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Foreword

In the current social, political, and cultural global context, the concept of identity, both individual and collective, has been undergoing a permanent process of redefinition. Therefore, the articles in this volume propose an examination of identity (in its broadest definition) with a view to uncovering its multilayered significance at literary and cultural crossroads between the East and the West: the “identity” of contemporary education (“Philosophies of Education”), identities in popular culture and literature (“When the East Meets the West”; “Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Choice;” and “Identity and Belonging”), and the “identities” of literary works expressed in terms of narrative structure, characters, and plot (in the short stories and novels by Alice Munro, Ian McEwan, and Zadie Smith). By discussing the tenets of the German and English educational philosophies in the 18th- and 19th centuries from a comparative perspective, Corina Beleaua creates a bridge across time to the contemporary educational process, arguing for an educational reform in the 21st century that should foreground the students’ self-discovery, as well as dialogue and openness towards one another, suggesting the study of literature as a way to achieve these goals. Ting-Ting Chan’s article focuses on how the hyphenated identity of a Taiwanese-American director, Ang Lee, has impacted his depiction of the American family from a cross-cultural perspective in the movie *Taking Woodstock*. Similarly, Anca-Luminița Iancu also approaches the issue of identity in popular culture, as her article examines the intricate connections between gender and racial/ethnic identity in interethnic relationships in the movies *Something New* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Likewise, Alexandra Mitrea’s article centers on various aspects of redefining key elements of racial and cultural identity in Caryl Phillips’ novel *Cambridge*, pointing to the complexity of such concepts as belonging and Englishness.

As far as the “identities” of literary works are concerned, Sorin Ștefănescu’s article looks at the connections between narrative construction and the theme of family identity in Alice Munro’s short story “Deep-Holes.” In her article, Monica Cojocaru examines the changing “identity” of Ian McEwan’s short prose by looking at its chronological and thematic evolution. In a similar vein, Cătălina Stanislav analyzes three novels by Zadie Smith in order to uncover the most salient features of her “plotless” fiction in terms of character construction and themes.

The two book reviews that conclude the volume also focus on the larger theme of identity. In *Transcultural Imaginings: Translating the Other, Translating the Self in Narratives about Migration and Terrorism*, Alexandra Glavanakova looks at contemporary migrant writing through a transcultural lens in order to uncover the complex connections between identity construction, Otherness, and terrorism. In *The Non-National in Contemporary American Literature: Ethnic Women Writers and Problematic Belongings*, Dalia M. A. Goma interrogates the concept of nation as a monolithic construct in her examination of the multifaceted “imagined transcultural communities” in contemporary ethnic American writing by women.

The Editors

Trans-Atlantic Pedagogical Dialogue – Philosophies of Education

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Abstract

Educational systems around the world are in a continuous reform. Even if there are local differences among them, it is undeniable that they share common values that lie at the foundation of the educational process of each individual. The present essay aims at portraying some of the prevailing values that pedagogues in America and Europe have been sharing for the last centuries, together with the ones needed nowadays. I will argue for a renewal in the conceptualization of the importance of literature, showing the urgency for adopting an educational system based on “cultivating humanity” through books and “global intelligence,” through openness toward others (Spăriosu 197).

In the first part of the essay, I will present the philosophies of the main German educators of the 18th and 19th centuries, by focusing on the three main targets they consistently discuss: **moral development**, **aesthetic freedom/ play** (regarded as a deliberate activity) and **self-discovery through reading**. The second part of the essay will build a framework of some of the English and North American philosophies of education in the 19th century. I will emphasize the German legacy, together with new institutional ideals, such as the ideal of unity found in Newman’s, Ruskin’s, Arnold’s and Dewey’s reforms. Lastly, I intend to highlight the contemporary educational tendencies focusing on the return to the individualistic ideal, through play and self-discovery, through aestheticism and freethinking. These trends situate the student at the center of the pedagogical act, by directing him toward the truth translated in **harmony**, **self-discovery** and proper **dialogue** with

the other. I will use a theoretical framework inspired by Martha Nussbaum and Mihai Spăriosu, in order to restate the need for educational reform and global education.

Keywords: philosophies of education, pedagogy, moral development, aesthetic freedom, self-discovery, play, global intelligence.

I. The German Philosophy of Education for an Autonomous Individual

The 18th and 19th century German pedagogues try to instill in children a set of values aiming at harmony and self-fulfillment. Their major aims are moral development (1), aesthetic freedom (2), and self-discovery (3). In contrast with these ideals, there are also several divisive perspectives, regarding, for instance, the process of **reading** and its moral role. On the one hand, there are pedagogues (such as Rousseau) who reject the Renaissance book knowledge because of the reproductive methods based on copying or repeating words without understanding them. On the other hand, there are those who embrace reading and provide students with a different approach, combining texts with real practice, and abstract experiences with concrete ones. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Fröbel follow Jean-Jacques Rousseau's shift from books to nature, from 18th and 19th theory to practice and decentralize the role of books, by connecting them to material practices.

The key concept in the German system of education is *Bildung*. A term associated with *Erziehung* (education), it represents the process of personality formation, as a response to education. It implies knowledge, value orientation and the responsibility for the human community (Danner 5). The word *Bildung* can easily refer to the 13th century German mystics' understanding of the individual who should internalize the image of Jesus.¹ In the 18th and 19th centuries Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller (aesthetic *Bildung*), and Alexander von

Humboldt approach it differently. As minister of education, Humboldt designs a new theory of *Bildung*, seen as the “harmonic growth and development of all inner forces and potentials of the human being” (Danner 8). This inner growth is based on freedom, energy (*Kraft*), love and friendship.

(1) Moral Development

The beginning of the 19th century offers the context for the establishment of an educational system based on national values. In such a context, an educational system that provides the student with social values becomes a necessity. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1922), Fichte promotes the role of the state in the attainment of **moral progress**:

The aim of the State is positive law, internal peace, and a condition of affairs in which everyone may by diligence earn his daily bread and satisfy the needs of his material existence...All this is only a means, a condition and a framework for what love of fatherland really wants, viz., that the eternal and the divine may blossom in the world and never cease to become more pure, perfect, and excellent. That is why this love of fatherland must itself govern the State and be its supreme, final, and absolute authority. (138)

He considers that the role of the community (fatherland) is crucial in the development of future generations and that the state is indispensable in the “regeneration of the whole human race” (187). If centuries before, theology offered the path “for salvation in heaven,” the beginning of the 19th century gives education this redemptive role, but “for life on earth,” increasing, thus, the power of the state (190). In his third Address, written in 1808, Fichte underlines that “education is the art of training the pupil to **pure morality**” (38). The new system of German national education would be the remedy for the mistakes of the old system. Fichte’s idea of education aims at “producing a stable, settled and steadfast character” (20). In his work *On Education*, Immanuel Kant sets forth his commitment to a future world ethics by nurture, discipline

(*Zucht*), culture (instruction), discretion (faculty of using one's abilities properly) and **moral training**. He considers that the establishment of a viable system of education is a "glorious ideal" (8), which leads to "cultivation of the mind that aims at nature, [while] moral training [aims at] at freedom" (67). He wants to instruct children "in the order and beauty of the works of Nature" (110). Moral training should be based upon maxims, not discipline (83) because morality is a "matter of character" (96). The good character determines children to be dutiful toward themselves, toward others and to even show benevolence in helping others. Thus, the purpose of education would be to encourage the development of attributes for good, so as for the child to "better himself" (33). Through the spirit of duty and obedience, one can reach "moral rectitude or truthfulness" (90). Fichte and Kant provide the 19th century philosophy of education with the incentive for the moral training of students. A century later, their ideal becomes a source of inspiration for English pedagogues, and one can unmistakably say that moral training is or should be at the core of any educational training even more so today.

(2) Aesthetic Freedom

Truthfulness could be attained through love, beauty, play and freedom which transformed aesthetics into an imperative allowing it to be called the *Germanic science*. Kant, Schiller, and Goethe highlight its inherent value. **Love** is a central aspect of Kant's reform, and it is understood as love for fatherland and love of knowledge, as a prerequisite for learning, since "the pupil learns willingly and with pleasure...purely for the sake of learning" (Fichte 25). Love has an essential place in Pestalozzi's philosophy as well. In his case, "...love of mankind must be preceded by a more primitive and intimate love – that of the mother" (239). As Fichte himself acknowledges, for Pestalozzi, the intensity of this personal experience is different and it targets the community, not the state. "The pupil's faculty of knowledge must never be stimulated without love...because man can will only what he loves" (171). Love is the "specific quality of the moral will, but...no one

can ever know whether obedience results from love of order or fear of punishment” (31). The transformation of knowledge acquisition into a pleasant experience is hard to reach, since its main condition is pupil’s freedom. Fichte states the importance of this process, and he makes sure to subordinate the personal self to the law and to the community. In contrast with Pestalozzi who encourages home schooling, Fichte’s suggestion is to separate children from their parents because “consciousness could be fostered only in the community,” the right place for acquiring clear knowledge (33).

Pestalozzi wants to simplify the mechanism of teaching and learning because he is not satisfied with the educational system of his time. He tries to make knowledge popular, because it is “not work, but play” (38). Both he and Fröbel believe in the method of “self-activity” because “instruction must be connected with a certain need and want of the pupil,” who has to listen to his instincts and inclinations toward certain activities, such as drawing (Hayward 53). Pestalozzi’s “faith in the possibility of improving the human race” (61) has in view the process of intensely raising the capacity of the mind, through spontaneous effort, “analogy and subjective observation” (236). Pestalozzi establishes an institution for training teachers and stresses the importance of methodology in the educational process. Even if his primary target is the education of the heart, he wants to reach an equilibrium in the formation of the student. Thus his head-hand-heart method aims at the **harmonious** development of three fundamental powers: intellectual, physical and moral. He wants to free the spirit from the yoke of tradition and allow an adequate development of the inner forces. Pestalozzi tries to create a system that grants access to knowledge and care for poor children. His father died when he was 6 and his mother raised him alone. Pestalozzi knows from experience the struggles of orphans. In his book *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, he makes an attempt to teach mothers how to educate their own children at home. His method consists of the combination of working and learning, together with the joy of the heart provided by the free activity of **playing**. Kant, who also values the role of free activities in education, considers that “by

games a child learns endurance, maintains his natural cheerfulness and gains in candor” (62).

Most probably one of the greatest philosophers who emphasizes both the importance of **play** and **beauty** is Kant’s friend, the poet Friedrich Schiller. In his letters *On the Aesthetic Education on Man*, he argues in favor of “the aesthetic creative impulse [that] cannot develop until the play impulse is in easy and habitual action” (8). He considers art the “awakener of human culture, through the liberation of man from desire” (11). Furthermore, he believes that “[m]an must pass through the aesthetic condition, from the merely physical, in order to reach the rational or moral” (12). His aesthetic play is an ideal of humanity. He insists that art should be at the core of the teaching experience because of its potential in creating alternatives of thought, by raising individuals to higher moral standards:

The aim of imaginative education...is to give the individual a concrete sensuous awareness of the harmony and rhythm which enters into the constitution of all living bodies and plants, which is the basis of all works of art, to the end that the child, in its life and activities, shall partake of the same organic grace and beauty...By means of such education we instill into the child that instinct of relationship which enables it to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly, the good from the evil...the noble person from the ignoble.
(18)

(3) Self-Discovery through Reading

Kant’s ideas about the role of novel reading are under the negative spell of his age. He considers that reading prevents the mind from properly engaging in useful activities. His interest is rather in the exposure to real experiences that have a higher potential to teach than texts might.

Novel reading is the worst thing for children, since they can make no further use of it and it merely affords them entertainment for the moment...Novel reading weakens the memory...because

there is no exercise of thought... The best way to understand is to do. (73, 80)

In response, both Pestalozzi and Fichte criticize the Renaissance “bookishness” of schools and the “overestimation of reading and writing, [...] the settling up of these as almost the aim and climax of popular education” (Fichte 161). Pestalozzi criticizes the “...mania for words and books [that] has pervaded the whole system of popular education...an empty chattering, fatal alike to real faith and real knowledge, an instruction of more words and outward show, unsubstantial as a dream” (233). Pestalozzi tries to apply the ideas of his mentor, the French writer and pedagogue, Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his book, *Emile, or On Education*, Rousseau develops his philosophy of naturalism, arguing that children should learn by experience, free choice and contact with nature, rather than through reading books. In his industrial school at Neuhof, Pestalozzi aims at supporting the same ideals: “All is artificial. We must return to nature. Man is bad by institutions, not by nature” (xiv). In contrast with Fichte who considers that the state can offer children an ideal system for their development, so as to dissociate the good from the bad, Pestalozzi prioritizes the “observing powers” (xi) of the individual and his potential for reflection and for doing good. His *Anschauung*, or the power of **seeing**, aims at “directing the senses to outward objects [including sounds], and exciting consciousness of the impressions produced on them by these objects...” (xxxi). Similar to John Ruskin, Pestalozzi “trusts the power of the eyes, and combines seeing with sounds” (xxxi), seeking the “pulse of Art” (14). The “art of sense-impression”, or observation, is at the basis of theoretical knowledge that together with practical skills allow “Nature to develop in her own way... [reaching] harmony between the impressions received by the child and the exact degree of his developed powers” (26).

Following Kant’s approach based on concepts as intermediaries between the child and the world,² Pestalozzi views words as the foundation of knowledge, moving from the idea of “words to things,” to that of “things to words” (viii). He ascribes a

magical power to words and wants to offer children a comprehensive understanding of language, proclaiming the dictionary “the first reading book for the child” (207). In regard to reading, Pestalozzi asserts the role of literature in developing the inner-self, and in contrast with the tendencies of his age, he portrays a new, enriching aspect of reading, connecting thoughts to words, thus inviting students to active reading: “...ideas from a passage...[represent] possible objects of an internal or subjective observation... knowledge gained by sense-impression teaches me the properties of things that have not been brought before my senses by the likeness with other objects” (211). These ideas are sources for developing modes of observation and intuition. His Socratic method aims at bringing minds together through mutual instruction. Personal thought is at the core of his philosophy, because he considers that “the development of the individual follows that of the race” (xi). He is “opposed to the idea that the parrot-like learning by heart of the “Heidelberg” can be the only method of teaching, by which the Savior of the world ought to raise the human race to reverence God and to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth” (Pestalozzi, 1894, 50). His suggestion is to provide students with leading ideas and let them find their potentialities in the child’s imagination. “We must never drive the children, but only lead them by this method” (53).

Schiller embraces the same ideal of freedom and shows its connection with art: “poetry can be to Man what love is to the hero... [Beauty] can educate him to be a hero. She can summon him to action and furnish him with strength...it is through beauty that we arrive at Freedom” (11, 27). In his 5th letter, Schiller presents his belief that poetry can offer a path beyond actuality, so as for the reader to get closer to **truth**. It is only through this openness toward the liminal world of poetry and art that one can reach a more holistic understanding of things: “...those who do not venture out beyond actuality will never capture truth” (60). His visionary stance anticipates the central role that poetry and literature would play in the centuries to come: “Poetry has not yet become the adversary of wit... [because] Before truth causes her

triumphant light to penetrate into the depth of the heart, poetry intercepts her ray..." (76). One can reach truth through the interaction with a text and by manifesting inner receptivity so as for truth to reveal itself within. Truth "is not something that can be received from outside" (109). It relies on freedom and spontaneity in front of a text/work of art. "Contemplation (reflection) is Man's first free relation to the universe which surrounds him" (120) and beauty is the result of this free and pleasant endeavor. **Imagination** "finally makes, in its attempt at a free form, the leap to aesthetic play" (135). Aesthetic play is the liminal space that receives the reader, allowing his imagination to freely construct the beauty inculcated in the text. The aesthetic impulse can confer man a "social character," establishing harmony in the individual since "...only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all" (138).

The liberating potential of the aesthetic function represents an ideal that Goethe tries to instill in the hearts and minds of youth. In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Goethe offers his readers a non-conventional method of self-improvement. If other philosophers of his time theorize methods of self-achievement, Goethe educates through literature. Together with his good friend Schiller, Goethe establishes Weimar Classicism (1788-1905), a cultural movement seen as a new humanism, as a synthesis of three doctrines: Classicism, Romanticism, and Enlightenment. During his time in Weimar, Goethe writes Wilhelm's story of becoming, in the form of a *Bildungsroman* that represents a perennial invitation to a profitable lesson of self-realization through reading, voyage, poetry, theater and eventually beauty. Wilhelm, the main character, reaches the German ideal of *Bildung* because he escapes his bourgeois artificial life and tries to reach happiness and "harmonious development" (174). Through the voice of his character, Goethe intimates what the purpose of his book is. By following Wilhelm on his path to maturity, self-discovery and freedom, the reader distinguishes a plethora of arguments that sustain the value of literature, art and beauty for one's pleasure, freedom and progress: "All I desire is to raise their minds" (154).

Raising people's minds is not easy and needs entertainment through the exposure to beauty and value in art. Through his character Serlo, an actor-manager, Goethe describes his educational ideals: "One should listen to a little song, read a good poem, or look at a fine painting every single day, and if possible say something sensible about it" (170). It is by doing so that beauty can nurture people's aesthetic needs. Wilhelm gives voice to general human concerns about the lack of communion and lack of care for the other. Goethe's character is "...overcome by a profound sense of how insensitive and neglectful we are toward our friends and acquaintances while they are still with us, and only when our happy relationship with them is terminated, at least for a time do we regret what we have failed to do" (170). The book is effective in conveying nurturing lessons about friendship, work ethics, and guides the path toward self- understanding by advocating attentiveness and receptivity,

Wilhelm suddenly found himself a free man... he had often realized that he lacked experience, he placed too much trust in the experience of others and attached too much value to what other people derived from their own convictions...he abandoned his own natural way of thinking and acting by following the lead of others...Thus Wilhelm, in striving to achieve unity within himself was in fact steadily depriving himself of the possibility of any such regenerative achievement. (171)

According to Goethe, books can assist one in the active process of achieving unity because they are providers of aesthetic models, examples of good practices, and life-lessons, "that would help us toward true enlightenment and the achievement of proper perspective, either by providing us with the right materials or by giving us a sense of the unity of our mental powers" (248). He also underlines the moral importance of art. "Good art...is like good society: it obliges us, in the most pleasing way, to recognize form and limitations like those which govern our being" (316). The effect of art is redemptive and one has to know how to embrace its eye-opening outcome since, "...many are reminded of their own

wretched deficiencies when they are in the presence of great works of art” (352). Poetry has an essential social role as well. The effect of reading a poem, a story, or a play is that of self-analysis and personal inquiry, together with a state of “jubilant self-satisfaction and radiant future prospects” (88). Theater and reading are educational forces that can assist one in his/her search for meaning in life. While theater entertains, enlightens and elevates (3), books “...provide us with names for our mistakes” (181), thus the exposure to both forms of art is essential for one’s self-discovery and moral enhancement.

Education, as a dominant theme of Goethe’s writing, is meant to provide individuals with appropriate means of reaching higher moral grounds. Goethe promotes non-institutionalized education, based on awakening curiosity in young people. “So much is talked and written about education; and yet I see very few people who understand what that simple, noble, all embracing concept means, and who can translate it into action” (68). Wilhelm’s transformation, from a disoriented young man hoping to find purpose by working in a theater, to the mature adult who manages to discover his right path in life, encourages readers to embark on a similar path. Listening to one’s natural rhythm and acknowledging the almost mute craving for self-cultivation echo Wilhelm’s methods and might lead readers to start their own process of self-discovery. Goethe’s ideal of unity within implies the desire to connect the physical, the intellectual, and the moral, allowing the outside of the individual to loyally project his inside. Art is the golden path for reaching this ideal, and Goethe, like Schiller argues that education needs to be built on wisdom, inclination, and predisposition. The educational system involves knowledge of particularities of students for the configuration of the future adult, since “[i]n every predisposition, and only there, lies the power to perfect [one]self. Very few people who want to teach and affect others, understand that” (339). As a master of words, a brilliant teacher and a moral lighthouse, Goethe manages to elevate the spirit of his contemporaries and successors. His philosophical ideals, together with those developed by Kant, Pestalozzi, Schiller,

Fichte, Fröbel and Humboldt echo throughout the following centuries, not only locally, but globally, because pedagogues from America and England rely on their suggestions when building their own professional avenues, similarly to Wilhelm who tries to “stake out his own path” (174).

II. English and North American Pedagogues and Their Pursuit of UNITY

The 19th century brings together the sustained effort of several pedagogues, critics and writers who militate for a system of education that could offer students appropriate conditions of development. The focus is on the university system that lacks clear methodologies and cannot anticipate educational outcomes. Several English pedagogues use the German *episteme* and *techne* in order to frame and conceptualize the aspirations of higher studies institutions. Following the German tradition of Humboldt, whose desire of research and teaching prevails in many universities around the world, John Henry Newman, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and John Dewey reshape the understanding of education in England and America.

(1) Moral Development

The 19th century brings many changes in the educational system in England. Newman lectures in Dublin about “the Idea of a University” advocating liberal views of universities. As a former Anglican and convert to Catholicism, he can no longer teach at national universities because of his new spiritual views that are in conflict with the Anglican dogma of all English institutions. Newman manages the unthinkable and proves that one can be both English and Catholic. After his conversion he inaugurates a Catholic university, preaching that the purpose of any university is “intellectual and pedagogical, not moral or religious.” He blames John Locke for his utilitarian idea of a university and consequently he wants to recover the lost unifying view of higher education institutions. For him, the university represents a “place for teaching universal knowledge” (preface). In his second discourse, he

indicates that “a university...by its very name professes to teach universal knowledge: Theology is surely a branch of knowledge...certainly the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind” (2nd Discourse). Newman rejects the idea of transforming morality into a discipline of study because education cannot replace religion in the formation of public morality. He points out that the target of a university is the cultivation of the intellect: “It should pursue knowledge and intellectual excellence for their own sake...” (Spăriosu 173). The only possible understanding of the idea of a university comes from the unity of disciplines and areas of study. He portrays education as a form of asceticism and self-control. The practical end of the university is to train “good members of society” (Newman 177) because “...its art is the art of social life and its end is fitness for the world.”

Many of Newman’s ideas are valid today and systems of education around the world could adopt them. Even if he does not focus much on aestheticism, however, he considers that universities are the right places for purifying one’s taste. Education “gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them and the eloquence in expressing them” (179). Even if he separates moral laws from education and leaves them on the shoulders of religion, he mentions that the church is necessary for the teaching of universal knowledge. He also draws a relevant distinction between education and instruction, focusing on the philosophical end of education, rather than the material or mechanical end of instruction (Spăriosu 175). Newman enriches the sphere of higher education, opening it up to art, thus trying to rescue it from the selfish hands of superficiality and materialism.

In his *Essays in Criticism*, Arnold questions the function of art and literature, emphasizing their unique potential to directly communicate to the mind the sense of fundamental values: “And yet, what is really precious and inspiring, in all that we get from literature, except this sense of an immediate contact with genius itself and the stimulus towards what is true and excellent which we derive from it?” (162). He emphasizes the moral dimension of

poetry: "...poetry is interpretative both by having natural magic in it, and by having moral profundity" (85). He also recognizes the role of religion and its edifying capacity: "The paramount virtue of religion is that it has lighted up morality" (220). Light, which brings together the spiritual search and poetry, correlates with Arnold's idea of culture. With a phrase borrowed from Swift, he connects culture to sweetness and light, where light represents active intelligence. Thus, culture conjoins the "endeavor to come at reason and the will of God by means of reading, observing and thinking" (23). He suggests that good taste as well as pleasure for truth and the beautiful can be transmitted through literature: "To accustom mankind to pleasure which depends neither upon the bodily appetites nor upon money, by giving them a taste for the things of the mind, seems to me, in fact the one proper fruit which nature has meant our literary productions to have" (183). The moral development that he dreams of aims at truth, at the perfect balance of one's nature, but also at bringing together classes and peoples through the promotion of social cohesion: "He wanted to correct the English opinion by bringing it into contact with European thought" (20).

On the other side of the ocean, Dewey continues the pedagogical dialogue that Humboldt, Arnold and the other English educators started. Dewey's pragmatic philosophy is the source for his experimental school. His pedagogical progress enlivens the American educational system of the 20th century. For Dewey, education is life itself. Inspired by Rousseau's educational philosophy (naturalism/ individualism), Humboldt's (freedom of choice), Pestalozzi's (sympathy for children) and Fröbel's (learning by doing), Dewey lays the foundation of contemporary American education. He gives scientific authority to the methods he adopts from his predecessors, by combining them with the new psychology of learning. The student-centered education should reach the realization of one's full potential through reflection and experience. In his *Pedagogical Creed*, he manifests his belief in a 'universal consciousness,' by stating that "...all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of

the race” (19). School for Dewey is a form of community life, or a “...mode of social life centered on moral education [through] the unity of work and thought” (22). The child’s own social activities are at the core of his pedagogy because one can learn and evolve in community through doing, through meeting others and interacting with others.

(2) Aesthetic Freedom

For Dewey, “image is the great instrument of instruction” (29). Ruskin’s inheritance centered on seeing is also one of Dewey’s instructive methods. He believes that the essential in preparing children for life is to “secure right habits of action and thought with reference to the good, the true, the beautiful” (30). His pragmatic approach does not prevent him from acknowledging the effect of art on the student. Dewey’s system of education contemplates ‘supreme art,’ which constitutes “the most perfect and intimate union of science and art conceivable in human experience...[It] gives shape to human powers adapting them to social service” (31).

