

STATELESSNESS AND THE MAKING OF  
A DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS IN U.S. LITERATURE

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This dissertation explores how U.S. literature of the 1980s and 1990s recalibrates the tropes, figures, and theories of decolonization to examine the meanings of statelessness—of not being considered as a national by any State—in the post-Civil Rights, post-Cold War context. I discuss how writers Kathy Acker, Gayl Jones, Francisco Goldman, Ammiel Alcalay, and Sinan Antoon use literary techniques to reveal statelessness as part of a colonial legacy that still shapes Western social organization. This literary treatment of statelessness is integral to the aims of a decolonial aesthetic practice that reveals and then challenges the political notions that underwrite traditional aesthetic projects, as well as projects to ostensibly counter them (such as the 1960s and 70s project of redefining a Black Aesthetic). Because statelessness is the absent center to definitions of the individual, belonging, and authority, these writers also adapt their treatment of statelessness to reconceptualize the terms of literary authority, including the concept of individual authorship and of a decolonial, authorial practice.

Chapter One of this dissertation is a theoretical discussion of statelessness, decoloniality, and aesthetics within the context of this project. Chapter Two explores how decolonial tropes in Goldman's 1997 novel, *The Ordinary Seaman*, revise literary conventions of immigration and globalization narratives. In Chapter Three, I consider

how Acker's anti-conventional practice of conflation in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) critically engages with ideologies of neoliberalism and national citizenship. I discuss how Acker conflates C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* with other texts of anti-colonial revolution to create a zombi(e) figure of political statelessness. The next chapter analyzes the interplay between the Sanctuary movement and a decolonization of the authorial "self" in Gayl Jones' 1999 novel, *Mosquito*, and in her essay on a "Third World Aesthetics." The epilogue, "Ghostwriting Iraq," extends Jones' redefinition of authorship as a feature of a decolonial practice. In it, I consider how Alcalay's book-length poem, *from the warring factions* (2002), and Antoon's novella, *I'Jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2007, English translation), elaborate tropes of ghostwriting and linguistic ambiguity as part of their challenge to models of sovereign authority and individual authorship.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Angela Naimou was born and grew up in southeastern Michigan as the daughter of Iraqi-born parents. She graduated from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with a B.A. in English. She earned her M.A. and Ph.D. in English Language and Literature at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she also spent one year as a Mellon Graduate Fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities.

Naimou taught at Tulane University as a postdoctoral fellow in 2007-8 and is now assistant professor of Ethnic American Literature at Clemson University in South Carolina.

For my family, and for David

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My aunt Weam has always shared her passion for writing and telling the stories that haunt us. My brother Andy's beautiful guitar playing served as the soundtrack to my writing. My sister Sandy is closest to my heart, my best friend and wisest counselor. My newest little brothers—daredevil Basim Jr. and his sidekick Calvin, both masters at the art of verbal sparring in Arabic—join me in welcoming the very newest member of the family, our nephew, Andrés Amado Nolasco, *mi tortugita*. And finally, my last two years at Cornell have been immeasurably brightened by David Sweeney Coombs. His patient readings and good humor shine through every page of this dissertation, and his love continues to be one of my greatest joys.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Statelessness, Decoloniality, and Aesthetics

In December of 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice defended the C.I.A. practice of using European locations to secretly capture, transport, and detain unknown numbers of people suspected to be involved with terrorism.<sup>1</sup> She explained that these suspected individuals “come from many countries and are often captured far from their original homes. Among them are those who are effectively stateless, owing allegiance only to the extremist cause of transnational terrorism. Many are extremely dangerous. And some have information that may save lives, perhaps even thousands of lives. The captured terrorists of the 21st Century,” she noted, “do not fit easily into traditional systems of criminal or military justice, which were designed for different needs. We have to adapt. Other governments are now also facing this challenge.”<sup>2</sup>

Rice’s use of the term “effectively stateless” has not been much discussed, but it is an important lynchpin to her argument that rendition “saves lives,” citizens’ lives to be specific, without violating the rights of other citizens. Even before they are kidnapped and secretly detained, the people who undergo rendition have been tactically relegated to the legal limbo of statelessness, of being a national of no political State on earth. These “effectively stateless” individuals, Rice suggests, have

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<sup>1</sup> Extraordinary rendition describes a secretive extra-legal program to extradite people deemed “illegal enemy combatants,” or “stateless terrorists” from one foreign state on undisclosed charges for indefinite secret detention, interrogation likely to include torture (according to many “suspects” secretly extradited and eventually released, though the Bush Administration has not admitted to the use of torture). See Jane Mayer’s article, “Outsourcing Torture.” *The New Yorker*, 14 Feb 2005.  
[http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?050214fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?050214fa_fact)

<sup>2</sup> *BBC News*, “Full Text: Rice Defends U.S. Policy,” 5 Dec 2005.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4500630.stm>

made themselves stateless by rejecting the national, challenging state sovereignty, and instead pledging allegiance to the flag of transnational terrorism.

Without a state to account for an individual's human rights, the effectively stateless figures Rice describes become located outside the legal bounds of the rights-bearing human.<sup>3</sup> For those kidnapped and detained by the U.S. or its partners, to challenge one's detention would be to reduce him or her to shadowboxing, as even those detainees allowed hearings are not allowed to hear the full charges or review the evidence against them.<sup>4</sup> Rice does not mention that statelessness is more often a legal limbo produced by states than one chosen by individuals. Instead, she draws on a long history of figuring the stateless person as a criminal, guilty first of trespassing against the nation. The transnational terrorist, as figured in U.S. political discourse since at least the Reagan administration, acts in lands foreign to him, has burned his real papers and renounced his citizenship (and the very concept of national citizenship), and moved underground or in the shadows of the law.<sup>5</sup>

It is this figure of the effectively stateless, anti-statist outsider that Kathy Acker has elaborated in her anti-conventional novels of the 1980s and 1990s. More importantly, Acker critiques the logic of citizenship and statelessness employed by both Rice and those who oppose her on the grounds of the need for states to uphold

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler is one of many intellectuals who, following activists and human rights lawyers, points out that "these prisoners are not considered 'prisoners' and receive no protection from international law...as a result, the humans who are imprisoned in Guantanamo [detention camp] do not count as human; they are not subjects protected by international law. They are not subjects in any legal or normative sense" (*Precarious Life*, xv). Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Many prisoners at Guantanamo—and presumably in other more secret prisons around the world—were effectively sold to the U.S. military, which compensated Pakistani authorities and the Northern Alliance members, and many have been the victims of local rivalries, misunderstanding, and rumors. For an interesting account of detention in the U.S. media that features the experiences of people who suffered extraordinary rendition before being released, see "Habeas Schmabeas," *This American Life*. National Public Radio. First Broadcast 10 Mar. 2006.

