she also dares to angrily say to her student: "I'm trying to change the damn world here. Literally. I'm Martin Luther damn King trying to blow up the entire justice system. You want me to save the world and be nice at the same time. Well that's not me" ("It's Her Kid"). As Wallace underlines, it was Viola Davis herself who insisted that producers should make Annalise Keating a conflicted, vulnerable character—one that is uneasy to read; she wanted her to be "messy, multifaceted and complicated" (Wallace) in ways that African-American protagonists rarely are. "I am who I am; if you don't like it, I don't care," says Keating

("Best Christmas Ever"), and it seems that Viola Davis passed onto Keating's character some of her own anger resulting from being an African-American actress, always oscillating between the roles of either a victim or a villain, or being a background to white protagonists: "It's what I've had my eye on for so long. It's time for people to see us, people of color, for what we really are: complicated" (Wallace). She elaborated on it in more detail in one of the interviews:

> Colorism and racism in this country are so powerful that the Jim Crow laws are gone, and we know most of segregation is gone, but what's left is a mindset. As an actress, I have been a great victim of that…. There were a lot of things that people did not allow me to be until I got [the role of] Annalise Keating…. I was not able to be sexualized. Ever. In my entire career. And here's the thing that's even more potent: I've never seen anyone who even looks like me be sexualized on television or in film. Ever. (Maerz)

I want to illustrate my argumentation with two examples from Season 4 in which, evidently, Annalise Keating's anger and dissatisfaction with racism and sexism permeating the legal system in the United States lead her to win two cases in which African Americans were victims. The first example is a scene in which Annalise is interrogating a witness in court, a retired judge, regarding her client, Jasmine Bromelle, an African-American woman—a prostitute and a drug addict, who is an inmate Keating met while imprisoned. Jasmine is on-and-off jail all her life due to the fact that she was forced into prostitution by her father when she was a girl. For the first time she was charged for solicitation when she was 13 years old ("I'm Not Her"). Annalise thinks she can get Jasmine out of prison and—by saving her—rework her own trauma of sexual abuse as a child. Getting angrier and angrier she proves her point about Jasmine's race and class contributing to multiple discrimination she suffered throughout her life, being disadvantaged by the system. She proves to the judge that he charged teenagers to different sentences because of their skin color:

> My client is black, and all of these girls were white. If Jasmine was treated as a white girl, she would've been sent to a safe place to eat, sleep, maybe even given an opportunity to go to school. But, instead, she is treated as a criminal by the officers and prosecutor whose duty it was to protect her and save her from the hell that was her childhood. But you turn your back out into the streets until she had a criminal record that prevented her from getting a job, government housing, assistance…. The system that should've been protecting this vulnerable 13-year-old girl blamed her and doomed her to a life in-and-out of prison. Because that's what we do to black people, women, and gay people in this world. We turn a blind eye, and we tell them that their lives don't matter. But they do matter. Jasmine Bromell matters. ("I'm Not Her")

This is just one of many cases Annalise takes to reveal the discrimination and disadvantage of African-American women. Idyllically, she wins the case; Jasmine is acquitted, although the win is only seemingly rewarding—when outside of prison, Jasmine cannot cope with freedom she has so suddenly regained; she dies of a drug overdose, so she is hardly a stereotypical victim that wants to be saved. It is impossible to simply erase her past and experiences resulting from racism and classism. Although, of course, one could also argue that this fragment of the series might perpetuate black stereotypes as Jasmine is not offered the opportunity to enjoy her freedom and turn her life around.

The second example also concerns discriminatory practices of the legal system, this time mass incarceration of black men—the topic that has recently started to be discussed more and more often in the United States by legal experts, journalists, and activists. Annalise Keating prepares a class action making a claim that people of color are denied the right to proper public counsel and hence they are given harsher punishments than whites: “One in three black men will go to prison versus one in 17 white men” (“Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania”). Interestingly enough, the plot was used as a pretext for a crossover between *How To Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal*. The latter benefited from including such African American-oriented and pro-civil rights plot, as it has often been accused by critics of being colorblind and not tackling the realities of African-American community in a sufficient way. As a consequence, Annalise Keating works closely on this case with Olivia Pope, who also needs a big win to gain back the respect of the White House.

Watching the two powerful African-American women working on a case so specifically resulting from black experiences of racism, classism, and denial of basic civil rights, presenting their case at the almost-all-white Supreme Court and winning is a completely new experience for both viewers and critics of network television. Importantly, their encounter and the joint forces of their teams (predominately African American) opened an opportunity (which Davis referred to in her Emmy acceptance speech) to go beyond controlling images. The two protagonists control the narrative, not the other way around. Pixley characterized Kerry Washington’s role in the following way: “Olivia Pope is not a monolith. She is a black woman, but she is also more than that” (Pixley 32). I think the same can be said about Annalise Keating.

Annalise Keating’s final argument during the Supreme Court hearing includes some powerful statements about race-related systemic discrimination:

> Race must always be considered a variable…. Racism is built into the DNA of America. And as long as we turn a blind eye to the pain of those suffering under its oppression, we will never escape those origins…. Due to the failure of our justice system, our public defense system in particular, Jim Crow is alive and kicking…. Some may claim that slavery has ended. But tell that to the inmates who are kept in cages and told that they don’t have any rights at all…. And is this the America that this Court really wants to live in? … The Sixth Amendment was ratified in 1791. It’s been 226 years since then. Let’s finally guarantee its rights to all of our citizens. (“Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania”)

Of course, on a more critical note, in Shonda Rhime’s fictional worlds complicated cases are much easier to win than in real life, it is easier to reveal racist policies (within one or two episodes), and it is even possible to convince people that discrimination of African Americans still exists. Although not without problems, Keating and Pope succeed in convincing even conservative, white, Republican politicians (one former and one current US president!) to support their endeavors to make a case before the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, we must remember that these shows are run on network television whose productions are directed at wide, diverse audiences with different attitudes towards race-related issues and different sensitivity to these problems. Network television has often been accused of offering such narratives to (white, middle-class) viewers that would present race relations in an assimilationist way and not addressing in much detail the complicated history of racism in the US. In this context, both Rhime's series, but *How To Get Away With Murder* in particular, bring these issues to the center of the narrative in a much more complex way and from an African-American perspective.

Transgressing the Jezebel Image

As mentioned above, the image of Jezebel and its various alterations have been one of the most popular stereotypes of African-American women, and, according to some critics, Shonda Rhimes in *Scandal* also makes a reference to it (duCille 154, Cartier 154, Maxwell). On the one hand, Olivia Pope is a brilliant and talented lawyer, a graduate of prestigious law schools, working for the White House, having influence on the elections (of two US presidents), and running a successful PR firm, which specializes in crisis management—fixing and handling embarrassing situations and mysterious problems of her rich clients: politicians, leaders and DC's VIPs. Olivia is manipulative, cunning, always ahead of her opponents, always winning, knowing dirty little secrets of the American political elite, and having devoted co-workers and a net of contacts that help her solve even unsolvable cases (Stępniak). Throughout the seven seasons of *Scandal* she gets more and more ruthless and hungry for power and influence; initially a skillful manipulator, throughout the series she becomes a blackmailer and finally a murderer.

