

# **US-American Inoutside Perspectives in Globalized Anglophone Literatures**

Dissertation

zur Erlangung des Grades Dr. phil.  
an der Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften  
der Universität Duisburg-Essen

vorgelegt von

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Datum der mündlichen Prüfung:	22. Dezember 2011
Gesamtprädikat:	summa cum laude
Erstgutachterin:	Prof. Dr. Annette Kern-Stähler
Zweitgutachter:	Prof. Dr. Jens Martin Gurr
Vorsitzender der Prüfungskommission:	Prof. Dr. Helmut C. Jacobs

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*Hong Kong Pizza, 2013*

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank this projects' three 'parents': Professor Frank Schulze-Engler, who guided my early steps in the field; Professor Annette Kern-Stähler, who took me on board in Essen and whose sharp mind, integrity and humor I admire; Professor Jens Gurr, who treated me like one of his own and whose advice has been invaluable. I am indebted to Professor Christoph Heyl, Dr. Rebecca Lindner and Professor Marc Prieue for giving me temporary academic shelter at the University of Duisburg and Essen, at Amsterdam University College and at Stuttgart University, respectively. Thanks to Professor Zoë Wicomb for being an inspiration and an exemplary teacher; to Professor Diana Brydon, the generous mistress of academic networking; to Dr. Gordon Collier for his helpful feedback for the completed manuscript and to Professor Timothy Brennan for reading and commenting on an earlier version of the chapter on cosmopolitanism.

Heartfelt thanks to my companions from the doctoral colloquium of the Frankfurt NELK department, especially Dr. Doreen Strauhs, Dr. Ellen Grünkemeier, Dr. Carla Müller-Schulzke, Cosima Wittmann and Jenny Diederich. I am grateful for the support of Professor Christa Buschendorf, Nicola Nowak, Arja Drexler and Sabine Frank.

Over the past decade, I have benefitted greatly from being associated with the German Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL/GNEL – soon to be known as GAPS). I would like to express my particular

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appreciation to Professor Mark Stein, Professor Susi Reichl, Dr. Ursula Kluwick, Professor Katja Sarkowsky and Professor Kylie Crane. Thanks also to the teams behind the 8<sup>th</sup> Summer School of the New English Literatures (Frankfurt, 2007), above all Malte Schudlich, and of the 10<sup>th</sup> Summer School (Berne, 2011), especially Patricia Bieder.

The doctoral colloquium at the Department of Anglophone Studies in Essen has been a source of valuable feedback and, in many cases, of friendship. I am deeply grateful to all members and contributors, especially Professor Josef Raab, Gregor Pudzich, Dr. Roman Bartosch, Mayannah Dahlheim, Dr. Wanja von der Goltz, Dr. Alexandra Berlina, Georg Drennig, Alexia Schemien and PD Dr. Pascal Fischer. I also wish to thank those friends and colleagues who made my time in Essen and in Stuttgart worthwhile and enjoyable, in particular the late Andrea Grün, who will be remembered for her wit and honesty, Sandarenu Kumarasamy, Dr. Michaela Meyer, Adam von Wald and Nina Jürgens. Thanks as well to my students in Frankfurt, Essen, Joensuu and Stuttgart for many challenging and (mostly) enjoyable hours.

I am grateful to all friends who offered their support and/or chocolates and reminded me of the world beyond the books. *Baci* to PD Dr. Sabrina Brancato (and the three Ciccarelli), Mahsa Mahamied and Franziska Jahn-Madell. Thanks to everyone associated with the Sneakpod podcast, the Pinke Bar and the Cocktailpodcast. *Merci* to Silvio Foscan for taking a photo of his pizza in Hong Kong – and for letting me use it. The soundtrack for the final writing stretch (January to June 2011) was provided by Daft Punk. The last chapters and corrections were completed amidst the marvelous scenery of Staffelsee, to the sound of cows mooing and Taffertshofer children trampolining.

I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my parents, Angela and Friedrich Perner, for having raised me to read and to voice opinions (sometimes too forcefully – which is not their fault) and for supporting my choices. Finally, thanks to my companions in years past and for many years to come: Christoph W. and Teresa Perner, Johannes Perner and Marc Nördinger.

Claudia Perner, Frankfurt am Main, August 2013

“[T]his is now the most dangerous power the world has ever known – the authentic ‘rogue state’, [...] a fully-fledged, award-winning, gold-plated monster.

It has declared war on the world. It knows only one language – bombs and death.”

Harold Pinter in *What We Think of America*

“America gives every man a second chance.  
Success or failure are not determined by family origins, or bound by the rules of class.  
The pursuit of personal happiness is not just a right, but almost a duty.”

Ian Buruma in *What We Think of America*

“People here are like silkworms wrapped in their cocoons.

Why is America empty? Where are the people?”

Hanan al-Shaykh in *What We Think of America*

## **Introduction**

In this study, I examine contemporary literary encounters with US-American locations, lifeworlds and characters. The novels that are the object of analysis originate from the global sphere of anglophone literatures beyond the USA and ‘mainstream’ Great Britain. In this field, the former colonial ‘motherland’ England and the colonial metropolis London have traditionally been considered central points of reference. Until today, the postcolonial subject’s engagement with the former colonizer and with legacies of colonialism constitutes one central objective of the ‘postcolonial approach’.<sup>1</sup> However, since the middle of the twentieth century the world has witnessed a reorientation towards the USA, in political, economic and intellectual contexts but also in the form of cultural and creative projects. As Ramachandra Guha has pointed out referring to India, “[i]n cultural terms, America, rather than Britain has become the locus of [...] emulation.”<sup>2</sup> This study pays tribute to the shift that has been taking place, tracing its echoes in a selection of contemporary novels.

In doing so, it covers ground that has been scarcely examined: the novels considered here might conventionally either be approached from a postcolonial studies perspective or incorporated into the field of American studies as ‘American migrant fiction’. In this study, I occupy a position between both scholarly fields,

<sup>1</sup> This approach was famously first conceptualized by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London/NYC: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Ramachandra Guha, [Untitled], Ian Jack (ed.), *What We Think of America* (Granta 77), London: Granta, 2002, 38–41, here 40.

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subjecting their agendas and conceptual tools to a critical rereading. Examining contemporary novels, I bring to bear discourses originating from both disciplines, thus situating my project within a larger context of what I describe as ‘globalized anglophone studies’. It may appear unremarkable to call for a globalized analytical approach to contemporary anglophone literatures, yet institutional realities often discourage such work. Paul Jay’s *Global Matters* offers one example of an attempt to look at anglophone literatures through a globalized lense,<sup>3</sup> yet Jay’s study also demonstrates one of the difficulties of such analytical work: despite its transnational objective, his analysis is clearly determined by its US-American situatedness. The difficulty of thinking beyond borders while being unable to transcend one’s own locatedness remains one of the challenges of globalized anglophone studies. Nevertheless, my study aims to demonstrate the conceptual and analytical potential of such an approach, putting particular emphasis on the ways in which it enriches our reading of contemporary literary texts.

Since 11 September 2001, novels such as the ones examined in this study have become subject to heightened attention. There has been great interest in publications which appeared to provide explanations for the ostensibly unexplainable, and the publishing industry followed suit. The *Granta* issue titled *What We Think of America* was one early attempt to unite a variety of voices on the topic: it featured a collection of short texts by writers including Amit Chaudhuri, Doris Lessing, David Malouf, Orhan Pamuk and Harold Pinter.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, novels such as Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* were marketed as a fictional commentary on the same set of issues.<sup>5</sup>

My analysis of Hamid’s book and of eight other twenty-first-century novels broadens the scope of engagement with literary perspectives on the USA. The novels’ literary inquiries go beyond the outsider’s perspective; their reflections of US-American lifeworlds are intimate and largely unrestricted by their authors’ cultural and national origin. The novels do not merely represent ‘the other side’ in a

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Jack (ed.), *What We Think of America* (Granta 77), London: Granta, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Mira Nair’s current film adaptation of the novel (starring Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson and Liev Schreiber) attests to the continued relevance of the issues raised by the novel.

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clash of cultures, nations and religions. In this book, I show that the literary texts under consideration employ diverse strategies of narrative negotiation and characterization. One aim of my study is to challenge the lazy use of labels such as ‘migrant fiction’ and ‘cosmopolitan writing’ and to show that while categorization remains a slippery task it is important to attempt to use such terms as precisely and logically as possible.

These are some of the guiding questions of my analysis: What do the novels have to say about the USA? How do characters position themselves in relation to US-American lifeworlds? Which perspectives do the novels construct in engaging with their US-American settings and characters? In my analysis, I draw on theories of globalization, Americanization and cosmopolitanism as well as on research on anti-Americanism. Engaging with a variety of conceptions of the performative, I furthermore consider the importance of stereotypes as elements of established social scripts and as a form of cultural knowledge. The flexibility that such a methodological approach implies enables an analysis of literary texts that takes into account their specificities while simultaneously identifying familiar patterns.

For this purpose, I adapt Obioma Nnaemeka’s concept of the ‘inoutsider’ as a central analytical category. In her article on “Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries,” Nnaemeka distinguishes the insider as the person who owns the birthright to national and cultural membership from the outsider who can merely acquire an empirical right of membership. Nnaemeka’s argument targets a specific context, namely the involvement of Western scholars in the interpretation of African cultural production. According to Nnaemeka, different combinations of birthright and empirical right produce “different degrees of *cognitive right* to unlock cultural productions.”<sup>6</sup> Nnaemeka allows that it may be possible for outsiders to become ‘inside outsiders’ – or ‘inoutsiders’ – but emphasizes that this “requires a lot of hard work and a high dose of humility.”<sup>7</sup> Nnaemeka’s essentialist reliance on the notion of

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<sup>6</sup> Obioma Nnaemeka, “Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots,” *Research in African Literatures* 26.2 (1995), 80–113, here 85 [Nnaemeka’s emphasis].

<sup>7</sup> Nnaemeka, “Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries” 86. See also Obioma Nnaemeka, “Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology,” Margaret Higgonet (ed.), *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994, 301–318, here 306.

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'birthright' as the key to cognitive understanding is debatable but it fulfills a strategic function: her aim is to defend African literary and cultural studies from being dominated and 'colonized' by Western scholars.

In drawing on Nnaemeka's concept, I subject it to two significant shifts in focus: firstly, I transfer it from the sphere of scholarly inquiry to the realm of creative production. The 'outsiders' who assess and portray the USA are writers; their projects of inquiry are fictional and creative. Furthermore stepping beyond questions of authorial biography, my analysis focusses on the 'inoutsiders' in the literary text and on their encounters with the novels' fictional and factual US-American locations. Secondly, it would appear that the USA does not need to be protected from the outsider's colonizing agendas or audacious judgments (even though responses to DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, for instance, imply otherwise, as my final close reading shows). US-American inside perspectives are commonly felt to have become something like a global cultural possession, available and decipherable to recipients worldwide. People who have never visited the USA feel that they know the country intimately. The settings and scenarios depicted in television shows and Hollywood films are more familiar to us than parts of our own home countries. In this respect, authors depicting the USA 'from the outside' might be said to all write from inoutsider perspectives. More importantly, the novels in question here feature characters and simulate perspectives whose inoutsiderdom proposes alternative ways of thinking about the USA and about national affiliation in general.

I conceptualize the inoutsider as a person who either has acquired access to a sphere that is not originally his or her own or, alternatively, feels alienated in an environment that is his or hers by 'birthright'.<sup>8</sup> What is crucial to my understanding of 'inoutsiderdom' is that it is not necessarily a type of 'in-between-ness'. The inoutsider may be alienated without being stuck (or happily free-floating) between cultural or national positionalities. In this respect I depart from much of the scholarly work on 'hybridity' in Bhabha's sense and on 'migrant literature' and consider

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<sup>8</sup> One might argue that the latter really ought to be called 'outsider'. However, I prefer to flexibly assign the category of the 'inoutsider' to both cases rather than introducing another (relatively ugly) neologism.



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nonphysical or ‘internal’ migration as one equally significant source of inoutsiderdom.<sup>9</sup>

In my literary analysis, I locate inoutsiders and examine inoutside perspectives in novels by Zadie Smith, Peter Carey, Imraan Coovadia, Salman Rushdie, Caryl Phillips, Chris Abani, Mohsin Hamid, Hari Kunzru and DBC Pierre. The selection of these primary texts stood at the end of an extensive survey of recent publications. As I outline in the chapter on “the transnationalization of American studies,” the novels in question were all published between the years 2000 and 2008. I have attempted to include a diverse range of regions of origin, viewpoints and topics. However, there is one obvious imbalance: only one female author ‘made the final cut’, that author furthermore being a writer with considerable celebrity flair. The absence of other female authors has not been a programmatic choice on my part. To the contrary, I would like to suggest that the difficulty of coming up with at least a somewhat more even distribution raises important questions about the choices made by the publishing industry.<sup>10</sup>

In the first of the two main parts of this study, I set the contextual and theoretical foundation for my scholarly endeavor, assessing a selection of discursive fields and theoretical approaches. The debates introduced in this part of the study provide the conceptual backdrop of the close readings. In some cases, the literary texts even actively engage with such current theoretical discourses, a phenomenon that I call ‘conceptually informed writing’.

In the chapter on “The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s),” I consider conceptualizations of globalization and explore how these are connected to the idea of an Americanization of the world. In addition to this, the chapter outlines the opposition between theories of globalization that describe it as a process of homogenization and others that emphasize heterogeneity and hybridity.

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<sup>9</sup> In my chapters on DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* and on cosmopolitanism I also consider in how far categorically excluding the work of US-American authors from this study is a justifiable choice.

<sup>10</sup> One possible explanation might be that female authors are still most likely to find a publisher if they provide fictions that deal with the domestic or, if venturing across national and cultural boundaries, portray migrant perspectives. Wherever literary texts approach topics that are deemed to be ‘universal’, political or (in this particular case) cosmopolitan, male voices outnumber female contributions. While it is unlikely that this is caused by some kind of superior insight on the male writers’ part, it may well be connected to a bias of the publishing industry and of the reading public.

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“Inquiries into Anti-Americanism” maps the scholarly discussion on anti-Americanism. In particular, I distinguish between the perceptions of anti-Americanism as either a hostile bias or as an expression of justified criticism, connecting such oppositional assessments to regional experiences and political agendas. Elements of such debates reoccur in some of the novels which creatively inquire into the origins of anti-Americanism.

“Dead-Ending Imagology?” offers a critique of imagology or image studies, a scholarly field that – especially in Germany – has enjoyed considerable popularity as the study of ‘the literary image of the other country’. I subject the category of the ‘image’ to a systematic evaluation and outline some of the central flaws of imagology, distancing my own research from the field’s basic assumptions.

The chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” examines a variety of conceptions of the performative, assessing in particular the adaptability of Judith Butler’s model of performative gender construction to the context of national affiliation. The chapter traces the performative from John L. Austin via Jacques Derrida to scholars like Butler and Bhabha and evaluates conceptions of the literary text as performative *per se*, as developed by Marie Maclean and Gérard Genette. In addition to this, I introduce the stereotype as a significant analytical category, drawing on insights from cognitive psychology and on Ruth Florack’s study *Bekannte Fremde*.

The second major part of this study opens with an introductory chapter which engages with recent debates around the transnationalization of the field of American studies. Distancing the novels under consideration from the category of the ‘American migrant novel’, I argue that the authors confidently claim inside perspectives on US-American lives and characters or construct a cosmopolitan viewpoint from above. The literary analysis that follows is divided up into three sections, concentrating on “social ties”, “the artist” and “the ‘terrorist’”, respectively. This structure enables an analysis that casts light on three different dimensions of human existence and identifies a disparate set of US-American inoutsiders and cosmopolitan observers.

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The section on ‘social ties’ emphasizes the individual experience of social interaction. Examining Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005), Peter Carey’s *His Illegal Self* (2008) and Imraan Coovadia’s *Green-Eyed Thieves* (2006), the chapters of this section explore encounters with US-Americans and the USA that are conditioned by issues of personal identity and individual ‘belonging’.

The second section contains three close readings that focus on ‘the artist’. The novels under consideration here are Salman Rushdie’s *Fury* (2001), Caryl Phillips’s *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) and Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* (2007). All three novels employ their protagonists as narrative focalizer, depicting the artist’s self-absorbed struggles as expressive of a more general condition of US-American society.

In the third section of close readings, I explore the notion of the ‘terrorist’ as a label that is assigned from the outside and conditions the protagonists’ movements. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* (2004) and DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* (2003) oppose the public demonization of their protagonists and map stories of reluctant emigration from the USA.

The final chapter of this study contextualizes issues raised in the close readings within the conceptual field of cosmopolitanism. Drawing on sociological and anthropological engagements with the cosmopolitan idea, I outline the characteristics of the ‘cosmopolitan perspective’ as a useful analytical tool in literary studies, in the context of this particular study and beyond.

This study incorporates insights from a variety of theoretical perspectives and disciplinary fields and engages with a diverse selection of literary texts. These texts articulate multilayered perceptions of the USA, US-American history, politics and society. In doing so, they do not necessarily answer the simplistic question ‘Why do they hate us?’ (as often asked in the aftermath of 9/11) but propose readings of the USA as situated in a globalized world.

# Part I

“Today, and even more tomorrow, the world is doomed to uniformity.  
And tomorrow has already begun.”

Serge Latouche, *The Westernization of the World*

“The United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images  
but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes”

Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*

## 1. **The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)**

A study that examines engagements with the USA originating in diverse parts of the anglophone world is logically indebted to a perception of the USA as situated in a global context. While such a perspective is today rather commonplace, very limited scholarly attention has been granted to its literary dimension.<sup>11</sup> This is all the more surprising considering the fact that there is no other country today that is so frequently assessed – sometimes praised but more frequently criticized – in terms of its interconnectedness with global matters. The concept of ‘Americanization’ routinely occurs in and more than just occasionally dominates globalization discourses, both in the media and in scholarly debates. Globalization is the game of the hour, and Americanization appears to be one interpretation of the phenomenon, a particularly influential one at that. As a consequence, globalization and Americanization discourses also constitute important parts of the conceptual backdrop of the literary encounters with the USA that this study examines.

Regardless of common pretension to the contrary, it is neither easy to define globalization, nor to characterize its exact relation with Americanization. This chapter aims to clear up some of the confusion surrounding both terms by evaluating conceptions of globalization that either attribute special importance to the role of the USA or question precisely such an ‘americentric’ approach.

Roland Robertson’s description of globalization identifies two of its main features and may serve as a preliminary definition: according to him, globalization “as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of

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<sup>11</sup> One notable exception is Cara Cilano (ed.), *From Solidarity to Schism: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US* (Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 126), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2009.

consciousness of the world as a whole.”<sup>12</sup> Robertson’s definition has been attacked by a number of scholars, in particular by those who favor a primarily economic reading of globalization. Since the 1990s, two opposed conceptions of globalization have manifested themselves more and more rigidly in scholarly writing: one understands globalization as a process of Americanization and consequently homogenization of the world; the second promotes the complete opposite, namely the idea that globalization results in increased plurality and heterogeneity.<sup>13</sup> In response to such seemingly irreconcilable oppositions, Fredric Jameson has called globalization “the modern or postmodern version of the proverbial elephant, described by its blind observers in so many diverse ways.”<sup>14</sup> This chapter constitutes an attempt to cast some light on a variety of impressions of said ‘elephant’.

Readings of globalization that revolve around the idea of a gradual homogenization of the world usually emphasize global economic processes and are connected to concepts like Americanization and cultural imperialism. We frequently encounter such conceptions, openly or implicitly expressed, in newspaper articles and documentary features. Here the ‘homogenization thesis’ surfaces as an integral part of a critical stance that gained currency in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. It is not always the ‘outside world’ (as opposed to the USA) that brings forward theories of Americanization: a number of its most prominent advocates are US-American. The USA’s ‘obsession’ with its own unpopularity can only partly account for this fact, well-documented as it may be in journalistic approaches to the topic.<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin R. Barber’s ‘McWorld’ constitutes one of the most prominent concepts that associate globalization with Americanization. Barber sees globalization

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, London/Newbury Park, CA/New Delhi: Sage, 1992, 8.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, NYC: Columbia UP, 1992. Much is to be said in favor of such an approach. However, conceptualizations that connect globalization with Americanization are obviously more relevant in the context of this particular study.

<sup>14</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Preface,” Fredric Jameson; Masao Miyoshi (eds.), *The Cultures of Globalization* (Post-Contemporary Interventions), Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 1998, XI.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Andrew Kohut; Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked*, NYC: Times Books, 2006; Julia E. Sweig, *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century* (A Council on Foreign Relations Book), NYC: Public Affairs, 2006; Ziauddin Sardar; Meryll Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?* Cambridge: Icon, 2002; Mark Hertsgaard (2002), *The Eagle’s Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World*, NYC: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

as dominated by economic and imperialistic forces which emanate directly from the USA.<sup>16</sup> Cultural globalization is considered merely a minor symptom of an economic pandemic. ‘McWorld’ globally (re)produces the “numbing and neutering uniformities of industrial modernization”<sup>17</sup> by “pressing nations into one homogenous global theme park.”<sup>18</sup> With echoes of postmodern paranoia, Barber describes ‘McWorld’ as a “virtual nowhere land”,<sup>19</sup> a reality “created by invisible but omnipotent high-tech information networks and fluid transnational economic markets.”<sup>20</sup> It is a “chilly new cyberspace [where] yesterday’s invisible hand reaches out to grasp the invisible body of tomorrow’s newly born virtual corporation.”<sup>21</sup>

Barber’s argument relies on the idea that the world of ‘McWorld’ is quintessentially and “prototypically”<sup>22</sup> US-American. It is a system that was implemented to ensure the USA’s position of complete power and to ‘sell’ US-American culture to the world. It is thus seen as eradicating formerly “colorfully distinctive self-images”<sup>23</sup> of peoples around the world and as spreading “American monoculture.”<sup>24</sup> In order to support this point, Barber refers to the usual suspects of Americanization theory: Hollywood film, McDonald’s and Coca-Cola.

The most striking feature of Barber’s depiction of globalization is the nostalgia which characterizes his descriptions of the world ‘as it used to be’. For instance, Barber claims that in the world before McWorld

[the French] ate nonpasteurized Brie and drank *vin de Provence* in cafés and brasseries that were archetypically French; one listened to Edith Piaf and Jacqueline François on French national radio stations and drove 2CV Citroëns and Renault sedans without ever leaving French roadways – two-lane, tree-cordoned affairs that took you through half the villages in France on the way from, say, Paris to Marseille.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, NYC: Ballantine, 1995, 17 and (partly identical phrasing) Barber, *McWorld* 79.

<sup>17</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 9.

<sup>18</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 4.

<sup>19</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 18.

<sup>20</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 26.

<sup>21</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 27.

<sup>22</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 25. There is a notable tendency to conveniently declare anything ‘American’ or ‘Western’ if this supports the general argument of Americanization. For criticism of this approach, see also John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 52.

<sup>24</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 89.

<sup>25</sup> Barber, *McWorld* 52.

The unrestrained romanticism of this image and the nostalgic style of the passage (and others much like it) are typical of writings supporting the Americanization thesis. For instance, Serge Latouche's *The Westernization of the World* is closely related to Barber's work both in thought and diction. Like Barber, Latouche stresses the "worldwide standardization of lifestyles"<sup>26</sup> which he claims to be the natural consequence of Western domination. He paints a bleak picture of the development of the world, calling Westernization a

mad machine [which] has shaken off all human attempts to stop it and now roves the planet, uprooting what and where it will: tearing men from their native ground, even in the furthest reaches of the world, and hurling them into urban deserts without any attempt to adjust them to the limitless industrialization, bureaucracy and technical 'progress' which the machine is pursuing.<sup>27</sup>

The lyrical style of works such as Latouche's is characteristic for the genre of the anti-Americanization jeremiad. Barber and Latouche provoke emotional responses rather than offering a systematic analysis of the complex topic of globalization, no matter how many statistics they cite – and sometimes misinterpret – in order to support their claims. It appears to be one of the common misconceptions of homogenization theorists that the degree of globalization or Americanization can be easily measured, for example by counting the number of Hollywood movies that make it to a given country's cinemas.<sup>28</sup>

Fredric Jameson's reading of globalization subscribes to parts of the Americanization thesis, however, displays more rhetorical refinement than Barber's and Latouche's approaches. In his essay "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," he initially proposes an even-handed approach to the topic, introducing both sides of the homogenization vs. plurality debate. Nevertheless Jameson's actual loyalties are transparent. The claim that globalization might in fact produce cultural variety is quickly dismissed as "one of the most vital utopian visions of our time."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Serge Latouche, *The Westernization of the World*, Transl. Rosemary Morris, Cambridge: Polity, 1996 [French original version *L'occidentalisation du monde*, La Découverte, 1989], 3.

<sup>27</sup> Latouche, *Westernization* 3f. Significantly, Latouche mostly speaks of 'Westernization' rather than 'Americanization'.

<sup>28</sup> For this particular example see Richard Kuisel, "Debating Americanization: The Case of France," Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 95–113, here 97.

<sup>29</sup> Jameson, "Notes on Globalization" 66.



Instead, Jameson defines globalization as “the worldwide Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences.”<sup>30</sup> US-American mass culture is considered the main drive behind this violent process of destruction which is enforced by “great, mostly American-based transnational or multinational corporations.”<sup>31</sup> The guiding principle behind Jameson’s neo-Marxist reading of globalization is the master theory of US-American cultural imperialism violently destroying defenceless local culture(s).<sup>32</sup>

There is a sizable number of scholars whose argument runs along similar lines.<sup>33</sup> In “Hyperpower Exceptionalism: Globalization the American Way,” Jan Nederveen Pieterse analyzes the evils of Americanization from a perspective conditioned by eurocentric sentiment. He seeks to explain what he describes as the essential “lack of depth”<sup>34</sup> of US-American culture (as opposed to European cultures) which is transmitted, like a disease, to the rest of the world. The answers that he provides rely on the idea that US-American modernity suffers from a general lack of complexity that is a consequence of the country’s deficiency of history and tradition.<sup>35</sup>

George Ritzer’s concept of ‘McDonaldization’<sup>36</sup> is very often mentioned in the same breath as Barber’s McWorld. However, it is important to differentiate since Ritzer’s approach is significantly more sophisticated than Barber’s. Ritzer does not propose a master theory of globalization but merely describes a process that *also* takes place as part of globalization (in addition to its importance for developments

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<sup>30</sup> Jameson, “Notes on Globalization” 57.

<sup>31</sup> Jameson, “Notes on Globalization” 64.

<sup>32</sup> Jameson, “Notes on Globalization” 63.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Geeta Kapur, “Globalization and Culture: Navigating the Void,” Fredric Jameson; Masao Miyoshi (eds.), *The Cultures of Globalization* (Post-Contemporary Interventions), Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 1998, 191–217.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Hyperpower Exceptionalism: Globalization the American Way,” Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 67–94, here 75.

<sup>35</sup> This classic perception of the USA is also discussed in part I, chapter 2 (“Inquiries into Anti-Americanism”).

<sup>36</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Revised New Century Edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2004. The original edition was published in 1993. The “New Century Edition” is more interesting in the context of this study as Ritzer has added a chapter on the connection between globalization and McDonaldization.

within the USA). The concepts of ‘McWorld’ and ‘McDonaldization’ thus differ in scope and focus even if they overlap in significant areas.

At the most fundamental level, McDonaldization is a Neo-Weberian model, rendering “more timely”<sup>37</sup> – as Ritzer claims – what Weber called the rationalization process. Its basic characteristics are ‘efficiency’, ‘calculability’, ‘predictability’ and ‘control’, four principles well represented in the tightly-structured processes of the McDonald’s restaurants. According to Ritzer’s own definition, McDonaldization is “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.”<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that the reference to ‘more and more sectors of society’ does not necessarily suggest cultural homogenization as such. Nevertheless it is clear that the rationalization of processes leads to certain types of standardization which in Ritzer’s view can extend to a very general – and also cultural – level: “On a global scale, travellers are finding more familiarity and less diversity.”<sup>39</sup>

In the New Century Edition of *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer makes a specific effort to draw attention to convergences and possible differences between globalization and McDonaldization. However, even in the original edition ‘McDonaldization’ was more than a mere synonym for globalization or Americanization. Yet, Ritzer and Stillman have elsewhere stressed that “at this point in history McDonaldization and Americanization go hand in hand,”<sup>40</sup> the spread of McDonaldized systems being among the common features of Americanization.<sup>41</sup> Ritzer and Stillman – like other homogenization theorists – identify capitalism as the driving force behind globalization, and of course it is historically and causally accurate to stress its importance for the development of the globalized world. Ritzer furthermore claims that the McDonaldization of processes – that is: their rationalization – inevitably is one of the major goals of any globalization that is

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<sup>37</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* XIII.

<sup>38</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 147.

<sup>40</sup> George Ritzer; Todd Stillman, “Assessing McDonaldization, Americanization and Globalization,” Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 30–48, here 31.

<sup>41</sup> Ritzer, “McDonaldization” 35.

defined exclusively in economic terms.<sup>42</sup> Ritzer acknowledges that this is not necessarily a one-way development and that today “McDonaldization is coming full circle. Other countries with their own McDonaldized institutions have begun to export them to the United States.”<sup>43</sup> He grants that there might be other forces, for instance Japanization, coming to oppose and even hybridize their US-American counterpart.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Ritzer argues that Americanization can be considered an important and powerful force of globalization that frequently also dominates local contexts in other parts of the world.<sup>45</sup>

Ritzer’s objection to Roland Robertson’s concept of ‘glocalization’, implying a potentially productive interaction between the global and the local, is that it may trivialize the actual dangers of globalization.<sup>46</sup> In *The Globalization of Nothing*, Ritzer therefore develops a concept to counter ‘glocalization’ and comes up with the awkward neologism ‘grobalization’ to describe

the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas. Their main interest is in seeing their power, influence, and in some cases profit grow (hence the term *grobalization*) throughout the world.<sup>47</sup>

‘Grobalization’ theory emphasizes “the increasing number of similarities that characterize many areas of the world”<sup>48</sup> and thus is more convergent with the concept of Americanization than McDonaldization. Yet, Ritzer maintains that “both capitalism and McDonaldization are purer grobalization forces than Americanization.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 162.

<sup>43</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ritzer and Stillman, “McDonaldization” 35. See also George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing 2*, Thousand Oaks, CA/London/New Delhi: Pine Forge, 2007, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Ritzer and Stillman, “McDonaldization” 44.

<sup>46</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 163.

<sup>47</sup> Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing 2* 15f. *The Globalization of Nothing 2* is an updated and revised version of *The Globalization of Nothing* that discusses globalization at greater length than the original version. Ritzer’s views on ‘glocalization’ seem to have softened somewhat since the publication of the first edition. He now amicably suggests ‘grobalization’ merely as “a much-needed companion for glocalization” and claims that “what is needed is not a choice between the cultural convergence and the hybridization paradigms but the integration of the two – the use of both to offer a better understanding of globalization in general” (Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing 2* 15).

<sup>48</sup> Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 165.

<sup>49</sup> Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing 2* 30.

*The Globalization of Nothing* depends on a basic distinction between ‘nothing’ and ‘something’: ‘nothing’ refers to “a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content”<sup>50</sup> while ‘something’ is defined as “a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content.”<sup>51</sup> Ritzer’s idea of the ‘indigenously conceived’ that is ‘rich in distinctive substantive content’ correlates with common arguments stressing the authentic quality of local cultures and indigenous peoples. Ritzer concedes the existence of various combinations of globalization/glocalization and nothing/something. Nevertheless he foregrounds the two extreme poles of the ‘globalization of nothing’ and the ‘glocalization of something’, unsurprisingly establishing the USA as “the center of both globalization and nothing.”<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to most other homogenization theorists, Ritzer admits that certain types of standardization, for instance regarding sanitary conditions, prove beneficial for the local context. On the other hand, Ritzer’s position differs sharply from the affirmative attitude that Todd Gitlin has displayed in an article on “The Unification of the World under the Signs of Mickey Mouse and Bruce Willis.” Indeed, few scholars would subscribe to such an enthusiastic view of the “dominance of American popular culture as a global lingua franca.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, this perception is noteworthy in the context of this study: the authors of the novels that I examine appear to consider insight into US-American life and culture as a knowledge that is globally shared or, at least, that their cosmopolitan lifestyle provides them with. In addition to this, a number of them access English as a kind of literary *lingua franca*; their work demonstrates how linguistic (and cultural) content changes shape and meaning as it is adapted within different contexts and to an individual’s creative agenda.

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<sup>50</sup> Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* 2 36.

<sup>51</sup> Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* 2 38.

<sup>52</sup> Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* 2 119.

<sup>53</sup> Todd Gitlin, “The Unification of the World under the Signs of Mickey Mouse and Bruce Willis: The Supply and Demand Sides of American Popular Culture,” Berndt Ostendorf (ed.), *Transnational America: The Fading of Borders in the Western Hemisphere* (Publications of the Bavarian American Academy 2), Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2002, 117.

Homogenization scholars tend to claim that cultural processes of globalization are determined by economic forces. On the other hand, even if globalization is primarily understood as a development dominated by economics, this does not necessarily mean that it always leads to standardization and homogenization. As Scott Lash and John Urry have pointed out in *The End of Organized Capitalism*, the current development of ‘disorganized capitalism’ is indeed characterized by an “increase in cultural fragmentation and pluralism”<sup>54</sup> and generally a decrease of control ‘from the top’. Furthermore, a number of opponents of the homogenization thesis have drawn attention to the fact that variety and differentiation are central requirements of the global market and a decisive feature of a successful (that means: profitable) marketing of products on a large scale.<sup>55</sup>

In the preceding pages, I have drawn attention to some of the flaws of homogenization theory. There is, however, another extremely significant point that can be made in opposition to most theories that complain about the evils of (supposedly US-American) consumer culture spreading around the globe: these concepts tend to ignore the fact that global consumer culture is above all a consequence of a new dimension of mass prosperity. It would be nothing but cynical (especially from a US-American or European perspective) to wish oneself back to the times when commodities were still more exclusively restricted to a very small fraction of the world and therefore naturally less ‘McDonaldized’.<sup>56</sup>

It is also evident that concepts of global homogenization such as McWorld and Americanization, continually referring to the same icons of – sometimes only allegedly – US-American popular culture as the ultimate markers of sameness, imply an extremely shallow understanding of the word ‘culture’. After all, it is quite contestable that local culture has been erased completely wherever we encounter a new branch of McDonald’s. People may eat at McDonald’s and may watch

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<sup>54</sup> Scott Lash; John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity, 1987, 6.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* Transl. Patrick Camiller, Cambridge: Polity, 2000 [German original version *Was ist Globalisierung?* Suhrkamp, 1997], 46; Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time – Space and Homogeneity – Heterogeneity,” Mike Featherstone; Scott Lash; Roland Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities*, London/Thousand Oaks, CA/New Delhi: Sage, 1997, 38 or Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter, “Introduction,” Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 1–11, here 3.

<sup>56</sup> See also Sznajder, “Introduction” 3.

Hollywood movies but that certainly is only the tip of the iceberg of their cultural experience and self-expression. Those who merely search for Coca Cola bottles and Kentucky Fried Chicken wrappers will most likely find confirmation for their narrow-minded ideas about the world. As John Tomlinson pointedly remarks:

The assertion of global homogenization of culture is a little like arriving by plane but never leaving the terminal, spending all one's time browsing amongst the global brands of the duty free shops.<sup>57</sup>

In order to leave the terminal building (and to catch a closer look at that 'elephant' called globalization), I will now turn to those readings of globalization that emphasize the complexity and plurality of globalization processes. From this perspective, global culture is not just the arena of global economic procedures but a vibrant field of exchange and interaction.

Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* is one of the most influential works that describe globalization in such terms. According to Appadurai, media and migration are the two major diacritics of modernity in a globalized world, creating a state of constant movement, a rapid oscillation of images and identifications.<sup>58</sup> The central characteristic of this connection between 'moving pictures' and 'moving people' is that "both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation," engaging in a "mobile and unforeseeable relationship."<sup>59</sup>

Appadurai dismisses the idea that globalization should "necessarily or even frequently"<sup>60</sup> be linked to homogenization or Americanization. He concedes that globalization at times works with "a variety of instruments of homogenization [...] that are absorbed into local political and cultural economies."<sup>61</sup> Of course, it is rather telling that Appadurai speaks of 'a *variety* of instruments of *homogenization*'. He further points out that fears of homogenization can easily be and frequently have been instrumentalized, for instance by nation-states that try to divert attention from their own hegemonic interests in relation to local minority groups.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 6.

<sup>58</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Public Worlds 1), Minneapolis, MN/London: U of Minnesota Press, 1996, 3f.

<sup>59</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 4.

<sup>60</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 17.

<sup>61</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 42.

<sup>62</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 32.

The quotation from Appadurai's work that precedes this chapter, characterizing the USA as now merely "one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes,"<sup>63</sup> demonstrates Appadurai's multi-polar conception of the globalized world. The USA may be one major exporter of cultural images and goods. However, these are quickly "indigenized"<sup>64</sup> as they travel to local contexts, ultimately turning the United States into "a huge, fascinating garage sale for the rest of the world."<sup>65</sup> Appadurai emphasizes the strong potential for "resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, *agency*"<sup>66</sup> that he detects in the way local communities respond to such cultural imports. It may be justified to be skeptical about this broadly optimistic assessment but – significantly in this particular context – irony, selectivity and agency certainly figure prominently in the literary engagements with the USA under consideration in the second part of this study.

Appadurai draws attention to the "free-floating yearning for American style" that can be found "even in the most intense contexts of opposition to the United States"<sup>67</sup> but stresses the importance of the distinction between the USA as a nation and 'America', the global utopia.<sup>68</sup> The USA as Appadurai perceives it is characterized by an "uneasy engagement with diasporic peoples, mobile technologies, and queer nationalities" that threatens the image of 'America' as "the heart of whiteness."<sup>69</sup> However, Appadurai argues that the central quality of the USA and its main attraction to diasporic peoples has long been its "very unruliness, the rank unpredictability, the quirky inventiveness, the sheer cultural vitality of this free-trade zone."<sup>70</sup> This is a somewhat idealistic claim: many migrants seek freedom and democracy or follow the promise of wealth and of the meritocratic system, as novels like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* attest. Either way, Appadurai rejects the idea that the USA or any other part of

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<sup>63</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 31.

<sup>64</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 32.

<sup>65</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 174. Geeta Kapur has dismissed this idea as a common misconception, calling it the "recycling argument" (Kapur, "Globalization and Culture" 202).

<sup>66</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 7 [Appadurai's emphasis].

<sup>67</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 174.

<sup>68</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 176.

<sup>69</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 159.

<sup>70</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 175.

today's globalized world could ever be as homogeneous as some scholars would have us believe.

Ulrich Beck, the author of *What is Globalization?*, has been an early authority in the debate around globalization. Beck offers the following general definition: “*Globalization* [...] denotes the *processes* through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientation, identities and networks.”<sup>71</sup> This comparatively open definition does not automatically imply cultural homogenization and hegemony. Indeed, Beck has elsewhere dismissed the concept of Americanization as essentially flawed due to its reliance on a national understanding<sup>72</sup> of what is after all a radically transnational process.<sup>73</sup> In Beck's view, globalizing forces work towards a process of active “*denationalization*”<sup>74</sup> and a disruption of boundaries. If Americanization can be described as possibly *one* force working in the context of globalization, ‘Asianization’, for instance, must be another relevant force.<sup>75</sup>

Globalization, both in economic and in cultural terms, proves to be a process characterized by ambivalence and paradoxes instead of standardization. Yet Beck's dialectic reading of globalization also shows the flipside of globalizing processes. One negative feature of globalization is what he calls a ‘Brazilianization’ of the world, the exclusion of those who lack the purchasing power to participate in the global game of exchange and interaction.<sup>76</sup> Following Zygmunt Bauman,<sup>77</sup> Beck argues that in today's globalized world, the ‘winners’ no longer depend on the ‘losers’ who have been stripped of all instruments of power and influence other than terrorism and naked violence.<sup>78</sup> This condition is well-documented by some of the

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<sup>71</sup> Beck, *What is Globalization?* 11 [Beck's emphasis].

<sup>72</sup> Ulrich Beck, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism: Emerging from a Rivalry of Distinctions,” Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 15–29, here 16.

<sup>73</sup> Beck, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 20.

<sup>74</sup> Beck, *What is Globalization?* 14 [Beck's emphasis].

<sup>75</sup> Beck, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 20. See also, for instance, Ahmad Najib Burhani's article on the ‘Arabisation’ of Indonesia (“Westernisation vs. Arabisation,” *The Malaysian Insider*, 16 February 2010, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/breakingviews/article/Westernisation-vs-Arabisation-Ahmad-Najib-Burhani-/> (1 July 2011)).

<sup>76</sup> Beck, *What is Globalization?* 50f.

<sup>77</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (European Perspectives), NYC: Columbia UP, 1998, 72. See also Bauman, *Globalization* 21f.

<sup>78</sup> Beck, *What is Globalization?* 97f.



literary texts under consideration in this study, in particular Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) may serve as an additional example.

Roland Robertson is considered one of the most significant thinkers on cultural globalization. It is thus interesting that the USA is only mentioned in passing in Robertson's *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (1992). At least at the time, Americanization did not appear to be a great point of concern to Robertson who dismissed the idea that globalization could be explained "in terms of one particular process or factor."<sup>79</sup>

To describe the processes that he believes to stand at the centre of globalization, namely "the simultaneity and the interpenetration [...] of the global and the local,"<sup>80</sup> Robertson coined the term 'glocalization'. According to this concept, the local appears as "an aspect of globalization"<sup>81</sup> and is not simply erased by globalizing processes. It is debatable whether the local necessarily becomes part of the global to the extent that Robertson imagines but Robertson's concept clearly suggests a world marked by plurality rather than by homogeneity. Robertson also makes a strong case against the concept of Americanization by pointing out that "even 'cultural messages' which emanate directly from 'the USA' are *differentially* received and interpreted; that 'local' groups 'absorb' communication from the 'centre' in a great variety of ways."<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, he stresses the importance of influences – "the flow of ideas and practices"<sup>83</sup> – coming from the so-called Third World to the allegedly dominant parts of the world: "Much of global 'mass culture'," Robertson argues, "is in fact impregnated with ideas, styles and genres"<sup>84</sup> coming from varying contexts. Globalization, as conceptualized by Robertson, is never just a case of either homogenization or heterogenization but inevitably incorporates features of both forces.

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<sup>79</sup> Roland Robertson, "Mapping the Global Condition: Globalization as the Central Concept," Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (Theory, Culture and Society special issue), London/Newbury Park, CA/New Delhi: Sage, 1990, 15–30, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Robertson, "Glocalization" 30.

<sup>81</sup> Robertson, "Glocalization" 30 [Robertson's emphasis].

<sup>82</sup> Robertson, "Glocalization" 38 [Robertson's emphasis].

<sup>83</sup> Robertson, "Glocalization" 38.

<sup>84</sup> Robertson, "Glocalization" 39.

Robertson has recently given more attention to theories of Americanization, yet his attitude remains skeptical: in “Rethinking Americanization,” he accuses Americanization theorists of unbalanced researching and a tendency of reveling in hysteria.<sup>85</sup> In criticism of Robertson’s position it must however be added that the distinction between (positive and complex) cultural influence originating in the USA and (evil) Americanization that he suggests largely depends on the good old distinction between high and low culture, the Guggenheim-Museum in Bilbao vs. films starring Sylvester Stallone.<sup>86</sup>

In his contribution to the *Handbook of Social Theory* (co-edited by George Ritzer), Robertson delivers an even-handed assessment of both sides of the argument around globalization. His conclusion remains that the terms ‘globalization’ and ‘homogenization’ should not be used synonymously and that the importance of processes of Americanization is generally exaggerated. What might be interpreted as Americanized global culture is very frequently “a pastiche of American popular culture, unrecognizable in its crassness as ‘American’.”<sup>87</sup> Robertson emphasizes the essentially transnational nature of globalization and dismisses the homogenization argument as “remarkably unsubtle and lacking in a seriously analytical mode of enquiry.”<sup>88</sup> Even though he acknowledges the commodification of cultures as a process that is significant to the age of globalization, he stresses that an exclusively economic reading of globalization is too limited and ultimately fails to capture its central characteristics.<sup>89</sup>

John Tomlinson’s book *Globalization and Culture* offers a particularly balanced overview of the debate around cultural globalization. Tomlinson defines globalization as a “complex connectivity”,<sup>90</sup> understanding it in terms of “simultaneous, complexly related processes in the realms of economy, politics,

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<sup>85</sup> Roland Robertson, “Rethinking Americanization,” Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 257–264, here 257ff.

<sup>86</sup> Robertson, “Rethinking Americanization” 261.

<sup>87</sup> Roland Robertson, “Globalization Theory 2000+: Major Problematics,” George Ritzer; Barry Smart (eds.), *Handbook of Social Theory*, London/Thousand Oaks, CA/New Delhi: Sage, 2000, 465.

<sup>88</sup> Robertson, “Globalization Theory 2000+” 464.

<sup>89</sup> Robertson, “Globalization Theory 2000+” 461.

<sup>90</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization 2*.

culture, technology and so forth.”<sup>91</sup> He points out that many theoretical approaches disregard the ambivalences and paradoxes that globalization contains:

[I]t is not surprising that attempts persist to account for globalization in ‘one-dimensional’ terms. [...] But if we take multidimensionality seriously, such accounts are bound to misrepresent globalization: lose the complexity and you have lost the phenomenon.<sup>92</sup>

Tomlinson does not deny the importance of economic forces, yet emphasizes the limitations of a purely economic approach:

The dynamics of capitalism in each of its moments of the production, circulation and consumption of commodities is heavy with implications for our increasing interconnectedness. However this does not mean that the economic analysis of transnational capitalism is the royal road of grasping globalization.<sup>93</sup>

Tomlinson concedes that the commodification of cultural experience is an extremely important aspect of modern life but questions that it automatically results in the emergence of a “single hegemonic ‘homogenized’ global culture.”<sup>94</sup> In reference to those (primarily US-American) products that by now have spread around the world, he argues convincingly that

if we assume that the sheer global presence of these goods is *in itself* token of a convergence towards a capitalist monoculture, we are probably utilizing a rather impoverished concept of culture – one that reduces culture to its material goods. [...] culture should (at least) be seen as existentially meaningful symbolization and experience. On this view, the thesis of global cultural convergence must contain the idea that our (that is everyone’s) interaction with these goods penetrates deeply into the way in which we construct our ‘phenomenal worlds’ and make sense of our lives.<sup>95</sup>

In strong opposition to such a superficial reading of culture, Tomlinson expresses the conviction that it is the “journey into localities” that provides us with the possibility to witness the “challenging reality of cultural difference.”<sup>96</sup> In extension of this thought, I consider the examination of novels such as the ones under consideration in this study an exploration of ‘textual localities’.

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<sup>91</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 16.

<sup>92</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 14.

<sup>93</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 16f.

<sup>94</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 83.

<sup>95</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 83 [Tomlinson’s emphasis].

<sup>96</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 8.

Tomlinson does not reduce the idea of global heterogeneity to a simplistic vision of ‘happy hybridity’ but acknowledges the fact that the “new world of decentred global capitalism” is also a world in which “events can be unpredictable, indiscriminate, instantaneous and catastrophic.”<sup>97</sup> He emphasizes that even though globalization is not simply the “story of the unilinear advance of the West,”<sup>98</sup> it is nevertheless a story that has its winners and losers.

In his essay “Living in a Post-Traditional Society,” Anthony Giddens calls globalization “an ‘in here’ matter, which affects, or rather is dialectically related to, even the most intimate aspects of our lives.”<sup>99</sup> He argues that the first phase of globalization was indeed shaped by Western domination but that globalization since has developed into a process in which not only “the other ‘answers back’, but [...] mutual interrogation is possible.”<sup>100</sup> Other scholars have emphasized the diverse and imaginary nature of the ‘America’ that is so seductive to other parts of the world.<sup>101</sup> A large number of globalization scholars appear to have come to the conclusion that globalization is not simply to be equated with Americanization. Nevertheless, the purely economic reading persists. It is with this fact in mind that I had engaged in a literary analysis that aims to show how far writers have ventured out and left behind the restrictive ‘terminal building’ of the homogenization thesis. Most of the literary engagements with the USA under consideration paint a picture that is more ambiguous than Barber or Latouche might suggest. Maybe it is up to literature – rather than to theory – to outline the complexities and to visit the manifold localities of individual perception. The perspectives on the USA explored in this study are conditioned by its interaction with a globalized world. In such a world not even the USA is completely ‘Americanized’.

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<sup>97</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 94.

<sup>98</sup> Tomlinson, *Globalization* 97.

<sup>99</sup> Anthony Giddens, “Living in a Post-Traditional Society,” Ulrich Beck; Anthony Giddens; Scott Lash (eds.), *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Traditions and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge: Polity, 1994, 56–109, here 95.

<sup>100</sup> Giddens, “Living in a Post-Traditional Society” 97.

<sup>101</sup> See, for instance, Gerard Delanty, “Consumption, Modernity and Japanese Cultural Identity: The Limits of Americanization?” Ulrich Beck; Nathan Sznajder; Rainer Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Studies in Social and Political Thought 8), Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003, 114–133.

“America is the world’s living myth. There’s no sense of wrong when you kill an American or blame America for some local disaster. This is our function, to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort themselves, justify themselves and so on. We’re here to accommodate. Whatever people need, we provide. A myth is a useful thing.”

James Axton in Don DeLillo, *The Names*

## 2. Inquiries into Anti-Americanism

Since its early colonial times in the seventeenth century, the territory that was later to become the United States of America was perceived as a place for new beginnings, a space of freshness and possibility. The promise of this ‘land of opportunity’ resonated in the ‘pursuit of happiness’ proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and hardened into national myth during the time of industrialization. In the twentieth century, the conception of the ‘American Dream’<sup>102</sup> came to encompass the essence of America’s belief in its own tales of ‘rags to riches’. Safe haven to Jewish refugees and rising global power in a world of declining empires, the United States of America became a favorite destination of migrants from all over the world.

Echoes of the ‘American Dream’ can be traced to iconic US-American speeches and continue to be central tropes in US-American political rhetoric and life writing to the present day. On the other hand, social and economic realities in the United States frequently have contradicted the idealistic vision of the ‘American Dream’. Nevertheless, it has retained the capacity to draw in people from diverse corners of the planet and it remains a central motif of US-American popular culture. While Hollywood has long fed on its fictional and real-life incarnations, the pursuit of the ‘American Dream’ – and frequently its disappointment – also constituted a major topic in twentieth-century literatures. The twenty-first-century novels that I examine in this study are ample proof of the continued importance of the ‘American Dream’ as a reference point for literary encounters with the United States. For instance, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* each depict the disappointment of an ‘American Dream’. In Imraan

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<sup>102</sup> The term was probably coined by James Truslow Adams who, however, used it in a more general sense to describe the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” and “of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” ((1931) *The Epic of America*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co, 1932, 404).

Coovadia's *Green-Eyed Thieves*, the 'American Dream' is one of many models which the protagonist simultaneously pursues *and* parodies.

While the 'American Dream' remains a powerful ideal, global attitudes towards the United States have long ceased to be dominated by admiration, if they ever were. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, critical and sometimes even hateful voices were increasingly drowning out idealized perceptions of the United States. The 'American Dream' seems to have lost part of its worldwide persuasiveness while the roar of anti-Americanism has claimed global attention. It is as yet hard to judge whether the spread of anti-American sentiment in the past decade has led to an ongoing erosion of the 'American Dream' but it has certainly left its mark on global literary engagements with the United States.

Indeed, fictional texts may lend a voice to grievances against the United States long before political action or historical evaluation has caught up with the specific situation the texts have arisen from. Literary analysis can thus fruitfully complement social, political and historical inquiries into anti-Americanism.<sup>103</sup> Conversely, the tension between anti-American discourses and the ideal of the 'American Dream' constitutes an important driving force for contemporary novels set in the USA. Thus scholarship on anti-Americanism and on 'individual anti-Americanisms' and conceptions of the United States that find expression in literary works can only benefit from being brought into active dialogue with each other. In the following pages, I set the foundation for such an approach and outline some of the major findings of scholarship on global perceptions of the USA.

If there have been shifts in global sentiment towards the United States, these have become ever more noticeable in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. In most parts of the globe, immediate responses to the terrorist attacks were characterized by sympathy for the victims and solidarity with the United States. However, global public support dwindled away as the Bush administration pushed forward its 'global war on terror'. It is notable that comprehensive scholarship on anti-Americanism has

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<sup>103</sup> I am not proposing a New Historicist approach to literary texts but merely wish to stress the rather obvious fact that sometimes literature can help us to understand areas of real life where empirical scholarship fails.

increased during the past decade.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, scholarly dialogue on the topic continues to be afflicted with a long-standing and often dogmatic disagreement on how to define and explain anti-Americanism. Opposing camps have tended to define it either as a kind of unjustified bias, often driven by ulterior motives, or as a justified response to US-American misconduct.<sup>105</sup>

The tendency to consider anti-Americanism a concrete and largely legitimate expression of criticism is prevalent among leftist commentators. It is also widespread among scholars focusing on geographical regions that have witnessed massive political and military involvement of the United States, such as the Middle East and Latin America.<sup>106</sup> In its extreme forms, this position has led to statements declaring the events of 11 September 2001 a natural consequence of US-American foreign policy and implying that the United States had ‘had it coming’.

The other side of the spectrum is characterized by the conviction that anti-Americanism can usually be dismissed as a hostile bias and as “to varying degrees unfounded.”<sup>107</sup> According to this reading, anti-Americanism is mostly inspired by “a scapegoating impulse”<sup>108</sup> or

the compelling need to find some clear-cut and morally satisfying explanation for a wide range of unwelcome circumstances associated with either actual states or feelings of backwardness, inferiority, weakness, diminished competitiveness, or a loss of coherence and stability in the life of a nation, group, or individual.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> See also Alan McPherson, “Introduction: *Antiyanquismo*: Nascent Scholarship, Ancient Sentiments,” Alan McPherson (ed.), *Anti-Americanism in Latin America and the Caribbean*, NYC/Oxford: Berghahn, 2006, 1–34, here 9.

<sup>105</sup> See Brendon O’Connor, “A History of Anti-Americanism: From Buffon to Bush,” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 2: Historical Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 1–27, here 6f. Brendon O’Connor has identified a number of other conceptions of anti-Americanism in popular and scholarly debate, for instance anti-Americanism as “one side of a dichotomy” (pro-American vs. anti-American), a “pathology” or an “ideology” (“What is Anti-Americanism?” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 1: Causes and Sources*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 1–21, here 8ff.).

<sup>106</sup> See, for instance, Sigrid Faath; Hanspeter Mattes, *Antiamerikanismus und politische Gewalt: Ausdrucksformen und Potential in Nordafrika/Nahost* (wuqûf – Kurzanalysen 13), Hamburg: Edition wuqûf, 2001; On regional differences, see Brendon O’Connor, “Introduction: Comparative Perspectives,” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 3: Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, XIII–XVIII, here XIII f.

<sup>107</sup> Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad. 1965–1990*, NYC/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992, VIII.

<sup>108</sup> Hollander, *Anti-Americanism* 335.

<sup>109</sup> Hollander, *Anti-Americanism* 343.

This explanation of anti-Americanism is frequent among conservative scholars and has often been used to discredit reasonable criticism of US-American foreign policy. It rests on the assumption that anti-American views tell us much about the person holding them and little about the United States.<sup>110</sup>

In its conception as a form of prejudice, anti-Americanism is frequently claimed to share certain characteristics with other forms of prejudice, such as racism, sexism and, in particular, anti-Semitism.<sup>111</sup> While it is certainly true that anti-Americanism sometimes overlaps with anti-Semitism, in particular in the Middle Eastern context, anti-American views do not necessarily contain elements of anti-Semitism.<sup>112</sup> To claim otherwise does not only mean playing into the hands of those who aim to discredit legitimate protest against US-American policies. What is more, it means ignoring the relevance of power structures: at a time when the USA arguably is the only remaining world power, the country's policies affect people all around the world who frequently see their lives at the mercy of US-American objectives. Sometimes anti-American voices merely constitute what is felt to be a last resort of opposition to an omnipotent US-American foreign policy, frequently in coalition with an oppressive local government. As such, they should be taken seriously.

More balanced views on anti-Americanism resist the clear distinction between justified criticism and prejudice. Graeme Orr, for instance, defines anti-Americanism as “a *reactive* manifestation of a *stereotyping* of things American.”<sup>113</sup> Brendon O'Connor stresses that it is “a prejudicial position often born out of grievances that

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<sup>110</sup> Richard Boyd and Brandon Turner, for instance, have suggested that “the American personality is like a Rorschach test: nebulous and amorphous, and [...] these criticisms of the American personality tell us more about the observers themselves than the empirical realities of the American scene” (“Anti-Americanism and the American Personality,” Brendon O'Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 1: Causes and Sources*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 115–137, here 116).

<sup>111</sup> See Hollander, *Anti-Americanism* 337; See also Christian Schwaabe, *Antiamerikanismus: Wandlungen eines Feindbildes*, München: Wilhelm Fink, 2003, 210.

<sup>112</sup> For an interesting if controversial analysis of connections between anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism see Andrei S. Markovits, “European Anti-Semitism and Anti-Americanism,” Brendon O'Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 2: Historical Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 119–150, here 119f.

<sup>113</sup> Graeme Orr, “American Democracy and Anti-Americanism since 2000,” Brendon O'Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 1: Causes and Sources*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 163–185, here 165 [my emphasis].



are both justifiably *and* unjustifiably held.”<sup>114</sup> Indeed, anti-American views usually contain elements of both sides of the argument even though degrees vary significantly. Alan McPherson argues that

anti-Americanism should be treated as an ideology in the cultural sense of the word, a protean set of images, ideas, and practices that both explain why the world is how it is and set forth a justification for future action. This definition of ideology assumes that anti-Americanism contains some negative stereotypes and simplifications, much as all ideologies do, especially those with the prefix ‘anti-.’ But it also advances that, as a complex system of thought, anti-Americanism cannot be dismissed as a mere political tool used by elites to manipulate the masses.<sup>115</sup>

At its most fundamental level, anti-Americanism can be defined as a psychological disposition to hold negative views on the United States in general or on selected areas of US-American life, society and culture.<sup>116</sup> As pointed out by Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane, it may contain “aspects of both instrumental rationality and social construction.”<sup>117</sup> It is conditioned and influenced by specific events and grievances but simultaneously rests on generalized assumptions and stereotyping. Anti-American attitudes are rarely all-encompassing. Instead, a person can easily subscribe to anti-American perceptions of US-American foreign policy or US-American popular culture and nevertheless admire US-American literature or the country’s technical achievements.<sup>118</sup> The fact that ‘some of one’s best friends’ are US-American does not constitute a vaccination against anti-American views. Furthermore, manifestations of anti-Americanism can vary drastically, ranging from mere opinions to terrorist attacks.

As indicated by a number of typologies that have been developed by scholars, motivations behind anti-American views and actions can also differ significantly. Alvin Rubinstein and Donald Smith have distinguished between ‘issue-oriented’,

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<sup>114</sup> O’Connor, “A History of Anti-Americanism” 7 [O’Connor’s emphasis].

<sup>115</sup> McPherson, “Introduction: *Antiyanquismo*” 1.

<sup>116</sup> See also Peter J. Katzenstein; Robert O. Keohane, “Varieties of Anti-Americanism: A Framework for Analysis,” Robert O. Keohane; Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Cornell Studies in Political Economy), Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell UP, 2007, 9–38, here 12.

<sup>117</sup> Katzenstein, “Varieties of Anti-Americanism” 13.

<sup>118</sup> See Katzenstein, “Varieties of Anti-Americanism” 16.

‘ideological’, ‘instrumental’ and ‘revolutionary’ anti-Americanism.<sup>119</sup> Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane, on the other hand, identify ‘liberal’, ‘social’, ‘sovereign-nationalist’, ‘radical’ and ‘elitist’ anti-Americanism.<sup>120</sup> A distinction between different types can be conceptually helpful in certain contexts. However, Andrew and Kristin Ross’s division between ‘anti-Americanism from above’, “an elitist contempt for the vulgarity of American life”, and ‘anti-Americanism from below’, which is considered to be rooted in “organic responses to the brutal record of native genocide and plantation slavery”, is surely too simplistic.<sup>121</sup> This is particularly true if, as in the present case, the object of inquiry is literature. Anti-American sentiment as it is negotiated in the novels under consideration in this study often combines features of elitist contempt *and* organic protest.

One central problem in studying anti-Americanism is that, especially in its less extreme forms, it is notoriously difficult to identify and to distinguish from other forms of negative opinion. As a consequence, scholars have frequently fallen into the trap of opinion polling, employing polling data to ‘measure’ anti-Americanism. Much to their credit, a number of scholars have spoken out against this tendency in recent years.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, opinion polls such as the ones performed by Gallup or by the Pew Research Center continue to enjoy massive popularity among scholars, and polling results are frequently read as either expressions of anti-Americanism or proof of its absence. Despite self-confident claims from the side of the pollsters,<sup>123</sup> polling data is inadequate as a tool for ‘measuring’ anti-Americanism. It can merely help to point out topics that might require special consideration.<sup>124</sup> Beyond this, one has to acknowledge that the study of anti-Americanism in any given region requires extensive knowledge on its political, historical, social and cultural background.

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<sup>119</sup> Alvin Z. Rubinstein; Donald E. Smith, “Anti-Americanism: Anatomy of a Phenomenon,” Alvin Z. Rubinstein; Donald E. Smith (eds.), *Anti-Americanism in the Third World: Implications for U. S. Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy Issues), NYC: Praeger, 1985, 1–30, here 20ff.

<sup>120</sup> Katzenstein, “Varieties of Anti-Americanism” 30ff.

<sup>121</sup> Andrew Ross; Kristin Ross, “Introduction,” Andrew Ross; Kristin Ross (eds.), *Anti-Americanism*, NYC/London: New York UP, 2004, 1–14, here 2.

<sup>122</sup> See, for instance, Katzenstein, “Varieties of Anti-Americanism” 16; Ross, “Introduction” 9f; O’Connor, “What is Anti-Americanism?” 6.

<sup>123</sup> See, for example, John L. Esposito; Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, NYC: Gallup, 2007, 1.

<sup>124</sup> Results of the “Gallup Poll of the Muslim World,” for example, point to an alleged lack of sincerity and of respect for Islam as major sources of resentment against the United States in the Arab world (Esposito et al., *Who Speaks for Islam?* 32, 58ff., 61, 83, 89, 165).

Literature and its reception may help us to acquire a better understanding of the phenomenon of anti-Americanism. In general, scholars would fare well to admit that local conditions are often too complex for definite explanations. Defined by its capability to accommodate diverse and contradictory views, literature is uniquely suited to meet this challenge.

