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Across Rivers and Selves:
Mobile Identities in 19th-Century American Literature of Enslavement and Escape

> The "where" of black geographies and black subjectivity, then, is often aligned with spatial processes that *apparently* fall back on seemingly predetermined stabilities, such as boundaries, color lines, proper places, fixed and settled infrastructures and streets, oceanic containers.
> (Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xi)

Keywords: African American literature, nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Charles Chesnutt, slavery, mobility

Abstract: The history of slavery is also a history of mobility: as the enslaved resisted, were displaced or replaced, planned insurrections, devised escape routes both fictional and historical, they did have geographical agency. In response to Orlando Patterson's understanding of slavery as corpse-like immobility and a permanent condition of living death, it can also be read through the prism of movement. This article starts from this assumption to complicate the issue of enslaved mobility as geographical as well as existential. My focus is on the proximity between geographical movement to freedom on roads and across rivers and borders, and the identity metamorphoses that accompany it. I perform close readings from 19th-century African American narratives of enslavement and escape that capture bonded individuals in the mo(ve)ment of geographical and existential transit. The characters of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) move not only across land, but also across selves. For the fugitive, escaping bondage meant adopting fictional identities to avoid detection and capture; "passing" in terms of race is one of the most common, but racial camouflage is often accompanied by crossings of gender, dis/ability, and age lines. This article's primary aim is to recast escape not as a linear trajectory but as a chain of interlocked mobilities, and study the existential movements that radiate from the experience of crossing the borders to the Northern states.

The correlation between slavery and immobility begs to be reconsidered. Bondage has been read across scholarship as intimately connected with stasis; after all, the term *bondage* itself implies a restriction of movement, pertinent to both captivity and enslavement; the two

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conditions are not only interlocked—captives, too, had masters and owners, and enslavement depends on capture—but also predicated on the impossibility to move freely, to depart, and to return. Slave movement of all sorts, "trading, learning to read, consuming school, acquiring poisoning techniques, or plotting rebellions" was criminalized throughout the early nineteenth-century South (Camp 13-15). "The control of slave movement [was] an issue of paramount importance" writes historian Stephanie Camp: the power of the slaveholders, she continues, depend on their ability to contain and confine slaves (13).[1] In this regard, she quotes Justice John Marshall Harlan, who echoed a generally held belief in the 19th-century U.S. South that "personal liberty… consists in the power of locomotion, of changing situation, or removing one's person to whatsoever places one's own inclination may direct" (qtd. in Camp 141). Like many others at the time, he associated liberty with movement and stasis with its opposite. Yet, there is movement in bondage and stasis in freedom. Capture and captivity are as entwined with mobility as they are with stasis. The slave trade forced millions of people to leave the apparent stability and permanence of their communities, dragged them across the Middle Passage, North America, Canada, and the Caribbean, to the auction block, and eventually to their places of enslavement. In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick argues that the idea of slavery as ideologically and materially driven by stasis is compelling in its simplicity, but it erases the multiple ways in which the enslaved did have geographical agency: as they resisted, were displaced or replaced, planned insurrections, devised escape routes both fictional and historical. To Orlando Patterson's theory of enslavement as corpse-like immobility and a permanent condition of living death, McKittrick opposes slavery as movement.

I want to build on McKittrick's position and show that literature on enslavement and escape reflects on the coexistence of stasis and movement as ingrained in the enslaved condition and generative of its existential ambiguities.[2] McKittrick helpfully locates this ambiguity in the slave ship, moving across the Atlantic with its cargo of people chained to its structure is an ambiguous space, a paradoxical one that synthesizes both movement and stasis. The slave ship is a site of transportation, of technological progress, a "moving technology" (McKittrick xii) that "materially moves diasporic subjects through space" (McKittrick x).[3] At the same time, the subject it carries are immobilized, often chained to it.

Marisa Fuentes's *Dispossessed Lives* reports another invaluable example of this paradox. She looks at the text of an advertisement for the return of a fugitive woman with indelible marks of provenance and possession carved on her body: she was branded with fire, possibly by her previous owner; "marks of her country" (13) are visible in multiple places, her neck shows a knife wound. These signs bind her to spaces of violence, capture, and bondage: her country,

where she was taken; the slave ship, where she might have suffered disfiguring violence; the plantation, where she was branded. Yet, the advertisement captures her in the moment of flight.

As the text seeks to restore bondage and return this woman to the immobility of her enslaved condition, permanently scarred and burned into her body, she is somewhere else, transiting towards freedom. A similar ambiguity in inscribed in the body of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent: her years of self-confinement in the attic, hidden from her master who thinks her gone, "are more liberatory than moving about under the gaze of Dr. Flint" (McKittrick 41). Jacob's body in the attic is both static and moving, enslaved and free, there and elsewhere (McKittrick 41-42). In this article, I look in more detail at Jacob's canonical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), but also at Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899). These three texts of enslavement and escape embed the central junctures at the heart of my argument: mobility and immobility, geographical and existential movement. There are several ways in which slavery and immobility are historically interconnected. The first is that the slaveholders' control on the enslaved depended on their confinement. In 1685, the Code Noir had already restricted direct or indirect forms of slave movement: it banned slave gatherings or assemblies on plantations and "still less in the main roads or faraway places" (Article XVI); it forbade slaves to sell their goods without permission and announced brutal punishments for fugitive slaves, including branding, disfiguring, and, eventually, after the third escape attempt, death.

By the 19th century, Southern laws had restricted most of slave mobility: bondspeople were forbidden to leave the plantation without a pass, a ticket, or a document that clarified the points and time of departure and arrival, the time granted outside, and the reason for traveling (see Camp, esp. 15-16, and article XVI of the Code Noir). Failure to comply exposed the enslaved to severe punishment, murder, or the risk of being captured and resold elsewhere. Slavery's "geographies of confinement" (Camp *passim*) exceed literal spaces of stasis—the plantation, the slave ship, and the chain—and extend to metaphorical places, such as social positioning. Orlando Patterson speaks of slavery through the metaphor of social death, relegating the enslaved body to the immobility of a "living death" (8).

Yet, although Southern legislatures designed the social "place" of the enslaved to be permanent and to be passed on to further generations, practices such as manumission opened spaces of social mobility. Even the Code Noir allowed for some margin: it encouraged slaveholders who had children with one of their enslaved to manumit the mother and the child, and these children could inherit property (Article IX). Another constriction of discursive rather than legal nature was the narrative of content that permeated plantation life, according to which

the enslaved did not wish to leave the plantation because of alleged *bonds* ranging from mutual obligation to paralyzing devotion or loyalty to a plantation fabricated as "home," to intimate affection for the family of their owners.

Uncle Tom, the title character in Beecher Stowe's novel, is an obvious example of this kind of affective immobility: when financial circumstances force his master to sell Tom further South, both men are shattered by the idea of separation. As much pathos and affection as this narrative may involve, Camp speaks of it as a manipulative form of stasis designed to keep the enslaved "in their place" (18), and so does Saidiya Hartmann, who discusses at length the tragic limits of imaginaries that designate the plantation as a "space of freedom and happiness" (266).

Not only movement across space but movements that cultivated bodily emancipation and self-reliance—and allegedly an insurrectionist state of mind—were also restricted. Some planters banned dancing as a radical tool of healing and reclamation of personhood. Some also criminalized religious assembly, which demanded movements both autonomous and mysterious, and conducive to "spiritual strength and rapture" (Camps 19). The enslaved could not trade or learn to read, were discouraged from marrying outside their own plantation or acquiring new sets of skills, such as poisoning or conjuring, Camps writes (16), which resonates in multiple ways with Charles Chesnutt's short stories. Developing and offering one's conjuring skills, or even walking to meet the conjurer and ask for their services, were unwelcome trading "movements" in the eyes of the owner. In Chesnutt's "Dave's Neckliss," Dave learns to read and write and develops an interest in religion, and that too encounters the master's strong disapproval.

These examples begin to foreshadow the conjunction between geographical and existential transits at the core of this article. The trope of escape in 19th-century American literature magnifies the interference of geographical mobilities with adjacent mobilities of a different kind, which can also be read as necessary strategies to change and conceal the fugitive self, such as passing, cross-dressing, and supernatural metamorphoses. In their pursuit of freedom, the protagonists traverse not only different states, but also different selves. Metamorphosis and mimesis, both contiguous to practices of passing and cross-dressing, will offer important lenses to read the trajectories of this chapter's shapeshifters, whether they are crossing borders between states, genders, races, or species.

Passing Rivers and Races: Lisa and Eliza

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, offers the ideal point of ingress into slavery's entangled mobilities: in her canonic slave narrative, Jacobs, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, narrates the days of her enslavement and escape. I use this text as point of departure because, as McKittrick already observed in *Demonic Grounds*, it presents slavery not as an invariably static system, but as one marked by the paradoxical co-presence of immobility and movement. McKittrick lingers on Jacobs'/Brent's self-confinement in the attic, a strategy she enacts to fake her escape in preparation of the real one, as a site of opposites: "Brent is everywhere and nowhere, north and south, … both inside and outside, captive and free … positioned across (rather than inside or outside, or inevitably bound to) slavery" (42). I would like to draw attention to a different episode in Jacobs' narrative, where the protagonist passes as a Black man. Afraid of being caught, Brent leaves the attic and is taken to a new hiding place: to ensure she goes unnoticed, she is given a sailor's suit. Later, she colors her face with a piece of charcoal, adding racial passing (a deeper Blackness) to her gender performance. In the following excerpt from *Incidents*, Brent demonstrates how passing is a relational, identitarian, and spatial phenomenon,

> I *passed* several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise. (170)
>
> I wore my sailor's clothes, and had blackened my face with charcoal. I *passed* several people whom I knew. (172)
>
> I had not even seen him since the night I *passed* him, unrecognized, in my disguise of a sailor. (All emphases added, 189)

Sarah Ahmed assists us in this reading: "passing," she writes, is "literal act of moving through space" and can be read adjacently with passing as embodiment of a different identity (94). In fact, the repetition of the word "passed" in *Incidents* conjoins physical movement—Brent walking past people she knows unrecognized—and the gender and racial *passing* she enacts to do so. As she passes for Black-er and for a man, Brent literally walks *past* danger and out of

enslavement, putting more and more physical distance between her past life and a new one, which she enters as a new, unreadable self.

Eliza's trajectory in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) is intensely dynamic: she crosses fields, woods, and rivers to freedom, she traverses multiple identities—white woman and Black man above all—and finally evolves into a different self. Her transformations begin when she overhears Mr. Shelby announce he has sold Eliza's son, Harry, to a new owner. This information begins a process of change for Eliza, who, immediately afterwards, is "an entirely altered being" (Beecher Stowe 43).

The threat of mobility and separation looming over her son triggers the necessity of preventive mobility: Eliza must plan her son's escape and her own. The novel is quick to reconfigure Eliza's resistance within a white-hegemonic rhetoric and to protect its white readerships through the fiction of "comparatively kind masters" (Beecher Stowe 116). Eliza's resistance against this unexpected transfer is coded through the sentimental vocabulary of purported affection towards the place of bondage typical of the 19th-century Southern pastoral to which I have alluded above. The plantation was "the only home she had ever known," full of "every familiar object" and happy memories, "everything … seemed to speak reproachfully to her, and ask her whither could she go from a home like that" (Beecher Stowe 61).

The novel reiterates that a self in stasis, not willing to flee bondage, is bound for inhumane suffering. Escape, however, requires inward and outward transformation and the openness to enter a state of identitarian flux. A tame personality like Eliza's shapeshifts into "the haggard face and dark, wild eyes of the fugitive" (Beecher Stowe 45). Her transformation animates supernatural vocabularies: Eliza herself wonders about "the supernatural power that bore her on" (61) as she leaves at night, "for it seemed to her to come from a spirit within, that was no part of her" (62).

Eliza is a central figure for this argument because her experience is one of territorial and identitarian crossings, of "movement through and across" (Ahmed 94). Principally, she must cross the Ohio river to freedom, a Biblical "Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side" (Beecher Stowe 64), but to do that safely, she must be "altered" (Beecher Stowe 454). She is Sarah Ahmed's "subject who passes," who must also experience "the passing of subjects through each other" (88). Eliza, simultaneously of a "brown … complexion" (Beecher Stowe 5) but also "white and handsome" (Beecher Stowe 82), passes as white man and dresses up her son, also white enough to pass, as a girl. The following excerpt shows the adjacency of Eliza's entangled transformations,

> She was many miles past any neighborhood where she was personally known. If she should chance to meet any who knew her, she reflected that the well-known kindness of the family would be of itself a blind to suspicion, as making it an unlikely supposition that she could be a fugitive. As she was also so white as not to be known as of colored lineage, without a critical survey, and her child was white also, it was much easier for her to pass on unsuspected. (Beecher Stowe 64)

Even before cross-dressing, Eliza is already moving through geographies and selves: she is "miles past any neighborhood where she was personally known." Like Jacobs/Brent, moving into a new space also means shedding her identity and community bonds to become a full stranger. This *tabula rasa* is integral to racial passing, which occurs in the absence of any memory of the subject, in a community where no one knows differently. In case she should meet anyone she knows, Eliza activates the "well-known kindness of the family" as a class credential that would protect her from suspicions of being a "fugitive." Lastly, she was "so white as not to be known as of colored lineage"; in this short passage alone, Eliza's racial passing intersects with transgression, a sapient performance of class, and geographical movement.

Eliza resorts to passing and cross-dressing when crossing over lake Eerie to Canada. Her camouflage is first shown through the eyes of her husband, looking at her "as she was adapting to her slender and pretty form the articles of man's attire" (Beecher Stowe 455): "'There, an't I a *pretty* young fellow?' she said, turning around to her husband, laughing and blushing at the same time. 'You always will be *pretty*, do what you will,' said George. ' … come, let's be off. Well, indeed,' said he, holding her off at arm's length, and looking admiringly at her, 'you are, a *pretty* little fellow'" (Beecher Stowe 455-56; emphasis mine). When Eliza's son enters the room in girl's clothes, Eliza keeps up the light atmosphere by remarking, "What a pretty girl he makes" (Beecher Stowe 457). The repetition of the word pretty—like "passed" in Jacobs's *Incidents*—is remarkable in its polysemy: the same words applies to re-gendered iterations of the same body, and underscores how the loveliness of these bodies remains unchanged across all transformations. The first time "pretty" refers simply to Eliza's feminine forms, while the second applies to her cross-dressed body, and the third and fourth time expresses a husband's admiration for his wife's beauty, whatever shape it takes, including that of a young man. Last, Harry as a "pretty girl" forms a chiasm with his mother as a "pretty boy."

The humorous exchange, in combination with the fixation on the word "pretty," throws into relief the instability of the family's identifications and of their bodies in flight: pretty

nonetheless, but elusive of all the categories they had been safely assigned to until that point (male, female, mother, son, husband, wife, heterosexual). At first sight, the jokes seem to hinge on the word "pretty," but, in fact, they rest on the fluctuation of gender and race. The strange recurrence of "pretty" also alerts the reader to a degree of turbulence: a strain of tension runs through the family's affectionate banter, which functions to dispel the tragedy of their present and the uncertainty about the future. Exchanging acknowledgments that they remain beautiful to one another no matter the circumstances exorcises the threat of separation and averts the "crisis of identity" that may affect the passing subject (Ahmed 92).

Magical Mobilities: Escape and Interspecies Metamorphosis in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*

Charles Chesnutt's short-story collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899) intermingles African American magic and classic mythology: the stories center on metamorphoses reminiscent of Ovid's, but recast in the context of Southern slavery and determined by the specificities of life in bondage, above all the desire to escape or be reconnected with loved ones who had been sold away. Similar to Jacobs' and Stowe's texts, Chesnutt's collection shows slavery as crossed by mobilities and immobilities both geographical and existential, natural and supernatural. One can say, by way of summary, that the characters' wish to move across space and away from bondage is enabled by and in turn enables movement across species and identities. In "Po' Sandy," for example, the conjurer Tenie considers turning herself and her husband into foxes "er sump'n, so dey could run away en go some'rs whar dey could be free en lib lack w'ite folks" (*Conjure Woman* 50).

"Po' Sandy" illustrates at best the interplay of geographical movement and identitarian transformation in the framework of escape. In the short story, an enslaved couple is repeatedly sold to different masters. The wife, a conjurer, resolves to use magic to stop this excruciating pattern. After shortly considering shapeshifting into foxes, rabbits, dogs, wolves, and birds, she settles on turning her husband into a tree. Exasperated by separation, Sandy himself wishes to be turned into "sump'n w'at could stay on de plantation fer a w'ile … sump'n w'at stay in one place" (45-46); unlike his wife, he does not wish to flee, but still partakes in Tenie's transgressive plan to counter the plantation's abusive logics.

"Po' Sandy" references the myth of Daphne, famously included in Ovid's metamorphoses. Chased by a lustful Apollo, Daphne implores her father, a river god, to save her. Her father responds by turning her into a laurel tree. The myth draws its power from the

change of pace from Daphne's panicked flight to sudden stillness: it is not by running faster or further that she escapes, but by stopping abruptly in the quiescence of a tree. In his new treelike abode, Sandy—as do other metamorphosed characters in *The Conjure Woman* —enacts a similarly paradoxical relation of stasis and movement, which builds a bridge with Harriet Jacob's self-confinement in the attic. Both characters hide in plain sight while everybody else thinks them gone. More than that, Sandy enacts a form of "running away" intimately connected with self-inflicted immobility. "Transformation," Ian Green clarifies, does not "necessarily imply the slave's liberation" (371), or, for that matter, their survival. When the plantation owner needs wood to build a new kitchen, it is Sandy's tree he cuts down, driving Tenie to madness and death. Even from within a tree's immobility, Sandy refuses to remain "quiescent" (Koy 60) and attempts to escape: the chain binding the logs to the cart symbolically comes lose, making transportation hard: "en dey had ter keep a-stoppin' en a-stoppin' fer ter hitch de log up ag'in … de log broke loose, en roll down de hill en in 'mongs' de trees" (53).

The wood that was the tree that was Sandy's body falls even deeper into objectification: from enslaved person, to plant, to building. This brutal ending reinforces the binomial of stasis and death. Similar to Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for whom staying would have meant seeing her son sent away, lingering within the confines of the plantation, no matter in what form, will eventually cause Sandy and Tenie's demise. Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, Chesnutt has no interest in constructing a sentimentalist safety net that exonerates the book's white readership: while, in the case of Eliza, the courage to move and the openness to change mean salvation, Sandy's metamorphosis reinstate the plantocratic order.

The falsely liberatory interspecies transformation that turns Sandy into a tree only deepens his entanglement in the destructive space of the plantation, quickening his trajectory towards death and confirming the inescapability of racism and enslavement. Tenie's fatal error finalizes her husband's objectification into a prop to be dismembered, moved, and repurposed at will. Their short-lived attempt at subversion via conjure reconfigures the Black body as "will-less actant" (Hartmann 104) to whom voluntary movement remains inaccessible.

The Conjure Woman's fictional universe is unique, as it mediates the tension between stasis and movement, death and transformation, rootedness and escape, through magic. In Ian Green's words, conjuring is a "mystical system organized around objectification, around things situated within places" (Green 99).

The recurse to magic to mend forced separation features in another short story in the same collection, "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny." Here, an enslaved mother is sold to another plantation, away from her child. The conjurer, in this case, transforms the child into a bird to allow him to

visit his mother in this guise. The enormity of the boy's transformation into a bird is as lyrical and enticing for the reader as it is disheartening: it illustrates what Saidyia Hartmann identified as "the terror that is part and parcel of the everyday landscape of slavery and, more important, the difficulty of action in such circumstances" (106). These double mobilities through time and species paradoxically reconfirm the inescapability of enslavement: its architecture of immobility and *bondage* not only binds the subject to an inescapable matrilinear inheritance, but also to a space one has no part in choosing. As an enslaved, it is easier to magically move across species than to move across space—an unthinkable act of transgression.

Slavery, as narrated in literature of enslavement and escape, is a condition determined by entanglements of stasis and movement that go beyond geographical mobility and immobility and cross over into the realm of identitarian flux. "Locomotion was definitive of personal liberty," writes Hartmann (151). She explains that abolition resulted in what she calls "ambulant expressions of freedom" (266) that manifested in the mass movements away from plantations, to places of birth, in search of loved ones, or simply across uncharted landscapes of freedom. The texts above show, however, that *forced* locomotion was also intimately bound with enslavement, and the *choice* of stasis—as in staying near familiar places and affections—was a crucial indicator of freedom.

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[2] Not all scholarship argues that slavery is marked by stasis. In "The Haunted Plantation," Jan Green elaborates the ambivalences in the idea of conjuring, a system offering the enslaved a chance for escape at the cost of their objectification – intended quite literally as the irreversible transformation into thing or animal. To this purpose, he helpfully claims that "both transformation and rootedness are the tense inextricable forces that produce the cultural past, present, and future of the plantation" 105). The work of Ian Green will become relevant later, in the section on Charles Chesnutt.

[3] On enslaved women's (absence of) mobility on the slave ship and the plantation, see also Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*, esp. 207 and following.