On the other hand, she has one weakness—she is involved in a complicated, illicit, doomed relationship with the (white, Republican) US president, Fitzgerald Grant. The critics of Olivia Pope's love life accused her of reproducing a modern incarnation of the Jezebel and reinforcing other controlling images:

> Pope's character has met with a plethora of angry rants. Many of these criticisms claim that her interracial relationships with questionable power dynamics are outrageously offensive. Others insist that her lifestyle itself is unrealistic, and her depiction of black womanhood simply scandalous. Pope has been criticized for representing a composite of nearly every black female stereotype—the Jezebel, the Mammy, the Sapphire…. To many media critics, Pope's cunning maneuvers in service to the so-called "Republic" (read: primarily white, primarily wealthy, American political behemoth) smacks [sic] of Mammy-esque mothering and her "immoral" relationship with a white married man align with the notion of oversexed Jezebel. When Pope runs her own business to laudable success through iron-fist maneuvering coupled with a commandeering personality, critics then insist she fits snugly into the Sapphire trope. (Pixley 29-30)

When you read Pope's representation through the prevailing controlling images, which assume that each relationship between a black woman and a white man is a reference to slavery, sexual exploitation by white masters, and total dependency of black women on white culture, then indeed Kerry Washington's character may be associated with the Jezebel. This logic of thinking assumes that “Pope cannot be unabashedly strong and competent, sexually active, or act as caretaker without being categorized as some variant of a stereotype. She cannot be Olivia Pope first—with all its intrinsic specificities and complications—and a black American second, with all the intrinsic specificities and complications of the role too” (Pixley 31).

However, there is a possibility to read Pope differently: she is very independent, goal-oriented, and powerful. In her relationship she is the one in charge—she influences the president’s decisions and she is always right; she decides to abort an unwanted pregnancy without consulting him; he needs her more than she needs him. I also agree with Warner that “black women are rarely allowed to be main characters in stories about choice, desire and fantasy” (17) in a way that Olivia Pope is. She also educates the president about racial and gender aspects of American politics: although tailored to the needs of mainstream audiences of network television, *Scandal* made numerous attempts to talk about contemporary socio-political issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement (“The Lawn Chair”) and #MeToo (“The List”) (Rosenberg). At the same time, she is passionate, both while at work and in love, and sometimes makes flawed decisions, for example when she tries to formalize her relationship with Fitz and become the First Lady. At the end though, she will always choose herself (her subjectivity, independence, and career) over others; she will be nobody’s mistress, nobody’s trophy; she always has the last word. Says Pope, “I don’t want normal and easy and simple. I want painful, difficult, devastating, life-changing, extraordinary love” (“Nobody Likes Babies”). I agree with Pixley that “Pope avoids primarily defining herself by physically embodied, racialized categories. Much like the whites and men on TV … her character is built on scripts of power, intelligence, leadership and the framework of her actions” (29).

Transgressing White Beauty Standards

Finally, I want to refer to the way Viola Davis contests some of the prevailing beauty standards on television (something that Kerry Washington in *Scandal* does not attempt to do). As Nicole Zhu underlines, “[i]n the process of determining one’s attractiveness against white and Western beauty standards, things like skin tone and hair become racialized and politicized to varying degrees. As a result, systems of discrimination in social, political, and economic contexts operate differently based on one’s appearance” (Zhu). The role of Annalise Keating is interesting in this context because she accommodates those dominant standards (picking outfits required of her profession, wearing high-heel shoes, make-up, and a wig with straight shiny hair, as well as lightening up her complexion, etc.), at the same time challenging them. In fact, Davis herself openly acknowledges the barriers she has encountered as a dark-skinned actress: “If your skin is lighter than [a paper bag], you’re all the good things: smarter, prettier, more successful. If you’re darker, you’re ugly” (Zhu). In other words, “color is the ultimate test of ‘American-ness,’ and black is the most un-American color of all” (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 90).

Davis challenges “preconceived notions of beauty, femininity, and sexuality typically associated with characters portrayed by dark-skinned actresses” (Zhu) in a powerful final scene of one of the episodes of Season 1 ("Let's Get To Scooping"). We can see her in the private space of her bedroom preparing for her daily bedtime ritual. The scene lasts for almost two minutes, accompanied by rhythmic music, and we observe Annalise in a series of close-ups removing her jewelry, slowly taking off her wig, showing her short, natural hair, removing eyelashes. We look at her looking at herself in the mirror while wiping off her make-up, eyeshadow and foundation that is much lighter than her real skin color.

Davis, who was behind the idea of including this scene in the narrative, "through this 'simple act,' reveals Annalise's own internalized views regarding performativity and beauty, and how these non-negotiable requirements operate in private and public. This broke a long-standing taboo for black women on television because black women on television without a weave, wig, or hair-perfection are a rarity" (Zhu). In this way Davis/Keating "demonstrates that despite prevailing notions of white desirability, natural hair isn't something to be ashamed of, covered, or hidden, but acknowledged and embraced as one's authentic self" (Zhu).

Undoubtedly, "dealing with prevailing standards of beauty—particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture—is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African-American women" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 89). Davis resists such white patterns of "attractiveness—and by extension, opportunity, privilege, and success…. Though her skin tone and hair has exemplified the discriminatory practices and attitudes within the film and television industry, she has also used her skin and hair to embody more realistic representations of black women and capture their depth and beauty" (Zhu). In this way she negotiates popular old clichés by offering a new understanding of black womanhood. As Everett rightly contends, "[t]he fact that Rhimes dares to construct dark-skinned black woman as romantically desirable, visually attractive and, yes, sexually desirable (beyond the stereotypical prostitute trope) is too much for some people to handle because it is so rare a sight on American mainstream television" (37). Thus, Davis offers a completely novel narrative, "in which her body is her own to embody or transcend, unfettered from the binaries of too black or not black enough (among many others) where she can be however she is—sexual not sexualized, desirous and desired—and free" (Cartier 153).

Conclusion

Summing up, I have chosen these themes and scenes from both shows to demonstrate that they introduce serious changes in contemporary network television and performative character of African-American women's depictions. *Scandal* succeeds more in promoting popfeminism and addresses both sexism and racism ever present within white American privileged political elites. The show does not try to suggest that the discrimination of African-Americans and women is gone; however, the narrative solutions offered to these problems are superficial—too easy, too fairly-tale-like, too unrealistic. *How To Get Away With Murder*, which I do not consider an assimilationist show, makes an effort to present race-related problems in a less simplified way. Racism (both individual and institutional) and racial tensions within American society are often at the center of the narrative in a variety of ways – for instance when Annalise represents, often disadvantaged and unprivileged, African Americans in court or when she emphasizes the challenges she has to struggle with being an African American woman in a predominantly white environment.

Apart from Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating, television (both network and cable) has recently given some space to other strong African-American female characters that transgress traditional expectations towards black women. It is worth having a critical look at such productions like *Suits*, with Gina Torres as Jessica Pearson (2011-2019)*; Person of Interest*, with Taraji P. Henson as Joss Carter (2011-16), *Empire*, with Taraji P. Henson as Cookie Lyon (2015-2020), or a much acclaimed show *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019) to examine in what ways they contest the dominant controlling images.

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Race, Violence, and the City: Chicago's Black Urbanity in Contemporary American Film and Literature

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Abstract: In this article we look at three recent films—*Native Son* (2019, dir. Rashid Johnson, based on Richard Wright's 1940 novel), *Widows* (2018, dir. Steve McQueen, based on a 1983 TV series), and *The Hate U Give* (2018, dir. George Tillman Jr., based on a book by Angie Thomas)—by Black directors that showcase the interactions between Blacks and whites in an American urban milieu. We argue that the setting of two of these films—*Native Son* and *Widows*—in Chicago, with *The Hate U Give* being set in a fictional urban setting bearing a strong resemblance to the Windy City, serves to articulate the continuing racial divisions of American cities in the twenty-first century. The three films show that the fossilization of the divide between Black and white districts inevitably leads to outbreaks of racial violence.

Keywords: Black urbanity, Chicago, *Native Son*, *The Hate U Give*, *Widows,* racial violence

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Introduction

The present paper discusses the articulation of the relationships between race, violence, and urbanity in new American films. The movies in question include *Native Son* (2019, dir. Rashid Johnson, based on Richard Wright's 1940 novel), *The Hate U Give* (2018, dir. George Tillman Jr., based on a book by Angie Thomas), and *Widows* (2018, dir. Steve McQueen, based on a 1983 TV series). The portrayals of Black[1] characters against the background of Chicago in two of these movies (*The Hate U Give* is set in a fictional urban milieu) speak to the whole tradition of Black urbanity, started by the Great Migration of Blacks from the plantations of the South to the metropolitan areas of the North in the first decades of the twentieth century. We argue that Chicago functions as a useful model for visual representations of American racial relations due to its history of racial segregation and the continuing validity of the metaphor of the racial line, whose cartographic predecessor dates back to the establishment of Chicago's Black Belt, a Black ghetto on the South Side, neatly separated from white parts of the city by Chicago's horizontal and vertical streets. The fact that all the three movies (and the literary predecessors of the two of them) have been authored by Black artists suggests that there is an ongoing struggle for representation of what it means to be Black in an urban milieu, a struggle in which African-American authors clearly wish their voices to be heard.