A thorough analysis of global anti-Americanism is beyond the scope of this book.<sup>125</sup> As it is, neither of the novels under consideration could sensibly be called anti-American *per se*. Nevertheless, many of the novels respond to or take up recent critical perceptions of the United States and of the ‘American way of life’. Anti-American sentiment functions as a reference point in the narrative fabric of the novels. It is mirrored in acts and convictions at the character level and in some cases influences the course of action. For a more profound understanding of anti-Americanism as a literary trope, I will inquire into the historical roots of the real-life phenomenon.

The history of anti-Americanism begins at the time of early European settlement on the American continent. Some of the conceptions that developed during that time have been remarkably persistent throughout the centuries. The elitist European perception of ‘the American’ as vulgar, ignorant, superficial and materialistic and of ‘America’ as an uncultured and ahistorical continent was born in those early days. It further intensified during the nineteenth century and survives to the present day.<sup>126</sup> In the early twentieth century, traditional elitist anti-Americanism was complemented by the Marxist critique branding “America’s mass-produced pseudo-culture” not merely “shallow, vulgar and inauthentic, but [...] also the product of corporate exploitation.”<sup>127</sup> It has been noted that European elitist anti-

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<sup>125</sup> The four volumes titled *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes* (edited by Brendon O’Connor) constitute the most comprehensive effort to date. Despite a number of contributions that are debatable in content, the collection is a laudable attempt and provides a quantity of useful and thought-provoking material. However, even more than 1,400 pages hardly suffice to offer more than a fragmentary selection.

<sup>126</sup> This is also the reason why Alexis De Tocqueville’s comments on America still sound so topical today and consequently remain favorite epigraphs among scholars working on contemporary transatlantic perceptions. See also O’Connor, “Introduction: Historical Perspectives” XIV; John E. Moser, “Anti-Americanism and Anglophobia,” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 3: Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 1–17, here 6.

<sup>127</sup> Moser, “Anti-Americanism and Anglophobia” 6f.

Americanism was also ‘exported’ to other parts of the world, in particular to the colonies of European empires.<sup>128</sup> For instance, Ainslie Embree has shown how Indian anti-Americanism mirrors British snobbery towards the United States.<sup>129</sup>

Other traditions of anti-Americanism are more fundamentally connected to the ‘global player’ that the USA became when it had left behind its colonial beginnings. Latin America was the first region of the world shaped by massive US intervention. Until today, it is home to a particularly virulent tradition of anti-Americanism. US influence on the hemisphere was achieved through diplomatic, military and economic means from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.<sup>130</sup> Anti-American sentiment intensified after the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 when the United States took military control over Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.<sup>131</sup> The dominant economic position of the United Fruit Company in various Latin American countries<sup>132</sup> and the objectives of the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 further supported spreading fears of US hegemony.

Nevertheless, the European repertoire of anti-Americanism appears to have had some impact on Latin American perceptions. This is demonstrated by manifestations of anti-Americanism such as the early twentieth century intellectual movement of ‘Arielism’, named after an essay by José Enrique Rodó.<sup>133</sup> With reference to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the United States was cast in the role of uncultured, materialist Caliban while Latin America was seen as characterized by the spirituality and refinement of Ariel.<sup>134</sup> This attribution of roles is noteworthy: postcolonial

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<sup>128</sup> Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism and Anti-Americanism,” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 2: Historical Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 99–117, here 115.

<sup>129</sup> Ainslie Embree, “Anti-Americanism in South Asia: A Symbolic Artifact,” Alvin Z. Rubinstein; Donald E. Smith (eds.), *Anti-Americanism in the Third World: Implications for U. S. Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy Issues), NYC: Praeger, 1985, 137–150, here 145.

<sup>130</sup> See Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism” 116; McPherson, “Introduction: *Antiyanquismo*” 12ff.

<sup>131</sup> See also Greg Grandin, “The Narcissism of Violent Differences,” Andrew Ross; Kristin Ross (eds.), *Anti-Americanism*, NYC/London: New York UP, 2004, 17–31, here 22.

<sup>132</sup> See, for instance, Rubinstein, “Anti-Americanism” 15.

<sup>133</sup> José Enrique Rodó (1922), *Ariel*, Transl. Frederic Jesup Stimson, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2008 [Spanish original 1900].

<sup>134</sup> Alan McPherson, “Anti-Americanism in Latin America,” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 3: Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 77–102, here 84.

discourse has come to routinely associate Caliban with the oppressed colonial peoples while Prospero is considered an agent of colonial oppression.

The 1970s and 1980s in Latin America provide an example of how the global phenomenon of anti-Americanism can resonate in local contexts. As Alan McPherson has pointed out, alignment with the Soviet Union was not generally favored. However, socialism as defined in more moderate terms as “protection from US capital” and opposition to US cultural imperialism proved more appealing<sup>135</sup> and continues to inform the rhetoric of Latin American governments until today.

While socialist ideas have had their share in inspiring anti-American views since the late nineteenth century, especially among intellectual elites in Europe and its former colonies, it is interesting to note that Soviet Cold War propaganda as such seems to have had little lasting effect on public perception of the USA. This holds particularly true for those countries in Eastern Europe that were most directly subjected to Soviet rule. Direct US-American intervention, such as in the Latin American context, appears to have provoked more animosity. The outrage that US-American power politics have caused since World War II can partly be explained by the fact that during the nineteenth and early twentieth century many colonies still considered the United States a potential ally in their struggle for independence.<sup>136</sup> These hopes were disappointed when it became clear that the USA’s main interest was in maintaining the upper hand in the rivalry between the two power blocs. The USA’s refusal to accept the objectives of the Non-Alignment Movement and the Vietnam War did major damage to the country’s global reputation.<sup>137</sup>

Today, the Middle East is the part of the world where anti-Americanism rages most fervently. This fact is closely connected to the region’s complicated and troubled history since World War II and to US-American involvement in that history. US support of Israel has been the most consistent source of anger to people in Arab countries. Anti-Americanism in the region has further been fuelled by an often self-

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<sup>135</sup> McPherson, “Introduction: *Antiyanquismo*” 20.

<sup>136</sup> Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism” 116.

<sup>137</sup> See also John Chiddick, “The Cold War and Anti-Americanism,” Brendon O’Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 2: Historical Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 151–175, here 166 as well as Rubinstein, “Anti-Americanism: Anatomy of a Phenomenon” 11, 14.

interested and manipulative US foreign policy. In addition, anti-American sentiment is often encouraged and instrumentalized by local rulers. It also serves as an outlet for grievances of various kinds, for instance frustrations sparked by ineffectual and repressive local governments.

US policy in the Middle East has been guided by a variety of strategic considerations that for most of the twentieth century centred on attempts to ensure access to the region's natural resources and to contain Soviet influence in Arab countries.<sup>138</sup> This has led to a strategy of shifting alliances, hidden agendas and support for unpopular and repressive regimes. This policy has helped to establish what Marc Lynch calls a "well-entrenched narrative identifying America as generally hostile, aggressive, and untrustworthy."<sup>139</sup>

While interventions such as the CIA-sponsored coup to topple Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953 began to inspire resentment against the United States soon after World War II,<sup>140</sup> it was not until after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 that anti-Americanism became a pervasive attitude in the Arab world.<sup>141</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and Kylie Baxter trace the emergence of a more radically religious rhetoric of anti-Americanism to the late 1970s when

the Middle East was wracked with conflicting trends. The stunning Israeli victory in the 1967 war had shattered the dream of unified Arab nationalism. The Cold War had fostered major divisions between the Soviet- and American-aligned states and the region appeared to be floundering.<sup>142</sup>

The USA's massive investment in opposition against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and its subsequent withdrawal are a prime example of those policies that have left the Arab world so thoroughly disillusioned with the political objectives of the United States. This frustration has served as a breeding ground for religious

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<sup>138</sup> See Shahram Akbarzadeh; Kylie Baxter, "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East," Brendon O'Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 3: Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford/Westport, CT: Greenwood World, 2007, 281–301, here 283.

<sup>139</sup> Marc Lynch, "Anti-Americanism in the Arab World," Robert O. Keohane; Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Cornell Studies in Political Economy), Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell UP, 2007, 196–224, here 197.

<sup>140</sup> Akbarzadeh, "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East" 283.

<sup>141</sup> Lynch, "Anti-Americanism in the Arab World" 199.

<sup>142</sup> Akbarzadeh, "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East" 286; see also Ella Shohat, "A Conversation with Rashid Khalidi," Andrew Ross; Kristin Ross (eds.), *Anti-Americanism*, NYC/London: New York UP, 2004, 106–122, here 112.

extremism and anti-Americanism, developments that should be taken seriously even if the attacks of 11 September 2001 were planned and carried out merely by a small group of fanatics.<sup>143</sup> The rhetoric employed by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as media reports on Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo further alienated people in Arab countries and led to a worldwide surge of anti-American sentiment. A few years after 11 September 2001, the world seemed to have reached a high tide of anti-Americanism.

If the election of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the USA in November 2008 opened up a new perspective for the future or merely a new chapter of an old problem, this particular study does not evaluate the literary responses. Obama's speech "On a New Beginning," delivered at Cairo University on 4 June 2009, seemed to set the tone for a new era in the relations between the USA and the Muslim world.<sup>144</sup> Yet many have since been disappointed by the meager outcome of Obama's first term, and it is doubtful whether Obama can bring about such fundamental change in terms of diplomatic and military strategy as would be necessary to significantly improve the situation. Regardless whether or not Obama uses his second term to fulfill his promise, his election constituted a beacon of hope to observers worldwide. As of now, a new 'genre' of novels, directly or indirectly inspired by Obama's presidency, is coming into being. Such novels and their specific take on global perceptions of the USA will provide material for scholarship in the future.

Much of the scholarship on anti-Americanism that is available in English at the moment is the work of scholars from the United States, from Europe or from Australia. More of an effort should be made to consider alternative voices that currently are largely absent from this scholarly dialogue. This may have to be achieved at the price of investing into translations of foreign scholarly (and literary) work. Yet, even within the realm of anglophone expression, there are multitudes to uncover which have too infrequently been considered in the context of global responses to the USA. After all, it is contradictory to engage in a scholarly debate on

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<sup>143</sup> See Akbarzadeh, "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East" 282.

<sup>144</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," Speech delivered at the University of Cairo, 4 June 2009. *The White House Online*. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/) (1 July 2011).

foreign views of the United States while simultaneously remaining inside one's self-contained Western enclave. Hence this study examines literary voices transcending such boundaries<sup>145</sup> and establishes a dialogue between literary texts, scholarship on anti-Americanism and current globalization theory.

In general, scholarship on anti-Americanism tends to focus on a very limited selection of geographical areas. Some countries and regions are deemed to be irrelevant for research due to the relatively low level of anti-Americanism that their populations display.<sup>146</sup> In other cases countries and regions seem to be omitted on the assumption that maybe it 'does not matter much' how they feel about the United States. Exclusion in such cases is thus based on crude power distinctions. Sometimes – as in the case of Africa – the absence of interest on the part of the scholars appears to mirror America's strategic, military and cultural disinterest.<sup>147</sup>

This study covers literary perceptions of the United States coming from a diverse selection of locations. At the same time, the diversity of the novels' origins and the transnational backgrounds of most of the authors indicate the limitations of the regional framework that I have employed in this chapter. As I have pointed out above, anti-American views have always travelled across borders and they do so ever more rapidly in today's globalized world. In an age when a different country can 'virtually' be only a mouse-click away, the same applies to anti-American sentiments. Scholars are only just beginning to explore the emergence of 'virtual

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<sup>145</sup> In the final chapter of this book, I address the issue of the authors' cosmopolitanism and the question in how far they can count (should be counted) as 'alternative voices'. On related issues, see also the introductory chapter of part II. However, even the most careful consideration of the issues at stake cannot do away with the fact that authors who choose to write a novel set in the USA or centrally concerned with US-American characters constitute a selection that may be said to be unrepresentative or 'insufficiently alternative' (whatever that may mean). This is a limitation that my study is logically incapable of transcending.

<sup>146</sup> The case of the Philippines – after all a former colony of the United States – is a frequent if curious omission that unfortunately cannot be covered in this study either. For an introduction, see Alan Tidwell, "Anti-Americanism in the Philippines," Brendon O'Connor (ed.), *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, Themes. Volume 3: Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford: Westport, CT/Greenwood World, 2007, 259–280.

<sup>147</sup> See Harvey Glickman, "Anti-Americanism in Africa: The Constraints of Globalism," Alvin Z. Rubinstein; Donald E. Smith (eds.), *Anti-Americanism in the Third World: Implications for U. S. Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy Issues), NYC: Praeger, 1985, 171–189, here 178; See also Rüdiger Seesemann, "Antiamerikanismus in Afrika südlich der Sahara," Sigrid Faath (ed.), *Antiamerikanismus in Nordafrika, Nah- und Mittelost: Formen, Dimensionen und Folgen für Europa und Deutschland* (Mitteilungen Deutsches Orient-Institut Hamburg 68), Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 2003, 279–294, here 279.



anti-Americanisms' that no longer solely depend on a specific geographical place.<sup>148</sup> Yet, as the analysis of Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* will show, virtual expressions of anti-Americanism have already arrived in the fictional realm.

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<sup>148</sup> Merlyna Lim's concise study *Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet* is an excellent example ((Policy Studies 18) Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005).

“[L]’image de l’Autre révèle les relations que j’établis entre le monde (espace original et étranger) et moi-même.”

Daniel-Henri Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle à l’imaginaire”

### 3. Dead-Ending Imagology?<sup>149</sup>

A study examining literary encounters with a country might be expected to pay its dues to the comparative school of literary imagology, in particular if it originates from a German scholarly background.<sup>150</sup> In the following pages I will explain why I am taking exception from this rule, subjecting the basic assumptions of imagology to a critical re-reading. This has been done to an insufficient extent in the past. If largely unheard of outside European academia, imagology has inspired an impressive number of research projects on (mostly national) ‘images’, often subtitled ‘a contribution to imagology’.<sup>151</sup> Postcolonial and transcultural studies are among those scholarly fields that continue to bring about research projects with an imagological

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<sup>149</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the annual conference of GNEL/ASNEL, University of Münster, 21–24 May 2009, and was published in the conference proceedings (Claudia Perner, “Dislocating Imagology, and: How Much of It Can (or Should) Be Retrieved?” Silke Stroh, Marga Munkelt, Markus Schmitz, Mark Stein (eds.), *Postcolonial Translocations* (Cross/Cultures 156), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2013, 29–44).

<sup>150</sup> Comparative or literary imagology is usually defined as the study of ‘the literary image of the other country’. While the term *imagologie* originally goes back to French ethnopsychology, the Aachen programme of comparative literary studies around Hugo Dyerinck began establishing ‘literary imagology’ in the late 1960s. *Imagologie* remains most widely known and applied in French and German academia. In English usage, some scholars, such as Joep Leerssen and William L. Chew III., have privileged the term ‘image studies’. However, Leerssen has recently adopted the English term ‘imagology’, most notably in his co-edited volume *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* (with Manfred Beller).

It is interesting to note that Milan Kundera uses the neologism ‘imagology’ in his novel *Immortality* (initially published in Czech in 1990), albeit in a very different fashion. ‘Imagology’ here refers to the rule of professionalized image-construction (such as in advertising or in image coaching), a force that has replaced ideology in shaping political and social realities (See Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, Transl. Peter Kussi, NYC: Faber and Faber, 2000 [original text in Czech titled *Nesmrtelnost*; first published as French edition *L’Immortalité*, Gallimard, 1990], chapter “Imagology”, 126–131. See also John O’Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1995, 124ff. and Michail I. Logvinov, “Studia imagologica: zwei methodologische Ansätze zur komparatistischen Imagologie,” *Germanistisches Jahrbuch GUS “Das Wort,”* Bonn: DAAD, 2003, 203–220, here 203).

<sup>151</sup> Titles of this format have been particularly popular in Germany. See, for instance, Martin Steins, *Das Bild des Schwarzen in der europäischen Kolonialliteratur 1870–1918: ein Beitrag zur literarischen Imagologie*, Frankfurt: Thesen, 1972; Andrea Wodeneck, *Das Bild der Juden Osteuropas: ein Beitrag zur komparatistischen Imagologie an Textbeispielen von Karl Emil Franzos und Leopold von Sacher-Masoch*, Frankfurt: Lang, 1987; Weigui Fang, *Das Chinabild in der deutschen Literatur: 1871–1933: ein Beitrag zur komparatistischen Imagologie*, Frankfurt: Lang, 1992; Petra Schöner, *Judenbilder im deutschen Einblattdruck der Renaissance: ein Beitrag zur Imagologie*, Baden-Baden: Koerner, 2002.

scope. This is true regardless of how routinely scholars comment on the erosion of the nation-state and the emergence of hybrid and ‘translocal’ spaces.<sup>152</sup>

Imagological research projects often rely on the theoretical framework without questioning even the most controversial of imagological concepts. Meanwhile, imagology has elsewhere been met with skepticism. In some circles, the adjective ‘imagological’ has acquired a mildly derogatory connotation, a fact that is mainly owed to the bland character of some imagological case studies.<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless there have been few sustained challenges to the validity of imagology as a theoretical tool.<sup>154</sup>

It is noteworthy that imagologists have repeatedly declared postcolonial studies a natural sister discipline of their own field. Some have even claimed that postcolonial studies has been ‘re-inventing’ central objectives and insights of imagological research.<sup>155</sup> However, most basic assumptions of imagology require a fundamental ‘makeover’ before they can sensibly be employed in the field of postcolonial studies. Indeed, it may be preferable to choose other theoretical tools at hand rather than to chain oneself to a field riddled with conceptual flaws past and present.

The understanding of imagology current from the late 1960s onwards put emphasis on the political and sociological contextualization of literary texts – an approach that was quite an innovation and hotly debated in comparative literary

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<sup>152</sup> See, for instance, Arjun Appadurai, “Sovereignty without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography,” Setha M. Low; Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (eds.), *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Blackwell Readers in Anthropology 4), Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003, 337–349, here especially 338f.

<sup>153</sup> Irrespective of other criticism that it has been subjected to, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) can be counted among the more thought-provoking works with an imagological scope. However, the undeniable qualities of *Orientalism* are hardly based on its conceptual interconnectedness with imagology.

<sup>154</sup> Ruth Florack’s *Bekannte Fremde (Bekannte Fremde: Zu Herkunft und Funktion nationaler Stereotype in der Literatur* (Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur 114), Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2007) is probably the most thorough critical effort to date.

<sup>155</sup> See, for instance, Joep Leerssen, “Imagology: History and Method,” Manfred Beller; Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey* (Studia Imagologica 13), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2007, 17–32, here 24, or Joep Leerssen, “The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey,” *Poetics Today* 21.2 (2000), 267–292, here 268f. See also Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann, *Einführung in die Komparatistik*. Second rev. and ext. edition, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2004, 197.

studies at the time.<sup>156</sup> Hugo Dyserinck has described imagology as a ‘concrete form of analysis of the phenomenon of experiencing-the-Other across borders’ [grenzüberschreitende Fremderfahrung].<sup>157</sup> In reality, imagology has displayed an unfortunate lack of theoretical progress during precisely those decades when research on localities, nationality and ethnicity was subject to fundamental transformation. Imagology, it appears, has been largely immune even to the draw of globalization. While it is true that there have been certain silent shifts in objective and unannounced reformulations of research focus, these shifts occurred whenever insights from other fields became increasingly hard to ignore. Nevertheless, it is rather striking how imagological studies still routinely cite a small number of ‘founding texts’ from the 1970s and early 1980s as their theoretical framework. Beyond that, literary imagology has not produced a sustained theoretical discourse. In addition, the inventory character of many imagological case studies has failed to bring about genuinely new theoretical insights. As a consequence, imagology today faces the same conceptual problems as forty years ago.

Imagology’s first and possibly most fundamental problem is its implicit reliance on national and cultural ‘containers’ and on the existence of separate ‘national literatures’. These ‘national literatures’ are usually defined by their use of a distinct national language.<sup>158</sup> Imagology, as defined by Dyserinck, is an examination of the relation between ‘national entities’<sup>159</sup> and of mutual perceptions across national borders. (This means, for instance, ‘The French as seen by the Germans’ and ‘The Germans as seen by the French.’<sup>160</sup>) It is one of the commonplaces of imagological research to stress that such cross-national observations and (literary)

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<sup>156</sup> See Hugo Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie jenseits von ‘Werkimmanenz’ und ‘Werktranszendenz,’” *Synthesis* 9 (1982), 27–40, here 40. See also Manfred S. Fischer, *Nationale Images als Gegenstand vergleichender Literaturgeschichte* (Aachener Beiträge zur Komparatistik 6), Bonn: Bouvier, 1981, 24.

<sup>157</sup> Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie” 31 [my translation].

<sup>158</sup> Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie” 31. In 1990, Karl Ulrich Syndram acknowledged that the reliance on national languages as dividing factor does not solve the conceptual problems (Karl Ulrich Syndram, “Das Problem der nationalen Literaturgeschichtsschreibung als Gegenstand der komparatistischen Imagologie,” Roger Bauer; Douwe Fokkema (eds.), *Space and Boundaries of Literature/Espace et Frontières de la Littérature* (Proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, München 1988, 4), München: iudicium, 1990, 36–42, here 37).

<sup>159</sup> Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie” 34 [my translation].

<sup>160</sup> Hugo Dyserinck, “Zur Entwicklung der komparatistischen Imagologie,” *Colloquium Helveticum* 7 (1988), 19–42, here 23.

descriptions tell us more about the observers than about the group that is being observed.<sup>161</sup> As a consequence, imagologists including Dyserinck claim the deconstruction of the concept of ‘national character’ as one of their prime objectives.<sup>162</sup> What they fail to acknowledge is that their scholarly project at large nevertheless relies on the validity of the very boundaries they claim to deconstruct. More often than not, imagological research continues to be caught up in the implicit validation of national and cultural categories.<sup>163</sup>

A second problem is imagology’s eurocentric bias, its largely unquestioned conception of itself as “Europaforschung”.<sup>164</sup> Imagology has never transcended its eurocentric orientation and somehow proceeds on the assumption that a scholarly approach concentrating on Europe can still bring forward results that ‘ultimately are valuable for humanity as a whole.’<sup>165</sup>

One of the most problematic imagological categories – and a surprisingly persistent one at that – is the so-called ‘supranational standpoint’<sup>166</sup> of the imagologist. Dyserinck’s call for an approach that is characterized by ‘cultural neutrality’<sup>167</sup> has survived through the decades and despite imagology’s advances to constructivist theory.<sup>168</sup> Criticism or qualifications of this concept are surprisingly

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<sup>161</sup> See, for instance, János Riesz, “Einleitung: Zur Omnipräsenz nationaler und ethnischer Stereotype,” János Riesz (ed.), *Literarische Imagologie: Formen und Funktionen nationaler Stereotype in der Literatur* (Komparatistische Hefte 2), Bayreuth: Ellwanger, 1980, 3–11, here 4; see also Gonthier-Louis Fink, “Réflexions sur l’imagologie: Stéréotypes et réalités nationales dans une perspective franco-allemande,” *Recherches Germaniques* 23 (1993), 3–31, here 21.

<sup>162</sup> Dyserinck, “Zur Entwicklung” 28; Hugo Dyserinck, “Komparatistik als Europaforschung,” Hugo Dyserinck; Karl Ulrich Syndram (eds.), *Komparatistik und Europaforschung: Perspektiven vergleichender Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft* (Aachener Beiträge zur Komparatistik 9), Bonn: Bouvier, 1992, 31–62, here 36.

<sup>163</sup> See also Friederike Heitsch, *Imagologie des Islam in der neueren und neuesten spanischen Literatur* (Problemata Literaria 42), Kassel: Reichenberger, 1998, 18.

<sup>164</sup> Dyserinck, “Zur Entwicklung” 39; also Dyserinck, “Komparatistik” 31.

<sup>165</sup> Dyserinck, “Komparatistik” 40 [my translation].

<sup>166</sup> Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie” 32 [my translation]; also Dyserinck, “Komparatistik” 37.

<sup>167</sup> Dyserinck, “Zur Entwicklung” 40 [my translation]; also 22f.

<sup>168</sup> See, for instance, Karl Ulrich Syndram, “The Aesthetics of Alterity: Literature and the Imagological Approach,” Joep Leerssen; Menno Spiering (eds.), *National Identity: Symbol and Representation* (Yearbook of European Studies 4), Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991, 176–191, here 183; Logvinov, “Studia imagologica” 211. Cf. the criticism raised in Heitsch, *Imagologie des Islam* 20f.

rare, and thus the ‘supranational standpoint’ continues to be invoked as one of imagology’s leading principles.<sup>169</sup>

Imagologists aim to detect ‘images’ in texts. The ‘image’ as a category may be intuitively appealing but loses much of its persuasiveness as soon as one considers its heuristic productivity. While Dyserinck initially claimed indebtedness to Karl Popper’s ‘World 3’,<sup>170</sup> most imagological studies invest little time in the tedious work of conceptual clarification.<sup>171</sup> In 1981, Manfred S. Fischer proclaimed a strict distinction between ‘image’ and ‘(national) stereotype’.<sup>172</sup> Yet, it seems that this failed to convince even his fellow imagologists; the synonymous use of both terms has grown more commonplace in the meantime. In 2007, Manfred Beller attempted to provide a more comprehensive characterization of the imagological ‘image’. In “Perception, Image, Imagology,” he describes the ‘image’ as

the mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race. Such an ‘image’ rules our opinion of others and controls our behavior towards them.<sup>173</sup>

In an attempt to link up with the theoretical jargon of postmodernism, Beller further emphasizes that “we do not know the real thing, but only its simulacrum in the form of mental images.”<sup>174</sup> Birgit Neumann, who has proposed a somewhat updated version of imagology grounded in cultural studies, maintains that the distinction between ‘image’ and ‘stereotype’ is valuable.<sup>175</sup> Her argument rests on the

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<sup>169</sup> Logvinov, “Studia imagologica” 215. A rare exception is Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s acknowledgement of the fact “that the analysis of representation and otherness itself is historically and culturally determined. There is no Archimedean point, no objective position beyond history from which historical processes of imagining and othering can be monitored and interpreted” (“Image and Power,” Raymond Corbey; Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship* (Amsterdam Studies on Cultural Identity 1), Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991, 191–203, here 193).

<sup>170</sup> Dyserinck, “Zur Entwicklung” 29.

<sup>171</sup> One rare attempt is Thomas Bleicher, “Elemente einer komparatistischen Imagologie,” János Riesz (ed.), *Literarische Imagologie: Formen und Funktionen nationaler Stereotype in der Literatur* (Komparatistische Hefte 2), Bayreuth: Ellwanger, 1980, 12–24, here 16.

<sup>172</sup> Fischer, *Nationale Images* 20.

<sup>173</sup> Manfred Beller, “Perception, Image, Imagology,” Manfred Beller; Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters – A Critical Survey* (Studia Imagologica 13), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2007, 3–16, here 4.

<sup>174</sup> Beller, “Perception” 4.

<sup>175</sup> Birgit Neumann, *Die Rhetorik der Nation in britischer Literatur und anderen Medien des 18. Jahrhunderts* (ELCH: Studies in English Literary and Cultural History 39), Trier: WVT, 2009, 38. Neumann’s approach improves upon some aspects of traditional imagology but suffers from an overemphasis on clear oppositions of Self/Other and ‘autoimage’/‘heteroimage’.

presumably more flexible character of ‘images’ as opposed to the ‘compressed’ nature of stereotypes.<sup>176</sup> Yet she characterizes stereotyping as a process that does not take place only once but is subject to ongoing renewal and modification.<sup>177</sup> The ‘image’ and its difference from the stereotype remain elusive as ever.

Further conceptual confusion is caused by the assumed relation between imagological ‘image’, literary text and reality. Imagologists often assert that imagological research is not concerned with the image’s claim to reality.<sup>178</sup> On the other hand, imagology has sometimes been declared to enhance knowledge of reality through literary means.<sup>179</sup> To complicate matters further, some scholars have promoted a ‘cultural turn’ in imagology, criticizing the prominent role that literature has ostensibly played so far. This approach overlooks the fact that imagology has often all but ignored the specific literariness of the literary text. Literary texts are frequently read as providing insight into the (collective) perceptions of a nation or a culture. Layers of character representation, narrative voice, authorship and ostensible national or cultural ‘background’ are merged. The result is an analytical maze rather than a systematic and transparent interpretation of the literary text. Despite this methodological fuzziness, it is hard to take seriously the claim that imagology is unconcerned with the relation between literary text and reality. After all, imagology has often been envisioned as a kind of ‘literary diplomacy’,<sup>180</sup> its objective being to unveil and to fight ideological misconceptions represented in literary texts.<sup>181</sup>

After having pointed out some of the conceptual challenges that imagology faces, I would like to draw attention to three relatively recent imagological reconceptions.

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<sup>176</sup> Neumann, *Die Rhetorik der Nation* 42.

<sup>177</sup> Neumann, *Die Rhetorik der Nation* 51.

<sup>178</sup> See, for instance, Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie” 37; also Syndram, “The Aesthetics” 183f.

<sup>179</sup> See Bleicher, “Elemente” 18.

<sup>180</sup> Bleicher, “Elemente” 20. See also Fischer, *Nationale Images* 17 as well as Stefanie Stockhorst, “Was leistet ein cultural turn in der komparatistischen Imagologie? Henry Crabb Robinson als Vermittler deutscher Dichter- und Gelehrtenkultur nach England,” *Arcadia* 40.2 (2005), 354–374, here 355.

<sup>181</sup> Dyserinck, “Komparatistische Imagologie” 36.

William L. Chew III, a historian by training, sees imagology as aiming at “creating greater inter-cultural awareness.”<sup>182</sup> As a consequence, Chew argues, imagological research continues to gain topicality in a globalized world:

Recent international developments, finally, marked by continued regional conflicts and a global terrorism characterised by apparent ethnic and religious incompatibilities [...] has [sic] lent added urgency to the deconstruction of complex stereotypes that seem to obscure and hinder understanding ‘the other’ rather than provide the true understanding and insight that can lead to a peaceful co-existence, characterised by humanistic values and common respect. If ever a scholarly field had direct relevance to contemporary social issues, it must certainly be imagology.<sup>183</sup>

This quotation suggests that Chew – like other imagologists before him – perceives the globalized world as divided into more or less clear-cut entities. Thus he also disregards the fact that imagology depends on a certain amount of transcultural blindness. In the passage I have quoted, Chew refers to *stereotypes* as the central object of imagological research, thus deviating from Fischer’s and Neumann’s models. In what he calls his own “pragmatic and functionalist manifesto”<sup>184</sup> for imagology, Chew proposes:

We are all imagologists, even if we do not realize the fact, and we cannot function socially and politically, in a humane and reasoned fashion, as individuals or groups, without studying the (national) stereotypes so current in our collective memory. For these stereotypes color, to a large extent, not only our self-perception (our ‘auto-image’), but determine for better and, regrettably, more often, for worse our behavior toward the other.<sup>185</sup>

What Chew suggests here constitutes a serious challenge to *literary* imagology. And indeed, Chew criticizes a “selective preoccupation with predominantly *fictional* representations of alterity.”<sup>186</sup> Instead, he calls for a “total imagology”<sup>187</sup> that

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<sup>182</sup> William L. Chew III, “‘Literature, History, and the Social Sciences?’: A Historical-Imagological Approach to Franco-American Stereotypes,” William L. Chew III. (ed.), *National Stereotypes in Perspective: Americans in France, Frenchmen in America* (Studia Imagologica 9), Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001, 1–53, here 1.

<sup>183</sup> William L. Chew III, “What’s in a National Stereotype? An Introduction to Imagology at the Threshold of the 21st Century,” *Language and Intercultural Communication* 6.3+4 (2006), 179–187, here 180.

<sup>184</sup> Chew, “Literature” 4.

<sup>185</sup> Chew, “Literature” 3f.

<sup>186</sup> Chew, “Literature” 8.

<sup>187</sup> Chew, “Literature” 8.



incorporates both a history of mentalities approach and methods taken from the social sciences.<sup>188</sup>

Like Chew, comparatist Daniel-Henri Pageaux favors an interdisciplinary approach to imagology. In addition, Pageaux offers a sophisticated description of the ‘image’ in which he distinguishes between three conceptual levels: the first level, *le mot*, is the dimension of individual expressions and constitutes what Pageaux calls ‘a fundamental vocabulary serving representation and communication.’<sup>189</sup> At the second level, Pageaux identifies the ruling principle of hierarchical relationships<sup>190</sup> that combine individual expressions into an ‘anthology of images’.<sup>191</sup> Finally, both ‘fundamental vocabulary’ and ‘anthology of images’ are integrated into what Pageaux calls an ‘image-scenario’. Thus the image constitutes ‘a more or less complete illustration of a ‘dialogue’ between two cultures, through a staging [*mise en scène*] of the foreigner that is also an aesthetic and cultural design [*mise en forme*].’<sup>192</sup>

Pageaux deems it insufficient for the imagologist to merely consider the *mise-en-text* of the image. Instead, it is equally important to explore its *mise-en-imaginaire*.<sup>193</sup> The imaginary that Pageaux envisions is ‘the theatre, the place where the different modes (literature, among others) in which a society sees, defines, dreams itself, express themselves in a pictorial manner [...], that is to say, by means of images, of representations.’<sup>194</sup> It constitutes, in Pageaux’s words, ‘the library’ that includes all images thinkable at a certain time and in a certain place. It is ‘the reservoir of a collective memory whose contours tend to superimpose on national

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<sup>188</sup> Chew, “Literature” 8f. and 16.

<sup>189</sup> Daniel-Henri Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle à l’imaginaire,” Pierre Brunel; Yves Chevrel (eds.), *Précis de littérature compare*, Paris: PU de France, 1989, 133–161, here 145 [my translation].

<sup>190</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 147.

<sup>191</sup> Daniel-Henri Pageaux, “Image/Imaginaire,” Hugo Dyserinck; Karl Ulrich Syndram (eds.), *Europa und das nationale Selbstverständnis: Imagologische Probleme in Literatur, Kunst und Kultur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1988, 367–379, here 373 [my translation].

<sup>192</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 148 [my translation].

<sup>193</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 155.

<sup>194</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 135f [my translation].

space.’<sup>195</sup> Thus imagological research must inevitably include an inquiry into the history of ideas.<sup>196</sup>

Pageaux’s theoretical work offers a number of thought-provoking perspectives on the connection between ‘image’, ‘imaginaire’ and society. Nevertheless, Pageaux’s approach remains crucially (if elegantly) abstract. The imagological project as Pageaux envisions it is to uncover – through literary texts – the ‘mental attitudes of an époque, of a society.’<sup>197</sup> This rather ambitious goal, surely, remains beyond the possibilities of literary research.<sup>198</sup> Hence it is hardly surprising that the two decades since the publication of Pageaux’s seminal article “De l’imagerie culturelle à l’imaginaire” have not brought about any convincing application of his theoretical considerations.

Joep Leerssen is currently the most prominent scholar working on the field of imagology. In contrast to Chew and Pageaux, Leerssen promotes a return to a literary focus of imagology. Literature, he argues, is singularly “explicit in reflecting and shaping the awareness of entire societies and [...] often counts as the very formulation of that society’s cultural identity.”<sup>199</sup> Leerssen defines literary imagology as the study of the “point of intersection between the text’s verbal (‘poetical’) and historical (‘ideological’) properties, between the text as verbal tissue

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<sup>195</sup> Pageaux, “Image/Imaginaire” 375 [my translation].

<sup>196</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 136.

<sup>197</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 141 [my translation].

<sup>198</sup> Literary texts are connected to such mental attitudes, albeit in a more indirect fashion. On the complex interrelatedness of material manifestations of culture (such as the literary text) and the mental dimension of culture, see Ronald Posner, “Kultur als Zeichensystem: Zur semiotischen Explikation kulturwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe,” Aleida Assmann; Dietrich Harth (eds.), *Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1991, 37–74. Posner also stresses that ‘the boundaries between two societies do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries between two civilizations or two mentalities’ (Posner, “Kultur als Zeichensystem” 42 [my translation]). See also Ansgar Nünning, “Literatur, Mentalitäten und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Grundriss, Leitbegriffe und Perspektiven einer anglistischen Kulturwissenschaft,” Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden: Eine Einführung*, Trier: WTV, 1998, 173–198, here 180f. and 184f. Following Siegfried Schmidt, Nünning claims that culture becomes ‘beobachtbar’ [observable] in cultural manifestations such as literature (cf. Siegfried Schmidt, “Medien, Kultur, Medienkultur: Ein konstruktivistisches Gesprächsangebot,” Siegfried Schmidt (ed.), *Kognition und Gesellschaft. Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstruktivismus 2* (Suhrkamp taschenbuch Wissenschaft 950), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992, 425–450, here 436). On ‘mentality’ and ‘history of mentalities’, see Volker Sellin, “Mentalität und Mentalitätsgeschichte,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 241 (1985), 555–598. Sellin stresses that mentality is not merely a type of opinion or idea that could be directly expressed (or not) but an attitude that stands behind a mode of (collective) behavior (Sellin, “Mentalität” 591).

<sup>199</sup> Leerssen, “The Rhetoric” 268.

and the text as social act.”<sup>200</sup> Thus imagology is concerned with “representations as textual strategies and as discourse”<sup>201</sup> rather than with cultural or national identity as such. Nevertheless, Leerssen identifies a connection between the imagological ‘image’ and the construction of national identity:

Images concerning people, human types or nations have arisen almost out of nothing, from literary commonplaces and intertextual formulae, and have solidified into belief systems and patterns of identification which in turn have given rise to the now-current set of tropes we call ‘national identities’ – tropes with which many of us, most of the time, actively identify and which thus have become real things in the real world.<sup>202</sup>

Leerssen’s research focuses on the textual function of stereotypes. Yet, ‘stereotypical images’ in Leerssen’s sense are not restricted to the repressive and ideological ‘images’ of traditional imagology. Quite in agreement with sociological and linguistic findings, Leerssen describes the national stereotype as a “shorthand invocation of a highly specific and widely known code of temperamental attributes.”<sup>203</sup> National stereotypes are thus part of a “culturally shared set of recognizable literary (as well as social) commonplaces.”<sup>204</sup>

It is true that Leerssen’s conception of imagology is more persuasive than most other approaches. All the more disappointing is the volume that Leerssen co-edited with Manfred Beller in 2007, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*. The book offers a selection of imagological vignettes, once more focusing on Europe and thus reconfirming the geographical bias of traditional imagology. Beller and Leerssen acknowledge this restriction in the introduction but merely voice their hope that postcolonial studies will step in to make

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<sup>200</sup> Joep Leerssen, “Echoes and Images: Reflections upon Foreign Space,” Raymond Corbey; Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship* (Amsterdam Studies on Cultural Identity 1), Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991, 123–138, here 125f. See also Joep Leerssen, “L’effet de typique,” Alain Montandon (ed.), *Mœurs et images: Etudes d’imagologie européenne*, Clermont-Ferrand: U Blaise Pascal, 1997, 129–134, here 134.

<sup>201</sup> Leerssen, “Imagology” 27.

<sup>202</sup> Joep Leerssen, “The Downward Pull of Cultural Essentialism,” Michael Wintle (ed.), *Image into Identity: Constructing and Assigning Identity in a Culture of Modernity* (Studia Imagologica: Amsterdam Studies on Cultural Identity 11), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2006, 31–50, here 37.

<sup>203</sup> Joep Leerssen, “Mimesis and Stereotype,” Joep Leerssen; Menno Spiering (eds.), *National Identity: Symbol and Representation* (Yearbook of European Studies 4), Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991, 165–175, here 174.

<sup>204</sup> Leerssen, “Mimesis” 174f. See also Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 140.

up for this deficit.<sup>205</sup> The vignettes featured in the second part of the volume vary in length, supposedly according to the alleged ‘importance’ of the countries under consideration. Non-European entries include (among a few individual countries) undiversified entities such as ‘Africa’, ‘Arabs’, ‘Creoles’ and ‘Latin America’ and are considered “only in their impact on European beholders.”<sup>206</sup> Beller and Leerssen point out that the

European perspective on distant nations and societies is perspectively and eurocentrically foreshortened, and will reduce real-world complexities into simplified clichés even more drastically than is the case in the intra-European process of cross-cultural stereotyping. The editors can only point out this fact, and cannot undo it.<sup>207</sup>

What they fail to acknowledge is that their own descriptions reconstruct both the entities observed *and* the observing entity (‘Europe’) as largely undiversified ‘containers’. It is difficult to see the scholarly use of such superficial and often a-historical inventories of exoticist ideas. If the volume *Imagology* aims to prove the productiveness of current imagological research and to establish imagology as a theoretical approach fit for the twenty-first century, it surely fails to achieve this.

As outlined above, imagologists have increasingly come to claim stereotypes as their main area of research. Pageaux has classified the stereotype as a specific form of image, thus distinguishing it from other, non-stereotypical images.<sup>208</sup> Scholarly usage of both terms today implies quite the reverse: it appears that really the image is (or has become) a specific subcategory of the stereotype – a type concerned with nationality as opposed to those stereotypes relating to, for instance, social hierarchy, gender, age or visual characteristics. If this is the case it seems rather problematical to insist on imagology as a separate scholarly discipline. Research on stereotypes has long become a productive interdisciplinary field and easily accommodates most scholarly projects that otherwise might be labeled ‘imagology’. There is no reason why interdisciplinary research on stereotypes should exclude works that focus on literary texts. Furthermore, I argue in favor of an

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<sup>205</sup> Manfred Beller; Joep Leerssen, “Foreword,” Manfred Beller; Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters – A Critical Survey* (Studia Imagologica 13), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2007, XIIV-XVI, here XIVf.

<sup>206</sup> Beller and Leerssen, “Foreword” XIV.

<sup>207</sup> Beller and Leerssen, “Foreword” XIV.

<sup>208</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 139.

approach that considers the creative potential of national stereotypes in literary texts.<sup>209</sup> As Friederike Heitsch has pointed out, literary scholarship is precisely *not* interested in the ways in which extra-literary reality is represented in literature. Instead, it aims to unveil the ways in which reality is transformed *for* and *through* the literary text.<sup>210</sup>

As I will show in the following chapter, interdisciplinary research on stereotypes – rather than imagology – provides insights that are valuable to literary scholarship. Literary research can only profit from tearing down artificial divides and considering national and cultural stereotypes side-by-side with stereotypes of class, gender and age. At the same time, the literary scholar should be prepared and willing to look beyond the stereotypical. Focusing on national stereotypes alone means consciously reading the literary text against the grain and ignoring other central – non-stereotypical – features. It thus seems only sensible to consider stereotypes in their textual relation to and interplay with the non-stereotypical, individualized and innovative. This holds true in particular for a field like ours where literatures increasingly are shaped by, respond to and explore transnational and transcultural lifeworlds.

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<sup>209</sup> See my chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>210</sup> Heitsch, *Imagologie des Islam* 5.

“Caution: Objects in this mirror may be  
closer than they appear!”

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

#### 4. Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes

Over the past decades, all things ‘performative’ seem to have acquired a striking currency in literary and cultural studies. The adjective ‘performative’ – along with its sibling nouns ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’<sup>211</sup> – has turned into a favorite buzzword, and frequently it remains somewhat unclear who is actually performing what or whom. In its most general sense, the performative has been celebrated as a category which covers almost anything deemed to be fluid or transgressive.<sup>212</sup> Most contemporary variations on the term can be traced back to (theatrical) performance theory<sup>213</sup> or to Austin’s notion of the performative – or to both at the same time.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, it is not uncommon for a study dealing with performance as a fleeting presentational act uniquely situated in the present to establish terminological links with Austin’s speech act theory.<sup>215</sup> While different notions of ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ can be brought into creative interaction, J. Hillis Miller rightly

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<sup>211</sup> The verb “to perform” can be traced back to Middle English *parfourmer* which derives from Old French *parfournir*, the prefix *par-* indicating “thoroughly, completely, to completion” and *fournir* meaning “to furnish” (“perform, v.” *Oxford English Dictionary, Second edition (Vol. XI, Ow-Poisant)*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, 543 and “per-, prefix.” *Oxford English Dictionary, Second edition (Vol. XI, Ow-Poisant)*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, 516).

<sup>212</sup> Such largely positive readings of transgression owe much to Michel Foucault’s “A Preface to Transgression” (Transl. Donald F. Bouchard, Sherry Simon, *Religion and Culture* (Manchester Studies in Religion, Culture and Gender), Sel. and ed. Jeremy R. Carrette, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999, 57–71 [French original “Hommage à Georges Bataille,” *Critique* 195–196 (1963)]). See also Kathrin Audehm; Hans Rudolf Velten, “Einleitung,” Kathrin Audehm; Hans Rudolf Velten (eds.), *Transgression, Hybridisierung, Differenzierung: Zur Performativität von Grenzen in Sprache, Kultur und Gesellschaft* (Rombach Wissenschaften Reihe Scenae 4), Freiburg: Rombach, 2007, 9–40, especially 10ff; Susan Stanford Friedman, “Das Sprechen über Grenzen, Hybridität und Performativität. Kulturtheorie und Identität in den Zwischenräumen der Differenz,” *Mittelweg* 36 12.5 (2003), 34–53, especially 41f.; cf. also the critical school of ‘performative writing’, for instance, Mary Poovey, “Creative Criticism: Adaptation, Performative Writing, and the Problem of Objectivity,” *Narrative* 8.2 (2000), 109–133.

<sup>213</sup> Works that helped to shape the field include Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (NYC: Anchor, 1959); Richard Schechner (1977), *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970–1976* (Rev. ed., NYC: Methuen, 1987); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (NYC: PAJ, 1982); Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (NYC: PAJ, 1986). An overview of the early development of the field offers Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London/NYC: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>214</sup> On such merging of the two different points of origin, see also James Loxley, *Performativity* (The New Critical Idiom), London/NYC: Routledge, 2007, 140.

<sup>215</sup> See, for instance, Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London/NYC: Routledge, 1993, 148ff.

stresses that it is “important not to be misled by the multiple incompatible uses of the same word.”<sup>216</sup> In the following pages I will outline and differentiate those approaches to the ‘performative’ that are most immediately useful to the specific aim of this study.

Generally cited as one part of the ‘holy trinity’ of postcolonial theory, Homi K. Bhabha has provided the approach to performativity that is most current in postcolonial scholarship. Bhabha’s approach is particularly relevant here since it bears direct relevance to the construction of national conceptions. According to Bhabha, “[t]erms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative,” are “produced performatively” as part of a “complex, on-going negotiation.”<sup>217</sup> He identifies a “recursive strategy of the performative”<sup>218</sup> which “intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation’s *self-generation*”<sup>219</sup> and establishes the marginal migrant subject as an agent of subversion, a force that counters essentialist constructions of nationality.

The literary analysis that forms the second part of this study shows to what extent the novels under consideration display challenges to the construction of normative conceptions of US-American nationality. At times, however, the novels document that Bhabha may have overstated the subversive potential of marginalized subjects.<sup>220</sup> It is also be up for debate whether all of the novels actively engage in (re)constructions of US- American identity. In the introductory chapter to the second part of this study, I question the category of the ‘migrant novel’ in reference to the novels under consideration in this study. As the literary analysis shows, the resistance to this label is connected to the narrative strategies employed in the novels: they oppose normative forces of US-American nationality yet refuse to be limited to the perspective or the area of experience of the migrant. It is in fact one overarching

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<sup>216</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida’s Special Theory of Performativity,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.2 (2007), 219–235, here 226.

<sup>217</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Locations of Culture,” *The Location of Culture*, London/NYC: Routledge, 1994, 1–18, here 2.

<sup>218</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” *The Location of Culture*, London/NYC: Routledge, 1994, 139–170, here 145. In this point, Bhabha’s indebtedness to Derrida’s reading of the performative is evident.

<sup>219</sup> Bhabha, “DissemiNation” 147 [Bhabha’s emphasis].

<sup>220</sup> See also Sangeeta Ray, “The Nation in Performance: Bhabha, Mukherjee and Kureishi,” Monika Fludernik (ed.), *Hybridity and Postcolonialism: Twentieth-Century Indian Literature* (ZAA Studies 1), Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1998, 219–238, here 221ff.

concern of my book to problematize the all too casual use of the label ‘migrant literature’.

While Bhabha’s approach has gained much currency in postcolonial studies, Judith Butler’s influential take on performativity is even more relevant to my conception of national affiliation. In many respects, Butler’s ideas about the essential constructedness of gender identity are transferable to the context of national identity.<sup>221</sup> Such an understanding of national identity, of course, relates back to Benedict Anderson’s seminal work on nations as ‘imagined communities’.<sup>222</sup> The literary texts I deal with show that nationality – like gender – is “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”<sup>223</sup> In particular Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* draws attention to the artificiality of such constructions by intersecting issues of gender and race in order to problematize and rearticulate notions of US-American identity. Like gender, national identity receives its actualization partly through the performance of the individual, yet it is neither a radically individual choice nor a pattern merely imposed on the individual through an oppressive outside force.<sup>224</sup>

Furthermore, it can be asserted that the ‘authors of nationality’, as much as those of gender, “become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness.”<sup>225</sup> Literary texts such as the novels under consideration in this study make creative use of this kind of ‘self-entrancement’. Even while dissecting the myth of national identity, some of the protagonists find themselves drawn to and in search of reassuring fictions of national affiliation.

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<sup>221</sup> See also Paul Gilroy’s and, in particular, Arjun Appadurai’s statements on the transferability of Butler’s concepts in Vikki Bell, “Historical Memory, Global Movements and Violence: Paul Gilroy and Arjun Appadurai in Conversation,” Vikki Bell (ed.), *Performativity and Belonging* (Theory, Culture and Society 16.2), London: Sage, 1999, 21–40, here 34f.

<sup>222</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed., London/NYC: Verso, 2006 [original edition published in 1983].

<sup>223</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1990, 270–281, here 270 [Butler’s emphasis].

<sup>224</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts” 277. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, NYC/London: Routledge, 1993, 187.

<sup>225</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts” 273.



My reading of the novels in question pays particular attention to practices of forcible and voluntary reiteration as a means of performing, establishing and potentially also rearticulating identity.<sup>226</sup> Performative utterances are “forms of authoritative speech”<sup>227</sup> that – in a paradoxical fashion – take their subversive potential from the very act of citing regulatory norms. As Judith Butler assesses in the context of gender formation,

[t]o the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which *undermines* the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language.<sup>228</sup>

It is important to note that the potential for subversion is always a restricted one, a possibility of opposition that “remains largely constrained by the terms of the original assailment.”<sup>229</sup> A reading of Butler’s theory that merely celebrates the creativity of performative citations is overly simplistic. At the same time, it is precisely the precariousness of performative gender formation which recommends Butler’s theory to be adapted to the context of national affiliation as well as to be applied to literary renderings of the USA in this particular study.

Nevertheless, I will also draw attention to the limitations of any attempt to employ Judith Butler’s or Homi K. Bhabha’s conceptualizations of performative identity formation as simple reading instructions for the literary text. The novels that I have chosen are particularly suited to demonstrate that a literary text should not be read as a direct and unmitigated representation of processes of identity formation. To

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<sup>226</sup> Cf. Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 1f and 15. In this sense, Judith Butler’s reading of performativity relies heavily on Derrida’s reformulation of Austin’s concept (see also Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 13). Butler has described her own use of Austin’s theory as “not [...] loyal” insofar as she mainly deals with Austin’s concepts as they are mediated through Derrida’s work (Vikki Bell, “On Speech, Race and Melancholia: An Interview with Judith Butler,” Vikki Bell (ed.), *Performativity and Belonging* (Theory, Culture and Society 16.2), London: Sage, 1999, 163–174, here 164).

<sup>227</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 225. Here Butler’s argument echoes Emile Benveniste’s linguistic assessment of the performative utterance as an “act of authority” (Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami Linguistics Series 8), Transl. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables, FL: U of Miami P, 1971 [French original version *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Gallimard, 1966], 236). Cf. also Judith Butler, “Burning Acts: Injurious Speech,” Andrew Parker; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds.), *Performativity and Performance* (Essays from the English Institute), NYC/London: Routledge, 1995, 197–227, here 205, as well as Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, NYC/London: Routledge, 1997, 3.

<sup>228</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 231 [Butler’s emphasis].

<sup>229</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 132.

a certain extent, such readings appear to be encouraged by the liberal use of literary examples that scholars like Butler make in their work on identity construction. While I do not wish to discount the merits of the literary text as an illustration of ‘real life’ and theoretical consideration, it is important to note that boundaries between actual processes of identity formation and the literary text exist and do indeed matter.<sup>230</sup> This is particularly true if one aims for a reading of the literary text that considers the text’s worth to be more than *merely* illustrative. Furthermore, there is much to recommend a certain amount of caution towards the activist impulse that leads literary scholars to consider inquiry into the author’s ethnic, racial, sexual or religious affiliations the key to literary interpretation – even if some authors appear to cater to such an approach.

It is a curious inversion of biographical readings motivated by theoretical concerns that theories on identity formation appear to have been so effectively assimilated into discourses of literary reception as to now surface also in the literary text: some literary works have begun to provide their own commentary on and contributions to such theoretical discourses. The close readings in this study show that literary texts do not only depict processes of identity construction as conceptualized in Butler’s or Bhabha’s work but that they also quote and creatively employ such conceptual notions. Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* and Salman Rushdie’s *Fury* serve as particularly apt examples of such ‘conceptually informed’ writing.

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<sup>230</sup> Wolfgang Iser has pointed out that the “reproduction of items [selected from social and other extratextual realities] within the fictional text brings to light purposes, attitudes, and experiences that are decidedly *not* part of the reality reproduced. Hence they appear in the text as products of a fictionalizing act” (*The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, Baltimore, MD/London: John Hopkins UP, 1993, 2 [Iser’s emphasis]). Such fictionalizing acts constitute crossings of boundaries that become visible through a ‘bracketing’ of the reality reproduced in the text (Iser, *The Fictive* 3 and 13). See also Stierle’s concept of the imaginary world of the literary text as *Anschlusswelt* (Karlheinz Stierle, “Die Funktion als Vorstellung, als Werk und als Schema: eine Problemskizze,” Dieter Henrich; Wolfgang Iser (eds.), *Funktionen des Fiktiven* (Poetik und Hermeneutik 10), München: Wilhelm Fink, 1983, 173–182, here 176). See also Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 1), Transl. Kathleen McLaughlin; David Pellauer, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984 [French original *Temps et récit*, Seuil, 1983], 45. Cf. furthermore Fluck on Kenneth Burke’s conception of literary texts as strategic responses to reality (Winfried Fluck, “Literature as Symbolic Action,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 28.3 (1983), 361–371, especially 363–365). On the conceptual development of ‘poiesis’, see Hans Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik: Band I: Versuche im Feld der ästhetischen Erfahrung* (Uni-Taschenbücher 692), München: Wilhelm Fink, 1977, 77–97, especially 85.

Returning to the notion of the ‘performative’, I will now consider whether the performative in its original Austinian sense can serve any practical purpose in the analysis of literary texts. The concept of the ‘performative’ as developed and – somewhat curiously – later dismissed in John L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* refers to utterances that constitute the performance of an act rather than merely having a descriptive function.<sup>231</sup> While *How to Do Things with Words* has received much scholarly praise, it has also been met with more than its share of criticism. Literary scholars in particular seem to have good reason for being skeptical about the applicability of Austin’s theory. In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin concentrates on non-literary performative utterances, branding performative utterance in literary texts “hollow”, “*parasitic* upon its normal use” and, finally, “*etiolations* of language”.<sup>232</sup> I agree with Shoshana Felman’s assessment that the importance of Austin’s exclusion of literary examples and his choice of words in this context has been over-stated.<sup>233</sup> Nonetheless it is clear that Austin’s statements were hardly suited to recommend his theory for application in a literary context. Since *How to Do Things with Words* was published posthumously, Austin never had the opportunity to expand his initial ideas to include literary uses of the performative.<sup>234</sup>

Jacques Derrida was one of the most vocal critics of Austin’s ostensible slighting of non-literal uses of the performative. His influence on Judith Butler’s conception of the performative is paramount. In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida stresses the essential iterability of all communication.<sup>235</sup> Derrida rejects Austin’s exclusion of the literary as based on metaphysical dogma rather than provisional pragmatism.<sup>236</sup> As a consequence of the citational character of *all* communication, Derrida considers Austin’s distinction between the ‘normal’ or ‘serious’ use of

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<sup>231</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, London: Oxford UP, 1962, 6f.

<sup>232</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things* 22 [Austin’s emphasis]. ‘To etiolate’ means ‘to wither’ or ‘to weaken’.

<sup>233</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, Transl. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983 [French original version *Le Scandale du corps parlant*, Seuil, 1980], 131f. See also Loxley, *Performativity* 63.

<sup>234</sup> Loxley, *Performativity* 7.

<sup>235</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” Transl. Samuel Weber; Jeffrey Mehlman. *Limited Inc.*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988, 1–23 [French original “Signature, événement, contexte,” 1972], 7.

<sup>236</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Limited Inc a b c ...,” Transl. Samuel Weber, *Limited Inc.*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988, 29–110 [French original “Limited Inc a b c ...,” 1977], 93. Cf. Loxley, *Performativity* 14.

performative utterances and mere ‘quotations’ (as in the case of literature) untenable.<sup>237</sup> In “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” John R. Searle aims to complete Austin’s argument. He characterizes the fictional use of language as a “nondeceptive pseudoperformance”<sup>238</sup> that is based on a “separate set of conventions which enables the author to go through the motions of making statements which he knows to be not true.”<sup>239</sup> In “Reiterating the Difference: A Reply to Derrida” and “Limited Inc a b c ...,” Searle and Derrida, respectively, engage in a polemical battle of words that strays far beyond Austin’s objectives and ultimately does not resolve the conceptual issues.<sup>240</sup>

In a provisional fashion, I argue that something may still be gained from applying Austin’s concept of the performative to literary texts. The concept of the performative utterance in its narrow sense may be of limited use in literary scholarship. Yet the general idea that speech can constitute the performance of concrete acts and that it can be ‘creative’ – in the most fundamental sense of the word – bears obvious relevance to the literary context. In this sense, fictional narration could be considered a performative act *per se*.<sup>241</sup>

In *Narrative as Performance*, Marie Maclean states:

[A]lthough John Searle denies logical status to fictional discourse, he posits a performative when he speaks of ‘a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of rules relating illocutionary acts and the world’ (1975: 326). The set of conventions is in effect the narrative performative which instructs one to differentiate between *énonciation* and *énoncé*, and more particularly between speaking and telling. For this differentiation to be made possible, what Erving Goffman calls *keying*, the indication of a change in the status of discourse, is necessary. When this keying occurs in story-telling, both teller and hearer accept a

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<sup>237</sup> Derrida, “Signature Event Context” 16f.

<sup>238</sup> John R. Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *New Literary History* 6.2 (1975), 319–332, here 325.

<sup>239</sup> Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse” 326. For no obvious reason, Searle insists on repeating the word ‘parasitic’ to characterize the relationship between ‘serious’ utterance and literary adaptation.

<sup>240</sup> John R. Searle, “Reiterating the Difference: A Reply to Derrida,” *Glyph* 1 (1977), 198–208; Derrida, “Limited Inc a b c ...” 29–110.

<sup>241</sup> See also Oliver Preukschat, *Der Akt des Ironisierens und die Form seiner Beschreibung*, Tönning: Der Andere Verlag, 2007, 218. See furthermore Poovey, “Creative Criticism” 123.

new frame of reference, they accept the contract implied by the performative ‘I will now narrate’, and their situation is modified by the act of narration.<sup>242</sup>

Maclean argues that narration is performative insofar as it constitutes “an implementation, and where possible a successful implementation, of a certain set of conditions of knowledge, skills, techniques, rules, or vocabulary.”<sup>243</sup> Performatives, she stresses, are not “limited to directly mimetic *énoncés* such as dialogue, but are also present in the narratorial relationship in which the narrator instructs, advises, warns, or persuades the narratee.”<sup>244</sup>

In her thought-provoking study *Narrative Gravity*, Rukmini Bhaya Nair demonstrates the performative force of fictional narration in drawing attention to the fact that it “creates emotional resonances through *purely linguistic means*.”<sup>245</sup> Nair claims narrative fiction to be “the most ‘performative’ of acts since its existence is typically predicated on its announcing itself as fiction, and that’s that, in the same way as a promise is a promise.”<sup>246</sup> In a similar vein, Gérard Genette stresses the performative character of fictional narration:

The statement ‘The meeting is in session,’ or ‘You’re fired,’ describes the institutional state of affairs brought about by its very enunciation; the statement ‘Once upon a time there was a little girl ...’ describes the mental state of affairs brought about in the mind of its hearer by its very enunciation, and the difference is finally quite small, for institutional states of affairs are collective mental states – as are, frequently, the mental states provoked by fictional utterances. [...] The specific feature of fictional utterances is that, contrary to utterances of reality, which describe in addition (!) an objective state of affairs, the fictional utterance describes nothing but a mental state.<sup>247</sup>

While it is debatable whether fictional utterances describe *nothing but a mental state*, perceptions of the USA as we find them in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury* or DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* could be described as a ‘mental state of affairs brought about in

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<sup>242</sup> Marie Maclean, *Narrative as Performance: The Baudelairean Experiment*, London/NYC: Routledge, 1988, 25f. [Maclean’s emphasis]. Maclean’s reference to ‘keying’ concerns the concept developed by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis* (NYC: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>243</sup> Maclean, *Narrative as Performance* 41. See also Wolfgang Iser, “Das Modell der Sprechakte,” Uwe Wirth (ed.), *Performanz: Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften* (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 1575), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002, 129–139, here 138.

<sup>244</sup> Maclean, *Narrative as Performance* 30.

<sup>245</sup> Rukmini Bhaya Nair, *Narrative Gravity: Conversation, Cognition, Culture*, London/NYC: Routledge, 2002, 11 [Nair’s emphasis].

<sup>246</sup> Nair, *Narrative Gravity* 74f.

<sup>247</sup> Gérard Genette, “Acts of Fiction,” *Fiction and Diction*, Transl. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell UP, 1993, 30–53 [French original *Fiction et diction*, Seuil, 1991], 42f.

the mind of [the reader]'. The novels under consideration here do not only create 'fictional worlds' in a general sense but shape conceptions of US-American lifeworlds.<sup>248</sup> It is thus an aim of this study to examine the extent to which narrative engagements with the USA constitute what Maclean calls the 'implementation of a certain set of conditions of knowledge, skills, techniques, rules, or vocabulary'. My inquiry concerns in particular the narrative strategies behind such 'acts of implementation' as well as the characteristics and the origin of the 'sets of conditions' employed.

In my analysis, I consider conceptions of the 'performative' with reference to ambiguous processes of affiliation and disaffiliation depicted in literary texts. Such literary depictions inevitably depend on or respond to the 'archive' of common stereotypes relating to the USA. In this context, it makes sense to consider national stereotypes as one important ingredient of those 'sets of conditions of knowledge and vocabulary' that aid the performative construction of literary 'Americas'. As a consequence, the category of the stereotype merits particular attention as part of my conceptual framework.