Targeting similar aesthetic ideals, Ruskin, a professor at Oxford and critic of art, dedicates his life to teaching others to see the beauty of nature and art: “The end of my whole professorship would be accomplished – if only the English nation could be made to understand that the beauty which is to be a joy forever, must be a joy for all” (vi). Ruskin identifies the main objective of moral education in fostering in the minds of students the ability to see beauty in nature, in the work of God, and in goodness. The recognition of beauty brings him joy and Ruskin’s desire is to impart it to all humans. Arnold pays homage to beauty as well. He considers aesthetics indispensable in fiction for its attempt to embody beauty in a work of art: “Fiction has no reason to exist unless it is more beautiful than reality” (182). He employs Keats’ final lines from *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in order to envelop “beauty in truth and truth in beauty.” Arnold relies on the belief that truth surpasses reason and rather than looking for existential answers in reason, one should focus on the metaphysical aspects of life that engage and comfort: “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty/ that is all ye

know on earth and all ye need to know” (182). Arnold states that the one aim of art is to convey beauty, and appreciates its aesthetically pleasing function. However he is not an apostle of “Art for Art’s sake,” but wants to rather cherish its moral role. Arnold trusts the potential of art and literature to provide individuals with beauty (which is essential), and with truth, both contributing to moral enhancement. For Arnold, literature is a criticism of life that aims at facilitating the improvement of individuals by promoting goodness, beauty and truth.

(3) Self-discovery through Literature

Newman’s opinion about literature is congruous with Arnold’s. Newman shares his personal experience when describing the role of literature for self-discovery. He is very affected by Saint Augustine’s words that “struck [him] with a power which [he] had never felt from any words before: ‘the verdict of the world is conclusive’” (226). Augustine’s words transform Newman’s view on life and he agrees that the truth is Verbum/Logos/God and is supported by the Bible. His conversion to Catholicism does not determine him to impose Christian literature on students as he wants to allow them access to a greater sphere of spiritual and practical understanding. He dissociates his individual beliefs from his pedagogical aims. From considering it “innocent recreation” (160), to showing its uniting power, Newman considers that, “[i]n the cultivation of literature is found that common link, which among the higher and middling departments of life, unites the jarring sects and subdivisions into one interest, which supplies common topics and kindles common feelings” (169). His main concern is to instill in his students the understanding of the necessity of a multidimensional perspective. He wants them informed about world religions and universal knowledge. He does not rely on one or two fields, or disciplines, but advocates the power of their unity. Connecting history, poetry, and philosophy, he helps students learn through association, critical thinking and individual inquiry, facilitating, thus, the evolution of the “intellectual tone of society” (177).

One thing is unquestionable, that the elements of general reason are not to be found fully and truly expressed in any one kind of study; and that he who would wish to know her idiom, must read it in many books...University education implies an extended range of reading, which has to deal with standard works of genius, or what are called the classics of a language...if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian Literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature for a sinful man. (176)

The tendency of valuing **unified knowledge** is also at the core of Ruskin's philosophy. As a polymath, Ruskin founds his pedagogical philosophy on the transformational role of literature that he continuously connects to morality. Ruskin wants his students to "read less and remember more" (489). Reading needs to provide the reader with moral foundations, thus the choice of the right authors and books is essential. He draws upon the Greek ancient wisdom in order to promote reading as building material for the moral basis of each individual: "Children should be taught what to admire, what to hope for and what to love" (255). He is aware of the powerful transformative effect of literature, and he dismisses texts that do not bring pleasure to the soul: "All literature, art, and science are vain, and worse, if they do not enable you to be glad, and glad justly" (442). As a source of elevation of one's spirit, literature exposes readers to the wisest minds and the most brilliant ideas:

Literature does its duty not in wasting our hours in political discourse, or in idle fiction, but in raising our fancy to the heights of what may be noble, honest and felicitous in actual life, in giving us the companionship of the wisest fellow spirits of every age and country, in aiding the communication of clear thoughts and faithful purposes among distant nations. (443)

In a lecture entitled *Sesame and Lilies* and included in his magnum opus, *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin specifically offers suggestions on reading. He is aware that the intellect "becomes

noble and ignoble according to the food we give it, and the kind of subjects with which it is conversant” (3). He suggests one should read the “good books for all time” (14) [because]...both well-directed moral-training and well-chosen reading lead to the possession of a power over the ill-guided and illiterate” (69). He wants to lead people to acknowledging their better selves. He also wants to cultivate in people the continuous desire for progress because the “training which makes men happiest in themselves, also makes them most serviceable to others” (220).

Newman’s thoughts echoed throughout Ruskin’s writing, but the influence went in both directions. These two great philosophers, together with Arnold, shared a common view on education and tried to foster in the English youth the openness toward the rich diversity of other nations. By far one of the most sounding voices of the 19th century, Arnold recognizes the priority of education for citizens in England and encourages reforms that are meant to define “individuality within a larger society” (xvi). He offers solutions for the “rawness and provinciality of his countrymen” by suggesting state control on higher education institutions and by encouraging the study of ‘the best that is known and thought in the world’ and a free play of the mind on all subjects...” (xviii). His method allows students to acquire knowledge by analogies and individual research. Arnold considers that self-discovery is possible through religion as an essential part of education, by combining the two traditional forces of Hebraism (strict obedience to conscience) and Hellenism (clear thinking and spontaneity of consciousness). Arnold dedicates his writing to children and their instruction because he is aware that change may occur through both literary and cultural education. On the other hand, Dewey’s system of pragmatic education incorporates the study of literature because of its “continuing reconstruction of experience.” In Dewey’s opinion, literature should not anticipate, but complement experience because it is “the reflex expression and interpretation of social experiences that... must follow upon and not precede such experience... It, therefore, cannot be made the basis, although it may be made the summary of

unification...I believe therefore, in the so called expressive or constructive activities as the center of correlation” (26).

Literature preserves its central role in cultivating people. At different times in history, pedagogues, philosophers and writers tried to arouse students’ interest in reading. However, the fundamental role of literature in cultivating character has often been misunderstood. Moving from the Renaissance bookishness to today’s reluctance towards reading, one can easily notice that literature has a collateral role in education. Ruskin, Newman, Arnold and Dewey are several of the spokesmen of the efficiency of reading. The 20th and the beginning of the 21st century witness new voices stating the relevance of reading for human self-development, in the light of a system of education aiming at cultivating humanity and global intelligence.

III. Global Education

Contemporary philosophers and pedagogues are left with a rich inheritance and an overwhelming responsibility. Martha Nussbaum predicates the need of liberal education to cultivate humanity. She reiterates the pertinence of Socratic methods for cultivating empathy. In her book *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum states the importance of reading for developing critical self-examination (moral development), the capacity to see oneself as a human being bound to all humans (aesthetic freedom/play) and narrative imagination that propagates empathy (self-discovery). Her powerful argument for the defense of a multicultural curriculum represents an answer to insularity, discrimination, racism, intolerance and moral relativism. She promotes civic friendship, cultural hospitality and independence of the mind, through a system of education that restores the contact with the classical thought of the greatest minds in history:

Like Seneca, we live in a culture divided between two conceptions of a liberal education. The older one dominant in Seneca’s Rome, is the idea of an education that is *liberalis*, ‘fitted for freedom’... The ‘new’ idea... interprets the word *liberalis* differently. An education is truly ‘fitted for freedom’ only if it is

such as to *produce* free citizens, citizens who are free not because of wealth or birth, but because they can call their minds their own... (293).

Mihai Spăriosu evades the current institutional paradigms and advances a plan for the university of the future. In his book on *Global Intelligence and Human Development* (2004), Spăriosu underlines the idea that the contemporary divisive discourse – that encourages students to endorse science-based career pursuits (STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, in the US, or elite higher education establishments in France: Ecole normale supérieure/ Ecole polytechnique), minimizing, at the same time, the contribution of humanities – is based on the secular “conflict between aristocratic and middle class values in academia” (172). On the basis of Foucault’s conceptualization, Spăriosu describes today’s university as a “disciplinary institution” belonging to a “society of control” that manipulates individuals through discrete, internal mechanisms of control (new media), imposing on them almost unavoidable postmodern critical trends, such as: post-colonialism, Marxism, de-constructivism, gender studies, etc. (183). His suggestion is enlightening because he wants to renounce disciplinary barriers and give higher education a liminal dimension, based on openness, cooperation, receptivity and mutual understanding, thus addressing the “needs of the community”:

The role of the university, then, would be not only to generate new knowledge, to debate and to exchange ideas, but also to facilitate their free flow both inside and outside the academic communities throughout the world (188)...its main purpose should be to pursue cooperative learning and research in the service of human self-development. (195)

Spăriosu uses Newman’s unifying ideal in order to pioneer a “liminal institutional model” that would eliminate spatial and cultural walls between universities and people, thus aiming at creating a “mindset conducive to alternative ways of relating to each other” (197). He invariably states the importance of all disciplines and their interconnectedness. The interdisciplinary

dialogue creates “feedback loops” that nurture each other and lead to a higher level of understanding, resulting, thus, in potentialities of thought, otherwise ungraspable in isolation. His unifying recommendation that echoes the Greek *Paideia* aims at the Aristotelian liberal ideal of “forming a habit of mind that would last through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom” (90). All these ideals bring together **(1) moral development, (2) aesthetic freedom and (3) self-discovery**. The aforementioned crucial targets have been discussed at different levels, starting from antiquity. The Socratic dictum that thinking leads to virtue has echoed until the present, resulting in several educational directions, previously described. Thinking has to be stimulated and education plays a catalyst role in expanding mindsets to a global dimension. Spăriosu’s conceptual framework is an enhancement of higher education, without excluding its connections with the other layers of schooling. His perspective bridges the institutional, cultural and geographical gap between universities and aims at creating a platform that challenges brilliant minds and engages them in a common effort of (mutual) understanding and respect. Spăriosu’s university of the future, similar to Jaeger’s *Paideia*, represents a project framed in the service of an ideal.

The changes that need to be implemented in educational systems irrespective of cultural or geographical variables have to first incorporate the classical ideals of unity of disciplines and values (goodness-beauty-truth) and secondly they need to arouse in each individual the **thirst for knowledge**, but also the **free play of mind** that aims at **moral development** and identification of one’s path in life. Freeing current educational systems from the heavy yokes of self-centered mentalities of power, that pursue manipulation and suppression of the individual potentialities through memorization techniques and inefficient evaluations, is a *sine qua non*. The aesthetic drive needs to be nurtured as well through an early exposure to beauty and art, in all its manifestations, by following classical standards. Literature, as a moral and aesthetic path, offers students a liminal space of

encounter with the other, thus fostering acceptance, a peaceful disposition and independence of mind. Regardless of the actual pragmatic tendencies in the current educational systems, literature compiles scenarios with “potentialities of transfer” (Steiner 318) that can remodel mentalities and offer alternatives of thought.

Literature and practical activities that pursue self-discovery should be reinforced, as the main targets of any pedagogy centered on the student. Education plays an essential role in molding characters, thus a retrospective analysis of different pedagogies refreshes the current educational paradigm and actualizes dormant ideals. Once revitalized, the free citizen of the world will find in himself/herself the keys to unlock humanistic potentials, and as a consequence he/she will understand that it is only through perpetual inner enhancement, receptivity towards the other’s diversity, and peaceful approach that he/she will reach truth and happiness. Eventually, reiterating Huxley’s warning, “Karuna, Karuna” (384), I advocate the urgency for a change of mindset concerning the actual disciplinary classification in education. Advancing the study of literature and arts will actualize compassion, universal friendship, peace and cooperation, thus producing the free person.

Notes:

¹ According to Dr. Helmut Danner, mystics suggested people should internalize the image of Jesus, so as to get closer to God. This process was called Bild-ung (Bild= picture/ image). See ‘Bildung’ A Basic Term of German Education, Cairo, in *Educational Sciences*, 9/1994.

² See Pradeep A. Dhillon. “A Kantian Conception of Human Rights Education.” *Education in the Era of Globalization*. Ed. Klas Roth and Ilan Gur-Ze’ev. Springer. 2007. 51-65.

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When the East Meets the West:
Ang Lee's Cross-Cultural American Family in
Taking Woodstock

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Abstract

This article focuses on Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee's *Taking Woodstock*, a film that directly addresses political and social aspects of a rather turbulent time in the US during the 1960s. I argue that the director's view of 1960s America in this cinematic representation reflects a particularly Taiwanese cultural ideology—the worship of the US as a superpower. Lee, as an example of transnationality himself, fittingly illustrates how intricately sociohistorical contexts and political diplomatic relations shape an individual's multifaceted cultural identity, political views, and national ideology in an era when Western thought and lifestyle have found a way to merge themselves with local Taiwanese ones. *Taking Woodstock* represents Lee's idealized view of the American society, a utopia that he longed for as a Taiwanese teenager. By focusing on family (one of Lee's signature themes), *Taking Woodstock* shows a different view of America from an East Asian perspective. Lee's *Woodstock* represents a Taiwanese ideology impacted by US-Taiwanese diplomatic relations, cross-pacific media transmission, state intervention, and pseudo-imperialist cultural invasion in Taiwan.

Keywords: Ang Lee, family, filial piety, Confucian values, film related to the Vietnam War, cross-cultural, Taiwan, *Taking Woodstock*, transnational, individualism

Ang Lee (1954-), a two-time Academy Award winner, is a significant contemporary East Asian filmmaker not only in Chinese-speaking countries but also in the US, where his martial

arts blockbuster, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and his homoerotic western, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), are best known. While Lee has made several films centered on American culture—nationalism and sports in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016), the Civil War in *Ride with the Devil* (1999), and a disillusioned middle-class society in the 1970s in *The Ice Storm* (1997)—there have always been questions of whether his representations of America are accurate and authentic enough. This criticism of authenticity inevitably leads to the issue of cultural and national identity, which Lee constantly deals with in both his films and his personal career. A second-generation Chinese Mainlander who grew up in Taiwan and now works in New York, Lee highlights a phenomenon of transnationality that enables him to negotiate cross-cultural issues, such as identity and family values. Lee's early film *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), for instance, illustrates Lee's transnationality by offering a view of the confrontation between Western modernity and Chinese traditions alongside gender and generational conflicts in a Taiwanese family. Similarly, in *Taking Woodstock* (2009) Lee endeavors to portray an American family in the postwar periods from a cross-cultural, transnational perspective.

This article focuses on *Taking Woodstock*, a film that directly addresses political and social aspects of a rather turbulent time in the US during the 1960s. I argue that his view of 1960s America reflects a particularly Taiwanese cultural ideology—the worship of the US as a superpower. Lee, as an example of transnationality himself, fittingly illustrates how intricately sociohistorical contexts and political diplomatic relations shape an individual's multifaceted cultural identity, political views, and national ideology in an era when Western thought and lifestyle have found a way to merge with local Taiwanese ones. *Taking Woodstock* represents Lee's idealized view of the American society, a utopia that he longed for as a Taiwanese teenager. By focusing on family (one of Lee's signature themes), *Taking Woodstock* show a different view of America from an East Asian perspective. Lee's Woodstock is not merely an American Woodstock; it is also a Taiwanese Woodstock, for it represents a Taiwanese ideology impacted by US-Taiwanese

diplomatic relations, cross-pacific media transmission, state intervention, and pseudo-imperialist cultural invasion in Taiwan.

Postwar American Influence in Taiwan

In the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwan underwent a number of social transformations and economic reforms. With the successful Ten Major Construction Projects (a series of national infrastructure projects) proposed by Chiang Ching-kuo, Premier of the Executive Yuan at the time in the Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan's socioeconomic achievements not only helped to bring fortune to the people but also further accelerated the island's modernization. However, between 1949 and 1987, the Taiwanese society was under martial law and was closely watched by the Taiwan Garrison Command, a secret police agency which held excessive power and would arrest and punish any Taiwanese people who "threatened ROC security and public order" (Roy 89). Under martial law, society was highly restricted and repressed. The right to protest, travel, and speak freely were all censored or prohibited, and true freedom, democracy, and human rights were almost entirely absent under the authoritarian regime. Consequently, Taiwanese society contrasted sharply with 1960s American society in terms of freedom of expression. The Vietnam War provoked a series of anti-war campaigns, the rise of counterculture, and widespread youth revolt. Also during that period, baby boomers began to come of age, and with them, a shift in favor of confronting values and traditions about politics and social justice swept over American society.

Despite the fluctuating diplomatic relations between US and Taiwan,¹ many Taiwanese people treat US as an amiable and respectable protector. American popular entertainment was more versatile and certainly more "popular" than Taiwan's monotone entertainment, which at that time was fully controlled by the government and limited to certain genres permitted by them. But with American troops stationed in Taiwan, American popular music of the 1960s and 1970s, such as rock and roll (with performers ranging from Elvis Presley to the Carpenters), enthralled younger

generations of the Taiwanese, who viewed American culture with a combination of admiration and awe. Hong-sheng Zheng notes that in the 1960s the Armed Forces Network Radio Taiwan (AFNRT),² now known as the International Community Radio Taipei (ICRT), contributed greatly to this widespread cultural phenomenon. The radio station was regarded as a vital cultural portal to “the voice of the superior country” for Taiwan’s young students (Zheng 459). America’s countercultural movement also made itself known through radio broadcasting. Allen Chun calls attention to the process of “Americanization” that involves the “mass standardization of routine lifestyle and [a] societal mindset [that sees] American modernity as the social norm” in Taiwan (504). Zhen and Chun both highlight the prevalence of American values and recognize the role popular culture plays in disseminating the American ideology in Taiwan.

In an interview with Lee conducted by *The Guardian* in 2009 to promote *Taking Woodstock*, he reflects on his youth in Taiwan and his early perceptions of American culture, particularly in connection with the famous Woodstock music festival held in 1969:

[Woodstock] it’s like the ideal utopia where passion, sharing, and niceness can be for real, even for a brief time. Woodstock is something like a dream far away... something we worship at the same time the Vietnam War was going on. My hometown was an American Air Force base for the Vietnam War. All kinds of aircraft hovering our heads. It’s a mixed feeling. We need security from US from the Second World War and also as a youngster... so it’s really a mixture.... (Solomons and Barnes)

Lee learned about Woodstock alongside the American hippie culture while in Taiwan in the 1960s. As a stressed teenager longing for a place free of schoolwork, patriarchal control, and a repressed social life, Lee found Woodstock to be a perfect and benevolent wonderland. When he remembers his adolescent perceptions of America, Lee bridges the gap between the US culture and his own at that time in Taiwan by emphasizing the connections between himself and the US. Lee’s noticeable admiration for the US and his

way of seeing it as the protector of Taiwan reflects a collective Taiwanese mindset. Lee uses “we” twice when describing his feelings toward the US military forces. For him, this choice of language does not reflect some kind of personal fervor for American heroism but is rather an expression of a collective and public emotion shared by “we, the Taiwanese people” at a specific point in history. Lee’s idealization of Woodstock came into being in the midst of a political context in which the diplomatic relations between the US and Taiwan, and the country’s military dependence on the US, shaped the Taiwanese political awareness and cultural identity.

In another interview, Lee discussed what the Korean War means to him:

When I grew up in Taiwan, the Korean War was seen as a good war, where America protected Asia. It was sort of an extension of World War II. And it was, of course, the peak of the Cold War. People in Taiwan were generally pro-American. The Korean War made Japan. And then the Vietnam War made Taiwan. There is some truth to that. So when this hippie thing started to come up, I remember admiring the Americans.... On the other hand, you feel this insecurity—like any conservative view—that if America decided to go the other way, what would happen to us? Where is the protection, the foundation? So there is some of that tension in the film. (Schreiber par. 7)

This interview further illustrates the shared, “pro-American” attitude among the Taiwanese people that has been prevalent since the Cold War. Indeed, the American influence in Taiwan reached its peak during the Cold War; yet after the 1970s, the American culture and political intervention continued to take root in the Taiwanese society. The interview above also touches on a sense of insecurity among the Taiwanese people because of the military threat from the People’s Republic of China (PRC).³ The other side of this fear was the belief that the intervention of the US had been a great help that had saved Taiwan and its people from falling under communist control. The history of the triangular relations between

the US, China, and Taiwan shows that Taiwan's internal politics and sovereignty are not only a domestic affair but also a source of controversy that involves the PRC—Taiwan's most important love/hate Other—and the US—Taiwan's unofficial protector.

Lee's interviews echo well with what Kuan-Hsing Chen terms as "anticommunist-pro-Americanism structure" (7), a dominant ideology created by the American political and military involvement in East Asia from the 1950s to the 1970s, which effectively established the evil image of communism. Chen draws attention to Taiwan's highly dependent and semi-colonial status in its relations with the US, and, more importantly, he argues that the US has long been an inseparable part of the local subjectivities in Taiwan. The Taiwanese people internalize the anti-Communist ideology according to which communism is demonized, while democracy and capitalism are idealized. At the same time, the people of Taiwan also identify closely with the American values and lifestyles because of the high degree of Americanization in Taiwan. *Taking Woodstock* exemplifies such complicated Taiwanese identity and subjectivity through the director's attempt to present an Eden-like American past, a place where the characters face conflicts between Confucian family ethics and individual freedom. Situated in a liminal position between Taiwan and the US as a transnational artist, Lee also converts *Taking Woodstock* into a transnational film that requires multiple cultural and national perspectives for understanding the East-West ideological nexus under the facade.

Taking Woodstock to the (Taiwanese) Heart

In the winter of 2013, Lee accepted the offer to serve as the chair of the jury for the 50th Golden Horse Awards, Taiwan's most important annual film awards. During his stay in Taiwan, he was invited to a forum hosted by Kwang-chung Yu, a prominent poet in Taiwan. When Yu asked Lee whether rock and roll inspired *Taking Woodstock*, Lee replied:

In fact, after shooting *Lust, Caution* (2007), I really wanted to find a more innocent and happier subject for my next film. When people

talk about Woodstock, they are thinking about the music since music is the primary feature of it. Woodstock was a concert, and many fans thought they could listen to lots of music. When I read the novel [the original novel by Elliot Tiber], I felt that actually Woodstock's music was pretty awful, albeit it was a classic. Woodstock's environment was very bad. It was just a happening...a lot of young people established a "Da Tong Shi Zhie" there...But this happening ended the innocent era of the 1960s... People had a fantasy toward the nation, and it went through the Vietnam War, Civil Rights protests, human rights activities, African American rights movements, feminist awareness, and equal rights movements. 1967 was the most beautiful moment when everything joined together. It was hippie. After that, situations went downhill. In 1969, it was like the final radiance in Woodstock. No one died, no one fought, and everyone gathered there like in utopia...I really wanted to film a happier and more innocent subject to commemorate the loss of an innocent era...The novel is about a family next to Woodstock, and I think it hits the core spirit of Woodstock.⁴ (Yu)

Lee is very interested in the 1960s, which he considers "an innocent era." Lee uses two different phrases to describe Woodstock: a Chinese saying, "Da Tong Shi Zhie," and Utopia. Da Tong Shi Zhie is a term borrowed from *The Book of Rites*, a classical Confucian text of morals and regulations. The term was first proposed by Confucius to promote the ideal political realm he longed for, but later the term gradually has become a reference to a happy, peaceful, and harmonious world in general. Utopia is a derivative from Thomas More's *Utopia*, a book about an idealized nation that has a perfect political system. In this sense, Woodstock converts itself into Lee's spiritual haven after the exhausting filming of *Lust, Caution*, a dark spy thriller set in the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. Though the director did not explicitly pursue an equivalent in the film, somehow, the linkage between the Eastern and the Western ideal world strongly makes this American film transnational and universal. Lee sets up a youthful and innocent world that satisfies both Eastern and Western political imaginations. As he points out, the film was inspired by the musical event; however, paradoxically, both of the levels of *Taking Woodstock*

move beyond the field of music to a wider social context.

Taking Woodstock is the story of a family. Elliot Tiber (Demetri Martin), a designer in New York City, returns home to Bethel, New York, to help his father Jake (Henry Goodman) and mother Sonia (Imelda Staunton) to run the family-owned motel. Elliot notices that the Woodstock Festival was denied at the planned location, Woodstock, New York. In need of more money to pay off his parents' mortgage, Elliot contacts Michael Lang (Jonathan Groff), the main organizer, and Lang agrees to relocate the Woodstock Festival in Bethel. Elliot faces opposition and protests from the town people, and later, some gangsters harass the family. Elliot then hires a transgender Korean-War-veteran, Vilma (Liev Schreiber), for the motel security. Elliot intends to join the concert himself; however, instead, he joins a hippie couple's drug and sex escapades in their van. Elliot has breakfast with his parents and quarrels with them over whether he can leave home for his own career. Much to his surprise, Elliot finds out that Sonia secretly hides a great amount of cash in her closet, which is sufficient to pay for their mortgage. In the end, with Jake's encouragement, Elliot makes up his mind to leave his family for California.