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[1] In this paper we follow the style adopted by several media organizations and capitalize Black when we refer to American people and communities of African origin. On the other hand, white is used in lowercase, because, unlike Black, it does not stand for a common culture and history. See Coleman, "Why We're Capitalizing Black".

What links all the three movies is the motif of violence as an apparently inevitable part of African-American urban experience and the fact that, as adaptations of two well-known literary texts and of a British TV show, they all attempt to reconstruct earlier interpretations of Black urbanity and offer their new visualizations through film. *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give* present their twenty-first-century cities as still divided into clearly demarcated Black and white zones, with racial tensions and prejudice resulting in outbursts of violence. In *Widows*, Steve McQueen uses the popular format of the heist movie and the plot of a TV series to offer an intelligent and moving portrayal of the space of the twenty-first-century Chicago and the current transformations of the city's race relations.

Native Son

The first case study that we focus on to discuss the construction of Black urbanity is the seminal novel by Richard Wright, *Native Son*, published in 1940, and its recent cinematographic revisioning in Rashid Johnson's 2019 film. To begin with the novel, Isabel Soto maintains that "space functions as a major structural and organizing principle, driving the novel at the levels of plot…, theme and rhetoric" (23). Our claim is that despite the passing of several decades between the publication of the novel and the release of the movie, during which significant events occurred that had a bearing on the political status and artistic productions of Blacks, the major one being the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s, Johnson's film offers hardly any reconceptualization of Black urbanity as construed by Wright. As controversial as this view on the fossilization of Chicago's Black urbanity may seem, it appears valid and convincing when interpreted with the use of Henry Lefebvre's theory of social production of space.

With the use of Henry Lefebvre's triad of spatial concepts, Chicago's Black space in Richard Wright's novel can be interpreted in terms of its representation of the social production of space. Lefebvre's triad consists of three elements: perceived space (spatial practice), conceived space (representation of space) and lived space (representational space). These are connections and relationships among the elements of the triad which show how people produce space and how socially produced space influences their lives (Lefebvre, esp. 1-61). The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, inhabits the territory which is in many ways the product of the abstract representation of space, based on the visions, principles, and beliefs of the people in power: city planners, policy makers, housing contractors, and estate owners. In part, these ideas produce the South Side as a racially segregated place, imposing the values of late capitalism and racial politics on urban space. The social space of the Black Belt is also constructed by spatial practice: actions, interactions, and daily routines, collective and individual, the visible and observable behavior of the people living in the district. Black inhabitants of the novel's Chicago co-create its space in the ways which reflect their needs, labor routines, and leisure practices. In addition, there is representational space, the unconscious space directly linked to the experience of such users of the space of Chicago as Bigger Thomas. Representational space is "directly lived through its associated images and symbols," "space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 39). It is Bigger's subjective "lived space" that stands in stark contrast to the conceived and perceived space of the Black Belt in particular and Chicago in general, resulting in the protagonist's marginalization, exclusion, sense of social injustice, and the belief in the inevitability of personal failure.

The familiar story of Bigger Thomas's inadvertent killing of a white affluent young woman in her family mansion and his subsequent attempts to escape the law evolve against the backdrop of the 1940s Chicago, a city neatly divided into two zones with clearly demarcated boundaries. The Black Belt, a Black neighborhood on the city's South Side, the only area where white real estate owners would rent apartments to Blacks, is presented in the novel as a space fraught with extreme poverty, dire living conditions, and a prevalent sense of gloom. The novel famously opens with an image of Bigger's family of four, living in one small rat-infested room in a dilapidating tenement house, owned—as it later transpires—by the father of the white girl who will be later killed by Bigger, Mr. Henry Dalton. "This prescribed corner of the city" (Wright 114), "this corner of the city tumbling down from rot" (174), "the marked-off ghettoes" (405) where Blacks are forced to live is a space that has a bearing on Black subjectivity and a sense of social determinism that Wright's naturalistic novel subscribes to, and is reflective as well of the dynamics of Black-white relations in the US of that period.

Just like the rat that he kills in the opening image of the novel, Bigger Thomas is himself driven by forces outside his control. His sense of being lost in the world is poignantly rendered in the following passage of the novel: "Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square: a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it, divide it, focus it" (Wright 240). Pointing to the spatial imagery of the cityscape—the square walls of the buildings and the straight city streets—the excerpt presents the cityscape the protagonist inhabits as a strange labyrinth that is virtually impossible to navigate and maneuver. What propels Bigger onwards throughout the labyrinth of both the city and his life is the fact of his Blackness vis-à-vis the whites he comes into contact with. Significantly, he does not seek contact with whites out of his own volition; he is first pressured to work for Mr. Dalton by his mother so that their food stamps are not revoked and then he is forced to associate with his employer's daughter and her boyfriend due to the naïve belief of the two in the equality of the races, a belief clearly spawned by their communist worldview.

The opening image of the novel—that of the rat being frantically chased throughout the room and then killed by Bigger with a skillet—bears a striking similarity to Bigger himself being chased by the Chicago police throughout the Black Belt in a later part of the narrative. Hiding in unoccupied apartments, Bigger keeps tabs on the policemen's whereabouts thanks to the maps of the search published in daily papers, their "[s]haded portion show[ing] area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer [and w]hite portion show[ing] area yet to be searched" (Wright 245). The map obviously changes as the search progresses; shortly before Bigger is finally caught, he examines the most recent map in the paper:

> This time the shaded area had deepened from both the north and the south, leaving a small square of white in the middle of the oblong Black Belt. He stood looking at that tiny square of white as though gazing down into the barrel

> of a gun. He was there on that map, in that white spot, standing in a room waiting for them to come. (256)

The maps published in the papers deploy the spatial metaphor of the color line: it is now not only the Black ghetto that is separated from the white part of the city with streets marking the boundaries of the Black Belt. Bigger visualizes himself on the map as occupying the ever shrinking white square, with the lines signaling the presence of white law enforcement closing in on him. The way in which Bigger is forced to proceed ever closer towards an imaginary center of the Black Belt appears to particularly bespeak his lack of agency in the context of the seminal theorization of city walkers offered by Michel de Certeau. As de Certeau argues, walking city streets is akin to the act of speaking, a process through which walkers create the city as a text (93, 97). The fact that Bigger has no control over the direction of his urban mobility suggests that his map of the city is not really created by him but by forces beyond his control (in this case, law enforcement). At the same time, however, as de Certeau further argues, walking is ultimately synonymous to placelessness:

> To walk is to lack a place. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. (103)

This lack of place, experienced according to de Certeau by any city-dweller and city-walker, is exacerbated in the case of Black denizens, like Bigger Thomas, by the fact of their powerlessness to even decide upon the directions and trajectories of their city perambulations.