It goes beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a full account of the development of and of the various attempts to define the stereotype. Originally derived from the language of printing,<sup>249</sup> the term was introduced as a designation of perceptions of social groups in Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922).<sup>250</sup> The rise of cognitive psychology in the second half of the twentieth century has resulted in an almost complete recovery of many of Lippmann's initial ideas concerning the stereotype.<sup>251</sup> In this context, Charles Stangor has recently defined stereotypes as representing "the traits that we view as characteristic of social groups, or of

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<sup>248</sup> See Stierle, "Die Fiktion als Vorstellung" 176.

<sup>249</sup> Wolfgang Stroebe; Chester A. Insko, "Stereotype, Prejudice, and Discrimination: Changing Conceptions in Theory and Research," Daniel Bar-Tal et al. (eds.), *Stereotyping and Prejudice: Changing Conceptions*, NYC: Springer, 1989, 3–34, here 4.

<sup>250</sup> Walter Lippmann (1922), *Public Opinion*, NYC: Macmillan, 1957.

<sup>251</sup> Jacques-Philippe Leyens; Vincent Yzerbyt; Georges Schadron, *Stereotypes and Social Cognition*, London: Sage, 1994, 10f. Henri Tajfel's article "Cognitive Aspects of Prejudice" (*Journal of Social Issues* 25.4 (1969), 79–97) set the foundations for a cognitive approach to prejudice and stereotype. Wolfgang Stroebe and Chester A. Insko describe the innovations of Tajfel's approach as follows: "The role of motivational biases was minimized, and stereotypes were conceived of as categories that bring coherence and order to our social environment. The biases and exaggerations characteristic of stereotypes were seen as the result of limitations of the human capacity for processing information" ("Stereotype, Prejudice, and Discrimination" 5).

individual members of those groups, and particularly those that differentiate groups from each other.”<sup>252</sup> Stereotypes, Stangor emphasizes, constitute “an important form of social knowledge.”<sup>253</sup> In a related fashion, Jacques-Philippe Leyens, Vincent Yzerbyt and Georges Schadron characterize stereotypes as “the result of a process that aims at regulating, as efficiently as possible, people’s social interactions.”<sup>254</sup> They stress the importance of distinguishing between stereotypes as such and the act of stereotyping: while stereotypes are “shared beliefs about personal attributes, usually personality traits, but often also behaviours, of a group of people,” stereotyping is “the process of applying a – stereotypical – judgement such as rendering these individuals interchangeable with other members of the category.”<sup>255</sup> The distinction between these two definitions bears great relevance for my own approach to stereotypes as literary devices: it is evident that employing stereotypes in a literary text does not automatically constitute an act of stereotyping, even more so as narrative perspective conditions the use of stereotypical notions.

Before moving on to explore the creative potential of stereotypes, it should be made clear that this approach does not constitute an attempt to gloss over the repercussions of real-life stereotyping. This is a significant point to make, in particular in a postcolonial context. Homi K. Bhabha’s reflection on the colonial practice of stereotyping in “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” clearly states the dangers inherent in stereotypical notions. Bhabha emphasizes the ambivalent and complex nature of stereotypical modes of presentation.<sup>256</sup> In Bhabha’s reading, the stereotype constitutes “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.”<sup>257</sup> Of course, Bhabha does not employ ‘knowledge’ as a primarily positive concept. Instead, he characterizes the stereotype as “the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and

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<sup>252</sup> Charles Stangor, “The Study of Stereotyping, Prejudice and Discrimination within Social Psychology,” Todd D. Nelson (ed.), *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, NYC: Psychology, 2009, 1–22, here 2 [original passage italicized].

<sup>253</sup> Stangor, “The Study of Stereotyping” 3.

<sup>254</sup> Leyens et al., *Stereotypes* 11.

<sup>255</sup> Leyens et al., *Stereotypes* 11.

<sup>256</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” *The Location of Culture*, London/NYC: Routledge, 1994, 66–84, here 70.

<sup>257</sup> Bhabha, “The Other Question” 67.

phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.’<sup>258</sup> It is, in Bhabha’s words,

an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.<sup>259</sup>

While I support this reading of colonial and racist practices of stereotyping, I maintain that in literary texts stereotypes often fulfill more positive and creative functions.<sup>260</sup> Indeed, their use can even serve the play of difference that Bhabha’s notion of the stereotype excludes. As a rule, it is important not to simplify in assessing an author’s use of stereotypes. Since the same stereotype can be used to mean different things in different contexts, it does not suffice to merely pick and choose from a list of automatic reading responses drawn from the back catalogue of postcolonial thinking. In the present context, Bhabha’s argument serves to reconfirm the crucial distinction between stereotypes and stereotyping that I have drawn attention to above.

My assessment of the literary functions of the stereotype correlates to a large extent with Ruth Florack’s study *Bekannte Fremde* [‘familiar strangers’]. Florack shares my skepticism towards the basic assumptions and methodology of comparatist imagology. She conceptualizes national stereotypes as a cultural ‘repertoire [...] that is part of shared everyday knowledge.’<sup>261</sup> It is significant for Florack’s understanding of the national stereotype that the currency of this cultural repertoire is very

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<sup>258</sup> Bhabha, “The Other Question” 81f.

<sup>259</sup> Bhabha, “The Other Question” 75 [Bhabha’s emphasis].

<sup>260</sup> The idea of such creative uses of stereotypes is not to be confused with the more general call for a rehabilitation of the prejudice that Gadamer proposes in *Truth and Method* (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second and rev. edition, Transl. Joel Weinsheimer; Donald G. Marshall, NYC: Continuum, 2002 [German original version *Wahrheit und Methode*, Mohr, 1960], 271ff., especially 276–285). Gadamer’s assessment has been opposed by Jürgen Habermas in “A Review of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*” (1977) (Transl. Fred R. Dallmayr; Thomas McCarthy, Gayle L. Ormiston; Alan D. Schrift (eds.), *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricœur* (SUNY series, Intersections Philosophy and Critical Theory), Albany, NY: State U of NY, 1989, 213–244 [German original version “Zu Gadamer’s *Methode und Wahrheit*,” Suhrkamp 1970], here 236–238) and “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality” (1980) (Transl. Josef Bleicher, Gayle L. Ormiston; Alan D. Schrift (eds.), *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricœur* (SUNY series, Intersections Philosophy and Critical Theory), Albany: State U of NY, 1989, 245–270 [German original version “Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik,” 1970], here 268–270).

<sup>261</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 2 [my translation]. Florack examines the interconnectedness of national stereotypes and national character in French and German literary texts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.



frequently not restricted by national borders.<sup>262</sup> In describing the image of the Other – in the imagological sense – as “*une langue seconde*”,<sup>263</sup> Pageaux has in fact implied a similar type of ‘cultural bilingualism’.

Florack grounds her conception of the stereotype in the findings of cognitive psychology. She describes national stereotypes as ‘rudimentary elements of knowledge that provide orientation in the social world by reducing complexity and facilitate communication.’<sup>264</sup> Stereotypes as Florack understands them are ‘generally known attributes that are grounded in tradition and mark group membership; as textual elements, national stereotypes refer to the (rudimentary) knowledge that the readers have about a people.’<sup>265</sup> This conception bears particular relevance in the context of this study: in today’s globalized world – the age of global information flows, of satellite TV and the internet – familiarity with US-American lifeworlds has long become something like a ‘global cultural possession’. It seems particularly apt to speak of a ‘*rudimentary* knowledge’ when considering literary ‘adaptations’ of this shared repertoire. After all, it is precisely the ‘rudimentary’ character which allows for creative rearticulations of national mythologies and stereotypes. In *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Mary Louise Pratt claims that

the way people produce and understand literary works depends enormously on an unspoken, culturally-shared knowledge of the rules, conventions, and expectations that are in play when language is used in that context.<sup>266</sup>

It appears sensible to conceptualize stereotypes as one type of such culturally-shared conventions, a set of conventions that has the potential to serve creative aims.

Rather than providing a corrective to the national stereotypes ‘quoted’ in literary texts, Ruth Florack opts for an analysis of their diverse textual functions.<sup>267</sup> To her, literary analysis should not consist of a search for coherent ‘images’ but examine the complex networks of cultural signification which characterize each

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<sup>262</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 37.

<sup>263</sup> Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 137. See also Pageaux, “De l’imagerie culturelle” 138.

<sup>264</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 4 [my translation]. See also Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 143. See also Magdalena Telus, “Einige kulturelle Funktionen gruppenspezifischer Stereotype,” *Zet: Zeitschrift für Empirische Textforschung* 1 (1994), 33–39, here 35.

<sup>265</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 39 [my translation].

<sup>266</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Bloomington, IN/London: Indiana UP, 1977, 86.

<sup>267</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 143f.

structural element of a literary work.<sup>268</sup> As suggested by Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron's distinction between the stereotype and the act of stereotyping, the presence of stereotypes in a literary text does not necessarily authorize us to judge the views of the person who employs them, be it author, narrator or a fictional character.<sup>269</sup> Furthermore, national stereotypes in literary texts 'are not always a sign of encounters with and of experiences of a foreign culture but can instead serve as an efficient way of activating the reader's previous knowledge of foreign countries and peoples through a catchphrase, without ever placing the Other as such at the centre of attention.'<sup>270</sup> What Florack does not mention is that such offhand or decontextualized uses of stereotypical notions can in themselves be extremely problematic, especially if assessed from a postcolonial point of view.

Florack calls for an analysis of national stereotypes as literary '*topoi* in the sense of conventional commonplaces.'<sup>271</sup> At the same time, she stresses the importance of engaging in an examination of such national *topoi* in relation to other textual features since an analysis concentrating on stereotypes can never do justice to the literary text as a whole.<sup>272</sup> There is much to recommend this approach to national stereotypes also in relation to the novels under consideration in this study. While stereotypical perceptions do play a rather important role, for instance, in DBC Pierre's depiction of small-town America in *Vernon God Little* or of the East coast intelligentsia in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, it is only in the interplay with other textual features that these stereotypes gain their specific force and expressiveness.

Astrid Franke's *Keys to Controversies* is one of the few studies in which such an approach has been attempted. Franke provides a perceptive analysis of stereotypes and their functions in a selection of modern US-American novels. As Franke points out, stereotypes and their function in the literary text

depend on our knowledge of their common usage outside the literary text. This extratextual knowledge is a vital part of the stereotype, yet it does not exhaust its

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<sup>268</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 21.

<sup>269</sup> See also Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 37.

<sup>270</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 151 [my translation].

<sup>271</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 159 [my translation; Florack's emphasis].

<sup>272</sup> Florack, *Bekannte Fremde* 160.

meaning within the text. Stereotypes are located at the interface between an individual literary work and the collective imagination at a given time.<sup>273</sup>

Franke understands stereotypes as a type of “sedimented knowledge.”<sup>274</sup> They exist “in the text as a ‘programmed reading’ where we reassemble and complete a representation from a set of given elements according to a preconceived form.”<sup>275</sup>

Franke also emphasizes what she calls the “dual nature” of stereotypes:

[T]hey have a social and an aesthetic function. Seeing it as a part of a textual structure must be complemented by its social significance in the world outside the text in as much as this significance may well bear upon the very structure of the text. Identifying the stereotype with its ideological power, however, is likely to miss the particulars of its textual manifestation and its potential transformation. Stereotypes are thus always doubly coded: they are embedded in a text but not solely controlled by it; they are charged with traces of social controversies but also taken out of this social context and modified by their function within a literary work.<sup>276</sup>

Franke, like Florack, opts for an approach to literary stereotypes that examines them in their relatedness to and interaction with other elements of the text.<sup>277</sup> Nevertheless both Franke’s and Florack’s analyses focus on the functions and specific ‘texture’ of stereotypical depictions. In the context of this study, stereotypes do not assume quite such a pivotal position. They are but one feature of the literary engagements with the USA, if a particularly expressive and interesting one. It is crucial not to exaggerate their importance for the individual text since such a reading would lead to an oversimplified and restrictive perception. Considering textual features first and foremost in their relation to stereotypical conventions frequently means little more than forcing an analytic grid onto the text. Thus merely searching for specific proto- or stereotypes – such as the cowboy, the hamburger-eating redneck or the intellectual East Coast Jew – will neither do justice to the texts in question nor make for an interesting reading approach.

Paul Giles has suggested a different theoretical concept that bears some relevance for my close readings. In his monograph *Virtual Americas* (2002), Giles focuses on the literary interaction between the USA and Great Britain, yet his

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<sup>273</sup> Astrid Franke, *Keys to Controversies: Stereotypes in Modern American Novels* (Nordamerikastudien 10), Frankfurt/NYC: Campus, 1999, 10.

<sup>274</sup> Franke, *Keys to Controversies* 30.

<sup>275</sup> Franke, *Keys to Controversies* 40f.

<sup>276</sup> Franke, *Keys to Controversies* 37f.

<sup>277</sup> Franke, *Keys to Controversies* 38.

observations on representations of the United States as “‘virtual’ phenomena in literary works”<sup>278</sup> lend themselves easily to an application in a wider context. Giles aims to establish a “critical process of virtualization” that

works to hollow out cultural formations by looking at them from a comparative angle of vision. It is as if the observer were seeing native landscapes refracted or inverted in a foreign mirror. Webster’s dictionary defines ‘virtual focus’ as ‘a point from which divergent rays (as of light) seem to emanate but do not actually do so (as in the image of a point source seen in a plane mirror)’; a ‘virtual image,’ accordingly, is ‘an image (as seen in a plane mirror) formed of virtual foci.’ Such mirror images deprive the object reflected of their traditional comforts of depth and perspective, illusions by which their claims on natural representation are traditionally sustained; instead, these objects are flattened out into replicas of themselves in a process of aestheticization that highlights the manifestly fictional dimensions of their construction.<sup>279</sup>

In the present context of depictions of the USA, it is, for instance, the national myth of the USA as the world’s ‘migrant haven’ or the ‘country of opportunity’, that may be subject to such ‘hollowing out’.<sup>280</sup> What distinguishes my application from Paul Giles’s original approach is not merely its wider geographical scope: it is not only in the interaction between different texts (from different geographical contexts) that a process of virtualization may take place. Instead, virtualization can also be performed by the multiple conceptions of the USA at work inside the individual narrative text. The novels examined in this study simultaneously display outsiders’ perspectives and inside views of the USA that go far beyond a repetition of common migrant motifs. Texts like Peter Carey’s *His Illegal Self* or Imraan Coovadia’s *Green-Eyed Thieves* offer depictions of the United States that in themselves are already subjected to literary virtualization.

Giles pays particular attention to the implications of the process of virtualization for the construction of “fictional forms of nationalism”.<sup>281</sup> He aims to demonstrate in how far conceptions of national identity and national history have

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<sup>278</sup> Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (New Americanists), Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 2002, 1.

<sup>279</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 1f.

<sup>280</sup> There obviously are limitations to the applicability of physical metaphor in literary studies. While the general image of the virtual focus appears to suit the literary context, the overall conceptual precision of the analogy is debatable. Nevertheless, Giles’ concept draws attention to a phenomenon that is relevant within the context of this study, namely the intersection of different perspectives on issues of nationality in fiction.

<sup>281</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 1.

been and are the result of an “engagement with – and, often, deliberate exclusion of – a transatlantic imaginary.”<sup>282</sup> Giles emphasizes that

national histories, of whatever kind, cannot be written simply from the inside. The scope and significance of their narrative involve not just the incorporation of multiple or discordant voices in a certain preestablished framework of unity, but also an acknowledgement of external points of reference that serve to relativize the whole conceptual field, pulling the circumference of national identity itself into strange, ‘elliptical’ shapes.<sup>283</sup>

Giles’s argument here, of course, responds to recent calls for a ‘transnationalization’ of American studies.<sup>284</sup> Nevertheless his observations carry beyond the scope of such institutional debates and serve as an apt assessment of national identity in a modern, interconnected world. It is in such a truly globalized context – transcending Giles’s transatlantic perspective – that I consider the virtualization of literary ‘Americas’.

The virtualization process as I conceptualize it with reference to Giles is characterized by a dialogue between different globalized (literary) Americas and the empirical reality of the United States. As Giles stresses, “[t]he crucial point [...] is that virtual reality does not so much reinscribe an antithesis between mind and matter as negotiate spaces between them.”<sup>285</sup> Indeed, “the iconoclastic effect of virtual reality lies in its hybrid form, its tantalizing position in between the material event and its shadow.”<sup>286</sup> Giles conceives of virtualization as a process that is not restricted to an abstract cultural sphere but that sends its ripples to the realm of hard political facts. In his reading, the attacks of 11 September 2001, for instance,

represented a particularly bleak example of the American cultural apparatus being appropriated and turned back against itself, with the rapid global circulation of people, technology, and capital creating an inherently unstable situation where, unlike in the cold war era, a national enemy cannot be positioned as geographically remote or intrinsically foreign.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 1.

<sup>283</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 6. A similar approach, stressing global interconnectivities, has been promoted in the field of historical study since the 1980s. For an introduction to ‘World History’ and a survey of the field, see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003.

<sup>284</sup> See my evaluation of the debate in “The Complex Fate of Not Being an American Book” (part II, chapter 1).

<sup>285</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 18.

<sup>286</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 18.

<sup>287</sup> Giles, *Virtual Americas* 286.

It has of course long become a conceptual cliché to speak of flexible or ambiguous positionalities, be they geographical, political, sexual or narrative (just to name an incomplete selection). Nevertheless, my theoretical approach in this study is defined by the flexibility and ambiguity which is the natural result of such a conceptual synthesis: my analysis takes into consideration Butler's and Bhabha's theories of performative identity formation as well as Maclean's and Genette's literary adaptation of the Austinian performative and Paul Giles's conceptualization of 'virtual Americas'. In reading these theoretical approaches side by side and in applying them to the literary texts, I outline the specific textures and narrative strategies of a selection of literary engagements with the USA. My analysis thus seeks to do justice to the diverse conceptions of the USA which are brought into being by and speak through the literary texts.

In applying Bhabha, I examine the potential and the limitations of processes of narrative subversion in the construction of national identity. I venture to adapt Judith Butler's conception of gender identity to the context of national identity, emphasizing processes of reiteration and citation in the literary texts. At the same time, I explore the reflection on and negation of such theoretical discourses in the novels in question. Paying particular attention to stereotypes as a form of 'cultural knowledge', I consider the performative engagement with 'narrative Americas' in the primary texts.

The novels' performative quality does not merely lie in their creation of 'literary Americas' but more generally – to adapt Lippmann's famous phrase – of the 'Americas in our heads' which may well bear direct relevance to 'real life'. Advertising, TV, Hollywood cinema as well as the global political, military and economic presence of the USA have long succeeded in creating a repertoire of virtualized (and often partly fictional) 'Americas'.<sup>288</sup> In a similar – if less obtrusive – fashion, performative depictions in literary texts leave their imprint on the USA as situated in the 'real world' – and on the way we perceive the USA both as a factual and a fictional entity.

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<sup>288</sup> See my chapters on "The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)" (part I, chapter 1) and "Inquiries into Anti-Americanism" (part I, chapter 2).

## **Part II**

“It’s a complex fate, being an American [book].”  
Mary Ann Snyder-Körber, “Building the Better Book”  
(following Henry James)

### **1. The Transnationalization of American Studies and the Complex Fate of Not Being an American Migrant Novel**

In the second part of this study, I set out to unravel the stylistic and thematic layers of a selection of contemporary anglophone novels. These novels are part of the corpus of texts that has been labeled (anglophone) ‘postcolonial literatures’. The suitability of this label for some of the novels, however, is doubtful. Therefore it may be preferable to speak of ‘anglophone literatures’<sup>289</sup> and, at the same time, to stress that in this particular case we are dealing with ‘global varieties’ of this field, thus excluding ‘mainstream British’ and North American texts.<sup>290</sup> The primary texts examined display perspectives of intimate and self-confident familiarity with US-American lifeworlds but nevertheless retain a sense of distance. Such a selection of anglophone texts, coming from diverse contexts and locations, is particularly suited to demonstrate the prevalence of the performative depictions that I have asserted in the previous chapter.

It has long become a truism that in today’s globalized world, geographical categorization can never be taken for granted – not even if they are as inclusive as ‘the anglophone world excluding mainstream Britain and North America’. Thus it is not very surprising that while working on this study I have repeatedly been asked to defend my claim that certain texts stand outside the body of ‘American literature’.

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<sup>289</sup> In German academia, the term ‘New Literatures in English’ has been established as a designation for the field. This has helped to promote an open and undogmatic approach to anglophone literatures from around the world. Within the institutional field of English studies, it thus fulfills important strategic and programmatic functions. Nevertheless, I avoid the label here because, in specific application, the adjectives ‘new’ and ‘English’ cause as many conceptual problems as they can help to solve. For an introduction to the conceptual backdrop of the ‘new literatures in English’, see Frank Schulze-Engler, “Commonwealth Literature – New Literatures in English – Postcolonial Literature,” Dieter Riemenschneider (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory: The Emergence of a Critical Discourse – A Selected and Annotated Bibliography*, Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2004, 1–14 and Frank Schulze-Engler (ed.), *New Literatures in English: Prospects and Retrospects: 25 Years of Study, Teaching and Research in German-Speaking Countries* (Acolit Special Issue 4), Frankfurt: Institut für England- und Amerikastudien, 2002.

<sup>290</sup> Canadian texts are consciously excluded in this particular context since the relations between the United States of America and Canada constitute a vast field of study of its own that transcends the limits of this study both in terms of extent and thematic scope.



Indeed, I was once told by a scholar that as far as she was concerned there really could be no doubt that Salman Rushdie was an American author. My point in relating such anecdotal ‘evidence’ is not that such claims are ridiculous nor (at all) that it is undesirable to work in American studies. Instead, I am interested in what statements of this kind tell us about the current state of the field: they appear to betray an anxiousness to protect and simultaneously extend the boundaries of a field that is arguably especially shaken by the erosion of spatial and disciplinary boundaries that we all are experiencing.

A few decades ago, English studies seemed to suffer from a similar fate. The onslaught of postcolonialism and the threat of an erosion of the traditional canon as well as the rise of cultural studies transformed the field to an extent which by many scholars was observed with much suspicion. Contrary to all prophecies of doom, English studies underwent a relatively swift recovery. The incorporation of postcolonial and cultural studies approaches and the canonization of postcolonial texts (albeit of a select number) ultimately resulted in a self-confident redefinition of the field as something like ‘(global) anglophone studies’. While large parts of the old canon have retained their importance, most English studies scholars today are also involved – in one way or other – in postcolonial or cultural studies.

For some time, American studies has appeared to face a similar moment of crisis. In a world of eroding borders, the national framework which once worked as a defining feature of American studies has become hard to uphold.<sup>291</sup> Ansgar Nünning and Andreas Jucker have pointed out that while English studies have traditionally concentrated on language and literature, the object of American studies has always been ‘American culture as a whole’.<sup>292</sup> If this is indeed true, then American studies depends fundamentally – and problematically – on the idea that there *is* such a thing as a whole (contained or at least containable) American culture.

Over the past decade, there have been various attempts to redefine the field and thus to equip it for the future (and, for that matter, for the present). The so-called

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<sup>291</sup> See, for a more comprehensive account of the history and (arguably constant) state of crisis of American studies in Germany, Sabine Sielke, “Theorizing American Studies: German Interventions into an Ongoing Debate,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 50.1+2 (2005), 53–98.

<sup>292</sup> Ansgar Nünning; Andreas H. Jucker, *Orientierung Anglistik/Amerikanistik* (rowohlt's enzyklopädie), Hamburg: Rowohlt TB, 1999, 39 [my translation].

‘transnational turn’<sup>293</sup> in American studies and conceptual reorientations in comparative and postnational(ist)<sup>294</sup> as well as postcolonial<sup>295</sup> terms have been documented by the emergence of new journals and associations with a transnational scope.<sup>296</sup> As Shelley Fisher Fishkin proposed in her presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2004, this “transnational turn” should enable American studies to “provide the nuance, complexity, and historical context to correct reductive visions of America.”<sup>297</sup> Transnational American studies, Fishkin argues, focuses

less on the United States as a static and stable territory and population whose most characteristic traits it was our job to divine, and more on the nation as a participant in a global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products – albeit a participant who often tries to impede those flows.<sup>298</sup>

It is thus particularly receptive to the everyday realities of a world dominated by globalization and transnationalization.

Winfried Fluck, on the other hand, identifies the search for the “ever-elusive revolutionary subject”<sup>299</sup> as the traditional core project of American studies. The

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<sup>293</sup> The label ‘transnational America’ is not a recent invention. Randolph Bourne used it as early as in 1916, albeit in a domestic sense (Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916), 86–97).

<sup>294</sup> John Carlos Rowe (ed.), *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles, CA/London: U of California P, 2000 as well as John Carlos Rowe, “A Future for ‘American Studies’: The Comparative U. S. Cultures Model,” Günter H. Lenz; Klaus J. Milich (eds.), *American Studies in Germany: European Contexts and Intercultural Relations*, Frankfurt: Campus, 1995, 262–278.

<sup>295</sup> See, for instance, Amritjit Singh; Peter Schmidt (eds.), *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 2000 as well as C. Richard King (ed.), *Postcolonial America*, Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 2000.

<sup>296</sup> The ‘New Americanists’ monograph series of Duke University Press was one of the early attempts to lend a voice to recent developments in American studies. New journals include *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* (JTAS), an open access online journal sponsored by UC Santa Barbara’s “American Cultures and Global Contexts Center” and Stanford University’s American studies programme. Another interesting example is *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* which promotes analysis of “the United States and South Africa from an international, transnational, and/or comparative perspective and seeks to understand each country in relation to the other” (“Welcome to Safundi.” *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*. 17 July 2009. <http://www.safundi.com/> (1 July 2011)). Recently founded associations include the “Society of Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas” (MESEA; founded in 2000) and the “International Association of Inter-American Studies” (IAS, founded in 2009).

<sup>297</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies. Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005), 17–57, here 20. A first phase of the ‘opening up’ of American studies, of course, brought about valuable research on migrants and minorities in the USA.

<sup>298</sup> Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures” 24.

<sup>299</sup> Winfried Fluck, “Theories of American Culture (and the Transnational Turn in American Studies),” Winfried Fluck; Stefan Brandt; Ingrid Thaler (eds.), *Transnational American Studies*

emergence of transnational American studies can be understood as “a consequence of [...] American Studies’ ever more desperate search for a configuration or location that would still be able to provide an oppositional perspective.”<sup>300</sup> In contrast to this, Djelal Kadir has drawn attention to a traditional complicity between American studies and the objectives of the USA as a political entity:

[H]istorically American Studies as a discipline and as an international field, especially, has been largely defined as an extension of US international policy and what is euphemistically referred to as ‘public diplomacy’.<sup>301</sup>

Kadir locates the potential for a reformation precisely in the rearticulation of the field in transnational terms. He argues that America has shifted from being a national project to being an “international object with historical density and global signification.”<sup>302</sup> In a similar vein, Kadir asserts that American studies are being revisioned “[f]rom a discipline in self-denial [...] as a powerfully determinative discipline and formative discourse.”<sup>303</sup> To achieve this, Kadir accentuates, “[t]he best hope for American studies as an area of knowledge [...] is for it to cease to be American.”<sup>304</sup> Instead, he asserts:

Our perspective must be translocal and relational, rather than fixed or naturalized. Our discursive locus must be supple, mobile, transnational, and, as mediate subjects among academic cultures and disciplinary fields, we must be ethical agents of transculturation, especially in times of affective paroxysms, when critical reason may be dimmed and civilized conversation drowned out. Only thus [...] can we temper with an ethical impulse the hegemonic impetus of our own critical interventions and institutional representations.<sup>305</sup>

Conceptually appealing as Kadir’s approach is, it also provokes one serious question: what remains of the field of American studies after it has been thoroughly transnationalized? The truth is that transnational American studies could threaten to

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(REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 23), Tübingen: Narr, 2007, 59–77, here 71.

<sup>300</sup> Fluck, “Theories of American Culture” 71.

<sup>301</sup> Djelal Kadir, “Defending America against its Devotees,” Theo D’Haen et al. (eds.), *How Far is America from Here?* (TexTxeT Studies in Comparative Literature 47), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2005, 13–34, here 17.

<sup>302</sup> Kadir, “Defending America” 14.

<sup>303</sup> Kadir, “Defending America” 14.

<sup>304</sup> Djelal Kadir, “Introduction: America and Its Studies,” *PMLA* 118.1 (2003), 9–24, here 11.

<sup>305</sup> Kadir, “Introduction” 22. See also Donald E. Pease, “From American Literary Studies to Planetary Literature: The Emergence of Literary Extraterritoriality,” Winfried Fluck; Stefan Brandt; Ingrid Thaler (eds.), *Transnational American Studies* (REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 23), Tübingen: Narr, 2007, 9–35.

turn into a campaign of disciplinary self-destruction. And while many scholars celebrate the transnational turn as a hopeful impulse for the field,<sup>306</sup> skeptical voices can also be heard. David Shumway, for instance, criticizes that it remains unclear “what the transnational study of *American literature* might mean, since the national remains the defining modifier of ‘literature.’”<sup>307</sup> Furthermore, he argues that

[t]hese hybrid conceptions of American literature [...] provide a way to try to distance oneself from a national identity tainted by war, racism, imperialism, etc., but they seek to retain the disciplinary status and symbolic capital associated with the traditional field.<sup>308</sup>

One might counter that really there is no way back: American literature will always be (and arguably should always have been) a hybrid object of analysis and a transnational approach in the end merely takes into account the realities of US-American history and society. Nevertheless Shumway is right to stress that a transnational turn should not constitute an easy escape from responsibilities and problematic legacies attached to the old scholarly framework.

Heinz Ickstadt has been one of the most resolute critics of ‘transnational American studies’. While he deems it possible – and potentially productive – to “[bring] a transnational perspective to American studies,” he questions the attempt to redefine American studies in transnational terms:<sup>309</sup>

American studies should accept its name as its limitation and its boundary – [...] it cannot be a global and postcolonial, not even an international American studies in the sense of inter-American or intra-continental investigation, although these fields will increasingly become areas of fruitful cooperative research between individual scholars or groups of different fields and disciplines.<sup>310</sup>

Ickstadt’s cautionary remarks have been brushed aside by some propagators of transnational American studies<sup>311</sup> but the concerns that he addresses are real. This

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<sup>306</sup> See, for instance, Alfred Hornung, “Transnational American Studies: Response to the Presidential Address,” *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005), 67–73, here 72.

<sup>307</sup> David R. Shumway, “American Literature Coming Apart,” *American Literary History* 20.3 (2008), 656–663, here 660 [Shumway’s emphasis].

<sup>308</sup> Shumway, “American Literature” 660.

<sup>309</sup> Heinz Ickstadt, “American Studies as Area Studies as Transnational Studies? A European Perspective,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007), 633–640, here 635. See also Heinz Ickstadt, “American Studies in an Age of Globalization,” *American Quarterly* 54.4 (2002), 543–562, here 545.

<sup>310</sup> Ickstadt, “American Studies in an Age of Globalization” 555.

<sup>311</sup> For instance by Uwe Küchler (*Interkulturelle Hochschullehre: Internationalisierung am Beispiel der Amerikanistik* (Bildung – Hochschule – Innovation), Berlin: Lit, 2007, 183f.) or by R.J. Ellis

holds especially true in the German academic framework where American studies departments are usually situated within the institutional context of English philology or English studies. Within this institutional setting, in particular a multilingual approach to American studies as promoted by Werner Sollors<sup>312</sup> – though indeed logical and conceptually overdue – creates problems. While it is a shame that institutional constraints should define the limits of scholarly work, we need to acknowledge that to a certain extent they do. The enthusiasm for innovative possibilities and interdisciplinary challenges expressed by many American studies scholars today is genuine. Nevertheless, the sense of apprehension that exists in the field is no less real (and one scholar or other may be wondering in sleepless nights whether one is not cheerfully taking apart the boat that one has been sailing on for more than half a century).

It appears as if the emphatic assertion of certain authors and (migrant) communities as central concern of American studies is partly a consequence of an increased need to reclaim a reliable field of studies. If the label ‘American’ (as in ‘American studies’) is in danger of dispersal, declarations concerning what and who lies “inside the field” (and what/who does not) turn strategically essential – even if they contradict the newfound transnational mantra.<sup>313</sup> Claims on individual authors have been facilitated by the USA’s dominant role in the publishing industry as well as by the fact that many well-known anglophone authors have taken on teaching positions in the United States (and continue to do so). It is noteworthy that literary celebrities (such as Salman Rushdie) appear to be much more likely to be ‘adopted’ than other writers.<sup>314</sup>

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(“‘East is West’: Interhemispheric American Studies and the Transnational Turn,” Winfried Fluck; Stefan Brandt; Ingrid Thaler (eds.), *Transnational American Studies* (REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 23), Tübingen: Narr, 2007, 163–188, here 166).

<sup>312</sup> See, for instance, Werner Sollors, “For a Multilingual Turn in American Studies,” *American Studies Association Newsletter* 20 (June 1997), 13–15 as well as Werner Sollors (ed.), *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, NYC: New York UP, 1998. See also Orm Øverland (ed.), *Not English Only: Redefining ‘American’ in American Studies* (European Contributions to American Studies 48), Amsterdam: VU UP, 2001.

<sup>313</sup> Meanwhile, the need for national categorizations seems to have been in something like a happy decline in English studies ever since scholars have grown accustomed to the fact that writers like V.S. Naipaul or Caryl Phillips do not lend themselves to being pigeonholed.

<sup>314</sup> Sabrina Brancato has drawn attention to similar cases in reference to Afro-European writers and their inclusion into/exclusion from the literary ‘mainstream’ of their European resident countries

The appropriation of Salman Rushdie as an object of American studies is well-documented by Rüdiger Kunow's article "Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream: Salman Rushdie." Paralleling Rushdie's biography and a selection of his novels, Kunow describes Rushdie's career (up until *Fury*) as a metamorphosis from postcolonial subject to cosmopolitan American, from being "a voice from the margin [to being] something like the voice from America."<sup>315</sup> The trajectory that Kunow delineates – and that situates *Fury* neatly within "the tradition of the U. S. city novel"<sup>316</sup> – ends with *Fury*. It remains up for debate whether Rushdie's most recent novels support or qualify Kunow's argument.<sup>317</sup> While it is easy to understand why a scholar would be willing to open up his or her field to include a writer like Rushdie, few writers' careers actually lend themselves to being cut up into neat national phases. Even if we can nail down the geographical locations that determine a writer's work, it remains a complicated task to evaluate the implications of these localities and to assess from whose perspective we are encountering the fictional scenery. And if we achieve to settle this question, we still have to take into account that physical movement may be mirrored and/or challenged by different trajectories, for example by mental or emotional attachments.

This also applies to the works discussed in this study and to the authors behind these novels. And while I have no strong feelings on whether (or not) some of the authors could be called 'American', I claim that my subject is *not* American migrant writing, nor do I consider the primary texts American migrant novels. This distinction from American migrant fiction proper rests on two defining features:

The first is situated at the textual level. The primary texts under consideration are not primarily invested with classical migrant topics such as processes of assimilation and integration in the host country or reconstructions of 'home'. Instead,

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(Sabrina Brancato, *Afro-Europe: Texts and Contexts* (Frankfurter kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge 7), Berlin: trafo Wissenschaftsverlag, 2009, 27).

<sup>315</sup> Rüdiger Kunow, "Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream: Salman Rushdie," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 51.3 (2006), 369–385, here 380.

<sup>316</sup> Kunow, "Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream" 378.

<sup>317</sup> *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) engages with the USA, yet large parts of the novel are set in Kashmir. In *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), Rushdie explores the Mughal Empire and Renaissance Florence. *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) relates back to the Indian-inflected fantasyscapes of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), yet it is set in a virtual sphere determined by the parameters of twenty-first-century computer gaming.

they display a very specific point of view that is characteristic for today's globally interlinked world: while speaking from a position of insight into American everyday life and society, they simultaneously retain an awareness of the outsider's perspective. The texts thus position themselves in conceptual proximity to what Obioma Nnaemeka has called "inside outsiders ('inoutsiders')." <sup>318</sup>

The second is a pragmatic distinction which concerns the authors' biographies: the close readings deal with novels by authors who were not raised in the United States of America and who spent most of their early formative years in other parts of the world. All have at one point lived and/or taught in the USA (or do so at the moment) while nevertheless remaining geographically flexible to a certain extent. Their lives and their writings are grounded in various locations at the same time. In the close readings and in the final chapter of this study, I also take into account the economic privilege that this (truly transnational) lifestyle usually entails. I consider the question to which extent these authors are part of a creative cosmopolitan sphere and furthermore engage with the recent theorization of cosmopolitanism.

This study focuses on twenty-first-century novels up until the Obama presidency. It thus covers a very limited timeframe. However, these few years did bring about a sizable number of fictional texts relevant to the topic. This is hardly surprising since globalization and US-American hegemony are among the discursive fields that have dominated the beginning of the twenty-first century. The events of 11 September 2001 constituted a landmark in the relations between the world and the USA, a major event that has caused much debate and – in extension – violent disagreements in many parts of the world. As the Bush administration carved out its course for the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, the global outpouring of grief and sympathy quickly gave way to disillusionment. The first decade of the twenty-first century has already seen several massive landslides in public opinion concerning the United States and its involvement in the world. And as always, authors have contributed their own creative responses to the United States and its global position.

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<sup>318</sup> Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries" 86. For a brief conceptualization of the 'inoutsider', see the introductory chapter of this study.

What has been particularly intriguing about working on this book is that while writing these pages, I could feel ‘its ground shifting’. It is difficult to predict the final impact of the Obama presidency, both in terms of political change and of its significance for fiction writing in the USA and elsewhere. The first ‘Obama novels’ have already been published: a fascinating, albeit a new chapter. Thus this study concentrates on novels that were published between 2000 and Barack Obama’s election in 2008: a very short period of time that nevertheless included a great many earthquakes in political and literary relations between the world and the USA – echoes of some of which are being uncovered in the following chapters.



**2. Social Ties:**  
**The Intricacy of Interacting and Belonging**

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## **2.1 The Pervasiveness of Class, Race and Nationality: Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (2005)**

As explained in the introduction, this study relies on the observation that recent years have witnessed a process of intellectual and creative relocation: some of the attention that ‘postcolonial’ anglophone authors have traditionally devoted to the former colonial motherland, England, and to its metropolis has been redirected to the USA. In the previous chapters, I have outlined some reasons for this development. As a starting point to demonstrate what such acts of creative relocation could entail, one of the literary stars of the younger generation of postcolonial writers provides a prime example: Zadie Smith is what journalistic jargon might label the ‘poster girl’ of postcolonial anglophone fiction writing (even if she is reportedly reluctant to act as such).<sup>319</sup> Smith’s first novel, *White Teeth*, turned her into an instant superstar in 2000 and became both a mainstream bestseller and a favorite object of analysis for scholars working on hybrid identities in a (supposedly) vibrant and transcultural England.<sup>320</sup> Two novels later, *On Beauty* takes us to Wellington, a fictional university town in New England. Again Smith explores questions of race, family and belonging. Nevertheless, *On Beauty* is hardly ‘*White Teeth* transplanted to the USA’. The geographical relocation to New England goes hand in hand with a more substantial departure from the imaginative messiness of the England portrayed in *White Teeth*. Diverging from the literary mode that James Wood has labeled “hysterical realism”,<sup>321</sup> Smith displays increased focus and restraint in narrative style

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<sup>319</sup> See, for instance, statements by Smith quoted in Boris Kachka, “Hello Gorgeous,” Rev. of Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, *New York Magazine*, 4 September 2005, <http://nymag.com/guides/fallpreview/2005/books/12856/> (1 July 2011) or Dwight Garner, “Inside the List,” *New York Times*, 2 October 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/02/books/review/02TBR.html> (1 July 2011).

<sup>320</sup> See, for instance, Laura Moss, “The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*,” *Wasafiri* 39 (2003), 11–17; Molly Thompson, “‘Happy Multicultural Land’? The Implications of an ‘Excess of Belonging’ in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*,” Kadija Sesay; Lola Young (eds.), *Write Black, Write British: From Post-Colonial to Black British Literature*, Hertford: Hansib, 2005, 122–140; Barbara Schaff, “Trying to Escape, Longing to Belong: Roots, Genes and Performativity in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*,” Frank Schulze-Engler et al. (eds.), *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2009, 281–292. Cf. also Elaine Childs, “Insular Utopias and Religious Neuroses: Hybridity Anxiety in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*,” *Proteus* 23.1 (2006), 7–12.

<sup>321</sup> James Wood, “The Smallness of the ‘Big’ Novel: Human, All Too Inhuman,” Rev. of Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, *The New Republic*, 24 Jul 2000, 41–45, here 41. In his review, Wood evaluates *White Teeth* as a representative of a new type of ‘hysterical realism’, an approach to novel writing in which “conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked” (Wood, “The Smallness” 41).

and literary personage.<sup>322</sup> In the following pages, I examine *On Beauty* as an exploration of social ties and personal quests on US-American ground, albeit in a location that makes no pretension to being a microcosm of the USA at large.

It is notable that the ‘America’ that Smith offers us consists of the (almost) enclosed space of an East Coast college town. In this cosmopolitan yet insular academic sphere, group association is likely to be based on institutional background and theoretical orientation (both partly products of active self-fashioning!) rather than on nationality or, for that matter, race. Indeed, parts of Smith’s novel read like a commentary on the insularity of academic life and on the moral futility of intellectual cosmopolitanism. It unveils the inability of theoretical constructs to contain personal realities and to provide direction or meaning for those who struggle through life-changing experiences. *On Beauty* is deeply invested in the portrayal of characters imprisoned in their own re-enactments of social scripts that are meant to simultaneously assert their individuality and earn them insider status to a group or community. As in Smith’s earlier novels, the comedy and the suffering contained in such paradox maneuverings are among the driving forces of the narrative. A campus novel<sup>323</sup> that is also a family novel, *On Beauty* professes little optimism for the family’s potential as a ‘shelter’.<sup>324</sup> The Belsey family, mixed-raced, transnational and dysfunctional, fails as a protective space for its members. Nevertheless, *On Beauty* hardly lends itself to be read as a commentary on prototypical US-American family life. After all, it is centrally the story of Howard Belsey, the English father who is to blame for the collapse of family life.

Any attempt to establish a clear dichotomy of *White Teeth*/England vs. *On Beauty*/USA is further complicated by Zadie Smith’s construction of *On Beauty* as a work of literary homage: significant features of the plot, the structure as well as

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<sup>322</sup> See also Ulka Anjaria, “*On Beauty* and Being Postcolonial: Aesthetics and Form in Zadie Smith,” Tracey L. Walters (ed.), *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, NYC: Peter Lang, 2008, 31–55, here 37.

<sup>323</sup> Other contemporary examples of campus novels which explore the issue of race and sexual affairs characterized by asymmetrical power relations include J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000).

<sup>324</sup> This is true despite the insistence of Carlene Kipps, one of the characters in the novel, that “[t]here is such a shelter in each other” (Zadie Smith (2005), *On Beauty*, London: Penguin, 2006, 93 [original italicized]). In the novel, Carlene fails to remember the source of the line. It is taken from the poem “Pedigree” by Nick Laird, Zadie Smith’s husband. In the following, further references to *On Beauty* (OB) will be inserted into the main text.

entire scenes are modeled on E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), binding *On Beauty* back to an English context. *Howards End* is fundamentally concerned with the condition of England, of the class system and the British Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a contemporary context, it seems almost too obvious a choice to transplant such a story to the USA. However, Zadie Smith's novel does not propose a simple literary version of *translatio imperii*. Rather than evaluating US-American society as such, the novel dissects the flawed choices and personal struggles of individual characters, the intricacies of the 'private' lives (in the double sense of the word) of its protagonists. Nevertheless, Zadie Smith's approach to Forster's novel is neither counter-discursive nor a postcolonial act of 'writing back'.<sup>325</sup> As Maeve Tynan has pointed out, we are dealing "with a peaceful negotiation of the source text rather than a hostile takeover."<sup>326</sup> *On Beauty* pays tribute to literary ancestry rather than challenging the literary canon.

Smith's refusal to access the USA as such – to stray far beyond the insular sphere of the college town – also constitutes a refusal to directly postulate a connection between the imperial decline in the backdrop of *Howards End* and the USA as an 'empire' in *On Beauty*. In fact, references to US-American politics and to the global position of the United States occupy a minor position in Smith's novel. Whenever such issues are raised, they are crucially framed as devices of characterization rather than as political messages. Affirmative action, for instance, appears as an issue of scholarly debate rather than as a political reality. It is mainly one of the arenas of intellectual dispute that Howard Belsey monopolizes in his narcissistic campaign under the flag of liberalism.

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<sup>325</sup> See Maeve Tynan, "'Only Connect': Intertextuality and Identity in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," Tracey L. Walters (ed.), *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, NYC: Peter Lang, 2008, 73–89, in particular 73 and 77f. However, I am dubious about Tynan's claim that Smith's novel depicts hybrid characters who "inhabit a comfortable zone of cultural self-fashioning" (Tynan, "Only Connect" 77).

<sup>326</sup> Tynan, "Only Connect" 77. Reviewers have been in disagreement on how successfully this act of homage is executed. While some reviewers have emphasized what Catherine Lanone calls "the tingling pleasure of recognition" ("Mediating Multi-Cultural Muddle: E. M. Forster Meets Zadie Smith," *Études Anglaises* 60.2 (2007), 185–197, here 186), other readers of the novel – myself included – are more skeptical about Smith's extended play of literary referencing. Robert Alter, for instance, has called Smith's rendering of *Howards End* an "unsubtle imitation [that] remains puzzling, superfluous, and perhaps a little precious" ("Howard's End," Rev. Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, *The New Republic*, 3 October 2005, 29–32, here 29). See also, for instance, Wyatt Mason, "White Knees: Zadie Smith's Novel Problem," *Harper's Magazine*, 1 October 2005, 83–88, here 86.

Vocal as characters like Howard Belsey, his daughter Zora or his academic antagonist Monty Kipps are about their convictions, there are characters who pontificate less but whose perceptions provide more conclusive insights into the novel's evaluation of US-American lifeworlds. The main objective of this chapter is to explore the narrative framing and the self-conception of such characters. Some of the more central US-American characters of the novel, in particular Howard's African-American wife Kiki and their youngest son Levi, are interesting for this study due to their performative engagement with issues of national and racial identity. Beyond that, I consider the way in which Smith uses minor characters to characterize the social setting of the novel and to communicate more concrete ideas on the nation's political realities. Some of these characters originate from outside the illusive microcosm of the college town or occupy active – if frequently also misguided – political positions. Others work as 'silences in the text'. It is my aim here to listen closely also to such characters who almost escape attention, tracing conceptions and impressions of the USA which lies beyond the boundaries of the college campus.

Before engaging with questions of narrative framing and characterization, I would like to draw attention to the fact that *On Beauty* features various examples of what I have called 'conceptually informed writing' in my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes." In fact, the novel's treatment of theoretical concepts proves crucial for its evaluation of the academic sphere that I have described above.

In some instances, references to theory fulfill mainly ornamental or comical functions. A passage introducing the "Bus Stop", a Moroccan restaurant turned into a club, illustrates this:

Morocco, as it was reimagined in the Bus Stop, was an inclusive place. The black kids from Boston were down with Morocco, down with its essential Arab nature and African soul, the massive hash pipes, the chilli in the food, the infectious rhythms of the music. The white kids from the college were down with Morocco too: they liked its shabby glamour, its cinematic history of non-politicized Orientalism, the cool pointy slippers. The hippies and activists of Kennedy Square – without even really being conscious of it – came more regularly to the Bus Stop now than they had before the war [in Afghanistan] started. It was their way of showing solidarity with foreign suffering. (OB 212)

Here the ironical referencing of Orientalism (albeit of the non-politicized kind) and of cultural constructivism constitute only two ingredients in a potpourri of cultural and political associations. Essentialist yearning for the exotic resides easily next to comforting inclusiveness and a vague sense of political solidarity.

Elsewhere, Smith chooses Choo, one of Levi Belsey's hustler friends, to communicate straightforward positions on the issue of Americanization that I have addressed in the chapter on "The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)." Choo's opinions echo Benjamin Barber's 'McWorld'<sup>327</sup> or Frederic Jameson's evaluation of US-America's global involvement. He explains to Levi that "Haiti is the ghetto of America" (OB 360). Choo's rant on Monty's hypocrisy (OB 361f.) and on the evils of global capitalism (OB 362) fulfills an important psychological function within the context of the novel: these new insights provide direction and a 'mission' for Levi, who is in search of an alternative 'home', a new 'family' to replace the one that he sees crumbling around him. Throughout the novel, Levi's cultural play-acting is depicted with distinct touches of comedy, but Smith's portrayal also reveals considerable sympathy. Following Levi on his personal quest, the reader learns to appreciate the frustration and tenderness that Levi's own father fails to detect in his son. Later Levi will confront his mother with his recently acquired political convictions, telling her that while people in Haiti suffer, "[w]e living off these people, man! [...] We sucking their blood – we're like vampires!" (OB 428) Zadie Smith does not gloss over or romanticize the shallowness of Levi's political involvement, but she simultaneously validates his position by indicating that his compassion may be sincere. In the novel, his mother Kiki indirectly acknowledges this by finally deciding to sell the painting she has inherited from Carlene Kipps and to donate the money to a Haitian support group (OB 437).

Howard Belsey is the character whose worldview is most closely associated with theoretical conceptions. Victoria Kipps sums up Howard's theoretical agenda with the following analogy:

Your class is all about never *ever* saying *I like the tomato*. [...] The tomato is just totally revealed as this phoney construction that can't lead you to some higher truth [...] Your tomatoes have got nothing to do with *love* or *truth*. They're not fallacies.

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<sup>327</sup> See my chapter on "The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)" (part I, chapter 1).

They're just these pretty pointless tomatoes that people, for totally selfish reasons of their own, have attached cultural – I should say *nutritional* – weight to. (OB 312 [Smith's emphasis])

While Victoria is willing to take Howard's radical deconstructivism as a sign of intellectual superiority, the narrative framing of Howard's theoretical obsessions hardly supports such a reading. Howard's perspective is exposed to ridicule when the text ironically asserts the rules which govern Howard's daily existence: Howard, we are told, has always disliked Monty Kipps "as any sensible liberal would dislike a man who had dedicated his life to the perverse politics of right-wing iconoclasm" (OB 29). As readers we may well equally dislike Monty, but we are unlikely to accept the characterization of Howard as a 'sensible liberal' or to take the conceptual rationale behind Howard's resentment at face value. Howard's envy of Monty's success and his own feelings of deficiency serve as a more convincing explanation for his antipathy. Theoretical concepts are employed – largely unsuccessfully – as a cover for egotism and a lack of genuine moral feeling.

Even more forcefully, Kiki reveals her husband's intellectual mantras to be ineffectual as responses to real life. She reminds Howard of the "ridiculous e-mail" (OB 394) – apparently containing Baudrillard's "The Spirit of Terrorism"<sup>328</sup> – which Howard sent around after 11 September 2001. What Kiki asserts here is that Howard's intellectual approach betrays a fundamental lack of understanding for the emotional needs of human beings in a time of crisis:<sup>329</sup>

I was thinking: *What is wrong with this man?* I was *ashamed* of you. I didn't say anything, but I was. [...] this is *real*. This life. We're really here – this is really happening. Suffering is *real*. When you hurt people, it's *real*. (OB 394 [Smith's emphasis])

Kiki's refutation of Howard's obsession with theoretical constructs appears to correspond with the novel's 'final verdict'. Just as much as Kiki is the one who finally validates Levi's support of the Haitian cause, she is the character who ultimately disqualifies Howard's perception of the world and – by extension – any scholarly preference for theory over life or, for that matter, beauty. Here Smith's

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<sup>328</sup> Jean Baudrillard (2002), "The Spirit of Terrorism," *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, Transl. Chris Turner, London/NYC: Verso, 2003, 1–34. The original French version "L'Esprit du Terrorisme" was published in *Le Monde* on 3 November 2001.

<sup>329</sup> See also Kathleen Wall, "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77.2 (2008), 757–788, here 762.

indebtedness to Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* becomes visible. While the novel's title as well as the motto of its second section and the heading of its last section are taken directly from Scarry's philosophical treatise, Smith furthermore draws on Scarry's argument about the university's association with the pursuit and the preservation of beauty. Scarry claims that this essential function of the university – in particular of the humanities – has been sidelined, that

conversation about the beauty of [things such as poems, stories, paintings, sketches, sculpture, film, essays, debates] has been banished, so that we coinhabit the space of these objects [...] yet speak about their beauty only in whispers.<sup>330</sup>

Smith's novel creates an opposition between mere intellectualism and beauty, privileging the latter. The novel thus constitutes a commentary on the academic obsession with theoretical conceptions<sup>331</sup> and a critical evaluation of the very sphere whose centrality for the novel I have established above. The USA beyond this academic space largely works as an absence in the text. Nevertheless, the novel indicates that more promising perspectives may be available only to those characters who dare to look beyond and step across the borders of Wellington and who are willing to engage with US-American realities of life. With this accentuation, Smith pointedly departs from the common view of liberal academia in the USA as something like a humanistic enclave in a sea of ignorance and barbarism.<sup>332</sup> To the contrary, Smith's protagonist Howard is both most deeply caught up in theorizing and most hopelessly removed from any prospect of happiness or fulfillment. *On Beauty* offers alternative departures for at least some of the characters who are less delusional than Howard. As I will demonstrate, such departures are often connected to implicit (re)conceptions of US-American life and identity.

Judith Butler's notion of the performative is particularly suited for an exploration of the performative dimension of national identity in *On Beauty*. In the following pages, I will examine the question in how far the text depicts a repetition

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<sup>330</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, *Tanner Lecture on Human Values at Yale University 1998*, Princeton, NY: Princeton UP, 1999, 57.

<sup>331</sup> Cf. Anjaria's reading of Smith's text as a commentary on the "negation of aesthetic value seen in postcolonial fiction and theory" (Anjaria, "On Beauty and Being Postcolonial" 37).

<sup>332</sup> Such a conception of liberal academia in the USA vs. 'the USA as such', of course, is rooted in the European tradition of anti-Americanism that I have described in the chapter "Inquiries into Anti-Americanism" (part I, chapter 2).



of stylized acts and whether characters fall victim to the kind of ‘self-entrancement’ that Butler describes. Before exploring two particularly pertinent examples of such performative acts of reiteration, I briefly consider the applicability of Austin’s notion of the performative – or an extension thereof – as a speech act that establishes a new set of conditions.<sup>333</sup>

Some of the adolescent characters in *On Beauty* play with and enact European or US-American accents and thus provide at least a superficial manifestation of what an approach derived from Austin’s ideas could imply. I will discuss Levi’s special case in more detail later, but there are also other characters who aim for a specific accent in order to establish a claim to a certain nationality, to establish themselves as either British/European or as US-Americans. Whether such pretensions are ultimately successful – and consequently whether they succeed as performative speech acts – is frequently subjected to the judgment of other characters in the novel.

The wish to be associated with Europe is attributed to the novel’s ‘intellectual’ sphere. Howard’s student Christian, for instance, was raised in Iowa but displays a “clipped, puzzlingly European inflection” (OB 99). He sounds, Howard perceives, “as if he were being translated as he spoke” (OB 254). This observation indicates that Christian’s ‘performative speech acts’ fail to establish him as an insider to the preferred (European intellectual) sphere but merely declare his outsider status in his US-American environment. In a similar vein, the campus column of the *Wellington Herald* sports a pretentious style “[smacking] of that wearisome Wellingtonian reverence for all things British” (OB 402). Again Smith provides us with a direct – if subjective – evaluation of such pretentiousness: Jerome Belsey, we are told, is “aggravated” by the column:

The British flavour spread to the contents of the column itself, which, no matter the student who happened to be writing it, always retained a superior, Victorian tone. Words and phrases that the student had never before had cause to use (‘indubitably’, ‘I cannot possibly fathom’) came from their pen. (OB 402 [Smith’s emphasis])

Among the Belsey children, Zora is the one who aspires to “[the tone] of the world-weary almost European bourgeois, for whom, at nineteen, all things were

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<sup>333</sup> See my chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

familiar” (OB 114). Despite such doomed pretensions, *On Beauty* portrays linguistic inflection as flexible and provisional, in particular in the transnational Belsey family. Howard is most acutely aware of this fact: observing the “various American accents” of his children, he notes that they are all “in some way artificial – not quite the products of this house or of his wife” (OB 11). My analysis below will show in how far Levi’s Brooklyn accent demonstrates the attempt to claim insider status to a type of ‘family’ unconnected to biological ancestry.

Before I consider Levi’s case, his mother Kiki may serve as something of a model case of performative identity construction in Judith Butler’s sense. As such, Kiki is also another good example of the type of conceptually informed writing that I have discussed above. Kiki’s re-enactment of stylized norms is so rigorous that her personality takes on stereotypical features. Kiki was slim as a young woman but has gained a lot of weight in the meantime. In accordance with her changed body image, she has fashioned a mode of public behavior and ultimately a personality to suit her physical appearance:

[I]t was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid forties, a strange fabulation of the person she believed she was. She could no longer be meek or shy. Her body had directed her to a new personality; people expected new things of her, some of them good, some not. (OB 47)

The norms that Kiki responds to in her refashioning of her own personality are founded on the standards set by earlier generations of African-American women but also, and to an even larger extent, by white perceptions of full-bodied African-American women. Kiki’s reliance on unwritten social rules is so far-reaching that she even actively enforces the enactment of scripted conversations when other participants fail to volunteer their part. We observe such a situation in Kiki’s conversation with a black stallholder:

He did not call Kiki ‘sister’, make any assumptions or take any liberties. Obscurely disappointed, as we sometimes are when the things we profess to dislike don’t happen, she looked up abruptly and smiled at him. ‘You’re from Africa?’ she asked sweetly [...]

The man folded his arms across his narrow filleted chest, every rib as visible as it is upon a cat’s belly. ‘Where do you *think* I am from? You are African – no?’

‘No, noooo, I’m from *here* – but of course...’ said Kiki. She wiped some sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, waiting for him to finish the sentence as she knew it would be finished.

‘We are all from Africa,’ said the man obligingly. (OB 48f. [Smith’s emphasis])

Kiki is intensely aware of and worried about the way she is perceived by others. For her, as for Levi, national identity is closely connected to and complicated by questions of racial identity. This is the reason why Kiki feels nervous about her Haitian cleaner, wondering about “what this black woman thought of another black woman paying her to clean” (OB 11). On the other hand, she acknowledges the legacy of US-American representations of black women that have shaped white perceptions. Struggling between such cemented images and the stereotypically desirous (and equally intrusive) gaze of black men, Kiki occupies an uneasy space that does not allow for independent acts of self-definition:

I’m the Aunt Jemina on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry play around. Of course they find me funny. And yet I could cross the river to Boston and barely be left alone for five minutes at a time. Only last week a young brother half her age had trailed Kiki up and down Newbury for an hour and would not relent until she said he could take her out some time. (OB 51)

Kiki’s situation is further complicated by her marriage with a white Englishman and life in an almost exclusively white neighborhood (see OB 206). It is debatable whether Kiki’s complete alienation from the African-American community is altogether convincing. After all, she and her foreign husband have come to live in *her* home country, a country that nevertheless she seems strangely unfamiliar with. Zadie Smith establishes Kiki as an inoutsider, yet it is not entirely clear why Kiki’s movements and her social life should be thus restricted merely because she married a white man.<sup>334</sup> Either way, Howard lacks the sensitivity to engage with or even understand Kiki’s dilemma, and it is therefore logical that *On Beauty* can be a story of Kiki’s emancipation only insofar as she manages to distance herself from Howard and their failing marriage. For Kiki’s development it is thus anything but a positive sign that the last page of the novel depicts Kiki and Howard smiling at each other across the distance of the lecture hall. This moment of silent companionship may provide hope for Howard, but it does not hold much promise for Kiki’s personal future.

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<sup>334</sup> On a pragmatic note, an African-American woman wearing her hair as “thick ropes of plait” (OB 14) is likely to at least engage with other African-Americans or Africans who regularly take care of the plaiting.

Kiki's propensity to enact stereotypical notions has been remarked on by a number of reviewers and scholars. While Sabine Nunius simply asserts that "Kiki unquestioningly accepts stereotypes such as the association of blackness with a ferocious sexuality and clichéd notions of (black) femininity,"<sup>335</sup> Tracey L. Walters concludes that Smith uses stereotypical depictions to demonstrate the "damaging impact upon the psyche of those who identify with the stereotypical image applied to them."<sup>336</sup> This is a convincing suggestion even if one remains dubious about Walters' claim that Kiki ultimately turns into "a heroic figure".<sup>337</sup> It is significant to note that in enacting stereotypes Kiki does not reassert her African-American identity in opposition to the surrounding "sea of white" (OB 206). Instead, she frequently seems to perform for a white audience, for instance when she purposely moves in a way that she knows to please white people (OB 52).

Kiki's understanding of her own dilemma is demonstrated by an "imaginary speech to the imaginary guild of black American mothers" that she envisions in a moment of pride about her eldest son's emotional depth and sophistication: "And there's no big secret, not at all, you just need to have faith, I guess, and you need to counter the dismal self-image that black men receive as their birthright from America – that's essential" (OB 71 [original text italicized]). It is precisely her own 'dismal self-image' that forces Kiki to rely on pre-given social scripts which in their conflation of gender, race and nationality leave very limited space for independent movement.

Levi engages in a more active project of self-fashioning than his mother. However, in this endeavor he also depends on pre-determined and frequently stereotypical 'scripts'. Levi is the only one of the Belsey children who was born in the USA. Nevertheless, his impression of the 'American essence' seems to be taken from Hollywood films and music clips rather than from real life. According to Levi, the white academic sphere of Wellington College "ain't America. You think this is

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<sup>335</sup> Sabine Nunius, "'Sameness' in Contemporary British Fiction: (Metaphorical) Families in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005)," Lars Eckstein et al. (eds.), *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*, Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2008, 109–122, here 115.

<sup>336</sup> Tracey L. Walters, "Still Mammies and Hos: Stereotypical Images of Black Women in Zadie Smith's Novels," Tracey L. Walters (ed.), *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, NYC: Peter Lang, 2008, 123–139, here 128.

<sup>337</sup> Walters, "Still Mammies" 132f.

America? This is *toy-town*. I was *born* in this country – trust me. You go into Roxbury, you go into the Bronx, you see *America*. That’s *street*” (OB 63 [Smith’s emphasis]). Zora, for all her intellectual pretensions, is arguably the sharpest observer of Levi’s play-acting. She rightly characterizes Levi’s conception of the black USA as “some kind of mysterious holy communion with sidewalks and corners” (OB 63) and criticizes Levi’s adoption of what he holds to be ‘the language of the street’: “It’s the worst kind of pretension, you know, to fake the way you speak – to somebody else’s grammar. People less fortunate than you” (OB 85). At work in a CD megastore, Levi finds a stage for his self-styled performance as a ‘black kid from the ghetto’, even walking with an “exaggerated limp as if a gun were weighing down his left side” (OB 192).