Lee's treatment of the Woodstock event draws scholarly attention to the filmmaker's philosophy of humanism and sexuality. David Zietsma argues that *Taking Woodstock* abandons the popular narrative of heroic violence but establishes an alternative heroism based on de-masculinization and nonviolence to criticize patriotic militarism. Lee's philosophy of nonviolence shows "a more human and more effective path to personal and national redemption" (Zietsma 193). Nancy Kang examines the film from an angle of Queer studies since the original novel, written by Elliot Tiber and Tom Monte, is a coming-out story of how the protagonist negotiates his sexual orientation as a homosexual. Kang claims that with the film adaptation, Lee shifts the novel's focus and downplays the novel's homosexuality and adds that "what should have been a coming-out story veers off into a discourse weighing filial piety against duty to self. Desexualization is a strategic approach to the work's plot and characterization that renders peripheral what was

originally central, namely homosexual identity formation” (210). In short, Zietsma and Kang similarly situate the film into an *American* context. Zietsma compares the film with other American hero movies and anti-war narratives, and Kang relates the film to the equal rights movements in the 1960s in the US. Yet, they both notice the Confucian characteristics that Lee instills in the film – a keen interest in the philosophy of nonviolence and an emphasis on filial piety as the topmost family value. Therefore, to fill in the gap, this article adopts a cross-cultural approach that considers how Lee’s Taiwanese background impacts on the film. This particular cross-cultural approach also addresses how the Woodstock festival, being a transnational cultural phenomenon itself, influences and resonates in places outside the US. Lee’s Woodstock is not merely an American Woodstock, but it is also a *Taiwanese* Woodstock, for it represents a Taiwanese ideology impacted by the US-Taiwan diplomatic relations, transpacific media transmission, state intervention, and pseudo-imperialist cultural invasion in Taiwan. Furthermore, this cross-cultural approach also facilitates discussions of *family*, the most important theme in Lee’s cinematic world. If there is a central idea that threads through Lee’s oeuvre, it is the filmmaker’s domestic philosophy, which Lee, in *Taking Woodstock*, again positions at the center of the storytelling.

A Utopia...Still Bound by Family

Lee’s Woodstock experience started with television,⁵ then just a recently launched entertainment medium in Taiwan. Lee recalls that “there were guys with big hair, jamming guitars, a sea of people,” and that “I was pretty dull and focused and wasn’t particularly cool but I could sense something big was happening” (Hiscock). At that time, Lee was a much stressed and unhappy 14-year old schoolchild,⁶ who faced strict social and parental expectations in the sixties’ Taiwan.⁷ Lee had a demanding father who valued schoolwork, since studying and passing examinations are a traditional way to secure a better career in East Asian countries. Under these circumstances, for Lee, Woodstock was not only an unforgettable cultural shock that broadened his horizons but also a

remote wonderland where he could escape from political reality and monotonous schoolwork. Nevertheless, Lee's *Taking Woodstock* is not in any sense a Young Adult film about youth unleashed, fantastic escapism, or self-indulging hedonism. On the contrary, it emphasizes the importance of taking on one's family responsibilities.

In one of the early scenes, Elliot and Esther, his older sister, have a conversation about their parents:

ESTHER. Oh, Elliot. Now's your time, to go to California like you've always wanted, to paint and design, be free, not a slave for those two in that Catskill prison.

ELLIOT. I can't give up on them now.

ESTHER. Why not? They gave up on you a long time ago.

ELLIOT. No, they didn't. It's the opposite. I'm the one they still want around. I guess that means they love me more than you.

ESTHER. That must be a great consolation to you.

ELLIOT. How'd you do it sis? How'd you get so sane?

ESTHER. I just walked, Elliot. I just walked away until I found a place of my own. (*Taking*)

This conversation helps to set a milieu for Lee's family drama, in which a child is caught in a struggle between the individual goal and family duty, a recurring theme in Lee's films. In the filmmaker's early Taiwanese Father Trilogy [*Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994)] and in his later films, such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the children's dilemmas between family and individual are always the focus of the films. In *Taking Woodstock*, Elliot faces the same challenge again: to choose himself or his obligations. Elliot and Esther take on very different attitudes toward their family. While Elliot "can't give up on them" when the parents are in a supposed financial crisis, Esther "just walked away," to seek her own life. On the one hand, Elliot and Esther resemble the two sides of the dilemma: the daughter represents the priority of personal goals, while Elliot sticks to family duty. On the other hand, from a cultural viewpoint, the brother and sister are also the embodiments of

diverging American and Taiwanese/Chinese domestic values.

In a traditional Confucian society, it is typical for parents to have strong preferences for sons, who are supposed to live with the parents and inherit the family business. For daughters, the expectations are smaller/lower because they eventually marry “out.” This traditional attitude toward gender also manifests itself in an old Chinese saying, which states, “Married daughters, spilled water”⁸ to refer to the situation where married daughters, like spilled water with no way to return, now belong to their husbands, not their families of origin anymore. The saying explains well the gender expectations in a traditional Confucian family. In the film, after her exit, Elliot, Jake and Sonia do not mention Esther, as if Esther did not exist. Her marginality in her family of origin further enhances the Confucian tradition of male preference now that a married daughter is invisible. Nevertheless, Esther makes the decision to walk away *by herself*. Her autonomy and agency subvert the gender roles established by Confucian traditions, making her a more independent and Westernized individual than a forgotten daughter does. Conversely, Elliot appears to be rather Confucian with his ties to the parents and the Tiber family business. Elliot returns to the Catskills not merely for Sonia and Jake, but also for the motel, the family business that represents the reputation of the Tibers. Additionally, there is a special relationship between Elliot and Sonia. When Elliot mentions that he understands the “special way” of seeing (Sonia’s left eye), he refers to the close mother-and-son bond between him and Sonia, an exclusive one lacking in Esther and Sonia’s relationship. It is noteworthy to relate this particular theme to Lee’s early film *The Wedding Banquet*, in which the protagonist, Wei-Tung Gao (Winston Chao), discloses his sexual identity to his mother rather than his father. Gao’s mother serves as her son’s *confidante*, whom Wei-Tung trusts, while Sonia rather resembles Elliot’s *superior*, from whom Elliot attempts to win approval. In the former mother-and-son relationship, Wei-Tung and his mother are of the same status, while in the latter group it is a hierarchical one. If Wei-Tung and Mrs. Gao’s relationship is untraditional and Westernized, then Elliot and Sonia can be seen as

performing a more traditional Confucian parent and child one. The two examples of mother and son relationships indicate that Lee continues to show an interest in positioning families in cross-cultural scenarios by giving characters both Confucian and Western values.

In *Taking Woodstock*, the Tiber family's relationship is revealed in a breakfast scene. Significantly, Lee frequently utilizes dining rooms as a cinematic setting to facilitate his representations of family dynamics. In *Pushing Hands* (1992), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Life of Pi* (2012), dining table scenes show conflicts, disagreements, or competitions for power, but they also show reconciliation. *Taking Woodstock's* breakfast scene particularly echoes the theme of the conflict between traditional Confucian family values and Western individualism: the mother expects the son to respect and appreciate his parents, but the son strives to gain individual freedom and independence. During this scene, Elliot tells his parents about his plan in San Francisco, but their talk ends in a quarrel:

ELLIOT. So I was thinking, when this is over...

SONIA. What a mess! It'll take months to clean up.

ELLIOT. But we can keep some of these new people on, right? We can afford the help now. And with the place paid off, maybe it's time you thought about some permanent staff, people to help you run the place, make some improvements.

SONIA. What are you talking about? That's why we have you!

ELLIOT. I'm just saying, I was thinking, when this is over, with all the money now, I could take a trip...

SONIA. And where did you get those pajamas? You're not going anywhere dressed like that!

VILMA. We've made brownies! Wonderful brownies! Some very special brownies! Elliot?

ELLIOT We'll take a pass.

SONIA. You see, Jake? That's just like him. He doesn't want dessert, but does he think to ask his mother?

ELLIOT. You know what? That's enough. You know, I'm the only one here, out of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and thousands of people, who's having breakfast with his parents! Do you think Janis Joplin's mom is backstage telling her to tuck her, I don't know, her whisky bottle into her pocket, or something? Or Jimi Hendrix's mom is telling him to wash his hair? I'm just going to go to Max's and enjoy myself--- and you know what? Go ahead! I'd love to see you eat one of those brownies – you should have two! (*Taking*)

Every time Elliot is about to talk about his plan to travel, Sonia interrupts him with imperative parental authority. Sonia's concerns show her over-protection when she reminds him of his inappropriate outfits and table manners. Interestingly, Demetri Martin, the actor who plays Elliot, interprets the role in such a way that “when we first meet Elliot, he doesn't have a real relationship with anybody. He seems kind of stuck between *obligation to his family* and *cutting the cord*. Guilt seems to be a big part of what keeps him in the kind of behavioral patten he's in” (Schamus 136, my emphasis). Indeed, Elliot does show a sense of guilt in his behavior in the film. Martin's performance and the Tiber family's Jewish roots tie firmly to the Jewish-American connotations of familial guilt and overbearing mothers.⁹ Intriguingly, these two Jewish domestic issues also illustrate Taiwanese/Chinese filial piety as well.

In a traditional Confucian family, if an only son evades the responsibilities of living with his parents and taking care of them, he is often blamed by the society for elder abandonment and betrayal. In this way, Eliot's sense of guilt reveals his fear of failing to reach the Confucian expectation that filial piety is the priority in one's social and family relations. Elliot's strong obligation of filial piety also shows itself even when Sonia is not around. In an early scene, Elliot talks to Billy, a Vietnam War veteran suffering from PTSD. After Billy shouts several “motherfuckers,” Elliot uneasily stops him and says, “Billy, can you just stop with the motherfucking this and motherfucking that. Please?” Uncertain about what Elliot means, Billy simply responds, “Fuck?” taking off

the word “mother” in his harangue. Elliot then rightly answers, “Yeah. Fuck.” This brief conversation of indecent expressions correspondingly reveals Elliot’s respect for and protection of his mother. Even though Sonia is not present, he still feels offended and in need to save his mother from the abusive language. Therefore, whether it is in the dialogue between Elliot and Esther, in the dining scene, or in Elliot and Billy’s short conversation, Elliot’s difficulty of making decisions and his relationship with Sonia underscore his contesting self-identity between Taiwanese/Chinese filial piety and American individualism.

In addition to the mother-and-son relationships, *Taking Woodstock* also addresses father-and-son bonding. The film portrays Jake as a very silent and powerless man, in contrast to the dominant mother, Sonia. Interestingly, Jake embodies several traits of Lee’s distinguished father characters in his early Taiwanese Father Trilogy: silence, melancholy, and aging. Yet, among those old fathers, Jake seems to be the least patriarchal, leaving the mastery of the house to Sonia. In many scenes, Jake gives in to Sonia to talk and to decide on business. Due to Jake’s calmer temperament, the relationship between Jake and Elliot is milder and often does not involve emotional outbursts. In one of the closing scenes, Elliot tells Jake his decision to go to California:

ELLIOT. I was gonna come say good-bye. I hope that's okay.

JAKE. Listen. Sit. A month ago, I was a dying man. I would think to myself, “It's nice of Elli to come back here to tend to a dying man.” Who knows? Maybe tomorrow I'll be dead. But now, I'm alive. You understand?

ELLIOT. No. JAKE. It's because of you. I'm alive because of you. And what should I want now, but for you, my son, to live, too? Huh? That's not so much to ask. ELLIOT. No, it isn't. JAKE. They're all starting to leave, the young people. Who knows where? They don't even know. And now you're one of them. You go. (*Taking*)

At first glance, it seems that Elliot still wants to ask parental permission and even *forgiveness*. Rather than saying that Elliot

respects Jake and would not hurt his feelings, it is more proper to say that in the Tiber family there is an implicit hierarchy, where parents are always above and superior to children. Not until Jake says, “you go,” does Elliot free himself from the obligations of taking care of his parents and business. Ironically, Elliot saves the family motel business when his parents are in a financial crisis. In addition, as Jake says to Elliot that he “is alive” again, Elliot not only keeps the family intact but also rejuvenates his aging parents. In this way, *Taking Woodstock* is unique when compared to Lee’s other family-themed films in terms of family protectors. In the Taiwanese Father Trilogy, parents (usually the fathers) are powerful and traditional parent-child relationships regulate the families. However, in *Taking Woodstock*, Lee subverts such traditional Confucian familial relationships by emphasizing the child’s contribution to save the family from collapsing. By creating characters who challenge the traditional Confucian familial hierarchy but still fulfill obligations, Lee demonstrates a new discourse of a cross-cultural family that merits equality and individualism yet is still centered on filial piety.

Taking Woodstock thereby helps the director advocate a transnational, cross-cultural domestic manifesto by portraying Westernized parent-child relationships that are still rooted in Confucian family ethics, and also by featuring Vilma, a transcendent character who uses her East-West background and androgynous gender identity to redefine the meanings of family. In the film, Vilma first appears as an attractive woman in a tight dress and high heels. Yet, as Vilma introduces herself and her wish to find a job, Elliot begins to realize that Vilma is not merely a sexy woman, but a Korean War veteran who chooses to dress and live as a woman. Vilma is a significant figure in two aspects: family and nation. In light of the family, Vilma serves as a substitute sister for the Tiber family. Vilma keeps Jake company and works side by side with him; she offers advice to Elliot; and she reconciles the son and the parents. In the breakfast scene, Vilma also attempts to stop the quarrel by sharing hash brownies. Later, when Elliot returns home, he finds his parents finally ate some of Vilma’s brownies and are

happily dancing in the rain. Because of Vilma's interference, Elliot joins his parents' celebration and becomes closer to them. Though Vilma is not biologically related to the Tiber family, she creates a bridge between Elliot and his parents like a second daughter of the family. Cross-culturally, Vilma, an American character, signifies the importance of family harmony, one of the fundamental elements to fulfill Confucian filial piety. Furthermore, Vilma, as she reveals to Elliot, also has a family and is already a grandfather since he married young during the Korean War. In some sense, she enjoys the freedom of choosing her sexual and gender identity, while still fulfilling family obligations: she rears children and grandchildren to continue the bloodline. Vilma shows Elliot an eclectic role model who does not need to decide between self and family but has the luxury to embrace both options. Moreover, on the national level, Vilma's previous position as Marine sergeant during the Korean War renders the security guard job more meaningful: she brings the harmony and peace to the entire country and to families. Vilma's androgynous character highlights a stronger power of comfort, relief, and defense, which transcends the cross-line of gender category. To situate Vilma into an even broader political and historical context, Vilma's achievement as a Korean War hero would remind many Taiwanese people of the old days when the US was Taiwan's most reliable ally. The Korean War prompted the US to defend Taiwan, and thus, the war produced a savior for Taiwan. Vilma, the incarnation of the Korean War, provokes a collective memory as well as an almost ideological nostalgia for the fifties when Taiwan had sufficient national defense, steady economic growth, rapid modernization, and better political diplomatic relations internationally. That being said, if *Taking Woodstock* exposes Lee's political and cultural imagination, Vilma serves as an epitome of the benevolent US, which gave Taiwan great help as a friend and even as a big brother/sister – another domestic reference that highlights the perceived close relationship between the two nations.

Conclusion

Ancient Chinese Confucian thinkers were very interested in how the state and family affect one another. For instance, Mencius (372-289 BC), a famous Confucian philosopher in ancient China, promoted the idea that the foundation of the state lies in the family in order to explicate the indispensable role that family plays in stabilizing a state.¹⁰ Tellingly, Lee's domestic and political philosophies in *Taking Woodstock* more or less echo the Confucian relationship between family and the state, and thus transform an American portrait of the Vietnam War and rock and roll into a Taiwanese/Chinese story of family and the individual. Lee shows his understanding of Confucian domesticity and brings his uniquely hybrid, and utterly Taiwanese, perspective of "America" back to the US. In this way, *Taking Woodstock* not only enables the transnational filmmaker to negotiate East Asian and Western cultures, but also helps him participate in the American history—a bold step that moves him from the periphery to the center, and from passive consumer to active creator.

Notes:

¹ The United States was an ally of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government during World War II. In 1950, the Korean War broke out and President Harry S. Truman sent the US Navy's Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait to prevent the Communists from seizing power in Taiwan. In 1954, the Kuomintang government of Taiwan and the United States signed the Mutual Defense Treaty. Then in 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower visited Taiwan, and in the same decade, Taiwan served as a US military base during the Vietnam War. However, in 1979, the Carter administration terminated diplomatic relations with Taiwan and instead officially recognized the Beijing government. Instead of an official nation-to-nation agreement, President Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) with the Taiwanese government, which promises to "provide for continued American commercial and cultural relations with Taiwan... [and] also outlines the terms of America's security commitment to Taiwan" (Hickey 25).

² According to the station's official website, "ICRT was born on April 16th 1979, after the break in diplomatic relations between Taipei and Washington. From 1957 to 1979, the station's predecessor, Armed Forces Network in Taiwan, served the needs of the US military then stationed on the island. AFNT was sold to the Taiwan government for US\$1 as the American troops pulled out." The station's primary missions are "bridging cultural gaps and integrating the resources of Taiwan's local and international communities for the ROC's continued growth and prosperity." It also helps Taiwanese people to "better understand English and join the global community."

<http://www.icrt.com.tw/page_details.php?&mlevel1=5&mlevel2=9>

March 11, 2016.

³ The Republic of China (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are two different political regimes. In 1949, the ROC, led by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party/Kuomintang (KMT), was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War. The KMT government and troops retreated to Taiwan, while the Communist Party established the PRC in the Mainland. Since then, the ROC has controlled Taiwan, and the PRC has controlled the Mainland.

⁴ The forum was in Mandarin Chinese. The English translations are my own.

⁵ In 1962, Taiwan's first TV station, Taiwan Television (TTV), was founded and began to broadcast shows.

www.ttv.com.tw/group/15/aboutTTV/default.asp.

⁶ See Hiscock.

⁷ During the 1960s, the Chiang government's Martial Law prohibited free speech and restricted human rights in order to maintain a submissive society. It was also during this peak time during the Cold War when the widespread anti-communist slogan, "Keep secrets confidential from hostile spies is everyone's responsibility," disseminated throughout Taiwan owing to incessant government propaganda. The highly alerted and straining society, caused by the anti-communist ideology and a totalitarian regime, made Taiwanese people exceptionally cautious of their expressions, since spying eyes might have been all around.

⁸ See Confucius et al. *The Book of Rites*. Ed. Dai Sheng. Translated by James Legge. Beijing: Intercultural Press, 2013.

⁹ For more on this cultural connotation of the Jewish mother, see Joyce Antler's *You Never Call! You Never Write: A History of the Jewish Mother*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ See *Mencius*. Translated by D. C. Lau. New York: Penguin Group, 2001.

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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: Race, Ethnicity, and
Women's Choices in
Something New and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

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Abstract

The movies *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and *Something New* (2006) interrogate various ethnic and racial traditions and expectations concerning interracial and intercultural relationships from the female perspective. The two romantic comedies illustrate how the female protagonists' decisions to date and marry men outside their ethnic and racial communities create tension and resistance among their family members and circle of friends, revealing an array of cultural and racial differences. By looking at the subtle ways in which these movies depict the challenges posed by interethnic dating/marriage in terms of gender, race, class, and ethnicity, especially in the female protagonists' family environment, this essay sets out to explore how the protagonists' choices to transcend cultural and racial borders may represent a new attempt to assuage the concerns regarding the complexity of interethnic relationships by including the option of individual female choice and agency.

Keywords: interethnic relationships; American film and culture; choice and gender, ethnic and racial identity; transcending ethnic and racial borders

In 2015, the *Journal of Social Issues* dedicated its fourth issue to a close examination of interethnic relationships in contemporary America.¹ In the introductory essay, "Interethnic Marriage in the

United States: An Introduction,” Stanley Gaines Jr. et al. maintain that although the “rate of interethnic marriage” has increased in the past fifty years, it “remains a potent social issue” (650).² Particularly since 1967, with Stanley Kramer’s groundbreaking movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, the complexity of this issue has been explored in popular culture, as well, where, as Renee Romano suggests, “portrayals of interracial couples in films, on television, and in the print media have increased dramatically” since 1975 (275). In this context, Erica Chito Childs argues in *Navigating Interracial Borders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds*, that “the [interracial] couples’ experiences and the communities’ views are undoubtedly shaped by the ideas, images, and beliefs that exist within contemporary discourse and culture” and “popular culture images and depictions are particularly important because ... they are often based in these larger images and discourses that exist in society” (15). Therefore, “media culture also provides the materials out of which any people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Kellner qtd. in Childs 15). Regarding interracial relationships, Romano points out that “although many blacks remain ambivalent about interracial relationships and whites have not overcome their fears of interracial marriage entirely ... changing attitudes about race, new legal norms, and cultural shifts toward individual autonomy have affected what is considered publicly acceptable discourse,” and claims that “some positive representations of interracial love can be found in the media and popular culture” (285-286). In this changing social and cultural milieu, at the beginning of a new millennium, the movies *Something New* (2006) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) intend to present a different perspective on interethnic relationships.

In 1967, Kramer’s seminal but also controversial movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* offered a new point of view regarding interracial relationships in film. He pointed out that “I don’t consider this film about interracial marriage. I consider this a film in which I try to transport you to a situation: where a man met a woman, they fell in love and they wanted to get married. One of

them happened to be a Negro. Well, is that a problem?" (Bonus Features, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*). In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* the story is viewed from the perspective of the young woman's white parents (perhaps, given the social environment at the time, a more appropriate choice in 1967), although, as Childs contends, for the most part, "Hollywood explores interracial love relationships ... from the perspective of the white man with an 'exotic' woman of color" (71).³ Moreover, she further suggests that "mainstream film (even in the depictions of black-white couples) does not depict acceptance; rather, it reveals a social structure that privileges intraracial unions," observing that "the images in these films provide certain ways of thinking about or understanding interracial relationships that serve to reproduce racial boundaries, even when attempting to challenge the existing racial hierarchy" (74). However, since *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, in spite of depicting white man-black woman relationships, few movies have looked at interethnic relationships from the woman's point of view (an exception might be, to a certain extent, *Made in America* in 1993).

Still, almost forty years after Kramer's movie, in a larger interethnic context, two women screenwriters, Kriss Turner and Nia Vardalos, created *Something New* (2006) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding (MBFGW)* (2002), two love stories "with a twist." In the former, Kenya McQueen, the African-American protagonist "happens" to fall in love with a good-looking white man, and, in the latter, Toula Portokalos, "happens" to be a Greek-American woman who wants to marry a non-Greek man, both women having to confront the challenges brought about by their families' fierce resistance to their choices to date outside their race and ethnic group. At the same time, the male representatives, Brian Kelly and Ian Miller, who belong to the white American-born majority, are the outsiders who are expected to "assimilate" into the minority families of the female protagonists. In true romantic and comedic fashion, each movie offers a multilayered story laced with racial and cultural stereotypes (when the women's families meet the suitors and/or their families), with the struggle between individual

identities, choice, and agency, with the significance of maintaining the racial and ethnic identity above all, and the more encompassing issue of assimilation into the American mainstream culture.

Both movies interrogate established assumptions and expectations about interethnic relationships: *Something New* centers on the intricate connections among gender, race, and class from the African-American point of view, while *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (*MBFGW*) revolves around the intersections between gender and ethnicity, with the Greek ethnic community holding the central position. The novelty of these two movies resides in the fact that they explore the complexity of interethnic relationships in terms of female ethnic and racial identity in private and public spaces. Turner, an African-American writer, and Vardalos, an actress of Greek descent, found inspiration for these movies in their own lives. As David Kehr points out in his review of *MBFGW*, it is “based on Ms. Vardalos's one-woman show, which was based in turn on her upbringing in Winnipeg, Manitoba, ... an amiable, offhanded comedy about ethnic identity and last-chance romance.” On the other hand, Turner states that “As an African American woman doing well professionally, I found I wasn’t doing well personally, meaning not married. I know a lot of women like this. They ask: ‘Where are the brothers?’ ‘Why are we still single?’ Many successful women just want companionship” (qtd. in Shuler). Moreover, Deardra Shuler quotes Turner saying about *Something New*: “it is now time, for loyal black women, to consider other alternatives,” pondering on the dating and marriage possibilities for educated, professional African-American women. In an interview with Wilson Morales, Sanaa Hamri emphasizes another significantly new fact about the movie: it is “produced [Stephanie Allain], directed [Sanaa Hamri], written [Kriss Turner], and starring all women of color [Sanaa Lathan, Alfre Woodard, etc.]. It’s never happened as a major studio release in Hollywood” She also observes that “in this film, not only do we have an African American lead as a woman, but we are looking at the film from her perspective as a human being versus a gratuitous moment in somebody else’s movie” (qtd. in Morales). Overall, the movies

focus on the female protagonists' choices to step out of the safe comfort zone of their ethnicity or race in order to marry an ethnic or racial "outsider" and the ways in which they are shaped and influenced, to a great extent, by their families and friends (as representatives of the cultural backgrounds they come from). Therefore, by looking at the subtle ways in which these movies depict the challenges posed by interethnic dating/marriage in terms of gender, race, class, and ethnicity in the female protagonists' family environment, this essay sets out to explore how the protagonists' choices to transcend cultural and racial borders may represent a new attempt to assuage the concerns regarding the complexity of interethnic relationships by including the option of individual female choice and agency.

Toula Portokalos, the protagonist of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, is thirty years old, still living with her parents, and working in the family restaurant. Her father's comment at the beginning of the movie: "You had better get married soon. You're starting to look old," is contextualized by Toula as: "My dad has been saying that to me since I was 15 because nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies, and feed everyone until the day we die. ... Nice Greek girls who don't find a husband are working in the family restaurant" (*MBFGW*). Her father might be referring to her sister, Athena, who is a "nice" Greek woman because she has a Greek husband and children, unlike Toula, who, at this age wants to get more education – take some computer classes at the community college, perhaps with a view to improving the family business in the future. This decision, the first individual decision that will steer her into a different direction from the one expected by her ethnic parents, is opposed by her father, Gus Portokalos, who perceives his daughter's desire for more education as the beginning of the end; after all, he thinks she is smart enough for a girl - what she needs is a husband not college courses. On the other hand, her mother, Maria Portokalos, praises Toula for wanting something more and different in life (suggesting that she takes after her mother, not her father): "you want something else. You have spirit" (*MBFGW*).