<sup>5</sup> I outline the figure of the terrorist as male because those detained as "enemy combatants" are mostly men, as are the discursive figures of enemies in U.S. political discourse.

human rights. In her work, the repeating figures of the terrorist, the refugee, the criminal—all categories of political and social exclusion from the nation—act as doubles of each other, ultimately as variations of the stateless figure. These characters must continually dodge the technologies of state power, including neoliberal, neoconservative ideologies, and a menacing cast of adversaries, including C.I.A. agents, mad Cold War scientists, revolutionary police, and Ronald Reagan.

In her 1988 novel, *Empire of the Senseless*, the female protagonist, Abhor, is one of several effectively stateless characters involved in a series of efforts to liberate the self and society from the matrix of economic, state, and colonial power that has formed them. Each of these efforts, from an Algerian revolution in Paris to an escape from the C.I.A.'s MK-ULTRA experiments, fail somehow, and Abhor wistfully recounts in the closing chapter, "I thought that, one day, maybe, there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust" (227).<sup>6</sup> The hesitation in this line—"I thought that, one day, maybe"—evokes the failed or ephemeral moments of imaginative and social decolonization that Abhor witnesses, participates in, and continues to hope for. In the verbal confusion between what "would be," what "is," and what "was," Abhor's line also suggests that the hope for a liberatory society also depends on notions of beauty and futurity.

This dissertation explores how U.S. literature of the 1980s and 1990s recalibrates the tropes, figures, and theories of decolonization to examine the meanings of statelessness in the post-Civil Rights, post-Cold War context. Statelessness usually is defined as an absolute lack of legal identity; the 1954 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, for example, defines the stateless person as "a person who is not considered as a national by any State

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<sup>6</sup> Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York: Grove Press, 1988).

under the operation of its law.” European intellectuals, critical of the human rights regime and refugee policies, have theorized statelessness as a consequence of eighteenth-century democratic revolutions and as crucial to the workings of sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> These theories, however, neglect the importance of what Latin American theorist Anibal Quijano calls “the coloniality of power,” the colonial element in the latest phases of national and transnational political and economic systems, such as citizenship laws and globalization practices.

Through readings of texts by Kathy Acker, Gayl Jones, Francisco Goldman, Ammiel Alcalay, and Sinan Antoon, I show how statelessness is depicted as indebted to the colonial legacy that continues to shape the organizing structures of Western society. This literary attention to, and treatment of, statelessness is part of an effort to construct a decolonial aesthetic practice, one that reveals and then challenges the political effects of traditional aesthetic projects, as well as the radical projects that ostensibly counter them, such as the 1960s and 70s project of redefining a Black Aesthetic. Because statelessness is the absent center to definitions of personhood, belonging, and authority, these writers also adapt their treatment of statelessness to a reconceptualization of the terms of literary authority, including the concept of individual authorship and of a decolonial, authorial practice.

Acker’s 1988 anti-conventional novel, *Empire of the Senseless*; Goldman’s 1997 novel, *The Ordinary Seaman*; Jones’ most recently published novel, *Mosquito* (1999); Alcalay’s book-length poem, *from the warring factions* (2002), and Antoon’s

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968). More recently, Giorgio Agamben’s belated theorizations of the figure of the refugee as bringing the “originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis,” and his European, rather than U.S. American, focus, nonetheless have informed several U.S. studies of refugee figures, the human rights regime, and the ideologies of citizenship. Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. Paul Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). See also *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

novella *I'Jaam* (2007, English translation), revises literary techniques and colonial tropes in the effort to form a decolonial aesthetic practice. A decolonial aesthetic practice explores how art might free the imagination from the colonial legacy of legal and social identities that constitute the nation and empire, but it does so by deliberately dwelling on the belated presence of colonialism in the present. It does not assume that the contemporary period has moved “beyond” an earlier, colonial one, as the term “postcolonial” may suggest;<sup>8</sup> rather, a decolonial practice engages with the history of colonialism as it shapes the colonality of the present, from the construction of racial, immigrant, and nationalist subjectivities, to the legal identities of citizen, alien, or stateless subjects, to the latest phase of economic globalization and its rhetoric.<sup>9</sup>

A decolonial aesthetic practice involves a critique of the politics of definition and a privileging of open-ended and dynamic processes that refuse narrative closure and systematic order. It makes a habit of breaking with conventions—literary, social, and legal. This aesthetic practice also makes the pseudo-utopic move of constructing new possibilities for liberation in the midst of oppressive global systems. And there is a playful but ambitious effort at exploring the practices of colonialism as tropes, as figures of thought that can be decolonized. I suggest that the persistent concern in U.S. literatures over how to reform the nation—or whether to build one anew—gives way to a concern over how we conceptualize sociality via the category of the nation

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<sup>8</sup> For criticism of the term “postcolonial,” see Ella Shohat, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial,’” *Social Text* 31/32, *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues* (1992): 99-113. See also Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Postcolonialism,’” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98.

<sup>9</sup> For a theory of belatedness in postcolonial discourse as part of a potentially oppositional praxis or an ahistorical and depoliticizing one, see Ali Behdad, “Une pratique sauvage: Postcolonial Belatedness and Cultural Politics,” *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 71-85. See also Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, (Durham: Duke UP, 1994). Behdad also has written a concise critique of the turn taken by postcolonial and cultural criticism to theories of “globalization” as “new” and as replacing earlier paradigms of imperialism and nationalism. “On Globalization, Again!” in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, eds. Ania Loomba et al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 62-79.



and the colonial legacies that endure in post-Cold War political and economic ideologies and practices. In this context, the long political contest between states (as well as between established and would-be states) becomes transformed by critical decentering of the categories of sovereign state power and of statelessness.