Before 2019, Wright's *Naked Son* was adapted to the screen twice, in 1951 and in 1986. The 1951 black and white film, entitled *Sangre Negra*, with the controversial casting of Richard Wright himself as Bigger Thomas, was made in Argentina by French director Pierre Chenal. Its heavily censored version had only a limited distribution in the US. In the very prologue of this movie a sharp contrast is drawn between the modern, affluent white downtown of Chicago and the extremely poor Black South Side. The spatial division of the city is introduced by the off-screen narrator and the stock shots of Chicago are contrasted with the following images of primitive houses of a Black neighborhood, which were actually constructed on the film set in Buenos Aires. Although the issue of spatial segregation and its immediate relationship to racial politics is thus placed at the very center of the film's narrative, the 1951 adaptation does not further explore this question visually, as its diegetic space is mainly limited to interior locations. Apart from a few panoramic shots of downtown Chicago, the making of the film in the Windy City was impossible, both because of the anti-racist message of the script and the association of Wright with the American Communist Party. The racial mapping of the city could not be realistically shown on the screen. Instead, the camera focuses on the vivid pictures of crowded South Side slums, constructed on the set in Buenos Aires, where people are oppressed by their drab environment, living in poverty and squalor (Phu 54-55).

In 1986, Wright's novel was again adapted to the screen by Jerrold Freedman. The film was made as a historical drama, set in the 1940s, with the story largely following the plot of the book, though its original extreme naturalism was blunted by omission of several more controversial scenes and topics, such as the rape and murder of Bessie. In terms of its use of spatial categories to convey the sense of racial relations, rather than to refer to the geographical space of Chicago as a point of reference, the director and cinematographer Thomas Burstyn relied on lighting, framing, and juxtapositions of color and shapes (Laws). Bigger, just as in the novel, is often framed with "whites to either side," or against a white background. The black-and-white newspaper maps from the novel are replaced in the movie by a medley of voices, accusing and denigrating Bigger as the police follow him on a snow-covered roof. The scene of Bigger's capture follows the passage from the book (and, incidentally, the 1951 film), showing how white water from fire hoses knocks him down from a black tower (Laws).

Neither the 1951 film nor the 1986 adaptation was a financial or artistic success. One critic called them "fascinating failures" (Laws 33), while several reviewers argued that the novel was "unadaptable." Despite that, the third adaptation was produced by HBO in 2019, with Rashid Johnson, so far known for his conceptual post-black art, debuting as director. While preserving the central message of the novel about Black identity and fate being inescapably structured and determined by forces beyond individual control, the film transfers the story of the novel to Chicago in the 2010s. Thus, the adaptation of the original text is of twofold nature: the literary text is made into a cinematic one, and the story is retold from the point of view of a contemporary Black youth. The plot has been subject to considerable transformation: for example, the whole Part 3 of the novel is omitted and Bigger meets his fate when he is killed by white police officers attempting to arrest him.

This way of paying homage to Wright's novel was only partially successful. Most reviews stress that the film's Bigger (more often called just Big, played by Ashton Sanders) is a character whose motivations are much more difficult to accept than was the case with the protagonist of the novel. An outsider in the visual terms, with his hair dyed green, sporting a leather jacket and steel jewelry, he stands out as much from white people as from his Black environment. In a sequence reminiscent of Rashid Johnson's artistic projects, Big is standing motionless in front of Chicago's famous landmark, Cloud Gate, among frantically moving people. The sculpture's rounded surface reflects and distorts both the city's skyline and the human figures. Big says in the voiceover: "Hurrying around like a bunch of rats. And they are blind… taking everything in a groove, but living in a rut." The scene suggests the city has a powerful effect on its inhabitants, determining their behavior, and possibly perverting their morality.

Bigger's appearance may actually suggest that he is strong enough to withstand the pressure of all forces around him and retain his individuality anywhere he finds himself: in the bleak environment of the South Side, the majestic Chicago's downtown, and in the rich white suburbia. Big's erroneous belief in his power to have control over his life is signaled in the very first scene of the film, when the camera shows a panoramic picture of downtown Chicago and Big appears in a window of a brick apartment block, smoking pot and saying in a voiceover: “Early morning. I’ve got the whole world to myself. I don’t need anyone to wake me up.” At the beginning of the film, Big works as a bicycle courier; he easily moves around different districts of the city and shows no sense of being restricted by the urban space around him. To the contrary, he appears to be completely at ease navigating the city. If the city is a labyrinth, Big believes he is able to easily find his way out and claim the city as his own place. To relate again to de Certeau and Lefebvre, Big is wrong in assuming he can control the territory of the city at his will: it has already been produced as “conceived space” and his movements, limited by the physical mapping of the city, will not create an original sense of space.

Chicago is shown here as a city still demarcated by invisible boundaries, separating the all-Black South Side from the affluent white districts of the city. Within the film’s visual and narrative representation of Chicago, Bigger seems one of the few Blacks able to cross such boundaries, even if only to serve whites in very low social roles. There are no liminal areas, no places where the two races can interact and share social space. The visit of the white protagonists, Mary and Jan, to a soul food restaurant in the South Side leads to an awkward and disconcerting situation, provoking stares and angry comments from the Black patrons and making Big uncomfortable. It is only outside the city that the racial divisions can be crossed. The scene set on a beach of what seems to be Lake Michigan is when Big and Bessie most freely interact with Mary and Jan, playing together and talking honestly about their lives. The space of the city, with its clearly demarcated boundary lines, and their social designations, puts both whites and Blacks within the exacting template of race relations.

The white suburban district where the Daltons live is still, as it was in the book and in the earlier films, a long train ride away from the South Side. The huge mansions of the white upper class, comfortably situated outside the city, have enormous spaces under their roofs and ample land outside. In contrast, the shabby and dirty South Side tenement houses speak of years of neglect and lack of investment. However, the interior of the Thomases’ apartment is no longer a shockingly squalid, filthy location. It is a simple, but well-furnished family space with a large and nicely decorated living room, where the appearance of the rat seems to be a fairly surprising event. The apartment of Big’s family cannot measure up to the Daltons’ residence, but does not seem to be much limiting the social aspirations or life chances of its inhabitants. Bigger has such high aspirations, even if he is unable to express what exactly they are. With his punk appearance, dislike of rap and black sports, his literary interests and passion for Beethoven, he, improbably, shares the intellectual and aesthetic space with upper class whites, such as Mr. Dalton. In many ways, Big’s sense of alienation—both from whites and from Blacks—is thus presented not so much in terms of physical but abstract, cultural space (Lefebvre 49-53).

Contrary to the original novel, the use of spatial categories in Johnson’s *Native Son* does not help the viewer to understand the motivations of Big’s actions, which is an obvious weakness of the movie. The question of the adequacy of film’s representation of Black space of Chicago seems to be more complicated. It is true that *Native Son* 2019 fails to give account of the effects of such demographic and social processes which have affected American cities, including Chicago, since the 1940s, as, for example, increased social mobility, gentrification of city centers, the flight of Black middle class away from the ghettos, and urban migrations of new ethnic groups. The film's narrative and visual representation of Chicago insists on the fossilization of racial mapping of Black urbanity in twenty-first-century America. According to the logic of Big's story, it is as much today as it was in the 1940s that social forces predetermine the fate of urban Blacks. Going back to Lefebvre's concept of social production of space, Johnson's adaptation of the novel shows the space of twenty-first-century Chicago to be a result of the confluence of a new "conceived space" (the effect of new city planning and housing development), the new forms of "spatial practice" of the novel's protagonists transferred now into the contemporary urban environment, and the "lived space" of Big, reproduced from the narrative of the novel in a largely faithful fashion. Strikingly, but not surprisingly, the film's social space of Black Chicago, resulting of the connections and relationships within the new spatial triad, remains very similar to the one which Richard Wright outlined in his original narrative. When the movie premiered in 2019, its somewhat incredible narrative and the bleak, selective representation of Black urbanity might have been one of the reasons for the film's lack of box office and critical success. However, it seems that today, after the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement, Rashid Johnson's re-invention of Wright's critical vision of Black urbanity has been significantly validated.

Widows

Widows is the first venture of artiste British director Steve McQueen, famous for *Hunger*, *Shame*, and *12 Years a Slave*, into the mainstream cinema. The film, an adaptation of Lynda La Plante's 1983 ITV miniseries of the same name, combines action and melodrama. The movie is set in Chicago in the middle of the 2008 recession and offers the picture of a city demarcated by racial divides and plagued by corruption and class disparities. McQueen and his script writer, Gillian Flynn, reveal that they transferred the original plot from London to Chicago, the setting which worked better for a heist movie, and which made it possible to address a plethora of interconnected issues, such as patriarchy and sexism, class conflict, and racial inequality (Kilkenny, Di Rosso).