This detail demonstrates that Levi’s notions of the ‘true America’ and of ‘blackness’ are heavily influenced by popular culture and receive little backing in his own lived experience as a mixed-race US-American. As a ‘half-white’ and a ‘half-European’, Levi feels the need to actively reassert his status as an African-American. His Brooklyn slang and behavioral patterns such as the artificial ‘gangsta limp’ are acts of overcompensation, a consequence of the fact that Levi’s environment does not provide him with any realistic and/or attractive African-American role models. In the beginning of the novel, Levi is not so entranced with his own performance as to fall for his own pretense. Nevertheless, he yearns to be able to turn play-acting into reality:

There was an alternative universe that Levi occasionally entered in his imagination, one in which he accepted [his colleague] LaShonda’s invitations, and then later they made love standing up in the basement of the store. Soon after, he moved in with her in Roxbury and took on her children as his own. They lived happily ever after – two roses growing out of concrete, as Tupac has it. But the truth was he wouldn’t know what to do with a woman like LaShonda. He wished he *did* know, but he didn’t. (OB 184 [Smith’s emphasis])

It is a response to the crumbling of the Belsey family that Levi’s dream includes the adoption of a new family, a family that erases his white roots and asserts Levi’s full membership in a romanticized version of the African-American community. In accordance with Ruth Florack’s conception of the stereotype as a type of cultural

repertoire,<sup>338</sup> Levi re-enacts a collection of popular myths and clichés on black US-America. Levi's case also demonstrates that stereotypes are a repertoire often imperfectly executed.

When he loses his job in the megastore, Levi makes friends with a group of street vendors originating from Haiti and Dominica. To Levi, this group soon acquires the status of a 'substitute family' extending beyond the borders of the USA, a kind of 'black global brotherhood'. In her article discussing *On Beauty*, Sabine Nunius proposes the useful concept of 'sameness' as a category that "designates the temporary suppression of all divisive elements in favour of one differential category or, respectively, a specific value to which the power of bridging fundamental differences is attributed."<sup>339</sup> In Levi's case, this category is race, despite his own mixed-raced family background. In his idealized perception of the street vendors, Levi believes to have found the fulfillment of his vision. National identity becomes immaterial. The text provides us with a description of Felix, the leader of the group, as seen through Levi's eyes, in which the predominance of 'blackness' is overwhelming:

Felix was blacker than any black man Levi ever met in his life. His skin was like slate. Levi had this idea that he would never say out loud and that he knew didn't make sense, but anyway he had this idea that Felix was like the *essence* of blackness in some way. You looked at Felix and thought: *This* is what it's all about, being *this* different; this is what white people fear and adore and want and dread. He was as purely black as – on the other side of things – those weird Swedish guys with translucent eyelashes are purely white. It was like, if you looked up black in a dictionary... It was awesome. And, as if to emphasize his singularity, Felix didn't goof off like the other guys, he didn't joke. He was all business. The only time Levi had seen him laugh was when Levi asked Felix that first Saturday whether he had a job going. It was an African laugh, with the deep, resonant timbre of a gong. (OB 242 [Smith's emphasis])

This accentuation of racialized physicality resonates with Levi's frustration about feeling locked up and isolated in the white enclave of the college town. The description of Felix also indicates a masculine role model that is directly opposed to Howard's whiteness, Britishness and intellectualism. Levi enters the harsh working life of the street vendors with a delusional kind of enthusiasm:

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<sup>338</sup> For a discussion of Florack's conception of the stereotype, see my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>339</sup> Nunius, "'Sameness' in Contemporary British Fiction" 110.

This ain't like working the counter at CVS! You hustling, man. And that's a different thing. That's street. To hustle is to be alive – you dead if you don't know how to hustle. And you ain't a brother if you can't hustle. That's what joins us all together – whether we be on Wall Street or on MTV or sitting on a corner with a dime-bag. It's a beautiful thing, man. We hustling! (OB 245)

In this comically misguided act of mimicry, Levi even manages to influence the sphere he so urgently aims to belong to: His new 'brothers' – though significantly less enthusiastic about the condition of their own lives – allow themselves to be drawn in by Levi's elaborate re-fashioning of life as an illegal street vendor:

Even if the other guys didn't fully understand Levi's enthusiasm for what they did, they always smiled and played along, and they had learned a few of the artificial words that Levi liked to apply to their real-life situation. *Hustler, Playa, Gangsta, Pimp*. The reflection of themselves in Levi's eyes was, after all, a more than welcome replacement for their own realities. Who wouldn't rather be a gangsta than a street-hawker? Who wouldn't rather hustle than sell? Who would choose their own lonely, dark rooms over this Technicolor video, this outdoor community that Levi insisted they were all a part of? The Street, the global Street, lined with hustling brothers working corners from Roxbury to Casablanca, from South Central to Cape Town. (OB 245f. [Smith's emphasis])

Levi is the only one who can afford to properly believe in his own vision, a luxury based on Levi's youth and on the privilege of his middle class background. His membership in the community of the street vendors is, of course, of a rather artificial nature. His own feeling of being "a little like Jesus taking a stroll with the lepers" (OB 243) is more to the point than Levi himself realizes. He ultimately remains – as his new friend Choo rightly states – the group's "little American mascot" (OB 243). The privileging of racial identity over national identity or social class is largely imaginary. Levi's new friends may accept him as a curiously misplaced US-American mixed-raced honorary member of their group, but Levi's membership also depends on his silence concerning his true social background. Thus the subversive potential of Levi's performative maneuvers is limited. His play-acting moves along worn-out paths of popular cliché and – even if Levi is unaware of this fact – proceeds from the (still comparatively) safe confines of his middle-class home.

The following pages will be devoted to five US-American characters in *On Beauty* who do not belong to the circle of the Belsey family. Their backgrounds are less obviously marked by 'in-between-ness', and one might thus expect them to be more naturally settled in their US-American lives. However, most of them are

inoutsiders in their own rights. What is more, their different living conditions and the dilemmas resulting from them illustrate how little Zadie Smith relies on nationality as a meaningful category of identity construction. Instead, the position of all five characters is either conditioned by issues of race, class and individual disposition or serves specific structural purposes in the context of the novel.

Claire Malcolm is a poet and Howard's colleague at Wellington. She was also the object of Howard's first extramarital indiscretion. In Claire's case as in instances that I have discussed previously, Smith employs other characters as judges of her characters' personality and preoccupations. Zora, explaining the concept of Spoken Word poetry to her family, notes: "it's in the African-American tradition – Claire Malcolm's all into it. She thinks it's *vital* and *earthy*, etcetera, etcetera" (OB 77 [Smith's emphasis]). The emphasis on 'vital' and 'earthy' in combination with 'etcetera, etcetera' mimics Claire's enthusiasm and simultaneously expresses Zora's dismissive judgment. Zora, of course, has reasons of her own for her negative attitude towards Claire: she has applied for but was not accepted into Claire's poetry workshop. Nevertheless – as so often in *On Beauty* – judgments driven by ulterior motives may yet prove to be accurate.

Claire's sermons on justice, politics and the "fundamentals, out there, in the world" (OB 120) establish her in the role of the liberal political activist. Like Levi, Claire believes that the 'true America' is to be found outside the privileged sphere of the college town, and, as much as Levi's, Claire's ideas about the 'real thing' are romanticized notions that unveil her emotional immaturity. Howard points at this when he tells Claire: "You sound like you're fifteen. You sound like my kids" (OB 120).

Smith complements such instances of external characterization with passages in which a heterodiegetic narrator uses Claire as the focalizer and which serve to expose the true core of Claire's activist bravado. In one of these passages, we find out that Claire's idea of an enjoyable evening is

listening to [one of her students'] startling accounts of ghetto life in a bad Boston neighbourhood. Claire was spellbound by this news of lives so different from her own as to seem interplanetary. (OB 215)



Such authorial insights lead us to understand that while Levi's political involvement may be shallow, Claire lacks the moral impulse that validates Levi's views:

Small-scale politics bored her. [...] Claire was only truly excited by the apocalyptic on the world stage: WMD [weapons of mass destruction], autocratic presidents, mass death. She detested committees and meetings. She liked to go on marches and to sign petitions. (OB 122)

There is something pathological and slightly disturbing about Claire's zeal for catastrophe. This impression is supported by Claire's "prepubescent" physicality (OB 51) and the contradiction of her "make-up free" (OB 118) appearance and the "strange, minute cosmetic attentions she [gives] to other, more private parts of her body" (OB 119f.).<sup>340</sup> While the novel does not delve more deeply into Claire's story, what we see indicates that there is something 'not quite right' about this attractive and popular woman. Part of the pathology may be connected to Claire's upbringing among "American intellectuals and European aristocrats, a cultivated but cold mix" (OB 215). While Claire's characterization is one of many instances of Smith's unkind treatment of her female characters, it confirms the novel's evaluation of the cosmopolitan intellectual sphere. Smith uses Claire to paint a scathing picture of intellectual do-gooders whose artistic aspirations and political involvement serve as a cover for egotism and immorality.

Katie, one of the students in Howard's class, is one example of a female character who is portrayed in a more sympathetic light. Her presence in the text occupies merely a few pages (OB 249–255), and from Howard's perspective she is no more than "Kathy" [sic], the "strange ghost girl who never said a word" (OB 255). The passage which reveals Katie's inner life employs a similar perspective as those that unveil Claire's true character. A heterodiegetic narrative voice introduces Katie as a lover of the arts in Elaine Scarry's sense, a person who perceives and deeply appreciates beauty. Katie is thus the novel's counter model to people like Claire and Howard – and, by extension, to academic intellectualism and artistic pretentiousness. In equipping a girl from the Midwest with such rare sensitivity, Smith counteracts common prejudice about the USA's regional divisions even if we are told that in South Bend, Indiana, Katie was "by far the brightest student in her

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<sup>340</sup> In this instance, the judgment is Howard's.

high school” (OB 249). Katie is characterized as a shy and sweet-natured girl who apparently has not yet seen very much of the world. Further characterization of Katie and her background is provided in a description of Katie’s choice of academic subject:

Katie is proficient in both the arts and the sciences, but her heart – if this makes sense – has always resided in the left side of her brain. Katie loves the arts. Given her parents’ relative poverty and limited education, she knows that it would probably have made more sense for her family if she’d tried for medical school or even Harvard Law. But her parents are generous, loving people, and they support her in all her choices. (OB 249)

By describing Katie’s parents as ‘generous’ and ‘loving’, Smith establishes Katie’s home in the Midwest as a space of caring, a ‘shelter’ that displays qualities which the sphere represented by Howard noticeably lacks. The fact that Katie lost “her faith slowly and painfully two years earlier” (OB 251) illustrates that despite her natural shyness Katie is well capable of independent thought. Before we can suspect Katie – who also learns Russian and volunteers at the eating disorder help-line (OB 249) – of being just a little too idealized and angelic, we are told that she hates Zora Belsey even though she “is not given easily to hatred” (OB 253). Katie most unique quality is her appreciation of beauty and her deep wish to share her love of the arts with like-minded spirits: “She used to dream about one day attending a college class about Rembrandt with other intelligent people who loved Rembrandt and weren’t ashamed to express this love” (OB 250). Of course, this is precisely the approach that Howard rejects most fervently. In addition to his private blunders, it is a demonstration of Howard’s academic failure – and the failure of his intellectual mantra – that he lets down a student like Katie. Feeling lost in Howard’s class, Katie characteristically blames her own deficiency:

And now the class escapes Katie; it streams through her toes as the sea and sand when she stands at the edge of the ocean and dozily, *stupidly*, allows the tide to draw out and the world to pull away from her so rapidly as to make her dizzy. (OB 253 [Smith’s emphasis])

Even though she does not dare to voice them, the sensitivity of her thoughts on the Rembrandt paintings tells us otherwise: it is the perceptiveness of this quiet US-American girl that the novel asks us to appreciate.

Chantelle Williams is a young African-American receptionist who takes part in Claire's poetry class and later becomes an intern to Monty Kipps. Her function in the novel is even more overtly structural than Katie's. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Chantelle has been more literally "Monty's new project" (OB 289) than initially apparent. This turn in the story may have appeared necessary to re-establish the balance of the reader's sympathies: Howard's behavior is erratic and questionable to such an extent that Monty's stance begins to look almost rational in comparison. In order to ascertain that *On Beauty* will not be read as an endorsement of Monty's conservative politics, Monty needs to be stripped of his moral integrity. It is not enough for him to deny underprivileged literary talents like Chantelle the right to participate in Claire's poetry class. As readers, we may disagree with Monty's political convictions, but this does not automatically lead us to detest him. The situation changes when it is unveiled that Monty wants Chantelle to leave college not merely due to his generally negative position on affirmative action but because of the illicit affair that he has entertained with the young woman. The structural function that Chantelle fulfills in the novel is to preserve the moral balance between two similarly despicable characters at a time when it may seem to be tipping towards Monty. Of course, it is debatable whether the narrative cliché of the conservative bigot who sexually exploits young women constitutes an apt resolution to the structural challenge posed by the Howard's want of likable character traits.

On the other hand, the fate of Carl, the novel's equivalent to Forster's Leonard Bast, serves to assert the fact that in the college town of Wellington class distinctions trump issues of race and nationality. The transnational inclusiveness of the academic sphere excludes those who are poor and black. Carl may be gifted with looks, talent and ambition, but he comes to realize that as an African-American of no means and prior education his prospects in Wellington are limited. Like Leonard Bast, Carl engages in a program of self-improvement that is ultimately doomed due to the rigid class restrictions that dominate the social environment he aspires to. The USA portrayed in *On Beauty* is no place where the 'American Dream' can happen for anyone, regardless of social class and racial background. Disillusioned with the Belseys and the Kippses, Carl bitterly concludes:

People like me are just toys to people like you... I'm just some experiment for you to play with. You people aren't even black any more, man – I don't know *what* you are. You think you're too good for your own people. (OB 418 [Smith's emphasis])

The self-confident comportment of Caroline, the wife of Howard's friend Erskine, confirms that in the USA portrayed in *On Beauty* social class determines division lines that trump race. Caroline is an African-American marked by "East Coast moneyed finesse" (OB 117), a "celebrated lawyer [...] extremely close to becoming a Supreme Court judge" (OB 117). When Caroline welcomes the funeral of Carlene Kipps as a chance to meet important people, her husband jokingly asserts: "She is the only woman I know who can power-broke at a funeral. [...] In Nigeria we weep at funerals – in Atlanta apparently they network" (OB 283). Indeed, Caroline is 'all business', in more than one way "one muscle from head to toe" (OB 117). Caroline's response to her husband's cheating suggests that her confidence and success may be hard-earned:

She was infamously proud (most women disliked her) and, like any wife of a superficially attentive man, she was admirably self-contained, apparently without external social needs. But Erskine was also helplessly unfaithful, which gave the pride a characterful, impressive edge of which Howard had always been slightly in awe. She expressed herself eccentrically – she referred to Erskine's girls imperiously as *those mulattos* – and gave no clue as to her real feelings. (OB 117 [Smith's emphasis])

While this passage indicates Caroline's sense of social superiority, it also attests to the emotional pain that she may have had to harden herself against in the pursuit of success and social status.

*On Beauty* is a novel that explores the struggles of individuals, their position in their personal environment and in society. Its US-American setting provides Zadie Smith with an opportunity to reconsider issues of race and class and to simultaneously escape from the restrictive 'drawer' of 'Black British' writing.

Even though the novel is set in the USA, Howard appears to be the only member of the Belsey family who masters at least the appearance of being a 'cultural insider' to the social sphere he inhabits. Of course, his insider status is challenged by the fact that even after ten years at Wellington he has not managed to secure tenure. In addition to this, his appearance of being 'settled' is largely connected to his being the least capable of change and most single-mindedly caught up in his own flawed

behavioral patterns. The depiction of Kiki, Levi and other US-American characters in the novel indicates that while your birth may grant you ‘national membership’, the struggle for social belonging is a natural condition of human existence.

*On Beauty* centrally depends on references to *Howards End* and the antagonism between the Belsey family and the Kippses. Despite its transnational makeup, the Belseys represent the US-American pole of this transatlantic interaction while the Kippses, London-based but with Caribbean roots, stand for the British end of the interaction. It is crucial that on both sides national affiliation remains tentative and provisional. The tension between both locations is visualized through the characterization of the houses which the families inhabit on their respective sides of the transatlantic divide. In London, Jerome is immediately struck by the Kipps’s house:

The House is just *wow* – early Victorian, a ‘terrace’ – unassuming-looking outside but massive inside – but there’s still a kind of humility that really appeals to me – almost everything white, and a lot of handmade things, and quilts and dark wood shelves and cornices and this four-storey staircase – and in the whole place there’s only one television, which is in the basement anyway [...] I think of it as the negativized image of our house sometimes. (OB 3f. [Smith’s emphasis])

The implications of Jerome’s observations are far-reaching: his description suggests a fundamental difference in essence which assigns humility, natural taste and cultural substance to the Kipps’s house – qualities which appear to be lacking at the Belsey family home. This impression is supported by the initial introduction of the Belsey family scene as a kind of ‘still life with a television set’ (see OB 7f.). Expressing a similar view, Mrs. Kipps privileges her London home over US-American houses:

It’s so full of humanity – I could hear petticoats in the hallway. I *miss* it so much, already. American houses... [...] They always seem to believe that nobody ever loses anything, has ever lost anything. (OB 92 [Smith’s emphasis])

In this passage, Mrs. Kipps metonymically replicates the traditional characterization of the USA as somehow devoid of ‘historical depth’ that I have explored in the chapters “The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)” and “Inquiries into Anti-Americanism.” Qualifying such stereotypical perceptions, the description of the Belsey house proposes a more complex evaluation of its historical ‘essence’:

The date of its construction (1856) is patterned in tile above the front door, and the windows retain their mottled green glass, spreading a dreamy pasture on the

floorboards whenever strong light passes through them. They are not original, these windows, but replacements, the originals being too precious to be used as windows. Heavily insured, they are kept in a large safe in the basement. A significant portion of the value of the Belsey house resides in windows that nobody may look through or open. (OB 16)

The prejudice that US-American houses have ‘no history’ is counteracted by the portrayal of this specific house which in fact resonates deeply with US-American history at large. While both houses – the Kipps residence in London and the Belsey home in Wellington – were erected at a similar time, the Kipps house was built during a historical period when English national history was largely taking place elsewhere. The history of the Belsey house, on the other hand, is closely entangled with US-American national history: paying tribute to the result of several generations of African-American emancipation and self-improvement, the house was originally a gift from a “benevolent white doctor with whom [Kiki’s grandmother] had worked closely for twenty years, back in Florida” (OB 17). The fact that the financial ‘essence’ of the house, the original windows, are not in use and visible for the passerby does not purport that this history has been erased. Instead, their being locked away in a safe indicates the precedence of financial, practical and preservative considerations while the house’s worth still depends on the ‘treasure in the basement’.

It is through such nuanced and ambiguous images and descriptions that *On Beauty* complicates and challenges stereotypical assumptions about US-American life and identity. It remains up for debate how successful *On Beauty* is as a literary successor of *White Teeth*. However, in her portrayal of a US-American sphere, Zadie Smith aims for the counter-intuitive and thereby develops a perspective that is distinctly and refreshingly unmarked by geographical bias and unapologetic about its use of US-American (hi)stories and characters.



## **2.2 Off the Grid:** **Intercultural Encounter in Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self* (2008)**

While Zadie Smith's characters struggle to position themselves in relation to common patterns of behavior and identity, Peter Carey frequently envisions protagonists who are thrown off the grid completely. In *His Illegal Self*, two US-Americans – a boy and a young woman – are cast into a situation which does not afford them with a reliable repertoire of social scripts. In their new environment, even rules of common sense often fail to apply. Peter Carey's main preoccupation is the shock and disorientation this entails as well as the possibility of building a new life among the rubble. To a certain extent, the novel can thus be read as a parable for the condition of New York City, if not the USA, after the events of 11 September 2001.<sup>341</sup> Peter Carey has documented the immediate psychological impact of the terrorist attacks in his piece for Ulrich Baer's collection *110 Stories*.<sup>342</sup> *His Illegal Self* depicts an involuntary engagement of its US-American protagonists with the 'outside world', in this case an Australia that is perceived through the lens of fear and dissociation. As such, it displays less of the performative strategies that are so prominent in Zadie Smith's novel. Instead, the novel examines issues and sentiments that I have addressed in my chapter on anti-Americanism. In *His Illegal Self*, national labels and stereotypes constitute challenges to the protagonists' self-conceptions and limit their freedom to take charge of their own situation. To refer back to Tomlinson's analogy,<sup>343</sup> Carey's novel decisively moves beyond the boundaries of the 'terminal building' and explores experiences far removed from the sheltered uniformity of cultural homogenization. *His Illegal Self* makes a strong case for the realization that people and things elsewhere are *anything but* 'the same' and that cultural encounter remains adventurous. At the same time, it explores one of the central objects of this thesis, namely the question of cultural inoutsiderdom.

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<sup>341</sup> Sofia Ahlberg has read *His Illegal Self* as a commentary on the role of progressive intellectual after 9/11 ("Within Oceanic Reach: The Effects of September 11 on a Drought-Stricken Nation," Cara Cilano (ed.), *From Solidarity to Schism: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US* (Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 126), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2009, 275–293, 275).

<sup>342</sup> Peter Carey, "Union Square," Ulrich Baer (ed.), *110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11*, NYC/London: New York UP, 2002, 54–56.

<sup>343</sup> See my chapter on "The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)" (part I, chapter 1).



Set in the early 1970s, *His Illegal Self* chronicles the flight of Anna 'Dial' Xenos, a prospective assistant professor at Vassar College, and eight-year-old Che Selkirk.<sup>344</sup> Che is the son of two former Harvard student activists who became left-wing terrorists soon after Che's birth. He was raised under the care of his grandmother, a self-declared "bohemian"<sup>345</sup> of Upper East Side riches. Anna was originally appointed to help arrange a meeting between Che and his mother but is forced to go underground with Che when the original plan fails. They flee to rural Australia where Anna tries to figure out what to do next. It is only here that Che comes to understand that the woman at his side is not his long-lost mother.

On publication in 2008, *His Illegal Self* was widely reviewed, but many responses were less than enthusiastic.<sup>346</sup> Reviewers complained about stylistic weaknesses, stereotypical imagery<sup>347</sup> and – above all – about the far-fetched plot movement that transfers the novel's action to Australia.<sup>348</sup> While *His Illegal Self* is arguably more flawed than some of Carey's other novels, it offers a new take on the subject matter of cultural encounter, a topic that has long been one of Carey's main literary preoccupations. If Carey's 2005 travelogue *Wrong About Japan* chronicled his struggle with cultural codes in Japan, most of his recent novels, such as *Theft* (2006) and *Parrot and Olivier in America* (2010), betray an interest in the world's perspective on the USA. Carey has been living in New York City for two decades, and his literary engagement with the USA has grown ever more prominent since the beginning of the new millennium. However, the subject matter figured in Carey's fictional universe even before he moved to the USA. This fact is documented, for instance, by his early short story "American Dreams" (1974), a story that James Ley

<sup>344</sup> I will comment on Carey's use of telling names later in this chapter.

<sup>345</sup> Peter Carey, *His Illegal Self*, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, 4. In the following, further references to *His Illegal Self* (IS) will be inserted into the main text.

<sup>346</sup> Cathleen Schine's review in *The New York Review of Books* is one notable exception. According to Schine, *His Illegal Self* is "a little book in the way that raspberries or bees or nuggets of uranium are little" and reading the novel is "like peering at the human heart, at the world itself, through the distorted precision of a magnifying glass" (Cathleen Schine, "The Call of the Wild," Rev. Peter Carey, *His Illegal Self*, *The New York Review of Books*, 20 March 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/mar/20/the-call-of-the-wild/> (1 July 2011). 1).

<sup>347</sup> See, for instance, Sam Anderson, "Losing His Voices," Rev. Peter Carey, *His Illegal Self*, *New York Magazine*, 10 Feb 2008, <http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/43884/> (1 July 2011).

<sup>348</sup> See, for instance, Michiko Kakutani, "Dickensian Happenings for a Child of the '60s," Rev. Peter Carey, *His Illegal Self*, *The New York Times*, 5 Feb 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/05/books/05kaku.html/> (1 July 2011). See also Anderson, "Losing His Voices."

has described as “less a tale of mutual incomprehension than of wilful blindness.”<sup>349</sup>

Referring to “American Dreams,” Graham Huggan has pointedly remarked:

But who controls the American Dream and its repertoire of utopian images? Certainly not the Americans themselves, who are as trapped in their own system of representations as those that they subject to it.<sup>350</sup>

The US-American protagonists of *His Illegal Self* share this experience of impotence. Here cultural encounter takes place involuntarily and is shaped by the participants' multiple misconceptions. Carey's story reminds us of the fact that in looking at the 'Other', we do not bring to bear merely our prejudices but our whole emotional history, our momentary needs and – most importantly – our unrationalized fears. By acknowledging this, much can be learnt about the way the world looks at the USA and the way the USA perceive other parts of the world. In the following, I will examine Carey's take on this issue in *His Illegal Self*, considering in particular in how far and from which perspective the US-American protagonists are portrayed as insiders and, alternatively, as outsiders. I will furthermore explore the chances for true communication and genuine exchange that Carey envisions for a moment of cultural encounter that bears the full burden of “occasionally disastrous” (IS 272) lives and histories.

In my introduction to the second part of this thesis, I have claimed that the authors under consideration here unapologetically assume the inside perspective of US-American lives and characters. *His Illegal Self* demonstrates the potential complexity of such acts of narrative impersonation. With the exception of a few minor passages, Che and Dial serve as the novel's focalizers. At the same time, Carey employs a covert heterodiegetic narrator who displays – in James Ley's words – an “unobtrusively Americanised idiom.”<sup>351</sup> Even though this narrative voice usually operates from Che and Dial's perspective, it frequently identifies the two protagonists as ‘the boy’ and ‘the mother’. This opposition between the focalizers and the distancing labels used to describe them indicates the narrative's ambivalent position between inside and outside perspective. The labeling is particularly poignant

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<sup>349</sup> James Ley, “His Illegal Self,” Rev. Peter Carey, *His Illegal Self*, *The Age*, 28 Jan 2008, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/book-reviews/his-illegal-self/2008/01/28/1201369007318.html/> (11 July 2011).

<sup>350</sup> Graham Huggan, *Peter Carey* (Oxford Australian Writers), Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996, 19f.

<sup>351</sup> Ley, “His Illegal Self.”

in the case of 'the mother' as the reader quickly finds out that Dial is in fact *not* Che's mother. Yet, to the extent that Dial gradually comes to accept the role of the mother, the label is not merely the mistaken assumption of an uninformed observer but comes to represent a deeper truth or the emotional core of the novel's plot.

Even at their most vulnerable, Che and Dial face an environment in which they are perceived as parts of an aggressive political entity. In taking on Che and Dial's perspectives, Carey explores the feeling of helplessness caused by the realization that one's behavior and individual character may be taken to reconfirm the other person's prejudices and national stereotypes. At an individual level, Che and Dial may have been outsiders in US-American society. From the Australian perspective, they are 'insiders' – implied in a system of power and domination. In Australia, Che and Dial struggle with the hostility of their new neighbors, the members of a hippie commune. By growing to accept this specific sphere, Che and Dial acquire a tenuous insider status that is qualified by the hippie commune's own position at the margins of Australian society and by the lack of legal validation of this new Australian existence.

The confrontation between the novel's protagonists and their Australian environment, even though politically charged, makes no claim to being representative. It is conditioned by the psychological states of the individuals involved in the interaction. The positions that Dial and Che occupy, both in the USA and in Australia, are neither smugly cosmopolitan nor characterized by power and entitlement. Che's prosperous upbringing is little more than a type of solitary confinement. The move from the USA to Australia, far from being an act of liberation, appears to merely exchange one type of entrapment for a different one.<sup>352</sup> While Che is dragged along, Dial's situation is the result of a sequence of unmanageable events and of her own flawed choices. In both cases, a very specific – and exceptional – US-American biography sets the stage for a negotiation of issues of nationality and belonging. In the following pages, I will examine Peter Carey's portrayal of his US-American protagonists. I will also show how their individual experiences shape the terms of their encounter with both the USA and Australia.

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<sup>352</sup> This is true even if the novel indicates a preference for the latter type of entrapment.

Che is ill-suited to provide a representative US-American perspective since his interaction with US-American life and society has been very limited. For most of his early life, he was hidden away in a house at Kenoza Lake.<sup>353</sup> His grandmother has withdrawn into isolation to protect her grandson and to bring him up according to her own ideals:

There were no kids to play with. There were no pets because Grandma was allergic. But in fall there were Cox's pippins, wild storms, bare feet, warm mud and the crushed-glass stars spilling across the cooling sky. You can't learn these things anywhere, the grandma said. She said she planned to bring him up Victorian. It was better than 'all this.' (IS 5)

As this passage indicates, the narration expresses ambivalence about such an upbringing: it may hold its beauties and Grandmother Selkirk may mean well, but life "behind the windshield" (IS 227) is an imperfect surrogate for the raw experience of 'real life'. In Che's particular case, 'all this' means not only the harsh realities of life in the USA at a time of political unrest but more specifically the truth of his own biography and the 'illegal' identity of his parents. He is being shielded, above all, from his own (hi)story:

His grandma had always fretted about it, being stolen back by revolutionaries. She never spoke directly to the subject, so he had to listen through the wall – his history in whispers, brushing, scratching on the windowpane. (IS 28)

Life at Kenoza Lake is an elaborate project of denial on Grandmother Selkirk's part, and Che is left to take his clues from his silent environment. If the "engravings of fish and elk and small flowers with German names" (IS 16) in his grandmother's books make Che sad, this is because they are an imperfect substitute for the living and breathing world outside. Locked up in isolation, Che has grown exceptionally receptive to the suppressed emotions reflected in his inanimate surroundings, such as the

big glowing valve radio which played only static and a wailing oscillating electric cry, some deep and secret sadness he imagined coming from beneath the choppy water slapping at the dock below. (IS 16)

Che's solitary existence at Kenoza Lake is imbued with the 'mythical' status of Che's outlawed parents. Student activists associated with the SDS (Students for a

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<sup>353</sup> Kenoza Lake Estates is a wealthy gated community in Sullivan County, upstate New York.

Democratic Society) in the 1960s, they have gone underground, choosing political commitment over their son and a life of privilege.<sup>354</sup> From a teenaged neighbor, Che learns that he is held a “political prisoner” (IS 17) at Kenoza Lake and that his father is a “great American” (IS 8) who has allegedly “changed history” (IS 17). We learn that even Che has been part of an iconic moment of ‘American history’: the “most famous photo of 1966” (IS 134) was taken during Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s 1966 visit to Harvard University and shows Che’s activist mother who has stumbled in front of McNamara’s car with baby Che in her arms.<sup>355</sup>

Even though Che’s early biography is thus closely interwoven with events of recent political history, all of this bears very limited meaning for his day-to-day existence. Che’s life is divided into three independent spheres: privileged imprisonment at Kenoza Lake, his parents’ mythical existence in the annals of US-American history (which is beyond Che’s reach) and the new, ‘illegal’ self that he uncovers in Australia. In neither of these spheres, Che is taught what it means to be ‘an American’. His first encounter with unfiltered US-American ‘reality’ takes place during his flight with Dial when he finds himself overwhelmed by fleeting impressions and sensations:

The 6 train carried him through the dark, wire skeins unraveling, his entire life changing all at once. [...] The cars swayed and screeched, thick teams of brutal cables showing in the windowed dark. And then he was in Grand Central first time ever and they set off underground again, hand in hand, slippery together as newborn goats.

Men lived in cardboard boxes. A blind boy rattled dimes and quarters in a tin. The S train waited, painted like a warrior, and they jumped together and the doors closed as cruel as traps, chop, chop, chop, and his face was pushed against his mother’s jasmine dress. (IS 7f.)

We find out a few pages later that the central ‘reality’ informing Che’s perceptions – the long-awaited arrival of his absent mother – is deceptive. This reminds us of the fact that a child’s perspective can only be authentic within the limits of the child’s understanding. This restricted insight of the focalizer is hardly a

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<sup>354</sup> Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) features a similar ‘career’ in the terrorist wing of the student protest movement, observed from the parent’s perspective: the novel tells the story of Seymour ‘the Swede’ Levov, Jewish personification of the ‘American Dream’, whose ostensibly perfect life starts to crumble when his daughter Merry gains notoriety as the ‘Rimrock bomber’.

<sup>355</sup> This incident and the photo are fictional even if McNamara’s visit and the student protests are historical fact.

creative innovation in itself, but the disruption portrayed in *His Illegal Self* is more profound: if Che's life up to this point has taken place in an artificial bubble and if 'the mother' is *not* Che's mother, there are no truths and essences for Che to rely on. *His Illegal Self* shows how a child copes with the loss of the security that – even imaginary – essences provide.

*His Illegal Self* is a novel about fundamental change even if most of its characters respond to changes with characteristic stubbornness. Initiated by Dial, Che's – external and internal – transformation starts immediately after he has been yanked from his familiar surroundings:

While the dye took, he looked at a comic book, soft and furry pages, stroked by so many hands. In the Batcave Bruce Wayne showed all the different Batman costumes including a pure white costume to make him invisible in the snow. It was the first comic he had ever seen, a hard dark thrill that made his eyes narrow. By the time he finished it he had become a *completely* new person, ink-black hair, two years older easy. (IS 112 [Carey's emphasis])

The 'dark thrill' of the comic book – 'stroked by so many hands' – suggests the unmitigated sensation of discovering an unknown world all by oneself, an experience that Che's 'Victorian' childhood at Kenoza Lake did not allow for. Che's conceptions of the USA are divided between two extreme polarities: the muted and orderly sadness of life at Kenoza Lake and the confused urgency of fleeing with Dial. In Australia, Che first learns to understand his natural surroundings as a habitat which must be encountered and explored rather than as a projection screen for suppressed emotions.

Unaccustomed to and unequipped for such autonomy, Che initially feels threatened by the unfamiliar and ungovernable environment of his new 'home'. He senses that he has been "jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial" (IS 61). Seen through his eyes, rural Australia is a "bad dream on the dark side of the earth" (IS 71), Che's personal 'heart of darkness'. The dichotomy established here, however, does not rest on an opposition of 'civilized America' vs. 'uncivilized Australia' but on the perceptions of a boy with little previous experience of life outside the 'golden cage'. It is from Che's perspective that we encounter the strangeness and hostility of his natural surroundings, the

“ripped-up [banana] leaves moving like fingers” (IS 96) and the trees which “like aliens, [swish] their dangerous tails” (IS 167).

In contrast to traditional literary representations of the Australian ‘bush’ which frequently ignored the presence of a native population,<sup>356</sup> Che quickly realizes that the forest is “laced with narrow winding trails, like veins in a creature as yet unnamed” (IS 141). Yet in keeping with such traditional depictions, the Aboriginals remain shadowy presences lingering beyond the limits of conscious perception. Even the members of the local hippie commune strike Che as alien, their way of speaking like “ground beef in their mouths” (IS 91). More than the difference in accent, Che’s lack of cultural knowledge brands him as an outsider and informs his movements in his new surroundings:

he had no idea that the Australian bush was crusted, creased, folded on itself, long gray ridges and bright streaky torn bits where the earth had tried to pull itself in half, or that he was like an ant making his way across a Jackson Pollock without a map. He did not know the story of the lost child or the drover’s wife and [...] he had lots of worries, mostly how he would get back to Kenoza Lake, but it did not enter his head that he might perish here. (IS 201f.)

In Che’s process of growing accustomed to his Australian environment, questions of emotional belonging are more important than questions of citizenship. For the first time, he independently recognizes the uniqueness of his surroundings: “The sky was so clear. The sounds were so distinct. The cries of the Australian magpie, like nothing else on earth. Who was it who said like an angel gargling in a crystal vase?” (IS 268) The question is an inside joke on Peter Carey’s part: the description of the magpie cry is Peter Carey’s own, taken from his 1985 novel *Illywhacker*.<sup>357</sup> Even if the narrative perspective in this passage does not resolve the anachronism, the reference indicates that Che may yet gain the cultural knowledge of an ‘insider’.<sup>358</sup> Nevertheless, *His Illegal Self* does not contain an argument of

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<sup>356</sup> This faulty impression was canonized by the writers of the Sidney ‘Bulletin School’, such as Henry Lawson. In particular between 1890 and the beginning the First World War, short stories and poems published in *The Bulletin* contributed greatly to the construction of the nationalistic self-image of (white) Australia.

<sup>357</sup> Peter Carey (1985), *Illywhacker*, London/Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1988, 340.

<sup>358</sup> In addition to this or alternatively, the reference could be read as self-referential in so far as it raises questions about Carey’s own national affiliation: if a narrative text speaking from a US-American point of view refers to Carey’s description of Australia, this also hints at Carey’s status as an ‘adopted’ US-American author (see also my previous argument about the likeliness of being

national preference. Instead, it articulates the human need for both autonomy *and* emotional belonging. Che has ceased to be the boy who merely watches the world “through the windshield of his grandma’s car” (IS 227). The novel does not tell us – nor does it matter – whether Che ultimately stays with Dial and whether his further “comic and occasionally disastrous life” (IS 272) will be based in Australia, in the USA or elsewhere.<sup>359</sup> The ending of the novel emphasizes the emotional meaning of having experienced a feeling of home and family, even if only for a limited period of time.

Dial serves as the second major focalizer of the novel. Her experience of US-American life must be more extensive than Che’s but the reader is granted very limited insight into her life before the ‘kidnapping’ of Che. It is one of the many small flaws of *His Illegal Self* that Dial’s real name, Anna Xenos, is not only a telling name but that this fact also needs to be spelled out lest the reader might miss it. The reader is informed that “[h]er name was Anna Xenos. Xenos meant displaced person, stranger” (IS 83).<sup>360</sup> Other than that, we learn little more about Dial’s life in the USA than the fact that she comes from a working-class migrant background and was once part of the student protest movement but lacked the revolutionary fervor of Che’s parents. She has preserved some sympathy for the political left and performs her interview at Vassar College like a kind of shame-faced masquerade. The reader may question whether Dial’s alienation from her university career is altogether genuine when on her flight with Che she reasons: “She was an assistant professor at Vassar College. So this could not be true, that she was apparently a fugitive, fleeing down a

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‘adopted’ in this way, in the chapter on “The Complex Fate of Not Being an American Migrant Novel”).

<sup>359</sup> One early passage of the novel indicates that as a grown-up, Che will undergo hypnotic treatment in New York City (IS 49f.). However, we are not given any details about the circumstances.

<sup>360</sup> Carey employs a number of other telling names, most prominently the surname Selkirk which refers to the Scottish adventurer Alexander Selkirk, real-life model for Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. This reference is interesting if we consider that both Che *and* his posh grandmother are Selkirks. One might argue that they also share a keen instinct for survival. Anna Xenos’ nickname ‘Dial’ is derived from the word ‘dialectic’ (HIS 182) and thus underlines the opposition between Anna’s promising academic career, on the one hand, and her hippie past and involuntary existence as a social drop-out, on the other. Che’s name is a political statement on his parents’ part but earns a certain poignancy when life in Australia forces him to develop his very own set of ‘Guerrilla techniques’. Finally, Trevor is a name of Welsh origin which is derived from the Welsh word *tref* which means ‘hamlet’ or ‘homestead’ (“tref,” *The Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition. Volume VIII: Thro-Unelucidated*, Ed. John Simpson, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, 473). Of course, Trevor is also the person who helps Dial and Che to settle in their Australian exile.



creepy hallway in Philadelphia” (IS 59). Again, Dial’s encounter with the USA, to the extent that it is portrayed in *His Illegal Self*, implies that it is conditioned by her individual psychological quest rather than by the state of US-American society as such. Dial is a psychological type rather than an analytical observer of US-American life and politics.

Dial’s situation changes fundamentally when she accepts responsibility for Che. Her initial response to Australia is determined by the fact that it is her obligation to take charge of the situation, a task that she feels ill-equipped for:

She had no guidebook, no Australian currency. She had no idea of what Australia even *was*. She would not have imagined a tomato would grow in Australia, or a cucumber. She could not have named a single work of Australian literature or music. (IS 80 [Carey’s emphasis])

Dial’s response to her new surroundings in rural Australia mirrors Che’s even if they do not communicate this similarity. Dial is overwhelmed by the impression of an environment that is “poisonous” (IS 100) and “somehow wrong” (IS 101). It seems to her that the only virtue of this hiding place is that it “[places] her up a dirt track at the asshole of the earth” (IS 103). If such thoughts remain unvoiced, it is because Dial accepts her responsibility to shield Che from her own helplessness and fear. Nevertheless, her encounter with their new ‘home’ is conditioned by exactly those feelings:

This was going to be his home, not just the acres, or the two huts, but this small third hut down in the darkness of the rain forest, creepier than the others, with nothing in it but an empty pickle jar.

Outside, on the stoop, someone had craved a face into a block of stone. It was not exactly sinister, but it suggested superstition, witchcraft and some very lonely lost life reduced to a hidden corner of the earth. (IS 100)

Like Che, Dial grows to appreciate the beauty of her Australian surroundings (IS 251). The symmetrical development of Che and Dial’s feelings, even if unarticulated, signals that the emotional bond between these two characters is really the novel’s central topic. *His Illegal Self* is the story of two characters adjusting to each other and only by extension to a foreign environment. As such, the novel does not provide straightforward answers to the question of how US-Americans perceive the world outside the USA. The protagonists lack the comprehensive characterization as US-Americans that might support such a reading. Their perception of the Australia

around them is conditioned by the initially tenuous state of their relationship. Carey thus enters the perspective of two very specific characters without giving much attention to the larger (and conceptual) questions that, truth be told, we also rarely stop to ponder in everyday life.

Even if cultural encounter in *His Illegal Self* does *not* prompt a constant preoccupation with questions of national identity, Dial and Che experience anti-American resentment that they are unprepared for. It is thus hardly surprising that Dial contemplates a question that has frequently been voiced in the aftermath of 11 September 2001: “We didn’t even know they fucking existed and they’ve been down here hating us. What did we ever do to them?” (IS 105) Indeed, it is exactly this ignorance about different circumstances and places that *His Illegal Self* cites as a central cause for anti-American resentment. This fact is articulated by the Australian activist whom Dial and Che meet when they first arrive in Australia: “It’s a shame, he said, you never learn more about the countries that you fuck with” (IS 82).

This ignorance is not merely based on geographical distance: even in Australia, Dial fails to acknowledge the political reality of the country she has come to:

Do you know you’re living in a police state? Yeah, yeah, she said. It did not occur to her for a second that this might be, in many ways, quite true. Certainly the name Bjelke-Petersen meant nothing to her. She had never heard of Cedar Bay, helicopter raids and arson committed by Queensland police. She did not know there was a Queensland Health Act which permitted police to search her house without a warrant. (IS 139)<sup>361</sup>

What is more, Dial is not merely ignorant about local circumstances; she is also indifferent towards them, automatically claiming superiority for her own and, somewhat paradoxically, for US-American concerns. When she cuts short a discussion taking place at a neighborhood gathering, she does so by referring to larger political issues:

[W]hile we’re sitting here arguing about this, Nixon is bombing Cambodia and Laos. Do you want to think what that is doing to the birds? I mean, I just came from a country where my friends are dying trying to end this war. (IS 138)

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<sup>361</sup> The quotation refers to Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, premier of the state of Queensland between 1968 and 1987, and to his rigid policy against left-wing activists and squatters settled in Cedar Bay.

Of course, her argument appears rather hollow if we take into account Dial's apparent ignorance about the specificities of the USA's international involvement. It is hardly more than a strategic polemic meant to repel criticism of her own position. With this argumentative stance, Dial positions herself in close proximity to those who dismiss anti-American sentiment as unfounded and irrational even while her argument is grounded in the left-wing counterculture of the time. It is thus unsurprising that Dial's behavior, even more than her ignorance, provokes anti-American sentiment. During another discussion with the members of the hippie commune, Dial is told that "[t]his is not America [...]. We don't decide ethical issues with lawyers" (IS 166). Even Che comes to the conclusion that it is Dial who has "made the neighbors hate Americans" (IS 122). In Dial, Peter Carey thus critically assesses the attitude of a US-American left which claims the moral high ground and professes superior insight even while being arrogantly caught up in its own concerns.

Dial's behavior and her apparent surprise about the resentment that she encounters as a US-American abroad reminds us of the fact that the anti-American backlash of the early twenty-first century had a predecessor in the 1960s and 1970s. *His Illegal Self* is set at the height of public sentiment against US involvement in Vietnam and thus invites comparison between then and today. If the novel's plot may seem implausible, Dial's uncomfortable position as a left-leaning educated US-American appears very familiar. She would like to distance herself from the political actions of her home country but simultaneously displays all the sense of entitlement and arrogance that the world holds to be characteristic for US-Americans. The anti-American sentiment portrayed in *His Illegal Self* is based on a generally hostile atmosphere connected to larger political issues. At the same time, it is a consequence of national prejudices that the Australians see reconfirmed in Dial's attitude. If national stereotypes are a type of rudimentary knowledge,<sup>362</sup> Dial contributes greatly to strengthening their foothold in her immediate Australian surroundings. Seen from her perspective, this behavior mainly expresses her fear and insecurity about being left 'in charge' of a situation that really is beyond her control.

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<sup>362</sup> See my discussion of this conception in the chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

*His Illegal Self* simulates a situation in which its – ostensibly privileged – protagonists have to cope without the protective shield of US-American political power and wealth. The picture that Carey draws of cultural encounter taking place under such premises is anything but romantic. Nevertheless, *His Illegal Self* expresses some optimism for the positive potential of such unshielded encounters. The latter part of *His Illegal Self* indicates the beginnings of a true engagement between the US-American ‘invaders’ and the local settlers. In the face of a bullying local government, a tenuous coalition develops that indicates the chance for mutual support.

In Trevor, Carey provides Dial and Che with an unlikely mediator. A former sanitation worker and a petty criminal, Trevor is described in curiously animalistic terms, as a “nasty-looking groundhog” (IS 76) or an “animal unexpectedly supple and sleek” (IS 217). While Trevor’s association with animal physicality is overdone, this ‘earthiness’ serves to emphasize his connection with the novel’s Australian scenery. In contrast to Dial and Che, Trevor is able to ‘read’ the codes of both the local residents and the natural surroundings while nevertheless retaining an outsider status. He is a cultural outsider by birth, brought to Australia as an English orphan with a family background that remains nebulous.<sup>363</sup> In Australia, Trevor thus is the quintessential inoutsider. Subject to abuse during his childhood in an Australian orphanage, Trevor has developed a fierce instinct for survival. It is towards Che that Trevor first displays an unexpected tenderness. Yet, Trevor’s rough manners and lack of education make him a surprising choice as Che and Dial’s cultural interpreter. Nevertheless, he accepts this role even at the most literal level: “You’re American? Trevor asked her. What we call a cyclone, you call a hurricane” (IS 28).

Besides the two main focalizers Dial and Che, Trevor is the only character whose perspective is voiced directly at least in a few short passages. Thus *His Illegal Self* does not provide us with any unambiguously Australian perspectives on its US-American protagonists. Nevertheless, Trevor’s perception of Dial and Che precisely

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<sup>363</sup> Trevor is one of the ‘child migrants’ who were taken from their families in Britain, brought to Australia and placed in foster homes or childcare institutions in the twentieth century. Many of these children were subject to systematic abuse while growing up in Australia. The child migrants are today counted among the so-called ‘Forgotten Australians’ to whom Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologized on 16 November 2009.

registers their 'alienness' both in rural Australia and in the 'underground'. Himself used to a life in hiding, Trevor ironically assesses Dial's behavior: "The American babe had a huge propane lamp. She was like an oil refinery" (IS 175). Of course, Trevor's perception of Dial is hardly an uninvolved observation across national boundaries. Instead it is defined by a strong sexual undercurrent:

The American did not reply and so he waited until she came to him. She would not come completely. She leaned against the doorframe, half in, half out, but her big dark eyes were sort of naked. He thought, She's single. (IS 176)

As seen from Dial's perspective, their relationship is shaped by her indecision about Trevor's trustworthiness and by her initial unwillingness to acknowledge their mutual attraction. Very early on, Dial takes note of Trevor's "pale blue eyes, hard as a broken bathroom tile" (IS 76). She is torn between the urgent need for somebody to trust and her fear of the predatory trait in Trevor's character: "His hand on her arm was not rough, or brutal, but really rather soft, as if he thought kindly of her and might protect her, but she thought of how gently cats hold prey inside their mouths" (IS 216). When Dial finally realizes that she can rely on Trevor, it is an active decision on her part to acknowledge the attraction that has been there from the beginning:

He was not an enemy, so she let herself notice his skin, the limpid rather pale blue eyes. She permitted him to turn off the propane light so they could not be seen from outer space and this, somehow, no longer seemed like a retreat from the Enlightenment. (IS 241)

The sexual connotation of '[permitting Trevor] to turn off the propane light' are obvious. Yet, it is important to note that this personal rapprochement also softens the opposition between Dial, now in the dark, and her nightly Australian surroundings.

Trevor's relationship with Che is shaped by the fact that Trevor recognizes his younger self in Che. However, Dial dismisses the similarities that Trevor professes: "[T]his boy comes from Park Avenue. In New York. He's going to go to Harvard and be a fucking corporate lawyer. He's so absolutely not you, Trevor. He's a fucking *prince*" (IS 177 [Carey's emphasis]). Nevertheless, the emotional bond between Trevor and Che and, by extension, between Che and his new Australian 'home' is finally reconfirmed on their flight from the police:

They breathed together, the boy's purple eyelids dropping, feasted on exhaustion. They traveled with one mind through the sharp cutting shale and into the paddock with the purple seeds, skirting around the fence line where no satellites could see. (IS 232)

It is this emotional connection and his bond with Dial that transforms Che's perception of his Australian environment. Che's perception of life and happiness is not defined by national or political realities but by small fragments of his day-to-day existence with Dial and Trevor: "What he cared about was the beach, eating pearl perch, teaching Trevor how to swim" (IS 247). *His Illegal Self* is a novel about the intimacy of 'home', even though it initially moves from one continent to another in a matter of pages, ripping its protagonists from their lives and homes. The relationships between Dial, Che and Trevor that develop in the course of the novel demonstrate what it means to create a new home. At the same time, *His Illegal Self* illustrates how personal relationships soften the edges of intercultural confrontation. Carey dislocates two US-American inoutsiders and joins them with another inoutsider to define a new – non-political – 'inside' circle. In doing so, Carey relativizes the importance of national membership and geographical belonging.

*His Illegal Self* remains ambivalent about the exact location of the 'inside' and the 'outside' and about the perspective that its protagonists occupy in looking both at the USA and at Australia. It is in this respect that the novel simulates what Paul Giles calls a 'virtual' perspective on national space. At the same time, national space is transcended or, rather, superimposed by emotional space. If, as Graham Huggan has stated, Peter Carey is "a 'cultural amphibian' [...] well-adapted to the changing climates of today's transnational world",<sup>364</sup> *His Illegal Self* also proves him to be a romantic at heart. The novel takes a pessimistic view of political involvement, no matter how idealistic its motivation. Mutual understanding and a sense of community develop at the smallest interpersonal level. Thus Che's 'illegal self' is primarily his private self, the self removed from politics and national space. The utopian quality of such a vision is underlined by the novel's lush setting and the vaguely otherworldly imagery employed to describe it. The novel's final reference to Che's "comic and occasionally disastrous life" (IS 272) indicates that such an escape from national and

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<sup>364</sup> Huggan, *Peter Carey* 2f.

political space can only be transient. However, Carey does neither dwell on this fact nor on the legal consequences of Che's 'kidnapping'. Despite his obvious skepticism towards any type of 'alternative lifestyle', his novel projects the fleeting dream of an 'illegal life' liberated from the constraints of national borders and political entities. At the same time, *His Illegal Self* demonstrates how such issues may bear particular poignancy for US-Americans and how hard-earned crosscultural insight may be even for those US-American who venture outside the national 'golden cage'.

**2.3 Criminal Cosmopolitans:****Imraan Coovadia, *Green-Eyed Thieves* (2006)**

It may be surprising how a study dealing with literary ‘outside’ perceptions of the USA should have steered clear of Alexis de Tocqueville and his classic study *Democracy in America* for so many pages.<sup>365</sup> Indeed, Tocqueville’s brilliant observations on the principle of equality, the ‘tyranny of the majority’ and US-American society at large remain authoritative to the present day. Joseph Epstein has thus rightly labeled Tocqueville “unavoidable”.<sup>366</sup> Tocqueville’s insights are all the more impressive if we take into account that he only stayed in the USA from May 1831 to February 1832 and never returned there afterwards. If Tocqueville has nevertheless failed to feature in this study up until this point, this fact is due to one of the study’s central claims: as previously stated, the novels under consideration here do not display ‘outside perspectives’ proper but very frequently appear to ‘hijack’ the insider’s perspective on the USA.

If I turn to Tocqueville in my examination of Imraan Coovadia’s *Green-Eyed Thieves*, there are two specific reasons for doing so: firstly, Coovadia’s novel does indeed provide an outside perspective on the USA, if that of a special kind of outsider: a criminal cosmopolitan. In the following, I argue that the observations of the first-person narrator in *Green-Eyed Thieves*, the shady Firoze Peer, share the narrative ‘intrusiveness’ that other novels articulate through US-American inoutsiders: while relating an outside perspective, Firoze disrespects the natural limitations of his insight into US-American lifeworlds. Indeed, he often claims superior insight and understanding. Secondly, Firoze cites Tocqueville as his analytical role model. As it happens, our narrator, a South African from a Pakistani family, sits behind bars in the USA and relates his perceptions of the country, its judicial system but – most of all – his own transnational career as a petty criminal. There is a double irony contained in this setup: Tocqueville originally travelled to the

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<sup>365</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: The Complete and Unabridged Volumes I and II* (Bantam Classics), Transl. Henry Reeve, NYC: Bantam, 2004. The French original version *De la démocratie en Amérique* was published in two parts in 1835 and 1840. The first English edition of the first part appeared in 1838.

<sup>366</sup> Joseph Epstein, “Introduction: Alexis de Tocqueville,” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: The Complete and Unabridged Volumes I and II* (Bantam Classics), NYC: Bantam, 2004, XIX-XLII, here XXXI.



USA to evaluate the prison system but ended up producing one of the most poignant evaluations of US-American society. Firoze, speaking from inside prison walls, sets out with large philosophical ambitions but writes a family memoir, a chronicle of his family's pursuits in crime and love.

Firoze's conception of himself as a "micro-Tocqueville"<sup>367</sup> results in sweeping judgments which generally concern one of Firoze's personal areas of interest or his 'line of business'. Echoing Tocqueville in tone if not in content, Firoze claims that "[t]he yardstick of a great nation [...] is the level of its defendants. [...] American criminal talent, talent in the real sense of the term, is scarce" (GET 9). Even in prison, Firoze feels himself to be on a mission of cross-cultural inquiry:

The long, low hallways, the African men who loom up behind each new set of bars, the stink of the wood-handled buckets, are of considerable interest to me, perhaps because I am subconsciously studying to be a political prisoner in the United States. (GET 72)

It would seem that the narrator has much to tell about the USA in general and about specific areas of US-American life in particular. However, Firoze turns out to be a postmodern trickster figure rather than a faithful observer. His account is strongly biased, self-centred and unreliable. For various reasons, his grasp of events, conditions and institutions that do not directly concern him or his family life is limited at best. This fact is partly connected to Firoze's "happy principle" of never being "one to [side] in a political dispute unless it's against [himself]" (GET 135). Of course, Firoze acknowledges that, after 11 September 2001, it has become hard to remain uninvolved. Nevertheless, Firoze's position behind prison bars grants him the liberty to disregard politics and everyday realities (which would only hinder his philosophizing). It is thus with a certain degree of satisfaction that Firoze reasons: "It's hard for the jailhouse memoirist to seize an image from the public's memory and bear it off to his glasshouse" (GET 135). Indeed, Firoze considers his incarceration as an appropriate condition for a writer and 'thinker':

The public likes its writers to be incarcerated. This condition indicates an author's authenticity, some knowledge of things beyond the confines of this skull. It symbolises the truth that a writer is trapped in the pages of his book surely as a bug in a drop of amber. (GET 8)

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<sup>367</sup> Imraan Coovadia, *Green-Eyed Thieves*, Johannesburg: Umuzi, 2006, 103. In the following, further references to *Green-Eyed Thieves* (GET) will be inserted into the main text.

Firoze's claim to 'authenticity', 'knowledge' and 'truth' is as unconvincing as are his philosophical pretensions. Our narrator may momentarily be confined to a prison cell but nevertheless moral and geographical flexibility remains his most crucial character trait.

Indeed, the diverse geographical locations and cultural implications of Firoze's story are vital. His second literary model, Ian Fleming's novel *Goldfinger*, may serve as an example: in claiming that his own book is "modelled after *Goldfinger*" (GET 64), Firoze casts himself in the role of a wannabe James Bond, a master of his trade, a philanderer, a man of elegance and success. Beyond that, the association with James Bond establishes a firm connection with a quintessentially British institution and, what is more, with one of the few British hero figures firmly at home in the twentieth century. The reference is complemented ironically when Firoze's twin brother Ashraf manages to fool a young woman into believing that the twins are the illicit sons of a princess from Goa and of Scottish actor Sean Connery (GET 17), the James Bond of the *Goldfinger* movie. On the other hand, Firoze's family's zeal for all things glittery and precious aligns them with Auric Goldfinger, Fleming's mastermind villain. Measured by the family's achievements and talents, Firoze's conception of a world where crime is ingenious and glamorous, of course, proves hollow at best. Much as Firoze may insist that he is "a spy in [his] family, in [his] culture" (GET 56), he possesses neither the heroic qualities of James Bond nor the villainous genius of Goldfinger.

The geographical movement of the novel's plot takes the reader from Johannesburg to Sun City and Peshawar and finally to the USA. Firoze's family is largely unhindered by the trivialities of migration bureaucracy due to Ashraf's exceptional talent for forgery. As a consequence, they appear to inhabit something like a cosmopolitan sphere of petty crime. In contrast to the cosmopolitan circles usually associated with power and privilege, this brand of cosmopolitanism operates underneath the deck boards of global mainstream society. As Firoze acknowledges, "being above things and beyond things is not a trait of the Dawoods and the Peers. We're usually beneath things, below them, and, generally, in the middle of the muck" (GET 48). Elsewhere Firoze calls his family's special trait a "talent for world

historicity – [...] our ability to find our way to the centre of things or to the centre’s underbelly” (GET 140). It is this special ‘talent’ – and the willingness to bend the rules – that sets Firoze’s family apart from the anxieties of lower-class migration in the age of globalization. During a visit to a mosque in New York City, Firoze realizes the arbitrariness of this distinction:

The worshippers, I guessed, were from the practical and technical economy: taxi drivers and dispatchers, electricians, engineers, garment cutters. They must have been Pakistanis, Palestinians, Somalis, Malays, Egyptians, Jordanians. They were fearful, quiet. They were one mishap away from deportation, as we would have been had Ashraf not created our counterfeit green cards. (GET 109)

Zubeida Choonara has labeled Coovadia’s novels *The Wedding* and *Green-Eyed Thieves* “migrant or transnational writing” as opposed to what she calls “national writing”.<sup>368</sup> While *Green-Eyed Thieves* is of course in no way a ‘national novel’, I object to both Choonara’s synonymous use of ‘migrant’ and ‘transnational’ and to the categorization of *Green-Eyed Thieves* as a migrant novel. I am equally skeptical about Choonara’s use of the word ‘cosmopolitan’ as more or less interchangeable with ‘migrant’. Indeed, I argue in favor of a clear distinction: migrant fiction frequently portrays processes of settling in, of (sometimes failed) assimilation and of nostalgia for a geographical point of origin. It negotiates the loss or absence of home as a dilemma or at least a challenge to its migrant characters. I will discuss the concept of a cosmopolitan perspective in literary studies in some detail in the concluding chapter of this study. For now, cosmopolitan fiction may be said to construct a perception of the individual as situated in and linked to the world at large. In a narrower sense, the term is often used to imply a state of geographical flexibility and (more often than not) a type of privilege that – at least temporally – transcends national borders. In this context, the absence of a geographically fixed home may appear a choice, even a luxury. In *Green-Eyed Thieves*, this luxury is acquired through illegal means, but it nevertheless sets Firoze and his family apart from the migrant ‘huddled masses’. Both in terms of his creative work and his biography, it makes sense to align Imraan Coovadia with other cosmopolitan writers

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<sup>368</sup> Zubeida Choonara, “Between Worlds: Exploring Imraan Coovadia’s *The Wedding* and *Green-Eyed Thieves*,” Research Report, *Electronic Theses and Dissertations* (ETD), 25 February 2010, [http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10539/7564/Research\\_Report.pdf](http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10539/7564/Research_Report.pdf) (1 July 2011), 1.

such as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, as Choonara does in her thesis.<sup>369</sup> However, it is debatable whether a reading of either of the three authors' work profits from being associated with the fuzzy label of the 'migrant novel'.

Our narrator in *Green-Eyed Thieves* and his family move but they rarely act as 'migrants' in any strict sense of the word. In contrast to Dial, Che and Trevor in Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self*, Firoze is not even an inoutsider. He acts on a principle of random adaptation rather than of integration, creating and dismissing cultural associations as he likes or as opportunity allows. From Firoze's perspective, boundaries are there to be disrespected and to be criss-crossed as one pleases, providing endless openings for his family's criminal pursuits. This is demonstrated by one instance in which Firoze's father reactivates a colonial stereotype for the sake of a criminal coup:

The captain, an inveterate fan of Holmes and Watson, finds it difficult to be irritable with the circuitous waiter [enacted by Firoze's father]. Seeing these humble Indians, as ridiculous as can be with their awkward smiles and neatly pressed turbans, renders him proud, once again, to be a Christian and a European. (GET 61)

In this instance, it is the satisfying playing-out of a stereotype that distracts the victim's attentions from the criminal act. Indeed, cultural play-acting is at the heart of the Peers' criminal enterprise, and once more cultural clichés play an important role as a 'repertoire' of possible performances.<sup>370</sup> Firoze further subverts common expectations about the power relation between migrant subject and host country by patronizingly referring to US-Americans as "natives" (GET 115) or "indigenous" (GET 121). As delusional (or tongue-in-cheek?) as Firoze's assessment may be, it challenges the common conception of the USA as a global power that frightens the rest of the world into a state of political, military and cultural submissiveness.