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Mobility and Identity in Ladee Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins*

Keywords: Ladee Hubbard, *The Talented Ribkins*, African American literature, mobility, movement, identity, race, gender, storytelling

Abstract: This article examines themes of mobility and identity Ladee Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins* (2017). I use the lens of mobility studies to closely analyze the novel's two primary characters, Johnny and Eloise, and the ways in which their cross-Florida road trip is both a literal and symbolic journey to self-discovery for each. In addition, I look at W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston as inspiration for Hubbard's novel and explore the role of storytelling as central to each character's process of identity formation. I furthermore consider the novel's Florida setting as particularly fertile ground for interrogations of mobility, given the state's place in the literary and national imaginations as a nexus of movement, ultimately asserting that reading *The Talented Ribkins* within this context can only illuminate its commentary on racial justice.

Introduction

There are several interviews in which Ladee Hubbard has discussed the inspiration for her 2017 novel, *The Talented Ribkins*. The title is a reference to W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth," which advocates for liberal arts education for African Americans. In it, Du Bois argues that "[t]he Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," (209) and that "the problem of education . . . is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races" (209). *The Talented Ribkins* takes up this idea of "exceptional" African Americans born with "gifts or talents" through the Ribkins, an African American family with special powers. The protagonist, Johnny, for example, can create perfect maps of places he has never laid eyes on;

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his cousin, Simone, can change her appearance, and his niece, Eloise, can move objects with her mind.

The novel follows Johnny and Eloise as they take a road trip across Florida. Over the course of their journey, Johnny shares with Eloise stories of his past and time with the Justice Committee, a group of Ribkins who used their powers for equal rights advocacy during the Civil Rights Movement. His stories—like Du Bois' "The Talented Tenth"—emphasize the importance of education for African Americans, while also helping to inform Eloise about Black history more broadly. For this reason, *Publishers Weekly* called Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins* "an ambitious . . . attempt to explore new dimensions of the struggle for racial justice" ("The Talented Ribkins").

Hubbard's Florida-based road trip novel also draws on the work of Zora Neale Hurston—specifically *Mules and Men* (1935)—especially given its emphasis on mobility and storytelling. "Hurston does not just write about place," notes Erin Wedehase, "she also writes about how humans maneuver through different spaces to solidify cultural and individual identities" (29). *Mules and Men* describes Hurston's literal journey through parts of Central Florida and New Orleans to collect stories from African American folklore. Yet, it is also a metaphorical journey, as several critics such as Cheryl Wall and Houston Baker have noted and, as Alasdair Pettinger describes, "to the heart of black female experience and identity" (177). Hubbard's novel is similarly concerned with movement and identity. In fact, Johnny's mapmaking is central to his identity and his road trip across Florida with Eloise is a crucial part of both characters' journeys to self-discovery. Through close reading and using the lens of mobility studies, this essay, therefore, examines *The Talented Ribkins* and how its theme of mobility/movement relates to issues of identity. I assert that reading Hubbard's novel within this context can ultimately illuminate the novel's commentary on racial justice.

Mobility Studies: Hurston as "Pioneer"

An understanding of mobility studies is first central to exploring *The Talented Ribkins* and its emphasis on movement. As Marion Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce note in the introduction to *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*, the field is most associated with the social sciences,

but has recently become popular with humanities scholars, principally in the areas of literary and cultural studies. They note the broad scope of movements that mobilities comprises,

> from the large-scale technologies of global travel, to transnational interconnections, to everyday local mobilities, including journeys by foot, road, rail, air, and sea, at local, regional, national, and transnational levels. Mobilities studies recognizes that mobility operates at multiple scales of meaning, any and all of which constitutes a society's mobile culture. (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2)

Stephen Greenblatt's "A Mobility Studies Manifesto" similarly contends that mobility refers to movement in a literal sense: "[b]oarding a plane, venturing on a ship . . . or simply setting one foot in front of the other and walking" (250). These are just some examples of the literal "physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement" (250). But movement can also be metaphorical: "between center and periphery, faith and skepticism, order and chaos, exteriority and interiority" (250). It can also include "hidden as well as conspicuous movements" (of people, but also of) "objects, images, texts, and ideas" (250). One sees this logic, for instance, in a clear precursor to *The Talented Ribkins*: Zora Neale Hurston.

If mobility studies furthermore takes into account not just *how* we move, but *why* and, very importantly, it recognizes the ways in which these movements constitute practices of power, such as "who has the power to move, how society limits the power to move, and what happens to the larger community when it loses or gains mobile members," then Hurston's *Of Mules and Men* is a foundational text (Wedehase 31). Given that so much of both her life and her writing involve movement from one place to another, it is no surprise that Hurston has been named "a pioneer in the relatively contemporary field of mobility studies" (Wedehase 29). On the surface, the relation to *The Talented Ribkins* is perhaps less obvious than Du Bois', but it is still paramount. Hurston, in *Mules and Men*, "does not just document folklore but dramatizes the way in which the author collected it," Pettinger observes (175). Rather, it offers "a recreation of Hurston's engagement with the people she spoke to and whose words she transcribed. To a considerable extent, its subject is the practice of fieldwork itself" (Pettinger 175). This fieldwork, of course, could not be completed without Hurston's ability to get from one place to another. Importantly, most of Hurston's travel

in *Mules and Men* occurs by car—a Chevrolet, to be exact—which is a significant feature of her narrative.

This marks *Mules and Men* as an early example of a road-trip story. At its heart is a literal journey through parts of Central Florida and New Orleans; it is also a metaphorical journey, as it "utilizes movement to symbolize self-development" (Wedehase 32). In her travels to and through Eatonville, Arnold Rampersad notes, Hurston "effect[s] a genuine reconciliation between herself and her past, which is to say between herself as a growing individual with literary ambitions on the one hand and the evolving African-American culture and history on the other" (xvi). In Hurston's work, mobility has several levels of meaning and is intimately connected to identity. In addition to this, the collection is also, according to David G. Nicholls, "a 'hidden transcript' of everyday resistance [that] is exposed through the narrative frame with which she surrounds her transcription of 'folk' tales" (467). Hurston's road-trip story therefore interrogates how movement constitutes practices of power.

Mobility in *The Talented Ribkins*: Johnny's Identity Crisis

Like *Mules and Men*, Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins* is also at once a road-trip story about a literal journey across the state of Florida and a figurative journey to self-discovery for its travelers, Johnny and Eloise. When the novel begins, Johnny is clearly in the midst of an identity crisis. He has just arrived at his dead brother Franklin's house—now occupied by Franklin's partner, Meredith, and their daughter, Eloise—in Lehigh Acres. He had never imagined coming back to Franklin's house and thinks about "all he'd been through since Franklin died, how hard he'd tried to put this place behind him only to find himself . . . right back where he'd started" (Hubbard 6). Now, at seventy-two years old, Johnny is a "peculiar old man [. . .] [o]ld and tired" (Hubbard 13). He thinks of himself as "[s]trange and pitiful, that was what his life had become " (Hubbard 10), and he questions his own value now, especially in light of his foray into crime. As his cousin, Simone, reminds him, he has let his talent go to waste. That talent is making maps, which he did as part of his activist work with the Justice Committee during the Civil Rights Movement; now, he sells his maps to crime boss, Melvin. Making maps is more than a talent, though—for Johnny, it is a core part of his identity; it is "not just what he did, but who he was" (Hubbard 6). Since the Justice Committee fell apart and Johnny became subsumed by criminal

life, he feels lost. His road trip with Eloise across Florida to dig up buried money, which he must use to repay Melvin or else Melvin will kill him, is his solution to this problem. The trip allows him a chance to reclaim pieces of his buried past and thus remember himself.

The primary way that Johnny reclaims those pieces of his past on this road trip occurs through storytelling. During their travels, Johnny frequently tells Eloise stories about his past and about the Ribkins family, and these stories help him recover lost parts of himself, aiding in his process of self-discovery. In one such example, during the first leg of their journey, *en route* to Fort Myers, Johnny tells Eloise about segregation and how it limited his mobility. It is the movement of the car, an old Thunderbird, and "a flashing view of the Gulf" (Hubbard 29) through the windows that prompt this memory; as the car "rolled down a wide boulevard full of superstores and car dealerships, pink condominiums and high palm trees" (Hubbard 29), Eloise asks Johnny if they're going to stop at the beach, which leads Johnny to recall how he and other Black people could only visit the beach "up the road" (Hubbard 29). Johnny also remembers that this beach has a fort, and tells Eloise about his first job out of college, before the Justice Committee, when he was working as a math teacher at a school in Lehigh and paid out of his own pocket to take his students on a field trip to this beach for Juneteenth so that he could teach them a lesson about how knowledge is like a fort. The metaphor here speaks to Johnny's belief that knowledge is power, and of the importance of education for African Americans. That Johnny visits this beach, once off limits to him during segregation, on Juneteenth is also significant. It is a moment of resistance in which Johnny recognizes that movement—his access to the beach—constitutes a practice of power. Johnny's limited mobility as a result of racism inspires his work—his identity—as an educator. Through recalling this story, he is able to remember how "[h]e'd been a different man back then. [. . .] "Young, idealistic . . . he'd truly believed he was going where he was needed most" (32). Sharing this story with Eloise, educating her about this part of his life, and also imparting on her the same lesson about the importance of knowledge allows him to recover this part of himself. The physical movement of the car, along with the more figurative movement of ideas, stories, that occurs within the space of the car, combines with the language of movement in this passage to further evidence how Johnny's identity is bound to his mobility. In this scene, Johnny's mobility contributes to his self-development, helping him to remember himself, to negotiate who he was and who he *is*, as a "talented" Ribkins advocating for racial justice.

Johnny's identity is tied together with his mobility. His Thunderbird, symbolic in that it serves as an extension of him, therefore plays a key role in his journey to self-discovery. For instance, Eloise calls the car "old" and "junky" (Hubbard 27). Johnny takes Eloise's comment personally because he recognizes that he himself—seventy-two, old, tired, and feeling he is lacking value—is a kind of antique. The Thunderbird furthermore serves as one of the novel's primary settings and a space where he shares stories with Eloise, particularly about his mapmaking and his work with the Justice Committee. When she asks if the Justice Committee was in the freedom movement, Johnny replies, "We were **with** the freedom movement. We were freedom movement adjacent. We were the freedom-of-movement movement" (Hubbard 29, emphasis mine). In this turn of phrase, Johnny demonstrates a kind of linguistic mobility; again, the language of movement ("in," "with," "adjacent") and language play (wherein "movement" at once refers to both an act of changing location and a group of people working together to achieve their shared goals) suggest an important connection between mobility and Johnny's identity. Again, the car's literal movement combines with the more figurative movement of ideas and stories, emphasized by the language of movement in this passage, to evidence how Johnny's identity is bound to his mobility.

Johnny's mapmaking, which was a central part of his work with the Justice Committee, is especially and intimately connected to his sense of self. As with his work in education, Johnny's mapmaking is an act of resistance shaped by his own limited mobility due to racism. He began making maps "for black drivers trying to navigate through the South on the interstate roads, telling them where to go if they needed gas or supplies" (Hubbard 47). He explains to Eloise, "Just being black, trying to get from one place to another without bothering nobody, seemed like a provocation to a lot of folks, so you had to be careful where you pulled over" (Hubbard 47). Sharing this story with Eloise is a means by which Johnny can remember this part of himself and his youthful efforts to effect change.

Johnny's mapmaking, central to his identity, is a means through which he recognizes how mobility constitutes practices of power. By sharing stories of his mapmaking with Eloise, Johnny is prompted to reflect on how "the distribution of mobility" (Hubbard 128) has historically been and continues to be limited for African Americans. Johnny is reminded of his limited mobility when walking through a mall with Eloise; he observes how "there were still certain doors he could not just stroll through, certain passageways other people would always keep locked to him" (Hubbard 120). This experience, combined with the stories he shares with Eloise on their car trip,

renews in Johnny a sense of purpose. It makes him realize what Meredith meant when, at the outset of their trip, she asked him to "help teach [Eloise] how to walk this world" (Hubbard 26). It is "what Meredith had wanted him to teach her. That you could come from something, even be something that made you stand out or off to one side, and still find a way to be strong and happy" (Hubbard 128). Telling Eloise about his mapmaking aids in his self-discovery as he finds purpose in helping her—a fellow Ribkins and a young Black woman—learn to navigate the world. It furthermore serves as an example of how *The Talented Ribkins* uses mobility to examine the ways in which movement can be used to regulate and also challenge structures of power. Johnny recognizes "who has the power to move, how society limits the power to move" (Wedehase 31) and he endeavors to impart this knowledge on Eloise.

Mobility and Eloise's Journey to Self-Identity

The road trip and the stories shared along the way also help Eloise negotiate her identity. Eloise knows little to nothing about the Ribkins. Her father, Franklin, died when Eloise was very young, and that is why she joins Johnny on this trip; as Meredith tells Johnny, "She needs somebody to help teach her how to walk this world. Somebody that understands" (Hubbard 26). Eloise has a Ribkins talent—she can catch objects thrown at her—but has no Ribkins family to guide her in how to put her talent to use. Johnny finds his purpose and a renewed sense of self by teaching Eloise about her family and their history of talents. He tells her more about her father, Franklin. She knows of his ability to climb things, but to this knowledge Johnny adds: "You know what your daddy was doing the last time I saw him? He was climbing a twenty-story building. [. . .] [Y]our daddy . . . just hiked his pants and scaled it. Went straight up the side like it was nothing" (Hubbard 117). Johnny talks proudly about Franklin's talent, instilling a similar pride in Eloise, and he also encourages her ability, calling it "beautiful" (Hubbard 69).

Importantly, mobility plays a pivotal role in Eloise's identity formation, too. It defines her talent—as it does her father's climbing talent and Johnny's mapmaking—which she is learning to use. When he discovers she has been hiding her true talent for fear of being offensive —that her "catching" is really "snatching," moving things with her mind—he assures her, "There's nothing wrong with being strange" and eagerly, "more than anything," he wants to "show it to people" (Hubbard 262-63). Johnny's eagerness to show off Eloise's talent and his encouragement puts her

on the path to finding her place, to embracing her identity. Here again, the figurative movement of stories also contributes to Eloise's self-development, teaches her something about who she is as a "talented" Ribkins.

The stops along the journey are equally significant, as they introduce Eloise to other members of the Ribkins family and to more stories that tell her about her family history and help her journey to identity. A stop at Simone's house, for instance, provides an opportunity for Eloise to learn more about the Ribkins' "legacy" and her place in the family. In addition to possessing her own unique talent—she can shapeshift*—Simone is an exceptionally significant figure in the Ribkins family in that she serves as an example of social and economic mobility, living a life of comfort and privilege in the "mini-mansion" gifted to her by her husband, the Judge (Hubbard 55). She encourages Eloise to see the value of upward mobility for herself: "Plus, you're a woman, so I'm sorry to say but that makes it doubly important that you know your worth. Because ain't nobody else going to tell you. Quite frankly, there's no such thing as a black woman who every amounted to anything walking around like they got something to apologize for. You've got to stand tall, child. Got to go out there and be strong no matter what" (Hubbard 55). The stories from other Ribkins such as Simone provide Eloise with a stronger sense of community. Beyond that, they help Eloise understand not just her Ribkins family, but her larger identity as a young Black woman trying to move through a world in which "the distribution of mobility" continues to be limited for African Americans, particularly Black women.

Florida as Significant Setting: Reclaiming History Through Movement

Finally, it is also important to take into consideration the novel's Florida setting: as particularly fertile ground for interrogations of mobility, given the state's place in the literary and national imaginations as a nexus of movement—travel and tourism, migration and immigration—but also, importantly, as a state with a vexed history of racial injustice. In her introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston acknowledges that she wanted to gather stories in Florida because it is "a place that draws people . . . from all over the world" (1). But Florida's reputation as "the sunshine state" has obscured some of its darker, Jim Crow-era history. The Florida setting, therefore, allows for Hubbard, through Johnny's journey, to recover some of that Black history that, like Johnny's money, has been buried. Johnny's memory of the segregated beach with the fort, for instance, is

likely inspired by Bunche Beach, the only Black beach in Ft. Myers during Jim Crow. It evokes other historic beach sites that are in danger of being lost to time, too, such as Jacksonville's Manhattan Beach, the oldest beach resort for African Americans in Northeast Florida. In Buena Vista, Johnny takes Eloise to a botanical garden that was once the home of the Ribkins patriarch, the Rib King: "It didn't look like this back then," he tells her, "When they settled here, all this was just a swamp" (Hubbard 124). He continues to explain how the area was a free Black settlement that was destroyed by white people in the next town over. The Rib King was the sole survivor. The decimation of this community conjures images of Rosewood, the historic Black town in Florida's Levy County that was the site of a racially motivated massacre. As Hubbard remarks in an interview with *The Guardian*, "So much is left out of official narratives of history . . . and yet so much is retained through stories and oral histories" (Lea). This is reflected in *The Talented Ribkins*, when Johnny remembers a time when Franklin told him, "Your map matters, history matters" (Hubbard 223). As we can see, making one's own map is a form of identity re-creation. Movement, in this sense, both exposes and elides power structures of identity containment. The novel's emphasis on movement is, therefore, ultimately an act of resistance, part of a larger quest to reclaim history.

Conclusion

The Talented Ribkins, through its emphasis on mobility and identity, demonstrates how stories matter, history matters. Johnny and Eloise's road trip across Florida is at once a literal and symbolic journey in which movement represents their process of identity formation. Through his travels with Eloise and through sharing stories of his past with her—particularly of his time with the Justice Committee and his mapmaking talent—Johnny can reclaim a lost part of himself; through teaching Eloise about her own talent and her history as a Ribkins, Johnny finds a renewed sense of purpose. Similarly, the road trip is significant for Eloise, too, as Johnny's stories and meeting other members of the Ribkins family help her understand who she is as a "talented" Ribkins. Looking at Hubbard's novel within the context of mobility studies can only help expand our understanding of its exploration of racial injustice, as its own effort in our current "freedom-of-movement" movement.

[1] The role of the supernatural in Hubbard's novel is an exciting and important area of inquiry, but it is beyond the scope of this essay. I leave it to other scholars to explore.

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Transnationality and Incorporation in the American Road: Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019)

***Keywords*:** American road, American West, women's narratives, *Lost Children Archive*

Abstract: Often set in the mythical landscapes of the American West, the American road narrative conveys the promise of spatial and social mobility that characterize the American Dream and that are made possible by going on the road. Nevertheless, this idea of mobility has been reserved to traditional road heroes—white, heteronormative men—and systemically excluded minorities from accessing the road in the same terms. Consequently, this had an impact on how American road narratives written by and about minorities have been received and analyzed. This article aims to analyze the novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019), written by Mexican-American author Valeria Luiselli, therefore applying a transnational perspective to the American road narrative genre. Drawing on Ann Brigham's concept of incorporation, it aims to understand how this narrative is positioned in the matrix of the genre and how it is able to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses that shape it.

Introduction

The American road narrative genre is one of the most iconic and appreciated genres in American literature; its epitome, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), has been called "one of the great American novels" (Pynchon 7).[1] This genre reflects the role of the road in the formation of the United States as a country and of American identity and citizenship, and also its growing importance, especially after the introduction of the car. According to Marin Marilyn C. Wesley, the U.S. is a "nation on the move" (xii) and the road and the car have been facilitators and boosters of mobility.

American road narratives have echoed the promise of mobility that is inherent to the road. Mobility, be it spatial or social, is a quintessential American characteristic, expressed since the time the first settlers arrived in the Eastern shores of the future country and started to

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move West. This process was mythicized in Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis (1893), a work that helped to create the myth of the Frontier. Turner's thesis was widely popular and used as a framework for understanding American identity since it was presented, despite many contemporary scholars pointing out its faults and contradictions (Mondi 30; Deverell 35; Limerick 63; Armitage 9).

Turner's thesis pinpoints westward expansion as the crucial building block shaping the American national character. He portrays the landscape of the American West as the Promised Land where Americans could live in a pastoral utopia of abundance and prosperity. This indicated that the land West of the Western frontier was available for them to take, and that the clashes between "savagery" (commonly understood as Native American culture) and civilization (white settlers) were justified. Thus, westward mobility reaffirmed American Exceptionalism and confirmed Manifest Destiny: the belief that the U.S. "was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently" (Shafer v) while the belief that Americans were entitled to the Promised Land, where they could live in a Western pastoral utopia would, in this way, fulfill the American Dream.

Roads were essential in facilitating westward expansion, thus contributing to the American Dream of spatial and social mobility. Indeed, within the American Road narrative, the road is often thought of as the new frontier: a place that offers opportunities for change and expansion, especially after the advent of the car. According to Rudolf Erben, "like the pioneers, the contemporary American reinvents himself on the road" (36), given that the automobile became a way to reopen the frontier declared closed by Turner, offering the promise of discovery that the pioneers had once experienced, as early automobile journeys mirrored their migrations routes. Also, more than the freedom of movement, there is an ontological freedom associated with the road, as its mythical character provides travelers with the opportunity to transgress the boundaries of the self.

In common road narratives, road heroes leave home in order to escape social order and/or to transform themselves. These heroes' journeys usually depict a white, male, Anglo-Saxon perspective of mobility, which relegates other social groups, such as women and African-American, to the background, denying them access to the promises of mobility and all that it encompasses. As explained by Alexandra Ganser, "social power relations have thus clearly shaped (auto)mobility as much as any other social practice" (16). The American road has been gendered masculine and marked by domestic/public and female/male dichotomies, where normative femininity is associated with the domestic realm/home and normative masculinity is associated with the public sphere/the road. This has produced spatial limitations

for women and has deemed the road unsafe and unfitting for them, creating obstacles and often punishing women who go on the road for their spatial transgression.