However, as the movie further illustrates, in a way, Toula's decision is indeed the beginning of the end for their family life as her father has known it so far, because each step she takes – taking the computer classes, working in her aunt's travel agency, dating Ian Miller, a non-Greek, and marrying him - makes her become less Greek in her father's eyes, equal to betraying her ethnic community and heritage.

On the other hand, Kenya McQueen, the protagonist of *Something New*, is a successful career woman in her early 30s, looking for the Ideal Black Man she would like to marry. Perhaps like Toula, who represents an exception as she starts questioning the established traditional female roles in the Greek community she lives in, Kenya and her three girlfriends, all in their early 30s, college educated, with successful careers, but single, are also a part of a minority as far as African-American women are concerned: they are among the 42.4 percent of African-American women who have never married (*Something New*). Kenya comes from a well-off family, an educated family “of academics” - her father is “a doctor” as her mother often likes to point out. Kenya is an accomplished woman: she owns a house, and, given her age, her family and friends (especially her younger brother and one of her younger co-workers) are intent on finding her a suitable husband. One day, out of curiosity, she decides to give in and goes on a blind date, only to find out, much to her surprise, that although Brian Kelly is a good-looking man, he is white and has nothing in common with the Ideal Black Man she is looking for, a situation that, like in Toula's case, will create tremendous turmoil in her life and that of her family.

Perhaps intrigued by the possibility of dating outside the comfort zone of their race and ethnic group – believing at first that these relationships do not have any future – and in spite of family or personal resistance, Toula and Kenya decide to give their new relationships a chance. This choice, however, prompts them to go through a double process: first of all, they themselves have to come to terms with this decision, and secondly, they have to defend it in front of the growing resistance of family members and intriguing looks from friends. As a result, once they take this decision, they

become “the other” in the family – the ones who need to be persuaded to change their minds because, from their families’ points of view, they are doing something wrong: it is unacceptable for Toula to date or marry a non-Greek, just as it is for Kenya to date or marry a white man.

As the movies illustrate, the decision to date a racial and ethnic “other” is not an easy one, and Kenya and Toula have mixed feelings during their first meetings with Brian and Ian. Toula likes Ian from the first moment she sees him in the family restaurant, and, when they meet again after her complete makeover, working in her aunt’s travel agency, she tells him that she would like to date him, but she is very much concerned about her parents’ - and possibly extended family’s - reaction. She tries to explain to him that a relationship between them would be extremely difficult because he is not of Greek origin: “I have a big and loud family,” she says, “the only other people we know are Greeks because Greeks marry Greeks to breed more Greeks to be loud, breeding Greek eaters. *No one* in my family has ever gone out with a non-Greek before. *No one*. ... You’re wonderful, but I just don’t see how this is going to work out” (*MBFGW*, emphasis added). This suggests that Toula would be willing to start a relationship with Ian, even if he is not Greek-American, but her parents would probably perceive that as a betrayal of the ethnic heritage, equal to assimilation into the American culture, and complete disregard for the ethnic culture and legacy. This situation is mentioned in various studies quoted by Elizabeth Vaquera and Grace Kao, who point out that a 1997 study found that “the higher the generational status, the more likely individuals are to outmarry,” a “pattern linked to the process of acculturation, meaning that generational status is directly related to dating/marriage rates through the adoption of behaviors of the majority youth in the United States” (487). Toula’s parents emigrated to the United States from Greece in their youth, and she is a second-generation immigrant, more open to assimilation, perhaps also because of the education acquired in American schools. To a certain extent, as demonstrated by her father’s attitude when he finds out about the relationship, Toula’s desire to get more

education - taking the computer classes and practicing her computer skills in her aunt's travel agency - facilitates her meeting with Ian.

On the other hand, after meeting Brian during the blind date, Kenya is taken aback and feels completely uncomfortable dating white men, although she cannot really explain why. Brian's straightforward remark: "So, I understand you don't do white guys" (*Something New*) catches her totally unprepared, and unlike Toula, who would like to date Ian, Kenya tries to explain to Brian that not dating white men is a matter of personal preference: "I just happen to prefer black men. It's not a prejudice; it's a preference" (*Something New*). Her preference may stem from her quest for the Ideal Black Man, or it might mask her reluctance to date outside her race. She might believe that black men are the only acceptable or safe option for black women, or she might not want to become "the other" in her social circle by dating outside her race. In this context, Childs's claim that "interracial relationships are an option that they [black women] *do not* accept because of contemporary racism as well as the history of sexual relations between blacks and whites" (95) might provide another answer to Kenya's "preference" not to date white men. However, she is not prepared for Brian's sarcastic reply: "Sure. It's your preference to be prejudiced" (*Something New*), which implies that in their case, Kenya, an African-American woman, is prejudiced, a reversal of the white-black perceptions in American society, where the white person is often considered the one who is prejudiced against the black people.

These brief conversations between Kenya and Brian and Toula and Ian at the beginning of what will develop as long-term relationships reflect the women's attitudes towards the possibility of having a relationship with a man from a different culture or race, as illustrated by Kenya's feelings of discomfort in front of family members and friends to date a white man and Toula's discomfort at being the first woman to transgress the traditional gender expectations of the Greek-American community. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that in *MBFGW*, Toula is reluctant to enter the relationship because of her family, as she would not have a problem with it, while in *Something New*, Kenya, who is also in her early

30s, does not even bring her family into discussion at first. She believes that as long as she is not sure whether she wants to take such a controversial decision (framing it as a matter of personal preference), the family members and her friends do not have a say in the matter yet (although subconsciously she might be aware of their resistance to it). Therefore, as Toula starts meeting Ian in secret, after giving the matter some consideration, Kenya hires Brian to recreate her garden (he works as a landscape architect) and gradually decides to date Brian and give the relationship a chance.

As the relationships unfold, Toula and Kenya are faced with various challenges in private and public spaces. Vaquera and Kao state that “all minority groups show, on average, lower levels of displays of affection in public, such as introducing the partner to the parents or going out with a group of friends” (502), and, as a result of the “stressful impact” of the family reaction to the interethnic or interracial relationship, the couple may be “withdraw[ing] from public interaction” (487), something experienced both by Kenya and by Toula. Aware of the fierce resistance from her family and not sure about the future of the relationship, Toula knows that, above all, she must keep the relationship secret. Given her family’s completely Greek lifestyle, Toula is not certain how to broach such a sensitive subject with her parents, especially as her father had been extremely resistant to her decision to take the computer classes in the first place. The house she lives in with her parents looks completely Greek: it is painted in white and blue (the Greek colors) on the outside, and the Greek flag is flying in the yard, obvious symbols of her parents,’ particularly her father’s, desire to maintain the family’s Greek heritage at all costs. Consequently, Toula and Ian have to meet in public spaces, but she has to make sure that those spaces are not frequented by her parents or the numerous members of her extended family (uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.). At first, they meet in her aunt’s travel agency, but after they are spotted in public by a family acquaintance and her parents find out, they move from the neutral public spaces into the private space of Ian’s house as the relationship progresses, in spite of her parents’ disapproval.

Kenya's situation, on the other hand, given the societal perceptions of interracial dating, particularly in public spaces, is much more complex and nuanced. First of all, unlike Toula, Kenya does not live with her family. She is an accomplished woman with a well-paid job and owns a modern house. When she finally decides to date Brian, she does not intend to tell her parents or her brother about him because she does not think that it is going to be a long-lasting relationship, given their different racial backgrounds. Once Brian starts working in the garden and they begin dating, they develop a closer relationship in the privacy of her home, where, away from unwanted prying eyes, she feels more comfortable dating a white man. In this context, Vaquera and Kao maintain that "interracial couples do share common experiences with stigmatized individuals, such as social pressures and rejection, and that as a result they diminish their social exposure by going out less often to have dinner or to the movies" (486). In a similar vein, Childs points out that the couples in her study "responded that when alone their interracial status was not a salient piece of their relationship. Racial differences did not exist, did not affect their treatment of each other, or were simply a source of diversity to celebrate, not to dwell on" (*Navigating* 31); however, they felt that "in their experiences with others, even close family and friends, ... their 'racial differences' are central" (*Navigating* 35). Still, even in the privacy of her home, Kenya is unsure about the relationship, and when Brian steps physically and symbolically from the garden into her home, she does not know how to respond to his laid-back way of being or to some of his suggestions for repainting the rooms. He seems to disrupt her organized and planned world by suggesting that she should include more color in her life (in her garden and in her house, painted mostly in neutral colors, particularly beige).

Like Toula, Kenya also chooses to keep her relationship secret, especially from her parents, but she is looking for her friends' opinion on her new dating situation. She thinks that it is probably not going to work anyway, but her friends encourage her to have fun and enjoy herself because that does not necessarily mean that she has to marry him as well, urging her to "let go, let

flow,” simply let things happen. As a result, encouraged by Brian, Kenya changes her hairstyle by taking out the weave; then he “introduces” her to color and together they spend a relaxing and cheerful time together, sheltered by the private spaces of her house. As the garden starts blooming into a harmony of color changing into a cozy and welcoming space, Kenya also changes into a more laid-back person, almost ready to give their relationship a chance. Still, she feels slightly embarrassed and rather uncomfortable to be seen with Brian in public spaces, whether it is simply going shopping or going out with her friends to a stand-up comedy show, mostly with black comedians and a black audience, especially when the black comedian makes some controversial jokes about black women dating white men.

As much as Kenya and Toula have tried to keep their relationships private and secret, their parents find out eventually and react accordingly. Obviously, they do not understand why Toula and Kenya would date outside their ethnic group and race. Therefore, once they have come to accept their decisions to date “the other,” Toula and Kenya have to find ways of persuading their families and friends that Ian and Brian are “the ones,” in spite of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.⁴ The creators of the movies chose to present the family response to the dating and marriage situation only from the female protagonists’ families, perhaps in keeping with the female perspective of the movies. Thus, in *Something New*, Brian’s family does not appear at all, perhaps suggesting that there is no resistance from them, or perhaps because, as a man, he does not need the family validation; in the end, it is his decision. In *M.B.F.G.W.*, Ian’s parents do appear, and when Toula meets them, they act in a very polite way, but do not show much emotion, although they do not seem thrilled by the relationship or the news that they will get married. Perhaps like in Brian’s case, they simply agree with Ian’s choice as a man. However, Toula’s encounter with Ian’s parents in their house and their encounter with Toula’s parents in their Greek-style house are awkward for both groups, although in the movie, the latter encounter is treated with much humor, peppered with more or less

subtle cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings. In this context, Gina Castle Bell and Sally Hastings claim that “in addition to ‘regular’ relational pressures, interracial couples also encounter societal and familial assessments that create tensions and conflict,” (756), similar to Vaquera and Kao who note that “families and friends appear as the most salient groups that influence individuals when choosing a romantic partner” (488). For Toula, the main obstacle is her family (not only parents and siblings, but also the extended family members – aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.). Her father, especially, is heartbroken when he first finds out about Ian, considering this a direct consequence of the fact that Toula was allowed to further her education: “Didn’t I say it’s a mistake to educate women? Now we have a boyfriend in the house. Is he a nice Greek boy? No, no Greek. A xeno! A xeno with big long hairs on top of his head!” (*MBFGW*). Gus Portokalos cannot understand why his daughter would do something like this to him, to marry “a xeno,” while Toula’s mother tells her: “maybe you are having a little romance. But end it now!” (*MBFGW*), and when Toula tells her that she loves Ian, her mother suggests the remedy for any heartache or pain in the Greek community: “Oh, Toula, eat something ...” (*MBFGW*). This, however, is only the first reaction because her father is determined not to let the relationship become more serious, and, in order to preserve the honor of the family and to keep Toula in the Greek community by all means, he starts inviting all the Greek bachelors he knows in Chicago – old, young, handsome or not – an array of suitors for Toula to meet and to choose from over lavish Greek dinners cooked by her mother. Still, Toula will not give up; she loves Ian and wants to marry him. The situation becomes even more complicated for her father, as Ian is willing to change his religion and become a Greek Orthodox so that he and Toula can get married in their church, as her parents want her to. For Gus Portokalos, this is the last straw; he must finally accept the inevitable, that his daughter will indeed marry outside her ethnic community.

When Kenya’s secret is discovered, the situation is similar in her family. Once her brother and parents become aware of the

seriousness of her unexpected transgression, they also start making their own plans, and, like in Toula's case, the solution is to find a suitable suitor, this time, the Ideal Black man who accompanies her brother to Kenya's house one day. At first, when her brother sees Brian working in the garden, he adopts an arrogant tone and attitude towards him, which makes Kenya quite uncomfortable, but her brother's initial reaction represents the way Brian will be perceived by her parents and friends: "It's the help," her brother says. "By the way, what's this I hear – are you skiing the slopes? Are you sleeping with the enemy?," and when Kenya defends herself: "It was a blind date. I didn't know," he simply sneers: "Going on a blind date with a white boy? No, *cause you're not that desperate!* I'm going to hook you up," he promises, with a suitable black man, Kenya expects (*Something New*, emphasis added). In this context, Childs claims that "interracial relationships are seen as an unacceptable alternative that allows black individuals to turn their back on their family and community and escape into 'white society'" (*Navigating* 129). She further states that "black families view interracial relationships as a loss in many ways—the loss of individuals to white society, the weakening of families and communities, and the devaluing of blackness" (*Navigating* 129), which is valid in Toula's case, too, since her father considers her decision to marry Ian as ethnic betrayal, as diluting the ethnic blood and tainting the ethnic identity. After her brother's first reaction to Brian, Kenya's discomfort is enhanced at the garden party she throws in order to show off her new garden and perhaps to have Brian meet her family as she does not expect her parents to be more understanding than her brother.

One of the problems with this relationship from her family's point of view, besides race, is the difference in social class. Kenya has a good job and a good financial situation, while Brian has chosen a more bohemian lifestyle working as a landscape architect, not much interested in social status or money. Social class is not a problem in *MBFGW* because both families belong to the middle class, having a satisfying financial situation: Toula's parents own a restaurant, and Ian is a teacher (his parents' occupation is not

mentioned). However, in *Something New*, Kenya's parents, especially her mother, is very vocal about Kenya's interracial relationship and her brother enjoys pointing out Brian's lower social status: he is "the help." Therefore, in order to remedy the situation, according to the devised family plan, at the garden party, her brother shows up with the Ideal Black Man, his mentor, in order to take Kenya's mind off her relationship with Brian. The guests, mostly Kenya's friends, are not very friendly towards Brian. Many of the black men at the party emphasize the fact that he is "the other;" he does not belong there, and they are not ready or willing to accept him: "You should feel blessed you were invited to this Negro spiritual" (*Something New*). Still, a few of them say that "that white guy is really nice," perhaps only because they want to be polite or politically correct. The most awkward moment is when Kenya's parents arrive – they are surprised to see the white man in their midst, and she is taken aback, not sure how to react. When her mother exclaims "oh, the landscaper," Kenya replies "actually Brian is my friend, mother," which takes her mother by surprise, although her father is very polite towards him (*Something New*). Her parents also notice that the house and the garden look different, bright and full of color, which prompts her mother to ask her: "you have gone all bohemian, what has gotten into you?" (*Something New*). Upon hearing the question, Kenya becomes aware of the fact that this outer change in her private space reflects not only a change in her lifestyle but also the inner change she has gone through. Her brother helpfully interjects at this point: "I found the one – your future husband. My mentor from law school" (*Something New*), a young man that her mother totally approves of: handsome, well-spoken, a perfect match for Kenya.

Kenya is torn about her relationship: she tries to defend it in front of her family, but she is still unsure of her feelings, not completely comfortable with having a relationship with a white man, a turning point in the movie that brings up the issues of gender and race. After a bad day at the office, Kenya snaps because Brian asks her not to bring the race issue into their relationship so much: "You're asking me to not talk about race? You expect me to

be in this relationship and never bring it up?,” and when Brian responds “we talk about it all the time. I just said, not right now,” she probably voices her concerns about their relationship for the first time: “When is it appropriate? At home, behind closed doors when we joke about it? ... I’m in a world full of white people and every day they remind me I’m black. That’s what being black is about – you don’t get a night off” (*Something New*). At this point, Brian perhaps realizes that their relationship makes Kenya truly uncomfortable and decides to end it, for her sake: “I’m never going to be on the right side of this war that’s going on in your head because I’m not black. I’m never going to be black – so maybe this is not what you’re looking for – not what you want” (*Something New*), and they decide to split up. Conveniently so, Mark Harper, her brother’s mentor and the Ideal Black man, shows up, and they start spending time together. As a result, when Brian returns and apologizes: “I won’t always relate, but I promise I’ll empathize,” telling her that he loves her, Kenya refuses him and mentions Mark. To his question “Let me guess – he’s black?,” Kenya feels the need to defend her new choice: “It’s not only that – we have more in common” (*Something New*). Brian is also aware of the difference in social class that might have been a problem for her family, so his next question, “A suit-and-tie guy?, to which she responds “yeah,” confirms his belief about the role played by the social status in their relationship (*Something New*).

At this point, Kenya has accomplished her goal: she has found the Ideal Black Man – good-looking, educated, successful, and with a promising career – but life in her home is very different with Mark. While she used to laugh a lot and have fun with Brian trying out new things, when she is with Mark, the atmosphere is very professional: they are both working on laptops on the couch. Kenya has a nagging feeling that this is not what she wants and feels torn between the two men. Her friends realize that she still has feelings for Brian and try to joke about the situation: “Let’s get real here: Brian is cute and all that, but he is a white boy” (*Something New*). Moreover, their question “Come on, Kenya, were you really gonna go the distance?” (*Something New*), makes Kenya wonder

whether she is willing or has the courage to commit to such a relationship. In the meantime, during a family dinner at her parents' house, Mark hints that they might get married; Kenya feels uncomfortable because Mark has simply assumed that they would get married without even asking her opinion, so she decides to break up with him. Unsure whether it has been a mistake or not to break up with Mark, she admits to one of her friends: "Maybe I just made the biggest mistake of my life. He was fine and smart but there was no fizzle, no magic." Her friend tries to understand and encourage her: "You did a brave thing. You let your heart do the talking, not your parents, not society, not black people, not your girls. You decided for you" (*Something New*) and suggests she might call Brian. Kenya says that if Brian had been black, she might have given him a chance, so her friend's boyfriend offers her the "black man" perspective: "as a black man, I was a little suspicious of the guy, when I first met him. But at the end of the day it's not about skin color or race. It's about the love connection. The vibe that's between a man and a woman. ... Does he make you feel loved, he make you laugh, ..., he make you enjoy life? Because if that's what you have with Brian ..." (*Something New*). While her love life is in tatters, Kenya is promoted at her job and becomes a partner in the firm; everything looks up in her life, but she is alone in her beautiful garden. Kenya joins her parents to the annual debutante ball, the cotillion, but feels miserable, and her mother is angry and blames her for being unhappy. Surprisingly, though, her father encourages her to follow her heart: "He's a good guy," he says of Brian; "if you have feelings for him, you need to do something about it. ... Love is an adventure; it's not a decision you make for others; it's a decision you make from the heart" (*Something New*), similar to the advice she has received from her friend. "Anyway," her father points out, "the boy's just white, he ain't a Martian. Folks carry on like we're some kind of pure race that shouldn't be diluted. But look at us, all of us in this country. Black white, brown yellow, we're all mixed up. ... Nothing pure about us" (*Something New*). Her father's words encourage Kenya, and, realizing that she does love Brian, she dashes to get him back,

a decision supported by her brother who gives her his car keys, probably as a sign of accepting his sister's decision. Once she finds Brian, she confesses: "I've never had to be anyone but myself with you, right from the beginning. And with you I feel I can do anything, say anything, try anything. And that's the life I want. I want an adventure with you. ...I know this is right. You're the one that I want" (*Something New*). They return to the ball, and in the end they get married.

In a similar vein, Gus and Maria Portokalos have to come to terms with Toula's decision to marry "a xeno." Therefore, they prepare a rich dinner to welcome Ian and his parents into the family, and all the members of the extended family are excited to meet them. As mentioned before, food is one of the staples of the Greek community, in this context perhaps used as a sign of accepting the Americans into their midst, so Ian and his parents experience a hearty welcome from the Greek-Americans. Aunt Voula, the owner of the travel agency, in particular, shows her willingness to "turn him [Ian] into a Greek" by honoring him with a lunch invitation. "I'll cook for him," she tells Ian and Toula, but is truly puzzled when she is told he is a vegetarian. "He don't eat no meat?," she exclaims completely taken aback, but she offers to compromise: "That's okay. I'll make lamb" (*MBFGW*). However, Ian's parents are not sure how to react to the displays of emotion and food in Toula's family, and to the stories and loud music that accompany the family gathering, leaving Gus to exclaim disappointed after they all leave: "My daughter is going to marry a xeno with a toast family. I never think this can happen to us" (*MBFGW*). The food references in the Greek-American community point to the strong connection between family gatherings, acceptance in the family, and love, as food sustains all of these. For instance, Toula's mother shows her way of accepting Ian into the family, by asking him: "Ian, are you hungry?," and to his sincere answer "No, I already ate," she replies: "Okay, I'll make you something" (*MBFGW*).

In the end, as Ian is willing to go the extra mile (being baptized in the Greek-Orthodox Church) to appease Toula's

parents, they decide to accept Toula's decision and prepare for a lavish Greek-style wedding in a big restaurant, "Aphrodite's Palace," with plenty of food, drink, and Greek entertainment (hence the title of the movie). Gus points out during his speech at the wedding: "So here tonight we have apple [Miller] and orange [Portokalos] ... we all different but in the end we all fruit" (*MBFGW*), similar to Kenya's father who observes: "But look at us, all of us in this country. Black white, brown yellow, we're all mixed up. ... Nothing pure about us" (*Something New*). In Greek fashion, Toula's parents surprise the newlyweds with a "big" wedding gift: a house next door. Toula may have married an outsider, but her father has made sure that they are not going to leave the Greek-American family and community, physically or spiritually. The end of the movie hints at Ian and Toula's future life together: in the house next door to her parents, with a little daughter who is expected to go to "Greek school" but is promised by Toula that she will be allowed to marry anyone she wants. By showing strong determination to change her life and stick to her decisions, in spite of emotional obstacles, and by transgressing the traditional ethnic gender expectations, Toula becomes a source of inspiration for her younger cousins and especially for her brother, who, at times, tried to be more supportive of her relationship (even if he enjoyed poking fun at Ian's attempts to learn Greek): "you wanted to do something else and you did it. Don't let your past dictate who you are, but let it be part of who you will become" (*MBFGW*), a statement valid for many second-generation immigrants who dare to be different from their parents by maintaining a part of their ethnic heritage but also embracing their American self. In the end, Toula comes to terms with her ethnic identity as a woman and starts accepting her cultural heritage: "My family is big and loud, but they're my family. We fight and we laugh. And yes, we roast lamb on a spit in the front yard. And wherever I go whatever I do they will always be there" (*MBFGW*), pointing to a renewed understanding and acceptance of her hybrid Greek-American identity.

As romantic comedies, both movies end on a happy note, with a wedding, with the perception that “love is the only color,” a cliché, especially as family acceptance for the interethnic relationships has been granted too easily, in the case of *Something New*, as various scholars have argued.⁵ Indeed, Toula and Kenya are carried away by the charm and looks of the white men, who seem to save them from a somewhat unfulfilled life. On the one hand, Kenya and Toula learn to take charge of their lives and be more in control of their own decisions and the consequences of their choices. On the other hand, Ian and Brian must learn how to yield some of their power as white men in order to demonstrate that they are worthy of being accepted in the women’s minority families, a perspective which, arguably, might be considered the beginning of a change in the depiction and perception of interethnic relationships in film and popular culture. Since 1967, the issue of interethnic relationships has been taken up in various movies, often presented as “something different,” difficult to accept or even discuss. However, Catherine Squires observes that, in recent years, “images and stories about celebrities, ... and statistics on rising interracial marriage rates provide mainstream media with regular opportunities to discuss multiracial identity,” and “to a certain extent, this celebration of multiracial families is an attempt to re-frame the meaning of interracial sexual and family relationships from a shameful to a hopeful phenomenon” (41). Therefore, by framing the stories in a female-oriented context, peppered with humorous cultural encounters in often exaggerated situations to underscore the struggles and challenges posed by a relationship “outside the box,” these romantic comedies may represent an attempt to alleviate previously-held beliefs by presenting interethnic relationships as a more “hopeful” phenomenon. Moreover, these movies look at interethnic relationships not only from the female perspective (“a woman who crossed the color line” in *Something New*, as Turner asserts, and, one might argue, “a woman who crossed the ethnic line” in *MBFGW*) but also from that of minority groups (African-American and Greek-American in this case), thus subtly interrogating the role of racial and ethnic identity

in terms of belonging to a minority culture and the perception of assimilation into the contemporary American society as a gain or a loss for the minority community. “My film opens up new possibilities to Black women. It says perhaps it’s time to let go of embedded outdated ideas and discover love can come in many hues,” declares Turner (qtd. in Shuler), similar to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, whose protagonist discovers love in a different culture. At the same time, Manohla Dargis’ opinion that “‘Something New’ isn’t especially new, which is actually part of its low-key charm,” could be juxtaposed to Hamri’s belief as the director of the movie that the most important reason to watch *Something New* is because “it will expand your mind and make you really think ...,” two statements that can be applied to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, too.