The eponymous widows are three Chicago women who plan a robbery when a crime boss Jamal Manning (Brian Tyree Henry) demands that they pay back the money stolen by their dead husbands. Veronica (Viola Davis), grief-stricken after the death of her expert thief husband Harry Rawlings (Liam Neeson), joins forces with Linda (Michelle Rodriguez) and Alice (Elizabeth Debicki), whose husbands were also killed during the last heist of Harry's gang. In the parallel plot, Jamal competes in a local alderman election against Jack Mulligan (Colin Farrell), a candidate running for the office vacated by his father in Southwest Side's Ward 18th.

Within its entertaining, sensational plot, *Widows* offers a grim picture of Chicago's racial divide and wealth inequality. With a rapid change of locations, the camera explores the city, from the South Side to the Gold Coast. Extremes of poverty and wealth exist in near proximity, as shown in a spectacular single take in which we see Jack go from a campaign event organized for Black constituents to his opulent—and fortified—mansion, still within the district's boundaries. The camera is fixed to the car's bonnet and captures the changing landscape, from desolate slums and empty storefronts to magnificent mansions, just a few blocks away from each other.[2]

The movie makes references to demographic and economic processes which are transforming Chicago's physical and social space, but is dramatically pessimistic about their outcome. The ward's demographics has changed, but Jack Mulligan still believes this is his territory, even though, as Manning tells him, he owns a house in the district, but does not really live there. Mulligan considers himself a politician of a new generation, open to ethnic and racial diversity, adapting his public image to receive endorsements from the Black community. But he is not much different from his racist father Tom (Robert Duvall). Cynical and corrupt, he uses the district's development projects for his own benefit. Jack initiates an employment program for Black women only to take a cut from each business they open. It is suggested he has taken bribes to advance an expansion of the Chicago Green Line, the project which he presents as a way of opening up his district to more business and employment opportunities. In a symbolic scene, Veronica discovers that the door to the safe room where the Mulligans keep their illegal money is hidden behind a huge 1927 ward map of Chicago, the city which Tom believes they "have made."

And if one remembers that Jack's opponent in the alderman race is unscrupulous boss of a black criminal gang, Manning, the movie tells the story of Chicago's ongoing disintegration, both in spatial and racial terms. The motifs of racial separation and incompatibility of the white and Black worlds appear on several levels of the narrative. The marriage of Harry and Veronica breaks down after their son Marcus is murdered by the police during a traffic stop, when he is shot reaching for something in his car. Harry reinvents his life with a white partner and a baby son. The widows, strikingly different in their ethnicity and class (Veronica, a middle-class African American; Alice, with a working class Polish background; and Linda, self-employed and of Latinx origin), are brought together by the imaginary narrative of the heist, but after the robbery their common story ends, as there are no other forces binding them together in the "real world," as shown in the film's final scene (Simmons).

Steve McQueen frequently uses the visual language to emphasize the sense of racial and class disparities and the distance among characters. One of the techniques is to show reflections of faces in mirrors and images filmed through glass. Veronica lives in an apartment in the Gold Coast, with splendid views of Lake Michigan. The camera emphasizes the absence of her husband by framing her with negative space, using black/white contrast and putting her in a sterile, cold environment (Kermode). Through rapid cuts, Veronica's apartment is contrasted with the places where the other widows live: Alice's impersonal, empty apartment and the cluttered house where, although surrounded by her children and relatives, Linda remains lonely and desperate.

Widows, despite its seemingly sensational and formulaic plot, explores Chicago race relations and class inequalities at great length. The movie's discourse on race bears distinct similarities to that of Rashid Johnson's contemporaneous adaptation of *Native Son* (and Wright's novel itself). However, in contrast to Johnson, McQueen gives account of new processes such as Black social mobility and gentrification of Black districts, and offers a more complex picture of Chicago's ethnic diversity. In *Widows*, the space of the Windy City is subject to slow, gradual change, but this physical transformation does not affect the social space—and fate—of the majority of urban Blacks, which seems to be still shaped by larger social and political forces.

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[2] The scene actually shows an eight-block drive from 47th Street to a Hyde Park mansion (Kilkenny).

The Hate U Give

The Hate U Give, a 2018 film directed by George Tillman Jr., based on the young adult novel of the same title written in 2017 by Angie Thomas, similarly to *Native Son*—novel and film—manifests the existence of clearly demarcated and hardly crossable lines separating Black and white populations of American cities. Even though Thomas's novel is set in a fictional urban milieu, its depiction of Garden Heights—a black ghetto where the teenage protagonist lives with her family—and of Williamson—an upper-middle-class area where she goes to an almost exclusively white school—corresponds to the divisions of Chicago into Black and white zones that we have already pointed out in *Native Son*.

Written with young adult readers in mind, the novel employs relatively simple and informal diction to present the story of its first-person narrator/protagonist Starr, who in the wake of a white police officer shooting of her unarmed Black friend begins to ponder her identity as a Black American and starts to develop a certain political consciousness.[3] Both in the novel and in the film, Starr is portrayed as having a sort of compartmentalized identity, corresponding to the two worlds—or spatial zones—that she simultaneously inhabits: that of the Black ghetto, presented as a dangerous space, fraught with gang violence and drug abuse, and that of a white school, where she and her brother are practically the only Black students. As Starr puts it in Thomas's narrative, "Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another, and I have to keep them separate" (Thomas 35). Lee M. Pierce reads Starr's code-switching as "an instantiation of the double consciousness concept-metaphor" developed by W. E. B. Du Bois (416). She goes on to argue that "[t]o come of age, Starr must shift from a DuBoisian double consciousness to a Fanonian one; instead of two identities in perpetual tension, Starr must shed the White false consciousness layered over the real of Black identity" (416). What Pierce finds problematic about the narrative—both in its literary and cinematic versions—is the fact that ultimately "Starr is made White—not in the demographic sense, but in the sense of having the illusion of Whiteness afforded by her capacity for political speech" (417). In other words, she becomes "white" by virtue of being able to perform the political ritual of speaking out, a capacity that very few Blacks enjoy.

It is interesting that Blackness is articulated in both the novel and its film adaptation in terms of certain easily recognizable tokens such as hip-hop music, basketball playing, wearing Air Jordan sneakers, and the like. These tokens of Blackness are perfectly acceptable to whites, especially when they are "performed" within a white space and preferably by whites themselves. This way Blackness is disciplined/domesticated and deprived of its unruly, uncontainable potential. White students at Starr's school listen and dance to hip-hop, and play basketball, thus performing this aestheticized version of Blackness. However, when they are exposed to the genuine conditions of life in a Black ghetto, for example when Starr's schoolfriends visit her at home and hear gun shots—a scene narrated in the book, though not in the movie—or when Starr's childhood friend Khalil is murdered and the whole district explodes into a wave of violent protests and demonstrations, white "fans" of Blackness by and large exhibit their displeasure and try to distance themselves from matters Black by withdrawing into their safe white suburban worlds.

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[3] Bernard Beck cites the film adaptation of Thomas's book as an example of "a recent outpouring of movies of protest by African American moviemakers" (202) addressing police brutality against Black youth.