As space influences narratives and as these narratives have an impact on the lived realities of space, women have been relegated to the background, despite the publication of several American road narratives written by and about women, given that women have also been attracted to the promises offered by the road. Many of these narratives have contributed to or fallen into the same power structures that have kept women excluded from the literary canon of the American road narrative. Yet, at the same time, they have also confronted spatial limitations. Only by escaping the previously mentioned dichotomies can female authors and protagonists appropriate the road on their own terms. Ann Brigham proposes that we analyze road narratives through the lenses of incorporation, which she defines as a challenge to the simplistic view of mobility, given that it involves the pursuit of new avenues and opportunities for self-expression,

> a dynamic process of engagement … that counter understandings of mobility as an "either/or" proposition … Incorporation is not synonymous with seamless reattachment or reintegration into a preexisting world. Instead, incorporation is used to define a search for new spaces and options for subjectivity that will propel the traveler to a different location—whether that be spatial, intellectual, cultural, social, personal, or some combination thereof. (9)

This perspective focuses on shattering the constructed dichotomies and analyzing women's road journeys as complex and capable of offering new insights into the American road narrative genre. This article argues that *Lost Children Archive (LCA),* written by the Mexican-American author Valeria Luiselli[2] and published in 2019, is able to destabilize and question the discourses and structure of this genre, namely through its narrators, the portrayal of family separation, and through the character of the mother and the juxtaposition between her and the father. *LCA* is a book of fiction that picks up where Luiselli's previous book, *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), left off.[3]

Lost Children Archive: Reimagining the American Road

Despite its similarities with reality, or rather inspired by them, *LCA* is a fictional narrative. The novel starts in New York, where a family of four—father, mother, a ten-year-old

boy and five-year old girl, who remain nameless throughout the book—goes on the road to the U.S.-Mexico border, for the parents to work on their professional projects that involve soundscape. The family's trip intersects with the telling of the story of refugee children who cross the border and the history of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, the last Apache group that withstand both Mexican and American efforts of colonization.

First, it is important to address the fact that *LCA* is a narrative written by a Mexican author who lives in the U.S., where she has spent most of her adult life. More traditional road narrative scholars, such as Ronald Primeau, consider that only narratives written by American authors can be part of the American road narrative genre (1). Nevertheless, Ganser argues that narratives written by non-U.S. citizens should also be part of the genre (43). Likewise, scholars have emphasized the need to include Mexican authors when writing about the American West, given the fact that this physical and mythical space has influenced them, and still does, as much as it did American authors. Krista Comer adds that western American literature is "obsessed by borders and power and the violence of colonial desires" (206), which serve to exclude non-white authors. Cheyla R. Samuelson (2020) goes even further, arguing for a transnational approach to the American West, one that does not consider the nationality of the author. Both American road narratives and American West narratives, genres that are so intertwined that it is, at times, difficult to set them apart, are enriched by the contributions of non-U.S. authors, such as Luiselli, who can help reshape the genres to include intersectional perspectives and to mirror the experiences of the communities to which these authors belong, communities which have been systemically excluded.

To tell the story of the family's trip, *LCA* follows a fragmented structure and employs different points of view. Most of the story is narrated by the mother, who mainly tells the story of the family road trip, but towards the end of the novel, the boy takes over as the narrator. He tells the story from the future, recording his voice to recollect the adventure he and his sister had when running away from their parents. The public/private spatial dichotomy is questioned by placing not only a woman, but also a child, as the narrators, offering new protagonists in the narration of road stories. Additionally, there are excerpts of a fictitious book, *Elegies for Lost Children*, also Luiselli's creation. This book helps the reader to accompany the perspective of the migrant lost children, in their journey from Mexico to the border and through the Sonoran Desert. It renders visibility to their stories and sheds light on the disparity of situations between them and the children in the car.

Intertwined with the prose there is the description of the content of seven boxes with the belongings of the family, that range from books to migrant mortality reports. Nicólas

Campisi links the family's archive of boxes to a need of having something on the road that reminds them of home, "the idea of taking root while traveling, two seemingly opposing activities … become compatible through the figure of the archive" (37). Thus, this is one dimension where the novel contradicts traditional road narratives, where road protagonists leave everything that reminds them of home behind, in search for something new. On the contrary, in *LCA*, there is a physical collection of artifacts that connect the characters to their home and to their former unity as a family.

The reader learns, from the start, that the family is not a traditional one. As explained by the mother, "I'm a biological mother to one, a stepmother to the other, and a de facto mother in general to both of them. My husband is a father and a stepfather, to each one respectively, but also just a father" (Luiselli 6-7). Hence, the girl is the mother's biological daughter, while the boy is the father's biological son. It is also important to highlight that the mother is not American and it is hinted that she is from Mexico. The mother describes the family as a "tribe" that "became a family" (7). As explained by Heike Paul, the family has an important role in American society, ever since the creation of the country, being deeply connected to the process of nation building, "The family, both as a core institution and as a generalized code for intimacy and belonging, has a firm place in the American cultural imaginary. It appears as a guiding metaphor in foundational discourses of the U.S. and, time and again, serves as a dominant model to channel questions of citizenship, alongside real and imagined kinship. (139). Thus, presenting an atypical family, one composed by patchworks of previous families, can serve as a vehicle to counter hegemonic discourses on traditional American families. This is important in the context of the American road narrative genre, given that the family is usually an integral part of these narratives: it can be something that the road protagonist is trying to escape from, such as in *On the Road*, the reason that the protagonist went on the road, such as in William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* (1982), or even a burden the (female) road hero takes with her, as in Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here* (1986). In *LCA*, the family and family-related themes are central to the narrative and the road protagonists are both the mother and the boy. By presenting central figures that are uncommon in the context of the American road narrative, established practices of the genre are questioned.

At the beginning of the novel, we learn that the parents' marriage came to an end after the road trip. Framing the trip as a way of dealing with the family's separation connects *LCA* to Brigham's concept of incorporation: mobility is a dynamic process of engaging with social conflicts, in this case a divorce and the breakup of a family. Applying the lens of incorporation can be a way of approaching the power structures and discourses usually associated with the

white male canon of the American road narrative. It can also help destabilize the formula associated with the American road narrative—"preparation to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return and reentry" (Primeau 1)—and consequent narration of the road story.

The novel places political issues in the realm of domesticity through the portrayal of family separation as not only a family or societal issue but a legal, bureaucratic, and political one. This family separation refers to the families that are divided at the border, when the children cross alone and the adults stay behind, but also to the divorce of the parents and consequent separation of their children. As explained by the mother in *LCA*, "beginnings, middles, and ends are only a matter of hindsight. If we are forced to produce a story in retrospect, our narrative wraps itself selectively around the elements that seem relevant, bypassing all others" (Luiselli 62). Additionally, by showing "how the sphere of the international is inseparable from the spaces of the domestic, which includes the nation and the home" (Kollin 306), Luiselli questions once again the public/private spatial dichotomy of road narratives.

Moreover, the novel compares and contrasts the wife and husband's approach to the road trip, highlighting how masculine tropes of the American road narrative genre are reflected in the husband's behavior—and problematizing them—and how the wife serves to counteract it. It starts with the desire to depart and go (south)west, which is motivated by the husband. The wife does not want to go and is only convinced when she meets Manuela, the mother of two migrant children whose whereabouts are unknown after crossing the border. Promising to help her, she decides to go on the road. The wife and the husband are also in dissonance in their approach to the pace of the travel: the husband wants them to move faster, to stop less and to shorten their stays—echoing the frenetic pace and speed of Kerouacian travels—while the wife enjoys "the slow speed on secondary roads across parks, the long stops in diners and motels" (Luiselli 116).

Moreover, the motivations behind the trip differ within the couple: the husband wants to go to the southern borderlands to set up "an inventory of echoes" of "the ghosts of Geronimo and the last Apache" (Luiselli 21). The fact that the sounds the husband wants to record are only echoes of the past creates a sense of recovery of a lost story but also of dissipation and immateriality, given that they will never be fully heard: he wants to create an archive in the present, using an archive of the past. On the other hand, the wife wants to look for Manuela's daughters, but also to document the issue of migrant children crossing the border and being deported, through soundscape. This leads the wife narrator to describe him as a documentarian,

while she is a documentarist. This means that the wife is more "like a chemist" (Luiselli 99), and the work she does is "… about not fucking it up, about getting the facts of the story as right as possible … (Luiselli 99), and the husband is more "like a librarian … an acoustemologist [sic] and soundscape artist" (Luiselli 99-100), transmitting here the sense that what she does appears to be more tangible, while the husband has more artistic approach to archive creation. The wife confesses that her husband looks down on her work, believing that she has a "lack of greater aesthetical principles" and "a blind obedience to funders and funding" (Luiselli 100), showing he sees her more like someone who just records sounds, instead of an artist who creates an aesthetic experience.

Thus, there is a major contrast between the husband and wife's approaches to documenting and archival creation and even some contempt shown towards the wife's vision of these practices. The novel then goes on hinting that this, as well as their approach to the road trip, is influenced by gender differences, which leads scholar Patricia Stuelke to point out the similarity between the father and *On the Road*'s Sal Paradise, "just as Sal flees bourgeois domesticity for the rejuvenating possibility of the road West, the family's road trip is precipitated by the husband's desire to flee his marriage for the Southwest" (55). Interestingly, one of the husband's boxes, Box III, contains *On the Road*, as well as what the mother describes as "an all-male compendium of 'going a journey,' conquering and colonizing: *Heart of Darkness, The Cantos, The Waste Land, Lord of the Flies, On the Road, 2666*, the Bible" (Luiselli 43). He also has academic papers and biographical works about the Apache leaders whose echoes he is going to record in his box. Contrastingly, the wife's box is composed mainly of objects that relate to the migrant children she is documenting: maps, mortality reports or photographs of objects that were found next to dead bodies in the desert. Rivera Garza considers that the archive in fiction can be used to tell the "so-called bottom-up history" (135) and Peinado-Abarrio states that *LCA* manages to do so thanks to the character of the mother (106). Contrarily to her husband, who wants to tell "the 'Great Man' version of the story based on the single individual 'who makes History'" (Peinado-Abarrio 106), she sheds a light on the migrants who have been rendered invisible and whose stories were left untold. The parents' discussion around the books in the husband's boxes helps to shed light on the differing views of the couple, and on how Luiselli uses the father as an archetype for the Kerouacian type of male road protagonist and the mother as its antithesis. The husband considers *On the Road* the "a perfect choice" for them to listen to during the trip, while the wife recalls that, while reading the book, as well as others by Kerouac, she thought of novels as "infinite bowl of lukewarm soup," stating that she would "rather listen to evangelical radio than to *On the Road*" (Luiselli

76-77). Moreover, she recalls that her sister, who is a literature teacher, "always says that Kerouac is like an enormous penis, pissing all over the USA. She thinks that his syntax reads like he's marking his territory, claiming inches by slamming verbs into sentences, filling up silences" (77). The imagery provoked by this passage associates Kerouac with territory-marking and also evokes the conquest of the American West. Kerouac, the hero of the American road narrative, who has taken the genre for himself, shaping it in a way that other authors must adhere to, has produced a mythical idea of the American West, through his writing, an idea that has shaped the way this space is generally perceived.

In fact, there are several instances were Luiselli hints to the reader that she is aware of the tropes of the American road narrative genre, such as when the mother-narrator sees a "father, daughter, no mother" family that reminds her "of something Jack Kerouac said about Americans: after seeing them, you end up finally not knowing any more whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin. Though maybe Kerouac had said it of Robert Frank's pictures in his book *The Americans*, and not of Americans in general" (41). Through these witticisms, the author addresses some of the symbols of the American road narrative, showing that she is aware of their impact on the genre, while, at the same time, deconstructing the canonical place they occupy in these narratives. Another example of this approach is when the mother is looking at a photography book by Emmet Gowin, stating, "I still like him more than Robert Frank, Kerouac, and everyone else who has attempted to understand this landscape – perhaps because he takes his time looking at things instead of imposing a point of view on them" (Luiselli 87). This remark implies that Frank, Kerouac and other canonical figures of the American road tell their story according to their standpoint, which might not be suitable to paint a tentative full picture of the American road and, consequently, serves to augment its mythical nature. Frank's work, especially his *pièce de resistance*, *The Americans,* has been characterized by its immediacy and by the direct influence of Frank's vision of a certain scenery or subject. As put forward by Tod Papageorge, "the effect of Frank's pictures is inseparable from the direct, rapid voice that seems to inform them" (6). Contrastingly, Godwin's work has been characterized by a thoroughness and preparedness present in the photographs he took when documenting the Nevada Test Site, for example, or in the pictures he took of his wife, which "demand a slower process of looking and composing images" (Jain 2). This contrast brings back the wife and husband's approach to their work, as documentarist and documentarian, respectively.

Furthermore, *LCA* deconstructs the American road narrative genre through the mother's representational dilemma, as she is constantly questioning if she is the appropriate person to tell the story of the lost children to a wider audience, "Constant concerns: Cultural

appropriation, pissing all over someone else's toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories …?" (Luiselli 79). In classic road narratives, the journey often serves as a means of exploration, self-discovery, or the pursuit of freedom. By embedding the mother's ethical and representational dilemmas into the narrative, the novel pushes the readers to consider the implications of who gets to tell certain stories and how those stories are told. This introspection challenges the notion of the road as a space of simple discovery and freedom, instead presenting it as a site of moral and cultural complexity, which brings back Brigham's concept of incorporation. Likewise, this dilemma again showcases the mother's more cautious approach to the subjects being documented and the awareness she has of imposing her own perspectives onto others' experiences, which suggests a critical awareness of the power dynamics involved in storytelling.

In more than one instance, the mother acknowledges the major differences in the journey of her family and the journey of the migrant children. First, the direction of the family road trip is in the opposite direction from the migrant children—(south)west versus north—which attests how the U.S. territory is marked by spatial differences (Luiselli 47). Whereas for the family and for other legal travelers who go on the road, the final destination is the West, for migrant children the destination is always the North. Secondly, "they [migrant children] travel alone, on trains and on foot" (Luiselli 47), while the family travels by car, a symbol of (American) middle class comfort. In addition to this, "they [migrant children] travel without their fathers, without their mothers" (Luiselli 47), whereas the boy and the girl in the car are travelling with their parents. At the same time, the migrant children travel "without suitcases" (Luiselli 47), while the boy and the girl are allowed to have their own boxes to keep their belongings. The migrant children also travel "without passports" (Luiselli 47), while the family has passports, demonstrating that they have legal authorization to be mobile in the country. Moreover, the migrant children travel "always without maps" (Luiselli 47), whereas the family chooses not to follow the GPS as a form of symbolic protest. Finally, the migrant children "have to cross national borders, rivers, deserts, horrors. And those who finally arrive are placed in limbo, are told to wait" (Luiselli 47). This series of details exposes the reality that, in the end, the children, not knowing if they will be able to stay or will be deported, will probably not find the closure to their stories and situations that the family will, even if it is not a "happy" one—the parents' divorce and siblings' separation—a closure that American road narrative protagonists usually find.

Furthermore, the mother is in conflict over how to tell the story of migrant children to her own children (48), showing another layer regarding power dynamics in storytelling, one that is not only concerned with the present but also with the future, and about how next generations will perceive these stories. This is patent when she exposes some doubts about the children's games in the car, where they role-play as lost children and as Apache. She deems these games "as silly and frivolous" and "irresponsible and even dangerous" (155), given the children in the car have not experienced the adversities the lost children and the Apache have. At the same time, she considers that the children, through these games, have the possibility to reinvent their stories and create alternative endings, asking herself, "What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes? What if he'd won the war? The lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!" (75). For the mother, the children's games can put into question the history of the removal of Native Americans and the present-day plight of migrant children. According to Campisi, it is the children who can "reframe the present through the creation of new words and cosmogonic narratives" (44), having the presumptive power to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and appropriations of space. The mother realizes that history itself is characterized by reenactment, as she interconnects the predicaments of the Apache and of migrant children (Luiselli 146), underscoring the novel's exploration of how history is not just remembered and recorded, but actively reenacted, highlighting the ongoing struggle to confront and understand the recurring patterns of injustice and suffering that shape both the past and the present. This culminates with the mother concluding that "maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of reenactment of the past" (Luiselli 155). Reenactment reveals the gaps and silences in the history of migrant children and Native Americans, while also addressing the selective and sometimes biased or unreliable representation of events. Nevertheless, it offers the opportunity to build or rebuild a more comprehensive archive of marginalized voices and overlooked experiences, allowing for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of history.

Conclusion

LCA offers a new approach to the American road narrative, one where the crimes of the past and present are exposed and unveiled by characters who were not considered part of the American road genre up until recently. By presenting the members of a "tribe" family as central figures, where the mother and the boy are the narrators, it destabilizes common practices of the genre, where the narrator is usually the white male protagonist. Another way the novel

questions the spatial order associated with American road narratives is by portraying family separation as a legal, bureaucratic, and political issue, and the road trip as a mechanism to deal with this event. When analyzing mobility as a process of engaging with social conflict and not as a process of breaking away from society, it is possible to engage with road novels through a different lens, one that is not marked by strict dichotomies such as public/private and male/female, and which can offer new hindsight on the genre, as proposed by Brigham.

LCA also counterpoints traditional American road narratives through the portrayal of the husband and the wife as opposites. The husband is heavily influenced by road archetypes: he uses the journey to end his marriage, while also feeling free to pursue his art on his own terms, and is concerned with telling a Great Man version of the story, in Peinado-Abarrio's phrasing. By contrast, the wife is concerned with getting the facts right, taking her time to document the journey and wants to tell the story of migrant children who have been rendered invisible. The wife also serves as a vessel to address the representational dilemma that is inherent to the novel: who can tell the story of migrant children? Is it appropriate for an upper-middle class legal citizen to be their voice? By constantly questioning and negotiating the different standpoints, *LCA* better positions itself to chronicle these (fictional) realities.

Thus, this novel's contribution to the genre allows readers and scholars to question the tropes associated with American road narratives and with the American West, as it uproots traditional readings of the genre. Given that the author, Valeria Luiselli, and the mother protagonist were not born in the United States, this article calls attention to the need to engage with transnational perspectives to the American road narrative genre, perspectives that focus on stories that reveal power structures and discourses of American exceptionalism and mythologized representations of the road and the people who get to be mobile in it.

[1] Despite *On the Road*'s undeniable influence in American literature, its conservative approach to themes such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality has been exposed by several scholars, such as Alexandra Ganser (2009).
[2] Valeria Luiselli is Mexican-born but has lived most of her adult life in the United States.
[3] *Tell Me How It Ends* is a book of non-fiction that depicts the experience of the author working as a translator for undocumented children who had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border.

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"Jus' hol' yuh breath an' kick":
Queer Self-Made Womanhood in Nicole Dennis-Benn's "Swimmer"

Keywords: myth, self-made man, American dream, displacement, migrant, LGBTQ+

Abstract: This article performs a close reading of the essay "Swimmer," written by the Jamaican American novelist Nicole Dennis-Benn and published in the anthology *The Good Immigrant USA: 26 Writers Reflect on America* (2019). On the one hand, "Swimmer" endorses the myths of the self-made man and the American dream by describing the remarkable achievements of its author, regardless of all the obstacles in her way. On the other hand, though, it questions the American success mythology by shedding light on the hardships faced by migrants. As a result, this article considers the following research questions: "Does Nicole Dennis-Benn's 'Swimmer' both legitimize and challenge the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream?" and, if so, "In which way are the myths of the self-made man and of the American dream simultaneously celebrated and questioned in 'Swimmer'?". To do so, this analysis adopts an approach located within the field of cultural studies, embracing its interdisciplinary nature and combining literary studies with American and Jamaican history and culture, while departing from Heike Paul's problematization of American myths in *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014).

Following the publication of the award-winning *The Good Immigrant* (2016), an anthology of essays edited by Nikesh Shukla and written by Black, Asian, and minority ethnic writers that explore the experience of living as a migrant in the United Kingdom, *The Good Immigrant USA: 26 Writers Reflect on America* (2019) was published. The book, edited once again by Shukla alongside Chimene Suleyman (a contributor to the original volume), is a well-curated selection of tales from artists and writers sharing their own personal stories about living in America during the first presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021) as first- or second-generation immigrants.[1] These

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autobiographical accounts chronicle the precariousness of coming from an immigrant background in a country that, at the time that the authors were writing, was witnessing the reemergence of far right and white supremacist rhetoric. This timely collection also alludes to some of America's core narratives of national beginnings in an ambivalent manner, specifically the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream.[2]

While the myth of the American dream, which can be traced back to James Truslow Adams (1878-1949) and his book *The Epic of America* (1931), has been described by Heike Paul, in her work *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014), as "a kind of 'umbrella myth' that encompasses all others" (16), the myth of the self-made man relates to popular expressions such as "rags-to-riches." First coined by Henry Clay (1777-1852) in 1832, the success myth is deeply connected not only to Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) or Horatio Alger (1832-1899), but also to the belief that, through sheer hard work and talent, anyone can successfully climb the social ladder in the United States.