Notes:

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I will use the terms *race*, *ethnicity*, *interracial* and *interethnic marriage* as employed by Gaines et al. in “Interethnic Marriage” (2015): “*race* as individuals’ presumed biological heritage;” “*ethnicity* as individuals’ presumed biological and/or cultural heritage” (“*race*” is viewed “as part and parcel of individuals’ ethnicity”) (649); the term *interracial marriage* is generally used to refer to marriage or dating between African Americans and Whites, while *interethnic marriage* is more encompassing, referring to intercultural/ethnic and interracial marriage and dating. Gaines et al. suggest that “interracial marriages constitute the specific type of interethnic marriage that the U.S. Supreme Court addressed in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967)” (*Interethnic Marriage* 649).

² For more information on the current situation of intermarriage, see Livingston and Brown. For more on interracial dating, see Yancey (2002); for more on interethnic relationships, see Gaines et al. (2006). For more on African-American perspectives on interracial relationships see Kennedy (2002) and Childs (2008); for more on gender in interracial relationships see Herman and Campbell (2012). For more on attitudes towards cultural diversity, see George and Yancey (2004).

³ Childs claims that “in popular culture, the images depicted in movies such as *The Bodyguard*, *Bulworth*, *Mission Impossible II*, *Monster’s Ball*, *Rich Man’s Wife*, and *Swordfish* are worth noting for their depictions of relationships between black women and white men, yet again the depictions are deviant, sexual, or do not portray successful relationships” (71).

⁴ For more on reactions from families and friends, see Miller, Olson, and Fazio (2004).

⁵ For different perspectives on the movie *Something New*, see Childs (2009).

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Identity and Belonging
in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*

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Abstract

The issue of identity as well as that of belonging has been Caryl Phillips's constant concern. In *Cambridge*, Phillips constructs characters who redefine their ethnic, racial and cultural identities in keeping with the bonds of kinship they develop as adults when they get married or have children. He sets before the reader characters with very limited agency – such as women or enslaved people – who preserve their dignity by embracing specific cultural identities of their own choosing.

Keywords: cultural identity, gender, race, social class, history, power, Christianity, abolitionism, Englishness

Questions of identity have become remarkably central in human and social sciences, both theoretically and substantively, in recent years. The term 'identity' has come to acquire different connotations depending upon the context within which it is used, given the fact that the category under discussion – be it 'man,' 'black' or 'community' is perceived as being fluid, fragile and incomplete.

In a very interesting article entitled "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall focuses on the issue of identity, pointing to its reformulations. He dwells on the question of what is meant by cultural identity, giving the example of black diaspora identities. Hall correctly starts from the question of who and what we represent when we speak, acknowledging the fact that the subject

always speaks from a specific historical and cultural position. He points to two different ways of approaching cultural identity. The first conceptualization is related to the way in which a community tries to uncover the 'truth' about its past in the 'oneness' of a shared history and culture which could afterwards be represented to consolidate and reaffirm identity, in Hall's example Caribbeanness. The second approach to cultural identity presents it from the perspective of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,' suggesting the fluidity of identity. Hall acknowledges that identity has a past, but argues that in the process of appropriating it, one invariably reconstructs it, the past undergoing constant changes all the while. This past belongs to an 'imagined community,' a community of subjects who speak as 'we.' Hall emphasizes the importance of the recognition of difference, which, however, should not be approached in a rigid way, in binary oppositions such as 'us' and 'them.' He correctly claims that meaning, which emerges through difference, is never quite fixed, and resorts to Jacques Derrida's notion of *differance*, where meaning is always deferred, never complete or fixed (21). In conclusion, this approach to identity which is seen as fluid makes one realize that those who appropriate identity are not only positioned by identity, they also position themselves and are capable of reconstructing and transforming historical identities:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives, of the past. (Hall 52)

The issue of identity as well as that of belonging have been Caryl Phillips's central concerns and he has constantly addressed these issues both in his non-fictional works and in his novels. Thus,

in his collection of essays entitled *A New World Order* (2001), Phillips dwells on the notions of identity, home, belonging and authorship, investigating the concept of identity from a geographic, racial, national and religious perspective in our increasingly international society. Furthermore, in an interview he gave to *The Guardian* in 2004, he pointed to how hurt he felt as a black child who grew up in the 60s and 70s: “The first time one is called a ‘nigger’ or told ‘to go back to where you come from’, one’s identity is traduced and a great violence is done to one’s sense of self” (“Necessary Journeys”). He also spoke bitterly about how the country of his adoption reduced identity to easily repeatable clichés and about how he felt that his plural self was never going to be nourished in Britain.

In his fiction, Phillips presents the development of self-chosen cultural identities as the means of adhering to a global, or at least transnational, community. This is very much the case of *Cambridge* (1991) in which he constructs characters who redefine their ethnic, racial and cultural identities in agreement with the ties of kinship they develop as adults after they get married or have children. He sets before the reader characters with very limited agency – such as women or enslaved people – who preserve their dignity by embracing specific cultural identities of their own choosing.

In writing *Cambridge*, Phillips relies on a large number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources by authors as diverse as slave narrator Olaudah Equiano, Scottish travel writer Janet Schaw, diarist Lady Maria Nugent, plantation owner Matthew Lewis as well as British actress Frances Ann Kemble. However, the novel is more than a simple patchwork of texts written on slave trade. By the skillful juxtaposition of conflicting narratives, the novel interrogates these narratives, criticizing the historical representation of slavery and the unreliability of historical sources.

Gail Low refers to Phillips’s technique as “deliberate, even defiant intertextuality” (130). She claims that “Phillips’s borrowings may represent an interrogation of the power of representation from the position of the margin,” and that they

represent a “deliberate aesthetic strategy of coming to terms with the power of representation in the official silencing and dismissal of slave history” (130). It follows that by recreating the lives of those who lived the experience of slavery, Phillips questions traditional methods of history that made it possible for these voices to be almost forgotten.

The novel is deeply engaged in intertextual dialogues. It not only alludes to other texts, it silently incorporates pieces of them, quoting without using quotation marks. Thus, Evelyn O’Callaghan’s eloquent article entitled “Historical Fiction and Fictional History. Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge*,” published soon after the novel appeared, offers a comprehensive account of the novel’s borrowing and referencing, pointing to plagiarism of exact phrases and plot items from Caribbean writings (36, 38).

The novel, which can be approached from the perspective of historical fiction, offers alternative views of the past by giving voice to the previously silenced. According to Linda Hutcheon in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, “historical fiction problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (89). She correctly argues that we know “the past (which really did exist) only through its textualized remains,” and that one way in which postmodern historical novels problematize knowledge is by complicating expected narrative postures. Hutcheon claims that the “conflating of two enunciative systems, those defined by Benveniste as historical and discursive” results in a transgression of the conventions of historiography. One becomes aware of a deliberate contamination of the historical with the didactic and situational discursive elements, which challenges the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality and transparency of representation (92).

By packaging his novel as historical fiction, Phillips challenges readers to rethink their sources about the past, questioning their knowledge of history and of the way in which history shapes one’s identity. Mention should be made of the fact that Phillips himself acknowledged the fact that “he is deeply committed to the notion of ‘history’ being the fundamental window

through which we have to peer in order to see ourselves clearly” (“A Conversation”).

In dealing with the issues of history and identity, the author addresses the problem of slavery and the complexity of the master-slave relationship. Phillips sets the plot on an unnamed small Caribbean island sometime between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the full emancipation of slaves. Its three main narratives are framed by a “Prologue” and an “Epilogue.” The two main parts are the core of the novel, providing the reader with different perspectives on the society and also on the main characters themselves. Thus, Emily Cartwright’s first-person narrative of her voyage to and stay on her father’s Caribbean plantation to inspect the property, gives ample space to the internal conflicts on the plantation which end up with the killing of the plantation manager, Mr. Brown, with whom the heroine has become emotionally entangled. Emily’s narrative written somewhat in the epistolary style is followed by Cambridge’s first-person narrative of his voyage from Africa to England where he becomes a Christian and a free man and then to the West Indies as a slave. Cambridge’s narrative often “writes back” to Emily’s, as it challenges her story since it describes her stay on the plantation from the perspective of the plantation slave. The third section, anonymous and extremely biased, written in the style of a planters’ newspaper, reiterates the major events of the novel very briefly, focusing on Cambridge’s murder of the overseer Arnold Brown, which resulted in his execution. These five parts written in various voices bring about different points of view and contrasting discourses.

The extradiegetic narrator of the Prologue sets Emily in the foreground, making the reader believe that the novel will revolve around her. This unidentified narrator introduces Emily Cartwright who is the thirty-year old daughter of an absentee planter who lives comfortably on the profits of his West Indian sugar estate. She is sent by her father to inspect the plantation and to offer a first-hand account of the running of this estate. On her return to England she is to marry an elderly widower who has three children.

The Prologue offers a perspective that prioritizes gender, as it insists on Emily's identity as a woman and on the expectations that nineteenth-century English society has of women: "A woman must run the household, do the accounts, command the domestic servants, organize the entertaining, but her relations with her children were to be more formal" (3). Emily seems to be perfectly aware of how she is to behave as a woman in a patriarchal society in which fathers "sacrifice their daughters" (3), and regard marriage as "the rude mechanics of horse-trading" (4). The only way she can cope with this oppressive society is to turn her back to it: "The truth was that she was fleeing the lonely regime which fastened her into backboards, corsets and stays to improve her posture. The same friendless regime which advertised her as an ambassadress of grace" (4).

Emily's first-person narrative of her travel offers us a different perspective on how she constructs her identity. If the unidentified narrator of the Prologue prioritizes gender, Emily looks upon race and social class as the main dimensions of her identity:

In this West Indian sphere there is amongst the white people too little attention paid to differences of class. A white skin would appear passport enough to a life of privilege without due regard to the grade of individuals within the range of that standing... The other men, perhaps, because I am a woman, have shown little courtesy in affording the attentions proper to my rank... This is barely tolerable amongst the whites, but when I find the blacks hereabouts behaving in the same manner I cannot abide it. (72)

In Emily's view of life on the Caribbean plantation, class, race and gender figure prominently. Dave Gunning argues pertinently that the "tripartite supports of her identity – whiteness, femininity and class privilege" (75) collapse in the Caribbean, resulting in her tragedy. She ends up an outcast giving birth to a still-born baby, sacrificed by a paternalist system which regards women and slaves as "children of a larger growth" (4), despite the fact that her race and class could have ensured her an affluent life. Little wonder,

then, that the reader will come to finally empathize with her and comprehend her existential confusion noticeable in her statement: “I am not sure of what I am” (179).

Emily seems to start as an abolitionist who rejects “the iniquity of slavery” (8) only to end up affirming the superiority of the white race. In Emily’s narrative, the reader can detect a transition from her initial abolitionist ideals to her identification with colonial planters out of a sense of belonging. Emily’s confusion concerning slavery is quite troubling as she claims to support abolitionism, intending to give lectures after her return to England. At the same time, she contemplates the idea of writing a pamphlet as a “reply to the lobby who ... would seek to have us believe that slavery is nothing more than an abominable evil” (86). Paradoxically enough, she starts cherishing a fondness for the island and considers the idea of prolonging her stay there. She realizes she no longer belongs to England. To Dr. McDonald’s question in the Epilogue: “And when will you be returning to our country?,” she answers quite confused: “Our country?” (172). She thinks to herself: “The doctor delivered the phrase as though this England was a dependable garment that one simply slipped into or out of according to one’s whim. Did he not understand that people grow and change?” (177).

In his study on belongingness and the poetics of alterity as they emerge in *Cambridge*, Maurizio Calbi convincingly argues that “Emily more or less unconsciously attempts to redefine herself – to re-write her self – as a vital and authoritative force of ‘feminine’ domestication in the margins of Empire.” Calbi correctly claims that she tries to supplement an absentee owner who pushes her towards the margins in the metropolitan centre. However, in the margins of the Empire, she will come to reassert – as Helen Maxson correctly points out – “the proper bodily, linguistic and religious boundaries of the self” (5), a process carried out in relation to bodies which she regards as racially inferior and completely degenerate.

Emily is biased and unreliable, “a mixture of tentative liberal instincts and blind prejudice” (Swift in “Caryl Phillips” 33). She

shows typically colonial attitudes and biases, asserting European cultural hegemony and the inferiority of the Black people. Thus, when encountering on the plantation a human otherness which seems to represent a menace to her own sense of the natural order, she takes refuge in a position of European authority. This is easily noticeable during her direct encounter with Cambridge – the character who gives the novel its title. This only direct interaction between the two protagonists is presented from both perspectives. It takes place one night when Cambridge guards her bedroom and reads his Bible. On realizing how well-educated he is, Emily feels her hierarchical world-view challenged:

I asked if this was his common form of recreation, to which he replied in highly fanciful English that indeed it was. You might imagine my surprise when he then broached the conversational lead and enquired after my family origins and my options pertaining to slavery. I properly declined to share these with him, instead counterquizzing with enquiries as to the origins of his knowledge. At this a broad grin spread over his face, as though I had fallen into some trap of his setting. Indeed, so disturbing was the negro's confident gleam, that I quickly closed the door, for I feared this negro was truly ignorant of the correct degree of deference that a lady might reasonably expect from a base slave. (92-93)

Emily closes the door on Cambridge not only literally but also figuratively, refusing to communicate with the Black Other. She feels her superiority as a white woman seriously endangered, and consequently “the liberal-minded” Emily severs any direct interaction and in-depth knowledge of the other. Once more, her narrative points to her self-delusion and self-contradictions. There are numerous such instances of the refashioning of a self that constructs itself by turning away from the other distastefully.

What triggers Emily's final demise is her sexuality. Her affair with Arnold Brown in the wake of which she gives birth to a still-born baby will lead to her demise. Gunning convincingly points out that it is the return of her repressed sexuality on the island that pulverizes the safety of the racialized and gendered positions: “Her

acceptance of sexual desire, and increasing identification with Stella (and even Christiania) causes a disintegration of the persona based on fixed and interlocking senses of race and gender” (76).

The process of disintegration of the self is also noticeable in Cambridge’s case, though he is constructed as Emily’s “foreign other.” Cambridge, the former Olumide, the former Thomas, the former David Henderson introduces himself as a black Christian. He also presents himself as a “virtual Englishman” (156), who boasts a superior “English mind” (155). He is “an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion” (147) who marries “a sturdy Englishwoman [...] unworthy of fleshy exploration” (141). From the way in which he introduces himself, it is obvious that, as Calbi argues, Cambridge opportunely interrogates the relationship between whiteness, Christian religion, proper use of English and English sexual restraint.

Cambridge’s narrative evinces several fairly sudden transformations of identity. Cambridge, born Olumide in Africa, gets converted to Christianity and this alienates him from himself by making him believe that he is an Englishman, which results in a false image of himself, as he comes to imagine himself above those he regards as heathenish Africans. He lacks realistic self-knowledge and is naïve enough to believe that he is “one of them,” that his race and condition are not relevant for the white society to which he thinks he belongs.

The eponymous hero is sent on an evangelizing mission to Africa as an example of what Western religion and civilization could offer the heathens. Despite the fact that the conditions he encounters during his missionary trip are far better and more humane than those endured during his original displacement from his birthplace through the Middle Passage, the religious abolitionists who sponsor him will finally decide what is best for Cambridge. When he leaves for Africa as a missionary, his desire to belong to the Western world is very obvious: “It was God’s wish that I should return to my old country with the character of a man in upper rank, and a superior English mind, inferior only to the Christian goodness in my heart” (155). Unfortunately, he is

completely blind to the barriers that prevent him from crossing the borders of race and class.

Cambridge speaks contemptuously of the ‘barbarity’ of Africa he has fortunately fled. In England, he is proud that his “uncivilized African demeanor” begins “to fall from [his] person” (144). When he becomes a slave again, he feels deeply hurt that he is mistaken for the African that he is not:

That I could still make a little sense of my own native language among the many spoken gave me some comfort, but the treachery of these white men, even towards one such as I who esteemed their values, tore at my heart with great passion. That I, a virtual Englishman, was to be treated as base African cargo, caused me such hurtful pain as I was barely able to endure. To lose my dear wife, fair England, and now liberty in such rapid succession! (156)

The clash between Cambridge’s self-image as an Englishman, i.e. his self-chosen identity, and the way in which he is perceived by the surrounding world is the central problem during his stay on the plantation. Phillips emphasizes Cambridge’s ambiguity towards Englishness and Africanness, challenging readers’ sympathy for him by presenting him in a different light, not as an innocent victim but as a person who cherishes feelings of superiority over the others. He feels deeply hurt by the fact that the Englishness he has done his best to achieve is so easily dismissed by his fellow Englishmen. Cambridge thus emerges as a character who is flawed, who is easy prey to harsh prejudices. In this way, Phillips avoids stereotypes and oversimplifications of the Africans.

Paradoxically, Cambridge does not tell his “wife” Christiania anything about his previous marriage. He does not try to convert her to Christianity and strangely enough, Christiania begins to “mock at his Christian beliefs,” a mockery which causes his heart to “swell with both sorrow and anger, for, as is well-known, a Christian man possesses his wife, and the dutiful wife must obey her Christian husband” (163). The Eurocentric perspective upon marriage that Cambridge has embraced is easily noticeable.

Cambridge's contradictory identity is clearly seen at the end of the novel when, in a fit of rage, he strikes the fatal blow and kills the overseer. Thus, Phillips intimates how complicated an identity can be when shaped by the surrounding society:

I then fell to my knees and prayed to my God to forgive me for my wretched condition. I, Olumide, who had become black Tom, then David Henderson, and now Cambridge, had broken one of God's commandments. On this Christian day, and for the first time since my second unchristian passage, I was truly afraid, truly frightened of my actions and the fearful consequences of my heathen behavior. (167)

Cambridge loses control of himself and disintegrates after being unable to cope with the roles and identities placed on him by the outside world. Cambridge's attempt to be David Henderson has affected his judgement, making him unable to see himself in the way in which the world around him regards him. The conflict between Cambridge's identities as David Henderson and Olumide leads to the fragmentation of his identity and the fact that he belongs nowhere leads to his tragic downfall. Ironically enough, the self that Cambridge appropriates at the end of his narrative is precisely the identity of which he has tried to get rid all along.

Neither Cambridge nor Emily is able to negotiate and reconcile the identities they have adopted in their new cultural environments. Their attempts to accommodate different cultures and identities fail tragically. Ironically, both Emily and Cambridge die at the end of the novel, and both of them die alone. They are profoundly isolated, their loneliness being the result of circumstances beyond their control. Emily's death may be taken to symbolize her failure to adapt to this new world and to belong, whereas Cambridge's hanging may suggest that a single man cannot fight against ignorance. What Phillips may want to point out is that "neither Emily nor Cambridge can escape the trap of the repressive colonial system" (Chavanelle 8).

To conclude with, Phillips resists the idea of fixed social and political identities, pointing to the complexity of the self. He sheds

light on how, in the attempt to accommodate different cultures and identities, one may fail tragically in the absence of a strong feeling of belongingness. Phillips's characters cross hegemonic borders, but, displaced as they are, they fail to redefine their identity in ways that would ensure their survival. The cross-cultural encounters the writer depicts stimulate readers to ponder on their own attitudes with regard to prejudice and harrowing fears of difference.

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Holes in the Fabric of Life

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Abstract

In this article I attempt to produce an inductive reading of Alice Munro's story "Deep-Holes" published in 2008. Departing from a more conventional type of criticism primarily based on impression, I mostly approach the ideology of the narrative by trying to write into it the effects that this ideology produced on my own mindset. The study sample in the story is a middle-class family, not unlike its stereotype in the Western world, whose eminent son has a life-changing revelation as a result of a life-threatening accident from which he emerges slightly incapacitated. I follow the effects of his conversion on other family members as well as on myself as a reader, revealing in the process a possible definition of humanity as well as a fresh approach to writing short stories.

Keywords: human being, self-irony, respectability, celibacy, Jonah, rehabilitation, help.

If I want to get a glimpse, just a suggestion, of what it means to be a human being, I read Alice Munro's story "Deep-Holes." Understanding comes from the skillful tackling of the issue in two parts, reflecting two possible visions of our adequacy in the world. The first part appears to be the easy answer, or rather, the easy way out, embraced by most middle-class people of westernised societies. The second part is a build-up of rather complicated ideologies, trying too hard to break free from essentially pluri-religious patterns and ending up falling prey to the very constraints

it rejects. In telling her story, Munro allows herself an irony that seems to come not so much from the back of her mind but from the back of her entire being, an intricate cluster of seriousness and self-irony, directed to the entire human race rather than to herself as an individual. It is probably the reason why she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. In exploring the human condition as she experienced it, Munro finds some building blocks for its understanding, initially by herself and ultimately by us, effecting a small revolution in short-story telling in the process.

The easy way out of the human dilemma is the road to respectability that the stereotypical middle class seeks to follow. A conventional marriage, a comfortable home, three children and a reasonable living standard is what the entry-level academic Alex hopes for and ultimately achieves. Mention must be made that the setting of our story, published in 2008, is late twentieth-century Canada. So I read about dutiful wife Sally who prepares a picnic and packs food and drink to cater for the tastes of every family member. She struggles with the packing and secretly wishes she did not have to bring devilled eggs, crab salad, or lemon tarts, articles that are notoriously difficult to handle out in the open. From a succinct, almost elliptical description, I learn about the drinks she fixes up, “Kool-Aid for the boys, a half bottle of Mum’s for herself and Alex.” And since Sally has a newborn baby, she does not expect to have more than one sip of champagne. Ironically, Alex, who embraces the traditional view that relegates his wife to the role of homemaker, is displeased with Sally’s choice of glasses for the French beverage – she packed plastic champagne glasses – and steps in himself, choosing and wrapping “the real ones – a wedding present – out of the china cabinet.” The tone of the narrative appears to suggest Sally’s mild gratitude for not making her go the extra length of switching and re-wrapping the glasses. I notice the narrative leap forward that reflects Alex’s position in the family: “‘Dad is really a sort of *bourgeois gentilhomme*,’ Kent would say to Sally a few years later.” Actually, Sally misreads her son’s use of the French term as sarcasm, a reaction quite typical for a person steeped in Englishness who spends much of her time in the home.

Kent is nevertheless trying to express admiration in his newly acquired competence with worldly expressions.

The picnic is a celebratory one, organized by wife Sally to honor Alex's first article publication in an international journal of geology. And, as I have already seen, she tries to make sure it will be a memorable event. Even the destination is selected to match the research topic of the published article – some unusual dolostone formations at a place called Osler Bluff, actually a deep cliff. From this point on, the entire narrative build-up inexorably leads to tragedy, lacking however the typical accumulation of doom of the classics. Munro skillfully blends suggestions of danger with factual surprise, inducing just a hint of a feeling that things are going to take a turn for the worst. This is achieved by diverting the priority to the accurate rendering of the picnic itself.

To my understanding, the scene of the picnic appears to evolve from conventionalism to misfortune. Any reader recognizes the conventional image of a family outing, which is described in quite some detail, conveying a feeling of confidence on the part of the male branch of the family (Alex and the boys) that nothing bad can happen. Sally, on the other hand, does not feel so confident. At the beginning of the trip, after they leave the car, she sees no cause for alarm because “[t]he entrance to the woods looked quite ordinary and unthreatening.” But after a climb that she finds quite challenging, carrying baby Savanna and her diaper bag, “[s]he was nearly crying with exhaustion and alarm and some familiar sort of seeping rage.” Sally is the last to arrive at the picnic site, a lookout like a clearing, and, from its fleeting description, I imagine a vantage point overlooking a vast stretch of land gloriously glistening with sunlight. Alex has no reaction to the view—busy, I presume, to focus on the unusual geological features—and neither has Sally, tired and preoccupied with Savanna and the boys. The landscape is mentioned in passing when she finds her family “lined up on an outcrop above the treetops—above several levels of treetops, as it turned out—with the summer fields spread far below in a shimmer of green and yellow.” In a different narrative context this view would have generated an effusion of descriptive prowess,

painting a pretty picture of rural beauty. I see why it is not the case here, with Sally beside herself, Alex pragmatically reigning over the realm of his research, and the boys, well, absorbed as boys will be with diverting themselves.

It falls to Savanna to signal the start of the picnic because, as soon as Sally sets her on the blanket, she starts to cry. Sally's reaction is brief, just one explanatory word—"Hungry"—and, the way I read it, she exhibits the warm calm and confidence that women nursing babies have when they know how competent they are. She is raising her third child, after all. Alex, on the other hand, seems to be the kind of father who is completely detached from his parenthood, when he somewhat naïvely observes, "I thought she got her lunch in the car." The very notion that babies feed in connection with the meals of grown-ups is quite silly and more typical of the romantic paternalism of the nineteenth century than of modern parenting. Moreover, Alex is rather displeased with the idea of breast-feeding and, when Sally nurses Savanna, he feels that it ruins the mood of their little celebration. Even at home in the kitchen—Sally's study, in a manner of speaking—he finds the image of his wife nursing the baby and doing things with one hand while he and the boys are present quite distasteful. In fact, for Alex, the whole concept of breast-feeding lacks in appeal both morally and aesthetically. He would like it if Sally could bring herself to start the baby on the bottle, but she keeps putting it off. Alex is even more embarrassed by Sally's casual breast-feeding Savanna in front of the boys. He thinks to notice their improper reactions when they witness the scene, basically "Kent sneaking peeks and Peter referring to Mommy's milk jugs." For some reason, Alex developed an adversity towards Kent, believing that he "was a troublemaker and the possessor of a dirty mind." Ultimately, Alex's distaste is felt by Sally herself who realizes "he dislikes the whole conjunction of sex and nourishment, his wife's breasts turned into udders."