The white consumption of Blackness is presented in Thomas's novel and Tillman Jr.'s film in contrast to a more authentic Blackness of Starr's father, Big Mav, who is deeply concerned about the fate of both his family and his community and manifests a decidedly political stance, shown for example in his unwavering support for the ideology of the Black Panthers or his prayers to Black Jesus. The father tries to protect his family by inculcating in his children the proper ways of behaving when stopped by a cop. He, however, refuses to leave the area despite the pleadings of his wife—who demanded that the children be placed in a school far away from their district—and her brother, who is a police officer himself. In this respect, the film adaptation fails to give justice to the complexity of characterization that Thomas attains in her narrative. Unlike in the film, the book's Big Mav and his brother-in-law manage to forge a connection based on their Black masculinity, whereas the film portrays Uncle Carlos almost as an Oreo, with white values and viewpoint internalized to a large degree. Further, in the novel the family ultimately decide to relocate to a safer neighborhood, without, however, severing their ties with Garden Heights. One can venture a statement that the cinematic narrative offers a somewhat watered-down version of the story, perhaps more amenable to the viewing public. Still, in both the novel and the movie, the white and Black worlds are presented as essentially irreconcilable.

Conclusion

Although *Native Son, Widows*, and *The Hate U Give* belong to very different cinematic genres, the three films offer complex articulations of the relationships between race, violence, and urbanity in twenty-first-century America. The three movies present the American city, Chicago being a representative example, as still divided into racial zones, with clear demarcation lines. Despite the transformations of physical urban space, the on-going processes of social production of space result in systemic marginalization and exclusion of African-Americans. The motif which links the three movies discussed here is that of violence: the institutional violence against Blacks and the retributive violence committed by African-Americans. This cycle of violence may again be interpreted as a series of attempts to control or defend one's territory, a peculiar form of social practice related to space. Thus, it is interesting to respond to these movies in the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests that were rampant in American cities in the wake of George Floyd's death. The media coverage showed the participants protesting against the systemic racism inherent in the US public life, against police brutality, and against unequal access to medical care, felt deeply acutely during the Covid-19 pandemic. American cities got ravaged during the protests, as if their Black participants refused to be contained within their prescribed ghettos. A reflection that comes to mind as regards the outcome of the protests, however, can be articulated in terms of Starr's statement in Thomas's novel: "People like us in situations like this become hashtags, but they rarely get justice" (59).

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Jovana Vujanov

The Emptiness of Hardcore: Consuming Violence in *Hotline: Miami*

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Abstract: The article explores the challenges to (media) consumerism posed in the indie action game *Hotline: Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012). *Hotline* deconstructs not only indulgence associated with violent gaming but also its main nostalgic interest—the cultural era of the 1980s—through a ludification of excess. I will aim to demonstrate this through an analysis of the game's "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost) and narrative structure. Overwhelming the player's senses with intense audio-visuals, and explicitly confronting her motivations for participating in extreme violence, the game balances the game experience between a trance-like state of indulgent overexposure and metaleptic commentary. The sensory overload is also sharply contrasted with the level of precision necessary to complete the levels, bending the adrenaline-pumping core of the gameplay towards mechanics more common in stealth-based games. The system of in-game rewards and the overall narrative structure further complicate the purposefulness of player acts, questioning the teleology of gore in gaming and subverting the conventional notion of video game violence as entertainment. As I will argue, the metaludic commentary destabilizes the game through irony, relativizing the player's commitment to it. In so doing, it makes *Hotline: Miami* a prime example of "dissonant development" (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter), a game that manages to both sweep the market and challenge its basic premises as an entertainment medium.

Keywords: *Hotline: Miami*, violence, consumption, procedural rhetoric, game narration

Introduction

Ever since the first *Doom* (1993), the discussion of gaming ethics has mostly focused on the sanitization of violence that certain genres utilize in their depictions of war and combat. As the medium of video games has expanded in scope and approaches, the critique has come to manifest mostly in metaludic works, with "serious games" in the vanguard (Flanagan; Bogost), and later on even in commercial first-person shooters such as *Spec-Ops: The Line* (2012), *Bioshock* (2007), or the infamous *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (1997-). The latter three are mentioned as exemplary in Marcus Maloney's article "Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design" (2019), in which he examines the (re)contextualization of player aggression through narrative. While the games differ to an extent, they all rely on showing the questionable nature of the player character's actions and the consequences these actions' questionability has for the gameworld. The acts of violence are therefore framed as wrong from a moral perspective, which remains confined to the fictional realm; the challenge these games pose to the usual representation of violence in gaming concerns its unrealistic and sanitized representations of aggression. While such depictions certainly represent a valid point about the medium and its numerous dubious exploitations of combat, other, more holistic statements about consuming gaming violence are possible as well. And this, I would argue, is the case with *Hotline: Miami*.

The 2012 game by "Dennaton Games" is a top-down shooter set in a fictionalized, nostalgically stylized version of the 1989 Miami in which the player assumes the role of an unnamed employee of the titular hotline. The player character (PC)[1] receives mysterious tips on his answering machine which serve as the primary narrative framing of the exceptionally bloody and graphic sprees delivered in a retro-neon aesthetic and accompanied by a beat-heavy synthwave soundtrack. Murder gigs are the main process described by the game's procedural rhetoric (Bogost 9). They are accompanied by the semi-interactive scenes of consumption and prominent paratext in the form of the scoring system. These elements are positioned through a linear but fractured storyline, full of omissions and metaleptic intrusions, and together they form a self-consciously convoluted statement on the emptiness of hardcore gaming violence. *Hotline: Miami* masterfully employs concepts of cultural consumption of the 1980s, as well as a tongue-in-cheek approach to the constructed nature of games and addictive high-skill gameplay, to raise awareness about the very act of media consumption. The game is an outstanding example of "dissonant development" (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 194), which takes gaming and consumerism as its primary targets[2] of dissent. As a post-millennial perspective on the desanitization of violence, *Hotline* adds new layers to exposure—a method of holding viewers accountable, pioneered by film authors such as Sam Peckinpah (Prince)—right to the point where it directly confronts the player about her motivation for participating. *Hotline* strips its action of any in-game sense, to the extent where it becomes clear that player enjoyment is the only element which survives the game's self-subversions. Ironic destabilizations lay bare the act of consuming the game, and expose the hardcore gaming experience as an empty sign, a form of easy fun which parades its own lack of meaning. However, as I will aim to show in my analysis, such nihilism still remains confrontational, turning *Hotline: Miami* into a poignant critique of the spectacle-oriented media consumption of violence. In order to demonstrate this, I will first analyze the gameplay loop and its rhetoric of gory spectacle. While the action sequences are definitely the game's centerpiece, destabilizing irony is present already on the level of play, sensitizing the player to self-aware consumption. Secondly, I will examine the game's elliptic narrative which intentionally fails to meaningfully contextualize player action, further voiding the game of any teleology. Both the representation of action and the story of *Hotline: Miami* subvert themselves to the point of vanishing and confront the player with the violence she commits without any sanitizing filters of purpose.

Interrupting the Trance—Framing the Gameplay Loop

Hotline: Miami introduces itself as a malignant fever dream. Striking neon visuals, rough-edged pixel art, enemies which all but explode in blood—in spite of its captivating sensorial intensity, the game is not very welcoming, which is only heightened by the angry, somewhat shabby tutorial instructor. In the best manner of a drill sergeant, the instructor delivers the basic controls and mechanisms very rapidly, for he is here to tell the player "how to kill people" (Tutorial). The game introduces its main activity without pomp: the player is here to kill, and to do it as efficiently as possible. The instructor is here to deliver the hows—completely ignoring the whys—while he scolds the player in advance, nagging about how whatever he says, she will just "get … [herself] killed anyway" (ibid). His aggressiveness is increased by the invasive use of metalepsis—such as mentioning the controls the player needs to press outside of the fictional world—which also introduces the all-encompassing feature of *Hotline*'s narrative: its tendency to constantly break the fourth wall and, in the process, question the player's motivation through direct address. This pairing of theme and device also extends into the first cut-scene which immediately follows the tutorial, and while further discussion on the topic will follow, for now it is important to note that metalepsis is also present in the game's ludic prologue, which integrates narrative destabilization into the very fabric of the game's fast-paced action.

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[1] While the name "Jacket" has become consensus in the fandom, the protagonist of *Hotline: Miami* is never named in-game, and since my interpretation relies on the self-exposed artificiality of the game, I prefer to use the more technical phrasing.