These texts are deeply indebted to twentieth century anti-colonial and post-colonial thinking, as well as to civil and human rights struggles within the U.S. and elsewhere. But, in responding to the post-Civil Rights and decolonization movements of the twentieth century, they also exhibit weariness (and wariness) toward radical nationalisms, reforms, and revolutions that either preserve or fail to transform the structures of political, cultural, and economic oppression established by the rise of Western imperialism. In twentieth century narratives of decolonization, the process of liberating oppressed people finds its beginning in a stirring national consciousness, one that unites (and claims the power to define those it unites); it finds its culmination in the establishment of an independent, national state, one that protects its borders and its new citizens. The disillusionment with political decolonization in this literature is epitomized by an encounter in a museum between Mosquito, the eponymous narrator of Jones' novel, and a man who calls himself a "dissident and disillusioned African in exile" (334).<sup>10</sup> He tells Mosquito that he visits the museum's African rooms to feel a sense of "wholeness"—he goes to feel "normal," to have an ordinary as well as "cosmic sense" of who he is. This sanctuary space is his consolation for the failure of anti-colonial revolution. "If you are African," he bitterly remarks, "every day they try to invade your self, not just the Europeans, the colonialists, I speak of now, but even sometimes your own rulers, when you have your nominal freedom, our *independence*." He then warns Mosquito: "Don't let anyone invade your essential

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<sup>10</sup> Gayl Jones, *Mosquito* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

self, your transcendental self. Them or us. We're both of us...exiles in the New World" (334). His comments underscore the distinction between a post-colonial as opposed to a decolonial aesthetics. For him, beauty, value, and form, lie in the now-protected African art objects, even if their protection is part of a history of colonial pillage. Having lost the struggle for national independence by nominally winning it, the man takes final refuge in protecting the self, which becomes a closed sanctuary defined by the legacy of colonialism. In the scene, Mosquito responds to his disillusionment by implicitly revealing the museum as a colonial trope, the essential self as not merely a fiction but a stifling idea, and the man's aesthetics as bound to Western colonial modes of gathering and ordering art and knowledge in such institutions as the museum.

Decolonial aesthetic practices focuses our attention on social relations—such as the relations of a sovereign nation to “its” individuals, of an artist to society, and of aesthetic form to formal authority. The aim of the practice is to re-imagine such social relations as freed from what Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins calls the “matrix of domination” (the organization of intersecting forms of oppression) elaborated by European and U.S. imperialism.<sup>11</sup> The effectively stateless figure becomes a major trope for reconceptualizing the relation of aesthetic practices to liberatory projects within late twentieth century state and capitalist systems. As a decolonial trope, the

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18. Theories of how particular forms of oppression are interlinked, intersectional, relational, and simultaneous constitute a major contribution of Black feminist thought since at least the nineteenth century (with such figures as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper) and significantly elaborated in the 1970s and 1980s. For a review of black feminist thought, see Collins (1999). See also Collins' essay “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2003), 109 (originally published in 1986). For Chela Sandoval's conception of “differential” and “oppositional consciousness” to oppression, see her essay “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders* #10 (1991): 1-24. See also Sandoval (2000).

stateless figure underscores the fiction of nationality and sovereignty as well as the enduring colonial legacy in the legal, cultural, economic, and political definitions of what is a human.

My use of the term decolonial aesthetics (and theory) should be distinguished from literal, political decolonization programs, which involve the transition from the colonial status of a territory to its formal construction of statehood. Political decolonization has some recognized limitations—a neocolonial, neoliberal relation may come to replace the colonial one, the anti-colonial nationalism may be revealed to be a continuation of colonial forms of governance. The novels I examine implicitly make this distinction between the nominal and the fuller social senses of decolonization at the level of the story, in which characters are preoccupied with the complicated status of anti-colonial revolution. In Goldman’s novel, the crewmembers are each recovering from, or else rehearsing, the trauma and disappointment of Central American leftist-socialist national revolutions, especially the Sandinista Revolution. Acker figuratively exhausts anti-colonial national revolutionary narratives of Haiti and Algeria by staging an imaginary revolution in Paris. I show how she conflates C.L.R. James’ 1938 *The Black Jacobins* with other textual representations of anti-colonial revolution and traces the desire for a decolonized world, freely expressive in its beauty and its sociality, in the form of an unfinished and impossible to finish quest, one in which various post-revolutionary “revolutions” join multinational networks like the CIA to “intervene.” *Mosquito*, for example, is partly a novel-length reflection on the possibilities, histories, and limits of revolutionary programs; in response to the oppressive quality of “Revolution” as a proper name, the novel’s narrator, Mosquito, enacts a decolonizing aesthetics on two fronts that converge in her narration—the Sanctuary movement, which turns into the “Zapatistas rebellion,” and her “minding [of] the word.”

I argue that a decolonial aesthetics disrupts the fundamental distinctions proper to Western aesthetics and reveals the connection between aesthetic principles and national, as well as colonial, ones. The literary texts I discuss engage in decolonial aesthetic practices in richly varied ways, but each focuses on the construction of national and authorial identities by depicting a version of the stateless figure distinct to the late twentieth century and a version of authorship that eschews its function as sovereign in the effort to redefine authorial meanings and practices. These writers extend the tropes of decolonization, from the relationship between the stateless figure and the nation or capital to the relationship between the text and its author. They wrestle with the issue of sovereignty and authority in literary terms, but this time figuring the sovereign author as a colonizing figure itself formed by the modern concept of the individual.

The concept of the modern individual, traced back to the European enlightenment and contemporaneous colonial projects in the Western hemisphere, informs the meanings of legal identity, of citizenship and statelessness especially, as the twin expressions of the national and state system. At the level of the literary, the authority of the writer has been important to the definition and evaluation of the literary in modern Western aesthetics, but it also has been claimed by anti-colonial literary movements that conceived of the author as a heroic individual who fights colonization in the realm of culture, by helping people to develop a national consciousness. Postmodern and post-structuralist theories that posit the coherent, unified self as a fictional construct effectively destroy the notion of the unified author because the category of the author has been tied to the category of the individual self.