In fact, Alex had a rather different projection about what this picnic would be. It was supposed to be all about him and his scholarly achievement, and here they are, "still letting Savanna and

the milk jugs dominate the picnic.” But as soon as the champagne is poured he lightens up. As planned, Sally only has a sip and exchanges with her husband the kind of secret glance relaying what all parents feel at some point, that they would like to be alone enjoying the champagne and taking it from there. His disappointment slightly fading, Alex “starts in on the picnic” a second time, aware that he was outrun by his daughter’s cry of hunger. Sally indicates which sandwiches each of them should eat based on their preferred kind of mustard. Reading about this I find it relevant that Sally and Peter enjoy the same mustard, Alex a different kind, while Kent does not like mustard at all. This mustard polarization of the family, if one can call it that, reflects the true partiality of its members. Sally and Peter are close and cut from the same cloth, Alex is the individualist centered on pursuing geological research, whereas Kent is the odd man out in the family equation, as I shall find out later on.

Then mischievous Kent manages to gain secret access to his mother’s glass and finishes her champagne. For some obscure reason Peter, the only one who notices, does not expose him and preoccupied Alex starts lecturing the boys on the intricacies of dolostone, while they are trying to enjoy the sandwiches but not the eggs or the crab salad. And when Kent feels they have had enough, of the lecture, I imagine, rather than of the sandwiches, the boys go off to answer – or pretend to answer – the call of nature.

The build-up to tragedy is triggered by the faded sign board that ominously dominates the path to the bluff. It urges to “CAUTION” and discloses that there are “DEEP-HOLES” ahead. Sally is even intrigued by the hyphen but readily dismisses the thought as irrelevant, not knowing that the misspelled syntagm will dominate their destiny. She is unpleasantly surprised by the scenery and we find out that “She did not expect the danger that had to be skirted almost immediately in front of them.” The geological formations display “[d]eep chambers . . . some the size of a coffin” – a morbid allusion— and the boys, Kent, nine, and Peter, six years old, look into the crevasses and make “exaggerated but discreet noises of horror.” They are playful, as children their age usually

are, and their father has to ask them to settle down, thinking that “Kent was a troublemaker.” And indeed, Kent is the one who falls into one of the crevasses. After the boys finished their lunch and went off, Sally, caught in a presentiment, can hardly restrain herself to forewarn them. And after Peter’s cry is heard, my access to the events is only possible through Sally’s unveiled premonition: “Sally will always believe that she knew at once – even before she heard Peter’s voice, she knew what had happened.” She senses that, of her two children, Kent is the one who is accident prone since he is the imprudent one. The way Sally imagines the events, Kent, and not Peter, stood too close to the edge of the hole, started to show off in front of his smaller brother and fell in. The narrative viewpoint is Sally’s. While Alex rushes to the bottom of the pit, Sally is frantic but surprisingly organized. She puts Peter in charge of baby Savanna, instructing him to carry her back to the blanket and watch her, and she desperately strains her mind to discover how she can help Alex. She thinks that a rope would come in handy, but realizes there would not be one in the car. With her crouching above the fissure, with Alex pushing and her pulling, they manage to bring Kent to the surface. At the hospital, they find out that he has both legs broken and has to spend several months in bed. To my surprise, Sally is now serene. She probably thought she would lose Kent, because, even when she is reproved by the examining doctor for not watching her boy properly, she does not mind. All she can feel now is a deep satisfaction that her son will live. “Her gratitude – to God, whom she did not believe in, and to Alex, whom she did – was so immense that she resented nothing.”

This is the big jolt that the cozy existence of this family experiences. While he is immobilized, Kent is looked after by his mother, who acts as a go-between and supplies him with work from school, taking it back shortly after he easily completes it. And when he is upgraded to tackle a more demanding project on remote explorations, Kent displays his abrupt maturity by targeting the unconventional. He says “I want to pick somewhere nobody else would pick.” Now Sally takes the opportunity of telling him about her escapist dreams involving an attraction “too small or obscure

islands that nobody talked about and that were seldom, if ever, visited. Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Chatham Island and Christmas Island and Desolation Island and the Faeroes.” Smart as he is, Kent is drawn into his mother’s addiction and unwittingly records in the back of his mind that her present life is not entirely fulfilling, but merely that of a wife living for and through her husband, raising the two boys and baby Savanna, without a chance of a meaningful involvement that would satisfy her spirituality. They find great enjoyment in discovering the smallest details about these isolated places, composing veritable fantasies centered on them. Very relevant, to my mind, is Sally’s notion to keep these daydreams from Alex, whom she senses incapable of imparting such frivolous pursuits. She explains to Kent, “[h]e would think we were off our heads.” Nevertheless, these months of convalescence and dreaming cement an emotional link between mother and son and increase Kent’s singularity in the family. This is not helped by Alex, who resents Kent’s attempts to get closer to him by constantly stressing his father’s key part in his rescue as soon as he recovers. Moreover, Alex complains to his wife about this. Wisely, she tries to decode Kent’s motivation when she tells Alex “[h]e’s saying you must have loved him, because you rescued him.” But Alex bluntly reveals his true feelings saying “Christ, I’d have rescued anybody.” All that Sally can reply in disappointment is: “Don’t say that in front of him. Please.” The only glimmer of relaxation of this adversity that Alex feels towards his son is occasioned by Kent’s decision to embrace science in high school.

The way I read it, the way Munro releases the story’s narrative rhythm is very particular. It must be her own strategy to feed us the relevant details, those that eventually make up the colors and shades of the whole picture. The narrative evolves in episodes that are separated by communication jumps. I notice, for instance, the somewhat detailed rendition of the scene of the picnic, followed by a laconic summary of the aftermath of the accident, in which few details, if any, are offered about the agony of driving Kent to the hospital and the complex rush of emotions the family must have experienced on the occasion. And then follows like a

narrative hiatus, when in just a few sentences, we see Kent recovered, going to high school and then enrolled into college. The key plot element, that after six months in college Kent disappears, is sprung on us abruptly, as it must have been on Sally and Alex, who did not see it coming at all.

Despite the succinct style, I am allowed to get hold of the details of the events: Kent evolves from being a social misfit, a college student excelling in hard sciences but lacking any friends, to being a lowly worker in a tyre company hoping for a career break, but with friends. This is at least what his parents witness when they pay him a visit, separately, after they receive his first letter. What they find out is that he will not go back to school and that he is drinking beer now, a fact reflecting on his figure. In discussing the issue privately, Sally and Alex have completely opposite reactions. As most mothers would do, Sally is quite tolerant of the situation and believes to have understood her son's attitude. "He wants to get a taste of independence," she says. Alex, on the other hand, is unsympathetic towards Kent's position and brutally replies: "He can get a bellyful of it, as far as I'm concerned," proving once more how little grasp he has of the world outside his field of expertise. And when Kent disappears again, Sally especially hopes that he will be in touch again and waits for another letter.

Exposed to the same technique of the narrative jolt, I am quite surprised when I find out that "[h]e did write, three years later" from somewhere in California. Kent wittily compares his own waywardness to that of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, but, when Sally reads the letter aloud, Alex fails to understand the literary allusion and rather stupidly asks "Who the hell is Blanche?" Sally does not want to embarrass him and elegantly replies "Just a joke... It doesn't matter."

Kent's letter is completely self-centered and, since he does not expect a reply, he doesn't inquire about his parents. Trying to define his present outlook, he writes: "It seems so ridiculous to me ... that a person should be expected to lock themselves into a suit of

clothes. I mean, like the suit of clothes of an engineer or doctor or geologist, and then the skin grows over it, over the clothes, I mean, and that person can't ever get them off." In other words, Kent is trying to break free from the conventional existence that his background and his parents prepared him for and to discover what he should be doing with his life. He declares that what he has "learned to give up is intellectual pridefulness." To which Alex, again, reacts badly. Incapable of grasping the somewhat abstract ideas in his son's letter, he misconstrues them as utter gibberish and concludes: "His brain's rotted with drugs." Not getting confirmation from Sally, he later puts forward another hypothesis: "Sex... It's what makes you do what he's talking about. ..."

And Kent's letter continues with a reference to "his 'near-death experience,' which had given him perhaps an extra awareness." He does not fail to reiterate his indebtedness to his father who saved him, which is a little puzzling as to whether he really admires his father or despises him. The way I see it, Kent initially admired his father and his admiration was boosted by the gratitude he felt for him after the rescue but, at the same time, he has come to despise everything he represents, his social class, his way of understanding reality and his scholarly superiority. The letter culminates with a striking notion that Kent has acquired: "Perhaps in those moments I was reborn," he writes. The statement is yet another blow, this time more for Alex, who groans in response and initiates a frugal and cryptic exchange with Sally about it. All I can infer is that Alex is in fact a stern atheist and is utterly disgusted by the idea that his son might have had a born-again conversion. This is not the case, of course, but Alex always simplifies things.

In an extreme example of narrative economy, Munro summarizes the next events as follows: "Peter went into medicine, Savanna into law. To her own surprise, Sally became interested in geology." So, basically, they have to admit that Kent is no longer part of their lives. And with Kent gone, Sally feels compelled to finally share with Alex her fixation with remote islands. But she still preserves part of the secret for herself. I see her hoping that the

wonderful time she spent with Kent while he was convalescing, when they teamed up to discover all those fascinating details about remote islands, had an effect on her son and that he is now fulfilling her dream to live on one of them. But Alex somehow shatters this dream by introducing her to the Internet search and this seems too remote from the book and paper-clip project that she shared with Kent. So she gives it up. And, when Alex asks her to assist him in his research, she agrees and discovers that geology is not exactly out of her reach.

However, hardly do I read that she felt closer and friendlier to her husband as ever before, that the next narrative shock is just spurted out. Alex “went into the hospital for an operation, taking his charts and photographs with him, and on the day he was supposed to come home he died.” And again the big facts of life go on without any reference to the emotional backdrop that no doubt accompanies such an event as the death of a husband and father. No mention of feelings of pain, regret, or abandonment is made, we do not partake in the reaction of Savanna, because Peter stopped being a character in the story the moment he grew up and “went into medicine,” while Kent is, well, lost. The next words that I come across after learning of Alex’s death are: “This was in the summer, and that fall there was a dramatic fire in Toronto.”

In place of Sally’s feelings after her husband’s death, I am absorbed into the atmosphere of the aftermath of this loss and read about her watching the news of the fire on television and expressing thoughts that were not her own. For instance, why aren’t the sleazy landlords of the unsafe burning buildings mentioned in the news, who are no doubt responsible for the blaze, just the suffering tenants? “She sometimes felt Alex talking in her head these days, and that was surely what was happening now.” So, while Sally faces the memory of her husband’s thoughts, Savanna rings her up convinced that she saw Kent in the images attached to the newscast. And, the astute lawyer that she is, Savanna soon manages to find and get in touch with her lost brother who is actually living in Toronto, just as the rest of them.

All of a sudden, I was made to rush towards cardinal plot elements like descending on a roller coaster. Savanna tells her mother that Kent really featured in the television footage rescuing victims of the fire and that all he does is to live in the present, “in the *real* present,” as he puts it. Occasionally he wears a robe of some sort, but he is not a monk or a Hare Krishna. He is still trying to discern whether his father had any regard for him, because seeing his obituary in the paper he hopes against hope that it was Alex’s idea to list Kent among his close relatives. He somehow achieves closure in his rapport with his father, realizing that Alex was rather indifferent towards him despite the rescue, when his sister confirms that it was the family’s decision to mention him in the obituary. He inquires about his mother and agrees to meet her, but only on his own terms, just as he did with his sister.

From now on it is all about Sally. All her clearly repressed feelings towards Kent are revealed in small bits throughout the episode of the reunion. When she hears about her son’s involvement in the fire rescue, her maternal instinct kicks in once more when all she can think of in the rush of emotion is “Is he hurt?” And then, when she learns from Savanna that Kent asked about her “Sally felt a kind of inflated balloon in her chest.” Finally and quite surprisingly, she receives a note from Kent with the required details of their meeting, now, when people of her kind communicate exclusively by e-mail and telephone, another symbol of his removal from conventional society. Sally feels uneasy, but also glad that he did not ring her up since “[s]he did not yet trust herself to hear his voice.”

The directions in the note plunge Sally into a world so unfamiliar to people of her background and upbringing that she feels utterly disoriented. She realizes she is not supposed to say things like “[y]ou’d think you were in the Congo or India or Vietnam,” but she can’t help thinking them. It is a neighborhood of poverty and dilapidation with inhabitants she can’t even look at and who make her quite apprehensive. Shockingly, one of them is Kent, approaching in a scruffy apparel and with teeth missing and steering her, alarmingly, towards a mysterious destination. And he

keeps preserving the mystery, only offering Sally half answers, worried that she might not understand, because he knows she couldn't understand. Even more, when Sally has a flash thought about AIDS, Kent, as if reading her mind, reassures her saying "I'm quite well at present. I'm not H.I.V.-positive or anything like that. I contracted malaria years ago but it's under control."

When they come to a run-down building that smells of "ancient cooking, burned coffee, toilets, sickness, decay," Kent informs Sally that he is celibate, and immediately retracts his statement, showing that he has not lost his wit: "Though 'celibate' might be the wrong word. That sounds as if it had something to do with will power. I guess I should have said 'neuter.' I don't think of it as an achievement. It isn't." They cross a kitchen where a heavy feeble-minded woman is in charge of the week's cooking and descend to the basement where Kent has what he calls his "sanctum." And here possibly the most important conversation of their lives takes place.

Sally would like to know the reasons for Kent's withdrawal from her life and sees herself quite capable to understand him as a person. Kent's discourse is rather intricate and can be followed, the way I see it, along two lines of reasoning, a theological one and a moral one. On the one hand, it contains a number of Christian symbolic allusions, which Kent uses but is immediately eager to reject ideologically. The already mentioned concept of celibacy is one of these allusions, mostly characteristic of Catholic priests, the very thought of which places Kent in a defensive position. The use of "Jeez" in casual conversation, in fact an American euphemism for "Jesus," prompts Sally to suspect that he might belong to some religious order. But this is not true either. To his mother's utter surprise, when she addresses him as Kent, he replies "Around here I'm Jonah," and then declares that he was also toying with the idea of calling himself Lazarus. Now both Jonah and Lazarus are Biblical characters epitomizing resurrections: Lazarus is raised from the dead by Jesus himself, while Jonah lives for three days and nights inside a big fish as a punishment for not following God's command and is spat out on the shore as soon as he repents. Both

prefigure the resurrection of Jesus. Additionally, Jonah is the prophet that saved the city of Nineveh from destruction by announcing God's wrath and convincing the inhabitants to repent for their sins. The similarity with Kent's self-appointed role in the lives of lost individuals he helps is a fact. Kent also alludes to a phrase in the New Testament, when he says "Man's days are like grass, eh? Cut down and put into the oven. . . ." The Biblical passage is originally directed against our obsession with dress and, in this sense, it is appropriate in the context of our story, but Kent immediately regrets uttering it, as he always does with anything religious or intellectual for that matter. So when Sally believes to have penetrated Kent's complicated spirituality and says, with an air of discovery "I was thinking of Jesus. 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?'" Kent is so outraged that "[t]he look that leaped to his face was almost savage."

On the other hand, Kent's entire ideology points to the Christian morality. It seems to me that what he rejects he preaches. Sally assumes that the house they are in is some sort of rehabilitation center, but Kent denies it. In true Christian vein he announces, "[w]e take in anybody that comes." The way they acquire the funds to help those in need is made clear to Sally: "we take turns soliciting the public." She cannot even conceive that her son might be begging in the streets, so, when he confirms, she is secretly hurt. Kent explains how it is possible to surmount the social barriers and beg, when one has a greater purpose in mind. "That's something I had to overcome," he says. "Just about all of us have something to overcome. It can be shame. Or it can be the concept of 'mine.'" He tells his mother why he asked to meet her. After he saw in the paper that his father died, he thought about the money he left and it seemed to him that, if he could win Sally over to his cause, he could fund his charitable actions. But when Sally tells him that Alex did not provide for him in his will, Kent is righteously relieved: "You think I'm asking for myself? You think I'm that much of an idiot to want the money for myself? But I did make a mistake thinking about how I could use it. Thinking, Family money, sure, I can use that. That's the temptation. Now I'm glad,

I'm glad I can't have it." Elements of Christian morality are also present when Kent summarizes his outlook on life. Asked by his mother if he is happy, he replies: "Sure. I've let go of that stupid self-stuff. I think, How can I help? And that's all the thinking that I allow myself" (Munro).

By the looks of things, being a smart boy, Kent evolves from the youthful desire to please his indifferent father to the realization of the inutility of the whole concept behind the polite and conventional Western society. He searches for the truth aided by the various ideologies well-known to him and his pragmatism causes him to create a rift between the Christian morality and the theology that engendered it. Alternatively, Sally, who searches for a more down-to-earth relationship with her son Kent is unable to cross the barricade, reinforced from both sides, between her world and Kent's. Suffice it to say that Sally has very little hope to see her son again after departing with a heavy heart. She goes back to her lonely dinner and her cat, hoping that, with age, contentment will return to her and cover the deep holes in her existence.

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“Brevity is the soul of wit”:
Ian McEwan’s Short Prose

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Abstract

Though often relegated to ancillary scholarly inquiry and overshadowed by the popularity of the novel typically at the centre of academic consideration and appreciation, short prose has captured the attention of contemporary critics who have rehabilitated it as a living form of literature and a valid subject for academic debate. Making his literary debut with two collections of short stories largely regarded as ‘shock lit,’ Ian McEwan has staged repeated comebacks to short prose throughout his career, a form that he has remodelled and refined in different manners and contexts. Centring on the writer’s early short stories as well as his more ‘mature’ novellas and his integration of the short story form into his lengthier works, my article discusses McEwan’s career-long interest in the short form and the ways in which he handles the genre, evolving from his initial shocking tales devoid of all morality to more ethically infused and self-reflexive renditions of short fiction.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, short story, novella, literature of shock, narrative ethics, metafiction

The short story has often been detrimentally defined in opposition to its ‘big sister,’ the novel. Viewed in this light, its brevity and constraints of complexity and depth put a strain on it, drawing the undervaluation of many literary critics and being often dismissed as a marginal form because of its lacking the extent, compass,

universal character, and representativeness of the novel. Nonetheless, its singularity and distinctiveness could not go unnoticed for too long. In *Re-reading the Short Story*, Clare Hanson explains the intent of contemporary critics to reinstate the legitimacy of the short story as a subject for critical debate and pins down some of the general qualities of the short story:

The short story is a vehicle for different *kinds* of knowledge, knowledge which may be in some way at odds with the ‘story’ of dominant culture. The formal properties of the short story—disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity – connect with its ideological marginality and with the fact that the form may be used to express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature. We might put it one way by saying that the short story gives us the other side of ‘the official story’ or narrative, or we might suggest that the short story suggests that which cannot normally be said, hence its close connection, in form and content, with fantasy, which is another mode of expression for repressed desire or knowledge. (Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story* 6)

Moreover, the critic locates the distinctive character of the short story in the kind of experience it offers the reader, which is quite different from that provided by the novel. In this regard, the short story is “a more ‘literary’ form than the novel,” since the elliptical nature of language in a short piece of fiction forces words, more than in other literary forms, to go beyond their mimetic, explanatory, or representational function, managing, thus, to create more mysterious and unfathomable images in the readers’ minds (24-5). What were conventionally regarded as the weaknesses and limitations of the short story become precisely its potential and even its assets.

Ian McEwan began his career writing short stories published in two collections, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), which, together with his early novels, earned him the reputation of one of the *enfants terribles* of English fiction and, as a result of his choice of disturbing, even shocking, and largely inaccessible subject matter, the nickname “Ian McAbre.” Ever since

he has written several lengthy novels, such as *Atonement* and *Saturday*, that won him international acclaim and numerous awards; nevertheless, his fascination with the uniqueness of and challenges imposed by short prose has often made him return to the novella form and prompted him to write the Booker-prize winning *Amsterdam* (under 200 pages long) and the even more concise *On Chesil Beach*, also nominated for the Booker.

Asked about his view on the short form, the novelist replied that he considered it especially adequate for apprentice writers—“a marvellous way for writers to try on voices,” arguing that “[i]t allows failure. It allows you to try out different ways of expressing yourself. It allows you to shrug off influences if you’re too much caught up in the voice of a writer you admire. It’s a way of trying on different selves” (“Ian McEwan on the Short Story”). Young McEwan himself took the short form very seriously and, though influenced by the tradition of Thomas Mann (“Death in Venice”), Henry James (“The Turn of the Screw”), Franz Kafka (“Metamorphosis”), Joseph Conrad (“Heart of Darkness”), Albert Camus (“L’Etranger”), and many others (Voltaire, Tolstoy, Joyce, Solzhenitsyn, Steinbeck, Pynchon, Melville, Lawrence, Munro), he used it to shape a voice of his own.

Like Hanson, the writer discusses short stories in terms of the language imposed by their brevity and unity, and its effect on the reader, explaining that

the demands of economy push writers to polish their sentences to precision and clarity, to bring off their effects with unusual intensity, to remain focused on the point of their creation and drive it forward with functional single-mindedness...They don’t ramble or preach, they spare us their quintuple subplots and swollen midsections.

Conversely, novelists become mere “slaves to the giant, instead of masters of the form.” He thus views short prose not as the Cinderella of literature, but rather as “the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated, ill-shaven giant” – the novel (“Some Notes on the Novella”).

While the significance of his early short stories should not be overemphasised, an investigation of the extent to which they not only constitute compelling works in their own right, but also anticipate the accomplishments of his later fiction proves to be worthwhile. McEwan admits that he chose to shape an “intense and enclosed fictional universeworld” in his collections of short stories, which were “a dream-like recapitulation” of his own life up to then and staged “de-socialised, distorted versions” of his existence (qtd. in Roberts 67-68). The stories included in these collections articulated his feeling of alienation, which stemmed from his dislocated background. His parents were both working class, and his father was commissioned as an army officer and posted with his family to Singapore, North Africa, and Germany. He spent his school years at a state-run boarding school for working class children, an experience which liberated him from “the niggling irritations of English class” (156) and which was deepened by the years spent at the University of Sussex, a new university that also kept him away from the typical education of English writers. The sense of social and geographical rootlessness in his life paralleled a sense of not being in line with the English writing of the time, “which took the form of social documentary, and which was principally interested in the nuances of English class” (67) of which he seemed to be oblivious. As a result, he looked for a voice of his own, one that could draw on his socially estranged personal experience, which found its expression in a fiction that deliberately avoided specific times and places. The vehicle of short prose smoothed the path for his urge to convey his sense of alienation from the mainstream culture and his engendering need to devise an atemporal and spaceless fiction.

The writer conceived these early stories mostly as pastiches of a particular style or a particular writer (e.g. Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, John Fowles), as taking-off points and shortcuts for the material from his own life that “didn’t suggest itself immediately” (14). The stories usually presented disrupted families, rites of passage, adolescent erotic fantasies, and sexual abuse, and featured first-person narrators that allowed for a great degree of

intimacy, making the stories appear as confessions. Compared to his later fiction, his early short stories may be seen as experiments, as thematically restricted works of apprenticeship. Nevertheless, as works that dissected taboo subjects, they were innovative, as they allowed the novelist to test different things and discover himself as a writer, giving him the confidence to move on to longer fiction and anticipating an ampler exploration of similar preoccupations in his more mature and socially conscious works.

In his extensive study of McEwan's work, David Malcolm charts the reception of his first two collections of short stories, from Jason Cowley's words lauding the stories' imaginative liveliness as well as their ambition and experimentalism (20) to Caroline Blackwood's more mixed response praising their originality but criticising their exaggerated contrivance (21). Malcolm examines these early short-stories in terms of narrative levels, language, genre, and subject matter, tracing similarities and, to a lesser extent, differences between them. Thus, most of the short stories included in *First Love, Last Rites* – “Homemade,” “Solid Geometry,” “Last Day of Summer,” “Butterflies,” “Conversation with a Cupboard Man” – and some of those belonging to *In between the Sheets* – “Reflections of a Kept Ape,” “Dead As they Come,” “To and Fro,” “Psychopolis” – stage first-person narrators, a perspective that, while facilitating the protagonists' narration of crucial events occurring in their lives, as the critic points out (25), also emphasises the dark, obsessive, and claustrophobic mood that pervades McEwan's early fiction.

Malcolm also discusses the homogeneity of McEwan's language, which is “rich, [with] very sophisticated vocabulary and syntax” in many of the short stories, e.g. “Homemade,” “Reflections of a Kept Ape,” “Dead As they Come,” and “Psychopolis,” though the narrators of other stories favour “a neutral language, neither very formal nor informal” (26) in terms of vocabulary (“Cocker at the Theatre,” “First Love, Last Rites,” “Pornography,” “Two Fragments: March 199-,” and “In between the Sheets”) and syntax (“Last Day of Summer,” “Cocker at the Theatre,” “Butterflies,” “Conversation with a Cupboard Man,” and

“Pornography”). “To and Fro,” however, strikes a different chord both linguistically, being based, as Malcolm points out, on incantatory repetitions that remind us of a poem in prose (28), and from a narrative viewpoint, since it hardly spins any story at all, on the one hand, and has a more complex temporal and spatial narrative organisation than the rest of the stories, which follow a linear sequence, on the other hand (28-29).