However, and as the phrasing of the expression suggests, the myth of the self-made man historically applies to white (and largely heterosexual) males (Paul 390-91), excluding women, ethnic minorities, and those identifying as anything other than heterosexual. By doing so, and because it is a myth of national origins, the myth of the self-made man suggests that white heterosexual men alone were essential and necessary in the founding of the American nation. This argument is further supported by the fact that Franklin, the prototypical self-made man, additionally described as "the *homo americanus* par excellence" (Paul 370-71), is a central figure of the myth of the Founding Fathers.

Traditional versions of the success narrative have not gone unchallenged and have been persistently appropriated by marginalized groups such as migrants, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Among these is Jamaican-born Nicole Dennis-Benn, the celebrated author of the highly praised novels *Here Comes the Sun* (2016) and *Patsy* (2019), and the writer of "Swimmer," an autobiographical short story about her first years in America as a lesbian, Black immigrant woman, included in *The Good Immigrant*. Throughout her account, the Jamaican American novelist endorses, on the one hand, the myth of the self-made man, and, alongside it, the myth of the American dream, describing her own remarkable achievements, regardless of all the obstacles in her way. On the other hand, though, the writer of "Swimmer" calls into question the American success mythology by depicting the hardships faced by migrants such as herself. As

a result, this article considers the following research questions: "Does Nicole Dennis-Benn's 'Swimmer' both legitimize and challenge the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream?" and, if so, "In which way are the myths of the self-made man and of the American dream simultaneously celebrated and questioned in 'Swimmer'?". To do so, this analysis performs a close reading of the tale mentioned above, adopting an approach located within the field of cultural studies and embracing its interdisciplinary nature to combine literary studies with American and Jamaican history and culture.

Experiencing the crushing effects of her nation's classism, complexionism, and homophobia,[3] Dennis-Benn, a dark-skinned homosexual girl from a working-class family, starts her narrative by explaining why she decided to move to the United States ("Swimmer" 17) in 1999, at the age of seventeen (Roney). Establishing a parallel between herself and her father, who had arrived undocumented in America years earlier (Dennis-Benn, "My First Visit") and who fixed "rich people's pools in Long Island when he wasn't driving his taxi" (Dennis-Benn, "Swimmer" 16), the author states that she "had left home for more or less the same reasons he did – the ability to thrive, the desire for upward mobility" ("Swimmer" 17).

The idea of rising above one's socioeconomic status, central to the myth of the self-made man and mentioned by the writer herself through the key expression "upward mobility" permeates the passage presented above, connecting the novelist's experiences and desires with those of her father's and with many immigrant narratives of self-making. It also clearly evokes optimistic stories of self-made manhood, such as the ones written by Alger, populated by "impoverished boys who through hard work and virtue achieve great wealth and respect" (qtd. in Paul 373). However, and unlike her father or Alger's boys, the narrator also sought sexual liberation, adding "and though unlike him [her father] I didn't have children to support, I knew deep down that I'd want them with a woman" ("Swimmer" 17). As a result, Dennis-Benn's displacement[4] is a means of escape, not only from a precarious socioeconomic situation, but also from a country where she would not be able to safely embrace her sexual orientation in an open way.

After arriving in the United States, Dennis-Benn joined a community college in Long Island, and what might at first have seemed a hopeful take on the myth of the self-made man begins to unravel. Indeed, the author describes how she would sit in classes with other immigrants who were "pursuing dreams of careers in nursing, physical therapy, radiology, teaching . . . sensible jobs that could allow them to send money back home or help them to afford rent in homes where

they lived with other family members" ("Swimmer" 18). Whatever passions these students might have had had to be pushed aside, so that they could not only provide for themselves, but also for those with whom they lived or who they left behind, in their home countries. In many cases, they were already doing so, working two or more jobs while studying, as the writer describes, striving to complete a two-year degree that would likely take them four years to finish, given the heavy workload that they were juggling. As the novelist explains, migrants living in the United States, such as herself and her classmates, did not have the luxury of choosing what they wanted, having instead to settle for what was necessary, which, in this case, was a college education that would allow them to access a down-to-earth profession in a relatively short amount of time.

The narrator's depiction of her first experience in higher education is in sharp contrast to Franklin's idealized thoughts on self-perfectibility, described at length in his *Autobiography* (1791), a sort of success manual where he explains how he rose from "Obscurity" to "some Degree of Reputation in the World" (qtd. in Paul 371). The embodiment of the self-made man in American culture (Paul 370), Franklin characterizes himself as an autodidact who went from being a printer's apprentice with little formal education to a well-respected statesman thanks to his "industry" and "frugality" (qtd. in Paul 371). In the second part of Franklin's *Autobiography*, he even sketches out the self-improvement scheme that he supposedly followed on a daily basis, which was then referenced by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) in *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

With self-perfectibility looming large in his text as a means of achieving upward social mobility (Paul 372), Franklin celebrates individualism and free will, while also suggesting "that everyone is responsible for their own fate and success in life" (Paul 372). However, and despite the amount of industry and frugality displayed by Dennis-Benn's Long Island classmates, alongside their determination to acquire an education and to make it in America, the odds were against them and they simply "couldn't afford for their ambitions to be bigger than their pockets unless their ambitions would prove to be lucrative" ("Swimmer" 18).

It was the inability to follow her own passion, combined with the need to find a practical job, that led the author to choose medicine, eventually applying for an Ivy League university, to escape her father's Long Island apartment, following her Jamaican and homophobic stepmother's discovery of her romantic feelings towards women and the hostile climate that ensued. As soon as she got her acceptance letter, after working "extra hard" ("Swimmer" 19), a classic trope of narratives of self-made manhood, she was "whisked . . . off to campus" ("Swimmer" 20), where

she was dropped off "like a sack of clothes at Goodwill" ("Swimmer" 20), holding a single suitcase. While the parents of her soon-to-be classmates could be seen "carrying heavy boxes, bean-bag chairs, shelves" ("Swimmer" 17) and cradling "special lamps, pillows, fleece comforters, and bags of snacks" ("Swimmer" 17), she was left by herself. With a hundred dollars in her pocket and without any basic items, such as sheets, pillows, comforters, toiletries, or other things that she would surely need for her "quiet, empty room" ("Swimmer" 17), she quickly found herself spending the financial aid money for books on the essential things that her classmates already had ("Swimmer" 18). This dismantles the fallacious assumption that there is equality of opportunity in America, on which the myth of the self-made man is based, illustrating the fact that "not all start out even or compete on an equal footing" (Paul 368) and putting the novelist at a clear disadvantage when compared to the other students.

The misleading belief in "competitive equality" (Paul 368) intersects with the utopian vision of the United States as a classless society, or, at the very least, "as a society that allows considerable social mobility" (Paul 368), another typical trait of American success narratives. This vision is also called into question by "Swimmer," specifically when the narrator's father, whose work van "stood out on campus next to the Volvos, Lexus, and BMWs" (16) of the other parents, drops her off and leaves her with the advice "Know yuh place, keep quiet, an' work hard" ("Swimmer" 16), before departing abruptly. By recommending that his daughter should accept her position in society and keep her head down, he signals that he does not fail to perceive America's highly stratified nature.

Dennis-Benn depicts her own distressing feelings as a product of the alienation that accompanied her efforts to adapt to her new surroundings, highlighting the fact that migrants striving to succeed in America need more than just hard work and talent, as the success narrative of the self-made man suggests. Without the emotional and financial support network that her classmates benefited from, Dennis-Benn was overwhelmed by feelings of dread and the taste of seawater. These sensations began to set in shortly after she was left to fend for herself, as memories of her father's swimming lessons when she was only three years old resurfaced. His advice, "Jus' hol' yuh breath an' kick" ("Swimmer" 17), which clearly evokes the hard work ethic of the self-made man myth, came back to her, impelling her to push through the unsettling emotions related to her displacement. Like Dennis-Benn, migrants must also confront the crushing emotional

distress of being separated from their homes, families, friends, or even the small community colleges where they may have begun their journeys ("Swimmer" 18).

Yet, the novelist could not bring herself to share these disconcerting feelings with anyone, "[f]or how could one be sad in America? How could one complain about an opportunity to go away to college knowing they'd come out with a degree from an Ivy League, which would forever establish them in their new country?" ("Swimmer" 18). Scribbling poems about home inside her biology textbooks and reading books to cope with her new country, the narrator was only saved from the depths of her "homesickness and loneliness" ("Swimmer" 20) when a literature professor, with whom she was spending her first Thanksgiving away, told her that she had never truly left home, for home had always been with her in her memories ("Swimmer" 20). Dennis-Benn's experience, nevertheless, still stresses the downside of displacement, which at this point in the author's narrative stops being a positive force that can lead to upward mobility and sexual liberation, becoming instead the catalyst for the writer's debilitating emotional pain.

The issue of privilege is approached in connection with other related issues, such as choice, talent and hard work. Now enrolled at an Ivy League university that most immigrants could only dream of attending, the novelist realized that, despite her desire to improve her social standing, she did not wish to become a doctor. Instead, she wished she "could desire something simply because [she] was told to desire it" ("Swimmer" 21). She began considering a change to a major with a creative writing minor, and after sharing this with her new pre-med friends, who were also of immigrant background, they asked her "If you want English, then what are you doing here?" ("Swimmer" 21). The question not only served as a reminder that she seemed to be taking the privilege of studying pre-med at an Ivy League university for granted, but also highlighted that other first-generation immigrants would "kill" ("Swimmer" 21) to be in her place. For them, it was a matter of "life or death" ("Swimmer" 21), given that many, if not all, were carrying the weight of their families on their backs. As the author's friends understood, success did not depend solely on being talented and working hard, as the myth of the self-made man suggests, but also on choosing the right major and getting into the right university. By opting for something within the Humanities which she found fulfilling, she appeared to be throwing away her chances of future prosperity, apparently insensitive to the fact that many would gladly take her spot.

The word choice employed by the narrator, who uses the verb "kill" and the expression "life or death," as shown above, is especially significant if one considers the "often

unacknowledged social Darwinist underpinnings" (Paul 388) of the myth of the self-made man. Developed by British sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), among others, social Darwinism departs from the belief that societies are organisms that develop according to the process of natural selection and to the principle of "survival of the fittest," coined by Spencer himself, which results in the ineptest dying out and the fittest surviving. This theory is often employed to justify and naturalize class stratification, claiming that there are natural inequalities among individuals, with those who display supposedly "superior and inherent moral attributes such as industriousness, temperance, and frugality" (The Editors), which Franklin uses to describe himself and which Alger associates with his hardworking boys, being able to acquire personal property.

According to this view, the poor are simply unfit to become successful and they should not be aided through any sort of state intervention or other types of means, for doing so would interfere with natural processes akin to biological selection that should not be meddled with (The Editors). Social Darwinism is also connected to the illusion of equality, addressed above, which, as was stated previously, disregards the fact that not everyone starts on a level playing field, as is the case of Dennis-Benn, of the classmates she met in both Long Island and her Ivy League university, and of most of the first- and second-generation immigrants that "would kill to take [her] spot" ("Swimmer" 21). In the case of migrants such as this, it is not simply success or self-made manhood that is on the line, however, but "sheer survival" (Paul 388), as the novelist makes clear when she states that attending a top university is no laughing matter, symbolizing instead "life or death" ("Swimmer" 21).

Coping with displacement and ensuing feelings is also framed as part of the wider issue of sexual expression. Dennis-Benn's hopes of sexual liberation soon came to partial fruition, though, after she moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for graduate school, where she dated a Jamaican woman who initially seemed like a miracle, simply because she was Jamaican and loved other women ("Swimmer" 22). However, this woman clearly was a closeted lesbian who perhaps was also grappling with internalized homophobia. Regardless of this, and despite later being forced to come out to her homophobic mother after one of her multiple breakups with this Jamaican woman, which led to her no longer being welcomed at home, the writer threw herself deeper into the relationship as a way to cope with the feelings that she was experiencing, a consequence of her displacement. As the novelist states, "she was the only thing I had left of home. There weren't many women I could share histories with – a culture, a whole country. She probably chose me for the same reason"

(“Swimmer” 22). While they were still together, the Jamaican woman she was seeing, who was also studying to be a doctor, would tell her that they couldn’t afford to be the way they were (“Swimmer” 22), meaning they were not able to be both Black and lesbians and still be successful, thereby acknowledging the profound shortcomings of the myth of self-made manhood. Although the narrator felt like telling her that in America they were free to be whoever they wanted to be, she confides to the reader that she, too, had considered passing as straight to achieve success, which stresses the added difficulties faced by migrants who are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

As Dennis-Benn argues, both she and her girlfriend were expected to be “good immigrants,” the phrase that gives the anthology in which the essay under analysis is featured its title. The Jamaican woman she was dating certainly tried to live up to those expectations, wishing to return home and make a difference, feeling it was her responsibility to do so. However, the notion of "good immigrants" (“Swimmer” 23) clearly comments on the widely disseminated belief that migrants are intrinsically bad. As Shukla and Suleyman describe in their “Editor’s Note,” immigrants are commonly perceived as “job stealers, benefit scroungers, girlfriend thieves, and criminals” (xi). The editors further state that immigrants are only deemed good “when they win an Olympic medal, treat you at your local hospital, or rescue a child from the side of a building” (xi), or, as the author suggests, when they surpass every expectation and become the shining example of a self-made Jamaican woman who was able to make it in America.

However, the writer’s tone displays a weary and cynical dimension, signaling her disillusionment not only with such unreasonable expectations of success, but also with their connection to far-right and white-supremacist rhetoric, indissociable from Trump and his vertiginous ascendancy to power, which culminated in his election as president of the United States in 2016. By that time, Trump was lamenting the presence of “criminal aliens” (Dennis-Benn, “My First Visit”) in America, despite the fact that it was those same aliens that “got up to scrub floors, mother other people’s children, clean toilets, lay bricks without helmets or health insurance . . . deliver food on bicycles through pouring rain and blizzards, drive taxis, and sweep train stations” (Dennis-Benn, “My First Visit”) while the country still slept.

It was also thanks to “criminal aliens” such as the narrator’s own father, who worked two jobs on just two-hours of sleep and who had the courage to move to the United States “to start over for the sake of his family” (Dennis-Benn, “My First Visit”), that Dennis-Benn became an American

citizen with two Master's degrees from some of the world's most prestigious universities, later acquiring the status of an award-winning novelist. Trump's xenophobic and outright racist rhetoric, however, has only become more extremist as the years have gone by. He even remarked, at a political rally while running for Republican candidate for the 2024 presidential election, that undocumented immigrants like the narrator's father were poisoning the blood of America (Helmore), which clearly echoes Nazi rhetoric, despite how many times Trump repeats he has never read *Mein Kampf* (Ibssa et al.).

Seventeen years after arriving in the United States, Dennis-Benn published her first book to much critical acclaim, following her marriage to her wife, whom she met when she moved to New York and who impelled her to write. By all accounts, she had made it in America, as her Ivy League friends insisted (Dennis-Benn, "Swimmer" 25-26) and as she herself admitted in an interview to *The Florida Review*. In it, she additionally declared that in Jamaica "a lot of people fantasize about heading up North, like heading to the United States" (qtd. in Roney), while also declaring that "for a lot of us, it's freedom, freedom to be ourselves" (qtd. in Roney). Dennis-Benn was able to find that freedom, not only to become a writer, but also to marry her wife, fulfilling her desire for upward mobility and for sharing her life with another woman, thus achieving her own version of queer self-made womanhood and, in addition, of the American dream. Swimming "out of the current, parallel to shore, and trust[ing] that the waves would carry [her]" ("Swimmer" 27), an ability that Dennis-Benn looks at as the true measure of her success, she stayed true to one of her father's earliest pieces of advice, namely, "[j]us' hol' yuh breath an' kick" ("Swimmer" 27), working hard while dealing with the painful emotions associated with displacement that had made her feel like she had been "treading in the deep end of the ocean all along" ("Swimmer" 27).

As this article demonstrated, and in answer to the research questions presented at the beginning, Dennis-Benn does both celebrate and criticize the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream. On the one hand, "Swimmer" presents the success narrative of a prizewinning writer, who, despite coming from a working-class context, being the subject of complexionism in Jamaica, and facing her own family's homophobia, embraces displacement as a means of acquiring financial and sexual freedom and gets into some of the most prestigious universities from the United States, later publishing her own novels thanks to her hard work and talent. On the other hand, though, the short story draws attention to the distressing

emotions that go hand in hand with displacement and highlights the grim reality of first-generation immigrants trying to make it in America while financially supporting their own families.

In addition to this, “Swimmer” emphasizes the inequality and social stratification that separate newly arrived migrants from those whose parents were already born in America, and the hard choices that LGBTQ+ immigrants are forced to make to become successful, especially if they are also female and Black. However, the tale’s biggest challenge to the myths of the self-made man and of the American dream, typically connected to narratives centered around white heterosexual males such as Franklin and Alger’s boys, comes from the fact that it symbolically rejects a white heteropatriarchal worldview by giving voice to a Black homosexual woman, with whom many of those who have ever felt oppressed because of who they are, be it in regards to their skin color, socioeconomic status, gender, or sexual preferences, can deeply relate to.

[1] While a first-generation immigrant can be described as "a person born in a country other than her/his country of residence and whose residence period in the host country is, or is expected to be, at least 12 months" ("Archive"), a second-generation immigrant is "[a] person who was born in and is residing in a country that at least one of their parents previously entered as a migrant" ("second-generation migrant").

[2] According to Richard Slotkin, myths, or the mythic expression of ideology, are "stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 5). The author then adds that, over a period of time and through "frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, 'icons,' 'keywords' or historical cliches" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 5). See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 5-8 and Slotkin, "Mythogenesis," *passim*.

[3] In an interview to *The Florida Review*, Dennis-Benn explained that in Jamaica people are often discriminated against because of having a darker complexion, connected to complexionism, of belonging to the working class, associated with classism, and of being part of the LGBTQI+ community, indissociable from homophobia (Roney). In particular, prejudice against homosexual and transgender people in Jamaica has been extensively examined by the United Nations Development Programme in their 2023 report *Being LGBT in Jamaica: National Survey for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons in Jamaica*.

[4] In *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* (2015), Pramod K. Nayar explains that displacement, usually employed in conjunction with dislocation, can refer to different types of physical movement, such as when Europeans moved to the colonies or when Africans were trafficked as slaves to the Caribbean, for example. This type of dislocation is, as Nayar points out, at the very heart of the imperial project. However, within postcolonial literature, displacement often addresses "the sense of cultural and social alienation experienced by the migrant when seeking to adapt to a new society/country" (52). When diasporic individuals leave their home countries, they remain connected to them, as do their own personal identities, even when they have already successfully settled in a new place. In some cases, displacement can be a positive force, representing "freedom to be oneself" (52), specifically when the home country is oppressive and intolerant, persecuting those who, like Dennis-Benn, exhibit a sexual orientation that goes against heteronormativity.

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William Least Heat-Moon's American Travels: Representing Spaces through the American Road Narrative

Keywords: American road narrative, mobility, ecocriticism, geocriticism

Abstract: William Least Heat-Moon embarked on a road trip across the United States in 1978, after having lost his job as a professor and after divorcing. With his van, called *Ghost Dancing*, after Native American ceremonies, Heat-Moon hits the open road for three months, travelling only through the backroads of America, with the intention to find pristine places. These experiences on the road are recounted in his well-known road book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982). The aim of this article is to discuss the representation of space—natural and manmade—within Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways,* using ecocritical and geocritical studies as a methodological mapping for the analysis. Applying the ecocritical and geocritical approaches will contribute to provide a more comprehensive study on the topic of space, leading also to a reconsideration of the genre of the American road narrative, and consequently, providing new insights on mobilities and space studies.

Introduction: Revising the American Road and Its Narrative

The American road narrative has been flourishing as a distinctive American genre particularly since the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), which is generally considered the novel that has marked not only a generation—the Beats—but also a whole genre. However, as road scholar Ronald Primeau claims, "The American road narrative … reaches back over hundreds of years of storytelling about a culture on the move" (18), this implicitly emphasizing that mobility is something rooted in the American character and that the road genre has become its modern literary and cultural product. The American fascination with mobility is rooted in America's history, being a feature that has marked the nation since its early beginnings, before any existence of roads or road tropes. As, in fact, Ann Brigham has stressed, "… the American, or perhaps more accurately, the Euro-American,

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national imaginary has been profoundly shaped by the promise of mobility: the freedom to go anywhere and become anyone" (*American Road Narratives* 3).

Mobility has almost always denoted a social achievement or progress, as well as territorial expansion. America was founded through journeys and through the successive conquest of frontiers/spaces. Thus, mobility allowed new opportunities and (self)reinvention as well as the extension of the American territory. Mobility occurred in space and space was discovered through mobility, this suggesting how they complement each other. Mobility held the promise of escape and of reinvention, and it opened new territories from which to start over again.