The literature I discuss draws upon recent theories of authorship and the self but does not easily fit into any one of them. Antoon, for instance, employs the frame narrative structure, common to Arabic and European literature. But, rather than use

the frame structure for its usual purpose of ostensibly authenticating the veracity of the main story or its accuracy as a found text, Antoon uses the frame structure to undermine its conventional purpose and instead explore multiple layers of mediation and ambiguity that cannot be attributed to any one, individual, sovereign author. There are at least two writers in *I'Jaam*: in the frame story is a government official who interferes with the “main” text, the journal manuscript of an anonymous prisoner in 1980s Baghdad, by literally writing over it, adding the diacritical marks necessary to clarify the meaning of the text. But the official’s work has the opposite effect than is intended—rather than “elucidate” the undotted Arabic manuscript and establish its authorship, the “ordinary ambiguity” of the language and the process of ghostwriting become the tropes that ultimately undermine the individualization of the author as sovereign authority. In the epilogue, I consider how Alcalay and Antoon take up the figure of the ghostwriter and focus on its shape among the shadows, as part of a literary decolonial practice against the mode of authorship that affirms models of the individual sovereign author.

By challenging the Western concepts of sovereignty and authority, these writers complicate the call for self-definition made by liberation struggles such as the Black Arts Movement. Larry Neal, a major figure in publicizing and organizing the movement, wrote in 1968, the “self-definition” of Black people and the definition of the world in their own terms is a major tenet of the Black Arts.<sup>12</sup> Self-definition is an attack on a white racist power structure, which has defined the world and the people it oppresses. In Neal’s terms, self-definition must be a rigidly binaristic process between white and black power to define themselves and the world: for him, “the motive

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<sup>12</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 12.4, Black Theatre (Summer, 1968): 29-39. Neal regards aesthetics as an ethical issue: “the new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors’?” (30).

behind the Black Aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world” (30). Barbara Christian puts it less programmatically than does Neal when she notes that the Black Arts Movement protested the same issues that long have concerned African-American writers: the political nature of literature, the “control of its production, value, and distribution by those who have power” and so deny that “literature is, of necessity, political.”<sup>13</sup> Christian pointedly observes that those issues, which also concerned the feminist literary movement, women’s studies, and black studies programs that grew out of the Black Arts Movement, required methods for self-definition and were “articulated...*not* from the declarations of the New Western philosophers but from these groups’ reflections on their own lives” (54).

Jones most explicitly draws on the legacy of the Black Arts Movement, as well as the black feminist literary critiques that intersected with it (Acker does to a lesser extent, and Goldman more implicitly draws upon the hemispheric literary connections of anti-imperial writers in the Americas).<sup>14</sup> This legacy of the Black Arts is both political and literary: Black experience, criticism, and art have offered trenchant critiques and challenges to the rules of citizenship in the United States, and it is the fiction of citizenship for people of color and women that makes the stateless figure an insightful and provocative trope for U.S. literature of the post-Cold War, post-Civil War period.

The literary texts I focus on in this dissertation construct the stateless figure as a crucial trope among other decolonial tropes and aesthetic practices. These texts

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 6, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (Spring, 1987): 51-63 (54).

<sup>14</sup> Acker draws from both Black literature and the contemporaneous literature, mostly by white men, written between the 1950s and 1970s (for example, the Black Mountain Poetry scene, William Burroughs, the New York and San Francisco art scenes).

revise late-twentieth century narratives of the nation and global capital by employing decolonial figures, structures, and concepts that undermine such narratives. The effectively stateless figure, whether legally a citizen or alien, is neither fully included nor excluded from the nation. This figure, in between legal identities as well as cultural ones, proves necessary to the national and economic narratives that disavow it. In the texts I examine, this version of the stateless figure reveals the legacy of colonialism that endures in contemporary concepts of the nation and of capital. Each of these texts revise immigrant and colonial narratives by depicting characters that elude clear legal identities. They complicate conventional meanings of citizenship, statelessness, and immigration.

The aesthetic practices I consider here also depart from the Black Arts movement and its legacy, not least through an attention to non-binaristic thinking. Rather than affirm the binaristic struggle prescribed by Neal, the literature I study lingers over the shadows, the interstices, the indefinable terms that undermine any dualistic system. As “an active member of the Black Arts Movement,” Christian also recounts her experience with the hardening of literary theory into a *prescription* for art and a stiffening of ideological perspective into the dictum of cultural nationalism (58). Ultimately, the desire to “destroy the power which controlled black people,” Christian notes, was also “a power which many of its ideologues wished to achieve” (60).

Such a view of liberatory struggle also disrupts rigid prescriptions of what is an author and how “he” should relate to politics and society; instead, its writers engage with how one might claim authorship of a literary narrative without being a sovereign authority over it, and they explore the possible relation of a decolonial aesthetic practice to society and to text. These texts also raise other questions: how do narratives serve to conceal the production and condition of statelessness in the late twentieth century U.S.? What might the concept of statelessness articulate (about the

legacy of colonialism to the nation, about citizenship, labor, affective ties to the nation) that the rhetoric of globalization would disavow? How do political and aesthetic ways of knowing, which involve remembering, imagining, and speculating, spur new conceptualizations of statelessness that counter “statelessness” as defined by governmental and international regimes of human rights and migration management?

The literary texts I examine reconceptualize the categories of the nation and the citizen as part of an effort to imagine liberating political and literary practices, practices that imagine forms of inclusivity and collectivity freed from the legacy of colonial modernity.<sup>15</sup> The character Mosquito, for instance, is a figure whose perfect auditory memory of all the stories she hears allows the text to become a decolonial play on the encyclopedic project, which traditionally refers to the effort to collect, preserve, systematize, and thus regulate knowledge for a singularized national culture. Mosquito incessantly reflects on the problems of who and what gets included within or excluded from the nation, and her narration sends up the encyclopedic project by proving the impossibility of a singularized national culture. The knowledge she “collects” is heteroglossic, digressive, accumulative, associative, and indiscriminately taken from television, newspapers, rap videos, fast food signs, and junk mail.