[2] At one point in the game, the developer stand-ins even comment on the amount of money they are making ("Resolution").

The game-proper begins with the "Phonecalls" (sic) chapter, in which the player character finds himself in his apartment, with new messages on his answering machine. The messages contain cryptic instructions concerning the delivery of cookies. The instructions point the player to a package in front of the apartment which upon examination turns out to contain ominous wording about his "target" ("The Metro"), along with an open threat that the protagonist is being watched. The rapid, brutal action in the subsequent level relies on this narrative context of imposed criminal labor, with the centerpiece notion that the PC is being forced into it, which is only confirmed at the level's end, when the PC falls to the ground vomiting. This seems like the culmination of the nausea induced by the game's audio-visual presentation, an actual materialization of its blend of splatter-focused animation, contrast-based palette and beat-heavy synthwave soundtrack. However, the tendency of *Hotline*'s audio-visual style to overwhelm is strongly counterpointed by its gameplay, which requires planning and an enviable degree of awareness and reflex. The player must stay alert throughout this lucid dream and act with caution, since any wrong move can start a chain reaction of mishap in levels which combine stealth mechanics with unforgiving and quick action. The bird's eye perspective and the necessity to rely on melee combat in order not to attract too much attention force the player into careful preparation, while simultaneously demanding swift and flawless execution, enforced further by the high score mechanic. The game unlocks new weapons and abilities through the scoring system, which tallies not only standard feats such as combos, kills, or time, but also less common categories such as "boldness," "exposure," or even "mercy kills." Another interesting feature is the play style descriptor, which employs qualifications ranging from "coward" to "sadist," including the rather derogatory category of "generic." The ludic paratext seemingly endorses violent spectacle. Still, it also exposes the player's activity in a somewhat confrontational manner, which becomes clearer when other framing devices are taken into account.

The game obviously has a lot to say about the way it wants to be played; but what reasons does it give the player to do so? The game's procedural representation is based on the gamification of criminal labor which emphasizes the visceral dimension of murder, and frames it as pure gaming fun. While this remains true for *Hotline*'s ludic core, based on mesmerizing audio-visuals and immersive combat,[3] framing devices, such as the small consumer epilogues, subvert the trance induced by the game's displays of violence. The PC seems to be forced into his peculiar employment, and in the short segments that succeed each level he wreaks havoc on the fictional world only to get free pizza, drinks, or rental VHS tapes. The only reward here is the consumption of trash. While this is telling on its own, it becomes even more intriguing when the game is compared to other cultural products concerned with the 1980s consumerism, most notably Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). Most "Blank Generation" authors have busied themselves with problematic consumption, but Ellis's novel is a particularly useful example, since it pairs a high-ranking corporate executive with "confused consumerism" that translates the whole world, and especially women, into commodities (Annesley 16). As has been noted by Annalee Newitz, the serial killer as type is usually depicted through images of unrestrained consumption (31). However, in *American Psycho* this form of violent excess is openly paired with media proliferation that serves as its stimulant (Annesley 22; Young 29). The novel's protagonist, Patrick Bateman, lives a life of luxury which slips into a boredom-induced killing spree. His alienation serves as a poignant critique of the new types of overstimulating media practices that emerged in the 1980s, namely of marketing and aggressive branding. However, the perspective provided by *Hotline: Miami* is placed much lower down the economic and business ladder, showing a world where fast food replaces fine dining, and a service worker deeply confused about her task. While Ellis's Bateman excels at investment banking, which enables him to expand his consumption almost infinitely, the player character is stuck in a position similar to the one Richard Sennett encountered in a bakery, while doing research on the effect flexible employment has on personhood, with the workers' overall impression being reduced to "I'm not really a baker" (Sennet 70). The protagonist is also "not really" a serial killer. Nor is he a proper mobster hitman. This, in turn, makes him way less glamourous, but also marks his consumption as either counterproductive, as in the vomiting sequence at the end of the first level, or empty, as in the endings of individual levels. It does not matter much if it is chips, pizza, or a piece of media like the movie rental[4]: the PC is never shown enjoying these low-end products and does not appear to benefit from them in any way. If novels like *American Psycho* are obsessed with brands and treat them as signs which blur the boundary between a person and an object, these consumerist markers of value are nowhere to be seen in *Hotline*. Consumerism does not lead to larger-than-life hybris, at least not on this plane. Such bleak procedural depiction of the work-consumption loop remains important for the game's depiction of emptiness. In this fictional gameworld, there are no grandiose, erotically imbued serial killers wearing Jean Paul Gaultier, just confused hamburger-munching service personnel throwing up in a shady alleyway.

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[3] Immersive in terms of the gameplay flow. The over-stylized nature of *Hotline* is as far from realism as an action game can afford to be.

[4] Or a woman, for that matter. After the PC saves a female character from one of his sites of operation, the game implies that their relationship develops. We see her getting more comfortable in his flat, eventually even sleeping in the same bed as the protagonist. Still, the female character is quickly and inconsequentially killed off, which reveals her to be as disposable as any of the other pseudo-consumables. While it is implied that the PC's final encounter with the Russian mobster is motivated by the female character's murder, the fact is never explicitly stated, and is even further complicated by the possible "it was all a dream" interpretation provided by the pre-hospital storyline. As can be seen from this brief example, *Hotline* is a text that intentionally leaves a lot of room for guesswork and "deep lore," and does not let any line of inquiry flop.

Aside from pointing to the possible social commentary embedded in the game, the voidness of fictionalized work represented in *Hotline* also hints at another good being consumed through the performance of this conspicuous hitman labor: the game itself. The in-game avatar does not seem to be enjoying himself. Yet, with her high scores and new weapon unlocks, the player might, and this manifests on the microlevel of individual episodes through the contrast drawn between the gameplay loop and its gameworld framing.

"You Will Never See the Whole Picture"—Resolution and Acknowledgment

The story of *Hotline: Miami* is told mostly through monologues uttered in the playable environment. The choice of the device is itself very telling, since it additionally shrinks the player's agency in terms of narrative, replacing the more common in-game dialogue, featured in story-driven games, with a sensation that the character is being talked or, more often, yelled at. *Hotline* also distances itself from commonplace video game narration on the level of composition: while easily digestible, the narration is episodic in structure, filled with fragments, red herrings, questions raised and forgotten, as well as all kinds of vague narration, including two conflicting storylines. The first thread follows the PC and his increasingly gruesome tasks for the hotline service, including a murder of a biker character who might be a fellow employee, an escape from a hospital, and a showdown with a vaguely Russian mobster. This arc's cut-up composition also contains dream-like sequences featuring three masked figures who deliver meta-commentary, as well as a wandering shopkeeper, who vaguely alludes to the events in the gameworld connected to the PC's murder sprees. The second storyline features the aforementioned biker character as the playable character, and in this sequence of events it is the PC who gets murdered. The other key difference between these two arcs is the new protagonist's active and aggressive attitude towards his employment. He seeks to get to the bottom of the phone calls and can succeed in doing so if the player has been arduously collecting letters scattered over the previous levels. The letters form a password that enables the biker to enter an underground bunker, where it is revealed that a couple of janitors the player has been encountering throughout the game are actually in charge of a secret "patriotic" organization that aims to discredit the "Russo-American coalition" ("Resolution").

Before concentrating on the contents of this narrative hodgepodge, it is worth pointing out how this convoluted structure relates to the action movie of the 1980s, *Hotline*'s central nostalgic locus. As Harvey Greenberg observes, the "McMovie" of the 1980s had a distinctive combination of narrative elements: loose plot ends, forgotten subplots, inconsistencies, and bare characters paired with iconic gadgets, which were in turn stylistically paired with fast paced, quick edits, and loud music (183-210). These tropes and devices are evident throughout the game, equally spread across its ludic, textual and audio-visual layers. However, just as is the case with blank fiction, there are key differences between *Hotline: Miami* and the 1980s action cinema it seems inspired by. Firstly, the game misses one of the key components of movies made in the wake of the Reaganite first strike ideology and Cold War polarization: the protagonist's mission for the common good, an unquestionably patriotic utilization of desanitized violence (Greenberg 97). On the contrary, the game is poignantly playful with its teleology, as can be seen not only on the example of its ambivalence towards the PC's criminal activities, but also in more direct ways throughout its narrative.