The road genre, in its literary, but also its filmic and other artistic forms, has gained popularity, particularly since Jack Kerouac's publication of *On the Road*, as previously stated. However, academic works seems to have been increasing fairly recently, this showing how the road genre is a fertile ground for research. In "Critical Meeting Places: Major Approaches to the American Road Narrative," Ann Brigham acknowledges the popularity of the road narrative genre, while also recognizing a kind of vacuum within the academic debate: "The road may be long and well traveled, but scholarly analysis of the road narrative is a newer and much less populated landscape. Even though road narratives date back to the early twentieth century … the first study book to define the genre did not appear until 1996" (15). Furthermore, Brigham stresses the importance of rethinking the transgressive character of road stories, suggesting one should avoid the general idea of transgression as intrinsically good (*American Road Narratives* 9). Overall, American road narratives have been interpreted through metaphorical lenses, in the sense that the American road has almost always meant the possibility of something else, neglecting, for instance, that that very same road not only crosses the American space, but it is also a space itself as well as a generator of other spaces, "Because the road is a geographical construct, the insights of geographers seem particularly important to help literary critics develop an approach to it that goes beyond viewing it as a metaphorical and physical space outside of social reality and structures" (Brigham, "Critical Meeting Places" 30). Thus, Brigham provides new paths for reflection, while also encouraging the relevance of interdisciplinarity, contributing to viewing matters from different angles, and, therefore, allowing us to debunk traditional readings and interpretations.

This article intends to provide a different outlook on this specific American literary genre by shifting the focus on how spaces—natural and manmade—are represented in William Least Heat-Moon's nonfictional road book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982), while also reflecting on mobility. Thus, instead of merely engaging with the author's feelings and with the overall idea of the road as a transformer of life, the article engages with ecocritical and geocritical theories in order

to place at the center of analysis (no longer the human but rather) the environment along the American road.

As Brigham has argued, the American road has mostly been considered "as a mythic space of possibility" (*American Road Narratives* 4), "as an unanchored space" (*American Road Narratives* 6), almost as something that transcends reality. Similarly to mobility, space has been dealt with in a stable way, almost as unchangeable. The influential works of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault and, in general, the spatial turn in the social sciences and humanities have fostered a more comprehensive reconsideration of space and place. The interlaced conversation between literature and geography and the emergence of literary approaches, such as ecocriticism and geocriticism contributed to give voice to spaces. Ecocriticism "seek[s] to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticise the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place" (Garrard 4), while geocriticism "embraces space in its mobile heterogeneity" (Westphal 73), thus providing a wide-ranging approach on space, comprising also ideological and social relations. As Tally T. Jr. and Battista argue, "While distinctive in meaningful ways, both ecocriticism and geocriticism share a concern for the manner in which spaces and places are perceived, represented, and ultimately used" (2), thus proving to be complementary tools for a better perception and awareness of spaces in literary texts. Furthermore, Peter Merriman argues that we should "rethink movement and mobility as not simply occurring *in* or *across* space and time, but as actively shaping or producing multiple, dynamic spaces and times" (1), therefore showing the correlation between mobility and space, and how, in the end, they mold each other.

A selection of spaces will be proposed and analyzed, such as natural spaces, manmade ones, and spaces that were built because of the American love affair with (auto)mobility. Thus, I pay attention to how Heat-Moon represents those spaces and ask whether he does it in a superficial manner or not, namely if there is a thorough reflection on them and if a certain degree of environmental awareness is present. By also relying on more specific texts about the discussed environments and not only on Heat-Moon's representations of them, thus, following what Bertrand Westphal has called "the interface between world and text" (112), this article further contributes to the field of environmental and space studies, and of the American road narrative, proposing new paths of interpretation.

The Spaces across the Road and on the Roadside: Representations of Natural and Built Environments in *Blue Highways*

In 1978, departing from Columbia, Missouri, William Least Heat-Moon embarked on a road trip with his van named *Ghost Dancing*, after Native American ceremonies. Heat-Moon decided to leave after he got divorced and lost his job as an English teacher. The road became the place to look for a purpose,

> A man who couldn't make things go right could at least go. He could quit trying to get out of the way of life. Chuck routine. Live the real jeopardy of circumstance … The result: … to set out on a long (equivalent to half the circumference of the earth), circular trip over the back roads of the United States. Following a circle would give a purpose—to come around again—where taking a straight line would not. (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 3)

Thus, for Heat-Moon, the American road represents an escape from ordinary life, a safe territory where adventures can be experienced and where meaning can be recovered, especially by tracing a circle. This idea of the circle comes from Native American beliefs, and, particularly, from what John Niehardt, in *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), calls "The Power of the World," an overall idea of connection and knowledge among things, following the natural cycle.

Heat-Moon looks for connection while travelling through his alien land, likely implying that, until that moment, he was feeling detached from his country. Thus, there is an urge to reestablish a certain kind of acquaintance with America, and to see whether some sort of connection is still possible. Thus, he claims, "With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land, I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 5). The lure of the open road is clearly felt, it being the place where a man can lose himself, alluding hinting at a journey of self-(re)discovery and of regeneration: "Maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens up an inner one. STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, the old railroad crossing signs warned. Whitman calls it 'the profound lesson of reception.' New ways of seeing can disclose new things: … Do new things make for new ways of seeing?" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 17). The road is the medium of observation, where the exterior, what surrounds him, might give room to introspection and self-examination, and, by mentioning Walt Whitman and its "profound lesson of reception," the idea of knowledge across the road is, once more, emphasized.

But does Heat-Moon offer a deep reflection on American spaces? How are they considered and represented?

Mobility towards Loss of Localness and Destruction: The American Road and the Surrounding Environment

Heat-Moon is looking for a more rural place, not encroached by modernity, where small businesses are still operating, and, particularly, where the idea of community is still at work and connection is still appreciated and cherished. In the chapter "West by Southwest," he depicts himself driving through Arizona, on highway 260, an Arizona state route, with the desire to arrive at the next town, Heber,

> I began anticipating Heber, the next town. One of the best moments of any day on the road was, toward sunset, looking forward to the last stop. At Heber I hoped for an old hotel with a little bar off to the side where they would serve A-1 on draft under a stuffed moosehead; or maybe I'd find a grill dishing up steak and eggs on blue-rimmed platters. I hoped for people who had good stories, people who sometimes took you home to see their collection of carved peach pits. (*Blue Highways* 172)

Heber is thought to be a smalltown, still characterized by its own specific features, which render it a place. Geographer Tim Cresswell has drawn a distinction between space and place, explaining that space needs to be endowed with meaning to become a place, "Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning—as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one of such way) it becomes a place" (10). Looking at places involves also looking at attachments, connections, and experiences (Cresswell 11), something that is missing in Heber. In Heat-Moon's road trip, small-town Heber is represented first as an idealization, and, shortly after, as the real space, or at least, as perceived through Heat-Moon's eyes, as he further comments,

> That was the hope. But Heber was box houses and a dingy sawmill, a couple of motels and filling stations, a glass-and-Formica cafe. Heber had no center, no focus for the eye and soul: neither a courthouse, nor high church steeple, not hotel. Nothing has done more to take a sense of civic identity, a feeling of community, from small-town America than the loss of

> old hotels to the motel business. The hotel was once where things coalesced, where you could meet both townspeople and travelers. Not so in a motel. No matter how you build it, the motel remains a haunt of the quick and dirty … Motels can be big, but never grand. (*Blue Highways* 172-173)

According to Heat-Moon, one of the causes that led Heber to become a soulless place is the loss of hotels and its replacement with motels. He views hotels as places in which connection and sharing were possible. Motels, instead, are regarded as nefarious for localness, being mainly built environments that promote standardization.

The first motels appeared during the 1920s and they were distinguishable from hotels, which were located in city centers, whereas motels were usually smaller and situated outside towns. The motels' upsurge, and especially that of chain motels, is a consequence of American people's devotion to automobility, as argued by Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers, "The rise of the motel (and the reorientation of the traditional hotel to accommodate motorists) followed from the automobile's adoption as America's preferred mode of transportation. The increase in the number of motels followed closely to the increase in automobile registrations" (20). Furthermore, Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers underline that, "Motels, as places, are commodified. They are packaged as a commercial product" (22), something that Heat-Moon also acknowledges when confronting small-town Heber. Mobility, therefore, has led to the standardization of places.

In a chapter titled "South by Southwest" we are confronted with a natural environment. Heat-Moon is travelling through "the Texas some people see as barren waste when they cross it, the part they later describe at the motel bar as 'nothing'" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 149), and he provides a description of the desert landscape. From afar, the land appears as a barren landscape, "so rocky and dry" (*Blue Highways* 149), but when Heat-Moon gets closer he observes a different reality. He enumerates the observed wildlife, providing a list of thirty different species of fauna and flora, which he ironically calls "a list of nothing" (*Blue Highways* 149). That portion of the Texan desert shows itself to be rich, thus contrasting with the general idea of the desert as a wasteland). From an anthropocentric perspective, the landscape is barren and desolate, but when Heat-Moon stops and observes it more attentively, looking for what is there, the land acquires different connotations. There is a whole ecosystem where human beings are almost imperceptible: "I was there too, but my presence I felt more than saw" (*Blue Highways* 150). This might imply that, in an environment like the desert, humans are not more than a plant or an animal, but they are equally part of the whole environment; thus, the immensity of the desert erases any feeling of superiority by human beings.

However, the area travelled by Heat-Moon is part of the Permian Basin, a region well-known for the human intervention upon the environment. Heat-Moon passes close the Pecos River, a river that begins in New Mexico and then flows into Texas, subsequently merging with the Rio Grande. Little is said about the river's conditions, except that it is "now dammed to such docility" (*Blue Highways* 150) and that it was "a small, but once serious river" (*Blue Highways* 150). Actually, the Pecos River is not a small river, as Jensen claims, "The Pecos River flows 926 miles through Texas and New Mexico draining a 38,000-square mile watershed (Huser, 2000; Graves, 2002; Horgan, 1984). The river flows approximately 418 miles through Texas and is the United States' largest tributary to the Rio Grande" (1). Although Heat-Moon mentions that the river is dammed (rendering it docile), he neither delves into the actual conditions of the river, nor does he address its long history of exploitation, as Patrick Dearen shows, "A river born of nature, the Pecos has long been subject to man. He has trod its banks and used its waters, usually content to accept its sustenance without considering the consequences of the stream's future. But no water source is immune to impact, especially in the arid Southwest, and the ramifications of man's involvement with the Pecos have been far reaching" (22). Around the end of the 1800s, the river began to be exploited, since American settlers wanted the region to become profitable for agriculture, and, from then on, the intrusion of man into the region has never stopped.[1]

Heat-Moon's disappointment does not come from the Pecos River, but from the reality of Fort Stockton, which represents another example of the standardization of places, as well as showing how mobility has indeed contributed to their alteration. From far away, Fort Stockton looks like "a mirage" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 151) or like "a golden city of Cibola" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 151). However, Fort Stockton's apparent splendor is overturned, when he realizes that those are the lights of "the plastic signs of Holiday Inn and Mobil Oil" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 151), while Jakle et al. stress: "… Holiday Inn led the motel industry's transformation from an aggregate of independent, largely disorganized, and inconsistent local businesses to a set of standardized properties dominated by internationally oriented corporate networks over the past forty years … In essence, Holiday Inn became the motel of America" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 261). Motels and billboards, among other infrastructures, are part of the commercial strip, which define a specific landscape categorized by David E. Nye as "the third transportation landscape … that of the automobile" (103), thus as a landscape that originated because of the existence and circulation of the automobile.

Early travelers by car regarded the American road, and, therefore, mobility, as a way to reconnect with nature and as a perpetuation of the frontier experience, which clearly involved a contact with "unspoiled" territories, and their subsequent domestication, resulting in the confrontation between man/technology and nature. The "natural sublime" which, as David E. Nye argues, extended

into the "automobility of 1900-1930" (104) was soon encroached by the commercial strip, providing services along the road, fostering consumption, and creating a modern version of the sublime. The commercial strip can be seen as the man's domestication of the American environment, creating an "automotive space" (Nye 105), thus becoming the mobile experience of drivers on the American road.

Nye's automotive spaces are emblematized in Heat-Moon's considerations of Heber and Fort Stockton. Looking at Fort Stockton, Heat-Moon might have had the same feelings when confronting Heber's reality: because of the motels—a manmade construction, consequence of the much-praised American mobility—America is becoming homogenized, since standardization is stripping away localness and the possibility for connection, something that Heat-Moon is strongly looking for through his road trip. Fort Stockton is a town not only dominated by Holiday Inns, but also by the Mobil Oil company. The town is the county seat of Pecos County, part of the Permian Basin, a region subdued to oil interests for a long time, as shown in a 1929 article from *El Paso Evening Post*,

> … oil was demonstrative of humanity's ability to conquer nature. Oil infrastructure was a fundamental improvement on the region's primitive past, erasing the region's lack of distinctive geographic features and natural beauty with rapidly expanding oil communities. Construction was a stepping-stone into the modern world and national freedom of movement, epitomized by the automobile, was fueled by Permian Basin hydrocarbons. (Stanford-McIntyre 164)

American mobility is highly dependent and connected with oil and, around it, America has centered its economy. As John Urry has highlighted, oil—"this 'carbon capital'" (586)—has been involved in several business activities. Companies such as Toyota, road construction companies like Bechtel, and companies related to drivers' facilities, such as Holiday Inn and McDonald's, are all linked to the carbon capital, thus becoming central to American economy (586). The freedom of mobility is paradoxical and even illusive, since, in order to happen, it has to depend on oil's extraction, thus on natural resources. The freedom of mobility occurs with the devastation and transformation of the environment, disclosing its deceptive nature. How, then, can mobility be seen as an act of freedom when that very same freedom is highly exploitative and intrusive?

In "South by Southeast," and especially in two instances, it is possible to reflect upon the relationship between the American road and its surrounding environment, and notice if the trap of idealization is still present. Heat-Moon enters the state of Mississippi, on highway 16, "a road of trees and farmhouses" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 103), a brief description, which conveys the idea of a harmonious balance between the road and nature. However, when Heat-Moon gets nearer the

landscape, he notices that the farmhouses are not as he thought they were, but more similar to suburban houses, which suggests that the place has likely been modified. All in all, highway 16 is described as a road that passes "through green fields, blue ponds, clumps of pine; it crossed the earthy Yokahockana River" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 104), thus infusing a feeling of stability among the road and nature, although he acknowledges some instability, when he mentions the way white settlers dispossessed Native Americans of their lands, specifically those owned by the Choctaw (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 104).

Afterwards, in Ofahoma, still in Mississippi, Heat-Moon enters the Natchez Trace Parkway, part of the America's Byways, a designation regarding scenic roads, created by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation. The Trace runs from Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee, "For miles no powerlines or billboards. Just tree, rock, water, bush, and road. The new Trace, like a river, followed natural contours and gave focus to the land; it so brought out the beauty that every road commissioner in the nation should drive the Trace to see that highway does not have to outrage landscape" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 104). Heat-Moon sees this road not only as a way to reconnect with nature, but also as an integral part of nature itself, and even compares it to a river.

His comment on landscape overlooks the history of parkways in America. Parkways, such as the Natchez Trace or the Blue Ridge Parkway, were built with a specific intention: merging the scenic view of nature and the act of driving, giving the impression that, through mobility, one could fuse with American nature. According to Thomas Zeller, those "roads were understood to mean a technology in synch with nature … The goal of these roads was more than simply carrying tourists to previously faraway and inaccessible places; according to the rhetoric of the designers, such roads would be able to reconcile the tensions between nature and technology through carefully designed landscapes" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 126). Natural spaces were, thus, readjusted to serve Man's purposes, and, therefore, revealing the illusive character of parkways, and, in general, of the American road as a regenerative path towards and into nature.

Conclusion

This article has shown how certain spaces are represented in Heat-Moon's road narrative, while also considering the road itself. Heber or Fort Stockton are examples of spaces where localness is replaced by the winds of modernity, mainly caused by the American appetite for mobility, even if Heat-Moon does not deeply recognize the extent to which mobility is indeed responsible for his much-praised localness. In the end, he is still trapped in the idealization of the American road. When confronting nature, it is possible to notice an ambivalent position: the desert is not considered through

an anthropocentric perspective, but his description of the Pecos River denotes superficiality and a lack of environmental awareness. The Pecos River and the surrounding area are spaces of environmental damage, something that Heat-Moon is not able to address. Similarly, when discussing the Natchez Trace Parkway, Heat-Moon dismisses "the tension between technology and the environment" (Zeller 135), regarding the Natchez Trace Parkway as an element harmoniously part of nature.

The adopted approach relied on what critic Derek Gladwin has quoted as "'Geocentric logic'" (40), that is to avoid focusing only on a singular perspective on a given space. Considering Heat-Moon's descriptions and including other texts has allowed us to gain a more comprehensive outlook on environmental and spatial issues. Renée Bryzik considered Heat-Moon's travel on the road as an example of ecocentric travel, regarding his style as "ecosensitive" and his book as an example of bioregional literature. If one considers Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, to which *Blue Highways* has been often compared, one cannot deny that spaces within Heat-Moon's road book are debated in a more critical way than in Kerouac's novel. However, his attitude is still egosensitive, as Jesse Gipko argues,

> Least Heat-Moon uses his journey—and, by extension, nature—to understand himself and other people, but he does so because he thinks he should change along the journey. Nature also serves to bolster his tenuous optimism, especially when he faces the negative in America. He finds that, though natural beauty still exists in the America of 1978, that beauty will disappear unless rampant greed and commercialization are checked. (234-235)

Heat-Moon is looking for connection, and spaces, as Gipko has suggested, are just a medium to fulfill his personal desire. At the very beginning of the book, Heat-Moon claims, "When memory is too much, turn to the eye" (*Blue Highways* 5), which might be interpreted as the author's determination in leaving behind the burden of his old life, and "turning to the eye," meaning seeking new ways of seeing, new perspectives that might allow him a new beginning. Thus, the American open road continues to be a locus of opportunity and regeneration.

Furthermore, in the "Afterword" of *Blue Highways* 2013 edition, Heat-Moon does not make any specific comment about the environment. Considering Bryzik's statement about the econsensitivity of Heat-Moon's road trip, it would have been expected to find at least one reflection on the American environment. Instead, what Heat-Moon advocates for is the American legacy of mobility, something that he is not able to question, "Perhaps it's in our blood, maybe it's just in our history, but surely it's in the American vein to head out for some other place when home becomes

intolerable, or merely even when the distant side of the beyond seems a lure we can't resist. After all, every American has come or is a descendant of people who came from another part of the globe" (*Blue Highways* 417). Heat-Moon is reaffirming and advocating for the myth of the open road and the promise of mobility as distinctive features for the American national identity, overlooking the fact that that very same promise of mobility has contributed to inevitably transform the American environment. Even if Heat-Moon states that he "took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin" (*Blue Highways* 5), he is, in the end, looking for connection. He hits the open road seeking for a new self, not for deeply acknowledging environmental damages or spatial transformations.

Furthermore, in 2014, thirty-two years after *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon published *Writing Blue Highways: The Story of How a Book Happened,* where he explains and explores the writing process of his acclaimed road book. The journey on the road proved to be twofold in its objective: on the one hand, it provided him with a new life, and, on the other hand, it furnished material to then be used for the writing of his book. After thirty-two years, Heat-Moon reiterates, once more, the importance of mobility for the American experience,

> After all, I lived in the most unfixed nation the earth has ever seen, a country conceived and populated by wanderers, wayfarers, migrants, immigrants, voyagers, vagabonds, most of them believing in the far side of the rainbow, in the possibilities of elsewhere, optimists for whom a road is an enticement beyond resistance and almost any there is preferable to a here. Movement is in our bloodstream in actuality and in metaphor. Is there an American who has never muttered, "What if I just quit? Just said fuggum and took off?" (*Writing Blue Highways* 9).

This reinforces the idea that, if one just leaves, a realm of new opportunities might be found, and that the appeal of the road will never cease, since mobility has always been part of the American foundations. Movement is intrinsic in the American character, and American roads—the arteries of the nation—allow for a perpetuation of the idea of America as nation on the move. Heat-Moon still clings to idealized notions of American mobility, and, consequently, he is not able to be fully aware of the nefarious consequences of that very same idealization.

To conclude, this article has, therefore, contributed to further the research in the field of the American road narrative, avoiding an exclusive focus on mobility as an inner quest. Following Ann Brigham's approach, the American road narrative "is not a method of freeing oneself from space …

but instead the opposite—a mode of engagement" (4), thus considering it as a genre that can disclose the reality of the exterior space, rather than merely representing a metaphor of inner quests.

[1] The river's water was leveraged, as well as the surrounding territory, and Dearen explains that, since the early 1880s, the Pecos region was exploited in terms of water, timber, and grazing (45). Other resources, such as zinc, copper, gold and silver were discovered and, around 1882, the Pecos River Mining Company began to operate in the region, specifically in the Pecos-Willow Creek area, inevitably leading to ecological damages (Dearen 46).

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Controlling Migration:
How *Martha of the North* and *Exile* Reclaim Inuit Sovereignty

Keywords: Arctic cinema, Inuit peoples, environmental justice, visual sovereignty.