As soon as the novel's action moves to the USA, it is fuelled by a tension between the Peers' pursuit of their very own American Dream and the hidden agenda of their recent acquaintance, pre-9/11 Mohammad Atta and his associates. It is this

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<sup>369</sup> Choonara, "Between Worlds" 1.

<sup>370</sup> See my evaluation of Ruth Florack's argument on stereotypes as a type of cultural repertoire in the chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

acquaintance that will ultimately lead to Firoze's imprisonment even though Firoze swears his loyalty to his host country:

I love this country. I'd never assist a man wishing to harm her. If I did encounter Atta, Mohammad el-Amir, it was only to notice he was a mixed up, very intense specimen. He attempted a seduction on me. I mean, the whole thing is a tragicomedy. (GET 8)

While his US-American audience gathered in court understandably fail to perceive the comic side of a story leading up to 11 September 2001, Firoze's characterization of Atta as an idiosyncratically crazy person is confirmed by Atta's earlier appearances in the novel. This is hardly surprising since Firoze serves as our narrator throughout and makes an effort to 'sell' his version of the story. Of course, there is something provocative about Firoze's evaluation of his early encounters with Atta. He claims that he knew "at once about Mohammad Atta that he [would] never amount to anything" (GET 94). Characterizing a person who has been canonized as one of the great villains of recent US-American history, Firoze merely expresses personal dislike and vague disrespect. In a similar instance of misplaced understatement, he accuses Ashraf of "poor judgment" (GET 13) for having provided Atta with a forged driver's license, albeit with an expired one. Considering that our narrator is a trickster, a liar and a thief, we can hardly take his innocent euphemisms at face value. In downplaying Atta's villainous qualities, Firoze means to assert his own innocence but of course fails to do so in any convincing fashion. At the same time, Firoze's portrayal of Atta alerts the reader to the fact that his or her own perception of the 9/11 terrorists is most likely conditioned by cemented media images and officially manufactured evaluations which may or may not serve their own specific agendas. Coovadia's text does not provide us with a counter image but raises questions about the process that turns immediate political events into national history.

It is in conversation with Atta that Firoze offers his most fervent criticism of the world's enchantment with 'America':

Something bugs me about people who are going to America. Going to America, okay – what does that mean? Something bugs me about the whole idea of the place in people's minds. I feel like it's just a blank space people project their craziest ideas on to. (GET 94)

Firoze stresses the fictional quality of the world's conception of the USA while silently adding his own (equally fictional) image to the repertoire. Atta's euphemistic response – "New York interests me" (GET 94) – constitutes another instance of the dark comedy that Coovadia draws from Firoze's encounter with the terrorists. Indeed, Coovadia's portrayal of Atta and his associates raises questions about the role of comedy in dealing with historical and political tragedy and about the 'tragicomic' potential of events such as the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.<sup>371</sup> At the same time, Firoze's evaluation of 'the whole idea [of America] in people's minds' can be connected to a theoretical conception I have discussed earlier in this thesis, namely Lippmann's description of stereotypes as 'pictures in our heads'.<sup>372</sup>

Stereotypes and clichéd perceptions of the USA and its role in the world play an important role in *Green-Eyed Thieves* precisely because the narrator so often refuses to play them out along expected lines. Our reading of Firoze's story is heavily influenced by the set of stereotypes that we bring to bear onto the text: the Muslim terrorist, the US-American Hispanic, the faded actress in small-town America. Meanwhile, Firoze and his family cast themselves in the role of the third-world victim merely for strategic reasons and use the workings of modern-day globalization for their own profit. If the USA provides much of the cultural input circulating in the global system of money-making, this does not mean that it is in control of the system as such. Indeed, Firoze's observations seem to provide an illustration for Arjun Appadurai's description of the USA as a "garage sale for the rest of the world."<sup>373</sup> According to Firoze, only (Western) sentimentalists still conceive of the world in colonialist terms and, as demonstrated by the episode referred to above, this makes them likely victims of those who understand the true workings of global ideas, goods and money. Firoze's father, we are told, sees the 'Third World' as

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<sup>371</sup> Similar issues have long been debated in the context of German Nazi history. While Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) constitutes an early satirical response to the Third Reich, the debate around the 'appropriateness' of such humorous portrayals is hardly over as can be seen from heated responses to recent films such as Dany Levy's *Mein Führer* (2007) or Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). 9/11 has not yet been canonized as an object of comedy but it has already been used in humorous entertainment, for instance in the case of the Australian activity picture book *Where's Bin Laden?* by Daniel Lalic and Xavier Waterkeyn (Chatswood: New Holland, 2006).

<sup>372</sup> See my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>373</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 174. See my discussion of Appadurai's position in the chapter on "The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)" (part I, chapter 1).

a place of business. There's no mystery, no enchantment. He wouldn't dream of going backpacking in Thailand or leaving to see Angkor Wat. Harrods, the Lake District, and Orlando, Florida, are where you go to relax. In New York Filene's Basement will be a place of mystery and enchantment as will be Tiffany's and Century 21 in Bayridge, Brooklyn. Whereas Angola, Bangladesh, Colombia you visit to make money. (GET 86)

It is the lure of Western money and commodities that Firoze describes in terms of 'mystery' and 'enchantment' but Firoze and his family are no innocent victims in this net of US-American products and attractions. Instead, Firoze and his family actively reinterpret cultural artifacts originating from the USA and elsewhere and thus serve as prime example for the global potential for resistance and irony that Appadurai has identified. Even Ashraf's ambition to attend "Hamburger University run by McDonalds [sic] in Oak Brook, Illinois" (GET 78) and to open a McDonald's franchise in Johannesburg is not simply an instance of McDonaldization. Ashraf is attracted by the capitalistic potential of such a business for "people say it's like having a licence to print money" (GET 78). What gives an ironic twist to this scheme is the fact that Ashraf's family has long been printing money and never felt the need for a license to do so.

In their criminal endeavors, Firoze and his family members rely on stereotypes a basic repertoire for their cultural play-acting. It is in activating what Astrid Franke calls the 'programmed reading' of a stereotype<sup>374</sup> that the Peers make effective use of stereotypical conceptions. Ashraf's enactment of a "comic-book Egyptian, like Omar Sharif in *Marco the Magnificent*" (GET 152) in the pursuit of an US-American woman serves as another example. Their talent for cultural ambivalence, their ability to enact a set of different roles is crucial for the Peer family's criminal strategy. At the same time, this strategic use of cultural markers constitutes a postmodern hollowing-out of these very tokens of cultural meaning, a fact that Coovadia uses for comic effect.

If Firoze claims – echoing Baudrillard<sup>375</sup> – that the USA is a "counterfeit nation" in which "pseudo-reality" rules (GET 123), it would seem that the USA is

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<sup>374</sup> For a discussion of Franke's concept, see my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>375</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1988), *America*, Transl. Chris Turner, London/NYC: Verso, 1999 [French original *Amérique*, Grasset 1986], 28f.

also a particularly suitable ‘stage’ for the Peers’ ‘performances’. Before examining Firoze and Ashraf’s encounter with the USA in some detail, let me draw attention to a passage in which Firoze relates his impressions of a small town in upstate New York:

The main streets of these upstate towns were almost as standardised and interchangeable as strip malls. There would be a petrol station with two morose attendants. One of them, a young chap with a denim jacket and inevitable mullet, would be meditatively smoking beside the single pump. The other would run Ashraf’s credit card without looking up. A pot of burned coffee stood on a warmer, beside packaged doughnuts, wiper fluid, and a column of big black car batteries. Further down was a bar, a video shop, a country bank. The large frame houses were in poor condition, their porches full of junk, from untended sewing machines to doorless refrigerators. The people were big and, in my estimation, suspicious of outsiders. You would have to be fair and say they were no more wrapped up in their own affairs than a typical New Yorker, but they seemed more tenacious, more grudging, protecting their corner of the cosmos. (GET 139)

In the first part of this passage, Firoze describes a selection of stereotypical impressions of small-town ‘America’, emphasizing the standardized and repetitive nature of the scene. In its barrenness, the scene has a filmic quality, recalling countless similar setups featured in Hollywood movies. The young attendant in his denim jacket, smoking ‘meditatively’, evokes James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) or Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1953). The ‘inevitable mullet’ adds a taste of present-day backwardness. The blandness of the scene, the excess of meaningless junk, the petrol station complete with the burned coffee on a warmer all recall canonized images of the US-American ‘wasteland’, as observed by the traveler who passes through. Our observer’s judgment becomes more outspoken in the second paragraph where Firoze does not merely offer images of neglect and decay but provides a pseudo-Tocquevillian analysis of the local population. The position that our speaker occupies is crucial: far from displaying the insecurity or puzzlement of the migrant outsider, Firoze speaks with authority and from a presumed position of superiority. The ‘big’, ‘tenacious’ and ‘grudging’ locals are presented almost like a grim kind of animal, as savages (albeit not of the noble type).

*Green-Eyed Thieves* tells a family’s story, and the novel’s engagement with the USA becomes most visible in the opposition between the twins, Firoze and Ashraf. Even though Firoze claims to be the more intelligent of the two, Ashraf is more streetwise, adaptable and generally more suited for the pragmatic matters of every-



day life. However, in the USA – in particular after 9/11 – common-sense rules do not always apply, and thus Firoze becomes the ‘hero’ of his very own fleeting American success story.

Ashraf’s approach to the USA – and to cultural difference in general – is performative in a very literal sense: it relies on an ever-growing repertoire of impersonations and crosscultural performances. As such, Ashraf’s play-acting does not reflect the USA like mirror but is characterized by kaleidoscopic fragmentation. Thus *Green-Eyed Thieves* cannot serve as an example of literary performativity in a narrow sense: it never ventures to establish a coherent depiction of the USA but allows its narrator and its characters to disassemble and rearrange allusive bits and pieces as they please. This means that in its depiction of the USA *Green-Eyed Thieves* effectively provides a psychological portrait rather than social commentary, notwithstanding Firoze’s Tocquevillian pretensions. The USA portrayed in *Green-Eyed Thieves* does not work as a ‘collective mental state’ in Genette’s sense but instead as a highly idiosyncratic individual mental state, even if it relies on a repertoire of well-known stereotypes and cultural markers. In this respect, Firoze and his brother’s choices are more conscious and selective than Judith Butler’s notion of the performative implies. More often than not, their cultural performances constitute a deconstruction of ‘stylized acts’ rather than a mere repetition. Thus Firoze, and to an even larger extent, Ashraf very clearly illustrate what Bhabha calls the ‘subversive potential’ of cultural performance.<sup>376</sup>

A natural impersonator, Ashraf begins to develop his ‘American repertoire’ at a very early age:

Since we were teenagers he had a sweet tooth for the B-movie side, the flaky grandeur, of this country’s culture. He was fixated from afar on a plebeian flavour of television star, starting with Telly Savalas in *Kojak*. [...] My brother does a splendid impersonation of Telly, raising both eyebrows and buttonholing me with his fist. The apparition is strange to behold in Jo’burg but in dog-eat-dog Brooklyn, in Crooklyn, where intimidation is the local speciality, the dude fits right in. (GET 14)

However, soon after their arrival in the USA, Firoze begins to worry about his brother’s adaptability. He fears that Ashraf – “an American at second hand” all his

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<sup>376</sup> I discuss Genette’s, Butler’s and Bhabha’s arguments in my chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

life – is quickly turning into a “real American” (GET 127). Firoze’s compelling concept of the ‘second hand American’ confirms the assumption that US-American culture and even US-American ‘identity’ have long become a global cultural possession. At the same time, Firoze’s worry implies that those who ‘wear’ US-American culture ‘second hand’ assign different values and meanings to it than ‘real Americans’ and thereby preserve both individuality and freedom. It is debatable whether Firoze’s worries about his brother are justified. While Ashraf moves in his new surroundings with relish, he hardly settles into a US-American identity proper. In fact, his mode of adaptation is largely unchanged, and maybe Firoze’s fears are more a matter of brotherly jealousy than a response to real danger.

Ever the postmodern metatextual commentator, Firoze provides a full analysis of his brother’s enchantment with the ‘fictional’ USA and of his zeal for impersonation:

Ashraf is a keen adapter, with his chameleon’s tongue and kaleidoscope soul. In Jo’burg he sounds like the born-and-bred Johannesburger that he is. In Pakistan, in the desert, he swears, talks, and mounts a camel like a proper nomad. In Brooklyn he’s Brooklyn to the bone. Ashraf is something of a Zelig figure. Nowadays (a reader asks) who isn’t a Zelig figure? What isn’t a Rorschach test? If every dot is Rorschachian and every yokel Zeligesque, then the terms have no meaning. (GET 20)

This self-reflexive statement constitutes another instance of theoretically informed writing. By commenting on the inflationary use of categories such as ‘Rorschachian’ and ‘Zeligesque’, Coovadia also draws attention to one of the problems that his own novel faces: *Green-Eyed Thieves* is so caught up in its characters’ manifold performances that one wonders whether it ever achieves more than being mildly and somewhat conventionally ‘postmodern’.

Coovadia’s point may be precisely that there is no meaning and no substance to his characters, in particular not to Ashraf, the happy impersonator. Ashraf’s rebirth as a “sort of Muslim Brando in repairman’s plumage” (GET 146) or his performance as an Onondaga Park policeman are entertaining. Nevertheless he remains strangely devoid of substance, an empty, cartoonish character. And for all the intellectual bravado, we can hardly tell whether Firoze has more to offer.

While Ashraf initially seems more adapted to life in the USA, the last part of the novel indicates that this may not necessarily be the case. Ashraf is the one who proposed the move to the USA in first place because he imagined the country to be uniquely suited to his talents: “It’s astonishingly easy to change identities in the United States. Americans don’t pin you down. Americans don’t need to put people in boxes” (GET 101). This is a surprising appraisal even at the moment it is uttered. After 9/11, it turns out to be completely mistaken.<sup>377</sup> Indeed, Firoze’s suitability for one very particular ‘box’ is precisely what wins him a short moment of fame. However, it is debatable whether the events of 11 September 2001 really cause fundamental change or whether they merely bring to the surface of US-American society what has always lingered underneath.

Firoze offers his own evaluation of the twins’ shifting fortunes:

You would have thought Ashraf was the type to prosper in a country of pure simulation and pseudo-occurrences but the truth is quite reverse. That sense of falseness which clings to an intellectual’s mind makes him beautifully adapted to American society. It seemed to me that my brother and I were ever so gradually changing places with one another. In this country I was ever more the junkyard cynic and he, Ashraf, was the idealist, purist, transcendentalist, and mystical dreamer [...]. (GET 165f.)

As always, we ought to be cautious in accepting Firoze’s judgments. Neither Firoze’s characterization of himself as a sharp intellectual thinker nor his description of Ashraf as a ‘mystical dreamer’ are altogether convincing. A brief look at Firoze’s short ‘career’ in the USA shows in how far his momentary success is really connected to his ‘intellectual mind’: Firoze enjoys this “briefest quarter of an hour in the history of fifteen-minuters” (GET 164) as the Republican Party’s token Muslim intellectual. His task is to provide “the right definition of a Muslim” because, he is told, “[s]ome kind of apology on behalf of the religion would be very much appreciated. It would have a calming effect” (GET 163). Morally flexible as ever, Firoze is more than willing to oblige and produces an article in which he claims that

[w]e Muslims are history’s brokenhearted, [...] but even if our nearest brothers and sisters have been altered beyond moral recognition by their pangs there are many of us who choose to abide by the laws of humanity. [...] We as Muslims feel our complicity, and ask only that we be the first to blame ourselves. Permit us only to

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<sup>377</sup> In this respect, Ashraf’s experiences equal those of Changez, the narrator of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (see chapter 1 of the section “The ‘Terrorist’”).

abuse and berate ourselves on your behalf. In this way your complicity will be undiluted with a drop of cultural defensiveness. (GET 170)

Firoze recognizes that for his family, as for Muslims in general, the days of ‘invisibility’ in the USA are over for “[a]fter that one September morning, the thousand unsleeping eyes of the United States would be fixed on us Muslims forever” (GET 170). Therefore he ventures to impersonate the type of Muslim that his US-American audience craves. This might have been another ingenious act of impersonation if not for Firoze’s greatest vices: self-importance and misplaced intellectual vanity. However, it is his brother’s history with Mohammad Atta that ends Firoze’s short career, but before that Firoze feels – at least for a fleeting moment – completely immersed in his very own ‘American Dream’:

[I]t’s obvious that the worldly forms of discourse are the real literature of the United States. We, in the United States, tend towards the practical, the how to, and whodunit. Novels, poems, philosophical flights of fancy may not sell like hot cakes, but polemics, confessions, memoirs, flagellations, sociological treatises, celebrity verse, any kind of self-help and connect-the-dots psychology, New Age textbooks, market analysis, and enquiries into business charisma do very well. And culturally speaking, I mean, it’s not like anyone else in the world has a better idea. For me the real revelation in the reception of my article was that I had found my true calling as a writer. This kind of writing, my kind of writing, helps people to believe what they already know. (GET 171f.)<sup>378</sup>

Firoze’s ‘we, in the United States’ indicates that he feels he has become a kind of insider by ‘making it’ in the US-American intellectual sphere. He believes that he has understood the potential of the US-American system and can now use it for his own profit, following his family’s conventional line of action. Once more, the Peers’ lack of fixed moral values proves an asset: Firoze describes the Republicans as “a local version of the Khmer Rouge” but adds that they practice “the kind of political belligerence a South African appreciates” (GET 172). However, it soon becomes clear that the system cannot be manipulated as easily as Firoze believes – or maybe Firoze is just not smart enough to do so. Ever the Tocquevillian observer, Firoze even realizes that the grounds may be more shifty than expected:

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<sup>378</sup> Firoze’s ‘American career’ echos what Edward Said has written about scholars who deliver “eloquent confirmations of what ‘we’ have always known [about Islamic culture and the Arabs]” (Edward W. Said, “Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World,” *Salmagundi* 70/71 (1986), 44–64, here 53).

The United States perpetually dissolves its own certainties and the hijackers had mysteriously intensified this accelerating process. A century's worth of progress, a thousand years of Dark Age regression, could happen in the space of a month under these new circumstances. Individual history was similarly accelerated. (GET 173)

This is certainly the case for Firoze's own career: his short moment in the intellectual limelight climaxes in a meeting with President Bush at the White House. In this encounter with "the beating heart of a heartless country" (GET 178), Firoze once more demonstrates his peculiar combination of analytical observation and comically misplaced romanticism:

The leader of the Free World, I can say, has hands which are notable for their stringy toughness. They are hands to hold the reins of a headstrong Arabian mare. Allow me to make a single observation of the man's remarkable resemblance to the muse of *MAD* magazine, Alfred E. Neumann. [...] The president of the United States is the only being who is surrounded by a simultaneously positive and negative cult of personality, stirring the hearts of a hundred million admirers and despisers on a daily basis. (GET 180)

This brief piece of characterization shows that Firoze's Tocquevillian impulse remains intact even if it frequently serves comical purposes. Of course, as so often the fool's remarks may bring to light a grain of truth.

The novel's ending sees Firoze settling in the USA as a prospective father of twins. This situation implies that Firoze may yet turn into something like a migrant proper. However, it is more likely that Firoze will continue to embrace his own "lunar religion", connecting "all the world's tribal peoples and their sacred places" (GET 100). In his response to the USA, Firoze remains as fanciful as ever, claiming that "America's kaleidoscopic thoughts, like mine, are perpetually on the future. Ah, this leopardine, leopardistical America which constantly changes its spots" (GET 206). So it seems that the USA and the Peer family are a perfect match after all, if only in their quality of being 'leopardine' and every-changing, of resisting all attempts at final categorization.

Coovadia's depiction of the USA is determined and partly obscured by the many small acts of impersonation and deceit of its protagonists and, most of all, by its unreliable narrator. It is debatable whether this constant play with fragmentation and delusion constitutes an act of narrative virtualization in Paul Giles' sense, but *Green-Eyed Thieves* makes a clear case for the subjectivity of perception and the

primariness of individual experience. The USA of *Green-Eyed Thieves* is superseded by the story of Firoze's family. In extension of this, it is a novel about 'lunar' (if not lunatic) people moving in a modern globalized world. In this global system, power belongs to those who understand the intricate rules and to those who know how to bend them, rather than to any monolithic force of financial, military or cultural domination. The USA is merely one of many stages on which the daily tragicomic dramas of crime and love are played out, if a particularly prominent one. The story of our trickster narrator implies that the USA may be susceptible to attack, both small and big, precisely because of its naive but pervasive "sense of centrality" (GET 178).

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## 2.4 Social Ties

In the three chapters of this section, I have examined three novels whose encounter with US-American characters and lifeworlds emphasizes the individual experience of social interaction. Each of the novels draws different conclusions about the interplay between national categories, social encounter and individual processes of identity construction.

Even though *On Beauty* is a novel built on national oppositions, race and class determine the characters' actions to a larger extent than nationality. At the same time, national and racial categories often work as cover for personal problems and motivations. Thus *On Beauty* first and foremost examines the individual choices and dilemmas of its characters, in particular as they concern questions of racial, social or national membership and of emotional belonging. *His Illegal Self* demonstrates how stereotypical conceptions of nationality can condition the individual's interaction with others, regardless of how tenuous their own claim to national or cultural insiderdom may be. In observing the emergence of a sense of belonging, Carey turns to the smallest interpersonal unit. It is the small matters of daily existence rather than nationality that shape his characters' perception of their position in the world. In *Green-Eyed Thieves*, notions of national difference are employed as a repertoire of stereotypes that serves the criminal purposes of the narrator and his family. Coovadia's novel tells the story of a family that has developed its own mode of transnational existence while nevertheless profiting from the pervasiveness of national conceptions. It thus emphasizes both the relativity of national categories and the characteristic self-interest of its protagonists.

Both in *On Beauty* and in *His Illegal Self*, the struggle for belonging is articulated through the fate of US-American inoutsiders, protagonists who are caught up between national membership and individual experiences of alienation. In both novels, narrative perspective plays an important role in portraying this dilemma. *On Beauty* depicts characters who claim or construct identities in response to common conceptions of race and nationality. The novel takes a pessimistic view of the potential for social belonging, and hence its characters remain inoutsiders at the family level as well as in terms of academic affiliation, race and nationality. *His*

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*Illegal Self* portrays the struggle of characters who are lost between an outside characterization as US-Americans and a situation in which they have been deprived of the political and legal protection US-American citizenship is thought to imply. As such, *His Illegal Self* examines a more existential state of crisis than *On Beauty*. In contrast to this, *Green-Eyed Thieves* dissects a special kind of cosmopolitanism. While intellectual cosmopolitanism is an object of scrutiny in *On Beauty*, *Green-Eyed Thieves* demonstrates the subversive and – arguably – creative potential of criminal cosmopolitanism. The narrator’s perspective plays an important role in establishing a specific perspective on US-American society and life, namely one that is characterized by a (misguided?) sense of pseudo-analytic superiority.

In all three novels, encounters with US-Americans and the USA concern the social ties between characters. Even where political issues are implied, the novels remain most interested in the personal quest of their protagonists. National identity appears as one facet of personal identity, often used strategically in the pursuit of individual goals. *On Beauty* even offers direct criticism of the theoretical and abstract approach to questions of identity construction. Meaningful processes of identity construction, the novel implies, take place at the individual level and are conditioned by idiosyncratic needs and preoccupations. This is true even if we are all caught up in enactments of a given repertoire.

In all three novels, stereotypical notions play a major role for specific encounters with US-American lifeworlds. *On Beauty* demonstrates how stereotypes may incarcerate and determine individual characters in their quest for a coherent self-definition. I have shown that the novel may serve as an illustration of how Judith Butler’s notion of performative identity construction can be applied to national and racial categories. The protagonists of *His Illegal Self* are confronted with stereotypical mirror-images of their US-American selves and are simultaneously forced to rethink their own bias in perceiving the outside world. *Green-Eyed Thieves* offers a playful and ironical approach to cultural and national stereotyping. However, Coovadia’s play of postmodern association appears rather tame, despite the Tocquevillian ambitions of his narrator. *Green-Eyed Thieves* depicts strategies of impersonation that are performative in Bhabha’s sense, but the subversive potential



of this particular trickster story remains limited. If anything, *On Beauty* most forcefully subverts and counteracts stereotypical conceptions of life in the USA. Zadie Smith achieves this with a subtle depiction of private and social negotiations and by paying minute attention to the unwritten rules of class and race that limit people's movements. On the other hand, *His Illegal Self* proves most insightful in terms of emotional enquiry. It sensitively portrays a profound state of disorientation, venturing close to the individual and sympathetically observing the tenuous inside perspectives of its US-American protagonists. In paying attention to the individual experience of intercultural encounter, it also provides larger insights into modern-day interaction between US-Americans (in their social capacity) and the world 'out there'.

**3. The Artist:  
Reflections of the Narcissistic Self**

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### **3.1 The Rage of the Self-Absorbed Observer: Salman Rushdie, *Fury* (2001)**

Salman Rushdie has long established himself as a quintessentially cosmopolitan writer, a traveler who is connected to multiple locations and whose main intellectual and creative preoccupation is the ‘step across the line’.<sup>379</sup> While imaginative and original, Rushdie’s early novels betrayed an interest in traditional migrant topics and were often deeply engaged with the political implications of the migrant condition. Saladin Chamcha’s ordeal in *The Satanic Verses* serves as a poignant example. In recent years, Rushdie appears to have become more interested in those individuals who move across national boundaries with ease, privileged by their status – as celebrities or intellectuals, for instance – and never settling anywhere for real.<sup>380</sup> Among his latest novels, *Fury* has been received most critically, much of the criticism being due to the extensive parallels between Rushdie’s own life and the struggles of his protagonist Malik Solanka.<sup>381</sup> Whatever its literary merits, *Fury* proves interesting in the context of this study, for what it has to say about the USA and – even more – in regard to its protagonist’s perspective on US-American culture and life. *Fury* demonstrates the professed outsider’s judgments on the USA may (also) speak eloquently of his or her own psychological condition.

Rushdie has been participating in public intellectual debates taking place across scholarly disciplines for a long time. *Fury* demonstrates this: for instance, it addresses the virtualization of today’s world, globalization and the commercialization of the arts, arguably displaying the exhaustion of what I have

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<sup>379</sup> Rushdie’s volume of collected nonfiction published in 2002 is titled *Step Across This Line*.

<sup>380</sup> See also Anshuman A. Mondal, “The Ground Beneath Her Feet and *Fury*: The Reinvention of Location,” Abdulrazak Gurnah (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, 169–183, here 181.

<sup>381</sup> James Wood’s review constitutes a particularly unsympathetic response (“Escape to New York: Is Salman Rushdie’s New Novel No More than Playful Self-Indulgence, or Is It the Mark of a Writer in Terminal Decline?” Rev. of Salman Rushdie, *Fury*, *New Statesman*, 10 September 2001, <http://www.newstatesman.com/200109100042> (1 July 2011)). Madelena Gonzalez has been similarly critical of the novel, citing it as one example of the ‘obscenification of everyday life’ in contemporary novels (“The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38.1 (2008), 111–133, in particular 115, 125 and 130). Dirk Wiemann has remarked that any reader of Rushdie “will easily recognize here the well-known textual practice of hodgepodge assemblage; whether this still marks the passageway of newness into the world, however, remains an open question” (“Back to Back Stories: Salman Rushdie, Transnationalism, and *Fury*,” Bernd-Peter Lange; Mala Pandurang (eds.), *Mediating Indian Writing in English: German Responses*, Jaipur: Rawat, 2005, 141–165, here 146).

previously called ‘conceptually informed writing’. It is thus unsurprising that critical responses to the novel have concentrated on the conceptual views expressed through the novel and have contrasted them with the marked change in Rushdie’s own political attitude.<sup>382</sup> Yet especially in the case of a literary celebrity like Salman Rushdie, it may lead to more interesting results to pay less attention to the writer and to concentrate on his literary work instead.

In comparing Rushdie’s earlier work with his so-called ‘American novels’, *The Ground Beneath her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001) and *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), one observes a shift in location and interest. In the introduction to the second part of this study, I cited Rushdie as one example of a writer who has been ‘claimed’ as ‘American’, for instance by Rüdiger Kunow in his article “Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream.” Kunow stresses the flexibility and the provisional quality of Rushdie’s geographical and personal positioning. Nevertheless, he claims that Rushdie has become “something like the voice from America”.<sup>383</sup> Of course, Kunow’s case does not rest on simplistic national categorization. He argues that Rushdie has come to conflate “the cosmopolitan with the (U. S.-)American”<sup>384</sup> and thus appears to promote an outdated type of “American cosmopolitanism”.<sup>385</sup> Regardless of general questions of national categorization, all three ‘American’ novels are in fact less concerned with the USA as such than with the USA as a mirror of the life in today’s globalized world. In this globalized world, the USA occupies a central position, both in terms of its political power and as a reference point in the global imaginary.<sup>386</sup>

*Fury* depicts New York City as the frantic heart of a global network of commerce and consumption. If *Fury* is a novel concerned with the condition of today’s globalized world, it is first and foremost a novel about globalization as commercialization. However, in contrast to theoretical concepts like Barber’s

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<sup>382</sup> See, for instance, Mondal, “The Reinvention of Location,” in particular 173. See also Stephen Morton, *Salman Rushdie*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008, 117.

<sup>383</sup> Kunow, “Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream” 380.

<sup>384</sup> Kunow, “Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream” 383.

<sup>385</sup> Kunow, “Architect of the Cosmopolitan Dream” 382. For a debate of conceptions of cosmopolitanism, see the final chapter of this study.

<sup>386</sup> ‘Imaginary’ is here used in the sense of Édouard Glissant ((1987), *Poetics of Relation*, Transl. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2009 [French original *Poétique de la relation*, Gallimard, 1990]. 1).

‘McWorld’,<sup>387</sup> *Fury* portrays the rule of commerce as conditioned by the marketing of difference. One of Malik Solanka’s early observations on New York City demonstrates how much the city’s consumer culture depends on the exclusive and the customized:

New restaurants opened every hour. Stores, dealerships, galleries struggled to satisfy the skyrocketing demand for ever more recherché produce: limited-edition olive oils, three-hundred dollar corkscrews, customized Humvees, the latest anti-virus software, escort services featuring contortionists and twins, video installations, outsider art, featherlight shawls made from the chin-fluff of extinct mountain goats.<sup>388</sup>

For those who can afford it, difference is the fashion, ostensible heterogeneity a major selling point. The conception of globalization that *Fury* depicts thus does not rely on visions of blunt homogenization but on an – arguably equally grim – rule of hybridity. As Dirk Wiemann has pointed out, “[o]ther than former regimes, the postmodern does not occlude or exclude differences but rather integrates them without entirely erasing them.”<sup>389</sup> Wiemann argues that

[i]t is only in *Fury* that Rushdie comes fully up to the possibility that hybridity might be a strategy of [...] imperial power [...] and hence the hallmark not of an interstitial and transgressive, but an accommodationist and scripted subjectivity.<sup>390</sup>

*Fury* thus subverts the common conception of globalization as either an evil form of homogenization or as a source of ‘happy hybridity’, an opposition that has been articulated, for instance, in George Ritzer’s model of the ‘grobalisation of nothing’ vs. the ‘glocalisation of something’.<sup>391</sup> In Rushdie’s novel, difference has been incorporated into the global marketing industry. As a consequence, the struggle to assert one’s individuality has turned into an increasingly anxious chase for meaningful labels and markers. It thus seems only appropriate that the Filbistani

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<sup>387</sup> See my chapter on “The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)” (part I, chapter 1).

<sup>388</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Fury*, NYC: Random House, 2001, 3. In the following, further references to *Fury* (F) will be inserted into the main text.

<sup>389</sup> Wiemann, “Back to Back Stories” 155. I support this observation despite my reservations about the idea that today’s world experiences a ‘regime of the postmodern’. Without wanting to enter the epic debate around what ‘the postmodern’ is supposed to signify, I argue that often it stands for little more than a type of funky modern-day randomness. In terms of its lack of conceptual precision, the ‘postmodern’ is thus a sibling of the ‘performative’.

<sup>390</sup> Wiemann, “Back to Back Stories” 156.

<sup>391</sup> I have evaluated Ritzer’s model in my chapter on the “USA in the context of globalization debate(s)” (part I, chapter I).

revolutionaries in the novel choose disguises borrowed from popular culture both as signs of their resistance and to evoke a sense of community.<sup>392</sup>

The novel does not merely offer a general commentary on consumer culture. It more specifically addresses the incorporation of ‘highbrow’ culture into global mass culture, the commercialization of the arts and the trivialization of intellectual thought. The novel depicts the artist’s predicament in a world in which art is routinely reduced to a means of assuaging the insatiable appetite of global consumer society. Malik Solanka, the novel’s protagonist and focalizer, experiences the popularization of his creation as an existential crisis which triggers a process of personal disintegration. In paralleling Rushdie’s own situation, the novel suggests that a public intellectual and celebrity writer may suffer from a similar fate. It is in this respect that Sarah Brouillette is right when she argues that *Fury* is a book “not about Rushdie’s life, but about ‘Rushdie’ as brand name, as paratext, and as icon.”<sup>393</sup>

In a similar vein, Solanka’s career ends up turning him into a marketable item rather than an independent agent. Inspired by the dollhouses at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Solanka initially starts creating his own dollhouses and dolls as a hobby. While his dollhouses are “the products of an idiosyncratic personal vision [,] [...] fanciful at first, even fabulist” (F 16), he models his dolls on history’s great thinkers. The dolls soon become the main attraction of a TV show commissioned by the BBC which provides a popular introduction to the history of philosophy. The BBC show turns out to be “a full-blooded prime-time hit” (F 15), yet success subverts Solanka’s

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<sup>392</sup> Lilliput-Blefuscu is a fictional South Pacific state modeled on the Fiji islands. The name establishes a connection with the first part of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). In Swift’s work, the Lilliputs and the Blefuscu are enemies. By integrating ‘Lilliput’ and ‘Blefuscu’ into a single political unit, Rushdie signals that the island state is characterized by ethnic heterogeneity and political conflict. ‘Filbistani’ is derived from ‘Free Indian Lilliput-Blefuscu’ (FILB) and designates the resistance movement of the diasporic Indo-Lilliputian population. For an evaluation of the parallels between Lilliput-Blefuscu and Fiji as well as of the influence of Rushdie’s involvement in the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, see Sarah Brouillette, “Authorship as Crisis in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40.1 (2005), 137–156, in particular 144–150. The masks used by the Filbistani movement are merchandise of protagonist Malik Solanka’s creation, the Puppet Kings.

<sup>393</sup> Brouillette, “Authorship as Crisis” 151. See also Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Market Place*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007. See furthermore Graham Huggan on Rushdie’s ‘staged marginality’ in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London: Routledge, 2002, especially 83–104; on the commercial industry behind contemporary literary prizes and on artistic self-commodification, see John English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2005.

original conception of the show as a witty introduction to the history of ideas. As the show prospers in mass entertainment, Solanka loses influence over his creation, most notably the show's protagonist, time-traveling interrogator 'Little Brain': "This creature of his own imagining, born of his best self and purest endeavor, was turning before his eyes into the kind of monster of tawdry celebrity he most profoundly abhorred" (F 98).

Solanka's sense of crisis is intensified by his own complicity in selling out his art:

He was compromised by greed, and the compromise sealed his lips. Contractually bound not to attack the goose that laid the golden eggs, he had to bottle up his thoughts and, in keeping with his own counsel, filled up with the bitter bile of his many discontents. (F 100)

Even though he has lost control over his creation, he cannot detach himself from the industry that it has become a part of.<sup>394</sup> Dominated by the 'product' he invented, he finds himself submerged in a growing fury that mounts into murderous rage towards his wife and son. Without as much as an explanation to his family, Solanka leaves his resident England and moves to New York City to battle his fury in isolation.

Set in 2000,<sup>395</sup> *Fury* depicts New York City as the centre of a world that, like Solanka, is caught up in inexplicable rage, a powder keg on the brink of explosion. The association between Solanka's psychological state and the 'furies' haunting the city lends the novel a quasi-prophetic edge, considering that it was published just before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001:<sup>396</sup> the New York City of *Fury*, filtered through the perception of Solanka, seems more than ready to go up in flames. In the context of the city's – and the country's – obsession with the shallow, the trivial, with celebrity and random cultural snippets, the explosion waiting to happen almost appears like redemptive justice. In another instance of conceptually informed

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<sup>394</sup> See also Brouillette, "Authorship as Crisis" 140.

<sup>395</sup> At the background of the novel's plot, Rushdie alludes to, for instance, the presidential campaign of 2000, the box office success of Ridley Scott's "Gladiator" (which started in cinemas on 1 May 2000), the NYPD union's threat to boycott the New York "Boss" concert over a Diallo protest song (June 2000) and the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games.

<sup>396</sup> See also Ines Detmers, "Global Minds and Local Mentalities: 'Topographies of Terror' in Salman Rushdie's *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown*," Laurenz Volkmann et al. (eds.), *Local Natures, Global Responsibilities: Ecocritical Perspectives on the New English Literatures*, Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2010, 351–364, here 356.

writing, Rushdie has Solanka consider the modern rule of the industries of culture and celebrity whose rise to power started in the 1970s:

This was the period in which the two great industries of the future were being born. The industry of culture would in the coming decades replace that of ideology, becoming 'primary' in the way that economics used to be, and spawn a whole new nomenclatura of cultural commissars, a new breed of apparatchiks engaged in great ministries of definition, exclusion, revision, and persecution, and a dialectic based on the new dualism of defense and offense. And if culture was the world's new secularism, then its new religion was fame, and the industry – or, better, the church – of celebrity would give meaningful work to a new ecclesia, a proselytizing mission designed to conquer this new frontier. (F 24)

The term 'apparatchiks' here refers to critics, scholars, publishers, TV hosts, editors – to the gatekeepers of the culture industry whose acts of exclusion, selection and definition are all too often influenced by the pursuit of money, status or tenure. Of course, this is Solanka's perception, born out of creative frustration and personal malcontent. Rushdie's novel offers a harsh appraisal of the professional dynamics that rule the cultural landscape. Culture, the focalizer's viewpoint suggests, is a commercial industry based on the marketing of products, objects and ideas. Fame, on the other hand, is its spiritual counterpart, providing the public with quasi-religious icons that advertise the 'cultural product'. Solanka's creations – as much as Rushdie's novels – have become part of an overwhelming commercial machinery. While both Solanka and Rushdie have profited from the workings of this machinery, they are haunted by the fear of losing their artistic integrity.

Solanka observes the world around him with a sense of impending doom, mourning what he perceives to be a loss of essence. In a Baudrillardian twist, Solanka asserts that

[b]ack in the seventies when Sara [his first wife] gave up the serious life for the frivolous, working in ad-land had been slightly shameful. [...] Now everyone – eminent writers, great painters, architects, politicians – wanted to be in on the act. Reformed alcoholics plugged booze. Everybody, as well as everything, was for sale. Advertisements had become colossi, clambering like Kong up the walls of buildings. What was more, they were loved. (F 33f.)

Solanka is troubled not merely by the artists' and the intellectuals' participation in the games of the culture industry but even more by the emotional resonance of the simulacra of modern-day advertising. Solanka here claims the perspective of the



cosmopolitan observer, of a detached commentator who evaluates the state of the US-American psyche:

The commercials soothed America's pain, its head pain, its gas pain, its heartache, its loneliness, the pain of babyhood and old age, of being a parent and of being a child, the pain of manhood and women's pain, the pain of success and that of failure, the good pain of the athlete and the bad pain of the guilty, the anguish of loneliness and of ignorance, the needle-sharp torment of the cities and the dull, mad ache of the empty plains, the pain of wanting without knowing what was wanted, the agony of the howling void within each watching, semiconscious self. (F 34)

Despite the Tocquevillian impulse that this critical appraisal betrays, the excessive reference to varieties of pain suggests that Solanka is also speaking about his own pain and loneliness. His new surroundings serve as a projection screen for his suffering. Far from evoking images of the USA as dominant and all-powerful, this passage conjures up the impression of a tormented and burdened creature whose very lack of essence causes a hunger for the soothing simulations of advertising. In a similar fashion, Solanka criticizes the rule of tawdriness and celebrity but simultaneously appears strangely immersed in the world of celebrity gossip and popular triviality.<sup>397</sup>

Solanka observes a pain-stricken country hardly in charge of its own destiny, let alone the fate of the world. Indeed, *Fury* appears to suggest that the global networks of information, commerce and politics can neither be governed from one single location nor by one single country. The globalized world is a system in which power is exerted from multiple locations and non-locations, such as the virtual space of the internet. At the same time, political struggle continues to be connected to specific political contexts and local conditions. The powerlessness and lack of autonomy experienced by the artist constitute merely an extreme version of the individual's predicament in such a globalized world. More and more, this world emerges as an unmanageable network in which the enemy can rarely be easily identified and in which fears and paranoia shape political realities.

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<sup>397</sup> See also Wood, "Escape to New York."

Rushdie has been most fervently criticized for his commentary on the relations between the USA and the world in the aftermath of 9/11. In a newspaper column that was published in February 2002, he argues that anti-Americanism

has become too useful a smoke screen for Muslim nations' many defects – their corruption, their incompetence, their oppression of their own citizens, their economic, scientific and cultural stagnation. America-hating has become a badge of identity, making possible a chest-beating, flag-burning rhetoric of word and deed that makes men feel good. It contains a strong streak of hypocrisy, hating most what it desires most, and elements of self-loathing [...]. What America is accused of – closed-mindedness, stereotyping, ignorance – is also what its accusers would see if they looked into a mirror.<sup>398</sup>

Rushdie neither denies the USA's problematic economic, political and military involvement in other parts of the world nor its patchy record in resolving international conflict. Nevertheless, the views expressed in his column echo the common dismissal of anti-Americanism as a hostile bias or as a cover for other countries' deficiencies. This position resonates with a sentiment that gained currency in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, namely the idea that criticism of US-American policies is *per se* anti-American. However, it is an unpopular view to uphold for a traditionally left-leaning intellectual, even more so as Rushdie uses the problematic generalization of 'Muslim nations'.<sup>399</sup>

Rushdie's position in the column cited above departs significantly from Malik Solanka's evaluation of relations between the USA and the world. Of course, *Fury* reflects on the status quo before 9/11 while Rushdie's column responds to the developments in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. What is more, Solanka's perspective is notoriously unreliable, and this makes it sensible to consider whether *Fury* promotes an appraisal that departs from the perception of its focalizer. In order

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<sup>398</sup> Salman Rushdie, "February 2002: Anti-Americanism," *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992–2002*, NYC: Random House, 2002, 341–346, here 342f. Rushdie's statement corresponds to a large extent with Paul Hollander's evaluation of anti-Americanism. See my discussion of Hollander's position in "Inquiries into Anti-Americanism" (part I, chapter 2).

<sup>399</sup> For a more comprehensive evaluation of the shift in Rushdie's political views, see Ana Cristina Mendes, "'Artworks, Unlike Terrorists, Change Nothing': Salman Rushdie and September 11," Cara Cilano (ed.), *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*, Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2009, 93–114, especially 99–103 as well as Robert Spencer, "Salman Rushdie and the 'War on Terror'," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.3–4 (2010), 251–265, especially 260–262. Rushdie's generalizing use of 'Muslim nations' appears all the more provocative as his novel *The Satanic Verses* is still notorious for its disrespectful approach to the prophet Mohammed.

to uncover whether the novel offers such an alternative perspective, it helps to examine Solanka's position and the way it is framed in the novel.

At first sight, Malik Solanka appears to embody the attitude that Rushdie describes in the passage quoted above: His response to the USA is deeply ambivalent, torn between bitter resentment and helpless fascination. Struck by the decadence of life in the USA, Solanka observes the world's hunger for the castoffs of US-American wealth:

In all of India, China, Africa, and much of the southern American continent, those who had the leisure and wallet for fashion – or more simply, in the poorer latitudes, for the mere acquisition of things – would have killed for the street merchandise of Manhattan, as also for the cast-off clothing and soft furnishing to be found in the opulent thrift stores, the reject china and designer-label bargains to be found in downtown discount emporia. America insulted the rest of the planet, thought Malik Solanka in his old-fashioned way, by treating such bounty with the shoulder-shrugging casualness of the inequitably wealthy. But New York in this time of plenty had become the object and goal of the world's concupiscence and lust, and the 'insult' only made the rest of the planet more desirous than ever. (F 6)

While Solanka blames the USA for its abuse of power and privilege, his own lifestyle is undeniably privileged. He maintains no connections to his childhood home in India, nor does he seem to care much about other parts of the non-Western world. Even during his trip to Lilliput-Blefuscu, he is largely unconcerned with the country's political and social realities and mainly interested in his personal amorous pursuits. Indeed, Solanka is a Western-educated snob, a selfish individual whose alignment with the causes of the poorer parts of the world is strategic at best.

His negative appraisal of US-American lifestyle and politics make New York City a surprising destination for his flight into exile.<sup>400</sup> Yet despite his old-world snobbery, Solanka shares the world's infatuation with the USA:

Yes, it had seduced him, America; yes, its brilliance aroused him, and its vast potency too, and he was compromised by this seduction. What he opposed in it he must also attack in himself. It made him want what it promised and eternally withheld. Everyone was American now, or at least Americanized [...]. America was the world's playing field, its rule book, umpire, and ball. Even anti-Americanism was Americanism in disguise, conceding, as it did, that America was the only game in town and the matter of America the only business at hand. (F 87f.)

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<sup>400</sup> As his friend Rhinehart remarks, "don't think I wasn't tickled when you decided to relocate yo' ass in the bosom of the Great Satan hisself" (F 68).

Claiming that both Americanism and anti-Americanism are symptoms of an obsession with US-America's importance to the world, Solanka effectively dissolves the ambivalence of his own position. If the USA is indeed 'the world's playing field', the difference between a positive and a negative evaluation of this fact appears a minor disagreement. In a world in which "American success [has] become the only real validation of one's worth" (F 224), local achievements and struggles, such as the uprising in Lilliput-Blefuscu, are all but meaningless, the world outside the USA existing as a mere blank. At the same time, Solanka doubts the US-American potential for leadership, observing how hopelessly adrift the country's rich are, that "class that ran America, which in turn ran the world" (F 74).

Solanka's anti-Americanism is deeply rooted in the traditional European perception of the USA as a country without historical depth, a nation that for all its wealth and power will "end in obesity and trivia" (F 87).<sup>401</sup> It is unsurprising that Solanka asks himself whether "nobody in all this bustling endeavour and material plenitude [is] engaged, any longer, on the deep quarry-work of the mind and heart" (F 87). James Wood encounters this attitude with characteristic sharpness:

This idea of America, as a place of amnesia and 'unknowing', represents a perfect coincidence of old-fashioned European disdain and new-fashioned postmodern naivety: in the older vision, America is disapprovingly seen as the country with no real history; in the newer version, America is approvingly seen as the country of no real history, as one enormous Disneyland, handing out Mickey Mouse ears to all its grinning immigrants. Rushdie seems not to realize that actual Chips and Spikes live in America, that amazingly enough they have histories, even American histories, and do not stride through clouds of 'unknowing'.<sup>402</sup>

Of course, it is not entirely fair to assume that *Fury*, and by extension Rushdie, support Solanka's snobbish attitude. As a focalizer, Solanka is sufficiently unreliable and unlikable for the reader to gain some distance from his views. Nevertheless, the novel remains inconclusive in terms of the implied author's overall position, sticking to the restricted perception of its flawed protagonist. This is what may have led Wood to complain that "it is one thing to write an allegory or apologia about how

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<sup>401</sup> On this tradition of anti-Americanism, see part I, chapter 2.

<sup>402</sup> Wood, "Escape to New York."

America has seduced and even, on occasion, compromised one's soul; but it is quite another to publish a novel that so emphatically re-enacts that compromise."<sup>403</sup>

Randy Boyagoda argues that in *Fury*

Rushdie's aim [...] surpasses a simple critique of American global might; in fact, he seeks to imagine America as embodying a set of practices. This is an extraterritorial gesture that playfully dismisses organic connections between identity, place, and history. Provocatively, Rushdie suggests that the consequent uprooting is both the product of contemporary globalization – media and migration together dismantling intact, homogeneous local places – and a longstanding feature of American life itself.<sup>404</sup>

A closer look at some of the characters in the novel will unveil whether *Fury* really proposes a conception of 'America' as a 'set of practices'. The novel's depiction of the USA is not performative in Genette's sense of establishing a collective mental state by its very enunciation.<sup>405</sup> However, *Fury* does capture a collective mental state before this state has articulated itself in the world: its quasi-prophetic quality resides precisely in its describing the fury, disintegration and chaos that became clearly visible during the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. *Fury* also depicts a society marked by randomness, by gossipy detail and – as stated above – by a lack of cultural and historical depth. In this combination of anxiety and shallowness, *Fury* recites the standard repertoire of 'postmodern' portrayals of US-American cityscapes.

Observed from Solanka's point of view, the city's young women – rich, gifted and beautiful – appear to have radically internalized the principles of Judith Butler's model of performative identity formation. Despite their ostensible success and independence, their appearances, behavior and personalities are so rigorously modeled on prescribed scripts that Solanka comes to associate them with his own doll-creatures. There is something disturbing, he suggests, about the world's infatuation with such doll-like female perfection, in its worship of the inanimate a global re-enactment of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*. These doll-women are the

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<sup>403</sup> Wood, "Escape to New York."

<sup>404</sup> Randy Boyagoda, *Race, Immigration, and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner* (Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory), NYC/London: Routledge, 2008, 23.

<sup>405</sup> See my chapter on "performative depictions" (part I, chapter 4).

product of carefully internalized social rules, external conditioning *and* of their own active choice of regulated perfection over ‘messy humanity’:

[N]ow living women wanted to be doll-like, to cross the frontier and look like toys. Now the doll was the original, the woman the representation. These living dolls, these stringless marionettes, were not just ‘dolled up’ on the outside. Behind their high-style exteriors, beneath that perfectly lucent skin, they were so stuffed full of behavioral chips, so thoroughly programmed for action, so perfectly groomed and wardrobed, that there was no room left in them for messy humanity. (F 74)

Soon after his arrival in New York, Solanka meets Mila Milo, a young woman of Serbian origin who has modeled her personal style on Malik Solanka’s popular creation ‘Little Brain’. In her relationship with Solanka she initiates role-playing in which she assumes the part of Little Brain. Raised by her father, an eminent writer in his own country, Mila grew up among the great names of contemporary literature. In the USA, Mila acts as a cosmopolitan outside observer. Unbothered by national borders, she reigns as queen supreme of a group of computer nerds whose true home is the transnational network of cyberspace. Solanka observes:

She is an expert in the ways of her age, this age of simulacra and counterfeits, in which you can find any pleasure known to woman or man rendered synthetic, made safe from disease or guilt – a lo-cal, lo-fi, brilliantly false version of the awkward world of real blood and guts. Phony experience that feels so good that you actually prefer it to the real thing. (F 232)

Mila shares the doll-women’s preference for the artificial, yet her refuge to electronic worlds indicates proficiency, even a sense of agency. During her role-plays with Solanka as much as in her cyberspace community, Mila constructs an escapist sphere for herself. In the real world, Mila’s poise and show of confidence prove more superficial than immediately apparent, as is demonstrated by her ultimate withdrawal into a mediocre US-American existence with a man intellectually her inferior. Throughout the novel, Mila is associated with Little Brain but her characterization as an acute cultural commentator is not very plausible. She also remains sketchy as a fictional character which makes it hard to perceive her as *either* a cultural insider *or* an outsider to the US-American sphere she moves in. She probably is one of the characters James Wood had in mind when he criticized the ‘cartoonishness’ of

Rushdie's novel, arguing that "the Manhattan of *Fury* is a city of half-truths precisely because Solanka/Rushdie peoples it with cartoons."<sup>406</sup>

Cartoonish or not, Rushdie's novel is peopled with inoutsiders, Solanka's friend Rhinehart being one of them. Rhinehart is an African-American who desperately tries to position himself within a society that radically polices his identity choices. A restless character, Rhinehart depends on available social scripts and role models. It is thus only appropriate that his name refers back to Bliss Proteus Rhinehart, the iconic con artist from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Rushdie's Rhinehart is "a hunter, fisherman, weekend driver of very fast cars, marathon runner, gym rat, tennis player, and, lately, thanks to the rise of Tiger Woods, an obsessive golfer" (F 54). During his time as a war journalist, Rhinehart grew disillusioned with humanity and lost his political edge, a development that also affected his identity politics: "He stopped hyphenating himself and became, simply, an American" (F 57). Now specializing in celebrity gossip, Rhinehart has become blind to his own project of self-refashioning. He strives to escape from restrictive categorizations and to immerse himself into the 'mainstream' of upper-class US-American society. Despite claiming that to him "being black's just not the issue anymore", he learns "the hard way, that it still was" (F 151). Rhinehart ultimately dies in his pursuit of membership in the rich white boys' club. The outcome of his project of performative identity formation suggests an immensely pessimistic view of any potential for free choice, in particular for those who are not at the top of the power hierarchy.

Malik Solanka's attitude constitutes a countermodel to such frantic attempts at self-fashioning. He does not strive for membership of any kind. To the contrary, New York City is the destination of his choice precisely because Solanka deems it the perfect place for self-erasure. His mission is radically anti-performative, an attempt to expunge his past and his personality. This project of self-deletion also includes the expurgation of ethnic association, most notably any memory of Solanka's Indian childhood. Nevertheless, Mita Banerjee arguably overstates her case in reading *Fury*

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<sup>406</sup> Wood, "Escape to New York." In the same review, James states even more scathingly that "this cartoonishness, which has been Rushdie's weakness throughout his career, and which has been lucky enough, over the years, to be flattered by the term 'magical realism', proves only that Rushdie is incapable of writing realistically."

mainly as the postcolonial protagonist's pursuit of 'whiteness'.<sup>407</sup> Solanka moves to the USA to "separate his life from life" (F 47). He yearns to "be devoured" and, as he claims, "to receive the benison of being Ellis Islanded, of starting over. [...] No longer a historian but a man without histories" (F 51). However, it is debatable whether Solanka initially really wants to 'start over'. Rather than trying to build a new life for himself, he has come to New York to be "crowded out by other people's stories, [to walk] like a phantom through a city that was in the middle of a story which didn't need him as a character" (F 89). He aims for self-erasure rather than reinvention, and his active immersion into US-American life is very limited. Indeed, his struggles in his new surroundings are remarkably self-absorbed.

In the second half of the novel, the romantic relationship with beautiful Neela triggers a change in Solanka's attitude. Dirk Wiemann argues that we witness

a reversal of the 'classical' Rushdiean value system: The utopian (and nostalgic) point of reference of *Fury* is not the interstitial transcultural domain of the universalised migrant who heroically transcends the constraints of fixed cultural boundaries, but precisely the overcoming of such fluid identity positions in an equally heroic act of reclaiming biographical continuity, including the embracing of one's own origins even if those prove traumatic.<sup>408</sup>

Wiemann further elaborates that

[u]nder a cultural regime that interpellates subjects as 'men without histories' (F 51), transgression occurs not in the shape of hybridity but in the act of reclaiming an intact, continuous and unabridged 'back story', however abject. In the postmodern, transgression therefore lies in a rejection of imposed nomadism, in an embrace of fixities, and a flight from freedom.<sup>409</sup>

The reading of the novel that Wiemann suggests here is intellectually satisfying, albeit it arguably renders the novel more compelling and conclusive than it is. *Fury* might have been a better novel for endorsing such a programme of reconstruction. However, it is stability that Solanka flees from initially, and the novel does little to propose a thorough reformation. It is true that Neela aims to reconcile Solanka to his ethnic origin, his childhood home and his 'back story'. In her company, he faces his childhood trauma. However, on the last pages of the novel we find nothing that

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<sup>407</sup> See Mita Banerjee, "Postethnicity and Postcommunism in Hanif Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift* and Salman Rushdie's *Fury*," Joel Kuortti; Jopi Nyman (eds.), *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition* (Textet 51), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2007, 309–324, in particular 312f.

<sup>408</sup> Wiemann, "Back to Back Stories" 141f.

<sup>409</sup> Wiemann, "Back to Back Stories" 144.



supports a reading as optimistic as Wiemann's. After losing Neela, Solanka once more withdraws from life. Even if he aims to reconnect with his son, he hardly 'reclaims an intact, continuous and unabridged back story', nor does he 'embrace fixities'.

As his detachment from his surroundings in the USA indicates, Solanka is not in search of a new home. He is a privileged expatriate, free to move as he pleases, rather than an exile subjected to the traditional pressures and regulations of migration. In his self-imposed banishment, he is reluctant to engage with the USA and his new home New York, this "city of half-truths and echoes that somehow dominates the earth" (F 44). Nevertheless, he acts as a cosmopolitan observer, arrogantly appraising the country's problems and shortcomings. From his allegedly superior viewpoint, Solanka analyses the US-American psyche:

Americans were always labeling things with the American logo: American Dream, American Buffalo, American Graffiti, American Psycho, American Tune. But everyone else had such things too, and in the rest of the world the addition of a nationalist prefix didn't seem to add much meaning. English Psycho, Indian Graffiti, Australian Buffalo, Egyptian Dream, Chilean Tune. America's need to make things American, to own them, thought Solanka, was the mark of an odd insecurity. (F 55f.)

Evaluating such instances of commentary, Dirk Wiemann states that Solanka "is by no means rendered as a rounded character but as a nodal point for a cultural critique of a wide range of aspects of neo-liberal, US-dominated globalisation."<sup>410</sup> Indeed, *Fury* contains passages of cultural criticism that could be taken from a book of essays if it was not for the heterodiegetic (if internal) narrative voice. Solanka here acts as a proxy for observations on globalization and on the world in the age of US-American domination. In this respect, *Fury* is radically critical of the USA and its position in the world, even to the extent of overstressing US-American influence on the processes involved. For instance, Solanka fails to note that the rest of the world is complicit in assigning special meaning to the label 'American'.

Solanka's perspective is characterized by the sense of entitlement of the cosmopolitan observer. At the same time, *Fury* suggests that in a world in which everyone's life is affected by the USA's global dominance, everyone qualifies as a

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<sup>410</sup> Wiemann, "Back to Back Stories" 142.

judge of US-American politics, culture and society. It is in this sense that Solanka is an inoutsider, an observer who evaluates the USA from 'above' but who nevertheless is an insider to its culture repertoire. What is more, the novel implies a correspondence between the USA Solanka observes and his own psychological state. This connection is established by various passages in which the condition of New York City is aligned with Solanka's personal visions of fury and confusion.<sup>411</sup> Even though he acts as a spectator, it is often not clear whether Solanka reflects on his surroundings or on his own mental disintegration. Thus he is an inoutsider to the New York City of that particular moment in an even more fundamental sense than we might initially recognize. The connection between his psyche and the world that surrounds him also occurs to Solanka:

What was true of him, he found himself thinking once again, might also be true to some degree of everyone. The whole world was burning on a shorter fuse. There was a knife twisting in every gut, a scourge for every back. We were all grievously provoked. Explosions were heard on every side. Human life was now lived in the moment before the fury, when the anger grew, or the moment during – the fury's hour, the time of the beast set free – or in the ruined aftermath of a great violence, when the fury ebbed and chaos abated, until the tide began, once again, to turn. Craters – in cities, in deserts, in nations, in the heart – had become commonplace. People snarled and cowered in the rubble of their own misdeeds. (F 129)

It is astonishing how precisely this passage foreshadows the scenery of 9/11 New York. In the context of the novel, the passage associates the USA, the city and its inhabitants with Solanka's anger and despair. The connection is further intensified by a slip in narrative perspective: as the shift from 'he' to 'we' in this passage indicates, the narration wavers between heterodiegetic distance and identification with Solanka's voice. Fury and fear are the dominant impressions in this and many similar passages. It is precisely because of his own suffering that Solanka – while intensely critical of the USA – appears to be particularly receptive to the anguish of this country deemed to dominate the world:

[T]he crushing of dreams in a land where the right to dream was the national ideological cornerstone, the pulverizing cancellation of personal possibility at a time when the future was opening up to reveal vistas of unimaginable, glittering treasures such as no man or woman had ever dreamed of before. In the tormented flames and anguished bullets Malik Solanka heard a crucial, ignored, unanswered,

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<sup>411</sup> Rushdie established a similar parallelism between Gibreel Farishta and the city of London in *The Satanic Verses*.

perhaps unanswerable question – the same question, loud and life-shattering as a Munch scream, that he had just asked himself: is this all there is? (F 184)

This passage describes the destruction of dreams, a postmodern state of existential crisis and the emptiness of modern existence. Rather than a location, the city appears to be expression of a psychological state, the physical manifestation of tortured humanity. Solanka finds his own pathological state mirrored in this noise and confusion: “The Furies hovered over Malik Solanka, over New York and America, and shrieked. In the streets below, the traffic, human and inhuman, screamed back its enraged assent” (F 184).

Despite the overt social commentary and Solanka’s cosmopolitan viewpoint, *Fury* is first and foremost a psychological portrait. Nevertheless, as in all of Rushdie’s novels, the depiction of the protagonist’s mental state proposes a more general assessment of the human condition and of modern life. It is in this respect that the artist’s receptiveness to the mood of his or her time, in Solanka’s case to the turmoil and roar of postmodern suffering, assumes particular importance. In contrast to Dirk Wiemann, I do not read *Fury* as a novel that proposes a ‘cure’ or depicts a process of healing. Even though Wiemann’s sophisticated reading of *Fury* is viable on many levels, I assert that *Fury* is even more pessimistic about the postmodern condition than Wiemann allows.

Several critics have remarked on the fact that *Fury* is a novel with a “global setting”,<sup>412</sup> even one that imagines the globe as “now a singular and indivisible space *without frontiers*.”<sup>413</sup> In a similar vein, Wiemann has proposed that the USA of *Fury* “turns out as an atopic global condition superseding national affiliations.”<sup>414</sup> This is largely the case precisely because *Fury* portrays an (arguably collective) pathology.<sup>415</sup> The novel does *not* suggest that boundaries no longer matter. It merely shows that they do not matter in a formal and bureaucratic sense for people like

<sup>412</sup> Cécile Leonard, “Mapping Global Contexts in Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Fury*,” *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 28.1 (2005), 100–108, here 102.

<sup>413</sup> Mondal, “The Reinvention of Location” 179f [Mondal’s emphasis].

<sup>414</sup> Wiemann, “Back to Back Stories” 152.

<sup>415</sup> In a similar vein, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru argues that “Rushdie’s American cities are fluid projections of a nomadic mindset in its continuous movement and search for relocation” (“Salman Rushdie’s America: Cities and Power in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown*,” *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 4 (2007), 172–180, here 176).

Solanka. On his flight from Lilliput-Blefuscu, it is patently clear how privileged he is for being able to leave. In fact, it is Neela's sacrifice that enables his escape.