Malcolm, Dominic Head, and Hanson all consider these stories from the perspective of genre, and identify a substantial amount of traditionality infused into them. Malcolm refers to them as “very traditional, rather conservative stories” (31) insofar as their subject matter, the setting, the characters’ psychological make-up and their relationships as well as the specific images they create, and even the metafictional elements they incorporate are concerned. Head takes the traditional character a step further and discusses it in terms of the stories’ effectiveness in achieving unity, in revolving around a central, compelling, albeit shocking, idea or image, or in creating, as Edgar Allan Poe famously put it, a ‘single effect’ (31-32). Hanson locates the success of McEwan’s handling of the short form mainly in his choice of subject matter, i.e. the private lives of alienated, marginalised characters and the odd, intimate relationships among them:

It could be argued that McEwan’s adoption of the short fiction and novella forms is bound up with this focus on our most private and usually well-guarded feelings. While short fiction does not deal exclusively with private emotion inevitably the sense of privacy and exclusion depends on an implied social context—it can shed the weight of social commentary which seems inherent in the novel form. (165)

This preference for disturbing, taboo subjects ranging from rape and child abuse to sado-masochistic torture constitutes fertile ground for, as Malcolm remarks, the defamiliarisation of the narrative, as McEwan “often aims to make the familiar strange” (41).

Starting from Viktor Shklovsky's famous formalist technique of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*), American critic David Miall discusses it in relation to emotion and indicates that feelings caused by defamiliarisation "embody alternative ways of construing the self and its position and effect in the world." New demands are made on the reader's sense of identity, and the reading process encourages alternative ways of understanding the self and its relations to the surrounding world. Miall also identifies another crucial attribute of feeling:

[I]t offers a distinctive set of processes that shape response to the formal aspects of literature. It does this through its self-referential aspects, and by its power to provide alternative perspectives that cut across existing cognitive domains. Feeling, in other words, combines both universal and culturally-specific features, and we need to take both into account in attempting to understand the response to literature.

Defamiliarisation thus requires a willingness to allow for the transformation of existing configurations of feelings and of the concept of the self, and Ian McEwan's short stories, such as "Homemade," "Butterflies," "Last Day of Summer," "Conversation with a Cupboard Man," "Disguises," and "Dead As They Come," are constantly involved in this process of disorientation, of rendering in a fresh light what has been taken for granted. As Kiernan Ryan indicates, the force of the stories lies in their ability to guide the reader towards self-reflective meditation: "Far from disguising the tainted pleasure they take in their more lurid themes, his best tales confess the ambiguity of their attitude and oblige us to reflect on the mixed motives governing our own response as readers" (13).

The question remains, however, whether this necessity for transformation relates to an ethical attitude towards other human beings, in other words, whether we apply a reading experience to the challenges with which we are confronted in our day-to-day social encounters. Indeed, with their extreme and morbid situations and unhinged narrators, written with too plain a desire to shock,

McEwan's early short stories seem completely devoid of morality and resistant to inspiring any feelings of compassion and humanity in their readers. This position is defended by Ryan, when he points out with reference to *First Love, Last Rites*: "What makes such narratives hard to swallow is not so much the author's soft spot for the gruesome as his seeming content to withhold moral appraisal, to let the monstrous smuggle itself out of his unconscious duty-free" (qtd. in Malcolm 43). Nonetheless, Malcolm identifies, in some of the stories included in the two collections, certain traces of moral stances that elicit matching "moral responses from the reader," such as the concluding "yes" alluding to a possible positive continuation in "First Love, Last Rites" or the final image of the male protagonist's reverie of his daughter's purity in "In between the Sheets" (43-44).

Another engaging critical perspective on McEwan's short stories is offered by Jeanette Baxter, who also considers the readers' response to these shocking tales. She identifies a Surrealist thread running through the stories and reassesses them, formally and thematically, in the light of radical Surrealism. To her, the reading of McEwan's early short prose turns out to be an undertaking that is at once disquieting and challenging as it forces the reader out of a complacent understanding of the text and raises such legitimate questions as these: "Should we refrain from indulging in these tales of violent transgression or should we allow ourselves to fall into textual abyss? How do we even begin to negotiate, or reconcile, our own shifting responses to McEwan's fictions when initial waves of shock, disgust and nausea give way somehow to feelings of confusion and fascination, and laughter?" (13-14). While working towards their self-reflexive understanding of the narrative, the readers have to cope with their own as well as the writer's ambivalent and unsettling vacillation between restraint and indulgence, frustration and ease.

Though less metafictional than his novels, McEwan's short stories evince a clear concern with the act of narration, with the limitations of language and those blanks that readers fill in the process of reading, being thus compelled to take an active part in

the narrative process and recreate the narrative through disruptive clues. Readers become, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "the distanced, yet, involved co-producers of the novel," their response being complicated by the writer's tendency towards self-consciousness (xii). "Solid Geometry" and "Reflections of a Kept Ape," in particular, depart from the conventions of realistic narrative and call attention to themselves as works of fiction by incorporating self-referential elements. "Solid Geometry" blends historical, metafictional, and supernatural elements, foreshadowing some of McEwan's interests in his later novels, such as *Black Dogs* (1992)—a metafictional enquiry into the present recollection of past evil. The narrator intrudes into the story to make direct reference to the story's fiction: "Perhaps we are in a fiction seminar" ("Solid Geometry" 9). The immediate association between a fiction seminar and a fictional work may be read as a hint for the reader not to give credit to the supernatural elements too quickly. Likewise, "Reflections of a Kept Ape" is concerned with fiction making. The story revolves around the image of a writer's block and confronts the idea that an author keeps writing the same novel over and over again, thus prefiguring a theme that McEwan would later tackle in *Atonement*:

Was art then nothing more than a wish to appear busy? Was it nothing more than a fear of silence, of boredom, which the merely reiterative rattle of the typewriter's keys was enough to allay? In short, having crafted one novel, would it suffice to write it again, type it out with care, page by page? (Gloomily I recycled nits from torso to mouth.) Deep in my heart I knew it would suffice and, knowing that, seemed to know less than I had ever known before. ("Reflections of a Kept Ape" 32)

Not only do McEwan's early short stories anticipate concerns that he would later develop in his novels, but they are also sometimes integrated into his more recent and 'mature' work. With the character of Tom Haley, who turns out to be the actual narrator of McEwan's multi-layered and intertextual novel *Sweet Tooth* (2012), the writer breaks the fictional frame of the narrative since

Tom bears strong resemblance to the young novelist himself, Haley's short fiction being thematically and stylistically similar to McEwan's early short stories (e.g. "Dead as They Come," "Reflections of a Kept Ape," "Two Fragments: Saturday and Sunday, March 199-," and "Pornography"). McEwan actually acknowledges this alter ego when he refers to *Sweet Tooth* as a "muted and distorted autobiography" (qtd. in Cooke) and when he confesses that Tom's experience mirrors his own as a young writer since, on publishing his first short story, he finds that a number of critics imply that "he has done something unmanly or dishonest" and fears that in a novella the writer might not "have the necessary creative juice" and might attempt "to pass off inadequate goods and fool a trusting public" ("Some Notes on the Novella").

McEwan does not embed into his novel the early versions of his works *per se*, but suggests new interpretations of the stories by infusing them with new value, particularly a more ethical significance. His initial eccentric fantasies are reshaped into narratives that present characters who are not only capable of grasping the make-believe aspect of their lives but also have the prospect of confronting this situation. This adjustment is smoothed by the novelist's metafictional device of placing the original stories not among the other accounts of sexual debauchery from his short prose collection but in the context of an espionage story that turns out to be a mere pretext for the writer's investigation of the demands imposed by the 'contract' between reader and writer. The idea of the manipulation of fiction is thus craftily developed by the novelist who resorts to autobiographical self-reflexiveness to complicate his ethical dilemma regarding his responsibilities towards the reader.

Like *Sweet Tooth*, *Atonement* (2001) also contains elements of short prose, under the form of a novella, "Two Figures by a Fountain," written by Briony, the novel's protagonist. Briony's novella turns out to be a fabricated and altered version of the fountain scene presented in Part One of the novel, thus prefiguring Briony as an unreliable narrator, a fact confirmed by the coda of the novel. Though Briony's tale does not draw on any of McEwan's

published short stories, as is the case with those incorporated into *Sweet Tooth*, the novelist's strategy once more proves to be instrumental in alerting the reader not only to the dangers of misperception but also of the narrative devices to which literature resorts in codifying and manipulating experience.

The short prose genre is further exploited by McEwan in his more recent two novellas *Amsterdam* (1998) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007), confirming the writer's career-long interest in the short form. Far from being intimidated by the obvious structural and strategic constraints imposed by the short form, McEwan manages with these two novellas to produce technically accomplished works and hence surpass the expectations ensuing from the appreciation of his major novels. The spotlight placed on a reduced number of characters (Clive and Vernon in *Amsterdam* and Florence and Edward in *On Chesil Beach*) as well as the scarcity of plot enables the reader to contemplate and concentrate on the characters' innermost mental workings and scrutinise the dramatic conflicts between individuals that typify a morally flawed society and, not least importantly, to revel in McEwan's precise and nuanced prose style and narrative control.

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Multiculturalism and Hybridity in Zadie Smith's Novels

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Abstract

This essay analyzes three novels by Zadie Smith in terms of content, influences and critical perception. My aim is to explore these novels and show how construction of characters, the depiction of the day to day life of banal existences, the disconnectedness that sometimes arrives in mid-life, issues of race and discrimination are a substitute for plot. Smith tends to do something new with every novel she writes, but she still has a couple of recurring themes and elements. Thus, through a comparison of the three novels, I will illustrate how Zadie Smith's narrative, through its influences and its construction of characters offers the perfect example of "plotless" fiction, as well as how this type of novel is more permissive in terms of style and more open to experimentation than novels with well-delimited plots.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, hybridity, multiculturalism, plotless, discrimination, personal history, posthumanism, 21st century literature

Zadie Smith's novels cover many topical issues of the 21st century, such as discrimination, beauty standards and their implications, mid-life monotony, sense of personal history and the struggle to find oneself. Due to her own upbringing in one of London's peripheral boroughs, most of her novels are set in London. Their much discussed multiculturalism lies in their capacity to include many of the struggles and joys of life as an immigrant in London.

Consequently, her life in NW London is reflected in both *White Teeth* and *NW* and it is probably the reason why dialogues sound so natural and why everyday life seems to be depicted so accurately. Smith's novels are usually narrated in the third person, which can often make it difficult for the reader to really penetrate the characters' mind and feel entitled to be part of their novelistic existence. Yet Smith is able to write in the third person and pay special attention to every detail of her characters, to carefully shape them and their personality, allowing her auctorial presence to be felt throughout the novels.

Related to this topic is an essay Smith herself wrote in her book of essays *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, entitled "Reading Barthes and Nabokov" where she speaks about this particular conflict as a reader, that is if one should read with the author in mind, as Nabokov used to teach his students, or if one should completely forget the author in the process of reading, as Barthes suggests. She pleads for complete freedom when it comes to a reader's relationship to the text. She believes a reader should be able to read a novel exactly as one pleases and should not be constricted in any way. Furthermore, she says, at the very beginning of this essay, that "The novels we know best have an architecture. Not only a door going in and another leading out, but rooms, hallways, stairs, little gardens front and back, trapdoors, hidden passages, et cetera. [...] When you enter a beloved novel many times, you can come to feel that you possess it, that nobody else lived there" (64). This feeling of possession is also a feeling of security, of being comfortable in a novel. Consequently, a well-written novel gives you the possibility to explore every little corner of it and feel as if you belong there, as if it is your space to explore.

Overall, the novels that will be discussed here treat issues people are faced with daily, the real hardships of marriage, the truth of the inability to feel beautiful when you do not fit into the European standards of beauty. Smith's genius resides in her ability to speak of the true, often dull problems that come with marriage or with adolescence or adulthood in a very witty manner, showing that

a novel's strong points are not in the plot, but in everything else around it.

1. *White Teeth*: Hybridity, Morality, and the “Posthuman”

Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), starts with a quote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: “What's past is prologue” (Act II, scene I). This epigraph can serve as a good starting point in attempting to shape an idea of what Smith is trying to achieve with her novel, as it is also echoed in a scene from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, when the narrator tells his lover, Padma: “To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world. I told you that” (121). This quotation is very appropriate for the characters Smith creates, because they each carry their personal history within their own existence. *White Teeth*, too, is about everything that took place before the birth of its characters. This sense of personal history manifests itself through the characters of this novel and this is suggested from the very beginning, through this Shakespearean reference. *The Tempest*, as Jennifer J. Gustar notes in “The Tempest in an English Teapot: Colonialism and the Measure of a Man in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*,” “enquires into the history of exclusions, into the illegitimate legitimation of colonial conquest and into the pattern of distinguishing the capture, use and invention of technology as that which distinguishes the human from its animal other” (333).

Thus, Irie's fixation on her own identity and ancestral history is deeply rooted in the Jamaican earthquake during which her grandmother was born. The earthquake is a very important incident in the book, not only because it shows Smith's mastery of language, but also because it is constantly referred to thereafter:

Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories. Outside of Ambrosia there was much white stone, no people, an altar peeling gold, little light, smoking candles, Spanish names engraved in the floor, and a large marble Madonna,

her head bowed, standing high upon a plinth. [...] Inside she was already running down King Street. But outside Ambrosia was frozen. [...] And then the world began to shake. Inside Ambrosia, waters broke. Outside Ambrosia, the floor cracked. The far wall crumbled, the stained-glass exploded, and the Madonna fell from a great height like a swooning angel. (360-361)

This tension between the outside and the inside, presented very graphically in this passage, is a recurrent trope throughout the novel. Archie's identity is deeply linked to the night he almost committed suicide and the night he met his wife. Samad's identity comes from his great-grandfather, a war hero. But to almost every cultural heritage there appears to be a blend with the culture they were brought into and this is illustrated, just as Philip Tew indicates in his book *The Contemporary British Novel*, by the episode in which the hurricane approaches the house of the Iqbal family, in which the members of the family are asked to take whatever belongings they cherish the most. Alsana picks items like Linda Goodman's *Starsigns*, three pots of tiger balm, her sewing machine, while Millat, one of the brothers, picks Bruce Springsteen's album *Born to Run*, a poster of De Niro, and a copy of *A Clockwork Orange*. Samad is enraged by the fact that no one bothered to take actual essentials and, also, nobody even thought of the Qur'ān. As Tew notes, "Smith suggests culture is difficult to locate, but a feeling for its presence persists within the cultural objects of our lives" (159). Furthermore, the way in which the characters explore their own identity and what each of them understands by culture and personal history brings about a lot of struggles and turns out to be very confusing for them, and this is best illustrated by the separation of the two sons of the Iqbal family, who grow to be very complicated and different human beings:

As Head indicates, Magid on his return has become Anglo-Indian and therefore innately and conservatively 'English' in much of his outlook. Millat is more influenced, in a very similar fashion to Kureishi's adolescent males, by popular culture that leads him to an affiliation with a militant Islamic group. (Tew 159)

Smith's take on multiculturalism has been discussed for quite some time. Some critics, such as Tew or Peter Childs, believe that *White Teeth* celebrates multiculturalism, that it shows a rather positive image of the immigrant condition in Great Britain: "Smith's narrative paints a generally optimistic view of multicultural Britain; one that largely directs its gaze away from issues of social difference between ethnic groups. It celebrates diversity by implication while mocking those who try to celebrate it explicitly" (Childs 219). In her essay "*White Teeth* Reconsidered: Narrative Deception and Uncomfortable Truths," Ulrike Tancke has a different perspective in what regards this issue. She dismisses Tew's and Head's opinions and explains her position through a quote from the novel: "Yet despite the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort [...] there are still young white men who are *angry* about that" (Smith, *White Teeth* 327). This fragment follows immediately after a very often quoted fragment, used by Childs (218-219) to exemplify how hybridity and diversity manifest themselves in 20th century London:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. (Smith, *White Teeth* 326-327)

Clearly, the popular quote that Childs as well as many other critics and reviewers have used to show the diversity of cultures in Great Britain is not so subtly dismantled a couple of sentences later. "The fault lines and limitations of the multicultural ideal are all too obviously exposed by a reality in which difference does matter and sameness is sometimes violently pursued," states Tancke, and all three of the kids (Millat, Magid, Irie) can be good examples here, especially Irie and her struggle to fit into European ideals of beauty. But the struggle to fit in is quite common in *White Teeth* and it is no

stranger to Samad either, who longs after a former self, a better self, unburnt by the sun and with a useful hand. Samad is a constantly challenged character and appears to be in a permanent state of self-rejection, he sees no good in the future, which is why, as Joanna O’Leary points out, “Samad’s only good option for life is the past, an uncomplicated place where he is a heterosexual good Muslim with two hands, light skin and no shame” (qtd. in Tew, *Reading Zadie Smith* 47). Samad is a very controlling type of personality though and this can be seen in his behavior towards his sons, especially Magid. Part of his self-hatred comes from his inability to have control over the body of Alsana, who does not let him touch her and believes “a husband needn’t be involved in body-business, in a lady’s...parts” (Smith, *White Teeth* 63). As O’Leary notes, Alsana’s two sons are the only mark he has ever left on her body.

Childs notes that Irie is the only character who has this strong feeling of *not fitting in*, of, as she puts it, being “a stranger in a strange land” (Smith, *White Teeth* 266), which is why she is so attracted to the Chalfens, the third family depicted in the novel. Irie feels that the diversity of her own family is chaotic and thus appreciates the “Englishness” of the Chalfens, because as one of the chapters describes them, they are “more English than the English” (Smith, *White Teeth* 365). The Chalfens are, in fact, third-generation Poles, which makes them, as Childs puts it “just as English as anyone else” (215). But Smith’s descriptive structure refers to the Chalfens’ empiricism and middle-class values. The Chalfens are a unique set of characters Smith created, because with their help, the novel slowly proceeds into the realm of “posthumanism.”

In an essay titled “The Gift that Keeps on Giving,” critic Brad Buchanan quotes N. Katherine Hayles’s “prescriptive” definition of posthumanism from her book, *How We Became Posthuman*, and shows how it is illustrated in *White Teeth*. Hayles asserts that “informational pattern” is superior to “material instantiation” and this proves that “the embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an

inevitability of life” (2). Moreover, she makes three more points in defining posthumanism: first, that “the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition, [...] as an epiphenomenon”; secondly, posthumanism considers the body as part of the “original prostheses we all learn to manipulate”; her final and most important point is that “the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines (qtd. in Buchanan 2-3). There is a marked tendency to interfere with the human gene through biological experiment in *White Teeth*, and this is exploited through Marcus Chalfens’ *FutureMouse*©. Smith experiments with themes connected to hybridity and cross-fertilization and illustrates them with examples from horticulture or meteorology, which is very well illustrated by Joyce Chalfen’s book, *The New Flower Power*. There, Joyce conveys “the idea that miscegenation is valuable in itself, and her marriage to Marcus is an expression of their shared belief in ‘good genes’, rather than pure blood” (Childs 215-216).

Although opinions differ on whether or not *White Teeth* celebrates diversity ignoring the reality of acts of racism which might be still happening, and some (Ulrike Tancke) believe there are allusions to issues of racism throughout the novel, *White Teeth* is still, most of all, a celebration of hybridity, mutation, of everything that does not come from just one place, just one territory, one language, one shade of a color. *White Teeth* celebrates “the hybrid and mongrelized, rather than the pure and well bred” (Childs 218). As Ashley Dawson notes in his book *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, even though genes play a major role when it comes to influence, “in no sense can it be said that our lives are determined solely by these genes” (150). There are many examples which are related to how lives are not exclusively determined by genes in *White Teeth*, one of them being the twins: they both carry the same genes, but the differences between them are considerable. Another good example, peppered with Smith’s fine irony, is Irie’s unborn

child, whose father she is not sure which one of the twins is and whom she decided to raise with Joshua Chalfen.

White Teeth is a book in which the *now* is very much emphasized, but in which the past plays a highly significant role and we are reminded of it constantly throughout the novel. The mere presence of Dr. Sick, the Nazi doctor (a reference to Mengele) who had an eye condition that made him bleed through his eyes, and who returns at the end of the novel, an event which leads to the escape of the *FutureMouse*©, is in itself a reminder of how the past always haunts us. Childs describes *White Teeth* as “an endorsement of uncontrolled cultural mix and random, passionate stirrings of the gene pool” (221). This definition shows the unique aspect of *White Teeth*, an aspect none of her other novels have, which is the idea of tampering with genes and human genomes, the idea of “playing God,” characteristic of posthumanism, which is not present in any of her future novels. Thus the teeth metaphor “plays with the idea that everyone is the same under the skin” (221), regardless of color, race, genes.

2. Aesthetics and Ethics in *On Beauty*

Smith’s third novel explores a slightly different position towards multiculturalism and how everybody’s personal history affects their perception of life. *On Beauty* is set in a small academic, preponderantly white American town called Wellington. Much of the novel is built around two families, the Belseys and the Kippses, which indicates Smith’s major influence, E.M Forster’s novel *Howards End*. The device of the two families set in opposition, both politically and ideologically, is akin to Forster’s presentation of the two families, the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels, who stand for conservative and liberal attitudes, respectively. But the similarities are mostly present in terms of themes, not in terms of plots: both novels illustrate the same search for beauty. The two novels are linked through many little scenes very similar to each other. Thus,

the episode where Helen Schlegel writes letters to her family while staying at Howards End corresponds to Jerome writing e-mails to his father while staying with the Kippses or the concert scene where the entire family goes (Beethoven in *Howards End*, Mozart in *On Beauty*). Another strong link is the fact that both novels illustrate a female friendship that stands against all the rivalry between the two families.

Just as in *White Teeth*, the characters' sense of personal history is a major dimension of the novel, but, as opposed to *White Teeth*, there seems to be less of a celebration of multiculturalism and more awareness in what regards racism in a white city. This is especially reflected in the construction of Kiki Belsey's character, as well as in that of all three of the Belsey children, especially Levi. As Susan Alice Fischer observes in her essay "Temporal Layers: Personal and Political History in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," even their house, described in the very first pages of the novel, "symbolizes an ongoing rift within the nation as a whole" (Tew, *Reading Zadie Smith* 84). The house is particularly important because of its skylight multicolored window, which creates a multicolored light the family never steps into (as part of a family tradition), the act in itself symbolizing "the nation's avoidance of recognizing its history and diversity" (Fischer qtd. in Tew, *Reading Zadie Smith* 84). The relationship between the characters is tightly linked to history and everything happens under the heavy, traumatic shadow of slavery. The novel is peppered with misconceptions and stereotypes (often, but not always, made by white people). The night of the party is a key episode in this respect. Levi, the youngest of the siblings, arrives late on the night of the party and is mistaken for a thief by a random woman passing by the house. This misunderstanding is brought about by Levi's fashion choices (he enjoys rap and hip-hop) and the color of his skin. On the same night Kiki finds out about her husband's affair with a white woman, which doesn't only hurt her as a woman, but it hurts her as a black woman as well. *White Teeth* only hinted at racism through ironic remarks or witty comments. *On Beauty* openly discusses life as a

black person in a preponderantly white community, the challenges that have to be faced, the frustrations that arise from such a situation, where Howard, married to a black woman, has an affair with a white woman, which results in a sense of abandonment felt by Kiki both on a superficial level and a profound one.

It is, therefore, true that “personal relations in the novel are inextricably tied to history, and the legacy of slavery reverberates in intimate interactions” (Fischer 85), which is why Kiki is always struggling both to escape and to hold on to her past and it is why Levi is so passionate about Haiti and hip-hop and ‘street life.’ The latter realizes that he is living a privileged life as a black man and that the black people whose music he listens to and the people he has met through his Haitian friend live in very poor circumstances, which constitutes the reason behind his decision to quit his job at the music store and to begin selling DVDs on the street illegally. Zora, on the other hand, is skeptical and carries some misconceptions with regard to the less privileged and this is obvious when she meets Carl, the ‘discretionary’ student, who has been discovered by Claire Malcom and persuaded to take her poetry class. Carl is talented without having had any kind of poetry background and Zadie Smith uses this character as an example of a more complex problem which was subject to many controversies between the ‘70s and into the 2000s, the Affirmative Action policies. How Smith includes this in *On Beauty* is also discussed by Fischer in Philip Tew’s *Reading Zadie Smith*:

The roll back against affirmative action – and the rise of the prison industrial complex – has had devastating effects on the black male student population, something that *On Beauty* perhaps alludes to with regard to Carl who, when an important painting disappears from Monty’s office, is the first person Monty thinks of accusing of theft, despite having no evidence whatsoever. Carl may well become a statistic along the lines of the one that Chace cites: “About one in three black men will go to prison in his lifetime, compared to one in 17 white males.” (91)

Affirmative Action (the policy of favoring members of a disadvantaged group) stirs even more controversy between Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps, making them so infinitely involved in these arguments that they refuse to see each other's points; they refuse to see that they could use some of each other's views, not only on this, but on liberal arts in general. Monty is a convinced Christian who wants to "take the 'liberal' out of *liberal arts*," and who is vehemently against Affirmative Action, because, as Fischer points out, it "allows racial discrimination," it "fosters a victim mindset," it "removes the incentive for academic excellence" and "encourages separatism" (90). Howard stands opposite of this, along with Claire Malcom, who tries to fight for Carl Thomas and Chantelle Williams, the 'discretionary' students in her poetry class. Howard and Monty seem to be arguing more for the sake of arguing than for actually solving any of the problems and because of this, Claire Malcom asks Zora Belsey, who had wanted to give a "barnstorming" (Smith, *On Beauty* 263) speech at the University for quite some time, to stand up for Carl and other 'discretionary' students in front of the faculty members of Wellington College, because she believes people like Carl do not have a voice to stand up for themselves and they need someone to do that for them (Smith, *On Beauty* 263). As Fischer further notes (92), after Howard's Affirmative Action committee in the *Wellington Herald* and Monty's reaction against it, Howard is mostly concerned about the agitation it creates around him, in his class, his inbox, without giving much importance to the issue itself, which proves Claire's argument that they are "just arguing the same stupid dialectic over and over" (Smith, *On Beauty* 263) correct.