Forms of inclusivity, too, are re-envisioned in Jones’ novel. Mosquito belongs to *The Daughters of Nzingha*, a tongue-in-cheek parody of social organizations that deflate or reverse every officious or mystical aspect they cultivate. The Not for

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<sup>15</sup> By the late 1980s and early 1990s, British and U.S. cultural studies had begun to grapple with changing conceptions of multiculturalism. As a model of incorporation of cultural difference into a single nation since the nineteenth century, what we call “multiculturalism” came under sharp attacks throughout the 1980s by cultural conservatives, especially those who saw the United States as the inheritor of a uniquely “Anglo-American” (or more broadly “Western”) cultural and democratic legacy from Britain—and, of course, ancient Greece. The ideology of multiculturalism also has been put in the service of state policymakers and multinational businesses, for example. Academic cultural critics have debated how best—or even whether—to recuperate the anti-racist and radical underpinnings of “multiculturalism.” For a historical account of the institutionalization of multiculturalism and a theory of “critical” multiculturalist practice, see Alan Palumbo-Liu’s introduction in *The Ethnic Canon: History, Institutions, Interventions* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1995).



Members Only membership card, for instance, is only valid if *un*-signed, and cards are valid even if you choose not to carry them—“that is, you do not have to be a card-carrying member...to be a Daughter of Nzingha” (413, 439). The rules of the membership card underscore the novel’s commitment to inclusivity without closure, to a way of imagining “everything” that does not become totalizing.

These writers nonetheless write within the interstices of nation-state sovereignty and global capital, and their narrative fictions plumb those intervening spaces, those openings often overshadowed by theories of “state,” “capital,” and their apparently nearly seamless cover of the “globe.” Set in an abandoned cargo vessel in Brooklyn harbor, a colonial 1980s Paris, the Southwestern borderlands, or a prison cell in Baghdad, the story worlds I examine are governed by economic and political patterns that resemble their real-world, post-Cold War counterparts. The stories treat globalization and nation-state sovereignty as interrelated themes and subjects that characters engage with, comment on, and reconceptualize. The literary treatment of sovereignty and capital occurs not only at the levels of story and theme but also of literary technique and aesthetic practice.

Decolonial thinking demands a rethinking of aesthetics. Each of these texts evince, at the levels of narrative and literary technique, a set of innovative practices that draw heavily on tropes of decolonization. This dissertation in part examines how writers of recent U.S literature draw on decolonial tropes to offer astute, often provocative insights as to how state sovereignty and globalization are conceptualized and practiced. The stateless figure, officially excluded but unofficially needed by such political and economic systems, is an important organizing trope in this literature. Varieties of the stateless figure abound in each of the texts I examine, from the citizen in name only, to the undocumented laborer caught in global capitalist systems shaped by the legacy of colonialism, to the unauthorized refugee with no homeland to return

to, to the *de jure* stateless figure, a citizen of no country. I consider the specific functions of the stateless figure, and how they operate within the organizing trope of decolonization, in the main chapters of this dissertation. In the sections below, I detail the history of the stateless figure in the context of my argument on rethinking statelessness as an important feature of a decolonial aesthetic practice.

### ***Between the Stateless and the Sovereign***

The story of *The Ordinary Seaman* unfolds within New York Harbor, a border zone to histories of statelessness and citizenship. Goldman revises the enduring myth of “a nation of immigrants” by depicting fifteen Central American laborers who become stateless refugees of a multinational capitalist venture. The men, marooned on board an unseaworthy commercial vessel, have a view of the Statue of Liberty. As the elder crewmember Bernardo wryly repeats as the refrain to the crew’s indefinite and indeterminate detention on board the ship, “When that statue walks, chavalos, this ship will sail” (45). The crewmembers’ dilemma calls up a neglected national history of Ellis Island, which acted primarily as an exceptional space of detention when it served in part as an INS detention center in which many “aliens” languished under indefinite detention, held for “confidential” reasons or none at all, until Ellis Island closed in 1954 to be remade a decade later as a national monument and museum. Their situation contrasts with the history of Ellis Island as the immigration gateway. It evokes Ellis Island as an “island prison,” as described by a dissenting Supreme Court judge in the 1952-1953 case of Mr. Mezei.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ellis Island was important to the 1924 restrictive immigration act and the new documentation procedures of aliens. INS and court decisions helped to define Ellis Island as an exceptional space of indefinite detention, thus producing subjects who could neither be “naturalized” as U.S. citizens nor be freed from a punitive relation to the U.S. Cold War persecution of “Communists” and other “subversive” actors involved indefinite detention on the island. For more on the indefinite detention of C.L.R. James and Mr. Mezei, see James, “A Natural but Necessary Conclusion” in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, introduction by Donald E. Pease (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001), 125-6 (previously published in

The experience of being a “man without a country,” let alone a “woman” without one, has existed since the founding of modern sovereign states, which formally define the relationship between a government and a citizenry.<sup>17</sup> Even before the modern concept of state sovereignty, to be “stateless” meant to be “without a state or political community” and “destitute of state or ceremonial dignity” (*OED*). The term “stateless state,” meaning “a state not worthy of the name,” circulated in English as early as 1609 (*OED*).

In all the literary texts I discuss, the stateless figure is both a fictional character and a trope, or figure of thought, that contains within it the contradictions of the nation-state and global economic systems. The stateless figure, in these texts, points up ideologies of citizenship and globalization to show how the world continues to be imagined through the framework of the unfinished legacies of empire. I suggest that the post-Cold War stateless figure serves as a multifaceted trope to counter celebratory versions of post-national, cosmopolitan citizenship.<sup>18</sup> In *Empire of the Senseless*, stateless and racialized identities, produced by colonial, modern national, and neoliberal global economic systems, are conflated with each other to produce a cast of stateless characters: black zombies in revolt against the colonial city, biracial loners who must negotiate between state power and multinational corporations, white actors

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New York, privately printed, 1953; Detroit: Bewick, 1978). See also *Shaughnessy v. Mezei*, 345 U.S. 206 (1953). Included in the I.N.S. official list of “subversive activities” for which James was deported to Trinidad was this study of Melville, which James wrote during his detention.

<sup>17</sup> I quote from Edward Everett Hale’s novel, *The Man Without a Country* (Boston, 1865, originally appeared in 1863 *Atlantic Monthly*). Cited in Linda Kerber (2005 & 7). See also Mary Das, “A Woman Without a Country,” *The Nation* 123 (August 4, 1926), cited in Kerber (2007). Linda Kerber, “The Stateless as the Citizen’s Other: A View from the United States.” Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* (Feb 2007): 1-34. Kerber, “Toward a History of Statelessness in America” *American Quarterly* 57.3 (September 2005): 727-749.