Abstract: In the twenty-first century, there is increased awareness in Canada about the horrors of residential schools and the destructive actions of the government towards First Nations peoples. But this education has not extended to the histories of Arctic Indigenous peoples, whose experience of settler colonialism is different because of their geographical location. Until outside intervention, Inuit had been semi-nomadic, populating the North with small, mobile communities, as this way of life was best suited for hunting and traditional practices. Beginning in the 1950s, the Canadian government forced Inuit into centralized communities, pressuring them to leave their lands and thereby destroying a traditional way of life that had been in place for thousands of years. This article will explore the negative consequences of 'domicide', or the killing of one's home, and the cultural devastation that followed. Years later, the relocation and its impacts were depicted in Inuit-made documentaries, such as Marquise Lepage's *Martha of the North* in 2008, and *Exile* by Zacharias Kunuk in 2009. In this chapter, I will detail how Inuit-made film is helping Northerners reclaim Arctic sovereignty, documenting for future generations how their ancestors lived.

Introduction

Despite the significance of the Canadian Arctic in documentary history and its importance in our collective imagining of Canada, Arctic and Inuit histories are scarcely taught in the South. Because of their geographical location, Inuit in Canada experienced colonialism differently than other Indigenous peoples in North America/Turtle Island.[1] It was not until there was interest in the Far North during World War II, in part because of the newly perceived value of the region, that "the Inuit way of life was profoundly disrupted by government control" (Bertrand 353).

Though the interference of the Canadian government impacted all aspects of Indigenous life, one of the most damaging for Inuit was related to altered mobility and migration because of

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how this changed their communities and connection to their territories. I will discuss the impact of "domicide," or the killing of one's home, that took place when Inuit were forced to leave their lands (Davey-Quantick 68). This forced migration was not simply the loss of a dwelling, but was "a disruption of a critical relationship of people with the land and animals," effectively eliminating their independence and transforming their way of life for the worse ("Nuutauniq: Mobility and Inuit Life" 43). Years later, the relocation of Inuit to the High Arctic and the resulting impacts were depicted in Inuit-made documentaries, such as Marquise Lepage's *Martha of the North* in 2008 and Zacharias Kunuk's *Exile* in 2009 (Bertrand 356).

The Canadian Arctic: A Brief History

The way that news about Inuit traditions and cultures first reached Southern Canada was through documentary films and videos taken by "generally well-meaning missionaries and ethnographers" (Bertrand 353). Through this documentation, these white outsiders perpetuated the "romanticized image of the luminous and desolate Northern landscapes" and its "'courageous and stoic' inhabitants" (Simard qtd. by Bertrand 354). Since then, outsiders have continued to make films about Inuit life, to varying degrees of accuracy and authenticity.

The Arctic itself has long been subject to conversations about sovereignty, with multiple countries fighting to lay claim to the region in the twentieth century, continuing on into the height of the Cold War. Having control over the North had become important, and Canada's perception of the Arctic had changed from viewing it as a remote, desolate, empty region, to one of military importance (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 17). This had to do with both the government's defense strategy (MacKenzie and Stenport 131) and because of potential resource extraction (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 15). This latter reason remains salient today.

Cinema became a tool in service of this narrative of Canadian sovereignty; as films from the Far North were paramount to the outside world's understanding of the Arctic, they were used both "to promote state and corporate interests" and "as a means of protest and dissent" (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 24). When Canada's National Film Board began making films about the Arctic, such as the *Netsilik* series—which showcased the lives of Inuit families in the late 1960s[2]—there was likely an ulterior motive; helping affirm the people in

the North as Canadian citizens. *Netsilik* was a "de facto political statement" that helped lay the groundwork to "ensure Canada's historical claims of inhabiting the Arctic" (MacKenzie and Stenport 130).

Contemporary Arctic cinema differs from historical Arctic film in significant ways. Narrative, aesthetic, and ideological differences can be explained by one key shift: older films were made from an outside perspective, whereas today's films are generally created by insiders. A prominent example of early Arctic cinema is Robert Flaherty's 1922 film *Nanook of the North*; to this day, it is perhaps the best-known Arctic film ever made, despite being made by an outsider, and its paternalistic (at best) depictions of the Inuit. In stark contrast to the work of Flaherty and his contemporaries, which depicted the lifestyles and customs of Inuit through a white Southern lens, today, "Indigenous artists, scholars, film critics and filmmakers are finding innovative ways of using cinema" (Bertrand 365). Rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes and serving a colonial government's calculated attempt to claim so-called "valuable" Northern land, Inuit filmmakers are able to deconstruct "white-generated representations" of Indigenous peoples (Raheja, *Reservation Reelism* 193) through narrative tools and strategies of resistance like survivance and visual sovereignty (Bertrand 365).

Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor coined the term "survivance" to describe the shift in Indigenous storytelling from a focus on "victimhood and loss" to empowerment and vitality (Bertrand 354). "Visual sovereignty," coined by Tuscarora historian Jolene Rickard, is explained by Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja as a way of "reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy" through mediums such as film and TV (Raheja, "Reading Nanook's Smile" 1163). This articulation has been helpful as a way of understanding how "cultural practices can be used as political mobilization" and how sovereignty can become "a creative act of self representation" (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 17).

The emergence of Arnait Video Productions and Igloolik Isuma Productions in the early 1990s was arguably the factor that had the biggest impact on modern Arctic cinema. These Inuit-founded film collectives differ significantly from those made or funded by the NFB in both their goals and their specific approaches to filmmaking. Isuma was founded in 1990 by Inuk filmmaker, community leader and cultural activist Zacharias Kunuk, late Inuk writer Paul Apak Angilirq, Inuk elder Paulossie Qulitalik, and American filmmaker Norman Cohn (Ginsburg, "Isuma TV" 319). Arnait, Isuma's partner group and the first Inuit women's independent production company, was

formed the following year, and creates works that have an "explicit focus on gender that challenges long-standing assumptions of male normativity in the Arctic" (Ginsburg, "Isuma TV" 320).

These companies have had profound impacts on the film industry in the North. Far from destroying a traditional way of life, Isuma's media has been able to document the legacy of the Inuit as a means of cultural expression and identity, in order to demonstrate to future generations how their ancestors lived (Ginsburg, "Screen Memories" 54). In its overarching work, Isuma explicitly makes use of videography "as a political tool" and aims to "offer an alternative voice" to the works of Robert Flaherty and other ethnographers and white filmmakers (Evans 150). Thus, video—rather than separating Northerners from their histories as a white tool—has been used in recent years as a way to revive facets of Inuit culture. *Exile*, directed by Isuma co-founder Zacharias Kunuk, is one of the films that I will explore shortly, in greater detail.

Controlled Migration and Forced Relocations

As mentioned above, the interference of the Canadian government in the lives of the Inuit has been harmful in myriad ways, and one manifestation was through enforced migration. Prior to outside intervention, for thousands of years, small, mobile communities had populated the North, as traditional living "required mobility and semi-permanent or impermanent dwellings to survive" (Davey-Quantick 82). This changed abruptly in the early 1950s, when many Inuit communities were forced to give up their semi-nomadic lifestyles and move into permanent, government-created settlements (Evans 4). The primary reason was that it made more economic sense to the government to have concentrated communities; it would be simpler to monitor the population and easier to provide administrative support and services ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 38). But this centralization was effectively enforced relocation for everyone living semi-nomadic lifestyles, and it eliminated a fundamental aspect of Inuit culture: mobility. Mobility was not random, but based on familiar routes that hunting families would follow annually, reoccupying sites that had been significant for generations and drawing upon "archives of experience and knowledge" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 9).

Additionally, the locations for these proposed settlements were not chosen in accordance with Inuit knowledge or seasonal habitation, and, thus, did not in any way benefit *Qikiqtaalummiut*, people of the Qikiqtani region (Davey-Quantick 58). In fact, there was no care

given to the hunting needs of the Inuit in planning the layouts of these communities, as is illustrated by the fact that "the single most important criterion for government was that they were accessible by sea or would fit into planned air routes" ("Final Report: Achieving Saimaqatiqiingniq" 22). As a result, these moves were culturally devastating, destroying a "traditional livelihood based on hunting, fishing, and gathering, and in its place came a dependence on a cash-based economy in a region virtually devoid of paying jobs" (Evans 4). Still, the government was convinced that these relocations were in the best interest of the Inuit, despite a total lack of consultation.

In 1950, there were over one hundred seasonally inhabited *ilagiit nunagivaktangit* or Inuit settlements, but, twenty-five years later, almost all Inuit were concentrated within one city and twelve hamlets ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15). Thus, these changes took place very quickly; as Davey-Quantick argues, "this was colonization at a rapid, immediate pace, and the trauma of that shift is still being felt today" (67). Canadian Inuk activist Sheila Watts-Cloutier, who grew up in Kuujaaruk, Nunavik, details the changes that took place during her childhood in her memoir: "the modern world arrived slowly in some places in the world, and quickly in others. But in the Arctic, it appeared in a single generation" (40). It was not merely that the Inuit were dealing with issues that typically befell isolated, rural populations, but that "they were a culture in the middle of radical social change, besieged by assimilation pressures and a rapidly changing world" (Davey-Quantick 52). As testimonies and reports demonstrate, government officials had complete control, and Inuit were powerless against these outside pressures.

The most damning of accounts came from the Qikiqtani Inuit Association's report titled "Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life," which documents how lives were impacted, through both first-person statements and research studies. It makes explicit how integral the environment was to the Inuit way of life, and that the government used coercion to move the inhabitants. As explained by the report, "Qikiqtaalummiut suffered what scholars have called 'domicide' (the killing of one's home) when they left the land. For Inuit, the loss of home is more than the loss of a dwelling; it is a disruption of a critical relationship of people with the land and animals. It represents the loss of independence and replacement of a way of life" (43). These moves resulted in less frequent hunting excursions, and a generational divide between Inuit who had been raised on the land and those who were born post-relocation:

> The interconnectedness of kinship and place is central to the Inuit worldview…. As Inuit travel across the land, sea, and ice, they strengthen their relationships with each other and deepen their understanding of their own pasts and kin. Qallunaat [non-Inuit] often mistook and continue to mistake the semi-nomadic history of Inuit as evidence of a lack of attachment to place. In fact, the ability to move to follow game while also maintaining connections with kin who live over a wide geographic area is the result of an intimate experience of place. ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 13)

When *Qikiqtaalummiut* were moved to modern, centralized communities, one of the customs lost was "the flexibility and purposeful seasonal movements" that for eons had been integral to their culture ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15). There was an abrupt disconnection from the land, which was only compounded by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) mass killing of *qimmit* or sled dogs, which directly affected Inuit ability to travel across the tundra and hunt.

Ultimately, the government's act of controlling the migration of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic was done because Southerners could not conceive that the Inuit way of governing, educating, feeding, and transporting themselves was optimal. Despite officials' presumption of knowing best, Inuit had inhabited the Canadian North for thousands of years, and "were not only able to survive in the Arctic but thrive, in large part because they lived in small, highly mobile communities" (Davey-Quantick 28). The needs of people habitating the North were different, and Northerners had figured out how to live. Simply sending "the imperfect institutions of Southern Canada… to the North" was not only insufficient, but dangerously naïve and paternalistic (Davey-Quantick 60).

***Martha of the North*: The Impact of Relocation on Family and Kin**

Another change imposed upon Inuit populations was the government-orchestrated act of transporting a select number of families to the far northern reaches of the continent; these individuals came to be known as High Arctic Exiles. These particular relocations were the result of Canada's perception of a political threat: that another country would attempt to claim the Arctic.

The government's first relocation attempt took place in 1934, when ten Inuit families were moved to Dundas Harbour (Devon Island) from their communities in Cape Dorset, Pangnirtung,

and Pond Inlet ("QTC Resolute Bay" 21). The experiment was quickly recognized as unsuccessful, as the families were unhappy in part due to the severe new environment ("QTC Resolute Bay" 21). However, despite this short-lived failed relocation, a similar maneuver was attempted in 1952, this time from Inukjuak and Pond Inlet to Ellesmere Island and Cornwallis Island ("QTC Resolute Bay" 22). According to the government, those relocated were not taken against their will, but recent reports suggest that "the question of consent … is a contentious issue" ("QTC Resolute Bay" 22).

Officials claimed that these regions were plentiful in game, despite a complete lack of wildlife studies and no Inuit presence in the area for centuries ("QTC Resolute Bay" 22). Once again, those relocated were dissatisfied, having experienced a drastic lifestyle change. Resolute Bay, for example, "experienced three months of total darkness, much more extreme temperatures, different ice conditions, and different animal patterns" than the home communities ("QTC Resolute Bay" 25). The new inhabitants were unable to use their skills in these far colder regions, and with no game to hunt, never had enough to eat (Evans 4). Robust support in the form of housing, health care, schools, jobs and food that had been promised was never delivered (Evans 30). Despite this, yet another group of Inuit were moved to Resolute Bay and Ellesmere Island in the High Arctic in 1955 ("QTC Resolute Bay" 29). This final group included Martha Flaherty, co-writer and subject of the film *Martha of the North.*

Marquise Lepage's 2009 NFB documentary follows Martha Flaherty, an Inuk woman who also happens to be one of Robert Flaherty's grandchildren. Martha's homeland was Inukjuak, Nunavik, in northern Quebec, and her family was resettled 2,250 kilometres away in Grise Fiord (Ellesmere Island) when she was very young ("QTC Resolute Bay" 24). Her father's stepfather (Paddy) and family had been relocated two years prior, and Martha's family moved at Paddy's urging. However, when Martha's family finally arrived at Ellesmere Island, they found out Paddy had died one year after arriving on the island. He had quickly requested to return home, but was informed that he would have to cover the cost of the return trip for himself and his relatives; this was an impossible feat. Paddy's daughter describes his realization that he would never again return to his homeland, which contributed to his failing health and early death. Had Paddy not been deceived into thinking it was an exceptional opportunity, neither family would have left Inukjuak. Martha, too, describes wanting to turn around as soon as she realized that the land was not the wonderful bounty that officials had described.

In the film, many of the original relocated individuals are interviewed, and they speak in detail about the hardships experienced. Martha's experience of being unable to return home was not unique; those relocated were promised that they would be brought home if, after one year, they were unhappy, but this commitment was not honored ("QTC Resolute Bay" 27). Once in Grise Fiord, like the other families, Martha's family had to spend the winter months in a canvas tent, as no permanent housing had been built. Some Inuit would put up *qarmaqs*, dwellings covered with hides that provided better shelter against the elements. This new region had fierce winds that blew for much of the year and prevented snow build up, so, despite the northern location, there was insufficient snow on the ground to build igloos. Thus, families were forced to move from one makeshift shelter to the next, depending on the season.

These long-term separations affected not just those who were forced to leave, but everyone in the home communities: friends, family, and kin left behind ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 9). The "lingering effects of unexpected moves" impacted subsequent generations as well, as relocation not only separated the Inuit from their wider communities, but from "the cultural practices that were central to a worldview rooted in their land and its resources" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 9). Martha affirms this in a voiceover, when she explains that what the relocated families left behind was not material possessions, but the people who were dear to them. As the narrator says, family and community are the heart and soul of Inuit life and moving far away from both one's territory and loved ones would have been frightening, but the RCMP reassured the Inuit by insisting that they were being relocated to a place chosen by individuals with so-called "expert knowledge" of the Arctic. The irony that a non-Inuk could claim to be an expert of the Arctic can only truly be appreciated after this ordeal.

The landscape itself is a character in *Martha of the North*, as is common in Inuit films because of the intertwined nature of people and place. Subjects talk about their homeland with love, remembering the soft grass and flowers, the vegetation, the wide variety of food to harvest, and plentiful game. Ellesmere Island, in contrast, was the land of mountains, glaciers, and fjords. The pain of leaving their homeland is clear in interviews with the subjects; as scholar Karine Bertrand writes of the film, "land is connected to language, culture and spirituality. These different layers of relationships to familiar spaces …. can be felt in the testimonies that connect the physical and psychological suffering of the protagonists to the separation of the body from the land where they were born, as though the body itself was an extension of the territory" (364). This

characterization of place helps illustrate how world-altering it was to remove Inuit from their relations and their homes.

Outside of the Arctic, director Lepage claims that the film was ultimately the reason for the Canadian government's long-awaited public apology and for its recognition of the damage caused to the families (Bertrand 361). *Martha of the North* helped make public the news of the forced relocations and the profound impact of this film is clear, both on the families who lived through the events and to a broader populace (Southerners) who had previously been ignorant. Perhaps most importantly, Lepage stated that the film "generated overwhelming reactions from the people who had lived through the relocations," and that a number of Elders felt that, with their testimonies having been validated, "they were ready to die in peace" (Bertrand 362).

Exile: Leveraging Film to Advocate for One's Community

Zacharias Kunuk's documentary *Exile* is similarly about Inuit families who were relocated; the majority of the film consists of extensive in-person interviews with those who were forcibly moved. *Exile* opens with one of the interviewees and her (presumed) granddaughter throat singing, and the narrator rhetorically asking us what really happened to those relocated. The statement that this is the Inuit side of the story establishes the film as both storytelling and testimony. The stories captured are extremely valuable, as the High Arctic Exiles are aging and have a limited time during which they are able to pass on their memories and knowledge. Through these interviews, *Exile* demonstrates Kunuk's conviction that film is an important means of sharing Inuit histories and culture. The QIA reports are similarly essential, but hearing the events from first-hand experiences is vastly more effective and affecting than absorbing information by reading documents and studies. In 1996, after explicit recommendations by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, those who had been relocated were provided monetary compensation and the opportunity to return home ("QTC Resolute Bay" 23). Despite this admission of guilt, the Canadian government still did not apologize for their actions. The High Arctic relocations had been justified in the minds of officials because of a notion "that all Inuit were semi-nomadic hunters who could live anywhere in the Arctic" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 16). This film was an intervention, reframing the relocations and making explicit their injustice.

The government viewed the Inuit as pawns to be moved wherever they were most useful; "the individuals involved didn't matter so much as planting human flags in the High Arctic" (Davey-Quantick 62). This complete disregard for the well-being of those relocated is clear from the way they were treated after officials had achieved their goals. In both this film and *Martha of the North*, interviewees verbalize the constant cold and hunger they experienced in the Far North and the challenge of simply finding drinking water. They discuss being so desperate for food that they would resort to eating scraps from the RCMP garbage dump. Even worse, they had to do so discreetly, because the officers (rather than recognizing their plight—which they themselves had a hand in causing—and providing them with food) forbade them from rooting through the dump.

Those relocated felt betrayed by the people who were meant to keep them safe, and many Inuit died, in part because of poor nutrition and unsafe living conditions. Over and over, Inuit interviewees recount the ways that the officers directly and indirectly hurt them—the RCMP did not send their mail south as pledged, the officers shot their dogs, which were necessary for hunting, Inuit were not paid for work they had done; the stories go on. One of the individuals interviewed, Dora Pudluk, remembers feeling that no one cared if they died, if they starved to death. It was a complete breach of trust and Inuit never forgot the broken promises. They only learned the true reason for the relocations decades later.

Martha Flaherty is interviewed in this film as well, and, though at last in 1996 the government provided financial compensation for the relocated families as mentioned, she stresses the importance of receiving an apology that had thus far been "adamantly withheld" (Wakeham 85)., "Ten million dollars was nothing. If we didn't come here, this would not be part of Canada today. When the Harper government talks about protecting our northwest passage, defending our Canadian sovereignty, what about us? Isn't that what we did? Don't we count?" (*Martha of the North*). The original statement that accompanied compensation payments to the survivors and descendants claimed that "government officials of the time were acting with honourable intentions in what was perceived to be in the best interests of the Inuit" (Wakeham 96). As scholar Pauline Wakeham writes, this statement "implicitly den[ied] the sovereignty motive behind the relocations [and] articulated that denial through the ventriloquized voice of the relocatees" (96). In order to receive remuneration, these individuals needed to sign the agreement, effectively preventing them from sharing their truth. *Exile* and *Martha of the North* provide them with this opportunity, giving the Inuit the final word, rather than a problematic and incomplete government document.

But the government did not escape responsibility as easily as that, as Inuit continued to campaign for formal acknowledgement. At long last, in August of 2019, the Canadian government "apologized for colonial practices and policies which radically transformed the Inuit homeland and traditional ways of life" (Qikiqtani Inuit Association website). As part of this apology, an agreement was signed whereby the government pledged to help build long-term and sustainable responses to the QTC findings, including investing in the region, implementing Inuit history and governance programs, and *qimmit* revitalization programs (Qikiqtani Inuit Association website).

Conclusion

Colonialism has looked different in the North compared to the South, but I do not mean to suggest that it was any less damaging. Inuit lifestyles were deeply misunderstood by *Qallunaat*, who believed Northerners to be detached from their habitats and sufficiently adaptive as to relocate to a distant island with which they had no familiarity ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15). These "mistaken prejudices and beliefs" resulted in extreme colonial injustice ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15).

A government that was willing to move people from one region of the North to another in order to strengthen Canadian sovereignty exhibited the clear Southern disdain for Inuit lifestyles (Davey-Quantick 61). As Davey-Quantick suggests, the act of "denying the difference in culture and territory different Inuit groups had" was simply another example of "devaluing that difference, and by extension, Northern or Inuit culture as a whole" (Davey-Quantick 62). Geographical challenges were compounded by the lack of support provided, and the people who had been forcibly relocated further north suffered drastic lifestyle changes (Evans 4), and this affected succeeding generations and all kin who had been left behind ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 23). Not only were the forced abandonments of their homes traumatic, but the circumstances endured by the inhabitants were unjust—they were not provided adequate food, housing, or basic necessities.