Far from being locked down to one specific narrative standpoint, *Fury* depicts the USA as perceived with a virtual focus in Paul Giles' sense.<sup>416</sup> The perspective of the focalizer is influenced by his (repressed) Indian background, the postcolonial British presence during his childhood, his own long and formative years in England and, finally, his cosmopolitan inoutsider status in the USA. The novel thus recognizes the USA as a space whose evaluation depends on the observer's personal and biographical associations yet relies on a global repertoire of perceptions and judgments.

Ines Detmers argues that *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown* document the emergence of

male protagonists as enraged, failing cosmopolitan migrants for whom geographical coordinates of home, such as nation or region, are progressively rendered insufficient. With this emphasis on the disempowerment of formerly meaningful territories, Rushdie confronts the pervasiveness of moral-ethical claims and impediments, to socio-political freedom, and thus clearly challenges current 'spatialized' obligations of both individual and collective responsibility.<sup>417</sup>

Like some of Dirk Wiemann's observations, Detmer's analysis appears to be influenced by the expectation that *every* novel by Salman Rushdie will offer some clever insight or a conceptually appealing variation on current theoretical debates. While *Fury* clearly shows Rushdie at his most aware of current theoretical discourse, it implies the possibility of vital questions but fails to raise them. In fact, questions of (individual or collective) responsibility are curiously absent from the novel. The depiction of 'postmodern' existence as confusing and frightening is hardly an innovation in itself. However, it may turn a little tedious if much of the protagonist's suffering appears self-imposed, the luxury of a person who can indulge in endless navel-gazing. Despite the detour to (fictional) Lilliput-Blefuscu and Solanka's critical commentary, Rushdie's novel displays little interest in the world at large. Instead, it dramatizes postmodern malaise and the anguish of the wealthy. Of course, this need not be a fault in itself but *Fury* suffers from its author's refusal to offer a

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<sup>416</sup> See my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>417</sup> Detmers, "Global Minds and Local Mentalities" 363.

sense of narrative detachment from its protagonist. Instead, the reader is left with and lost in the self-absorbed pondering of Malik Solanka.

### **3.2 The Gloomy Side of Comedy:** **Caryl Phillips, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005)**

Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark* examines a chapter of US-American cultural history through the story of a famous entertainer now all but forgotten: the black minstrel performer Bert Williams.<sup>418</sup> Like Salman Rushdie in *Fury*, Phillips focuses on individual psychology yet Williams's artistic dilemma also bears general relevance for the experience of black people in a society conditioned by racial perceptions. In this chapter, I consider Phillips's adaptation of Williams's story and his engagement with the problematic history of blackface minstrelsy.<sup>419</sup> Phillips approaches racial 'performance' of a very literal type, a theatrical tradition highly dependent on racist stereotypes. At the same time, *Dancing in the Dark* explores the psychological repercussions and, to a certain extent, the subversive potential of Williams's performances. Despite concentrating on Williams's story, *Dancing in the Dark* can be read as part of Phillips's larger literary project of emphasizing shared histories of racial oppression. In my analysis of *Dancing in the Dark*, I examine in how far this 'programme' relies on a combination of fact and fiction and on the dramatization of Williams's inoutsider perspective.

Today, the specifics of blackface minstrelsy appear to have faded from public memory. They may have been pushed into oblivion for being shameful reminders of

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<sup>418</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff rightly state that Bert Williams is still well-known among informed insiders. They even argue that "[s]o much emphasis has been placed on Williams's individual career that the larger context of black musical comedy in the ragtime era has been obscured" (*Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, 'Coon Songs,' and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (American Made Music Series), Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2007, 6). On Williams's biography see, for instance, Ann Charters, *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams*, NYC: Macmillan, 1970; Eric Ledell Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian*, Jefferson, NC/London: McFarland, 1992; Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last 'Darky': Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*, Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 2006; Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star*, NYC: Basic Civitas, 2008. Nevertheless, Bert Williams is largely unknown to today's wider public.

<sup>419</sup> The traditional blackface minstrel emerged in the 1830s as a show by white (usually male) performers who blackened their faces with greasepaint or burnt cork and dressed in exaggerated 'Negro' costumes. The shows featured song, music, dance, humorous dialogue as well as a variety of novelty performances and re-enacted racist stereotypes for the entertainment of a white audience. In the second half of the nineteenth century, black performers increasingly joined the scene. Like their white predecessors, black minstrel performers were forced to paint their faces and don costumes to caricature black physiognomy and appearance. For a concise description of the classical minstrel show, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Race and American Culture), NYC/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993, 3f. For more detailed information, see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, NYC: Oxford UP, 1974.

the USA's tarnished record in engaging with its black population. The topic of minstrelsy resonates with a whole history of victimization and oppression. It establishes connections between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century entertainment and the history of slavery. In particular black-on-black minstrelsy, in its self-deprecating enactment of racist stereotypes, appears all too extreme a rendering of W. E. B. DuBois 'double-consciousness'<sup>420</sup> for present-day sensibilities.<sup>421</sup> After all, the black performer does not merely *look* at him- or herself through the eyes of others but actually *physically experiences* the self as it is imagined, constructed and ridiculed by the white Other.<sup>422</sup>

In their book on ragtime 'coon songs', Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff criticize the alleged repression of the topic of black-on-black minstrelsy and stress the benefits for the black community at the time:

Minstrelsy has become another 'forbidden' subject, lately reduced to a metaphor for historical racism in popular culture. But do not confuse the African American minstrel companies of the ragtime and blues era with their nineteenth-century white predecessors! Black minstrel companies stole the audience away from the pale imitators, thus opening a pathway of employment for hundreds of musicians, performers, and entrepreneurs. In the process, they brought elements of musical comedy, vaudeville, and circus entertainment under their all-embracing umbrella. Dispassionately appraised within its historical context, black minstrelsy requires no special exculpation.<sup>423</sup>

Indeed, around the turn of the century blackface minstrelsy provided a platform for black artistic expression. Within this sphere, black performers and entrepreneurs were granted freedoms and opportunities that were not available elsewhere. It is thus surely wrong to suggest that there was *no* agency to be found in black-on-black minstrelsy. Nevertheless, Abbott and Seroff's distinction between racist minstrelsy staged by white performers and creatively vital minstrelsy involving black performers is overly optimistic on the latter part. Caryl Phillips's novel examines

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<sup>420</sup> See W. E. B. DuBois (1903), *The Souls of Black Folk*, Fourth Edition, Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1904, 3.

<sup>421</sup> Spike Lee's uncomfortable film "Bamboozled" (2000) is one of the few recent re-examinations of the topic.

<sup>422</sup> I am aware of the problematic legacy of racial labels that appear to naturalize categorizations which really are biological fictions. In the present context, 'black' is used as an inclusive label whenever I wish to stress the participation not merely of African Americans but also of 'black' people with an African or a Caribbean background, as in the case of Bert Williams. Nevertheless, I use 'African American' – also considering Bert Williams's contribution – whenever I refer to a group's or a development's specific relevance to US-American history, culture and society.

<sup>423</sup> Abbott; Seroff, *Ragged but Right* 7.

precisely the intricacy of this question. Of course, Phillips's depiction is heavily (and somewhat anachronistically) conditioned by modern-day perceptions of racial history. However, it is true that also quite a few contemporaries regarded black-on-black minstrelsy as an impediment to the progress of the 'black race', an appraisal that became dominant in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and of the arrival of the radical 'New Negro'.<sup>424</sup>

In its weird doubling-up of racial identity, black-on-black minstrelsy lends itself well to the psychological complexity of the novel genre. We might expect Caryl Phillips to aim for a better understanding of this particular minstrel performer and to bestow a certain dignity on his apparently undignified task. However, as my analysis shows, Phillips's novel above all dissects the performer's aphoristic sadness which famously led W. C. Fields, Williams's colleague at the Ziegfeld Follies, to describe him as "the funniest man [he] ever saw, and the saddest man [he] ever knew."<sup>425</sup>

*Dancing in the Dark* portrays Harlem around the turn of the century, the novel's prologue serving as a type of 'reading instruction' for its social setting. In the Harlem of the time, before the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, Bert Williams's presence exudes "dignity" and "pride", the "quiet civility of an emerging middle-class elegance."<sup>426</sup> Indeed, the Harlem of the time was quickly becoming home to a new African American middle class. This, the prologue tells us, was a time when "New York City Negroes were finally becoming American citizens with homes of their own. Peering through DuBois's newly embroidered veil, they saw before them a new century and new possibilities" (DD 5).

It may be surprising that a minstrel performer should be considered such a figurehead for this new dignified middle class. By introducing Bert Williams as the "king" of a "respectable colored world" (DD 4), Phillips discourages any association with tacky circus shows or frantic vaudeville. The Bert Williams of the prologue is a

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<sup>424</sup> In his anthology *The New Negro. Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925; NYC: Simon and Schuster, 1997), Alain Locke collected writings from the burgeoning African American scene of the time, stressing its rootedness in the Harlem area and proclaiming a new spirit of racial pride.

<sup>425</sup> The statement has been attributed to Fields by Ann Charters (*Nobody* 11).

<sup>426</sup> Caryl Phillips (2005), *Dancing in the Dark*, NYC: Vintage, 2006. 4. In the following, further references to *Dancing in the Dark* (DD) will be inserted into the main text.



well-respected and successful artist, a man who has contributed to the uplift of his race. However, while this may be the ideal that he continues to aspire to, the Bert Williams whom we encounter in the rest of novel departs significantly from this first impression. Here Williams transpires as troubled, socially and emotionally remote, prone to drinking and to depressed silences. The marked contrast between the prologue and the rest of the novel raises the question whether the Bert Williams *and* the Harlem of the prologue are merely what *seemed to exist*, at the surface. The moment of possibility and promise only lasts for a short time, both for the novel's protagonist and for the African American middle class in turn-of-the-century Harlem. The prologue establishes an opposition between this brief enchanted period and the time of the Harlem Renaissance when "society people were encouraged to enjoy the primitive theatrics of those who appeared to be finally understanding that their principle role was now to entertain" (DD 6). Bert Williams is associated with the world before "everything changed and Harlem began to sell her smile" (DD 5). This is a counterintuitive entry into the story of a minstrel performer, even more so as Phillips spends the rest of the novel dispersing this initial impression of pride and achievement. Phillips's portrayal of Williams remains sympathetic throughout the novel. However, it becomes clear that Williams cannot help being a part of a larger history of racial oppression and that this historical burden time and again calls into question the artistic content and value of his work as a performer.

As usual in Caryl Phillips's novels, it is apparent in *Dancing in the Dark* that Phillips prepared by thoroughly reading up on his subject, the historical background and, in this particular case, on the biography of his protagonist. Anyone familiar with the nonfictional work published on Bert Williams will recognize what Brooke Allen calls "factual nuggets"<sup>427</sup> that reappear in the novel. Phillips also makes extensive use of snippets from newspapers of the time and other contemporary sources. This technique of collage is common in Phillips's writing<sup>428</sup> and it becomes increasingly

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<sup>427</sup> Brooke Allen, "Dancing in the Dark: The Entertainer." Rev. of Caryl Phillips, *Dancing in the Dark*, *New York Times*, 2 October 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/02/books/review/02allen.html> (1 July 2011).

<sup>428</sup> For instance, the second half of Phillips's novel *The Nature of Blood* (NYC: Vintage, 1997) displays a similarly technique of fragmentation. In an interview, Caryl Phillips admitted – with a hint of coquetry – that the structure of *The Nature of Blood* was to some extent a consequence of a "[I]ack of discipline" (Lars Eckstein, "The Insistence of Voices: An Interview with Caryl Phillips," *ARIEL*

pronounced in the latter part of *Dancing in the Dark*. This may be meant to accentuate the psychological state of the protagonist. Instead, it disrupts the narrative flow of the passages observed through the eyes of Williams or of some of the other characters. Brian Seibert has, not altogether unconvincingly, suggested that “the lyrics and script fragments that Phillips pastes into his story [...] have been included [...] as more affronts to the characters’ dignity, more weight upon their heavy hearts and souls.”<sup>429</sup> Most of the snippets certainly do support the somber mood of the narration. However, the inclusion of nonfictional material might also be read as an attempt to maintain a link with the protagonist’s real life and history. As in the case of Eva Stern in *The Nature of Blood* (modeled on Anne Frank), Phillips’s incorporation of the nonfictional may serve to express a sense of obligation to historical fact and respect for the real-life models of his literary characters.

Like his historical model, Phillips’s protagonist in *Dancing in the Dark* was born in the Bahamas and moved to the USA with his parents when he was still a boy. More than any of the other protagonists I have so far discussed in this study, Bert Williams is thus a migrant proper. He experiences the clash between his West Indian background and growing up in the USA, “[h]is hot Caribbean past undermined by cold American anxieties” (DD 23). The article “The Comic Side of Comedy” demonstrates how much of a cultural outsider the real Bert Williams felt in the USA. Here Williams states that as he entered the minstrel scene, he “took to studying the dialect of the American negro, which to [him] was just as much a foreign dialect as that of the Italian.”<sup>430</sup> The African American stereotypes that constitute the core of minstrel performance are a repertoire that Williams, the cultural outsider, had to acquire, both in real life and in Phillips’s novel.

At the same time, Phillips’s Williams is not introduced as a migrant in so far as for us to witness his struggle with the everyday problems of social integration and

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32.3 (2001), 33–43, here 38) on his part. However, he was quick to add nonchalantly that after all the fragmentary style went well with the fact that he was writing about “Diaspora, dispossession, historical fracture, people being uprooted and displaced” (Eckstein, “The Insistence of Voices” 39).

<sup>429</sup> Brian Seibert, “The Troubled Side of Comedy,” Rev. of Caryl Phillips, *Dancing in the Dark*, *The Threepenny Review* 105 (2006), 20–21, here 21.

<sup>430</sup> Bert Williams (1918), “The Comic Side of Trouble,” Gerald Early (ed.), *Speech and Power: The African-American Essay and its Cultural Content, from Polemics to Pulpit. Volume 2*, Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1993, 3–9, here 8.

cultural assimilation. We are told very little about his adolescence in the USA. Phillips jumps from the arrival in the USA to the beginning of Williams's career as a performer. In the novelization of the life of a famous entertainer, this may seem like a minor omission but it clearly takes attention off the topic of migrant life. It also creates the effect that Williams appears to migrate from the Bahamas of his early childhood almost directly to the artificial sphere of US-American show business. A thorough engagement with US mainstream society does not seem to have taken place or at least does not feature in the novel. The circumstances of the US-American life of Williams's parents remain equally sketchy. Among the other black minstrel performers, Williams sticks out as a West Indian, a cultural outsider amid these 'professional outsiders'. His lack of integration into a 'normal' US-American existence is further emphasized by the emotional and sexual sterility of his marriage. He is unknowable even to his African American wife, who comes to the conclusion that for a West Indian "the problem of being colored in America appears to engender a special kind of hurt" (DD 42).

In the USA, both Williams and his parents find themselves in the uneasy position of migrant outsiders while nevertheless being naturalized as part of the US-American history of racial oppression. They are not treated

as West Indian people who have come to America by steamship and who are keen to work; they are not viewed as migrants who are prepared to remake themselves in the new American world, but who nevertheless hold fast to a dream that one day they might return home with money in their pockets to live out the late autumn and winter of their lives. (DD 23f)

From the dominant white perspective, they are 'Negroes', indistinguishable from the African American population. This establishes them as inoutsiders of a special type: cultural outsiders who are involuntarily claimed as historical insiders. Adapting to the conditions of the migrant situation in this particular case means above all learning to deal with this schizophrenic constellation of national and racial identity. The Williams family is forced

to learn how to be both of the Caribbean *and* of the United States of America; they begin to learn how to be coloreds *and* niggers, foreigners *and* the most despised of homegrown sons. Eleven-year-old Bert begins to learn the role that America has set aside for him to play. (DD 24f.) [Phillips's emphasis]

It is because of this painful experience that Bert's father cannot be reconciled to his son's choice of career, a career that so overtly places Bert inside US-American racial history and that appears to perpetuate the stereotypical notions that the USA assigns to its black population.

Quite aware of this dilemma, Phillips's Bert Williams is centrally preoccupied with the question of how to win appreciation for the artistry of his performance. For most of the novel, Phillips employs a heterodiegetic narrative voice with changing focalizers, Williams's perspective being the one most frequently occupied. As the novel portrays Williams's internal struggle, it becomes clear that he is intensely troubled by the audience's apparent lack of appreciation for his artistic mastery. In an attempt to separate himself from the racial caricature that delights his audience, Williams has come to perceive the – allegedly shameful – blackface masquerade as protection, a marker that distinguishes his stage character from the artist behind the act:

Do the audience understand that his character, this Shylock Homestead whose dull-witted antics amuse them, bears no relationship to the real Egbert Austin Williams? Every evening this question worries him, and every evening as he takes his curtain call he tries to ignore it, but he often lies in his bed late into the night trying to calculate where he might force a little more laughter here, or squeeze an inch more room to work with there, and therefore impress them with the overwhelming evidence of his artistry. (DD 12)

It is by perfecting his artistic skills that Williams hopes to win not merely the applause but the respect of his audience. In contrast to his more radical partner George Walker, Williams resolves to carve out for himself merely the small space for artistic agency that his white audience will be able to stomach:

The audience may think they are watching a powerless man but they are, in fact, watching art. [...] They feel safe watching a supposedly powerless thing. Williams and Walker have to respect this and simply strive to be the center of laughter, not the object of it. In time an alternative to the counterfeit colored culture that besmirches our stage will emerge, but only in time. Right now nobody will pay to see the colored man be himself, so we must tread carefully. (DD 121)

While this assessment expresses hope for better times, *Dancing in the Dark* chronicles a story of disillusionment. Williams never manages to transcend the narrow theatrical conventions of minstrelsy. Despite his immense success as an entertainer, he never feels confident about having won the respect for which he

years. What is more, in the context of a more radical stance developing in the African American community towards the end of Williams's career, his style of performance begins to be perceived as outdated, even harmful to the betterment of black affairs. Louis Chude-Sokei offers an explanation of this clash between Williams's artistic programme and the new generation of radicalized African Americans:

For the generation of the Harlem Renaissance, [...] the space between mask and flesh was too precarious for diversion and too historically overdetermined by whites for self-conscious irony [...]. The minstrel figure becomes for them the fixed sign of a slave past and a slavery symbolically linked to dialect as well as symbolic caricature. Its ambivalence and ambiguity were lost or erased by the need to consolidate and control representations of 'the Negro.' Bert Williams, who had once been respected for his attempts to dignify the stereotype and who had claimed it from the depths of epistemic violence, became a sign of the 'old Negro'.<sup>431</sup>

In this new atmosphere of radicalization, the black community is even less receptive to the careful calibration of Williams's act. Towards the end of the novel, an interviewer asks Williams how he feels about black actor Charles Gilpin who stars in a 'serious' play by Eugene O'Neill. We are told that

it is the phrase 'colored actor' that bothers him [Williams], with its unpleasant implication of failure on his part, for he is most certainly not regarded as a colored actor. He is a colored performer. 'Actor' is a term that suggests a certain dignity, and it implies a necessary distance between the performer and the character to be interpreted. This one word, 'actor,' if properly applied to him, might have spared his soul much misery, but he understands that nobody, including this reporter, considers him to be an actor. (DD 199)

Phillips's novel lends great importance to Williams's struggle with the distinction between the 'actor' and the 'performer', between 'art' and mere 'entertainment'. The status of the actor is what Williams aspires to but what he cannot achieve. In contrast to this, the real Bert Williams is said to have declined the opportunity to star in a 'real' play.<sup>432</sup> Phillips establishes the unattainable ideal of the 'actor' in order to stress Williams's status as a tragic figure, a wannabe pioneer and artist who ends up being a relic of times felt to be better buried in the past. If readers today neither share the radicalized sensibilities of the Harlem Renaissance nor have a historical sense of how controversial blackface minstrelsy would have been at the

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<sup>431</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last 'Darky'* 62f.

<sup>432</sup> Bruce Keller, "Williams, [Egbert Austin] Bert," Bruce Keller (ed.), *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era*, Westport, CT/London: Greenwood, 1984, 388.

time, the opposition between ‘artist’ and mere ‘entertainer’ works as a shorthand for Williams’s artistic failure. The historical Williams did in fact seem to have less of a problem to declare his work art than Phillips’s novel implies. In “The Comic Side of Trouble,” Williams explains that “the entire aim and object of art is to achieve naturalness. The more simple and real the manner of your walking or talking the more effective, and that is the purpose of art.”<sup>433</sup> Williams did enjoy great acclaim as a performing artist, and it may be partly a consequence of hindsight that leads Phillips to paint quite such a bleak picture. The portrayal of a perpetually shame-ridden Williams is arguably somewhat conditioned by relatively recent discourses on and reappraisals of US-American racial history.<sup>434</sup>

Phillips’s novel concentrates on Williams’s suffering and despair to such an extent that the reader may almost forget that the protagonist was once considered one of the USA’s greatest comedians. Many reviewers have criticized, and justifiably so, Phillips’s curious omission of Williams’s comedy in the novel.<sup>435</sup> If Phillips’s Williams is a comedian who “performs as though he derives little joy from his tomfoolery” (DD 99), it is hard to understand why he should have been such a comic superstar in his time. Brian Seibert has stated that “Phillips can’t or won’t recognize the comedy as comedy” and that “[w]ithout the humor, [...] Williams doesn’t make sense.”<sup>436</sup> Phillips’s aims to show that Bert Williams was sad, but he misses out on the great contradiction in Williams’s character by failing to show us that he was also funny. This is all the more of a defect since, as Andrew DuBois has pointed out, “it is precisely [the electricity and joy that he discharged from the stage] that recommend Williams, among all the performers of the period, to our attention.”<sup>437</sup> Brian Seibert takes his criticism one step further, arguing that

Phillips’s book conjures an embarrassment on the order of Stepin Fetchit or worse. And yet in the extant films and sound recordings [...]. Williams doesn’t embarrass. Gambling, chickenstealing, and other stereotypes loom in the background, but

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<sup>433</sup> Williams, “The Comic Side of Trouble” 9.

<sup>434</sup> See also Allen, “The Entertainer.”

<sup>435</sup> See, for instance, Claudia Roth Pierpont, “Behind the Masks,” *New Yorker*, 12 December 2005, 102–108, here 104; see also Seibert, “The Troubled Side of Comedy” 21.

<sup>436</sup> Seibert, “The Troubled Side of Comedy” 21.

<sup>437</sup> Andrew DuBois, Rev. of Caryl Phillips, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Harvard Review* 30 (2006), 192–193, here 192.

Williams's humor is droll, genteel, often domestic, and not especially racial. He's a hard-luck, put-upon Everyman; an Edwardian, melancholic Bill Cosby.<sup>438</sup>

As performance looms large as a topic in *Dancing in the Dark*, the question whether minstrelsy can be understood as a performative act in Judith Butler's sense requires careful thought. Minstrelsy relied on a continual re-enactment of a stylized repertoire in order to create 'entertaining' impressions of racialized identity. What rendered this process particularly troubling was the fact that the repertoire had been established and was policed not by the performing self and his or her predecessors but by the white Other. There was an "unwritten contract" (DD 10) between the black performer and his white audience according to which the performer should never step outside the confines of his pre-defined role. Phillips's Bert Williams "knows not to strain the color line" (DD 10). He understands that his white audience requires "both the cork and the movement, the broad nigger smile and the shuffle, and only then do they know me" (DD 94). The well-known racial repertoire reassures the white audience. Any marked departure from the script on the performer's part, for instance the dismissal of blackface makeup, would be read as a threat or a provocation. From the white perspective, the re-enactment of racial stereotypes in black-on-black minstrelsy thus was not only a convention contributing to their entertainment. It also was reassuring as it appeared to reconfirm the traditional power hierarchy.

*Dancing in the Dark* portrays a performer who is fully aware of the conceptual and psychological implications of this dilemma. Being thus other-directed, it becomes an essential task for Phillips's Williams to uphold a clear distinction between the blackface character and the self:

The dressing room is where I dress, but it is also the place where I can set my true self to one side and put on the clothes and mind of another. [...] [E]ach night in my dressing room I have to find him, breathe life into him, make him walk, and talk, and grin. A wistful, sad, helpless man, but there is no doubt that the audience recognizes him. [...] But this is not me. [...] This is simply a person that I have discovered, a person the audience claims to recognize. (DD 122f.)

The autonomy asserted with such insistence is fragile. After all, individual autonomy does to a certain extent depend on being acknowledged as such. In his ritualistic

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<sup>438</sup> Seibert, "The Troubled Side of Comedy" 20.

claims to an identity independent from the act, Williams betrays the fear that the two spheres maybe cannot be as unambiguously divided as he hopes. Williams's partner George Walker refuses to be soothed by the distinction that Williams clings to. In the wake of politics of the Harlem Renaissance, Walker urges Williams to cast off his minstrel antics:

[T]he so-called character that you're playing is a damn-fool creature who has been created by the white man, and this 'smoke' fixes us in their minds as helpless failures. But times have changed now and we should no longer be standing up in front of the white man and delivering simplistic stories with the right amount of darky naivete. (DD 123)

Phillips offers an alternative perspective on the issue in an earlier scene in which Williams and Walker have been hired to enact 'authentic' African primitives at an exposition because the actual Africans are delayed *en route* to the USA. The final encounter between one of the Africans and the professional 'imposter' is observed through the eyes of the African:

The man from Dahomey stands in front of him and stares in disbelief. He looks at the mottled animal skin that is draped over Bert's shoulder. He looks at the Indian axe that is tucked into Bert's waistband, and at the headdress fashioned out of old leaves and pieces of twisted twig, which makes it appear as though Bert is wearing a crown of thorns. The man from Dahomey looks at the Chinese lettering that has been painted onto Bert's face, and at the small Swiss bells that are strung together on a fraying piece of string and tied loosely around his ankles, but he says nothing to the American man about this costume. So this is America standing tall and proud before him. It never crosses his mind that this bizarre-looking man could possibly be representing Africa, let alone Dahomey, and against his better judgment the African begins to feel sorry for Bert. The man from Dahomey stands in front of Bert and stares in disbelief at this pitiful apparition and he worries about this strange land called America. (DD 68f.)

The episode demonstrates that the US-American audience prefers the manufactured African, the exotic 'composite savage', to the real thing. However, in this particular scene we are provided with the unbiased appraisal of a black person who is free from the historical burden and the double-consciousness that Williams struggles with. The African feels sympathetic towards the strange creature that he does not even recognize as a caricature of his own people. This is a rare moment of innocence in the novel, if only because our focalizer is foreign to the US-American history of racial oppression. Of course, it is debatable how convincing this combination of natural pride and Edenic unawareness is in an African who has just been shipped



across the Atlantic to serve as an anthropological specimen. In a metaphorical sense, we might read the African as an impersonation of Williams's younger self looking back at the person that he has become. It only intensifies the feeling of shame on Williams's part that his opposite is so compassionate, so undeniably free-spirited and innocent.

In his study on blackface performance, W. T. Lhamon Jr. employs the concept of 'lore' as signifying "the basic gestures of all expressive behavior, from moans to narratives, signs to paintings, steps to dances."<sup>439</sup> According to Lhamon

[L]ore does in culture what stereotypes do in discourse. Both lore and stereotypes hold current beliefs together in highly charged shorthand. Lore expresses a group's beliefs so that the group does not need to weigh and consider all its ramifications at any given moment.<sup>440</sup>

It is debatable whether stereotypes are necessarily exclusive to the discursive level. What makes Lhamon's concept interesting is the vital connection between 'folklore' and 'lore' that he suggests:

'Folklore' has historical associations with peasants and provinciality. Drop this associative baggage, and the concept of *lore* becomes a tool to recover emotional histories of groups who have left few conventional records.<sup>441</sup>

It is this association that recommends the concept of lore for an engagement with the repertoire of minstrel performances. Lhamon relies heavily on Butler's conception of performativity, stressing that lore is continually repeated and reasserted but in this act of repetition retains its ability to develop and change.<sup>442</sup> It is in this respect that "[s]tereotypes and lore cycles are packed palimpsests of meaning. They have been written over but not erased."<sup>443</sup> Lhamon argues that "[p]erformance of racial masquerade neither solves nor resolves the issues it addresses. Instead, the conventions of minstrelsy keep its troubling parts grinding against one another."<sup>444</sup>

In the context of this study, it does not make sense to employ the concept of 'lore' as a central analytic category. However, the reading of minstrelsy that Lhamon

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<sup>439</sup> W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1998, 69.

<sup>440</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 70.

<sup>441</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 70 [Lhamon's emphasis].

<sup>442</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 71.

<sup>443</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 81.

<sup>444</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 78.

proposes emphasizes the subversive potential of blackface performance, and it is the inquiry into this potential that also causes friction in *Dancing in the Dark*. If Judith Butler proposes that the subversive potential of performative identity construction lies in the necessity for continual repetition and reconfirmation of stylized acts,<sup>445</sup> the repetition of racial stereotypes in minstrel performance may have opened similar spaces for agency. Phillips's Bert Williams engages in an act of resignification in so far as he aims to provide the black stereotype with dignity:

I am merely trying to give this low-bred colored man some humanity. My colored man may be interpreted by some as a gin-guzzling, crap-shooting, chicken-stealing, no-good nigger, but there is more to him than this. Our compassion goes out to him. He shuffles a little, and he may be slow-witted, but we surely recognize this poor man. The essence of my performance is that we know and sympathize with this unfortunate creature. (DD 180f.)

During the past decades, a number of scholars have acknowledged, sometimes arguably overemphasized, the subversive potential of black-on-black minstrel performance. For instance, Eric Lott draws attention to

the intricacies of the process by which black performative practices were recruited into blackface minstrelsy, a process that is only partly accounted for in the notion of a static and reified 'black culture's' removal into the pocketbooks of white imitators. Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely 'performative,' a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world.<sup>446</sup>

W.T. Lhamon Jr. asserts that "blackface performance can work also and simultaneously *against* racial stereotyping."<sup>447</sup> Emphasizing Williams's migrant position and with a nod to Bhabha's theory,<sup>448</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei argues that "[b]ehind the burnt-cork mask, Williams's accented voice became also the silent voice of a global black modernism that is often eclipsed by the rhetoric of both binary chromatism and African American exceptionalism."<sup>449</sup>

Chude-Sokei further states that it is

essential that the active participation of black minstrels be aligned within the history of blackface minstrelsy as constitutive of its ritual, its history, and its

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<sup>445</sup> See my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>446</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft* 39.

<sup>447</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 6 [Lhamon's emphasis].

<sup>448</sup> See my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>449</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last 'Darky'* 117.

counterhistory. After all, to switch identities and to perform the other – or the other’s version of ‘the other’ in the case of Bert Williams – was not just to play with mimicry and destabilize the ‘real’ by performance. It was also to suggest that both sides of the social dialectic could occupy the same space and be intimate with each other. Both could share and play and struggle with each other’s absent bodies within the shared space of racist fantasy.<sup>450</sup>

On the other hand, Michelle Ann Stephens points out that

the future beckons us forward with the promise of a space of greater cultural agency, one in which we gain more control over our own performance-effects. The reality, of course, is that the black act circulates within a semantic economy of accreted meanings, vocabularies, racial signs, gestures, and words that maintain certain fixities within prescribed parameters of representational constraint.<sup>451</sup>

According to Stephens

Bert Williams’ performances make visible the complicated intersubjective space between multi-racialized performers and audiences, the very space in which blackness itself is rendered. These gendered performative relations sometimes conflict with the operative racial narratives of freedom and agency in the performer’s time, yet reveal the very prohibitions that complicate New World intersubjective relations as they are enacted through gendered black male performances.<sup>452</sup>

Despite the ambitions of its protagonist, *Dancing in the Dark* expresses a similar skepticism. While Caryl Phillips stresses Williams’s artistic mastery, the attempt to ‘dignify’ racist stereotypes does not appear to hold great promise as a subversive strategy. Phillips is clearly – and understandably – reluctant to read minstrel performance as an artistic form that has contributed much to the uplift of the black race. In agreement with Judith Butler’s theory, his novel stresses the limitations of consciously and programmatically subversive performative maneuvers. Phillips’s Williams appears like a character stuck in the wrong times, unable to adapt to the changes as African Americans grow increasingly impatient with the space assigned to them. As Williams is told by a group of African American businessmen,

the Negro is only acceptable on the American stage as long as he is singing idle coon songs and dancing foolishly. In other words, as long as he is a close approximation to the white man’s *idea* of a nigger. Players who indulge in this so-called art are wounding the race [...]. (DD 179) [Phillips’s emphasis]<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last ‘Darky’* 39.

<sup>451</sup> Michelle Ann Stephens, “The Comic Side of Gender Trouble and Bert Williams’ Signature Act,” *Feminist Review* 90 (2008), 128–146, here 133.

<sup>452</sup> Stephens, “The Comic Side of Gender Trouble” 138.

<sup>453</sup> Cf. Chude-Sokei, *The Last ‘Darky’* 48.

Phillips's novel shows clearly that he is well aware of the scholarly discussion on blackface minstrelsy that has been taking place over the past decades. However, it is debatable whether *Dancing in the Dark* provides us with a more thorough understanding of the character, motivations and ambitions of Bert Williams. *Dancing in the Dark* appears like a literary contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate and a slightly anachronistic one that it. Despite contemporary criticism from the side of the African American community at the time, blackface minstrelsy was not conceptually reassessed until the 1950s and 1960s. The now common understanding of minstrelsy representing white racist fictions was established by people like Ralph Ellison, who in 1958 wrote:

The role with which they are identified is not, despite its 'blackness', *Negro American* (indeed, Negroes are repelled by it); it does not find its popularity among Negroes but among whites; and although it resembles the role of the clown familiar to Negro variety-house audiences, it derives not from the Negro but from the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore. In other words, this 'darky' entertainer' is white.<sup>454</sup>

In a critical appraisal of scholarship on the issue, W.T. Lhamon Jr. draws attention to the development of the 'scholarly consensus':

Hans Nathan's study of Dan Emmett in 1962 and particularly Robert Toll's history of minstrelsy in 1974 reversed many of the earlier understandings of the form. The racism in minstrelsy appalled Toll and the form's subsequent critics. The newly conventional embarrassment at white racism popularized in the fifties and sixties had so determined public responses that simply underlining the stereotypes in minstrelsy served as a satisfactory analytic maneuver for this new wave of scholarship. Current historians have extended Toll's noticing that the minstrel show was neither about authentic black life nor about an authentic South. Alexander Saxton, David Roediger and Eric Lott have more recently argued that blackface performance was a fantasy of northern white performers, largely from middle-class homes, who knew little or nothing of black life.<sup>455</sup>

*Dancing in the Dark* owes much to such relatively recent debates. Phillips establishes a link between Williams's story and a present-day conception of racial issues. The novel serves as a reminder of the USA's history of racial oppression and simultaneously constitutes an attempt to bring modern analytical tools to bear on a racial dilemma from an earlier time. In this respect, *Dancing in the Dark* is a textbook case of postcolonial writing in the original sense. This may explain why

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<sup>454</sup> Ralph Ellison (1958), "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act*, NYC: Random House, 1964, 45–59, here 47 [Ellison's emphasis].

<sup>455</sup> Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 6.

Williams's comedy is pushed to the sidelines: rather than aiming to do justice to a historical person, *Dancing in the Dark* claims this person as part of a shared history of displacement and suffering. As Brian Seibert has pointed out, Phillips's Williams "joins a long line of displaced, unhappy characters."<sup>456</sup>

*Dancing in the Dark* articulates criticism of the USA and of the way it has handled its history and continues to handle the issue of race. The impact that the country has on black people is perceived from the perspective of Williams's father:

[H]e now understands that bringing his son to America was an act of foolishness that has allowed the powerful nation in the north to come between them. The country has made a nigger of the boy and there is nothing that he can do to fight this United States of America, which he now understands habitually snatches children from the arms of those who gave them life and encourages them to become people who their parents no longer recognize. (DD 144)

While he initially brought his family to the USA to give them "a chance to improve themselves in the land of opportunity", he and his son have come to understand that "freedom comes with a price" (DD 214) and that the 'American Dream' remains a mirage shining from the other side of the colorline.

Rebecca L. Walkowitz has argued that *Dancing in the Dark* displays the "international history of African American and *U. S.* cultural traditions."<sup>457</sup> Walkowitz draws attention to the geographical locations and transnational implications of the novel:

Presenting Williams as an Afro-Caribbean performer who is taken for an African American performer who is taken for the racist stereotype of a Southern 'coon' that he imitates so well, Phillips wants us to understand the regional and international migrancy that complicates the geography of African American culture, which includes not only the story of Bert Williams but also the frame of that story – a novel by Caryl Phillips. *Dancing in the Dark* emphasizes the international and regional journeys that make up the typical artefacts of national culture. In this case, the African American minstrel performer par excellence turns out to be a native not of the American South or of a Northern city, but of the Caribbean and the Pacific coast.<sup>458</sup>

All of this is true and lends a distinct irony to Williams's position, in real life as in Phillips's novel. However, Phillips's portrayal concentrates on Williams's

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<sup>456</sup> Seibert, "The Troubled Side of Comedy" 21.

<sup>457</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer," *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (2006), 527–545, here 541.

<sup>458</sup> Walkowitz, "The Transnational Book" 541.

psychological dilemma and gives relatively little space to geographical and national context. Nevertheless, by inserting Williams's story into a narrative sphere conditioned by current theoretical debates, *Dancing in the Dark* asserts the relevance of Williams's story for contemporary times. The novel suggests that Williams's story is part of a larger history which establishes a transnational racial community and thus creates something like a fictional inflection of Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic'.<sup>459</sup> If anything, the global draw towards the USA and the yearning for all things US-American have intensified during the past century. Phillips, who himself teaches, publishes and lives in the USA, holds up history's mirror and claims US-American racial history as a globally shared possession, a kind of cosmopolitan legacy of suffering.

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<sup>459</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.

### 3.3 The City as a Canvas: Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* (2007)

In his third novel, *The Virgin of Flames*, Chris Abani uses a grid of religious imagery to tell the story of a radically performative engagement with sexual and cultural identity.<sup>460</sup> The novel's protagonist, muralist Black, is driven by the wish to discover the essence of the self. The performative stylization of his body is simultaneously a re-enactment of his childhood trauma. It is the artist's sphere as well as the derelict scenery of East LA that construct a permissive space which enables such radical self-exploration. In contrast to Rushdie's *Fury* and Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*, *The Virgin of Flames* furthermore depicts the 'artist at work': Black adorns the city with his enigmatic murals, and in a similar way, Chris Abani uses his character's psyche to paint and repaint East LA for his readers. Abani's East LA is a canvas for Black's idiosyncratic quest but Abani simultaneously creates a specific urban landscape. It is a taboo of scholarly writing to fall victim to the diction of publishing blurbs. Nevertheless, I may be forgiven for drawing attention to the fact that *The Virgin of Flames* is an original and stunning novel. Ikhida R. Ikheloa has pointedly called it "a book of eclectic lunacy."<sup>461</sup> In the following, I uncover some of the explicit yet sophisticated strategies of representation and exploration depicted in the novel.

Abani uses a motto attributed to the photographer Diane Arbus to open *The Virgin of Flames*, preceding even the author's acknowledgements:

There are singular people who appear like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, author and hero of a dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Abani had previously published *Masters of the Board* (1985) and *GraceLand* (2004) as well as two novellas and four books of poetry. Religion and religious imagery is a frequent feature in Abani's work, for instance in his recent book of poetry *Sanctificum* (2010). Like *The Virgin of Flames*, some of the poems in this collection use religious imagery in describing the city of Los Angeles, most notably "The Pilgrimage." See Chris Abani, "Pilgrimage," *Sanctificum*, Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2010, 57–68, in particular 59–60.

<sup>461</sup> Ikhida R. Ikheloa, Rev. of Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*, *Nigerian Village Square*, 30 May 2007, <http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/forum/bookshelf/10029-book-review-virgin-flames-chris-abani.html> (1 July 2011).

<sup>462</sup> Doon Arbus; Marvin Israel (eds.), *Diane Arbus* (Aperture Monograph), NYC: Aperture, 1972, no pagination.

Abani's protagonist Black is such a 'metaphorical' person, caught up in an epic struggle to make sense of his own identity. *The Virgin of Flames* is peopled by characters that Diane Arbus might have featured in her haunting photographs. Black, the narcissistic yet confused muralist; Ray-Ray, the self-destructive dwarf; Sweet Girl, the transsexual stripper and Iggy, the tattoo artist: they all are ambassadors of the universe of misfits that Arbus's art portrays.<sup>463</sup> Arbus is on record for having said that

[t]here's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats.<sup>464</sup>

However, both Arbus's photos and Abani's novel suggest that such trauma is never conquered completely and that the pain of existence abides.

The first section of *The Virgin of Flames* is preceded by a motto by Beat poet Bob Kaufman: "I want to prove that Los Angeles is a practical joke played on us by superior beings on a humorous planet."<sup>465</sup> If Chris Abani's Los Angeles is a practical joke, it is a grim one. Untouched by the city's lure of celebrity and movie glamour, Abani's East LA is inhabited by marginalized migrants and social deviants. In this community of outsiders, reverence for the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe holds particular meaning:

The Virgin was important to the people here. Not only as a symbol of the adopted religion of Catholicism, but because she was a brown virgin who had appeared to a brown saint, Juan Diego. She was also a symbol of justice, of a political spirituality. (VF 41)

Since the seventeenth century,<sup>466</sup> the Virgin of Guadalupe has been perceived as a figure of contradictions, sometimes even of transgression, uniting features of Spanish Catholicism and Aztec religious tradition and inviting multiple, even oppositional,

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<sup>463</sup> See for instance "Burlesque comedienne in her dressing room, Atlantic City, N. J." (1963), "A naked man being a woman, N. Y. C." (1968) and "Mexican dwarf in his hotel room in N. Y. C." (1970).

<sup>464</sup> Doon Arbus et al., *Diane Arbus 3*.

<sup>465</sup> Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*. London: Penguin. 2007. 1. In the following, further references to *The Virgin of Flames* (VF) will be inserted into the main text.

<sup>466</sup> The appearances of the Virgin of Guadalupe are said to have taken place in December 1531. The first known written account of the events dates to 1648 (Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797*, Tucson, AZ: U of Arizona P, 1995, 26).



readings.<sup>467</sup> As Stafford Poole has pointed out, “she symbolizes destruction and the fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecies or, conversely, motherly protection and love. She represents both liberation and submission.”<sup>468</sup> The inherent sexual ambivalence of the virginal mother is accentuated in *The Virgin of Flames* where the Virgin also symbolizes the protagonist’s sexual confusion. Thus it is less a practical joke than a meaningful coincidence when cross-dressing Black is taken to be an apparition of the Virgin and causes an upsurge of local pilgrimage.

Despite the religious theme evoked by the novel’s title and by the section titles,<sup>469</sup> *The Virgin of Flames* does not articulate belief in religion as a redemptive force. Religion is a mystery people cling to in their yearning for hope and transcendence. At the individual level, *The Virgin of Flames* associates religious belief with the acting out of neuroses, fears and traumata. The novel frequently pairs the allegedly sacred with the profane, for instance in sexually explicit yet religiously allusive scenes. Black’s interest in religious symbols and rituals is aesthetic, artistic and, finally, self-exploratory. As Jane Smiley has pointed out, “Black’s preoccupation with the Virgin is not religious [...]. Rather, he toys with the idea that the Virgin might be, or might not be, an image of himself.”<sup>470</sup>

Black’s own childhood trauma is closely linked to his mother’s religious obsession and appears to be a driving force behind his artistic work. *The Virgin of Flames* shows that both religious practice and art constitute an engagement with the self and with the self’s position in the world. Black’s friend Iggy claims that “[g]hosts are the things, the shapes that we make with our memories” (VF 35) and that it is “the haunted” who attend to their ghosts and create art (VF 36). Indeed, Black’s story suggests a strong connection between his art and his personal ‘ghosts’.

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<sup>467</sup> See Louise M. Burkhart, “The Cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico,” Gary H. Gossen (ed.), *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality* (World Spirituality 4), NYC: Crossroad, 1993, 198–227, here 198.

<sup>468</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe* 6. See also Eleanor Heartney, “Thinking Through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination,” *Hypatia* 18.4 (2003), 3–22, here 4. For detailed information on the tradition of *guadalupismo*, see D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

<sup>469</sup> ‘The Annunciation’, ‘The Unconsoled’, ‘Idolatry’, ‘The Anointing’ and ‘Benediction’, respectively.

<sup>470</sup> Jane Smiley, “Our Lady of East LA,” Rev. of Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*, *The Guardian*, 21 April 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview21/> (1 July 2011).

Born as the son of an Igbo father and a Salvadoran mother, Black was dressed as a girl until the age of six to evade the wrath of a family curse. This charade and the changes triggered by his father's disappearance in Vietnam continue to trouble grown-up Black many years later:

He knew why he did this; dressed up in Iggy's old wedding-dress, in any dress. He wasn't gay, he wasn't. He was also sure he wasn't a transvestite. [...] Black did it to feel safe. That was all, simple really when he thought about it. He did it to revive the magic of the white dress that had protected him from evil until he turned seven. Maybe if he'd continued to wear a dress his father would have come back and his mother wouldn't have died in that living room in Pasadena when they came to tell her that his father was MIA, presumed dead. Died to be replaced by the woman who'd hurt him until she died, seven years later. (VF 77)

Of course, Black's confusion is more profound than he acknowledges. He has never been able to exorcise the demons of his mother's abusive behavior which the novel recounts with the immediacy of unresolved traumatic recollection:

Eight years old and kneeling on hard rice before an altar [...]. Eight and the rice biting into his knees and sweat running down his face and his mother standing over him with a cane. Stroke after stroke on his back and he struggling to hold back the tears. (VF 73)

The overwhelming impression of his mother's violence and religious obsession keep revisiting Black, for instance in a dream

[o]f being stuck in the River and of blood in a flash flood washing him away and then, sailing toward him on an upturned wooden box, was the Virgin except when she got closer and reached out her hand, he saw it was Sweet Girl and then just as she was pulling him to safety, she turned into his mother and drowned him. (VF 178)

In this dream, the boundaries between the Virgin, Sweet Girl and Black's mother become blurred, all of them personifying his fears and confusion. This confusion has a strong sexual dimension but it also results from Black's experience of growing up as a fatherless biracial child in East LA where "[e]veryone could see he wasn't quite one thing or the other, and yet since his father wasn't around no one could tell what he might be" (VF 106f.).

In his art Black finds some release from his trauma and a fragile illusion of calm and rootedness. He establishes his connection with the cityscape, literally painting his murals on the city's surface. Through the symbolism of his artistic

technique, he also manages to reconcile himself to some of the contradictions that surround him:

Each color was designed specifically for a particular part of a particular mural that he might be working on at the time, and each had a different chemical consistency and density so that he could apply the paint in layers that never bled or dried into each other. Like LA, he thought, a segregated city that still managed to work as a single canvas of color and voices. (VF 87f.)

However, since the city's authorities erase Black's murals almost as soon as they have been completed, such impressions of meaningful interconnectedness are only transitory, fleeting visions of a world that appears to hold deeper truths than the universe that Black inhabits.

Black's confusion is the radiating centre of Abani's novel. Lost in restless yearning, he is unable to identify the core of his desire: "The nearest thing he could say was that he didn't want to be himself. Or maybe that he was looking for who he should be." (VF 39). Black experiments with various models, with flexible terms of sexual and ethnic association. In this context, *The Virgin of Flames* reconfirms my earlier suggestion that the principles of Judith Butler's theory of performative gender identity might also be applicable to the construction of ethnic or national identity.<sup>471</sup> Black engages in a stylized re-enactment of sexual and ethnic scripts yet his performative acts are never naturalized into a coherent impression of sexual or ethnic identity. In fact, their violent artificiality articulates the extent of his confusion. His performative experiments remain uncompleted and do nothing to disperse his sense of doubt and ambivalence. In many ways, they constitute the manic reliving of traumatic experience rather than a performative assertion of identity.

His obsession with the transsexual stripper Sweet Girl is less a homoerotic infatuation than an inquiry into Black's own sexual identity. In related fashion, Black self-stylization as his own artistic model for 'the Virgin' contains elements of cross-dressing and drag. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler identifies the revelatory dynamic behind drag as playing

upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender

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<sup>471</sup> See my chapter on "Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes" (part I, chapter 4).

performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.*<sup>472</sup>

Partly because of his early childhood experience of forced cross-dressing, Black has developed an unstable sense of gender performance. What is more, he lacks a firm sense of his gender identity and of his sexual preferences. Of course, the novel rather problematically suggests that homosexual desire and a deviation from heteronormative behavior might be seen as consequences of childhood trauma and psychological pathology. However, *The Virgin of Flames* does not offer clear-cut explanations for the contradictions in Black's character. While the religious excitability of his surroundings and his artistic sensibility heighten Black's confusion, it is the illicit desire for Sweet Girl that triggers the escalation of his crisis of identity. In related fashion, Black's performance of ethnic and national identity appears provisional and undetermined. He feels the strong desire "to become a thing of his own making." (VF 37), and the ambivalence of his looks provide Black with a certain performative flexibility. He is "dark enough to be black, yet light enough to be something else" (VF 30). He rejects Bomboy's claim that he is simply "an African" (VF 195). Instead he likes to think of himself as a 'shape-shifter',

going through several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe, and discarding them just as easily. For a while, Black had been Navajo, the seed race: children of the sky people, descendants of visitors from a distant planet. [...] It was the ethnicity that best suited his personality, their language the most like his memory of Igbo. But he gave up because he never mastered the steely-eyed and clenched jaw look he saw in films. Besides, he didn't like being a sidekick and after a while it felt like every Indian on TV or in the movies was Tonto. Except, of course, the crazy one in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He liked him, wanted to be him, but he couldn't stay angry about anything long enough. (VF 37) [Abani's emphasis]

The repertoire that Black draws on is taken from popular culture, the reservoir of stereotypes established by Hollywood films and by TV. It is ironic that the hero of

<sup>472</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, NYC/London: Routledge, 1990, 137 [Butler's emphasis].

a novel depicting a LA so far removed from Hollywood glamour should rely on filmic role models to design his identity. Despite his nonconformist appearance, he is prone to enacting stereotypes – or, alternatively, feels forced to actively oppose them. For instance, he is

constantly trying to reassure white people that he wasn't out to mug them, wasn't the criminal they expected he would be, should be. It was ridiculous, but he couldn't rid himself of these tics. Like waving his ATM card around while waiting to use the machine, to reassure those in line before and behind him. (VF 195)

Notwithstanding the ostensible radicalness of Black's performative acts, he remains locked down to restrictive repertoires and pre-given sets of social rules.

If his position offers any subversive potential, it is located in his work as an artist. He paints a large mural displaying Fatima, a Muslim woman who strangles a dove and holds a Kalashnikov assault rifle. Having derived from Black's obsession with the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Fatima of his mural also establishes a connection with the Lady of Fátima, an apparition of the Virgin Mary that approached shepherd children in Fátima, Portugal, in 1917 and delivered visions of hell and war. On the other hand, Fatima was the daughter of Mohammed, an exemplary Muslim woman known for her moral purity. Black's Fatima furthermore articulates the USA's political fears and unresolved trauma after 9/11 as well as Black's own ambiguous sexuality and cultural identity.<sup>473</sup>

When Black is ordered to eradicate the mural, he does so layer by layer, first removing Fatima's clothes. For a short moment before it is sandblasted off by the city's officials, the image of the uncovered Fatima constitutes a haunting presence in the cityscape:

Those who had gotten to school early were rewarded with Fatima in all her nudity, not this fast vanishing figure. And for years after, those boys and girls, even when they grew old, would never be satisfied with any love they had, because they, like Black, became infected by the desire for Fatima. And even though they would never remember the name of it, this desire, it would fill every pore in their body and drive them crazy. (VF 238f.)

There is a subversive – arguably even sadistic – edge to Black's work. However, while the disappearing mural may “haunt that wall forever” (VF 239), the effect of

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<sup>473</sup> As Iggy realizes, Black has modeled the image of Fatima on himself: “With the exception of the vagina and the breasts, she looks exactly like you” (VF 239).

Black's rebellious artistic act is finally negligible. Mainstream society remains unbothered by such artistic transgression, even if his art may inspire or alarm at the individual level, momentarily unsettling pre-established perceptions and challenging preconceived notions of sexuality and ethnicity.

In his depiction of Black's psychological struggle, Abani strongly depends on a construction of East LA as a symbolical landscape, and it is here that Abani's credentials as a poet become most visible. In her review of *The Virgin of Flames*, Karen Olsson states that Abani "audaciously stakes his claim on a city not his own. And wisely, he doesn't so much try to reveal its hidden side as to give it a costume, or a paint job, of his own making."<sup>474</sup> Abani's East LA is a highly idiosyncratic and poetical landscape. While the heterodiegetic narrative voice of *The Virgin of Flames* is not completely restricted to his perspective, Black's point of view is pivotal to the novel's depiction of the city.

The portrayal of East LA is infused with religious imagery, as the following passage demonstrates:

This is the religion of cities.

The sacraments: iridescent in its concrete sleeve, the Los Angeles River losing faith with every inch travelled. A child riding a bicycle against the backdrop of desolate lots and leaning chain-link fences, while in the distance, a cluster of high-rises, like the spires of old Cathedrals, trace a jagged line against the sky, ever the uneven heart of prayer. The inevitable broken fire hydrant surrounded by an explosion of half-naked squealing children bearing witness of the blessed coolness of water. (VF 3)

The 'religion of cities' is a religion of concrete and soot, a secular spirituality of erring lights, small transient pleasures and urban desolation. Abani establishes a clear contrast between the official Los Angeles, success-driven and glamorous, and Black's LA, a city characterized by the beauty of decline and the harsh realities of everyday life. For Black, Los Angeles does not consist of Beverly Hills, Rodeo Drive or "the people everywhere with too perfect hair and smiles as fake as the teeth they framed" (VF 99). Instead it is characterized by impressions such as "the angle of

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<sup>474</sup> Karen Olsson, "The Recycled City," Rev. of Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*, *The New York Times*, 28 January 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/28/books/review/Olsson.t.html> (1 July 2011).

light caught in the trickle of the Los Angeles River as it curved under one of the beautiful old crumbling bridges of East LA” (VF 99).

The Los Angeles of *The Virgin of Flames* is a city in constant transformation, “digesting its past and recycling itself into something new” (VF 153), and it is this spirit of change that attracts Black. He loves the city because its dynamic of continual reinvention accommodates his own lack of direction. It provides him with the feeling that he can “become the person he always wanted to be, even though nothing in his life [points] to it” (VF 53). His friend Iggy explains the appeal and simultaneous challenge of the city’s aura of change:

In LA we are always becoming, and any idea of a solid past, as an anchor, is soon lost here. And I mean *any*, that’s why there is no common mythology here, that’s why people come here, to get lost or to be discovered, makes no difference. [...] If you can’t change, if you don’t embrace it, you destroy yourself. The only landscape in this city is in your mind. (VF 207 [Abani’s emphasis])

Having grown up in LA, Black is not one of the outsiders who come to the city to get lost or be discovered. Iggy observes that this makes it all the harder for him to determine a direction in life: while outsiders may move to Los Angeles to build a life in opposition to their pasts, Black has to live with the fact that the city’s characteristic ambivalence is also deeply ingrained in his own personality.

Iggy’s observation about the only landscape in the city being one’s mind is apt for the LA of *The Virgin of Flames*. It is, in Karen Olsson’s words, “a perpetual blank canvas, which Black loves because it allows him to be whatever he wants – if only he could figure out what that was.”<sup>475</sup> LA works as a projection screen for the struggles of this particular urban vagabond. It is “a rambling maze” that forces you “to find the city within you” (VF 177). Abani establishes close associations between Black’s surroundings and his biography and personality. Black’s story appears to be inevitably linked to the symbolical landscape that he inhabits. Even the journey “from the Pasadena of his early childhood to the East Los Angeles of the rest of his life, [seems] guided by this river and its ghosts” (VF 16). The close connection between the novel’s protagonist and his urban environment is further emphasized by

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<sup>475</sup> Olsson, “The Recycled City.”

Black's art: even though his murals ultimately fall victim to the city's continual dynamics of change, Black uses them to establish his place in the cityscape:

It seemed that as fast as he could paint them, the army engineers (who'd built and maintained the river wall) covered them up; the army and the bloody city council. But somehow there were still many that managed to escape, and sometimes a homeless person riding a bicycle or pushing a cart down the channel from a distance looked like part of a painting, as though they had come to life; part of the river's memories and dreams. (VF 38)

The LA of *The Virgin of Flames* is a magical and otherworldly place, a city peopled by apparitions and ghosts. These ghosts are the manifestations of the inhabitants' memories, hopes and fears. It is Black's special receptiveness to the repressed and the invisible that opens our eyes to this hidden world:

There were a lot of ghosts around the old parts of Los Angeles, same as in any city. It was just that in Los Angeles, the neon lights and the new buildings distracted one's vision. But Black knew if he looked closely, they would be there, crowding in, singing, begging, crying and dying all over again, every night. (VF 10)

In a magical realist twist, Black is occasionally followed by the angel Gabriel. Black is clearly in need of a guardian angel even if, as Jane Smiley has pointed out, "Gabriel doesn't take an enthusiastic interest in Black [but merely] does his job."<sup>476</sup> The novel does not reflect on the question whether the apparitions of Gabriel are real or hallucinations but Black does not seem to question their authenticity. If anything, he is annoyed by the presence of the angel, who has made a habit of intruding on Black's most embarrassingly private moments. The reader is sometimes provided with Gabriel's own – notably businesslike – perspective on his 'mission'. In a moment when Black considers suicide, Gabriel watches him with marked indifference:

Gabriel could tell Black wanted to jump, and he couldn't care less, but this was his job: to make a perfunctory attempt at saving humanity from itself. [...] Anyway, deep down Gabriel knew Black wouldn't jump. If he was going to, he would have by now. All these years of carrying the darkness like a perverted torch. All these years and still searching. He sighed, thinking humans always did things the hard way. (VF 141)

For all his superior insight and angelic capabilities, Gabriel ultimately is one of several quirky characters in *The Virgin of Flames*, one of the 'freaks' that inhabit

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<sup>476</sup> Smiley, "Our Lady of East LA."



Abani's East LA. At the same time, Gabriel's perceptions resonate with the heterodiegetic narrative voice which – though bodiless – hovers above the novel's action. Ikheloa R. Ikheloa has pointed out that the descriptions of the LA neighborhoods are delivered in “an eerie voice over – an echo that no one hears – so absorbed is the reader in the characters' narcissism and self-immolation.”<sup>477</sup> While it is debatable whether the ‘eerie voice-over’ is really unheard, it is true that Black's narcissistic preoccupations direct the reader's attention.

At the novel's climax, Black, dressed in drag, appears in front of the religious worshippers waiting for an apparition of the Virgin. After a sexually confusing and violent encounter with Sweet Girl, he has fled onto the roof of Iggy's tattoo studio wearing Iggy's wedding dress. The waiting worshippers take him for the Virgin yet the scene is not simply a parody of religious delusion. Instead, it suggests that Black and the onlookers share a special moment of frantic elation. Black's hysteria mirrors the suffering and yearning of the crowd. The moment, for all its madness, has an air of genuine spirituality:

Black could hear [...] everything; feel everything: the heartbeat of the faithful, the band in The Ugly Store, Sweet Girl on the roof screaming. He was sobbing and he raised his hands to rail against the night. The faithful in the River below cheered and began to sing another song. The police helicopter circled, washing him in a halo of light that seemed only to increase his appeal. (VF 289)

Black's self-stylization as the Virgin is an expression of the people's pain, fear and excitement. The crowd's mood is further reflected by the natural world, the ash rain and the wind “howling through the city, tearing souls from their moorings and casting them into the primordial swirl of making and unmaking” (VF 289). Quite literally, it is Black's unmaking that the crowd observes. The wedding dress is soaked in turpentine as a consequence of Black's fight with Sweet Girl, and when he accidentally sets it on fire, the worshippers witness the apparition of the Virgin going up in flames. For a moment, Black – burning – becomes the ‘Virgin of Flames’ of the novel's title, part of the city's religious mythology, connecting him with this place “where every moment is a life lived too fast, where the spines of freeways, like arteries, like blood, circle in hope” (VF 291).

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<sup>477</sup> Ikheloa, Rev. of Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*.

Abani's LA is a bleak location yet it is neither the LA *noir* of Raymond Chandler's fiction nor the apocalyptic city portrayed in Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*.<sup>478</sup> Abani is unapologetic about entering East LA at street level, without taking refuge to the migrant's perspective. Black is an inoutsider: he is part of the city's story and scenery yet his ambiguous cultural background and sexual identity as well as his emotional isolation exemplify his outsider status. His personal trauma and his position as an artist make it impossible for him to completely belong. At the same time, *The Virgin of Flames* depicts East LA as a *community of inoutsiders*. This, of course, is not a 'community' in a cozy, communal sense but a space where misfits gather, haunted by their fears and neuroses. The cityscape that Abani depicts unveils the cruelty but also the beauty of their struggles.

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<sup>478</sup> In *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction*, David Fine provides a survey of the literary image of Los Angeles since the 1880s (Reno, NV: U of Nevada P, 2000).

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### 3.4 The Artist

In the section on ‘social ties’, this study deals with novels whose engagement with the USA is centrally concerned with social encounter and questions of group membership. The novels under consideration in the three chapters of this section concentrate on the individual, portraying artists who are radically self-absorbed and invested in processes of self-stylization or, in the case of *Fury*, self-erasure. Only one of the novels, *The Virgin of Flames*, pays significant attention to the artist’s creation as such. In all three novels, the artist emerges as an individual whose experience constitutes an extreme version of a more general condition at a specific moment in US-American history or of a particular part of US-American society. The artist’s special sensitivity channels insights into the inner workings of the novels’ temporal and spatial locations to the reader. At the same time, the US-American landscapes depicted work as mirrors that reflect the artist’s self and his idiosyncratic struggle.

All three novels emphasize the struggle of the individual, the artist’s fears and his sense of or need for isolation. Both *Fury* and *The Virgin of Flames* delve into individual pathology and explore their protagonists’ trauma and neuroses. In *Fury*, Malik Solanka, artist and intellectual, suffers from the consequences of the commercialization and popularization of his art. The pain and fury that he observes in US-American society corresponds with his own state. Black, the protagonist of *The Virgin of Flames*, is not ‘burdened with success’ like Solanka. Instead, the novel portrays his confusion and egotism but simultaneously suggests that moments of artistic, personal, even spiritual beauty may be born from such radical self-absorption. In *Dancing in the Dark*, the minstrel performer Bert Williams yearns for individual artistic recognition and is at the same time inescapably implicated in the larger context of the US-American racial history.

Only in *Fury* does the artist transpire as an overt social critic. In a globalized world allegedly dominated by US-hegemony, Solanka assumes the right to judge the USA as a kind of natural cosmopolitan privilege. *Dancing in the Dark* does not offer outspoken commentary yet shows a historical dilemma: Bert Williams’s story raises questions about the larger issue of life in a society ruled by racial perceptions and by a legacy of racial oppression. Black, the protagonist of *The Virgin of Flames*, is too

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self-absorbed to be a credible social commentator but the universe of misfits portrayed in the novel constructs an impression of LA that counters the popular image of glamour and wealth.