<sup>18</sup> On the equivalency of the term “nationality” with “citizenship” in legal discourse, see Agamben’s critique of the conflation of nation and state, birth (natality) and belonging to a political community (citizenship) in “Beyond Human Rights.”

who operate God-like in networks of power beyond the grasp of the state. Such stateless figures undermine the liberal sympathy and the nationalist fear inspired by non-national subjects and thus challenge hegemonic ideologies of nation-state sovereignty and global economic practices.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, an unknown number of millions of people were made legally or effectively stateless, from imperial expansion and competition underway at the turn of the century, to the major remapping of national and imperial boundaries instigated by the First World War and continued through the second, to the postwar wave of anti-imperial nationalist movements and the neo-imperial proxy wars and engineered coups of the Cold War. Cold War discourse in the United States elaborated the concept of the citizen as an embodiment of the nation, and of the nation as an embodiment of freedom, and of citizen-nation-freedom under perpetual threat. In my mind, images of (white) citizens with home-built underground bunkers in their basements, or children rehearsing safety drill measures in the case of nuclear war, exemplify this conflation of the individual citizen body with the nation. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s challenged U.S. Cold War ideology by exposing the racist, oppressive core of citizenship and thus of national belonging; at the same time, leaders in the Civil Rights movement worked within the Cold War framework by working with presidential administrations to improve the standing of the U.S. in the world and by moving through official international channels, such as the United Nations, to claim human rights violations against the United States.<sup>19</sup> Immigration policies were part of the political effort to

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<sup>19</sup> For a study of how African-American leadership internationalized the struggle of African-Americans in the 1920s and 1930s, of the political significance of the emerging cooperation between African-American leadership and political actors in the framework of Cold War anti-communism (including the significance of regarding their struggle as a human rights and then a civil rights issue), see Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African-American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an account of how Black thinkers engaged the international context of African-Americans in the United States before the Cold

improve the U.S. appearance of openness while in actuality maintaining strict control over those within its borders. Immigration policies maintained the national origins quota system—and expanded powers to deport aliens and naturalized citizens based on “communist” affiliation—but eliminated racial and ethnic conditions for immigration and naturalization with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (also known as the McCarran-Walter Act).<sup>20</sup> This immigration policy became the nation’s “foundational immigration law,” which helped to change the demographic profile of immigrants entering the country through formal channels.<sup>21</sup>

During the Cold War period, decolonization struggles, wars, and instability in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America also dramatically increased the numbers of large refugee populations—while neoliberal and neocolonial economic practices drove many nationals to hazard their citizenship and enter the U.S., among other countries, by informal channels. Cold War ideology divided the globe between its two main competitors for establishing imperial “spheres of influence” for over fifty years. By 1992, after the complete dissolution of the Soviet Union, President George H.W. Bush announced, “[C]ommunism died this year...By the grace of God, America

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War, see Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883-1950,” *The Journal of American History* 86.3, *The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History: A Special Issue* (Dec., 1999): 1045-1077.

<sup>20</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 237.

<sup>21</sup> As Ngai notes, the McCarran-Walter Act “established, for the first time, the general principle of color-blind citizenship. But the law also created an ‘Asia Pacific Triangle,’ which was a global race quota aimed at restricting Asian immigration into the United States” regardless of the country in which Asian immigrant applicants were born or residing (238). The Immigration Act of 1965 “ended the policy of admitting immigrants according to a hierarchy of racial desirability and established the principle of formal equality in immigration” (227). In addition to elaborating the national quota system and racializing “Asians,” the act drew hard lines against anyone affiliated with various political organizations, most prominently, communists. McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act, Pub. L. No. 82-414 (1952).

won the cold war.”<sup>22</sup> Amid the spiking numbers of displaced people and people newly made stateless by these changes, U.S. ideologues soon followed Bush’s lead in proclaiming “new world order[s]” to have replaced the old one—from the seamless globe of nation-states culminating in “the end of [imperial and thus modern] history” (Francis Fukuyama) to the economic and technological matrix of what gets called “globalization,” to the strengthening of international law under the leadership of the U.S., figured as benign but world-weary “global policeman” (Thomas Friedman).<sup>23</sup> A few stories of national hospitality toward refugees have received glowing, sustained national attention, such as the so-called “lost boys” [and girls] of Sudan, while thousands of Haitian, Vietnamese, and other refugees were detained, forcibly “repatriated,” and relegated to the category of “boat people” with relatively sporadic news reportage.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union” (Washington, D.C., 28 Jan 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Cooper is one of many scholars who criticize the recent scholarly attention to globalization and the global, advocating instead that scholars examine specific networks and the specificity, contingency, history, and limits of interconnectedness and other large-scale, long-term processes. Cooper argues that scholars who use “globalization” as an analytic category confuse a discursive category with actually existing conditions in the world, conditions which are neither quite “global” nor in the process of becoming global (a process signaled as occurring in the present, as distinguished from the past, by the suffix “-ization”). Cooper complains that globalization (like its predecessor term, “modernization”) “defines itself by naming a future as an apparent projection of a present, which is sharply distinguished from the past” (97). He points out that any globalization theory, whether celebratory or condemnatory, suffers from “totalizing pretensions” and “presentist periodization” (94). While the term “globalization” is loaded with ideological baggage, I will use the term with the understanding that it has come to refer to a set of economic, political, and technological changes that some argue began with the development of world economic systems, especially that of the New World since the sixteenth century. Especially in my chapter on *The Ordinary Seaman*, it is globalization discourse and the legacy of colonialism to contemporary forms of globalization that interest me.