Over the past decade, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association has published a number of reports that explore the history of the government's actions towards Inuit. In the introduction to one of the reports, Josie Okalik Eegeesiak, president of the QIA, dedicates the writings to her grandmother, who passed away in a sanatorium in the south, and to her grandchildren, "so that they can

understand what our family has experienced … And it is also for the young people of Canada, so that they will also understand our story" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 7-8). Just as Josie felt that the reports were important in ensuring the history of the Inuit was enshrined for next of kin, films such as *Martha of the North* and *Exile* are similarly crucial for creating access points for future generations. This is a story of colonialism in Canada, one that has not yet been fully told. As the QTC is a legacy project for Inuit, so too are these documentaries a tool to share their experiences, and a key part of mobilizing the change that led to the government's apology. Lepage and Flaherty, as well as Kunuk and his team, successfully consulted Inuit to tell their stories, in both English and Inuktitut, in a way that the government never did. Looking ahead, this is not an isolated issue that affected Inuit solely in some historic past; the impacts of these events "continue to reverberate" seven decades later (Wakeham 84). Additionally, mobility will continue to have significance for inhabitants of the North in future, as multinational corporations peddle in resource extraction and force communities out of the homes that they were previously forced into by the Canadian government. The stewards of the land have not changed, but the antagonists pressuring them to move have. Thus, it will be vital for Inuit cinema to document the changing Arctic and its impacts. One can only hope that Inuit filmmakers, and film collectives such as Isuma and Arnait will be able to take up the charge.

[1] Inuit means "the people"; while "Inuit peoples" is commonly used, it is redundant. In this paper, I simply use "Inuit" to refer to the people.
[2] The series was set in the late 1910s, as it was putting on display a lifestyle that was no longer entirely accurate.

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Moving out of the Background: Québec Women Filmmakers and the American Roads

Keywords: road movie, Québécois documentary filmmaking, American roads, women and mobility.

Abstract: In the American tradition of the road movie, female characters have often been relegated to being sex workers, third wheels, or background characters who can only be foils to the journeys of male characters on the road. This study examines how two Québécois documentaries, *Hotel Chronicles* (Léa Pool, 1990) and *L.A. Tea Time* (Sophie Bédard-Marcotte, 2019) comment on and subvert these expectations of women by placing them simultaneously behind the camera and behind the steering wheel as they travel these American roads. In completing close analysis of scenes from both films and comparing it with texts in feminist studies and Québécois cultural history, this study will reveal the fabricated nature of the American road as well as attest how Québécois women find their place on it.

Introduction: Quebec Documentary Films, Mobility, and Americanness

The birth of modern Quebec cinema can be dated back to the early 1960s, with the advent of Direct cinema, a movement propelled by technology (the possibility of recording and broadcasting sound and image at the same time) and by a social movement, the Quiet Revolution,

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which brought French-Canadians (soon to become Québécois) to sever their ties with the British Empire and to redefine their place in North America, as the only majority French-speaking population. Led by the father of Direct cinema, Pierre Perrault, the films born from this movement, adopting a documentary style with a bit of fiction or *mise-en-scène,* were mainly concerned with questions of identity, because, as Perrault stated, Quebec people had long lived in and through the fictional images produced by two dominant film industries: France and the United States (qtd. in Clanfield 198). With this statement, Perrault sought to denounce a cinema of the image coming from, among other places, a country home to "palm trees that are very beautiful, but that don't grow here" (Clanfield 198), and that in no way reflected the identity of a Nation still searching for itself, "caught between the American dream and distant French roots" (Clanfield 198). Most of his strongly nationalistic works found the filmmaker going on the road, always within Quebec borders, trying to constitute what he called the "family album," i.e. inviting his protagonists "to take part in an action, a quest, a journey or a hunt and through these acts of mobility, collecting their stories" (Desjardins).

Following in his footsteps, other generations of filmmakers (all men) also took the road, transgressing the geographical limits of Quebec, to explore French-Canadian identity far from its Canadian and European (French and British) heritage, thus seeking new possibilities of emancipation. Indeed, according to Yvan Lamonde, if the Americanness of the post-war Québécois subject is linked on the one hand "to its consumer habits, its architecture and the predominance in its various cultural manifestations of the practical code over the cultural code" (qtd. in Thériault), it is also linked to a concept of Americanness that can be understood as the journey of new societies which, through a reconstruction/remediation of the American myth, acquire a new autonomy by detaching themselves from their European roots. More specifically, Jean Morency explains that the notion of Americanness has made it possible to place the myth of Americanization "in a much broader perspective" based on cultural transfers and confluences between Quebec, the United States and Latin American countries (32).

Following this train of thought, this article seeks to further explore questions of mobility, identity, and Americanness, through Québécois female filmmakers' lens and perspectives, which have not been studied up until now. Furthermore, because the quest for the American Dream has been forever associated with the conquest of the land by male protagonists who, from the Western genre to the road movie, have been represented as the main travelers of the American roads, we

wish to investigate how the American Dream has been criticized/sought after by two women directors, Léa Pool (*Hotel Chronicles*, 1990) and Sophie Bédard Marcotte (*L.A. Tea Time*, 2019) thirty years apart. Inspired by female critics who have written about women's mobility (Rebecca Solnit, Jessica Enevold) as well as by Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986), we look into the ways in which some important elements of the road movie—the music, the journey, the spaces/locations—are addressed in these works that creatively mix documentary and fiction, social criticism and intimate emotions and thoughts about the concept of belonging.

French-Canadian Women on the Road: Transgressing the Borders of Gender and Space

The history of women in regard to their social and physical mobility in a Western context (and beyond) is plagued by examples of how women have been associated with "immobile place-bound domesticity and symbolic geography" (Enevold 406) and public spaces and traveling having been "closed off or minimally accessible to women" (Enevold 406). Indeed, women's bodies were, in the past, considered unsuitable for walking and long journeys, because their supposed "fragile constitution" and "width of their pelvis" made it hard for them to walk long distances (Solnit 43). They also were physically and symbolically restrained from traveling alone on long journeys, for example through restricting items of clothing (high heels and corsets, narrow skirts and dresses) and because "the impurity of their being made them a bad luck charm on the road" (Solnit 43).

Both in road books and road movies, women travelers were portrayed, up until recently, as atypical travelers, third wheels or sex workers, present to satisfy men's sexual desires and putting their lives at risk to travel the open road, as it can be seen in Kerouac's *On the Road* (1947) and its movie adaptation (Salles, 2012). On the documentary side of things, it is also of atypical women travelers/explorers that anthropologist Serge Bouchard and writer Marie-Christine Lévesque wrote about in their monograph *Elles ont fait l'Amérique* (*They Have Made America*, 2011). Whereas the discovery and exploration of America have been mostly associated with men, the two authors write about how the achievements of important historical female figures from Quebec—many of them Indigenous or Métis—are linked with their time spent on the road, often traveling from Quebec to various regions of the United States, as part of fur trade expeditions (Marie Iowa Dorion, 1786-1850) or for their career (Robertine Barry, journalist, 1863-1910).

Through these narratives, which span three centuries, we can trace back the willingness of French-Canadian/Québécois women to be part of the American Dream, conquering new territory in the hope of giving themselves and their families a better life, or, in Barry's case, improving the status of women in the workplace. It is therefore relevant to ask ourselves, three hundred years after Marie Iowa Dorion's overland expedition to the Pacific Northwest, how and why the roads of America are travelled by women. We propose to do so through the analysis of documentary/essay films made by two women filmmakers who have chosen to go on the road, exploring symbolic territories and identities different from the ones investigated by their Québécois male counterparts, and perhaps, adopting a more personal approach, discovering if America, as Baudrillard has stated, "has become the orbit of an imaginary power to which everyone now refers" (Baudrillard 117).

Feminizing the American Road in *Hotel Chronicles* (Léa Pool, 1990)

Hotel Chronicles was produced by the National Film Board of Canada in 1990. This documentary film covers Québécois transplant (she is originally from Switzerland) Léa Pool's travels from New York City, Washington D.C., Monument Valley, Las Vegas, and the roads in-between. In her travels, she speaks with people she meets about the reasons why they are traveling (or have traveled), and what the "American Dream" means to them. *Hotel Chronicles* often plays with road movie tropes, such as several shots of vehicles and gas stations, as well as various people being lost and needing to consult road maps. It also adapts from the road movie the notion of motion being intermittent, instead of constant, as most of the film is spent speaking to individuals in hotel rooms, diners, and gas stations, and thus focusses on the act of stopping and self-reflection, as seen in classic road movies, such as the camp fire scenes in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1967), which "serve as effective moments of punctuation" for reflection upon the journey (Lederman 72).

Furthermore, there are three key road movie tropes that the film adapts: the heavy use of music becomes a study of the mediated nature of the road; the focus on landscape speaks to how a woman challenges masculine notions of being on the road; and the repeated *motif* of self-reflection emphasizes the dangers of the American Dream. In studying how *Hotel Chronicles* adapts these three tropes, we reveal the simultaneously liberating and restricting nature of the American Dream for a Québécois woman going on the road in the early 1990s. Furthermore, we

discover how the never-ending Québécois identity quest is brought forth through the narrative dimension of identity (i.e. the ability for Québécois transplant Léa Pool to share bits and pieces of her own identity quest while on the road).

In a first instance, when performing a study of this film, one immediately notices how omnipresent the use of soundtrack is, notably through its narration, in which Pool reads out loud letters sent to her lover. In fact, music is almost always present; it is heard in the television screens of the various hotel rooms, in the dance halls, and on the radio of the stores that she visits. Even in moments of anticipated silence, such as when she is getting ready to go to sleep in Washington, D.C., the television remains on, quietly playing the theme to a news bulletin. This busy soundtrack is suggestive of a process of self-reflection (or lack thereof).

This use of music specifically reveals the mediated nature of the American Road, as it is saturated in images of its own making. It might even be endemic to the American experience, as Jean Baudrillard notes: "the TV is constantly on" (Baudrillard 68) and it "delivers its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages" (Baudrillard 51). This notion is seen in the consistent references to the musical cues of other road films, such as an electric guitar playing a solo with a slide in D minor, akin to Ry Cooder's theme of *Paris, Texas* (Wenders, 1984). The consistent use of road movie music represents how going on the road in America is not about the journey itself, but about replicating the dream that has been set up by so many men beforehand.

This idea makes itself most present in the beginning of the film, where Neil Diamond's "America" plays over short clips of transport in New York City, where archive footage of immigrants arriving on Ellis Island can be seen, and brief moments from films such as *The Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957) are edited together in a montage. With lyrics such as "We've been traveling far/Without a home/But not without a star" and "Got a dream to take them there/They're coming to America," it is clear that the film regularly uses music to play with the fabricated image of the American Road, rather than merely depicting the road itself. Its oversaturation of soundtrack suggests that the purpose of going on the road in America is not to tread new and unseen territory, as it is usually depicted in Western films, but rather to re-tread a path taken by men, in hope of finding a dream that many have already sought.

Secondly, in terms of women traveling these American territories, they have often been consigned to the background of landscapes inhabited by men. In her study of women in road novels, Jessica Enevold notes that "women [characters] become public property rather than private

individuals and circumscribed as 'goods' contained by masculine borders" (409) by being represented as unable to drive, consistently desiring to marry male characters and "settle" (409). In *Hotel Chronicles*, this stereotypical view of women is challenged. Not only is Pool, the filmmaker, consistently moving (through driving a car in Las Vegas or walking as part of an activist march in Washington, D.C.), but she also captures women leaving the background to speak directly to the camera about their desire to move. This is seen in Monument Valley, where she speaks to women working as waitresses in a hotel about wanting to leave to get an education elsewhere in the United States; they are later seen driving in a car, going towards an unknown location.

Thus, Pool places women at the forefront of her narrative, always wanting to move and travel to their next location. This is most evident in one of the film's final shots, where Pool is represented against a backdrop of a mountain, at first stationary, then moving as her narration picks up, where she admits she does not know where she is going, but will travel regardless. The image originally looks like a painting, but then motion occurs; she will not be passive against the road ahead of her. As such, in Pool's use of landscape shots, women are not stable, but in constant motion on the road.

The women in *Hotel Chronicles*, therefore, adapt the American Dream by being consistently in motion. Yet, a study of the final trope of the road movie reveals how there is a duplicitous nature to the road for women—it is freeing yet dangerous, open as means of escape yet closed in its possibilities. This ideal is represented through the consistent metaphor of reflection. This is most evident in a shot where she is composing a letter to her love in the Monument Valley, where we see a shot of a window, showing both the mountains outside and an opaque reflection of Pool as she writes. In this moment, she admits, "I'm gradually recognising our link. The roots run deep. They suffocate us, but they also sustain us. What fascinates me about you are all your contradictions." This is obviously represented to be a personal letter written to a male lover, but through the double nature of the image, this could also be a letter to the America she is seeing. She is fascinated by how the image of the American Road is constructed, but unsure of how its large, meaningless landscapes will change her. As Janis Pallister notes in her study of Pool's approach, she often accomplishes "two visions" within her documentary work—discovering herself through exile, but also making a statement against alienation (Pallister 209).

Thus, as this analysis demonstrates, *Hotel Chronicles* does not merely replicate the tropes of the road movie. It is responding to them, expanding on them, and commenting on what mobility a woman possesses, on the road built by the American Dream. It is up to her to self-define what the road is and consistently reflect on what the American Dream is—both are never static, and always adapting, as we will also discover through the exploration of Sophie Bédard Marcotte's *L.A. Tea Time* (2019).

L.A. Tea Time and the Reconfiguration of the Yellow Brick Road

Just as Baudrillard explores the fictional and cinematic nature of America through its open roads, deserts, mountains and freeways, Québécois filmmaker Sophie Bédard Marcotte is intent on touching the fringes of the American Dream. To do so, she embarks on a documentary filmmaking journey, taking on the American roads with her director of photography, Isabelle Statchenko, hoping to maybe have tea in L.A. with her idol, independent filmmaker Miranda July. We learn early on, even before the two protagonists leave the arid wintery Montreal city for the U.S., that the aforementioned meeting with July is but a pretext for the struggling filmmaker to get away from an alienating job translating online texts for hotel sites to pay for rent. Trapped in this artistic desert, which is clearly demonstrated in the very first panoramic shot of the film, showing the two women as tiny figures walking arduously in a white desert landscape (of sand or snow, we are not sure), fighting against the wind, the filmmaker leaves her life behind to find some kind of solace and inspiration on the road.

The film's score suggests a desired connection to director Miranda July, as it often references her films. The sixteen bars of joyful piano score that repeats throughout the film is, for example, reminiscent of the score used in Miranda July's *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), a film in which July's character is a video artist who abandons a comfortable life in order to go out and seek connections with others in the art world. The use of tubular bells in the documentary's meditation sequences is also similar to the score used in the narration sequences of *The Future* (2011), a film in which July's character feels isolated and afraid to settle in a domestic relationship. The references to July thus serve as a means to speak to the simultaneous freedoms and isolation that come from living a non-sedentary life.

As the women cross the Canadian border, heading down south, America clearly and quickly becomes a kind of promised land, as we see their car driving out of the snowy landscape and into the green pastures of a more fertile space. These green fields and the animals that they hold fill their frame (and ours) for a large part of their journey, the flora and fauna being captured in such a way by their camera as to let us rediscover the magic of what can be found on both sides of an open road. The long desert sequence (which lasts about 15 minutes) conveys the organic connection to the land and the sometimes-utopic ideas/images we have about American open spaces, as it leaves the two women wandering, on foot, in the Arizona desert, looking for the perfect shots. These turn out to be the rocks, sand, and some strange vegetation they find along their path, with the almost fiction-like space they get lost in once again, heightened by majestic panoramic shots which confirm that "in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of [this space]" (Baudrillard 70). These sequences are in a way self-reflexive, as the filmmaker and her sidekick are made conscious of their limits (and of the limits of the American dream) and use humor to convey the futility of their journey.

It is in fact this whimsical, intimate look at a cinematic America that constitutes the main narrative of their travels, with Sophie framing herself as a modern-day Dorothy *en route* towards the enchanted kingdom of Oz (L.A.), Miranda July being the elusive wizard to which Bédard-Marcotte seeks counseling on her career. Stylistically, this translates to giving the audience glimpses of yellow bricks along the way, as well as very short, random, and dispersed shots of the lion (a real one, shot in a zoo), scarecrow (in a field), and tin man (in a dream sequence), as reality and fiction meet sporadically, reflecting "a transcending of the imaginary in reality" (Baudrillard 104). But the real wizard, whose voice they encounter along the way, mostly through daydreams, is that of another important figure of cinema: the French filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who appears as a purple-colored hue in the sky and dispenses her wisdom to Bédard Marcotte, telling her, for instance, "I don't know how to define the real. Does it exist? Do we ever find reality"? Akerman, whose documentary work seeks to preserve the intimacy of captured reality without establishing a clear line between the magical and the real, evidently inspires the Québécois filmmaker, who is attentive to these intimate moments she shares with the people she spontaneously reaches out to, including university students, a yoga practitioner and especially during the online conversations she has with her mother.

The somewhat raw documentary aspect of the film shines through in the limited dialogues where the two women discuss their film, the different shots and composition they choose, as well as the direction they are taking (literally and figuratively). This way of intertwining the two genres are, according to Quebec film specialist Paul Warren, what makes the specificity of Québécois cinema: the capacity to integrate, into these films, the two cardinal traits of documentary, "on the one hand fidelity to factual data, to the basic material (during the shooting phase) and, on the other, creativity or ingenuity (during editing)" (72).

In *L.A. Tea Time*, the mixing of documentary, essay, and fiction genres contributes to the physical and symbolic mobility of the protagonists, leaving more space to cinematic as well as internal/intimate explorations of movements that propel them both outwards and inwards. In a context where, historically speaking, geographical and social mobility has always been limited for women, and where "the first explorers often refused to allow women on board because they thought they would distract the men from their task" (Pritchard 45), the act of traveling American roads, on foot or by car, is in itself a political act of reappropriation of the female body, in the sense that "the affirmation of mobility is partly enjoined as a feminist strategy constructing the conceptual binaries that constrict women's identities" (Pritchard 45). During their travels, the two women find a certain freedom within themselves, as they allow for the events, peoples, and spaces to impregnate them, pushing them to move forward, despite their knowledge of the possible dangers of the road. Furthermore, their debonair attitude, casual clothing and overall untidy appearance of Bédard-Marcotte and her partner all challenge and question stereotypical images of femininity in road movies, thus furthering a feminist agenda that is not at the forefront of their journey, but lurks in the background and can be felt, for example, through the relationship they share with two other filmmakers. Indeed, the ghostly presence of July and Akerman, referred to as role models, serves as a motivation for the filmmaker and her friend to move forward and to position themselves as being capable of self-creation through their physical mobility, in a context where traditionally "women were consigned to the background … in a space without distance and time without future" (Bauman 87).

The inclusion of a scene where the filmmaker and her friend encounter a shady, redneck man intent on giving them compliments on their bodies (which he qualifies as being "sexy") reminds the viewer of the ways in which women on the road have been considered like "women on the streets" aka sex workers, remaining to this day still "imagined territories" for men (Rojek

and Urry 17). Despite this scene, there are no other instances where we are made to feel like the two women are in any kind of peril in the middle of a deeply divided country, perhaps because Bédard Marcotte is "not interested in the missiles that saturate the US horizon, but in the flowers that lie in their wake" (Thibodeau). In fact, the America that unfolds for them (contrary to the very political America Léa Pool is confronted with in the 1990s) is infused with people intent on making sense of their lives through esoteric means, with very few individuals wanting to discuss politics, religion, or anything else going on in their country, leaving more time and space for wandering, for inner reflection, and contemplation.

Conclusion

Both *Hotel Chronicles* and *L.A. Tea Time* present women based in Québec who seek the American road as an act of self-definition. While *Hotel Chronicles* plays with postmodern aesthetics of the 1990s (through its repetitive use of television, music, and film references), and suggests that the road is a political realization, *L.A. Tea Time* presents an intimate portrait of what the freedoms of the road can provide for two women in a contemporary setting. This suggests a new sense of mobility for women since the 1990s. Thus, it is crucial to recognize how far these women have come between the time both films are made. As Alison Yarrow writes in her review of feminism in the 1990s, "[w]hen any woman made the news, she often stayed there for days, weeks, months, and, in some cases, years. Meanwhile, news consumers blamed women for their own unceasing visibility, as if they had narcissistically engineered unflattering coverage of themselves for personal gain" (Yarrow).

Pool's investment is thus inherently political, as visibility and mobility on the road are political acts that are present even through the more intimate moments of the film, where the filmmaker reads out loud letters to her lover/to America. As for Bédard Marcotte's era, the women of "a new generation are becoming more involved in the mass media and culture, calling for social mixing, acceptance of difference, inclusion and the 'disappearance of power relations instituted by gender norms'" (Dagorn 19) and her work suggests that the road can be more than just a political realization; it can also be an artistic practice (Dagorn 19). Though Pool's film is inherently more political than Bédard Marcotte's, it is important to acknowledge how the two documentaries are revolutionary in how they capture movement.