*Fury* and *Dancing in the Dark*, on the one hand, and *The Virgin of Flames*, on the other, are set in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively. The city, of course, has often been described as the natural habitat of the artist, the thinker and the Baudelairean *flâneur*. And indeed, all three protagonists at times assume the pose of the *flâneur*. However, while the setting of Black's meanderings is characterized by dereliction and social hardship, Solanka is time and again overwhelmed by his inner demons and withdraws into furious isolation. In *Fury*, the city emerges as the reflection of both the protagonist's and the country's pathological state. *Dancing in the Dark* depicts a restricted sphere, the Harlem of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By doing so, the novel offers a microcosm of a part of African American history. The East LA of *The Virgin of Flames*, finally, works as a permissive – if precarious – space for the protagonist's self-exploration and a symbolical landscape that reflects the mental state and spiritual needs of its inhabitants.

One might claim that the status of the inoutsider is the artist's natural state of existence. After all, art tends to be radically conditioned by time and place, even when it expresses an oppositional stance. At the same time the artist occupies a special, arguably somewhat detached position within mainstream society. Solanka in *Fury* has distanced himself both from his Indian childhood and his English home. In New York, he resides in his own privileged, cosmopolitan sphere, observing mainstream society from an allegedly superior viewpoint. Bert Williams in *Dancing in the Dark* is a cultural outsider who struggles to accept his role in US-American society and racial history. As a minstrel performer and an individual who prefers to suffer in isolation, he is detached not only from mainstream society but also from the African American sphere he inhabits. Nevertheless Caryl Phillips suggests that Williams's story may be read as part of a larger transnational legacy of racial suffering for which the African American experience plays a pivotal role. Black in *The Virgin of Flames* is an outsider by consequence of his profession, his sexual and

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ethnic ambivalence and his emotional confusion even if he is a 'local' to the novel's setting. Of course, the novel portrays East LA as a tenuous community of outsiders, a space that is characterized by a never-ending cycle of transformation. It is thus a place where 'inside' and 'outside' are continually redefined and where group membership is *per se* provisional.

The inoutsider position of the protagonists is emphasized by narrative perspective: all three novels employ a heterodiegetic internal narrator largely relying on the protagonist's point of view, a narrative perspective that signals both distance and intimacy. The novels intrude on the protagonists' most private moments yet nevertheless retain a sense of detachment. From this narrative position, the artist's experience is portrayed as exceptional, yet at the same time representative for and expressive of larger social and historical issues.

The novels of this section depict the USA as experienced by, filtered through the perception of and reinvented by the individual. Social interaction takes place only to a limited degree and if it does, it is often obstructed by the protagonists' self-absorbed preoccupations. Insofar as the novels are stories of withdrawal or isolation, they review a common cliché about the creation of art. However, they also explore their protagonists' encounter with the US-American cityscapes they inhabit. The novels tell the stories of individuals who see themselves reflected in and simultaneously challenged by their US-American surroundings. They struggle to assert a sense of agency, confronting the pressures of global capitalism, historical legacy, social and sexual norms or individual trauma. Quintessentially flawed, they nevertheless acquire an air of heroism in their – maybe doomed – yearning for a more coherent, more authentic or simply more peaceful state of mind.

**4. The 'Terrorist':  
Anatomies of Reluctant Emigration**

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#### **4.1 The 9/11 Emigrant Novel:** **Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)**

Mohsin Hamid’s second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* tells the story of a young Pakistani’s brief ‘love affair’ with US-American meritocracy and with a US-American woman as well as of his disillusionment in the aftermath of 9/11. The novel’s protagonist, Changez, comes to the USA as a young adult to be educated at Princeton and later works for a prestigious valuation firm in New York City. After 9/11, Changez’ personal American Dream crumbles as his US-American environment is poisoned by an atmosphere of patriotic nostalgia and xenophobic hostility.

The novel thus chronicles a migrant’s pursuit of the American Dream, his hopes and aspirations, and their subsequent disappointment in front of the backdrop of the political and social climate brought about by the events of 11 September 2001. All of this might be considered fairly predictable features of a post-9/11 migrant novel. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* relates a perception of the USA which is dominated by the protagonist’s realization that despite his immersion in a US-American life of privilege and success, he has remained a Pakistani at heart.<sup>479</sup> Mohsin Hamid has thus persuasively labeled *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* not a ‘migrant’ but an ‘emigrant novel’, “a story of leaving America.”<sup>480</sup> In the following, I engage with this idea, connecting it to the conceptual focus of my study. Changez’ Scheherazadic account of his ‘rise and fall’ offers a specific take on the inoutsider’s perspective. Exploring the narrative position from which the story is related, I examine the novel’s engagement with the USA and its creative and – arguably – political agenda.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts a sudden shift in perspective, the catalytic turning point being 9/11. It may be surprising for an examination of twenty-first-century encounters with US-American lifeworlds that 9/11 has so far been such a minor thematic preoccupation of this study. However, it is important to note that contemporary literary engagements with the USA are not necessarily prominently

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<sup>479</sup> See also Amina Yaqin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation,” Interview with Mohsin Hamid, *Wasafiri* 23.3 (2008), 44–49, here 45.

<sup>480</sup> Yaqin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation” 47.

concerned with 9/11. Much as I object to the idea that writers in former colonies cannot but produce ‘post-colonial’ works of fiction,<sup>481</sup> my point has been to emphasize that in observing the United States of the early twenty-first century, writers can choose and have chosen to address issues other than 9/11. I argue that the importance of the events of 11 September 2001 for anglophone literature published in the aftermath of 9/11 has frequently been exaggerated.<sup>482</sup> While 9/11 obviously has become a major benchmark in the USA’s national consciousness, many writers have ventured to explore other, less obvious topics.

Now, as this study enters a more ‘political’ arena (in its section on professed ‘terrorists’), 9/11 and its repercussions occupy a slightly more prominent position. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a ‘9/11 novel’ even if its protagonist does not experience the events first hand<sup>483</sup> but, like people all around the world, watches them unfold on television. At the time of the attacks, Changez is in Manila. The distance from his resident New York City is a coincidence but simultaneously seems like a physical confirmation of the detachment that is unveiled in Changez’ immediate reaction to the attacks: to his own surprise as much as to the astonishment of the reader, Changez smiles in pleasure.<sup>484</sup>

Mohsin Hamid has stated that after 9/11 it felt like a “wall had suddenly come up between [his] American and Muslim worlds.”<sup>485</sup> His protagonist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shares this sensation. However, Changez’ initial response to the attacks shows that this wall is not merely a consequence of being rejected by what up until then is his resident home. His smile marks Changez as an emotional outsider. It is a moment of revelation that, even before the rise of public hostility, makes clear that our narrator has not acquired an unproblematic sense of belonging in his US-

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<sup>481</sup> If ‘post-colonial’ is supposed to indicate anything beyond a mere temporal relation which, conceptually and logically, it should.

<sup>482</sup> See also Michael Butter; Birte Christ; Patrick Keller (eds.), *9/11: Kein Tag, der die Welt veränderte*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2011. In this anthology, a group of German scholars explores the thesis that 9/11 ‘did not change the world’ to the extent that has frequently been suggested.

<sup>483</sup> As it is the case in 9/11 novels such as Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* or Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*.

<sup>484</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, London: Penguin, 2007, 72. In the following, further references to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (RF) will be inserted into the main text.

<sup>485</sup> Deborah Solomon, “The Stranger,” Interview with Mohsin Hamid, *The New York Times*, 15 April 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/magazine/15wwlnQ4.t.html> (1 July 2011).



American surroundings. In this respect, his disenchantment with the USA, his ‘emotional emigration’ (even before his physical departure), is not only a response to the changing social and political climate. It also constitutes the recognition of an emotional partisanship that had been hidden underneath Changez’ US-American success story. At a time when it holds obvious relevance to explain ‘the other perspective’, Hamid complicates notions of in- and outsiderdom. The originality of his approach lies partly in this emotional ambivalence.

The topic of individual privilege figures prominently in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Changez is hardly a mere victim. He comes from a Pakistani family that used to be very wealthy and continues to be prestigious, providing Changez with a sense of class distinction. Hence his criticism of the vulgar behavior of some of his US-American acquaintances, mere “upstarts” with an air of entitlement that Changez rejects (RF 21), is not just a testament to his greater sensibility but also to his sense of social superiority. Changez is glad to gain access to the US-American world of privilege and wealth that his performance at Princeton and, even more, his employment at Underwood Samson grant him. The relationship with Erica, finally, opens the doors to “an insider’s world – the chic heart of the city – to which [Changez] would otherwise have had no access” (RF 56). He enters this sphere without hesitation, in fact with a sense of entitlement:

I was presumptuous enough to think that this was how my life was *meant* to be, that it had in some way been inevitable that I should end up rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy in such exalted settings. (RF 85 [Hamid’s emphasis])

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is centrally preoccupied with the shift in Changez’ perspective that takes place as his privileged lifestyle and uninvolved cosmopolitan ease begin to crumble. It is in the aftermath of 9/11 that he begins to understand that in the USA such privilege is anything but his natural birthright. His privileged status begins to slip, partly due to the changes that take place in the country but also because of his increasingly deviant behavior. His time as Erica’s charmed companion ends when Erica withdraws into mental illness. Somewhat unexpectedly, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* resonates with Peter Carey’s *His Illegal*

*Self*.<sup>486</sup> In Carey’s novel, the main characters find themselves removed from the sphere where they were protected by the privilege that US-American citizenship and relative wealth granted them. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez experiences a personal story of disenchantment that leads him to give up the protective shield of his cosmopolitan expatriate existence.

Hamid’s novel does not simply recount a spoilt prodigy’s petty experience of disillusionment. Instead, it appears to follow a didactic impulse or, at the very least, the wish to promote something like intercultural or interreligious understanding. Marina Budhos has pointed out that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an “intentional misnomer” because Changez is “not a reluctant fundamentalist, but a reluctant anti-American.”<sup>487</sup> In an interview, Mohsin Hamid has commented on his protagonist’s ‘reluctant fundamentalism’:

He is not a religious Muslim but a secular person. He is a reluctant fundamentalist in the sense that all of us Muslims in today’s modern world are. Because the assumption increasingly among non-Muslims is that Muslims are fundamentalist until proven innocent.<sup>488</sup>

Hamid’s statement echoes his protagonist’s. The novel’s narrative frame has Changez’ tell his life-story to an unnamed US-American listener during an evening in Lahore. Towards the end of his narrative, Changez remarks that “you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (RF 183). However, the novel simultaneously thrives on the suspense created by the fact that *this* particular Pakistani or *this* specific US-American might yet turn out to be what we fear they are. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* draws attention to the way irrational fears influence or even prevent intercultural interaction. Hamid has claimed that “the invitation of the book is to step back [...] and say, well, what if it is just a conversation?”<sup>489</sup> However, it is the unresolved suspense that keeps *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* from being merely an elegant fictional articulation of a

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<sup>486</sup> See my chapter on Carey’s novel (part II, chapter “social ties 2”).

<sup>487</sup> Marina Budhos, “Fiction: Runes of Ruins,” Review of Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2007, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2007/05/books/runes-of-ruins/> (1 July 2011).

<sup>488</sup> Amina Yaqin, “An Interview with Mohsin Hamid,” *Moving Worlds* 8.1 (2008), 111–119, here 112.

<sup>489</sup> Yaqin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation” 48.

programmatic message. Either way, the novel’s allegorical dimension is so clear that Changez’ story at times acquires a schematic quality.

Much of the novel’s effect depends on the unusual narrative situation that Hamid constructs. Changez’ recounting of his own story is delivered as a kind of dramatic monologue that implicates the listener – both the US-American in the novel and, by extension, the reader – but is restricted to Changez’ part of the conversation. This narrative mode echoes the narrative voice of Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Albert Camus’ *The Fall*,<sup>490</sup> an intertextual reference that reinforces any reservations the reader may have about the reliability of Changez’ narration.

The narrative framing of the story is supported by features that suggest the immediacy of oral storytelling, for instance the direct address of the implied audience, repetitions, allusion to the further development of the story or (possibly) dramatic embellishments. At the same time, the exclusion of the fictional addressee creates a sense of theatrical artificiality. All of this contributes to the overall effect that the novel appears as a kind of mirror for the reader,<sup>491</sup> a medium reflecting the reader’s fears, stereotypes and presuppositions. As Mohsin Hamid acknowledges, “the ending [of the novel] is determined by the way a reader reads it and by the preconceptions and prejudices and fears that a reader has.”<sup>492</sup> The unresolved ambivalence of the frame story creates a situation in which the reader is free but simultaneously forced to come up with his or her own conclusion. Marina Budhos has pointed out that the novel’s

minimalism, which leaves so much room for argument, also renders our complicity, forcing us to actively talk back, unable to retreat to our national borders with their complacent certainties.<sup>493</sup>

At the very least, the novel makes the reader aware of the fact that she or he is the one who assigns meaning to certain details in the text, connecting them to an ostensibly coherent interpretation of the story.

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<sup>490</sup> Albert Camus (1957), “The Fall,” *The Plague*, *The Fall*, *The Exile and the Kingdom* and *Selected Essays* (Everyman’s Library 278), Transl. Justin O’Brien, NYC: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, 273–356 [French original version *La Chute*, Gallimard, 1956].

<sup>491</sup> See Hamid’s own remark on this topic in Solomon, “The Stranger.”

<sup>492</sup> Yaqin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation” 46.

<sup>493</sup> Budhos, “Fiction: Runes of Ruins.”

Like Jean-Baptiste Clamence’s in *The Fall*, Changez’ narration displays a show of exaggerated frankness, not shying away from observations that question his moral integrity. For the reader, it is hard to decide whether this excessive honesty is a sign of genuine candor or merely a sophisticated strategy of deceit. At the story level, Changez’ tries to put his agitated listener at ease by telling him that he is “a lover of America” (RF 1). However, the extensive use of predatory imagery in the passages in which he directly addresses his US-American listener keeps the reader wondering who in the end will turn out to be the hunter and who will find himself to be prey.<sup>494</sup>

More than any other novel examined in this study, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an inquiry into the nature and the genesis of anti-Americanism. One of the reasons for the novel’s great success in the USA may have been that it appears to offer at least one possible answer for the recurring public question “Why do they hate us?”. In this respect, Hamid acts as a cultural interpreter, delivering an exploration of the resentment that exists even among Muslims who seem to have been faring well within the US-American system.<sup>495</sup>

In an article published in the *Washington Post*, Mohsin Hamid offered an explanation of the anti-American resentment that exists around the world:

Part of the reason people abroad resent the United States is something Americans can do very little about: envy. The richest, most powerful country in the world attracts the jealousy of others in much the same way that the richest, most powerful man in a small town attracts the jealousy of others. It will come his way no matter how kind, generous or humble he may be.

But there is another major reason for anti-Americanism: the accreted residue of many years of *U. S.* foreign policies. These policies are unknown to most Americans. They form only minor footnotes in *U. S.* history. But they are the chapter titles of the histories of other countries, where they have had enormous consequences.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> See Alastair Sooke, Review of Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 April 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/04/15/boham14.xml> (1 July 2011).

<sup>495</sup> John Updike’s *The Terrorist* (2006) constitutes an even more straightforward attempt to access the inside perspective of the ‘terrorist’: the novel depicts the radicalization of a young Arab-American who turns to orthodox Islam out of frustration with the triviality and decadence of the US-American society he has grown up in.

<sup>496</sup> Mohsin Hamid, “Why Do They Hate Us?” *Washington Post*, 22 June 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072001806.html> (1 July 2011).

In the case of Changez, such emotions are complicated by his personal encounter with the USA as well as a growing awareness of his own complicity in a system of global exploitation and domination. The tension between Changez’ American Dream and his anti-American resentment constitutes the driving force of his personal development. Even his early response to the USA is tainted by the kind of feelings that Hamid describes in his article. Changez later admits he realized on arrival that the USA

was another world from Pakistan; supporting my feet were the achievements of the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known. Often, during my stay in your country, such comparisons [...] made me resentful. Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities are largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. (RF 34)

Such feelings of deficiency and critical views on US-American foreign policy are matched by a story of personal disillusionment. In fact, Changez’ changed attitude towards his host country is closely interlinked with the disappointment of his romantic pursuits. However, far from presenting Changez as merely one exceptionally conflicted case, the novel suggests that the individual’s anti-American sentiments often result from a combination of idiosyncratic presuppositions, personal experience and the larger historical and political framework.

In Changez’ story of disenchantment with the USA, the notion of unreality plays a major role. Already on arrival in Princeton, his new surroundings make him feel that his life is “a film in which [he is] the star and everything [is] possible” (RF 3). When he starts to work for Underwood Samson, he feels like “a veritable James Bond – only younger, darker, and possibly better paid” (RF 64f.). Thus it is hardly surprising that Changez initially perceives the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – arguably the most cinematic event of recent world history – not in the practical terms of the victims’ suffering or of possible political consequences. What moves him – and causes him to smile in response – is “the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (RF 73 [Hamid’s emphasis]). Changez’ feeling that his daily US-American existence ‘lacks reality’ is heightened to an unexpected degree after the terrorist attacks:

[I]t seemed to me that America [...] was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring words as *duty* and *honor*. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look *back*. Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in grainy black and white. [...] I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether – if it could indeed be animated – it contained a part written for someone like me. (RF 114f. [Hamid’s emphasis])

Changez is prone to perceiving his surroundings filtered through a lens of fictional or historical allusion. Thus it is hardly surprising that a historical comparison resonates so powerfully with him that he feels his eyes have finally been opened to the truth. Inspired by Juan-Bautista, chief of a publishing company Changez is sent to evaluate, Changez begins to consider his own position in the scheme of things. He recognizes himself to have enacted the role of a

modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those [...] whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain. (RF 152)

As Changez comes to realize, he is “a man lacking substance” (RF 125) and therefore easily influenced by his surroundings: “I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither” (RF 148 [Hamid’s emphasis]). Of course, his adaptability initially seems like an advantage, even a skill and helps Changez to prosper in the USA. As a man without a ‘stable core’, he enacts the social scripts and stereotypes that his surroundings offer him, thus providing for frictionless and satisfying social interaction. If considered in relation with Judith Butler’s concept of performative identity construction,<sup>497</sup> *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* examines the question of what happens if a single political event changes the scripts available and leaves you with no reliable role to enact, if your

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<sup>497</sup> See my chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

social existence can suddenly no longer be played out by the rulebook you are familiar with.

In Princeton, Changez’ role is that of the aristocratic stranger, the “young prince” (RF 11) and “exotic acquaintance” (RF 17). Beyond this, Changez’ first years in the USA are dominated by the principle of meritocracy: membership appears to be based on individual talent and dedication. This becomes even more pronounced when Changez starts to work for Underwood Samson. National categories seem only superficially relevant, as a question of personal style. What really matters is performance, in a literal and economic sense. Changez has successfully internalized the rules of this system. He is an insider on account of his skill and professional commitment. However, as his boss Jim recognizes long before Changez, this insiderdom may be more fragile than immediately apparent.

Even though his insider status is determined by his job performance, his cultural repertoire does play a role for Changez’ success:

I have subsequently wondered why my mannerisms so appealed to my senior colleagues. Perhaps it was my speech: like Pakistan, America is, after all, a former English colony, and it stands to reason, therefore, that an Anglicized accent may in your country continue to be associated with wealth and power, just as it is in mine. Or perhaps it was my ability to function both respectfully and with self-respect in a hierarchical environment, something American youngsters – unlike their Pakistani counterparts – rarely seem trained to do. Whatever the reason, I was aware of an advantage conferred upon me by my foreignness, and I tried to utilize it as much as I could. (RF 41f.)

Changez distinguished colonial appearance signals good breeding and wealth. His habitual air of reverence and politeness are appreciated as old-world refinement. However, Changez comes to understand that some situations require that one quickly adapts to a different social script. On an assignment in Manila, he realizes that his US-American colleagues are treated with particular respect and thus he adapts the role of the ‘American’:

I attempted to act and speak as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business – and I wanted my share of that respect as well. (RF 65 [Hamid’s emphasis])

Such maneuvers demonstrate that to Changez cultural membership is negotiable. He oscillates between different available repertoires, a strategy that initially seems to be working well. In fact, Changez' flexibility makes him particularly suited for Underwood Samson's professional mantra to 'focus on the fundamentals'. The fundamentals in this sense, of course, are financial value and economic structures, not cultural content. In a context where questions of individual identity are distractive impediments, Changez' apparent lack of a stable cultural essence constitutes a professional advantage.

After 9/11, Changez' position is fundamentally altered. Membership is suddenly defined by ethnic background, race and religion. Whatever positive value flexibility of association may have held before, new and rigid lines are drawn in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. On the plane back to the USA from Manila, Changez becomes aware that his appearance elicits distrust among the other passengers: "I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty" (RF 74). As it is, it is hard for Changez to feel his host country turning against him in distrust. Beyond this, his feeling of guilt demonstrates his schizophrenic dilemma: used to adapting to the role that is assigned to him, he suddenly finds himself being typecast as the threatening stranger, the potential terrorist. This experience is all the more excruciating since Changez feels guilty about his clandestine initial response to the terrorist attacks.

On arrival back in New York, Changez is interviewed by a markedly unwelcoming airport officer whose "mastery of English," as he notes, is "inferior" (RF 75) to his own. The officer acts as the country's gatekeeper, and the interaction signals that performance – in this case, the mastery of the country's official language – has lost its importance. It has been superseded by legal citizenship as well as cultural and racial identity. As the situation becomes increasingly difficult for Muslims in the USA, Changez holds on to the conviction that this does not concern a man of his profession and social status:

Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse. I reasoned that these stories were mostly untrue; the few with some basis in fact were almost certainly being exaggerated; and besides, those rare cases of abuse that regrettably did transpire were unlikely ever to affect me because



such things invariably happened, in America as in all countries, to the hapless poor, not to Princeton graduates earning eighty thousand dollars a year. (RF 94f)

However, it soon becomes apparent that class distinction does not afford the kind of protection that Changez envisions. As he comes to understand his own role as the USA’s ‘janissary soldier’, Changez turns to embrace the new script that has been assigned to him: withdrawing from his duties, growing his beard and finally returning to his home country in anger, he assumes the role of the professed – and indeed rather reluctant – ‘fundamentalist’.

Returning to Hamid’s conception of the ‘emigration novel’, I would like to cite his statement on the topic at some length:

I suppose one of the things I was very concerned about in this novel was the immigrant novel about America – usually that’s a story about coming to America, this magnet that pulls people, often poor, from all over the world to itself. There they have the American dream or the American nightmare. That is what I understand to be the typical American immigrant novel. Writing in the twenty-first century I was conscious of what happens to that dream after America’s relationship to the world has radically changed. So this novel became an emigrant novel, a story of leaving America, which I think is as much the immigrant novel of today as a story of going to the United States.<sup>498</sup>

The movement that Hamid describes proceeds outwards from a professed centre, away from the country that used to be the migrant’s destination. Roots have been established in this country. A certain insider status has been acquired. Now our protagonist chooses to leave behind his US-American aspirations and turns his back on the American Dream. In such a scheme of national affiliation, the migrant is an inoutsider on account of having been settled in an US-American existence which is now consciously and – at least partly – voluntarily left behind.

The question of how Changez proceeds from the ‘inside’ to the ‘outside’ requires some attention. He was, we are told “in four and a half years, never an American [but on arrival in New York] *immediately* a New Yorker” (RF 33 [Hamid’s emphasis]). This distinction is a significant one since New York City has frequently been perceived as an enclave that offers a local identity uniquely accessible for and inclusive of people of all nationalities, races and religions. In this environment, Changez feels like an instant insider. Again, it is the business trip to

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<sup>498</sup> Yaqin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation” 47.

Manila that brings about the first challenge to this comfortable feeling of belonging. Being driven through the city, Changez becomes aware of the hostile stare of a local jeepney driver. Turning to his US-American colleague, Changez is startled by the difference in appearance:

I looked at him – at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work – and thought, you are so *foreign*. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside. (RF 67 [Hamid's emphasis])

As Changez' relationship with the USA becomes increasingly conflicted, he struggles with the apparently paradoxical nature of his resentment:

I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed? (RF 73)

However, he soon ceases to consider himself merely a US-American 'product' and increasingly identifies with his original home country. When he sees newscast images of US-American troops invading Afghanistan, his response is emotional and markedly negative:

Afghanistan was Pakistan's neighbor, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation besides, and the sight of what I took to be the beginning of its invasion by your countrymen caused me to tremble with fury. (RF 100)

Nevertheless, when he returns to Pakistan for a visit, he is troubled by the 'Americanness' of his own perception, suddenly shamed by the shabbiness of his parents' home. However, as soon he becomes once more accustomed to his Pakistani surroundings, his experience only accelerates his conscious detachment from the US-American insider perspective. He is painfully aware of the shift in his frame of reference that has led him to regard his home with condescension:

I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite. That realization angered me; staring at my reflection in the speckled glass of my bathroom mirror I resolved to exorcize the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed. (RF 124)

It is thus clear that Changez does not merely remove himself from USA in a geographical sense but even more importantly aims to reestablish his original

Pakistani perspective on the world. Returning to the ‘fundamentals’ of his own life, he shakes off the patterns of behavior and perception that have defined his US-American existence.

The small range of social roles available to Changez suggests that in this system of enactment and performative self-stylization his potential for subversion is meager. In the USA, Changez’s only choice is between sticking to the role assigned to him and rejecting it, thereby forfeiting social recognition, his job and his right to stay in the country. How rigidly Changez’ surroundings police his ‘performance’, becomes clear when he grows a beard:

It is remarkable, given its physical insignificance – it is only a hairstyle, after all – the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen. More than once, traveling on the subway – where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in – I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares. (RF 130)<sup>499</sup>

Changez becomes increasingly infuriated by US foreign policy, in particular by the ‘war on terror’ and the USA’s refusal to support Pakistan in its conflict with India. It is inconceivable for him to simply return to his professional and social routines and to ignore the things happening in his part of the world:

As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interest not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own. (RF 167f.)

The novel does not settle the question how far exactly Changez might be willing to go to ‘stop America’. He returns to Pakistan and becomes a university lecturer, teaching his students his “ex-janissary’s skills” (RF 181) and encouraging them to engage in campaigns and demonstrations demanding greater independence from the USA. It remains unclear whether this is where Changez’ commitment ends and whether he is, as he claims, “a believer in non-violence” (RF 181). Either way, even

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<sup>499</sup> On the implications of Changez’ choice to grow a beard and the reaction of his surroundings, see also Cara Cilano, “Manipulative Fictions: Democratic Futures in Pakistan,” Cara Cilano (ed.), *From Solidarity to Schism: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US* (Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 126), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2009, 201–218, here 212.

as he campaigns against US-American foreign policies, Changez' public appearance resonates within an Americentric frame of reference. He is the professed 'radical' delivering anti-American soundbites for international television, mentor of a rising generation of 'fundamentalists' and thus, ultimately, a media image that is used to heighten global paranoia and to deepen the divide between his part of the world and the 'West'.

I have claimed earlier on that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is patently allegorical. In the case of Changez' story of disillusionment with the USA, it may be more accurate to say that it is expressive of a general feeling of disenchantment on the part of secular Muslims worldwide. Changez' relationship with Erica and its development in the aftermath of 9/11 is the part of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that most clearly invites allegorical readings. Lest we might miss out on this fact, Hamid repeatedly reminds the reader of the parallelism between Erica's condition and the state of the USA:

Like so many others in the city after the attacks, she appeared deeply anxious. Yet her anxiety seemed only indirectly related to the prospect of dying at the hand of terrorists. The destruction of the World Trade Center had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled in the manner of sediment to the bottom of the pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored. (RF 82f.)

For some time, Changez continues to ignore the "portents of coming disaster in the news, on the streets, and in the state of the woman with whom [he has] become enamored" (RF 93). Erica's withdrawal into pathological nostalgia is mirrored in the patriotic theatricals of post-9/11 New York. In his review of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, James Lasdun comments on the love affair's non-too-subtle allegorical dimension:

[T]he turbulence following September 11, this preoccupation with [Erica's] own past becomes a crippling obsession [...] resulting in a breakdown, hospitalisation and probable suicide. It all feels a little sketchy, psychologically: simultaneously over the top and undersubstantiated. But after a while you realise you're not in the realm of psychology at all, but of allegory [...]. It dawns on you that Erica is America (Am-Erica) and that [her ex-boyfriend] Chris's name has been chosen to represent the nation's fraught relationship with its moment of European discovery

and conquest, while the narrator himself stands for the country’s consequent inability to accept, uh, changez.<sup>500</sup>

If Changez’ relationship with Erica parallels his relationship with the USA, both, in turn, provide a pars-pro-toto commentary on the USA’s post-9/11 interaction with other parts of the world. For some time Changez struggles to prevent himself from “making the obvious connection between the crumbling of the world around [him] and the impending destruction of [his] personal American dream” (RF 93) but Hamid makes sure that the reader catches on to the parallel development. Hamid has stated that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is “a failed love story about somebody who desperately wanted to succeed in loving the United States but failed to do so.”<sup>501</sup> In equal measure, the novel is the story of Changez desperately wanting to succeed in loving Erica but failing to do so. At the same time, it is a commentary on his failed relationship with Erica as much as on his encounter with the USA when Changez reasons that

it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. (RF 173f.)

As much as Changez has been altered by his encounter with Erica, he has been shaped and transformed by his life in the USA.

In an article on American prose writing after 9/11, Richard Gray stated that the events of 11 September 2001 and their psychological and political repercussions required

at the very least a radical reaccentuation [of the works of its immediate past]. A book like [Claire Messud’s] *The Emperor’s Children* may acknowledge this by suggesting how ‘forlorn’ texts written prior to the crisis appear to be, but it does not enact it. The irony is that, relying on a familiar romance pattern – in which couples meet, romantic and domestic problems follow, to be concluded in reconciliation or rupture – books like this, and, for that matter, [Jay McInerney’s] *The Good Life*, [Ken Kalfus’s] *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, and [Don DeLillo’s] *Falling Man*, simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated. ‘All life had become

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<sup>500</sup> James Lasdun, “The Empire Strikes Back,” Review of Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Guardian*, 3 March 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/03/featuresreviews>.

guardianreview20 (1 July 2011).

<sup>501</sup> Yaqin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation” 47.

public,' that observation made by a central character in *Falling Man*, is not underwritten by the novel in which it occurs, nor in any of these novels. On the contrary, all life here is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists.<sup>502</sup>

In response to Gray's poignant criticism of the books in question, I would like to offer two observations:

The first observation is that while the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 clearly were a shocking and extraordinary event, it may by now have become clear that for the majority of people in the USA, even in New York City, they probably were less life-changing than it was initially felt. The question in how far individual catastrophic events transform artistic genres and conventions is a complicated matter. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, some proclaimed the death of the Hollywood blockbuster action film. Later it turned out that blockbuster action merely took a short break to return with increased vitality and at the very least unreduced brutality. If anything, 9/11 has reinvigorated the old popular image of the shaggy Arab villain, granting the industry with a welcome replacement of the outdated Cold War antagonist. My point is not that 9/11 was an insignificant event but that much of the debate after the attacks and many of the literary works that followed did not engage with the locations where the most drastic changes have taken place in the meantime. A decade after the attacks, we have to acknowledge that while things in the USA have gone largely back to (relatively) normal, the repercussions for other parts of the world have been significantly more severe.

My second observation is that while *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also plays out major political events at a personal level, the novel nevertheless provides a more wide-ranging scope. In comparison to 9/11 novels such as the one mentioned above, it may therefore be closer to fulfilling what Michael Rothberg has demanded in a response to Gray's article. Rothberg called for

a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship. If Gray's account tends toward the centripetal – an account of the world's movement toward America – I propose a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US

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<sup>502</sup> Richard Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," *American Literary History* 21.1 (2009), 128–148, here 134.

empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multicultural, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds.<sup>503</sup>

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* achieves this by offering a story of emigration from the USA and by depicting a character who learns to look beyond both his private preoccupations and his existence based in the USA. The novel does not only describe the outward movement of US-American political and economic power but simultaneously that of a foreigner who appeared to have been naturalized into the US-American meritocratic system. At the same time, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* displays an intent awareness of the fact that intercultural (mis)perceptions contribute to and shape social and political realities. If fiction does indeed hold the potential to be performative in Genette’s sense, Mohsin Hamid takes this responsibility very seriously. His fictional project poses the question of what literature can achieve in a time in which global intercultural perceptions are often dominated by fears, ignorance and lobbyist agendas.

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<sup>503</sup> Michael Rothberg, “A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray,” *American Literary History* 21.1 (2009), 152–158, here 153.

#### **4.2 Virtual Attack on a Globalized World: Hari Kunzru, *Transmission* (2004)**

Like Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* chronicles the disappointment of a young foreign professional’s American Dream. Of course, the US-American migrant novel offers a long tradition of such stories of personal failure and disillusionment. However, Kunzru’s novel is more wide-ranging, constructing what one might call a ‘globalized’ perspective. Drawing attention to this fact, Berthold Schoene cites *Transmission* as one example of the ‘cosmopolitan novel’.<sup>504</sup> In the following, I demonstrate why *Transmission* lends itself to a reading that emphasizes global interconnectivities rather than concentrating on the US-American migrant experience. To once more borrow Arjun Appadurai’s phrase, the USA in *Transmission* transpires as merely “one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes.”<sup>505</sup> At the same time, the novel constitutes a further example of what Mohsin Hamid has called the ‘emigration novel’.<sup>506</sup> It does not merely dwell on the migrant’s disillusionment but depicts an – admittedly reluctant – departure from the USA.

The novel’s protagonist, Arjun Mehta, is a young Indian software engineer who moves to the USA after having been hired by an IT staffing agency. The agency, tellingly named ‘Databodies’, lends out Indian IT experts to US-American companies on cheap short-time contracts, a practice popularized in the 1990s and known as ‘body shopping’.<sup>507</sup> After a period of involuntary unemployment, Arjun acquires a job at a firm specializing in computer security but is laid off shortly after for economic reasons. In a desperate attempt to turn around his fate, Arjun releases a computer virus, hoping that his knowledge of a ‘cure’ for the virus will win him his

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<sup>504</sup> It is object of one of the close readings in Schoene’s book-length study *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010).

<sup>505</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 31. See my discussion of Appadurai’s approach in my chapter on “The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)” (part I, chapter 1).

<sup>506</sup> See my discussion of this concept in the previous chapter on Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

<sup>507</sup> See Liam Connell, “E-Terror: Computer Viruses, Class and Transnationalism in *Transmission* and *One Night@the Call Center*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.3–4 (2010), 279–290, here 283. For an introduction to the topic of body shopping see Biao Xiang, *Global ‘Body Shopping’: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology*, Princeton, NY: Princeton UP, 2006 as well as chapter 3 “body shopping” (pages 37–66) in A. Aneesh, *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization*, Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 2006.



former employer’s respect and gratitude. Instead, the virus causes worldwide damage and confusion and turns gentle Arjun into one of the FBI’s most-wanted cyber-terrorists. Two further plotlines feature Guy Swift, a British PR consultant whose bubble of high-powered yuppiedom is on the brink of bursting, and Leela Zahir, a rising Bollywood starlet who also serves as the virtual ‘face’ of Arjun’s computer virus.

The connections between and juxtaposition of the novel’s main plotlines, along with glimpses at other individuals situated in diverse locations, create the general impression of a ‘global focus’. At the same time, *Transmission* might be said to offer a ‘virtual focus’ in Paul Giles’ sense<sup>508</sup> even though the central object of observation is not the USA but the larger framework of a globalized world. Nevertheless, while Arjun observes the USA from the perspective of the irredeemable outsider, his colleague Chris offers an idiosyncratic inside vision. Guy Swift, on the other hand, moves the emphasis away from the USA, posing as a professed insider to the modern games of global business. However, his bravado tenuously depends on extravagant simulation rather than entrepreneurial substance. Characters like Guy’s girlfriend Gaby and Leela Zahir are portrayed as displaced from their own lives, lost in geographical movement, superficially successful yet devoid of recognizable roots or a stable core of identity.

The novel’s heterodiegetic narrative voice sometimes retreats to internal focalization, in particular in Arjun’s and Guy’s case. However, such instances of restricted insight are opposed by sweepingly omniscient observations at a global scale. Alan Robinson has attributed the latter instances to a “panoptic viewpoint, as if from a GPS satellite.”<sup>509</sup> While the description of the novel’s narrative perspective as ‘panoptic’ is apt, Robinson’s reference to a GPS satellite implies a narrative voice that employs external focalization. To the contrary, *Transmission* frequently offers intimate insights while skipping from one corner of the world to the other. Seemingly

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<sup>508</sup> For a discussion of Giles’ concept, see my chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

<sup>509</sup> Alan Robinson, “Faking It: Simulation and Self-Fashioning in Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*,” Neil Murphy; Wai-Chew Sim (eds.), *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary*, Amherst, MA: Cambria, 2008, 77–96, here 88.

random locations are connected by the global flows of data, money and imagination and, in the second part of the novel, increasingly by Arjun’s computer virus.

In some passages describing the movement of the virus, Kunzru employs a narrative style popularized by Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s feature film *The Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain* (2001): the narration offers flashlights on individual characters who are introduced with small pieces of curious detail and left behind the next moment. This narrative technique simulates randomness, yet creates a carefully constructed comical and illustrative effect. In the *banlieue* of Paris, we briefly encounter

a junior doctor called Patrice, [who] has hooked up [his computer] to a broadband connection so he can play Second World War flight Sim games. Patrice sometimes thinks he would rather be a fighter ace than a medic with a crummy apartment in a bad part of town.<sup>510</sup>

The next moment, “fifteen-year-old Kim Young Sam, who is cutting his English class at Seoul Science High School, comes back to his bedroom with a bowl of microwaved instant noodles and wonders why he has mail from France” (T 107). This narrative style conveys rapid movement yet exemplifies how the virus inserts itself into the quirky habits and life circumstances of individual people around the globe and how its progress depends on a – surprisingly reliable – network of chance.

Elsewhere, the narrative voice employs a more superior telescopic vision, offering, for instance, a vignette of global simultaneity:

Around the world, Thursday, 12 June, was a quiet day. Bombs went off in Jakarta, Jenin and Tashkent. An elderly single-hulled tanker sank off Manila, releasing its load of crude oil into the South China Sea. In Malawi a man was diagnosed with a previously unknown retroviral infection. At London’s Heathrow Airport two dead Ghanaian boys were found frozen to the undercarriage of a Boeing 747. (T 120)

Rather than establishing the narrator in a godlike position, this passage may be taken to suggest that in today’s world factualities are mediated through, sometimes even created by news reports. From a virtual globalized perspective, only events that are considered news-worthy are ‘real events’.<sup>511</sup> The passage raises the question whether

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<sup>510</sup> Hari Kunzru, *Transmission*, London: QPD, 2004, 106. In the following, further references to *Transmission* (T) will be inserted into the main text.

<sup>511</sup> This constitutes a curious inversion and at the same time a logical progression of Daniel J. Boorstin’s ‘pseudo-event’, an event that has no function other than to be dramatized for the media

such news items are worth being reported because they point to a larger interconnectedness of the suffering caused by allegedly 'minor' events or simply because they have somehow made it to the news feed of what was considered a 'quiet day'. Of course, the description of the day as 'quiet' does not reflect the perspective of the victims but of the virtual (cosmopolitan?) observer who experiences the world as it is mediated through news channels.

*Transmission* documents how global information flows create their own mythologies, in particular in a sphere as responsive to the lure of conspiracy as the global community of internet users. The emotional resonance of rumors spread through the media is demonstrated by a passage which reflects on the reception of mediated information from an omniscient narrative standpoint:

Across America, citizens started to look with suspicion at the computers on their desks. These machines which had always terrorized them in small ways – by crashing, hanging, demanding meaningless upgrades or simply scolding them in the persona of an annoying cartoon paperclip – were now revealed to harbour something more sinister, something with an agenda. This was it, the enemy within, a technological fifth column in the homes of ordinary Americans. By the time talk-radio got hold of it, a consensus had emerged that the attack should be avenged in blood. (T 146)

The consensus is articulated and established via electronic media. In fact, without the media, there is no consensus.

In equal measure, the reader of *Transmission* is guided by the novel's covert narrator. Carefully calibrated to preserve our sympathies for Arjun Mehta, the narrative voice tells us little about the truly hazardous consequences of the virus.<sup>512</sup> Instead, *Transmission* thrives on the comic effect created by the absurdity of an unmanageable situation dominated by ignorance, rumors, fear and provisional 'on-the-spot' journalism:

There were rumours that the virus was 'attacking the water supply', and the claim circulated that the Colville plant shutdown was part of a strategy by a foreign power to contaminate drinking water with (depending on who you spoke to) cryptosporidium, *E. coli* or LSD. Alarms, mostly false, were raised in various US government offices, at power plants, dams and military bases. Lack of technical

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(Daniel J. Boorstin (1961), *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, NYC: Vintage, 1964, 11f.).

<sup>512</sup> Liam Connell has argued that *Transmission* "asks us to think about terrorism as something that is potentially sympathetic despite the contemporary discourses that attach to it" ("E-Terror" 279).

knowledge contributed to the confusion. In Honduras, Leela was suspected of blowing lightbulbs in the Ministry of the Interior. A man in Ottawa papered his bedroom in silver foil, convinced that his son’s PC had started to emit harmful rays. (T 147 [Kunzru’s emphasis])

Passages like this are reminiscent of the news reports on the ‘catastrophe’ that Tristan Egolf describes in his *Lord of the Barnyard* (1998). Egolf opposes mythologizing and distorting news reports with the corrective account of a disembodied collective ‘we’ coming from the ranks of those who were lead by the alleged ‘terrorist’ John Kaltenbrunner.<sup>513</sup> In contrast to this, Kunzru provides us with some limited insight into Arjun’s own response to the events that unfold after he has released the virus. Where John Kaltenbrunner achieves at least a short moment of agency, Arjun merely realizes his own impotence:

Sooner or later they would find him and then life as he knew it would be over. *All I wanted was my job back. All I wanted was to work and be happy and live a life in magic America.* None of that would count for much in court. Would there even be a court? They were calling him a terrorist, which meant that he would probably just join the ranks of the disappeared, the kneeling figures in the orange suits against whom anything was justified, to whom anything could legitimately be done. It was the revenge of the uncontrollable world. He had tried to act but instead had made himself a non-person. (T 149 [Kunzru’s emphasis])

The virus quickly creates an ungovernable situation. At the same time it merely seems to unveil what the novel professes to be the natural condition of life in a highly complex globalized world. In this respect, *Transmission* – like the computer virus – is immensely democratic: if at all, Guy Swift and his glamorous girlfriend Gaby appear only liminally more in control than Arjun. In terms of its narrative construction, *Transmission* confronts us with a highly crafted and richly allusive type of confusion. Alan Robinson has noted that

what the characters experience as irruptions of the chaotic or absurd into their attempts to structure their lives is meticulously planned by the narrator. This exercise of authorial power implies a model of reality which is at odds with *Transmission*’s ideological critique of social control. Kunzru attempts to resolve this contradiction when the hitherto omniscient and omnipotent narrator finally disclaims knowledge of Arjun’s and Leela’s whereabouts.<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>513</sup> *Lord of the Barnyard* chronicles the story of John Kaltenbrunner who finds his calling as the leader of a strike of garbage disposal workers in a Midwestern mining town.

<sup>514</sup> Robinson, “Faking It” 94.

Indeed, at the end of the novel Arjun and Leela withdraw to the realm of rumor and hearsay, and omniscient insight is curiously suspended. The 'happy ending' that is suggested on the final page can be read either as vaguely utopian or as a mere rumor originating from an electronic parallel universe whose globalized nature does not guarantee transparent vision. In this sense, the opaqueness of the novel's ending could be understood as a shadow of the confusing repetitions, reflections and inflections of virtual mythmaking at a global scale.

As much as *Transmission* is the story of an American dream disappointed, it is also the story of a continued pursuit of this doomed vision. Long after his own hopes have been shattered, Arjun is driven by his fear of disappointing his family's expectations. *Transmission* speaks eloquently on the impact of what in other parts of the world may be perceived as an 'American success'.<sup>515</sup> Arjun's mother is initially reluctant to let her "unmarried 23-year-old baby" (T 16) move to a country

known to be populated by females [...] whose well-documented predilection for exposing flesh, drinking alcohol and feeding ground beef to unwitting Hindu boys was nothing short of an international scandal. (T 15f.)

However, for his father Arjun's move to the USA is mainly a treasured opportunity to level with his brother-in-law whose son is an 'American success' in his own right. Surely meant to be reassuring, Arjun's father farewell wishes are a double-edged sword: "Son, we know you are going to be a great success. Don't disappoint us" (T 31).

Of course, Arjun initially entertains his own set of mythical ideas about the USA. As an IT nerd, Arjun's daydreams circle around Silicon Valley which he imagines as

a lost world, a hidden ravine lined with fibre optics and RadioShacks, where surfer girls accompanied you to films viewable on day of international release and the number of available flavours  $N$  was always  $n+I$ , where  $n$  was the total when you last looked at the menu. (T 22)

Arjun gives in to these dream visions even though he has learned early on: "[D]reaming was penalized. If you ignored the world, it tended to ignore you back" (T 14). Depending on how one reads the novel's ending, *Transmission* might be

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<sup>515</sup> A similar observation is made in Rushdie, *Fury* 224.

taken to forcefully reconfirm this message. Alternatively, the ending might be understood to indicate that there is hope for the likes of Arjun – at least in a novel – precisely because he is such a gentle dreamer.

At a time when Arjun appears to have given up on his own American Dream, the simulation of an ‘American success’ for his family remains his main preoccupation. When we encounter him one year after first arriving in the USA, he has “made no money, gained nothing at all since coming to America except a new and harder picture of the world” (T 45). Meantime, his family is ignorant about his misery. From their perspective, failure is inconceivable: “America was booming. This was known (in India, at least) to be a permanent condition” (T 40). Arjun finds himself unequal even to telling his beloved sister the truth about his situation:

He had wanted to be honest with her, but she seemed so entranced by her image of his American life that in phone call after phone call he had never had the heart. She was so happy for him that he had even made up a few things to please her. (T 43)

Arjun’s job at Virugenix is badly paid and his life in the USA devoid of social contacts and genuine pleasures. Nevertheless, staying on a working visa and somehow earning enough money to survive, he continues to provide his family with fictional stories of glamorous achievement. As he later explains to Leela Zahir in a video message: “If I lose this job, I have to go back to my parents in disgrace. Although of course I’m a much bigger disgrace now” (T 229). In contrast to Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Arjun does not appear to develop any pronounced anti-American sentiments or anti-capitalist views. In fact, he retains his appreciation for the pleasurable efficiency of designed products and for the satisfying rituals of consumer society.<sup>516</sup> Up until the novel’s elusive ending, Arjun yearns to reconcile with the system and to recover his little (imaginary) splinter of American success.

Arjun’s self-description as a “non-person” (T 149) establishes him as a quintessential outsider. Having come to the USA with the aspiration for a US-American life, he never achieves the status of an insider, nor, in fact, that of an inoutsider. While the novel simulates various perspectives on the USA, its protagonist fails to acquire even the most qualified insiderdom. His life in the USA is

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<sup>516</sup> See also Connell, “E-Terror” 284.

permeated by a sense of isolation. This is exemplified by a passage that depicts Arjun walking along the highway:

If the soccer moms zipping by in their SUV's registered him at all, it was a blur of dark skin, a minor danger signal flashing past on their periphery. To the walking man, the soccer moms were more cosmological than human, gleaming projectiles that dopplered past him in a rush of noise and dioxins, as alien and indifferent as stars. (T 37)

Arjun's failure to integrate himself into US mainstream society is not merely illustrated by the fact that the 'soccer moms' perceive him in racialized terms and as a 'minor danger signal'. The text further distances its protagonist from his surroundings by introducing him generically as 'the walking man' and pointing out that in suburban California the only people walking are those who are either "poor, foreign, mentally ill or jogging" (T 37). If the passing mothers are 'alien and indifferent as stars', Arjun is aware of the fact that he is part of a sphere they hardly even recognize.

His time as an unemployed guest worker provides him with insights into the realities of the US-American class system:

The idea of American poverty, especially a poverty which did not exclude cars, refrigerators, cable TV or obesity, was a new and disturbing paradox, a hint that something ungovernable and threatening lurked beneath the reflective surface of California. (T 41)

Class distinctions may be harder to discern at first sight than they are in India. However, Arjun quickly realizes that in some respects they work according to rules that are even more brutal:

He knows what lies above him, the sublime mobility of those who travel without ever touching the ground. He has glimpsed what lies below, the other mobility, the forced motion of the shopping-cart pushers, the collectors of cardboard boxes. At least in India the street people can lie down for a while before being moved on. (T 45f.)

Kunzru draws attention to the fact that other parts of the world are not always aware of the USA's internal social stratification. At the same time, Arjun's juxtaposition with the 'star-like soccer moms' and with other equally indifferent characters in the novel signals that from a Western perspective poverty is also frequently perceived as restricted to far-away places, a condition that holds only limited relevance for the comfortable worlds of Western capitalism. While poverty

has always been a global phenomenon, in Western societies it has been pushed to the margins and made invisible. Berthold Schoene points out that Arjun “wants to free himself of the yoke of postcoloniality and quite simply live, and be at home, in America.”<sup>517</sup> In depicting Arjun’s failure, the novel forces the reader to see the parallel universe that illegal migrants and body-shop workers inhabit. What is more, Arjun’s middle-class background, his professional skill and his eagerness shatter the comforting illusion that poverty in Western societies is for the deprived and uneducated and for those who refuse to contribute to the nation’s benefit.

Arjun and the other body-shop programmers occupy a position that is so detached from US-American mainstream society that attempts to assimilate or to claim access appear like little more than instances of playacting meant to pass the time. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the programmers’ engagement with US-American language:

[W]hen he watched TV, it was ‘tube’, when he thought of his parents, he didn’t think of them as his parents, but as ‘the folks back home’. The others did it too: little experiments with slang, tentative new accents. (T 39)

The novel depicts a situation in which life does not allow for large spaces of self-determination. Body-shopping is depicted as a modern type of indentured labor that strips the IT professionals of their fundamental rights, incarcerating them in a situation in which they are silenced by isolation and financial debt.

Arjun’s alienation is intensified by his being a social recluse whose personality appears to border on the autistic. This is illustrated, somewhat stereotypically, by his excitement for the geometrical and systematic. For instance, he appreciates his new resident home Redmond as “a town with nice graphics and an intuitive user interface” (T 51). In a similar vein, Arjun takes satisfaction from the security procedures at his new work place:

It felt good to show his pass with its code numbers and little colour headshot, and he was excited by the rumour that Virugenix was about to install an iris scanner. Biometrics was neat. The security controls seemed to underscore his elite status, to confirm that his daily routine had drama and importance. He sometimes imagined film plots in which he (played by Shah Rukh Khan) worked against the clock to outwit evil Pakistani virus writers who were holding Leela Zahir hostage. (T 52)

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<sup>517</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 148.



This passage indicates that it is a thin line between the enthusiastic tech nerd and the borderline autistic. Arjun’s attraction to the artificial, stylized world of Bollywood cinema is triggered by his lack of experience and skill in dealing with and articulating feelings. He does not have the social skills required for romantic pursuits but yearns for emotional companionship. This becomes painfully obvious in his interaction with his colleague Christine, a loose friendship that Arjun misconstrues as a love relationship after a rather mechanical, alcohol-induced one-night stand initiated by Christine.

As the virus crisis evolves, it becomes clear how much Arjun depends on an environment which provides him with a set of rules and reliable structures, an ideal unattainable in real life but fulfilled in the world of code:

When you write code you are in control. You construct a world from first principles, drawing up the axioms that govern it, setting in motion the engines of generation and decay. Even in a computer environment designed by someone else you can relax, safe in the knowledge that you are engaged with a system that runs according to potentially knowable rules. From this perspective the real world possesses the paradoxical quality of not feeling real enough. Surely, of all things, reality ought to be transparent, logical. You should be able to unscrew the fascia and view the circuitry inside. (T 98)

Arjun has become convinced that other people are not to be trusted because “[t]hey may behave as if, like you, they are animated by internal processes. But you never know. Some of them are just machines” (T 98). It is in numbers that he finds the solace and stability that he seeks:

Numbers were the truth of the world, numbers cloaked in materials. Find certainty by counting the things. In decimal. In binary, hexadecimal. How many sixteens of trees in his field of vision? How many around the lake? Streams of numbers came to him, too fast to handle. But he had to try. It all boiled down to your ability to handle complexity. (T 99)

Kunzru arguably somewhat overemphasizes Arjun’s (borderline) autistic character traits, even more so as the description is often overly stereotypical and appears as a bit of an afterthought of authorial characterization. However, in relation to Arjun’s ‘terrorist’ act, this disposition serves a specific purpose: it provides him with an air of innocence. His deed is not caused by feelings of anger and revenge but by his wish to be appreciated as a valuable employee. For all the damage it causes, it

is thus an act of misguided loyalty.<sup>518</sup> The reader sympathizes with Arjun who responds to his situation with irredeemable sweetness and innocence. In contrast to the FBI and the media, we understand Arjun’s pain and his loneliness. Like Leela Zahir, we see him as “someone who knows his link to the world is extremely tenuous” (T 230).

However, it is also for this reason that the subversive potential of Arjun’s act is finally very small. The virus causes massive damage but fails to secure Arjun’s job. Maybe it is in this respect that Arjun’s deed is in fact a proper act of terrorism. After all, terror is often considered the weapon of the powerless, an excess of violence in response to an ostensible lack of other options. In Arjun’s case, however, upheaval and destruction are unwanted side-effects rather than the ‘terrorist’ objective. When he is fired, he treats this as a technical problem. He notes that his life is “malfunctioning” (T 99) but insists that the problem is “fixable. All he had to do was treat this situation like any other technical challenge. Parse the problem. Find the bug and deal with it” (T 93). Berthold Schoene has argued that

[d]isplaying a conspicuously American individualism, Arjun emerges as an exotic subaltern who not only acquires passable proficiency in speaking the language of his oppressors, but avails himself of the right to have his own say, however momentarily, by inserting a disruptive counter-code of his own making, shutting up everybody by stopping the system dead.<sup>519</sup>

Schoene concludes that Arjun is “portrayed as endowed with the promise of cosmopolitan agency.”<sup>520</sup> Despite the undeniable impact of Arjun’s deed, this reading appears overly optimistic. More than anything, the virus uproots and takes over its creator’s life. It turns his individual crisis into a calamity of global proportions. Far from being a self-determined agent, he becomes the punching ball of forces beyond his control.

Arjun lacks any sense of political commitment or a programmatic motivation. As Liam Connell has pointed out, he does not qualify as a ‘hacktivist’.<sup>521</sup> According to Paul A. Taylor’s definition

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<sup>518</sup> See also Robinson, “Faking It” 90.

<sup>519</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 145.

<sup>520</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 147.

<sup>521</sup> Connell, “E-Terror” 284.

hacking as it evolved over time increasingly became the pursuit of technological means as an end in itself. Hacktivism, by contrast, is presented as a refocusing upon the political nature of the end to which technological means should be put: a normative element has been put back into objectified computer code.<sup>522</sup>

In terms of his insular and nonpolitical preoccupation with the world of code, Arjun is a hacker rather than a hacktivist. As Alan Robinson has pointed out, he is not “a rebel, but rather someone who desperately wants to belong to the system which he reluctantly disrupts and shamefacedly helps to restore”<sup>523</sup>

True challenges to the system of globalized capitalism are almost inconceivable in *Transmission*. Arjun’s attempt to shape his own fate is doomed but most of the novel’s characters display even less potential for agency. Their lives appear to hover in globalized space, stripped of cultural content and emotional resonance. Indeed, wealth and privilege does not seem to improve the individual’s potential for self-determined action or for a meaningful existence. The lives of the ostensibly privileged, such as Guy, Gaby or Leela, are depicted as even more devoid of substance and pleasure than Arjun’s who at least has a family that cares about his wellbeing.

Guy Swift is the novel’s most prominent example of privileged meaninglessness. This is exemplified by a passage reviewing Swift’s professional achievements:

In a glittering career Guy had raised awareness, communicated vision, evoked tangible product experiences and taken managers on inspirational visual journeys. He had reinforced leading positions and project-managed the generation of innovative retail presences. His repositioning strategies reflected the breadth and prestige of large portfolios. His communication facilitation stood out from the crowd. Engaging and impactful, for some years he had also been consistently cohesive, integrated and effective over a spread spectrum. (T 19)

Mimicking the empty grandeur of PR jargon, this passage introduces Guy’s existence as an inflated fraud, a PR maneuver without substance. Despite his show of wealth and confident lifestyle-choices, Guy is lost in fear and denial, manically enacting empty scripts of entitlement that are devoid of cultural content. Berthold Schoene has pointed out that “Guy’s understanding of the world is in fact remarkably blinkered

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<sup>522</sup> Paul A. Taylor, “From Hackers to Hacktivists: Speed Bumps on the Global Superhighway?” *New Media Society* 7.5 (2005), 625–646, here 626.

<sup>523</sup> Robinson, “Faking It” 90.

and old-fashioned; his busy, jet-setting, globalised lifestyle has left him unequipped with a suitable cosmopolitan vision.”<sup>524</sup> However, the novel does not offer any successful counter-concepts and expresses very little belief in the potential for such a suitable cosmopolitan vision. If the end of the novel finds Guy ‘reformed’ to a more settled and humble lifestyle, this again is merely a parody: he ridiculously enacts yet another stereotypical script, namely that of the peaceful, self-sufficient recluse. Extreme in its own right, this role bears no more psychological authenticity than Guy’s previous existence.

Most of the characters in *Transmission* are unable to overcome their lack of agency in an existence defined by hollow lifestyle choices. As Alan Robinson points out, “Kunzru appears to interpret modernity as an era in which human beings risk becoming imprisoned within an iron cage of their own rational construction.”<sup>525</sup> It is maybe debatable whether they are incarcerated by their ‘rational construction’, but any sense of freedom of choice and movement is surely superficial and deceptive. In relation to the depiction of the USA, Robinson furthermore remarks that

Kunzru differs from Baudrillard [...] in that he does not appear to endorse Baudrillard’s somewhat paranoid reduction of America to mere simulacra. Instead, Kunzru implies that there is an ontological reality which the façade of the ‘reflective surface’ seeks to conceal, much as exploitative working practices are dissimulated by the fetishism of commodities.<sup>526</sup>

The hidden reality that *Transmission* unveils is not a reality governed by national entities or by a clearly discernible group of people. Instead, the novel evokes the brutality of the capitalist system and the indifference of the people that inhabit its landscapes and act as the system’s dehumanized executors.

It is thus hardly surprising that Arjun’s virus, adorned with the face and consequently associated with the name of Leela Zahir, appears to be the novel’s sole real agent. Kunzru reconfirms this impression by describing the virus in personified terms, as a living being that moves forward and develops according to its own logic. Throughout the novel, the narrator refers to the virus as ‘she’. We are told that

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<sup>524</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 146.

<sup>525</sup> Robinson, “Faking It” 83.

<sup>526</sup> Robinson, “Faking It” 88.

[d]uring Leela’s brief period of misrule, normality was completely overturned. [...] For a few weeks she danced her way around the world, and disaster, like an overweight suburbanite in front of a workout video, followed every step. (T 4)

This passage emphasizes the virus’s human surface features, namely the video clip of the actress’s dance that accompanies the virus around the world. At the same time it presents ‘Leela’ as a kind of superior life form. ‘Her’ power and resourcefulness surpass human understanding. The virus’s subversive potential resides in its ability to

take on new forms at will, never staying stable for long enough to be scanned and recognized. Each generation produced an entirely new Leela, her organs rearranged, mutated, hidden under a novel layer of encryption. (T 108f.)

The virus and its creator are soon appropriated by groups with more programmatic goals. Arjun becomes, in Liam Connell’s words,

the ‘mythic’ focus for a slew of disparate political grievances. While his initial attack lacked the ideological coherence that it subsequently attracts, this very absence allows for its co-option by a range of political positions as he becomes the symbol for more fully articulated rejections of capitalism.<sup>527</sup>

In the aftermath of the Leela crisis, the brand ‘Arjun Mehta’ acquires widespread currency in anticapitalist circles and is applied to numerous causes. Arjun’s name appears under

statements on the food industry and the World Trade Organization. His Virugenix employee ID photo [...] has been screen-printed on to t-shirts with humorous anti-capitalist slogans. Arjun Mehta, Gap loyalty-card holder and habitué of Seattle Niketown, is rapidly changing shape. (T 272)

At the same time, as the ‘t-shirts with humorous anti-capitalist slogans’ indicate, the brand ‘Arjun Mehta’ already passes back into the realm of capitalist consumerism. What is an anticapitalist icon one minute, may be a major marketing success the next. With a free-floating strategy of postmodern quotation and reappropriation, capitalism incorporates even its opponents, the marketing of oppositions being an integral part of the diversified global market. The same applies to Arjun’s innovative achievement, the professed “revolution in code” (T 271) sparked by the virus he created. As Liam Connell pointedly remarks:

The use of revolution here sees the word stripped of any political efficacy and turned into a symbol of innovation. As such it suggests that Mehta’s attack on the system of capitalism allows one further co-option, becoming the very thing that

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<sup>527</sup> Connell, “E-Terror” 285.

capitalism has sought to claim as its own: innovation, entrepreneurialism and development.<sup>528</sup>

As previously asserted, *Transmission* is another 'novel of emigration'. As Berthold Schoene states, it is "neither unfolding from nor directed towards a homecoming; rather, the narrative opens on the preparations for a departure."<sup>529</sup> Arjun prepares to leave behind the USA, to pass into the unknown, both literally and at the narrative level. Even though the reader learns nothing about the actual 'passage', the whole novel appears to prepare for this moment of border-crossing. Indeed, borders and their permeability are one of the novel's central topics. This is true even if many of the novel's characters appear to cross borders casually and despite the fact that the ostensibly 'borderless' world of the internet is one major location in which the novel's action is played out.

The novel explores conceptualizations of and responses to actual and imaginary borders. Fluid virtual borders are opposed by the rigid national border regime of the West. If Guy Swift works on a PR campaign advertising Europe as "the world's VIP room" (T 243), it is one of the novel's final ironies that he becomes a victim of Europe's rigid exclusiveness, accidentally being deported to Albania. Arjun, on the other hand, realizes that there is "nothing left for him in America" (T 182f.) and ventures towards the Mexican border:

For days the border had acted as the outer limit of his imagination. Beyond it were abstractions: Escape, Freedom, The Future. Now the future had a landscape, a mess of flat roofs strung with telephone and electrical wires, the store signs and billboards written in a language he did not understand. What kind of life could he have over there? (T 252)

This moment of realization and tangible fear opposes the hollowness of Guy's PR talk on the mental dimension of borders and maybe, by extension, some of the theoretical flourish of scholarly engagements with border-crossing.