<sup>24</sup> A few examples of coverage of the “Lost Boys” [and, less often noticed, of the girl refugees] include: “How To Help 'Lost Boys Of Sudan' Find A Home In U.S.; Catholic Charities Help Young Men Make Transition Into American Lifestyle,” *San Jose Mercury News* 15 Feb 2001 Thurs Morning Final Ed: 1B, 687. Betty Barnacle, “Lost Boys' Learn To Savor Freedom; Refugees From Sudan Adapt To Life In U.S.,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 6 Jul 2002, A1 Ed.: B1. Burton Bollag, “Lost Boys of Sudan Go to College in America; After surviving war, young men find support in U.S. and succeed in school,” *State Department Documents and Publications*, 10 Jun 2008, *News From America.Com* and *The Washington*

Neoliberal globalization discourse emphasized “free trade” of capital but not people, international banking policies for “underdeveloped countries,” and “opening new markets” for private capital to “penetrate.” At the same time, Lisa Lowe describes the 1990s as a period of “imperial overstretch” for the United States. This period was marked by the “decline of its economic hegemony” and, so often the case, by a spike in harsh immigration policies “[r]eminiscent of the nineteenth-century laws barring Chinese from naturalization, education, and safe working conditions” (Lowe 20). During the Reagan, Clinton, and Bush administrations, these policies were often directed against foreign laborers. “The result,” Lowe observes, “is an officially disavowed and yet unofficially mandated, clandestine movement of illegal immigration, which addresses the economy’s need for low-wage labor but whose dehumanization of migrant workers is politically contradictory” (21). International “free trade” agreements such as the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, were passed alongside oppressive controls on immigration, refugee policy, and non-citizen rights. One oft-cited example is Proposition 187, passed by California (also in 1994, the same year as NAFTA), and Congressional legislation aimed at granting individual states the right to deny free public schooling, medical care, and other benefits to undocumented residents. In 1996, so-called welfare reform curtailed benefits to aliens, including legal residents. Five years earlier, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, declared her hope for the mutual benefit of refugees and sovereign states “that 1992 will be ‘the year of repatriation.’”<sup>25</sup>

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*File.* For all sources cited: Accessed June 23, 2008 via Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. For coverage of so-called “boat people,” see my note on “compassion fatigue” below.

<sup>25</sup> As Sylvana Foa, spokeswoman for Ogata, told reporters: “Ninety-nine percent of the refugees in the world want to go home.” Cited in Felicity Barringer, “The World: ‘Repatriation’ Is the Trend For Refugees Worldwide,” *The New York Times* 17 Nov 1991, Sun Final Ed.– Final: s4, p4. Accessed June 23, 2008 via Lexis Nexis Academic Universe.

Indefinite detention, deportation, forced or “voluntary” repatriation has become an increasingly systematic way for the U.S. and other countries to practice immigration policy. U.S. citizens born to undocumented parents, especially Mexicans, became targets of Republican-led efforts to change radically the meaning of citizen and alien in the U.S. Arguing that children of “illegal aliens” should never have belonged to the nation, for example, the 1996 Republican Platform Committee worked to eliminate birthright citizenship from the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>26</sup>

These harsh exercises in sovereignty seem fueled in part by talk of a weakening of states’ sovereign authority to determine who is or is not included in the nation, and what citizenship even means in a world shaped by neoliberal global economic practices. This apparent crisis in sovereignty—in terms of a break from the past and a predicament—could be ominous or promising, depending on one’s position. Nightmare scenarios of being effectively stateless (even as a legally recognized citizen of a country) have flourished alongside dreams of living freely outside the legal bonds of any state. “In recent years,” historian Linda K. Kerber notes, “[s]tatelessness can be made to sustain a cosmopolitan dream...[for whom] a destabilized citizenship is an enriched citizenship.”<sup>27</sup> I suggest that a distinct version of the stateless figure emerges in the U.S. fiction of the late 1980s and 1990s, one that explores the meanings of statelessness as constitutive of twentieth century political and economic life. The literary texts I examine boldly depict this stateless figure in ways that trouble the distinctions between citizenship and statelessness as maintained by national and

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<sup>26</sup> For *New York Times* coverage of welfare changes and the birthright citizenship controversy, see: Barbara Crossette, “The World; Citizenship Is a Malleable Concept.” *The New York Times*: 18 Aug 1996, Sun Late Final Edition: s4, p3. A.M. Rosenthal, “On My Mind; Dred Scott in San Diego,” Editorial, *The New York Times* 9 Aug 1996, Fri Late Final Ed: A27. Robert Pear, “Citizenship Proposal Faces Obstacle in the Constitution” *The New York Times* 7 Aug 1996, Wed Late Final Ed: A13. For all sources cited: Accessed June 23, 2008 via Lexis Nexis Academic Universe.

<sup>27</sup> Kerber 2007, 7.



international laws (even as such laws reveal a crisis in distinguishing between legal identities).

In order to explain how the stateless figure gains a renewed significance in U.S. literature specific to the post-Cold War period, it is worth examining the concept and practice of statelessness in the international and especially U.S. context. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has a human right to a nationality, and that nobody should be arbitrarily deprived of a nationality. Those who live without this right are legally defined as stateless. The 1954 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines the stateless person as “a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.”<sup>28</sup> Whereas citizenship is the “legal bond” between a state and an individual, statelessness is the shape of the bond’s absence. “Proving statelessness,” as one UNHCR expert notes, “is like establishing a negative. The individual must demonstrate something that is *not* there” (emphasis in the original).<sup>29</sup> Defined by what a nation is *not*, stateless people have no legal identity; defined as a lack, “the stateless” are people treated as “non-persons, legal ghosts.”<sup>30</sup> How does a “ghost” demand to be

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<sup>28</sup> I take the phrase “legal bond” from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees definition of the stateless as someone who “does not enjoy citizenship—the legal bond between a state and an individual—with any country.” UNHCR, “The World’s Stateless People: Questions and Answers,” September 1, 2006, 6, <http://www.unhcr.org/basics/BASICS/452611862.pdf>. Article 1 of the 1954 United Nations Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons defines a stateless person as “a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.” Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, Adopted on September 28, 1954, by a Conference of Plenipotentiaries convened by Economic and Social Council Resolution 526 A [XVII] of April 26, 1954. The United Nations conventions on statelessness can be found at <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/statelessness.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Carol Batchelor, UNHCR, Department of International Protection, “The 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons: Implementation within the European Union Member States and Recommendations for Harmonisation,” *Refuge* 22:2 (Summer 2004): 1-46, 13.