If the scoring system hints at how the game wants to bring (critical) attention to its ludic component, this tendency is only cemented in the story sequences with three masked figures in a lobby-like room. The figures are introduced into the narrative as soon as the tutorial ends, and their attitude towards the player is immediately confrontational. It seems that the PC has forgotten who he is or does not want to disclose it, which of the two is hard to tell, since he remains silent. The three figures have distinctive attitudes and colors associated with them: the horse mask is light blue and almost friendly, the rooster is yellow and inquisitive, while the owl character is outright aggressive and bright red. In the first encounter, they are all interested in whether the protagonist remembers them, which is equivalent to the structural role of the cutscene as an introductory clip that should set up the story. Aside from this being a somewhat subtle metalepsis which continues the destabilization that has already begun in the tutorial, the conversation also features important remarks made by the horse-masked character:

> "Do you really want me to reveal who you are?
> Knowing oneself means acknowledging one's actions.
> As of lately you've done some terrible things." (Part I—Phonecalls)

The metaludic implications are only expanded in the next encounter, this time through a series of questions asked by the rooster-mask:

> "Do you like hurting other people?
> Who are [sic] leaving messages on your answering machine?
> Where are you right now?
> Why are we having this conversation?" (Part II—Questions)

While it can be argued that the protagonist is deeply involved in these questions and is experiencing not just some form of memory loss but also a general sense of confusion with reference to his actions, from the recipient's standpoint these utterings have a clear intention of breaking the fourth wall. The player is being guided again and again to dissect her play, especially the gore and havoc she wrecks on the fictional world. Does she enjoy it? Does she want to acknowledge her actions? In this aspect, *Hotline*'s metaludism is similar to the direct critiques of player compliancy found in *Bioshock* or even in *Spec-Ops: The Line* (Maloney). Still, the game not only questions its procedural rhetoric but also confronts the player with its narrative, urging her to ask the standard questions associated with the very basics of storytelling: "who," "where," and even "why."

As already noted in a profound analysis by Chris Franklin (2012), *Hotline* is peculiarly reluctant to give any answers to these questions. The game effectively sidelines narrative concerns for more than a half of its duration, namely when the player controls the "Jacket" character. Questions are set aside only to be suddenly brought back to the forefront through the biker, who is violently insistent on getting answers. At the end of his bloody breadcrumb trail lies a secret underground facility run by two janitors whom a careful player recognizes from the brief encounters on the sidelines of the previous levels. The final dialogues come in two versions and offer radically different answers to the big question of what has happened. The first conversation advances the game's focus on metaludic statements by marking the janitors as a tongue-in-cheek self-insertion by the developers. The line between the fictional characters and their creators blurs, as the janitors explain their motivation for founding the organization and therefore initiating the plot as "We were bored—that's why" ("Resolution")[5]. In this ending, the story *still* does not matter, as much as it did not matter in the fun, captivating combat sequences which intentionally avoided the story of the first PC, offering only mystifying clues and nods to its existence. The second, "completionist" ending is unlocked only if the player has collected letters hidden throughout the game, and its big revelation is that the janitors are what Franklin terms "stereotypical video game bad guys who want to take over the world." Their appearance is aimed as a parody of the 1980s conspiratorial tendency in media—the janitors run an underground organization named "50 Blessings," which, as they explain, is "a foundation for patriots" whose goal is to topple the "Russo-American coalition" ("Resolution"). The latter is a supposed political treaty which is never explained in any more detail, but is framed by the janitors as anti-American, in the very few words they use to refer to it. The game leaves this vague entity unaddressed, as it also does with numerous instances of narrative incoherence and outright plot holes.[6] For instance, both of the playable characters join the organization at some point, but they obviously do not have any recollection of it. What is more, the characters' patriotic effort involves fighting the Russian mafia, whose alleged anti-American influence is never explained. While I agree with Franklin that the game is subverting expectations and outright making fun of players who anticipated narrative fulfillment, it is also worth noting how the nostalgic lens hollows the "conspiracy interpretation of problems" associated with the 1980s media and especially with the renewed Cold War anxieties which the first strike ideology produced, regardless of "whether these clandestine threats involved terrorism, serial murder, or hate crimes" (Jenkins 152). The final encounter with the janitors dismisses such thinking as nonsense and paranoia, a form of obsessive behavior equivalent to tedious pixel-hunting for clues, only to get a half-baked, unsatisfying, and completely empty resolution. As the player is warned in the final dialogue the first PC has with the rooster-masked character:

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[5] Similarly, they also hint at the game's indie production, saying "We're independent, we did it all ourselves" ("Resolution").

[6] While some of these questions are answered in the sequel, they will be disregarded as not directly relevant to the subject matter of the article. There is a curious tendency in some indie games with sequels to over-explain their plots and simultaneously introduce features like level editors, which, in my view, sacrifice the artistic integrity of the original in favor of further ludification and easier consumption. One of the obvious examples is *The Binding of Isaac* by Edmund McMillan, whose initial obscurantism and overall nihilism are neutralized in expansions to the point of explicitly giving the player base the possibility to introduce new elements into Isaac's imaginary world through modding. *Hotline* does not go to these lengths, but the heaps of plot thrown at the player in *Hotline: Miami 2* illustrate a similar tendency.

> "What you do from here on won't serve any purpose.
> You will never see the whole picture…
> And it's all your fault" (Part IV—Connections)

Conclusion

Hotline Miami offers no clear narrative resolution that could gratify its violence. The murders are emptied of any purpose and exist only to be acknowledged for their own gruesomeness. The actions the player has taken are at best empty gestures, at worst an enjoyment procured from executing the fictional Miamians—"They were all scum anyway, weren't they?," as one of the janitors puts it ("Resolution"). The pure visceral, audio-visual-ludic glory of the game seems to intentionally dominate the game's story, which, throughout most of the game, consists of repeated acts of murder and rather pointless consumption. The intricacy of the ludic experience contrasts with the game's almost random narrative structure, which is additionally relieved of any meaning through disruptive irony and storytelling dead-ends. At the point of the final ending credits, with the biker character driving out of Miami as the player stand-in, the fictional world is neutralized and hollowed out of any sense. What appears to leave a far stronger impression is the hardcore gameplay, which is not substantially questioned. Ludic action is subverted only once, i.e. in the level in which the unarmed PC tries to escape from the hospital. As already mentioned, this singular instance of the player's helplessness only serves to emphasize how well-crafted and engaging the action sequences are (Franklin).

Hotline: Miami seemingly strips itself of any pretensions to being anything more than a successful consumer good, with a simultaneous wink to the ethereal nature of consumption. It evokes the 1980s media through structures, motifs, and style, but instead of offering a parody, a critique, or even a proper pastiche, it only "reinvents the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period" in the manner Fredric Jameson associates with consumerist nostalgia (8). Not only does the game render the Red Scare as a mere mechanism of obsessive thinking but it also inverts the craze for luxurious consumption that is said to shape the characters of "blank fiction:" both the scare and the craze are imitated in structure but saved of overt criticism. The game undermines an entire range of possible interpretations, downplaying its own aspects, with the sole exception being the act of consuming *Hotline: Miami* through the challenging and satisfying gameplay. Only the metaludic survives the emptying out of meaning, leaving a gleaming shell of excessive gameplay that not only questions its own displays of violence, but exposes videogame play as an act of media consumption. The sensory overload and smooth gamefeel triumph over meaning. The triumph, in turn, corresponds to the game's exploration of the relation between murder and consumption, making a statement about the seductive, enjoyable, but intrinsically empty nature of carrying out gamified hardcore violence.

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