The actual border-crossing and the realities that await Arjun on the other side are omitted from the novel. Berthold Schoene describes the novel's opaque ending as follows:

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<sup>528</sup> Connell, "E-Terror" 285.

<sup>529</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 143.

Ingeniously, the novel loosens its grip on its characters and events, bringing about a deliberate dis-employment, which causes the narrative not so much to unravel as fruitfully to disperse. The characters are released into a radical freedom that possesses no clearly identifiable, definitive shape lest it tighten into another formative imposition.<sup>530</sup>

This radical freedom, of course, is a solution exclusive to the realm of fiction. Along similar lines, Alan Robinson argues that the novel’s closing page, “with its unconfirmed report of a happy ending, moves readers firmly back into the genre of romantic comedy, qualified by a postmodernist self-consciousness.”<sup>531</sup> This is to say that even though Kunzru grants the reader some relief and his hero the possibility of a happy ending, he does not substantiate the rumors lest they might undermine the novel’s critique of today’s globalized world. The ending serves to lighten the novel’s mood, not to soften its critical edge.

Berthold Schoene’s reading of *Transmission* as a cosmopolitan novel depends centrally on the notion of subaltern resistance and on an opposition of globalization and cosmopolitanization:

*Transmission* highlights the distinction that must be upheld between the processes of globalisation and cosmopolitanisation. Whereas the former requires individuals to give up their local affiliation and allow themselves to be absorbed into the homogeneous, economically driven chimera of one and the same globalised dream, the latter promotes world-creative self-formation predicated on the belief that one can only make a worthwhile contribution to world culture by drawing on the local specificity of one’s origin.<sup>532</sup>

I have previously demonstrated that a conception of globalization characterizing it only in terms of homogenization is simplistic at best.<sup>533</sup> Schoene’s definition of cosmopolitanization as a creative process conditioned by the cosmopolitan agent’s local roots will be considered in the conclusion of this study. For now, I would like to point out that Arjun can hardly be considered securely rooted in his home culture. It is equally debatable whether it makes sense to read the computer virus as a ‘subaltern’ form of opposition merely because Arjun attaches it to the clip of a Bollywood actress. Even before leaving India, Arjun prefers cyberspace to the disquieting confusion of the real world. He yearns to be an

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<sup>530</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 150.

<sup>531</sup> Robinson, “Faking It” 95.

<sup>532</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 149.

<sup>533</sup> See my chapter on “The USA in the Context of Globalization Debate(s)” (part I, chapter 1).

inhabitant of virtual space and, in this respect, he could be called an 'electronic cosmopolitan'. Arjun's main source of disappointment is that he expects Silicon Valley or, more generally, the US-American IT industry to be a real-life extension of the comforting order prevalent in the world of code. This vision, of course, is brutally shattered. Yet Arjun is neither a 'subaltern' nor does he turn into an 'agent' of protest. While his life as a body-shop worker in the USA is depicted in bleakly realistic terms, he simultaneously evolves as a symbolic figure, a representative for those who would like to withdraw from an existence dominated by globalized capitalism. Arjun's 'escape' from the novel's final pages and his departure into the realm of romantic myth are qualified and ironic victories at best. Kunzru's conception of both the USA and the globalized West in *Transmission* is bleak, even if he presents it in the guise of comedy. The novel's actual catastrophe is not the virus but the cultural and emotional vacuity of the people inhabiting the 'real world'.



### **4.3 The Outsider Dares to Speak from Within: DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little* (2003)**

In the final close reading of this study, I examine a case which challenges the notion of the 'national novel' to an even larger extent than the novels previously discussed. DBC Pierre's Booker-Prize-winning debut *Vernon God Little* demonstrates the limitations of a conceptual framework that assigns major importance to the national context from which a novel emerges. This may not seem very particular in a time in which many scholars stress the flexibility and the provisional nature of national affiliation. Yet much of the scholarship proceeding along such lines depends on the general validity of the categories it is aimed to subvert. Significantly for this study, DBC Pierre's narrative approach to his plot calls into question the very concepts of cultural and national 'insiderdom' and 'outsiderdom'. *Vernon God Little* counteracts any sense of national attribution, and it is probably for this very reason that so much of the novel's reception has been engaged precisely with questions of national affiliation and of 'authenticity'.

DBC Pierre has alternatively been identified as an Australian writer, as English or as Mexican. Pierre, whose real name is Peter Finlay, was born to English parents in Australia, raised in Mexico, lived in the USA for some time, among other places, and today resides mainly in Ireland. This is a transnational biography if ever there was one but the question of Pierre's 'true' national identity seemed to acquire heightened importance when his novel was awarded the Booker Prize. While British responses were largely positive, numerous US-American commentators expressed their disagreement with the jury's choice. Indeed, many US-American reviewers appeared to consider the novel an assault on their national honor.

*Vernon God Little* tells the story of Vernon Little, a young Texan whose closest friend has just taken his own life after carrying out a massacre at the local high school. In the aftermath of the massacre, Vernon becomes subject to police investigation and to public scrutiny as he is wrongly accused of having been complicit in the shooting. The novel offers a caricature of Texan small-town life. It revels in the stupidity, the egotism and the hysteria of the town's population and makes fun of US-American legal proceedings. The narrative voice of Vernon Little

takes much inspiration from J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield yet surpasses Caulfield in terms of its unflinching preoccupation with the excremental and the obscene. This may partly account for the distaste of many US-American reviewers of the novel who have time and again challenged DBC Pierre’s right to put forward such nasty visions of life in the USA. Most reviewers have taken the detour to claim that Pierre forfeits this right on grounds of failing to write about the USA authentically. For instance, Michiko Kakutani has called the novel a “vigorous but unimaginative compendium of every cliché you’ve ever heard about America in general and Texas in particular.”<sup>534</sup> She states that

[i]n trying to score a lot of obvious points off a lot of obvious targets, Mr. Pierre may have won the Booker Prize and ratified some ugly stereotypes of Americans, but he hasn’t written a terribly convincing or compelling novel.<sup>535</sup>

For Laura Miller, *Vernon God Little* is “a synthetic concoction of artificial flavors and colors, about as authentic a representation of American life as cherry soda is of the fresh fruit.”<sup>536</sup> The novel, she asserts, “doesn’t sound American, it doesn’t sound Texan, and it doesn’t sound teenage.”<sup>537</sup> More crucially, Miller criticizes the novel’s engagement with the topic of the high school massacre and with the media’s role in contemporary society:

It’s [...] true that some of the homegrown complaints about [the issues raised in the novel] aren’t much more sophisticated than the cartoonish spitballs lobbed by Pierre. But at least they come from inside the culture, from people who have no choice but to wrestle with them every day of our lives because we live here. We send our kids to schools like Columbine, and we’ve gone to them ourselves. If school shootings arise from some particularly dark vein in American culture, only someone who actually understands America can trace it to its source.<sup>538</sup>

Miller’s shift from ‘people [who are] inside the culture’ to ‘we [who] send our kids to schools like Columbine’ signals personal hurt and anger about the outsider’s audacity in approaching what she – somewhat curiously – considers national issues.

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<sup>534</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “Deep in the Heart of Texas (via Australia),” Rev. of DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, *The New York Times*, 5 November 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/05/books/05KAKU.html> (1 July 2011).

<sup>535</sup> Kakutani, “Deep in the Heart.”

<sup>536</sup> Laura Miller, “Furriners go nuts for gun-totin’ Yanks!” Rev. of DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, *Salon.com*, 6 November 2003, <http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2003/11/06/shootings/> (1 July 2011).

<sup>537</sup> Miller, “Furriners go nuts.”

<sup>538</sup> Miller, “Furriners go nuts.”

Anthony Daniels appears to have been similarly offended by Pierre’s novel, in particular by its preoccupation with the obscene. Daniels asserts that “it takes a very special kind of person not to recognize the book’s deep and irredeemable, though no doubt socially and culturally representative, trashiness.”<sup>539</sup> Complaining about the novel’s “combination of ersatz Texan vernacular and strained and imprecise poetic metaphor”,<sup>540</sup> Daniels concludes that “Pierre’s writing is not authentic but completely false, except in the sense that it betrays an authentic depravity of mind.”<sup>541</sup> To be fair, even reviewers more sympathetic towards Pierre’s creative project argue that he lacks the insider’s insight. Sam Sifton, for instance, calls the novel “dangerous, smart, ridiculous and very funny” and praises its “jagged, punk-rock sensibility”.<sup>542</sup> Nevertheless, he states that Pierre “appears to know America well, but does not fully understand it.”<sup>543</sup>

This chapter does not constitute an attempt to further evaluate whether Pierre’s book is faithful – or ‘authentic’ – in its depiction and criticism of US-American life. Even US-American commentators appear to disagree on whether Vernon’s voice is rendered convincingly and whether the scenery is recognizably Texan. This is for others to assess, if they must. My analysis is invested in the novel’s textual politics and in the narrative framing of the US-American experience it relates. It may be precisely the fact that *Vernon God Little* does not invite being read as an outsider’s perception that accounts for much of the controversy. Pierre audaciously refrains from framing his depiction of US-American life in a way that could easily be identified as the colorful if polemical inflection of an outsider’s perspective. His novel displays a clear sense of ‘being in the know’ and of having the full right to judge. Pierre claims the novel’s ground, refusing to adorn his novel with textual markers of foreignness.

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<sup>539</sup> Anthony Daniels, “Booker vs. Goncourt: Or, When Silence Is a Duty,” *The New Criterion* 22.5 (2004), 24–27, here 24.

<sup>540</sup> Daniels, “Booker vs. Goncourt” 25.

<sup>541</sup> Daniels, “Booker vs. Goncourt” 26.

<sup>542</sup> Sam Sifton, “Holden Caulfield on Ritalin,” Rev. of DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, *The New York Times*, 9 November 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/09/books/holden-caulfield-on-ritalin.html> (1 July 2011).

<sup>543</sup> Sifton, “Holden Caulfield on Ritalin.”

At the linguistic level, there is no easy way of distinguishing *Vernon God Little* from a 'proper' US-American novel. It is beside the point that the linguistic markers situating the novel in Texas may or may not be unconvincing: many writers have failed in reproducing a voice coming from their own linguistic and cultural sphere. Such failure does not serve as a litmus test to differentiate the 'imposter' from the 'authentic insider'. The attempt to recreate youth language in creative writing has a particularly proud history of defeat, regardless of the respective author's age or individual experiences. Again, the reviewers' opinions have been divided in Vernon Little's case. In opposition to negative evaluations such as the ones quoted above, Sam Sifton applauds Pierre for rendering "adolescence brilliantly, capturing with seeming effortless the bright, contradictory hormone rush of teenage life."<sup>544</sup> Beyond questions of national specificity, articulations of teenage *angst* might be considered a genre with the potential to supersede national space, driven by linguistic codes and emotional content that resonate across national boundaries.

DBC Pierre may be a cosmopolitan author but this does not automatically make *Vernon God Little* a cosmopolitan novel.<sup>545</sup> The novel also shows no signs of being programmatically post-national or post-ethnic in the way of, for instance, some of Hanif Kureishi's more recent works. Vernon Little speaks from the position of an inoutsider, if not in national or ethnic terms. As so many teenage protagonists before him, he struggles with the oppressive narrowness of small-town life. He is pushed further into isolation as the town's scapegoat for his friend Jesus's deed.

Like Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Vernon is an unreliable narrator, prone to exaggeration and adolescent profanity. At the same time, his natural intelligence and strong sense of irony make him an acute cultural observer. What is more, he acknowledges his own partial responsibility for the course of events, time and again drawing attention to his ineptness in dealing effectively with the situation he finds

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<sup>544</sup> Sifton, "Holden Caulfield on Ritalin." See also James Wood, "The Lie-World," Rev. of DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, *London Review of Books* 25.22 (2003), 25 and Sarah Fay McCarthy, Rev. of DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, *The Missouri Review* 27.1 (2004), 183–185, here 184.

<sup>545</sup> Maria Del Pilar Blanco has commented on DBC Pierre's politics of "cosmopolitan proprietorship" in engaging with Mexico in the production of the TV documentary "The Last Aztec" (2006) ("DBC Pierre's Blood Meridian: Cosmopolitan Returns and the Imagination of History," *Symbiosis* 11.1 (2007), 59–74, here 62).

himself in. This is demonstrated, for instance, by Vernon's comment on his lies about having found a job which were meant to quieten his nagging mother:

[B]y the time you're in the deep, and you've invented an imaginary job, with an imaginary start time, and imaginary pay, and put your loved-ones through the sandwich routine [...] it doesn't matter anymore whether you admit the lie, or just get fucken busted doing it. People go, 'But he was so *credible*.' They start to realize you introduced them to a whole parallel world, full of imaginary shit. It's [...] like suddenly you qualify for membership in the fucken Pathology Zone, even though those same people immediately turn around and go, 'Can't make it, Gloria – my folks just flew in from Denver.'<sup>546</sup>

In this passage, Vernon delivers a critical self-characterization *and* denounces the hypocrisy prevalent in his surroundings. In Vernon's account, it is always partly his own fault that things get out of hand. Nevertheless, the depiction of individuals other than Vernon tends to be simplistic. The Texan scenery that he describes is inhabited by mostly despicable caricatures instead of fleshed-out individuals. This, of course, is mainly a consequence of Pierre's decision to use an angry adolescent as the novel's sole narrative voice.<sup>547</sup> This choice clearly limits the complexity of the novel's perception.

Pierre's rendering of life in a Texan town appears to owe much to stereotypes that recur in US-American TV programs, films and books. Conjuring up common images of small-town desolation and lower-class pettiness, *Vernon God Little* treads on familiar ground. In terms of its pervasiveness, the repertoire that Pierre draws from is indeed what one could call a 'global cultural possession'. People in diverse locations, inside the USA and elsewhere, would know how to decipher such images of US-American provinciality, maybe even incorporate them quite organically into their perceptions of the 'American wasteland'. Yet critical responses to *Vernon God Little* suggest that the outsider's use of this repertoire of stereotypes is considered an act of literary slander. The offense appears to be all the more severe if such a novel is 'authorized' by being awarded a prestigious literary prize.

It is true that Pierre does not come up with particularly creative uses for his repertoire of predictable stereotypes. Nevertheless, what many reviewers fail to

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<sup>546</sup> DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, Orlando, FL: Harvest, 2003, 125 [Pierre's emphasis]. In the following, further references to *Vernon God Little* (VGL) will be inserted into the main text.

<sup>547</sup> See Wood, "The Lie-World" 25.

acknowledge is that for all the conventional descriptions of racism, stupidity and shallowness, the novel also offers surprising touches of warmth for the town's people. Pierre's novel is not simply crudely anti-American: it attempts to represent the restricted perspective of an isolated, angry teenager, and Vernon's observations are not always harshly dismissive. In fact, they sometimes display unexpected gentleness and sensitivity. A passage in which Vernon watches a local policewoman at the Pizza Hut may serve as an example:

She sits by the window, hunched over a wedge of pizza. Sitting by the window ain't a sharp idea for a diet fugitive, but you can see the place is overflowing with strangers. [...] Strangely, I get a wave of sadness watching her. Fat ole Vaine, stuffing emptiness into her void. Her eating strategy is to take six big bites, until her mouth's crammed to bursting, then top up the gaps with little bites. Panic eating. Here's me yearning for Mexico, there's Vaine hogging herself slim, just another fragile fucken booger-sac of a life. (VGL 84)

Vernon's perspective implies an unlikely moment of silent companionship, a momentary connection established between the narrator and the woman who aims to put him behind bars. With similar sympathy, Vernon perceives an old man:

The skin of his face hangs down in pockets, like he has lead implants. Character, they call it. It ain't character, though; you know it's feelings. Erosion from waves of disappointment and sadness. (VGL 85)

While beautifully observed, passages such as this display unexpected literary flair for a teenager of Vernon's background and disposition. Of course, other observations are considerably less poetical. Yet most of his dismissive remarks do not primarily discredit the people that he describes. More often than not, they constitute a general commentary on the teenage experience of contemporary life or on the social and linguistic conventions that keep people from interacting authentically. We encounter an example of such social criticism in the description of a conversation between Vernon and his mother:

She gives one of those disbelieving laughs, a hooshy little laugh that means you're the only asshole in the world who believes what you just said. Notice how popular they are these days, those kinds of fucken laughs. Go up to any asshole and say anything, say, 'The sky is blue,' and they'll wheel out one of those fucken laughs, I swear. It's how folk spin the powerdime these days, that's what I'm learning. They don't shoot facts anymore, they just hoosh up their laughs, like: *yeah, right*. (VGL 117 [Pierre's emphasis])

The point that Vernon makes here is not concerned with a dismissal of a specific US-American sphere, of Texas or, for that matter, the USA in general. He despairs over a world governed by television images and educated by advertising jargon. Pierre convincingly captures the exasperation of an individual who has been raised on a diet of “Beavis and Butthead” and “South Park” yet yearns to break free from the automatic irony deeply ingrained in present-day linguistic conventions. Vernon’s perception of his surroundings does not provide much material for a complex analysis of performative identity construction in Judith Butler’s sense.<sup>548</sup> Observed from Vernon’s perspective, most actions of other characters in the novel appear to be inspired by a combination of stupidity, vanity, greed and a shallow repertoire of social conventions and popcultural references.

*Vernon God Little* paints a familiar, if satirically enhanced scenario of a community in the grip of media frenzy, corrupted by vanity, manipulated by a diabolical newscaster and more than willing to sacrifice one of their own. At the novel’s satirical climax, Vernon sits on death row which becomes the stage for the ‘ultimate reality TV show’:

Internet viewers will be able to choose which cells to watch, and change camera angles and all. On regular TV there’ll be edited highlights of the day’s action. Then the general public will vote by phone or internet. They’ll vote for who should die next. The cuter we act, the more we entertain, the longer we might live. I heard one ole con say it’d be just like the life of a real actor. (VGL 246)

The show’s inventor brands this “humanity in action – the next logical step toward true democracy” (VGL 245). Of course, it is merely the next logical step towards a totalitarian rule of the mob which in turn is manipulated by those pulling the strings behind the scenes. The introduction of ‘death row reality TV’ adds a few eerily suggestive scenes to the novel’s plot yet the satirical implications of this twist are fairly conventional.

Like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Transmission*, *Vernon God Little* tells the story of an emigration. Yet, in contrast to Changez’ and Arjun’s, Vernon’s flight from the USA is doomed. Vernon is an insider also in the sense that he appears to be ‘stuck’ in his US-American existence and inside his US-American imaginative

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<sup>548</sup> See my discussion of the concept in the chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

horizon. Wishing himself away to Mexico, he imagines "cactus, fiestas, and salty breath. The howls of men in the back of whose lives lurked women called Maria" (VGL 114). His escapist visions of life in Mexico are imbued with the vocabulary of Hollywood cinema:

Remember that ole movie called *Against All Odds*, where this babe has a beach-house in Mexico? That's where I can run. Mom can visit after things die down. There she is, sobbing with joy, ole spanky-cheeked Doris Little, who could be played by Kathy Bates, who was in that movie *Misery*. Tears of pride at the excellent sanitation, and at my decent, orderly life. (VGL 47)

While Vernon is mystified about his mother's obsession with the phoney and the trivial, he himself lacks the independence of mind to come up with anything but recycled dreams. In this respect, it seems suitable that the novel's unlikely fairy tale ending is brought about by a *deus ex machina* moment rather than by a heroic act on Vernon's part. Early in the novel, Vernon tells us: "Under my grief glows a serenity that comes from knowing the truth always wins in the end. Why do movies end happy? Because they imitate life" (VGL 8). The novel, of course, does nothing to disperse our skepticism about this piece of wisdom. Nevertheless, everything *does* end well for Vernon. This 'resolution', however, does not imitate life but reproduces stereotypes of filmic closure. The happy ending is used as a narrative shortcut in order to release Vernon from death row and to compensate him for his suffering. We might read it as an ironical inversion of postmodern entropy and as the climax of Pierre's satirical poise. However, it is with some justification if Sarah Fay McCarthy complains that this final plot movement "borders on the ridiculous."<sup>549</sup>

The novel's most enthralling parts describe Vernon's flight to Mexico. Even though Mexico is the destination of Vernon's escapist visions, his encounter with the country and its inhabitants also opens his eyes to the Mexican Other's dreams of 'America':

Tall, small people flow around me like tumbling store-displays, chubby types in denim carve between them, with all the confidence of home. Mexicans. The faces seem cautious, like you might interrupt a promise made to them. The hem of their dream hangs over this bridge too, that's why. You can taste it. I pass by an ole man wearing Ray-Bans, a *Baywatch* cap, a *Wowboys* jacket, fluorescent green Nikes, and carrying a Nintendo box tied with *South Park* bedsheets. (VGL 167)

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<sup>549</sup> McCarthy, Rev. of DBC Pierre 185.



Vernon is receptive to the yearning of the people on the other side of the border. At the same time, Mexico attracts him precisely because he is unable to ‘decode’ it. In his brand of teenage exoticism, poverty and shabbiness imply authenticity and promise adventure. The border looks “like Steven Spielberg built it, a blast of arctic light framed in darkness” (VGL 167). Moving beyond it, Vernon realizes that “[n]ight doesn’t die in Mexico. If the world was flat, you just know the edge would look like this. Natural law is suspended here, you can tell” (VGL 172). Mexico opens up as a space of exploration and possibility, an alternative non-American future. However, when Vernon reaches Acapulco, the presence of a touristic infrastructure catering to US-Americans re-establishes ‘natural law’. One such law is the boundary dividing Vernon from his temporary Mexican travel companion Pelayo. The economic and social implications of Vernon’s US-American citizenship become patently clear, disrupting the momentary bond that Vernon had established with Pelayo and his son:

He [Pelayo] senses I have to melt back into my dry-cleaned world awhile. [...] An awkward membrane grows between us [...]. As if he knows my natural habitat is in one of these towers full of wealthy people. He knows he’d be like a fucken gardener in one of these places, if so much. His eyes grow shy from the truth of things, and for the moments past of our unusual friendship. (VGL 183)

Vernon’s self-reinvention as “Vernon Gonzales Little” (VGL 183) remains a fleeting reverie. It is only fitting that his adventure is brought to an end by his inability to leave behind the repertoire of dreams that he has been raised on in the USA: it is the call to Vernon’s all-American dream girl Taylor that leads to his arrest.

*Vernon God Little* expresses little optimism for potential challenges to the established order and the rule of the media-manipulated mob. Bhabha’s conception of the migrant as a subversive force finds no match in Pierre’s novel.<sup>550</sup> The most prominent migrant character, Vernon’s dead friend Jesus, haunts the text as a shadowy presence. In contrast to Vernon, Jesus was never an inoutsider but always an outsider proper, on more than on ethnic grounds. What triggers his ‘terrorist’ act is not his status as an ethnic outsider, nor everyday racism or other common causes of teenage alienation. Pierre offers a specific explanation for the unexplainable: Jesus has not only been subject to a particularly severe case of sexual abuse but

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<sup>550</sup> See my chapter on “Performative Depictions and Creative Stereotypes” (part I, chapter 4).

photographic evidence of his humiliation has also become available to his peers. Of course, *Vernon God Little* is not primarily an inquiry into the phenomenon of the high school massacre. Nevertheless it is a curious misstep on Pierre's part to deliver such a straightforward reason for Jesus' deed. Jesus is a victim, not an agent.

For all its cheap shots at Texan small-town life, *Vernon God Little* is mainly a story of teenage alienation, of abuse and humiliation and of an idiosyncratic narrator's attempt to manage an unmanageable situation. As such, it could probably have been set anywhere. The phenomenon of the high school massacre is, of course, also not a purely US-American one, no matter how reassuring such an attribution might be for the rest of the world. Pierre's literary border-crossing is performed with apparent indifference towards the 'audacity' of the act. Issues of national and ethnic identity only transpire during Vernon's escape to Mexico. Of course, it is a characteristic trait of the insider to consider questions of group membership only to a very limited extent unless there is a specific motivation to do so. In this respect, Pierre's avoidance of such discourses of group membership might be read as a confident claim to US-American narrative ground. The implicit message appears to be that in today's world, we can all speak about the USA with authority (even if many of Pierre's reviewers dispute precisely this point). Furthermore Hollywood cinema has turned images of the US-American teenager into something of 'prototype' for teenagers worldwide. Of course, it would be extremely problematic to conceive of the US-American teenager as a cultural, ethnic and national 'blank'. Nevertheless, Vernon's conflict with a specific US-American sphere may also be read as an accentuated critique of contemporary society at large. Thus the sarcastic edge of *Vernon God Little* should in fact not only unsettle if encountered from a US-American (reading) perspective. The novel's satirical impact may ultimately be slight but then again this ineffectuality adequately reflects the powerlessness of its teenage protagonist, thus establishing an implicit alliance between author and fictional character.

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#### 4.4 The ‘Terrorist’

As the use of the inverted commas around ‘terrorist’ implies, the three close reading chapters of this section engage with individuals onto whom the label ‘terrorist’ is assigned from the outside. Each of the three protagonists is perceived as a terrorist; neither of them is a terrorist proper in any conventional sense. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid refuses to provide the reader with any clear response to the question whether Changez is an extremist plotting a violent attack or just a victim of racial profiling. Arjun, the protagonist of Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*, unleashes a virulent computer virus. Yet as the reader gains insight into his emotional world, the innocence of his motivations calls into question the label of the cyberterrorist. Finally, Vernon in DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* is completely innocent, hunted by the police and the media for reasons largely unconnected to anything he may or may not have done. In addition to this, *Vernon God Little* portrays the actual high school killer, Vernon’s friend Jesus, as a victim, a person whose violent deed was the last resort in a situation of complete powerlessness.

All three novels challenge the idea of the demonic blood-thirsty monster and redirect attention towards questions of who assigns the label of the terrorist and for which reasons. Narrative voice plays an important role in achieving this change in perspective. In two of the novels, the professed criminal tells his own story. This, of course, raises questions about the narrator’s reliability, all the more crucial in these specific cases. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* sends contradictory signs, never allowing the reader to settle whether the narrator Changez deserves to be trusted or not. DBC Pierre’s Vernon frankly admits to be a liar on small matters. Nevertheless, his claim to innocence appears trust-worthy. In *Transmission*, Arjun’s internal perspective is matched by a globalized narrative scope. The reader gains access to Arjun’s individual suffering but also receives panoptic glimpses at a more general barrenness of human existence in a globalized, virtualized world.

Mohsin Hamid has described his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as an ‘emigration novel’, and I have applied this category to all three novels in this section. All of them portray a departure from the United States. For two of the three protagonists, Changez and Arjun, emigration follows a failed project of immigration,

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the disappointment of their respective American Dream. However, what distinguishes the category of the 'emigration novel' from the conventional label of the 'migrant novel' is not merely a change in direction. The term 'migrant novel' implies neutrality in so far as it does not identify an 'inside' and an 'outside' but merely describes a movement from one location to another. On the other hand, 'emigration' suggests an outward-movement, in the cases under consideration here a movement away from the USA. While this is precisely the movement that Hamid's novel describes, Kunzru's and Pierre's novels complicate the geographical directionality of emigration from their US-American spheres. Arjun's escape is not primarily a flight beyond the national boundaries of the USA. He passes into the unknown, 'emigrating' from an existence shaped by disappointment and ruled by a transnational system of exploitation. In *Vernon God Little*, Vernon's literal emigration from Texas to the mythical Mexico fails, but he nevertheless transcends the constraints of his previous life. Like Arjun, he crosses over into a kind of utopian idealized space. Thus both Hari Kunzru and DBC Pierre resolve their novels with a step into utopia, granting relief to their protagonists without suspending the novels' social criticism. Mohsin Hamid leaves the ending of his novel unresolved and thereby forces the reader to reconsider his or her own preconceptions and stereotypical assumptions. All three novels refuse to offer closure. The destination of their acts of narrative emigration remains unclear.

Beyond questions of national belonging, the novels explore their protagonists' position as insiders, outsiders or inoutsiders. As his American Dream crumbles, Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* comes to understand his position in the USA as that of a 'modern-day janissary', the janissaries having been historical 'inoutsiders' in their own right. Changez has learned to succeed in the US-American business world and appears to have earned his entrance, yet his position is transformed by the events of 9/11. As an IT body-shop worker, Arjun in *Transmission* remains an unassimilated and largely invisible outsider in US-American society. At the same time, his hacking expertise provides him with access to a secret existence beneath the surface of people's computerized everyday lives. His 'creation', the computer virus, effortlessly enters homes and offices, disregarding political boundaries and questions of group membership. In *Vernon God Little*,

Vernon is an insider in national and cultural terms, but as the quintessential angry teenager he is an outsider in his specific social sphere. Finally, *Vernon God Little* has been received as a provocative metatextual statement on issues of group membership: DBC Pierre's refusal to take refuge to the migrant perspective, his decision to speak 'from the inside' of US-American society questions the very conceptions of 'insiderdom' and 'outsiderdom'. It is in this sense that this section of the study may be seen to engage with 'terrorism' also as a form of transgression that disrespects the boundaries both of modern life *and* of narrative conventions.

**Cosmopolitan**

Jigger Gordon Gin  
 2 Dashes Cointreau  
 Juice of One Lemon  
 Teaspoon Raspberry  
 Glass no. 4 [goblet 3 ½ oz].  
 Shake and strain.

American Travelling  
 Mixologists, *Pioneers of  
 Mixing Gins at Elite Bars  
 1903–1933* (1934)

“Absolut Citron,  
 a splash of triple sec,  
 a drop of roses lime  
 and just enough cranberry  
 to make it  
 oh so pretty in pink.”

Cheryl Cook (1985/86)

**Cosmopolitan,  
 “Sex and the City” variation**

3 cl lemon vodka  
 1 cl Cointreau  
 1 cl freshly squeezed lime juice  
 3 cl cranberry nectar  
 Shake on ice.  
 Strain into martini glass.

Recipe courtesy of  
 Cocktailpodcast,  
[www.cocktailpodcast.de](http://www.cocktailpodcast.de) (2011)

**The Cosmopolitan Perspective in Literary Studies**

More often than not, the literary encounters with the USA explored in this study refer back to or are played out in a global context. The authors have assessed and reimagined US-American landscapes and characters from within, yet these acts of creative involvement originate from diverse localities and display a sensibility that transcends national and cultural membership. It is for this reason that the final chapter of this study is dedicated to the concept of cosmopolitanism. I consider contemporary debates around the term and outline my own approach to the conceptual field. Finally, I make suggestions for its applicability within literary studies.

Throughout this study, I have used the term ‘cosmopolitan’ to describe the kind of person who moves confidently between nations and cultures and whose lifestyle, largely by choice, is geographically flexible. Of course, cosmopolitanism deserves more analytical attention, not least because it has been subject to a renewed and rather vivid debate over the past two decades. The concept as such, of course, is a rather old one, usually being dated back to Stoic philosophy. Since the late eighteenth century, it has been associated with Kant’s notion of a universal sociability.<sup>551</sup> Later it was reappropriated by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt.<sup>552</sup>

<sup>551</sup> See in particular Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Transl. David L. Colclasure, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (Rethinking the Western Tradition), Ed. and intr. Pauline Kleingeld, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006, 3–16 [German original version “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in

Since the late 1980s, cosmopolitanism has enjoyed a major revival, a fact that appears to be closely connected to the global processes of political, economic, ecological and cultural transformation that have been taking place since the beginning of the twentieth century. Ulrich Beck has argued that these changes and the emergence of a ‘world risk society’ have created the necessity for human beings to conceive of their position in relation to the world at large. In this context, cosmopolitanism can be seen as a productive way of thinking about the world in terms of shared responsibility and planetary interdependence. Beck has formulated his call for such a programmatic outlook in his ‘Cosmopolitan Manifesto’.<sup>553</sup> In a related fashion, Walter D. Mignolo has described cosmopolitanism as “a set of projects towards planetary conviviality.”<sup>554</sup> We may agree that the global challenges of our time demand a sense of cosmopolitan responsibility and interconnectedness, but this still tells us very little about the exact shape of a “cosmopolitan democracy” which, at least according to Beck, is “a realistic, if utopian, project.”<sup>555</sup> Before moving on to consider possible conceptions of the ‘cosmopolitan novel’, I would thus like to draw attention to recent debates around the characteristics of a cosmopolitanism suitable for the twenty-first century.

In developing a contemporary projection of cosmopolitanism, one obvious challenge is the question how it might relate to notions of national citizenship. The cosmopolitan as a person who is ‘at home in the world’, to borrow the title of Timothy Brennan’s study, has often been perceived as standing in opposition to conventional modes of national affiliation. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, for instance, have suggested that contemporary cosmopolitanism “transcends the

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weltbürgerlicher Absicht,” 1785] and “Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” Transl. David L. Colclasure, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (Rethinking the Western Tradition), Ed. and intr. Pauline Kleingeld, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006, 67–109 [German original version “Zum ewigen Frieden,” 1795].

<sup>552</sup> See in particular Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New ed., San Diego: Harcourt, 1994. See also the chapter “Concluding Remarks” in the original edition (NYC: Harcourt, 1951) which was replaced in later editions.

<sup>553</sup> Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999, in particular 15–18.

<sup>554</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” Carol A. Breckenridge; Sheldon Pollock; Homi K. Bhabha; Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism* (Millennial Quartet), Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 2002, 157–187, here 157. See also Gerard Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination: Critical Cosmopolitanism and Social Theory,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 57.1 (2006), 25–47, here 29.

<sup>555</sup> Beck, *World Risk Society* 9.

seemingly exhausted nation-state model.”<sup>556</sup> Mike Featherstone has argued that in the process of cosmopolitanization “national identifications are undermined [and] items which make up the fabric of our everyday lives, elements as diverse as food and memory, can no longer be located locally.”<sup>557</sup> It makes sense to consider the implications of the examples that Featherstone has chosen. Of course, traditions of food have a long history of traveling across national boundaries, food being among the most typically transcultural items of everyday life. On the other hand, the idea of ‘cosmopolitan memory’ requires more careful thought. Featherstone’s point is that even abstract processes of identification and imagination are subject to cosmopolitanization. Our recollection of the events of 11 September 2001, for instance, might be an instance of ‘cosmopolitan memory’: we are likely to remember not only our own feelings and ‘where we were at the time’ but also our responses to media reports from the USA and from other parts of the world as well as our worries about the event’s larger political and military repercussions. ‘Cosmopolitan memory’ is a mode of recollection that expresses the individual’s self-perception as interconnected with the world at large. As such, it must not be confused with transcultural memory which is connected to the individual’s experience of transcultural realities.<sup>558</sup> In general, ‘cosmopolitan’ is *not* simply synonymous ‘transnational’ or ‘transcultural’ even though much of the recent scholarship on cosmopolitanism has been notably careless in differentiating such related terms from each other.<sup>559</sup>

<sup>556</sup> Steven Vertovec; Robin Cohen, “Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism,” Steven Vertovec; Robin Cohen (eds.), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002, 1–22, here 4.

<sup>557</sup> Mike Featherstone, “Cosmopolis: An Introduction,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19.1–2 (2002), 1–16, here 4.

<sup>558</sup> ‘Transcultural memory’ has been conceptualized, for instance, by Nadia Butt in “Fictions of Transcultural Memory: Zulfikar Ghose’s *The Triple Mirror of the Self* as an Imaginative Reconstruction of the Self in Multiple Worlds,” Frank Schulze-Engler et al. (eds.), *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities* (Cross/Cultures 102/ASNEL Papers 12), Amsterdam/NYC: Rodopi, 2009, 293–306. See also Nadia Butt’s forthcoming monograph *Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories: Transcultural Memory and the Indo-English Novel*.

<sup>559</sup> The ‘trans-’ in both ‘transcultural’ and ‘transnational’ indicates movements, negotiations and (individual or collective) positionalities that challenge the idea of distinct cultural or national entities. This does not necessarily include an engagement with the world at large. For a conceptualization of the ‘transcultural’, see Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, London: Sage, 1999, 194–213. For an early discussion of the ‘transnational’, see Robert Keohane; Joseph Nye,



Despite the fact that the tension between cosmopolitanism and the nation-state remains vital, not everyone conceives of cosmopolitanism in ‘post-nationalist’ terms. Timothy Brennan has drawn attention to the fact that it too often constitutes an “act of avoidance if not hostility and disarticulation towards states in formation.”<sup>560</sup> Proposing an alternative type of cosmopolitanism, Brennan argues that to

understand and appreciate the values of all humans is to understand [...] the right of small nations – patriotism and all – including that embarrassing, but sizable, variant of socialist nationalism that is also internationalism. A cosmopolitanism worthy of the name [...] would have to give space to the very nationalism that the term is invoked to counter.<sup>561</sup>

In uncharacteristic agreement with Brennan’s argument, Bruce Robbins has emphasized that the “commonsensical opposition [of cosmopolitanism and nationalism] is no longer self-evident.”<sup>562</sup>

Traditional models of cosmopolitanism rely on a universalist approach to the world. This constitutes another major challenge for current reconceptions, in particular for fields of study such as sociology or cultural and literary studies which increasingly appear to specialize in the celebration of difference and complexity. So it is hardly surprising that the question how cosmopolitanism engages with the experience of difference has been central to scholarly debates.

In his introduction to *Cosmopolitics*, Bruce Robbins states that

[u]nderstood as a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole, cosmopolitanism has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives. It has seemed to be a luxuriously free-floating view from above. But many voices now insist [...] that the term should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are unprivileged – indeed, often coerced.<sup>563</sup>

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“Transnational Relations and World Politics: An Introduction,” *International Organisation* 25.3 (1972), 329–249.

<sup>560</sup> Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Convergences: Inventories of the Present), Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1997, 2.

<sup>561</sup> Brennan, *At Home in the World* 25.

<sup>562</sup> Bruce Robbins, “Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” Pheng Cheah; Bruce Robbins (eds.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Cultural Politics 14), Minneapolis, MN/London: U of Minnesota P, 1998, 1–19, here 2.

<sup>563</sup> Robbins, “Introduction Part I” 1.

Robbins thus proposes a non-universalist cosmopolitanism or, rather, the global dialogue of various “discrepant cosmopolitanisms”<sup>564</sup> that are conditioned by realities of “(re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance.”<sup>565</sup> At the same time, Robbins addresses one of the concept’s historical flaws, namely its association with privilege. Whether it makes sense to subsume the world’s involuntary transnational travelers under the label of cosmopolitanism will be discussed later in this chapter.

Along slightly more traditional lines than Robbins, Amanda Anderson argues that “cosmopolitanism endorses reflective distance from one’s cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity.”<sup>566</sup> In addition to this, Anderson suggests a useful differentiation between ‘exclusionary cosmopolitanism’ and ‘inclusionary cosmopolitanism’:

In exclusionary cosmopolitanism, little to no weight is given to exploration of disparate cultures: all value lies in an abstract or ‘cosmic’ universalism. In inclusionary cosmopolitanism, by contrast, universalism finds expression through sympathetic imagination and intercultural exchange.<sup>567</sup>

Anderson emphasizes the fact that cosmopolitanism is characterized by a tension between an elitist ideal of worldly intellectualism and an egalitarian belief in the “humanity of all, wherever positioned.”<sup>568</sup> This contradiction, though sometimes disputed in current debate, continues to be an inherent quality of the cosmopolitan idea and cannot be transcended by formulaic references to the vibrancy of contemporary transnationalism.

Gerard Delanty attributes the emergence of post-universalist conceptions of cosmopolitanism to the recent theorization of multiple modernities. Post-universal cosmopolitanism is “critical and dialogic, seeing as the goal alternative readings of history and the recognition of plurality rather than the creation of a universal

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<sup>564</sup> Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanism,” *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues, Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 169–186, here 181.

<sup>565</sup> Robbins, “Introduction Part I” 3.

<sup>566</sup> Amanda Anderson, “Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity,” Pheng Cheah; Bruce Robbins (eds.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Cultural Politics 14), Minneapolis, MN/London: U of Minnesota P, 1998, 265–289, here 267.

<sup>567</sup> Anderson, “Cosmopolitanism” 268.

<sup>568</sup> Anderson, “Cosmopolitanism” 268.

order.”<sup>569</sup> Delanty further accentuates that “the local and the national is redefined as a result of interaction with the global.”<sup>570</sup>

Kwame Anthony Appiah characterizes the cosmopolitan attitude as conditioned by a combination of two basic principles:

One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in practices and beliefs that lend them significance.<sup>571</sup>

Appiah thus identifies the encounter with difference as an integral part of the cosmopolitan experience. He emphasizes that cosmopolitans “suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don’t suppose, like some universalists, that we could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary.”<sup>572</sup> The cosmopolitan attitude thus promotes dialogue, not necessarily consensus.

In a similar vein, Ulrich Beck stresses the “dialogic imagination” of the cosmopolitan perception “which corresponds to the coexistence of rival ways of life in the individual experience, which makes it a matter of fate to compare, reflect, criticize, understand, combine contradictory certainties.”<sup>573</sup> Beck contrasts this ‘dialogic imagination’ with the ‘monologic imagination’ of the national perspective which “excludes the otherness of the other.”<sup>574</sup> This clear opposition is debatable as modern nationalisms are frequently forced to actively engage with questions of otherness. However, Beck rightly points out the ‘cosmopolitan fallacy’ of the assumption that the individual’s experience of difference and transnationality necessarily leads to a sense of cosmopolitan responsibility.<sup>575</sup> Beck sensibly approaches cosmopolitanism as an attitude or a mode of perception rather than a

<sup>569</sup> Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination” 35.

<sup>570</sup> Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination” 36.

<sup>571</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Issues of Our Time), New York/London: W. W. Norton, 2006, XV.

<sup>572</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* 57.

<sup>573</sup> Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19.1–2 (2002), 17–44, here 18.

<sup>574</sup> Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society” 19.

<sup>575</sup> Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society” 29.

condition or a mode of existence. This distinction helps to avoid the common but faulty identification of transnational lifestyles as cosmopolitan *per se*.

In a valuable contribution to the debate, Nina Glick Schiller, Tsypylma Darieva and Sandra Gruner-Domic have recently connected cosmopolitanism to “sociability practices rather than to a tolerance for cultural difference or a universalist morality.”<sup>576</sup> In their reading, cosmopolitan sociability depends on

forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world. As such [it] is an ability to find aspects of the shared human experience including aspirations for a better world within or despite what would seem to be divides of culture and belief.<sup>577</sup>

This model highlights a certain attitude as well as a set of practices and skills. Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic conceptualize contemporary cosmopolitanism as a “Kantian project” in so far as it relies on “the recognition of the human capacity to expand the circle of identification, belonging and social relationship.”<sup>578</sup> What is particularly useful about their approach is the importance it assigns to “moments and possibilities for cosmopolitan sociability”<sup>579</sup> rather than to a cosmopolitan condition as such.

Both this emphasis on ‘cosmopolitan possibilities’ and Beck’s remark on the ‘cosmopolitan fallacy’ oppose the misconceived yet common notion that mobility and transnational encounter necessarily correspond with cosmopolitanism. Much of the scholarship on the topic cites examples taken from the mobile sphere that Arjun Appadurai has called ‘ethnoscape’.<sup>580</sup> This makes sense since it is here that a lot of cosmopolitan possibilities arise. However, these ‘possibilities’ are precisely *not* cosmopolitan imperatives, nor is the cosmopolitan necessarily a traveler in any physical sense. This is why Ulf Hannerz’ early attempt to define characteristics

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<sup>576</sup> Nina Glick Schiller; Tsypylma Darieva; Sandra Gruner-Domic, “Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability in a Transnational Age: An Introduction,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34.3 (2011), 399–418, here 401.

<sup>577</sup> Glick Schiller et al., “Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability” 402f.

<sup>578</sup> Glick Schiller et al., “Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability” 403.

<sup>579</sup> Glick Schiller et al., “Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability” 403.

<sup>580</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology,” Richard G. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1991, 191–210, here 192.

which distinguish the cosmopolitan from the tourist, the exile and the expatriate<sup>581</sup> was logically flawed to begin with: the most obvious difference is that it is quite possible to cultivate a cosmopolitan perspective without ever leaving one's house.

In their introduction to *Cosmopolitanism* (2002), Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty argue that cosmopolitans today

are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community.<sup>582</sup>

Pollock et al. soften their statement by merely suggesting what they deem to be *often* the case. Yet even this claim is debatable. It is obvious that Pollock et al. seek to rehabilitate cosmopolitanism from accusations of elitism. However, they fail to show what qualifies the groups of peoples they evoke as cosmopolitans proper. Refugees, diasporic peoples and migrants are transnational or transcultural travelers. They may or may not be cosmopolitans. What is more, many of them are excluded from discourses and processes of decision-making that shape what Pollock et al. call the 'cosmopolitical community'. Pollock et al. furthermore claim that cosmopolitanism

is infinite ways of being. To understand that we are already cosmopolitan, however much and often this mode of being has been threatened by the work of purification, means to understand these ways in their full breadth through a disciplinary cosmopolitanism.<sup>583</sup>

This is precisely *not* the case. We are *not* all cosmopolitans, and I argue that cosmopolitanism is *not* primarily a mode of existence. Pollock et al. fail to deliver an explanation why what they describe should be called 'cosmopolitan' rather than 'transnational' or 'transcultural'. It is in this respect that Glick Schiller et al.'s

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<sup>581</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (Comedia), London/NYC: Routledge, 1996, 105f.

<sup>582</sup> Sheldon Pollock; Homi K. Bhabha; Carol A. Breckenridge; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Cosmopolitanisms," Carol A. Breckenridge; Sheldon Pollock; Homi K. Bhabha; Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism* (Millennial Quartet), Durham, NC/London: Duke UP, 2002, 1–14, here 6.

<sup>583</sup> Sheldon Pollock et al., "Cosmopolitanisms" 12.

concentration on ‘cosmopolitan possibilities’ constitutes an important step towards increased analytical clarity.<sup>584</sup>

As early as in 1997, Timothy Brennan complained about the fact that the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ had become “less an analytical category than a normative projection, complementing at once celebratory claims and despairing recognitions.”<sup>585</sup> Brennan’s critique of contemporary cosmopolitanism as well as of the scholarship that engages with it is vital and thought-provoking even if *At Home in the World* arguably exaggerates US-American influence on both. Brennan argues that today

there are more objective foundations for a ‘new world’ than Kant ever knew: namely, the existence of a nation (the United States) with the individual means, the motive, and the alliances to establish the first universal law.<sup>586</sup>

Beyond questions of political, economic and military dominance, it is debatable whether cosmopolitan discourses and scholarship on the topic are always centrally occupied with and complicit with the pursuit of US-American objectives. Brennan underestimates, for instance, the influence that anti-American intellectualism still exerts on conceptions of cosmopolitanism in Europe, in the USA and elsewhere. Furthermore, while it is true that European scholars engage with the output of the big US-American research institutions and publishing houses, it is open to question whether the ‘Americanness’ of these ‘locations’ is as important for cosmopolitan discourses as Brennan implies. It is also misleading to assume that this is the only type of scholarly and intellectual debate that takes place. Nevertheless, Brennan is right to remind us that cosmopolitanism as celebrated today may sometimes be “less expansive ethos than an expansionist policy.”<sup>587</sup>

In an article on what he calls ‘cosmo-theory’, Brennan characterizes recent scholarship on cosmopolitanism as often relying on

the coupling of an overdeveloped sensitivity to significant cases of mixed forms of cultural life – usually related in vivid, anecdotal form – with a relatively weak

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<sup>584</sup> Glick Schiller et al., “Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability” 415. See also Victor Roudometof, “Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Glocalization,” *Current Sociology* 53.1 (2005), 113–135, here 128. See also Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination” 32.

<sup>585</sup> Brennan, *At Home in the World* 1f.

<sup>586</sup> Brennan, *At Home in the World* 4.

<sup>587</sup> Brennan, *At Home in the World* 55.

understanding of processes of power, labor management, territorial control, or governance [...]. It is a discourse of 'processes,' 'movements,' 'unfoldings' rather than designs, projects, or campaigns. Life is described as what happens to people. It is not as though there were no role for agency in such theories, which on the contrary rely on excited exaggerations of activity, creativity, and plebeian initiative. But agency is almost never seen in moments of civic participation. It is primarily about subject formation.<sup>588</sup>

I have quoted Brennan's criticism at some length because despite its polemical edge it identifies a number of flaws that are indeed common to current research on the topic. Some of the characteristics of 'cosmo-theory' become even more pronounced as notions of cosmopolitanism are transferred to the vocabulary of literary scholarship. Too much of the scholarly work in particular on so-called 'postcolonial' literatures contends itself with plot-driven analysis and a vague rhetoric of 'complex processes' and 'hybrid identities'. In literary studies even more than elsewhere, it makes sense to conceive of cosmopolitanism as first and foremost a perspective and attitude, possibly a programme (in Brennan's sense). If we do so, literary studies are in fact at an advantage compared to sociology or anthropology: while it is difficult for the sociologist, for instance, to examine people's attitudes and perspectives (rather than the transnational setup of their lives), literary texts lend themselves well to this kind of inquiry. Literary scholarship on cosmopolitanism should constitute an engagement with cosmopolitan projects, programmes and perspectives at all levels of the literary text. Before I elaborate on such an approach, I would like to briefly consider the more colloquial use of the term 'cosmopolitan' as descriptive of a certain kind of author or intellectual.

The adjective 'cosmopolitan' is frequently used to describe a person's transnational lifestyle, in particular if the person is an intellectual, a writer or an artist traveling 'between worlds' and maintaining associations with various geographical locations. Used in this fashion, the adjective evokes financial privilege and intellectual elitism. In response to such charges, Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen have, somewhat feebly, stated:

A frequent attack on cosmopolites is that cosmopolitanism is only available to an elite – those who have the resources necessary to travel, learn other languages and absorb other cultures. This, historically, has often been true. [...] However, in the contemporary world, cultural and linguistic diversity is omnipresent, and the

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<sup>588</sup> Timothy Brennan, "Cosmo-Theory," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001), 659–691, here 677.

capacity to communicate with others and to understand their cultures is available, at least potentially, to many.<sup>589</sup>

The insertion of ‘at least potentially’ signals the tenuousness of Vertovec and Cohen’s claim. The truth is that the kind of lifestyle described above very frequently *is* and *continues to be* connected with privilege. However, my main objection to concentrating on this use of the word is that it is not very effective as an analytical category in literary studies. A writer’s “habits of travel or foreign residencies” are, as Timothy Brennan has pointed out, “barely relevant.”<sup>590</sup> Such facts may be interesting in themselves as the kind of trivia appreciated by the literary *connoisseur*. However, they contribute very little to the analysis of a writer’s creative work. In fact, an author’s self-stylization in interviews and newspaper columns often appears barely connected to his or her literary work as such. Of course, some authors speak beautifully and lucidly on their own work, Chris Abani being a notable example.<sup>591</sup> Nevertheless, an author’s public utterances are part of larger creative, intellectual or political debates at best and individual creative bravado or part of a circus of marketing and celebrity entertainment at worst.

Neil Lazarus’s attempt at defining the cosmopolitan outlook provides a prime example of intellectual self-stylization. Lazarus elaborates that to be

at home in the world is not only to be travelled and ‘worldly’, it is to be capable of retaining one’s centre of gravity, one’s ability to be oneself, wherever in the world one might be. One is not born, but made cosmopolitan. To inhabit cosmopolitanism as a structure of feeling, one has to develop a critical faculty and to assume command of the affective and institutional means of using it. These ‘affective’ means consist not least in the form of an acquired *confidence*, exuded as though it were a private, characterological endowment, although it turns out, of course, to have been publicly constructed, through upbringing, schooling, socialization generally: the cosmopolitan is not only at home in the world; he – and I guess therefore that I do mostly mean ‘he’ – is also typically a ‘man of the world’.<sup>592</sup>

<sup>589</sup> Vertovec et al., “Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism” 5.

<sup>590</sup> Brennan, *At Home in the World* 24.

<sup>591</sup> That such eloquence may be a double-edged sword is demonstrated by the debate around the authenticity of Abani’s autobiographical claims, see for instance Ikhida R. Ikheloa’s blog entry “The Trials of Chris Abani and the Power of Empty Words,” *Ikhida. Email from America*, 25 November 2011, <http://xokigbo.wordpress.com/2011/11/25/the-trials-of-chris-abani-and-the-power-of-empty-words> (1 December 2011).

<sup>592</sup> Neil Lazarus, “Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46.119 (2011), 119–137, here 119 [Lazarus’ emphasis].



Lazarus' proudly sexist and elitist appraisal is interesting for its effective self-characterization, yet it seems to come from a different age and does not contribute much to a conceptualization of cosmopolitanism as an analytical category in literary studies.

Of course, if we argue that biographical facts about an author are largely irrelevant, a study like this has to face the question why its choice of primary texts would partially depend on the authors' origins and the very transnational lifestyle that I have just dismissed as immaterial. Throughout this study I have emphasized that the authors claim inside perspectives on the USA. If we are no longer interested in their individual background as 'cultural outsiders', this creative choice seems hardly noteworthy. What is more, it becomes hard to justify the exclusion of US-American authors. The example of DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* has shown the challenges of a framework that claims to consider the literary text irrespective of its author's nationality and origin. Nevertheless, I have tried to show that authors who traditionally might have approached the USA via the migrant perspective increasingly choose to construct confident inside perspectives or cosmopolitan outlooks that situate the USA within the world at large.

The cosmopolitan perspective as a analytical tool in the literary text does not depend on the author's biographical background or on national categorization. As such, it lends itself to an analysis that concentrates on the literary text. Berthold Schoene has developed such an approach in *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009). He sensibly characterizes the cosmopolitan novel as "the novel that imagines the world"<sup>593</sup> and emphasizes its preoccupation with the "representation of worldwide human living and global community."<sup>594</sup> Moving beyond such general claims, he describes narrative techniques that authors employ in order to create such a cosmopolitan vision. He argues, for instance, that cosmopolitan representation

resorts to the montage technique of contemporary cinema, effecting rapid shifts in focus and perspective with the aim of cramming as many story lines and clashing imageries as possible into one and the same *mise en scène*.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 28.

<sup>594</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 17.

<sup>595</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 14.

Schoene's conception of the cosmopolitan perspective is helpful, and his analysis of individual literary texts is persuasive. However, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* suffers somewhat from the programmatic quality of Schoene's analysis. Following Ulrich Beck's *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, Schoene states that

the contemporary cosmopolitan novel must aim 'to break out of the self-centred narcissism of the national outlook and the dull incomprehension with which it infects thought and action, and thereby enlighten human beings concerning the real, internal cosmopolitanization of their lifeworlds and institutions' (Beck 2006: 2). It must do its best to demonstrate that 'in a world of global crises and dangers produced by civilization, the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival' (14). Such a radical refocusing of the literary imagination from the national to the global will bring about truly paradigm-shifting change, heralding the beginning of a new era in both critical and creative thought.<sup>596</sup>

Schoene asserts that in the twenty-first century

the task is to venture beyond our nationally demarcated horizons into the world at large and understand the domestic and the global as weaving on mutually pervasive patterns of contemporary human circumstance and experience, containing both dark and light.<sup>597</sup>

According to Schoene, it is the role of art and literature "to provide the cosmopolitan imagination needed to facilitate this fundamental shift in the way in which we conceive of ourselves in relation to one another."<sup>598</sup>

While I whole-heartedly support the idea that literature matters to and shapes the world we live in, I oppose the thought that the contemporary novelist should be under the obligation to produce a certain kind of novel, a novel to provide us with imaginative guidance. Much as one may object to Fredric Jameson's notorious claim that all third-world texts are to be read as national allegories,<sup>599</sup> one should refrain from assigning a programmatic burden to contemporary writers. The national novel still has an important role to play, in particular in so-called postcolonial societies or 'nations in the making'. Beyond this, there continues to be creative space for the

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<sup>596</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 15. See Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, Transl. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge: Polity, 2006 [German original version *Der kosmopolitische Blick oder: Krieg ist Frieden*, Suhrkamp 2004], 2 and 14.

<sup>597</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 15f.

<sup>598</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 183.

<sup>599</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986), 65–88, here 69.

domestic, the literary chamber piece and even for the parochial. It makes sense to identify cosmopolitan novels as such, but we cannot and should not order writers to produce novels that – ostensibly – suit our times.

Nevertheless, in so far as it traces “the development of a new narrative *modus operandi*”,<sup>600</sup> Schoene’s study is immensely productive. Schoene argues that cosmopolitan narration “assembles as many as possible of the countless segments of our being-in-common into a momentarily composite picture of the world”<sup>601</sup> and points out that

in the cosmopolitan novel [the] turn to the small is no second-best compromise, but the actually preferred mode of representation, strategically necessitated by apprehending globalisation as a powerfully meaning-enforcing system whose impact can be allayed only by mobilising the entire microcosmic ‘nitty-gritty’ of global multiplicity.<sup>602</sup>

These are valuable insights that are mirrored by some of the results of my own textual analysis.

Like Schoene’s, my interest lies in the cosmopolitan perspective as recreated in the literary text. I conceptualize the ‘cosmopolitan perspective’ as a perception that establishes a connection between the individual and the world, that perceives the individual as situated in and conditioned by a global environment. Throughout this study, I have used the category of the ‘inoutsider’ as an analytical tool. My objective has not been to propose a new master theory of ‘inoutsiderdom’. Instead, I have used the expression descriptively and flexibly, as a broad term that does not push an analytical grid onto the text and evades the fashionable ‘in-between-ness’ of notions such as a ‘hybridity’ and ‘transculturality’.<sup>603</sup> The concept of the ‘inoutsider’ has been helpful in broadening the analytical focus beyond national and cultural categories: this study takes into consideration categorizations of social class, race, gender, age and personality and thereby maps the precise positionalities of characters in the novels.

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<sup>600</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 32.

<sup>601</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 27.

<sup>602</sup> Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* 28f.

<sup>603</sup> See also Timothy Brennan’s critique of the terms ‘complexity’ and ‘hybridity’ in Brennan, *At Home in the World* 13 and 55.

While all of the novels feature inoutsiders, not all of them are cosmopolitan novels. A cosmopolitan perspective today is not merely an omniscient view from above, a narrative perspective more suited to traditional, universalist notions of cosmopolitanism. The contemporary cosmopolitan text ‘speaks’ from a position of belonging and observing at a global scale.

The shifting internal focalization of Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* may be said to create such an effect, even if the narration remains grounded in the USA. Peter Carey’s *His Illegal Self* depicts a kind of ‘reluctant cosmopolitanism’ as Dial and Che’s lives become uprooted by the forces of history and displaced to a ‘hidden corner of the earth’. In Imraan Coovadia’s *Green-Eyed Thieves*, cosmopolitanism becomes a creative tool in the hands of a family of transcultural tricksters. The three novels in the section on ‘the Artist’ use a heterodiegetic narrative voice and internal focalization, their focalizers being characteristically self-absorbed. Rushdie’s Solanka in *Fury* is a cosmopolitan only in a shallow, colloquial sense, yet the novel links his struggle to a global environment of rage and unrest. Caryl Phillips’s *Dancing in the Dark* connects Bert Williams’s story to a historical and global community of racial suffering yet does not construct a cosmopolitan perspective in itself. On the other hand, Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* is dominated by radical ‘groundedness’ and a strong acknowledgement of the individual, but it arguably nevertheless displays a cosmopolitan sensibility. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid depicts the withdrawal from a cosmopolitan perspective, a kind of ‘cosmopolitanization in reverse’. In a similar way, DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* refuses to open up to a cosmopolitan perspective, even as it ventures across boundaries. Finally, Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* offers a cosmopolitan focus in creating narrative interdependencies between diverse stories and locations.

To establish whether a novel constructs a cosmopolitan perspective, it is not sufficient to consider the movements and shifting cultural and national associations of its characters. It is in this respect that an application of Judith Butler’s or Homi Bhabha’s theories of performativity is of limited use for the evaluation of a novel’s ‘cosmopolitan-ness’. In general, I would like to propose that postcolonial literary studies have sometimes paid too much attention to the identity politics of literary

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characters and to plot analysis. Both in this study and in the analysis of cosmopolitanism in literary texts, the characters' actions and feelings are but one object of analysis. Literary characters are not merely exemplary travelers or hybrid specimens. What is equally important, and sometimes sidelined in postcolonial literary studies, is the question how the text engages with the characters, how narrative framing and perspective contribute to the text's effect. For this reason, I suggest that there is a need for at least a slight 'narratological revival' in postcolonial literary studies. Identifying plot items and cosmopolitan lifestyles in novels falls short of being an interesting reading approach, just as much as merely identifying the transcultural and hybrid in the literary text has often led to very bland and uninventive analysis.

The final thought of this study concerns the importance of theory for literary studies. I hope to have shown how theories of globalization, of performativity and cosmopolitanism enrich our encounter with the literary text. Yet, I would like to oppose what I consider a trend towards 'theory for theory's sake'. In his characteristically polemical, yet refreshing and thought-provoking piece "Looking Back at 'Literary Theory'," Richard Rorty has questioned the importance of philosophy and theory for literary scholarship.<sup>604</sup> Rorty's claim is controversial, but it deserves some serious thought. Attending conferences and lectures, it sometimes appears as if especially successful, established literary scholars withdraw from literary analysis proper. 'Major players' in the field appear to silently (or not so silently) yearn to be sociologists or political scientists, to finally be allowed to engage in broader debates concerning the world. In this frame of mind, the application of such 'big thoughts' to literary texts fulfills illustrative functions and often appears to become an obligation rather than the objective as such.

In decisive opposition to such an approach, I claim that the royal discipline of literary studies is and must remain unlocking the treasures of the literary text, making us appreciate literature in new ways or reminding us of particular modes of encountering the literary text. Of course, the pursuit of a better understanding of the world we live in and the inspiration of theoretical innovation will continue to be

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<sup>604</sup> Richard Rorty, "Looking Back at 'Literary Theory,'" Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 2006, 63–67.

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important parts of this project, even more so in the realms of anglophone fiction beyond the USA and the UK. Gaining insight into complex localities and cosmopolitan visions is a major part of the work we do. In addition to this, the close look at the literary text remains indispensable. In this respect, literary critics such as James Wood have done much for literary scholarship. With their unflinching attention to the text, their love of language, their receptiveness to narrative layers and, finally, their willingness to judge (rather than to relate plot details), critics like Wood remind us of the literary worlds that remain to be uncovered in the text. Returning to Elaine Scarry's thoughts on the reception of 'beauty' in the humanities,<sup>605</sup> I assert that literary scholars should continue to sharpen their vision for theoretical innovation and extratextual insight. At the same time, they should explore the intricacies and courageously celebrate the beauty of the literary text.

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<sup>605</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty* 57. See my commentary on Scarry in the chapter on Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (chapter 1 of my section on 'social ties').

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