Howard and Monty's dispute is spread throughout the novel. They are both Rembrandt scholars with very different views on art and beauty. Monty, a very committed Christian, sees art as a gift from God, and believes that only through art is spiritual perfection achieved. Howard, on the other hand, is unable to look at beauty and just acknowledge it, which is why Victoria Kipps tells him that Howard's class is "about never saying *I like the tomato*" (Smith, *On*

Beauty 312). Howard is so caught up in his theorization of beauty that he fails to actually see beauty.

Howard's limitations, his inability to see beauty for what it is, his inability to believe that people have faith in certain things, to see beyond his theorists and philosophers are heavily criticized by Kiki. To illustrate this, we can look at the section where Kiki tells him how ashamed she was when, after 9/11, Howard sent an e-mail to everyone they knew about Baudrillard and simulated wars: "I was *ashamed* of you. I didn't say anything, but I was. Howard", she said, reaching out to him but not far enough to touch, "this is *real*. This life. We're really here – this is all happening. Suffering is *real*" (Smith, *On Beauty* 394).

Smith borrows the title of this novel, as well as the title of one of the chapters (*on beauty and being wrong*) from Elaine Scarry's essay, *On Beauty and Being Just*. In her essay, Scarry pleads for what she calls the "banishing of beauty from the humanities" and essentially says that although the humanities explore art and beauty, "conversation about the beauty of these things has been banished" (qtd. in Mengham and Tew 131). The characters' relationship with beauty and their understanding of it is very different from one character to the other, but maybe it is best seen in their reactions to the painting Carlene, Monty's wife, gave to Kiki. For Clotilde, the Kippses' Haitian maid, the painting is a "subject of superstitious fear" (Tolan 134), Monty feels as if it is his "mission to protect important black art" (Smith, *On Beauty* 113). To Kiki, it is of personal significance and to Levi, it represents the "emblem of American imperialism" (Tolan 134). As Fiona Tolan also notices, perhaps Smith's view on beauty is similar to Carlene's "transcendent view," which "cuts through the intellectual elitism of Howard's discourse" (134). Perhaps the real view on what beauty represents lies in the friendship between Kiki and Carlene. Where their husbands argue about what beauty means, real, palpable beauty swoops in and it takes the form of the bond between the two women. After all, this is a novel about beauty, and it is a novel about how beauty is perceived by each of these

characters and their perception of art is what gives them authenticity and individuality.

3. NW: Marginal Aspects of Life and Chronologically Intertwined Stories

NW, as Smith herself admits in various interviews, is the result of an experiment she tried, of writing in different manners. Thus, *NW* consists of four well-delimited parts, each written in a different manner, according to the main characters of the novel. Felix, Natalie (formerly Keisha) and Leah are three young adults from North-West London who are not connected to each other in any way until the very end of the novel. This technique of taking two or three characters and following their lives closely as separate individuals and have the threads of their lives intertwined by the end of the novel is similar to what David Foster Wallace (*Broom of the System*, 1987) or Roberto Bolaño (2666, 2004) might do. Smith's "plot" is built on the accounts of various aspects of these people's lives. Although it is a little more complicated than that, in an interview by Synne Rifburg at the Louisiana Literature Festival in 2013, while speaking precisely about *NW* and the fact that her books do not have a clear plot she says: "Nothing happens in these books, nobody does anything. They're just some people, they're just alive" (15:59-16:03). In the same interview she speaks about the importance of time in novels and how "the way a writer thinks about time, the time of their lives, is what novel writing is about" (19:54-20:01). *NW* is, in Smith's own words, "a black existentialist novel" (4:25-4:29). According to her, there is a common idea that people of color have always been quite sure of their identity, because they had to be sure and this is why not many "black existentialist novels" following the pattern of 20th century French novels, for example, were written. This is what *NW* represents, a novel in which three young people are trying to find themselves. There is always the question "Who am I" hanging above every paragraph and the idea behind this novel is to break stereotypes by building them.

NW follows the life of three young people, each of them reaching the middle of their lives and while *White Teeth* is concerned with diversity, beauty standards and body acceptance journeys, *On Beauty* with how people perceive joy and beauty in its purest form, *NW* explores the reality of marriage issues, of “mid-life crisis.”

What is different here from Smith’s other novels is that the omniscient narrator no longer has the powers she had in the other novels, meaning that there is a sense of distance between the characters and the narrator, almost as if she sits back and watches the characters unfold along with the reader. The characters, although stereotypical, have unique attributes this time. They seem to be more secretive, time seems to move differently according to each character, an effect that is also created through the novel’s construction (four different parts) and the deliberate inaccuracy achieved through the disrupted chronology and the fragmentariness of narrative style. Wendy Knepper, in her essay dedicated to revisionary modernist aesthetics in *NW*, describes the novel’s construction as a “map or entry into its narrative” (117). Thus, *NW* is divided into four parts: *Visitation*, telling the story of Leah Hanwell, a 30 year-old half-Irish Londoner who lives with her black European husband, Michel; *Guest*, dedicated to Felix Cooper, a kind young black man about to get married to the woman he loves, but who ends up tragically killed in a street incident; *Host*, which tells the story of Natalie (formerly Keisha) Blake, and *Crossing*, in which Natalie and her childhood acquaintance Nathan desolately roam the streets of NW London. *Crossing* is also where they encounter a roadblock on Albert Road and have to detour, a point where the reader should piece together the crime novel quality of *NW*.

One way of interpreting *NW* is that of a crime novel with a story that has to be slowly put together in order to find out who the murderer was or, as Knepper notes, it can be viewed as a story about Natalie and Leah, with Felix, Grace and Nathan as ramifications that help build Natalie’s character:

Ostensibly, on first reading, this is a loosely written narrative about the coming-of-age experiences of Leah and Keisha (later Natalie). However, the novel eschews chronology in favor of a spatially coherent account of events: the text navigates a series of seemingly unrelated encounters in NW in order to expose overlooked narratives of dis/connections and violence. (117)

The three characters are built on stereotypes as an ironic way of actually dismantling these stereotypes and, while they might not be obvious if you are reading *NW* as crime fiction (which is actually hard to do on a first reading, as the reader doesn't realize very early in the novel that there has been a crime involved somewhere), the stereotypes exist: "All three characters, then, clearly represent the challenges of contemporary life in London's poorer neighborhoods, and all three disrupt racial stereotypes, to some degree" (Wells 100).

In this sense, the novel starts with Leah's character, which is a very confusing narrative, similar to her personality. Leah is a good example for what Smith discussed briefly in the interview at the Louisiana festival I mentioned above about women experiencing time differently. Leah is often paid special attention to because of her attitude towards procreation. She has been lying to her husband about wanting a baby and has been secretly taking birth control pills to prevent getting pregnant. In the interview Smith says she was trying to address the problem of wanting children and how this has become such a widely discussed topic in recent years, and that such an intimate issue shouldn't create this much violence around it. She also mentions that a lot of women often wait for this "intimate and profound desire" (6:02-6:07) to have children, which might never even arrive. But with Leah things are different and she seems to want to remain in the blissful state of the newlywed or even a state of constant adolescence. In a novel full of people who want to rise above their precarious social condition, she does not feel that she wants to achieve anything, she is happy with her mediocrity. Smith also seems to address, both through Leah and Natalie, the common perception that women are

desperately trying to have children, to be good wives, to dedicate themselves to this particular domestic life, when in fact this is far from true, “women are running a million miles in the opposite direction, trying to work” (9:36).

In her essay entitled “The Right to a Secret: Zadie Smith’s *NW*,” Lynn Wells explains how these characters are not entirely controlled by the narrator because they all have something to hide and she quotes Smith in her book of essays *Changing My Mind*:

Recently I came across a new quote. [...] It is a thought of Derrida’s: ‘If a right to a secret is not maintained then we are in a totalitarian space.’ Which is to say: enough of human dissection, of entering the brains of characters, cracking them open, rooting every secret out! For now, this is the new attitude. Years from now, when this book is done and another begins, another change will come. (Smith qtd. in Wells 106)

As opposed to the other two novels, here the narrator never discloses anything. The narrator is almost a function of the text, everything else is contained inside the characters, their dialogues, their gestures, the way they talk, their background. In essays such as Wells’s “The Right to a Secret: Zadie Smith’s *NW*,” there is a discussion about the characters’ secretive mode and how its ubiquity affects the novel.

Leah’s decision of lying to her husband and secretly taking birth control pills stems from the pressure that Natalie, her mother and other women put on her: “Under this internalized social pressure, Leah finds herself retreating into the inner world of her hidden desires” (Wells 104). Just as Natalie tells Michel at the end of the novel, Leah loves her husband very much, she just does not desire children. Nobody speaks of why she rejects this idea so much, but it comes from the same refusal to grow up, as Leah nurtures quite maternal feelings for her dog, Olive, who dies, ironically, after an incident where she has to lie and yell that she’s pregnant in order to escape a fight her husband started on the street. Leah’s character is quite the paradox. She is the only protagonist

who does not aspire to an above-the-average life and also the only one who lived in slightly better circumstances growing up (this is obvious because of Keisha's jealousy of her life when they were children). She is also the only white character of the novel.

Leah's strong bond with Natalie is obvious throughout the novel and goes way back to their childhood, when Natalie saved Leah from drowning. *NW* might even tell the story of a strong friendship. Natalie, who we later find out used to be Keisha Blake, is very different from Leah. Their relationship is often confusing, as Leah is envious of Natalie's current life, of her happy family and her career, whereas Natalie envied Leah's white "Englishness" her entire childhood, which is what motivated her to leave Caldwell. Natalie comes from an extremely religious family where she had to repress most of who she really was. She would share her deepest secrets only with Leah, therefore only Leah is aware of Natalie's strong sense of sexuality, yet she does not know to what extent it can go. Natalie also did not "intimately and profoundly" (Smith, *Zadie Smith Interview* 6:10-6:13) desire her children, as can be understood from her distant behavior and her choice to leave them with a nanny. Once she is annoyed with this routine she starts going on obscure sexual websites as KeishaNW, "a name that remaps her earlier, youthful self through the virtual/real worlds of NW" (Knepper 121-122). What is interesting is that, while Leah does seem to be jealous of Natalie's life, she is not exactly suited for the life Natalie leads, as she is willing neither to work, nor start a family.

Keisha's road to self-discovery might be even harder than Leah's because she has been taught all her life to reject who she really is. After leaving her very religious family behind, Natalie meets Frank and she is pushed again into a life she does not necessarily seek, but she accepts. So she embraces the high-end lifestyle she is offered and does not question it for a long time. *NW* encapsulates the nuances of mid-life and marriage and shows how marriage issues don't always have to do with cheating, as it happens in *On Beauty*, but that they can operate on a deeper level. After she is caught by her husband and shamed for what she has

done, she goes on a long walk through her old neighborhood and this is what the chapter titled “Crossing” consists of. Natalie and her childhood acquaintance Nathan go on a symbolic journey, a journey where she goes through different stages of desperation and shame, at some point even contemplating suicide. Here Natalie lets herself go and this particular section is where all the unanswered questions are starting to receive an answer.

But in between these two sections there is Felix, a young black man who is, perhaps, the kindest, most innocent person in this novel. The section about Felix is entitled “Guest” and it shows Felix trying to buy a car for his fiancée Grace and then fix it up for her. In the Rifburg interview Smith states that Felix is so special because he doesn’t have any of the “novelistic values,” in the sense that he is generous and kind and honest. Felix is endowed with the best human qualities in this novel and yet he dies because he tried to do a nice gesture for a pregnant lady on the subway. His death is explained by Smith in the Louisiana Festival interview: it reflects an epidemic of stabbings going on at that time in London that people did not pay much attention to. In the stabbings, the victim was usually a young black man and Felix’s character speaks for the victims of these stabbings which everybody ignored, these victims who have fathers and children and fiancés who expect them home. As Knepper points out, “*NW* is, after all, a parable at heart: an absurd tale about the death of a man named Felix (meaning ‘happiness’) who comes to a violent end because of his undying love for ‘Grace’, a woman who has expressed her love through the gift of zirconia (artificial diamonds)” (118).

Although *NW* treats different kinds of people as compared to *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, what they all have in common is that they all approach the issues black people are faced with in today’s society. Natalie is probably the only character whose search for self-acceptance is similar to that of Kiki Belsey, as well as Zora Belsey: Kiki tries to come to terms with herself after she realizes her marriage is falling apart, as well as with the fact that she does not fit into Howard’s world of “intellectuals;” Zora is also trying to come to terms with being rejected by Carl. Leah and Felix are, for

the most part, incomparable to any other Smith characters. In the Rifburg interview, Smith said she wanted to write about mid-life, about the disoriented feeling that comes along with it. She has done so, and we can say that “Crossing” is a metaphor for a road that leads to the end of this search.

Conclusions

The aim of this essay has been to show how Smith’s fiction, although essentially without a plot, makes up for its inexistent plot through her complex character profiles and her humorous episodes depicting life as an immigrant in London, as well as through her witty remarks and the serious themes she treats, such as discrimination. Her fiction often feels like creeping into someone’s personal life, watching them closely and analyzing each aspect of their life. Almost each and every one of her characters has a complete account of their past life, the narrator creating in this way a complex character profile. I set out to explore Smith’s three novels, their hybrid narratives, their diverse representation of the millennium, as well as to trace back their influences, in order to show that the invisible plot of these books becomes visible through everything else that would have traditionally been regarded as secondary to the plot. These are novels with novels within them.

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Reviews

Glavanakova, Alexandra. *Transcultural Imaginings: Translating the Other, Translating the Self in Narratives about Migration and Terrorism*. Sofia: KX – Critique and Humanism, 2016. Pp 262. ISBN 9789545872013.

In the contemporary global social, political, economic, ideological, and cultural climate, the concept of identity construction in various communities has gained deeper significance, with issues such as im/migration, Othering, refugee, alienation, and even terrorism acquiring new dimensions and meanings. As stated in “The Global Risks Report 2017,” issued by the World Economic Forum, one of the most significant current challenges is “facing up to the importance of identity and community” (6). In her thought-provoking book *Transcultural Imaginings*, Alexandra Glavanakova, the author of *Posthuman Transformations: Bodies and Texts in Cyberspace* (2014), proposes a different, more nuanced examination of the ways in which “transcultural experiences” impact identity construction. The book, divided into three main chapters preceded by a detailed preface, focuses on uncovering the complex connections in the “construction of the East versus the West, and of Self versus the Other” in different authorial voices and genres (12), drawing on “transculturalism” and “cultural translation” as the main theoretical lenses (13). The first chapter offers an overview of the theoretical framework, while the second and third chapters comprise in-depth examinations of contemporary texts written in the last twenty years by Bulgarian, Pakistani, American, Canadian, and French writers, who share an “interest in the dynamics of cultural encounters” (21) and identity formation in the fraught contexts of global migration and terrorism.

The first chapter, “Transcending Borders,” starts with a discussion of “three interpretative models of *difference*” in order to frame “the debate on transculturality” (33). By offering Bulgaria as an example, Glavanakova interrogates Samuel Huntington’s notion of cultures as homogeneous entities in his theory on “the clash of

civilizations,” juxtaposing Ilija Trojanow and Ranjit Hoskote’s thesis, which posits that civilizations have evolved through encounter, exchange and synthesis and stresses the effects of cultural hybridity on identity construction. Regarding the connection between identity construction and Otherness, Glavanakova maintains that “identity arises as a complex interplay between self-definition and the definition provided by others of oneself” (47), pointing to it as a “dynamic, complex” social construct. She discusses Julia Kristeva’s perspective on identity and Otherness in order to underscore the fact that transcultural persons have “multiple belongings” (48), placing particular emphasis on Kristeva’s “definition of the Other as an integral part of the Self” (48). The second part of the chapter is devoted to a thorough explanation of the key concepts of the analysis: “*transculturality*” - “the lived experience of border-crossing”; “*transcultural*” - “a particular mind-set marked by openness to diverse cultures, as well as to the creative practices ... which reflect such experiences and mentality,” and “*transculturalism*” - the critical and theoretical approach in cultural and literary studies” (87).

In the second chapter, “Migrant Narratives,” Glavanakova examines migrant writings in the context of Bulgarian immigration to Canada and to the United States, maintaining that these writings depict “the loss of the home country, adaptation to the host country, the feeling of dislocation, the creation of a hybrid identity, the comparison between the home and host countries” (111). Glavanakova compares Radka Yakimov’s exilic narratives with several diasporic writings that appeared in the form of articles “in the Bulgarian monthly newspaper *Forum*” published in Montreal (116) in order to highlight the fact that “Bulgarian-Canadian authors confirm their double cultural identity, which is ‘typically’ Canadian, and can be defined as that of people who straddle simultaneously different territorial, both in the sense of regional and ethnic, identities” (120). On the other hand, Miroslav Penkov’s short story collection *East of the West* and Zachary Karabashliev’s novel *18% Gray* are discussed as transcultural texts that offer

different representations of America. Glavanakova argues that Penkov's text illustrates how, as a result of "cosmopolitan nomadism" (144), the voluntary migrant's identity crisis might foster new individual critical perspectives on identity, cultural heritage and belonging to various communities. She further claims that, conversely, Karabashliev's narrative, centered on characters in constant motion, exemplifies how "the compulsion to move arises from the inability to conform, to fit within the social structure, or a given belief or philosophical system" (164). The migrant narratives discussed by Glavanakova in this chapter point to the ways in which the often traumatic experience of displacement, loss, and nostalgia of Eastern European (im)migrants in Western (Canadian and American) cultures in the late twentieth- and the early twenty-first century redefines and impacts the process of cross-cultural identity construction.

The final chapter, "Translations of Terrorism," centers on the significance and effects of 9/11 in American and global contexts. In the context of 9/11 as an American event, Glavanakova offers a minute comparison of Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* (2007) and Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003), a French novel chosen "for its transnational perspective" (172). She claims that "both novels are as much about 9/11 as an event, as they are about its representation," and while focusing on "the trauma of loss," the texts suggest a "reconsideration of the causes leading to the excesses of terrorism" (188). Furthermore, Glavanakova's in-depth analysis of 9/11 "as a shared global and historical trauma" (189) includes a comparison between Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Shauna Singh Baldwin's collection of short stories "We Are Not in Pakistan" (2007). Both texts depict "the traumatic search for self-identification" (198) brought about by the difference in how the characters perceive themselves and how they are perceived as "the alien Others" in the dominant culture (190). The final part of the chapter discusses "the role of fiction and the artist as intellectual in translating terrorism and violence" (209) in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* and "the

experimental play *P.O. Unabomber* by the Bulgarians Gergana Dimitrova and Zdrava Kamenova” (209). Glavanakova states that “both offer interpretations of terrorism across cultures ... as a commentary on the status and identity of contemporary America,” concentrating on “the exploration of the terrorist mind, especially where it concerns that of an intellectual-turned-terrorist” (210). She concludes the chapter by pointing out that “by questioning the potential for political impact of their own art, ... [these authors] explore the dynamics between art and politics, fact and fiction, look for possible alternatives for action, and invite their audience to take a position” (229). By way of conclusion, in a “note” to the reader, entitled “Emergence,” Glavanakova states that the study of transcultural elements in identity formation at the beginning of the twenty-first century promotes a more nuanced interpretation of the concept and of the “manifestations of Otherness, which though seemingly dichotomous, actually form a complex network of oppositions and interactions” (230).

In *Transcultural Imaginings*, Glavanakova’s use of the transcultural lens to capture the complex process of constructing a hybrid identity in new and different cultural spaces allows for a comprehensive examination of the individual process of self-perception and of the collective action of “being perceived” as different, as “the Other” in various cultures. As a result, she has succeeded in illustrating with great skill that the texts she has analyzed in this study complicate the notion of intercultural encounters both from the inside perspective of the migrant (belonging to a broadly-defined East) and from the outside viewpoint of the receiving culture (Canada or the United States, for instance). Her insight that “the boundaries with the posited Other are constructed and imaginary, permeable, yet deeply meaningful for they uncover the confluential processes between individuals and cultures” (230), is particularly relevant in the fraught current globalized world where the ethnic make-up of cultures is in a constant process of change and of “becoming.” Therefore, through the thought-provoking ideas set forth and the questions it opens up,

this book offers a framework for further research on the transcultural elements that problematize the process of Othering and the construction of identity as informed by gender, age or class, for instance, in migrant writings from various hybrid spaces located at the crossroads between a geographically-determined or an imaginary/created East and West, in local and global contexts of migration.

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Gomaa, Dalia M. A. *The Non-National in Contemporary American Literature: Ethnic Women Writers and Problematic Belongings*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. (€85,59). Pp 195. ISBN 9781137502865.

In *The Non-National in Contemporary American Literature: Ethnic Women Writers and Problematic Belongings*, Dalia Gomaa employs the concept of “non-national” as the theoretical lens to interrogate established national identifications. In the four chapters of the book, she offers an insightful analysis of a number of late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century texts about migration, authored by Arab-American, Chicana, South Asian-American, and Cuban-American women writers, by problematizing key elements of nation formation, such as “national consciousness, national time, national space, and national belonging” (1). In the introduction, Gomaa contextualizes the concept of “non-national” in the current context of American Studies, arguing that this theoretical framework facilitates a more in-depth understanding of the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of national identifications, since, in migrant narratives, the “non-national subject” is placed in an in-between space “at the intersection of the national and the transnational” (5), in an “interstitial space between belonging and un-belonging” (6). Moreover, she suggests that a contrapuntal approach allows for a complex interpretation of the ethnic and American spaces inhabited and navigated by the characters, as it focuses on the differences “within and across” minority groups (17).

In the first chapter, Gomaa examines the “non-national” in *The Language of Baklava* (2005) by Diana Abu-Jaber and *An American Brat* (2006) by Bapsi Sidhwa, whose female protagonists struggle to reconcile their ethnic and American identities in the United States, in Jordan, and in Pakistan. The in-betweenness of the protagonists is framed as a *not yet* process, an ongoing “process of

shifting from the ‘particular ethnic identity’ to the ‘universal identity as a member of a Nation-State’” (29). In this context, Gomaa employs the concept of “imagined transnational communities,” “formed beyond the geographical boundaries of a single nation and not nation-centered” (31), in order to complicate the notion of “a homogeneous national consciousness” (61). Gomaa interprets the “form of individualism that the stories depict” as “contingent and situational” (61) and maintains that in spite of unresolved issues of belonging either to one place or to another, the protagonists strive to accept both sides of their identities, American and Jordanian, and American and Pakistani.

While the first chapter discusses “national consciousness” in terms of communities marked “by their ethnic, racial, and religious affiliations ... within and outside of specific geographical territories” (63), Gomaa’s comparative analysis of *West of the Jordan* (2003) by Laila Halaby and *The Last Generation* (1993) by Cherríe Moraga in the second chapter centers on uncovering “the nuances of ... non-national time” (64). She argues that the temporal aspect of “non-national” in the novels is influenced “by conquest, invasion, occupation, and political unrest in both the occupied territories of Palestine (in *West of the Jordan*) and indigenous Indian lands (in *The Last Generation*)” (67),” which impacts the ethnic and cultural legacy left by the parents to their children, therefore complicating “the passage of heritage,” which, similar to the issue of “national belonging,” is “neither homogeneous nor linear” (66).

The third chapter revolves around the reconceptualization of the notion of “home(land)” (93) as illustrated in *The Time between Places: Stories that Weave in and out of Egypt and America* (2010) by Pauline Kaldas and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri. In comparing the two texts, Gomaa underscores the significance of the setting, as the notion of “home” (or feeling/being “at home”) is an essential element that shapes the process of identification with/in a particular place during the migration experience. However, as the families in both texts are not attached to particular places or homes,

Gomaa claims that “their political and national affiliations are replaced by local and/or regional affiliations as they struggle to be fully integrated in a national homeland” (97), consequently interpreting “the characters’ political disengagement” as “a form of un-belonging, ... as non-national,” and concluding that in these novels “home and nation are separate spheres” (128).

The final chapter compares *The Night Counter* (2009) by Alia Yunis and *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) by Cristina García “as national and transnational allegories” with “the non-national subject as a possible space for allegory” (129). While the previous chapters have examined different perceptions of the “non-national” in relation to national belonging, national time, and national space, the last chapter explores the political and economic aspects of the “non-national” in the fraught power relations between the United States, the Arab/Muslim countries, and Cuba, in the context of “three historical crises which the United States has engaged with—the rise and fall of communism, the conflicts caused by capitalism, and the 9/11 attacks” (162). As the two texts illustrate, the political, ideological, and economic contexts, transcending geographical borders, have opened in-between spaces of identification for the protagonists. Consequently, Gomaa claims that while “*The Night Counter* dismantles national boundaries,” *The Agüero Sisters* “recapitulates the economic boundaries (and possibly advantages) between the United States and third world nations that struggle within neoliberal economic systems” (162).

Gomaa’s informative study in *The Non-National in Contemporary American Literature* represents a valuable contribution that expands and enriches current American Studies and contemporary Arab-American literature. Her analysis demonstrates that interrogating “Americanness and assimilation” (164) as homogeneous constructs by employing the *non-national* framework allows for a multifaceted interpretation of the complex contexts of individual and collective ethnic and (trans)national identification. Therefore, Gomaa’s insightful study, which proposes a new interpretation of the constitutive elements of nation

formation, such as “national consciousness, national time, national space, and national belonging” (1), provides a useful theoretical lens for further studies that seek to (re)define, (re)position, and (re)connect contemporary (im)migration narratives in larger, transnational and crosscultural global contexts.

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Guidelines for Contributors

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