Neither work claims it is a feminist work (nor do the women put forward their Québécois identity in a significant manner), yet both films are invested in a form of female self-discovery through the realization of mobility. In both films, each woman is shown transgressing the background: Pool moves from the mountains, as Bédard Marcotte's journey begins when she decides to move out of the stillness of the Québécois winter to begin her journey on the yellow brick road possibly leading to the American Dream. They also travel symbolically with other women along the way: Pool through the various women she meets and interviews, and Bédard Marcotte with the magical images of July and Akerman. Thus, they both effectively position themselves as strong, confident women on the road, seeking liberation through physical, aesthetic, and symbolic mobility.

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"Flowing Perpetually Outward": Quest and Journey in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998)

Keywords: Terrence Malick, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Over-Soul, Nature, war

***Abstract*:** North American director Terrence Malick's films poetically explore inner journeys that, particularly in his early work, deeply engage with the narratives surrounding the American Dream, often intertwining these with literal journeys. The protagonists of Malick's cinema share a common experience of existential inquiry, which propels their personal journeys and serves as the core narrative element of his films. In Malick's transcendentalist framework, the interplay between a character's path and the surrounding landscape connects to Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul, a philosophical idea in which all things converge and unify. This article examines Malick's interpretation of mobility in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), analysing its (meta)physical journey through thematic and philosophical lenses. This approach aims to illuminate how the notion of the Over-Soul continues to shape Malick's spiritual approach to storytelling. The analysis will consider both narrative structure and formal style to explore this relationship.

Introduction

In this article, I aim to explore the trope of the journey in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), directed by Terrence Malick (b. 1943), in relation to a key concept in Ralph Waldo Emerson's metaphysical thought (1803-1882), the Over-Soul, which is the universal divine essence accessed by each individual via the internal power of their own souls.[1] While Emerson was a pioneer of literature and philosophy in the recently founded United States,[2] Malick played a central role in North American philosophical and transcendental film a century later.[3] His films tell tales of men and women seeking their spiritual purpose[4] and the notion of the journey is present in every one of his narrative trajectories. The importance of communing with nature, the ethereal unity of all things

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and the optimistic belief in individual spiritual revelation situate Malick's philosophical sensibilities within Emerson's thought (Fech 8).

In the pages that follow, I analyze the North American soldiers' journey to Guadalcanal in *The Thin Red Line* with reference to Emerson's Transcendental philosophy. To this end, I begin by mapping the place of movement in the director's feature films. Then, I explore how random encounters bring the traveller into contact with otherness, revealing different dimensions of this movement. Finally, I examine the links between the journey in Malick's work and Emerson's notion of the Over-Soul and the ways in which these links are codified in the director's filmic style. The landscape, as a stage for contradictory natural worlds and the rhetorical figure of light, is key to my analysis of a war film that is unconventional in its portrayal of a physical and metaphysical journey to a specific geographic location, which is itself twofold.

Roads, Paths, and Journeys in Malick's Work

In Malick's first four films, *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and *The New World* (2005), the journey structures the narrative in the sense that it depicts events that are made possible by the characters' physical movement. *Badlands* is an existential road movie in which a young criminal couple travel through the Badlands of Montana on their way to Canada in the 1950s. *Days of Heaven* narrates the story of a couple who travel with the young man's sister as part of a diverse, multicultural group of immigrants in 1916: they are all seeking work, so they move from Chicago to the Texas panhandle in search of opportunities. In *The Thin Red Line*, American soldiers from Charlie Company cross the island of Guadalcanal in the Pacific Ocean in 1942, during World War II. *The New World* tells the tale of English colonizer John Smith, who arrives in Virginia in 1607 and falls in love with the young Pocahontas from the Powhatan indigenous community. Initially fascinated by the untouched landscape of North America, he eventually becomes disillusioned with it and decides to leave. The journey as a metaphor of the existence of the North American nation occupies a prominent place in United States literature,[5] and Malick follows a similar path, using visual motifs rooted in the mythical imaginary of the United States to paint a clear picture of a community's domestication of a natural (wild) environment and trace the country's history (Cerero 238).

However, in his following films—*The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2013), *Knight of Cups* (2016), *Song to Song* (2017) and *A Hidden Life* (2019)—the journey is not central to the plot, despite forming part of the narrative arc. In other words, it is no more significant or consequential than any of the other tropes used by Malick, such as the suburban domestic space, the rural landscape, the angular cityscape and other spatial figures that gradually came to form part of the Texan director's filmic lexicon: the luxury villa, the music festival, the prison. *The Tree of Life* focuses on Jack, who ponders his earlier family life and the impact of his younger brother's death as he strolls around the city and its modern architecture. Featuring flashbacks and a whole sequence exploring the evolution of the universe and organic life on the planet, the film ends in an allegorical natural landscape where every moment in Jack's memory of a time beyond time comes together. *To the Wonder* (2013), *Knight of Cups* (2016), and *Song to Song* (2017) are hyperlink films that are also set in the present day and each focus on a small group of four characters, whose fates become interwoven at some point in time. The feelings aroused by these encounters prompt each character to talk at length about their lives in existential and spiritual terms. Finally, *A Hidden Life* (2019) returns to the past, narrating the tragic experience of a conscientious objector who revolts against the Nazis' actions and principles in World War II Germany.

On Mobility

As we can see from this summary of his filmography, Malick's first major foray into film was a road movie. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the road embodies the very definition of travel, as a place where encounters with the unknown—coming face-to-face with otherness—occur,

> The chronotope of the road associated with encounter is characterized by a broader scope, but by a somewhat lesser degree of emotional and evaluative intensity. ... The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road ("the high road"), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, states, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. ... Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: "the course of a life," "to set out on a new course,"

> "the course of history" and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which the road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time. (Bakhtin 243-44)

The road's existential dimension, through the fusion of space and time, renders the physical encounters it enables as also symbolic, often mythical. In this sense, the very experience of mobility is mythologized. The moving state of the individual on the road, with its encounters, stops and crossings, essentializes and reflects the traveler's existential condition, with their linear chronology progressively materialized in time by their own life journey.

Film is the ideal medium for the chronotope of the journey (Stam 11) and, by extension, the road movie is the most fitting genre for this chronotope. The character's experience of mobility—or even that of the camera or editing—reveals their relationship with the journey, or, in other words, mirrors specific subjectivities. The road becomes a reflection of the traveller's identity: as the characters experience the random encounters noted by Bakhtin, they react to and are shaped by these stimuli.

In other words, the encounter implies a confrontation with otherness, thus readjusting the migrant's identity, with greater or lesser violence. Giovanni Gasparini's sociological thinking helps to systematize the way in which travel affects the identity of the traveler. He identifies five different dimensions of the concept of the journey. As a personal experience offering access to a more concrete vision of reality and fuller self-realisation, the journey is (I) an expression of personal freedom (freedom of movement); (II) a quest driven by the tension aroused by curiosity over what lies beyond the bounds of the domestic sphere; (III) a separation from and loss of familiar people and social constraints; or (IV) an "a-modern" experience or exploratory journey on foot in areas where there is little to no human presence. The journey is also (V) a "total social reality," a unifying, concentrated experience that influences all the individual's actions during the process (Gasparini 7-19).

Malick's films are experimental in their reflective nature and filmic style. His first four feature films take a historicising approach and their narrative revolves around the motif of a journey made not only by the characters but also by the director himself, who uses these films to apply or test philosophical and religious ideas. As soon as the history of the United States is not directly addressed in the films, the physical journey of the characters no longer structures them. As a road movie, *Badlands* established a matrix

of thematic exposition for subsequent films in the first phase of the filmmaker's work that allows the character to operate in a primeval landscape and culture in which they are an outsider via the (in)voluntary exploration of a specific geographical territory. In this regard, *The Thin Red Line*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The New World* may be interpreted as road movies whose plots test the strength and elasticity of the genre's mythology, motifs, and iconography.

In Malick's films, journeys are not only quests but also "a-modern" (Gasparini 13) experiences and total social realities, as the spiritual figure of totality—"God"—is key in this universe insofar as all the characters seek a spiritual link to the world. The representation of these (personal, existential, and religious) quests encompasses the character's solitude; the contemplation of the space in combination with an internal monologue narrated in voiceover; extradiegetic (sacred) music; constant movement (of the camera, figures, and forms); nature as an embodiment of wonder; multiple individual tempos, and the simultaneous presence of material and allegorical spaces/realities.

The powerful combination of these elements prompts the character to adopt a critical distance and a questioning stance in their interactions with the world. It also creates an intense intimacy between the viewer and the character, whose personal, private sphere we are invited to access. In other words, reality in Malick's films is shaped internally and collectively by his characters as they question their place in a physical and metaphysical world. There is a certain atmosphere that is present in all his films due to his filmic style, which is rarefied from film to film and transcends the idea of a mere ambiance. Due to the way it brings together the subjective individuality of the characters, the way they connect with nature, and the way they reflect on their own trajectory, this atmosphere, as Malick stages it, is lived by the characters as a religious experience. Emerson understood this specific spiritual connection between the self and the other as a transcendent figure of totality which he named the Over-Soul. On this concept, the philosopher considers the following,

> We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as

> the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. (Emerson 207)

This unifying entity, attainable to every human being, opposes to the chronological, rational time regulating our lives, also enables both existential freedom and spiritual fulfilment. Also, according to Emerson, nature, with its mystical qualities, is key to transcend the consecutive time and fragmented space mundane perception. Communion with the overwhelming, natural—physical—world allows for an immersion in a metaphysical, undivided realm. In that sense, Emerson states,

> In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (39)

It is in the natural world, then, that human beings are most directly linked to the Over-Soul via the revelation of an infinite, universal consciousness of which they themselves come to form part. This spiritual link between the individual soul and the all-encompassing soul emerges in the experience of the sublime: an overwhelming centrifugal vortex that allows the transcendental to emerge. Nature is the ultimate locus of the sublime in Emerson's thought.

With a body of work spanning more than fifty years, Malick's filmic style has naturally evolved over time, although the link between human beings and Emerson's universal being has been a constant feature in the director's work, lending his films huge thematic power and narrative structure. From a conceptual point of view, Malick's sensibility is Emersonian because it is structured around the belief in a universally accessible unifying figure of totality that transcends the material and historical. So, how does Malick's spiritual cinema codifies the link between the character and the Over-Soul[6]? The character's inner world is revealed primarily through voiceover monologues that convey reflective, questioning thoughts, along with POV shots depicting individual perspectives, which are emphasized by using a hand-held camera. Meanwhile, the figuration of the unified, multi-faceted divine being and the characters' communion with

it is achieved using a wide-angle fisheye lens—to create Emerson's transparent eyeball—hand-held camera shorts and narrative fragmentation of time and space because of non-linear editing.

The director's decision to opt for hyperlink narratives reinforces the total dimension of this universal being, which, in turn, is mythologized and eulogized by the extradiegetic sacred music. Nature, as a place of revelation and amazement with the divine, tends to be depicted using expressive shots whose lines of force summon the sublime. One example is the main leitmotif of Malick's filmography: a low-angle shot of tree leaves moving in the foreground, with a ray of sunlight that appears to illuminate everything behind them peeping through. Shots of animals filmed front-on at camera level, very open landscape shots and detail shots of natural life help decentralize human beings in this highly personal, complex perspective of the world.

Transcending History in Nature: *The Thin Red Line*

Malick's war film depicts the experience of North American soldiers at the Battle of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in the Pacific Ocean during World War II. It tells their story from the individual perspectives of more than twenty men, whose voiceover narrations become muddled as they convey their complex conceptual and spiritual thoughts.[7] The brutal attack scenes are framed by soliloquies that often personalize them without mitigating the violence and extreme racism towards the Japanese army, as well as the pervading desire to destroy the landscape.

The apparent disorder of the voiceover narrations causes them to merge into one, reconfiguring them as a whole. The inner voices of the soldiers expressing their state of mind produces a total soul: Emerson's Over-Soul, reconfiguring the genre's classic iconography.[8] However, this chorus of souls is not the only element that subverts the codes of war films: fascination with the lush natural environment and its "natural" hazards, with the native people and with Melanesian culture, mythologized in the spectacular opening to the film, stands in opposition to the idea of a region being dominated by the military capture depicted in the film. The landscape is at once a contested territory and a place of death, as well as an arena for philosophical reflection (Silberman 177).

The first scene in the film, depicting a crocodile in a dark, remote tropical forest, attests Malick's natural setting as the deadly albeit exuberant locus of existential

dissertation. The animal enters a body of water, slipping down and disappearing beneath the surface, which falls still once again. The danger posed by the hidden animal is heightened by the crescendo of deep tones in "The Carol Atoll" (Zimmer, 1999), composed of electronic sounds and, later, organ music. A lyrical sequence of images of huge tropical trees follows, accompanying a voiceover revealing the thoughts of Private Train. Low-angle POV shots track the trees' immense exterior roots, long trunks and lush tops. The camera moves up to the sky, where rays of sunlight shine down through the leaves. The surroundings are contemplated at length, as Train says: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?" (*The Thin Red Line*). Then, we watch as Private Witt—the first white man and soldier that we see and the main overarching character in the film—is dazzled by this little paradise. Gone AWOL, he is happily living in a small native community. Malick's story picks up here, following the experiences of field combat of Witt and many other soldiers.

The Thin Red Line features different approaches to the same natural environment. Blasi identifies two visions of the natural world in the film: an organicist, vitalist vision in which humans and nature form part of a larger whole, in which all parts are connected and interrelated, and a vision in which the parts of the natural world are completely separated from the laws of causality and reciprocity that characterize organic life in general (80). In this regard, war embodies an idea of culture created by modernity (Woesser 129), reminding us that the mythical link between humans and nature was lost when it was brought under capitalist principles (Armstrong ch.1).

Indeed, the first voice heard in the film reveals its purpose as an exploration of the natural world and of human nature (Silberman 177). The journey in *The Thin Red Line* facilitates this investigation by enabling contact and familiarity with the mythical natural world, which is presented as exotic from the outset. This is a land of spiritual revelation and wonder; these are present particularly in Private Witt's inner world. The journey brings him into contact with another reality, yet it also causes him to become intrinsically aligned with the world and everything in it. Exploring Guadalcanal's idyllic nature allows the soldier to access the Over-Soul, tested by the historical violence of war, which, in turn, is portrayed amid the same primeval natural environment and experienced by the character. Witt's journey on the island is a path to divine revelation, which encompasses Gasparini's five dimensions: expression of personal freedom, quest, violent separation from the nuclear family, a-modern event, and total social reality.

In the film, the world's different forms forge a narrative about nature that generates the sublime, as it is understood by Emerson, "a thrill passes through all men at the reception of new truth, or at the performance of a great action, which comes out of the heart of nature" (214). Witt, the Emersonian Hero, as Bill Fech argues (67), experiences and personifies the whole process, but the film also conforms to the Transcendentalist vision of the world, which is apparent in the unfocused scenes, for example. The recurring motif of the sun's rays shining down through gaps in the darkness—invoking a classic idea in cinema—introduces the trope of light to the film visually from the opening scene. Sunlight represents the spirit and spiritual illumination, while the sun radiating this light symbolizes the divine eye, the active principle and the source of life and energy (Cirlot 187).

Several important dialogues between Witt and Sargent Welsh reinforce the idea of light as the presence of the divine when it appears in association with the soldier.

> First Sgt. Welsh: Hey Witt, who you making trouble for today?
> Private Witt: What do you mean?
> First Sgt. Welsh: Well, isn't that what you like to do? Turn left when they say go right. Why are you such a trouble maker Witt?
> Private Witt: You care about me? Don't you Sergeant? I always felt like you did. One day I come up and talk to you. Then the next day it's like we never even met. Lonely house now, you ever get lonely?
> First Sgt. Welsh: Only around people.
> Private Witt: Only around people.
> First Sgt. Welsh: You still believe in the beautiful light do you? How do you do that? You're a magician to me.
> Private Witt: I still see a spark in you. (*The Thin Red Line*)

Emerson explains that, "[f]rom within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all" (208). Witt believes in the "beautiful light" and can recognize luminous particles in the more sceptical, pragmatic Welsh.

At one point, Witt walks among dismembered, bloodied soldiers scattered across a plain near a stream. As he gazes upon this historical horror in the midst of the natural environment, we hear him say, "Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of,

all faces are the same man. One big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself, each like a coal drawn from the fire" (*The Thin Red Line*). When faced with darkness, Witt moves ever closer to the divine dimension of the Over-Soul—the transcendental imperative expressed in terms of light (Smith)—in the sense that he perceives it in the mundane dimension of historic reality.[9]

Witt's physical journey on the island paves the way for his spiritual journey. In this regard, the specific geographical territory of the lush Guadalcanal is juxtaposed with another, conceived as a paradise and as a hell-as-paradise-lost. These realms are demarcated by the thin red line of the title, which is erased by the Emersonian hero's transcendental experience as he establishes a personal, original connection with the universe: the Over-Soul, constructed by the splendour, intelligence, and visual and sonic sophistication of Malick's film.

His individual spiritual connection with the world led Witt to transcend the physical realm towards the metaphysical, as it has been established. His inner conflict—specifically caused by a war experience lived in an idyllic landscape—as well as its resolution have existential and philosophical outlines, which, together with Malick's film style and narrative, render *The Thin Red Line* as an abstraction, almost rhetorical, despite its obvious historiographical focus.

The story of a man inwardly surpassing a materialization of civilization's overwhelming cruelty is of universal reach. Contemporarily, this level of brutality can be traced in the neoliberal capitalist regime that, in the pursuit of corporate wealth, has increased social inequality, generating extreme exploitation and precarity. Present-day mental coping tools, such as popular spiritual training, positive psychology, and the broader happiness industry borrow from the Transcendental Romantic Emersonian sensibility Malick displays and holds forth in the film. It can be understood in the ways they all tend to manage negative emotions by focusing on the person's individual sphere, detaching oneself from the historical-political circumstances that give rise to those emotions, not actively reacting against the context (Purser). In the specific case of the film, the context would be the Battle of Guadalcanal, during World War II.

Malick chooses to focus on the depoliticized dimension of the war experience, associating it primarily with the spiritual path. In this way, he excludes the social and political criticism that Emerson did make, particularly with regards to the treatment of Native Americans and the practice of slavery, on the rise in the United States at the time (Goodman). Malick's—Witt's— ethics does not lead to agency, as opposed to Emerson's

Transcendentalism. Notwithstanding, Emerson's Over-Soul structures *The Thin Red Line*. It does so narratively, by giving the account of the spiritual and physical journey of a soldier, thematically, by focusing on the spiritual fusion between the individual and the world, and, formally, by activating the properly filmic in the staging of this all-encompassing key concept.

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[2] According to Goodman, Transcendentalism is an early nineteenth-century American literary, philosophical, religious and political movement led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Inspired by English and German Romanticism, Herder and Schleiermacher's biblical criticism and Hume's scepticism, Transcendentalists were driven by the "feeling" that a new era was dawning. They criticized the unthinking conformity of contemporary society and called for every individual to find, as Emerson put it, an original relationship with the universe (Goodman).

[3] In the 1960s, the filmmaker switched from teaching philosophy to studying at the American Film Institute, leading specialized critics to conclude that his films cannot be analyzed within a purely philosophical framework as they resist the imposition of theoretical ideas about the world (Blasi 80).

[4] Due to its narrative, thematic and stylistic characteristics, Malick's work is primarily analyzed from the perspective of spiritual and filmic philosophical thought and of its relationship with the history of the United States. See Woessner, Blasi, Sinnerbrink, Hintermann & Villa (eds.), Tucker & Kendall (eds.), Rybin, Sinnerbrink,Michaels, Paterson [(ed.), among others.

[5] Broadly speaking, the literature on road movies draws on writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Walt Whitman because of their poetic exaltation of the self through the recognition of space and the awareness of the symbolic power of the frontier crossing as a catalyst for the full realisation of the individual as such. Whereas *Huckleberry Finn* introduces the notion of the journey as a quest for freedom, *The Road* by Jack London mythologizes the travelling vagabond (Frasca 15). In the work of John dos Passos and Hemingway, movement is associated with restlessness, while Steinbeck explores the journey as a hope-fuelled escape in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Meanwhile, the Beat Generation equate travel with bliss, rediscovering the landscape in a carefree manner ("innocent" in its insignificance) in association with a bohemian lifestyle that shuns materialism and middle-class moral values (Laderman 10). Whitman, Steinbeck, and Kerouac could be considered the founding authors of the genre and are symbolically present throughout the corpus.

[6] Despite being only peripheral in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* (Fech 57), it is a more prominent theme in his later films.

[7] The following utterances from Private Witt exemplify the nature of these monologues, "Everyone lookin' for salvation by himself. Each like a coal thrown from the fire"; "We were a family. How'd it break up and come apart, so that now we're turned against each other? Each standing in the other's light. How'd we lose that good that was given us? Let it slip away. Scattered it, careless. What's keepin' us from reaching out, touching the glory?"; "Who are you to live in all these many forms? Your death that captures all. You, too, are the source of all that's gonna be born. Your glory. Mercy. Peace. Truth. You give calm a spirit, understanding, courage. The contented heart."

[8] Generally, war films depict large-scale combats or individual ones; there is a target to be obtained and a group of combatants with whom we identify, and who show different types of courage, and comradeship is a vital element (Hayward 492).

[9] Witt's journey and life also end on the island, which, in spiritual and religious terms, evokes ideas of a departure and journey of a different kind.

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