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR, “The World’s Stateless People: Questions and Answers.” The UNHCR has tried to establish a legal identity for stateless people, but only a few countries have ratified the convention, underscoring the dilemma of the UNHCR, which is committed to reducing cases of statelessness but only by respecting the terms of state sovereignty as set by individual states.

recognized as wrongfully ghosted, as a person deserving to materialize? How does one escape the “Kafkaesque legal vacuum” of being a non-person person, “trapped in this legal limbo”?<sup>31</sup> Statelessness, when defined as the exception to the rule of citizenship, seems to be a legal anomaly. Such rhetoric also affirms statelessness as nothing less than a formalized condition of “inferiority and insecurity” within all nations.<sup>32</sup> Thus confined and made invisible, the existence of stateless persons seem to prove the authority of sovereign states to distinguish between those who may appear and disappear under the law, who do or do not belong to the nation, and who have access to basic protections, health care, education, and employment. If statelessness is depicted as a mode of ghostliness, then citizenship is apparently a mode of real flesh-and-blood living: in both cases, however, it is the sovereign who possesses the authority to give legal life or taketh it away. The authority of the sovereign state is affirmed by the status of citizen and stateless person, and by the distinction made between them.<sup>33</sup>

Defining statelessness simply in terms of absence or anomaly elides its importance to sovereign states. Sovereign states historically have affirmed their authority to regulate the nation by inventing and regulating categories of statelessness. Kerber acknowledges this political purpose of statelessness when she suggests that we understand “the stateless as the citizen’s other” (2007). According to Kerber, the “legal ghost,” now transformed into the stranger or marginalized other, is needed to

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<sup>31</sup> UNHCR, “Refugees By Numbers 2006 Edition,”  
<<http://www.unhcr.org/basics/BASICS/3b028097c.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations, “A Study of Statelessness” (Lake Success, New York, August, 1949): 11.

<sup>33</sup> As anthropologist Aihwa Ong notes, citing Giorgio Agamben, “‘by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity and nationality*,’ refugees ‘put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis’ because the refugee is truly the ‘man of no rights’ who exposes ‘the fiction of the citizen.’” Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 27.

define the citizen self. The stateless “other” throws into relief the citizen “self,” still presumed to be the central political subject. Kerber’s analogy (that citizenship is to statelessness as self is to other) is a basic version of the self/other duality, in which the “others” are contained within the category of non-citizen, especially racial and ethnic non-citizens who are “other” to the white male citizen. And yet, statelessness and citizenship are features of the same system. Although “distinctions between those who belonged to a state and those who lacked one were invented, elaborated, and expanded” to develop systematized citizenship, these distinctions have always been at once fundamental and unstable (Kerber 2007, 40). “Statelessness” now includes multiple kinds of exclusion from the nation and by extension the world of nation-states: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has broadened the definition of statelessness to include “the unprotected.”<sup>34</sup> As immigration lawyer Stephen Legomsky puts it, “[i]n a world built on nationality, one simply cannot leave home without it...Every individual needs one sovereign state to play the role of guardian angel.”<sup>35</sup> Legomsky’s metaphor evokes the dependency and vulnerability created for all individuals in a world “built on nationality”— everyone “needs” a state, but these dubious “angels” tend to guard their gates and wield protection as a political instrument, causing at least as much harm as they ward off.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, if “home” is a metaphor for “nation,” an individual does not need to “leave home” at all to experience features of statelessness: “home” (and the state effort to put the national

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<sup>34</sup> Carol Batchelor, “Stateless Persons: Some Gaps in International Protection,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 7, no. 2 (1995): 232-259. Cited in Kerber, 2007, page 11. For a thorough discussion of the need to recognize *de facto* stateless conditions and ways to affirm the human rights of *de facto* as well as *de jure* stateless persons, see David S. Weissbrodt and Clay Collins, “The Human Rights of Stateless Persons,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 28.1 (February 2006): 245-276.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Kerber 2007 page 11.

<sup>36</sup> Kerber notes that “Ambiguous borders cloud the margins between [Aihwa] Ong’s ‘mobile homo economicus’ and the trafficked, between the trafficked and the refugee, between the refugee (subject to multiple *refoulements* despite its illegality in international law) and the stateless” (Kerber 2005, n.73).

house in order) is where it may begin. The rhetoric of guardianship figures the nation as home and the state as (patriarchal) guardian: in the U.S. historical context, white women, indigenous groups, African descendants, people in U.S. occupied territories—even, in an unusual case I’ll get to later on, adult male sailors—were excluded from full citizenship status and defined as “wards” of the state (Wald 18).

Thus, the *features* and *effects* of statelessness—if not statelessness *de jure*—permeate all legal national subjectivities and inconsistently blur distinctions between aliens (legal resident and undocumented) and refugees, and between aliens and citizens. In the United States, distinctions between citizenship and non-citizenship (including what we may, somewhat anachronistically, name “statelessness”) have been shaped by a history of race, ethnicity, gender, capitalism, and colonialism. By reading the history of the nation as a palimpsest, a story of statelessness (for women and in some sense their children, for those excluded from the category of “white,” for those living in U.S. colonial territories) can be discerned through the layered meanings, the partial erasures and additions made over time to the story of citizenship since the founding of the United States. The U.S. progress narrative of citizenship is often told as the story of an imperfect, exclusionary beginning for a young nation that, as it matures, expands and comes to include everyone in a democratic society of “We the People.” But the sovereign right to grant, require, withhold, and revoke citizenship gives states their originary power to determine who does and doesn’t belong to “the nation.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> According to the Department of State, “Section 349 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1481), as amended, states that U.S. citizens are subject to loss of citizenship [only] if they perform certain specified acts voluntarily and with the intention to relinquish U.S. citizenship.” Citizens convicted of treason, for instance, are presumed to have voluntarily chosen to renounce citizenship by way of acting against the state (Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-653, §18, 100 Stat. 3655). See U.S. Department of State, “Advice about Possible Loss of U.S. Citizenship and Dual Nationality,” [http://travel.state.gov/law/citizenship/citizenship\\_778.html](http://travel.state.gov/law/citizenship/citizenship_778.html). In practice and by law, to describe the loss of citizenship as resulting from “voluntary” acts is unfair to more than a million naturalized citizens, dual nationality citizens, and residents who have lost citizenship or resident rights and have been deported since the early 1980s and especially 1990s. Ever-

A history of statelessness shadows every history of citizenship. Although the term “statelessness” began to circulate widely after World War I, features of being “without a country” permeate the nation in fundamental ways, in the shapes it takes, in its histories and futures. As a term, “statelessness” has been rarely deployed in studies of the U.S., whatever the disciplinary field. Kerber correctly notes that most historians of the U.S. “have treated [statelessness] as belonging to other national histories—Jews, Gypsies, Palestinians. That U.S. history is taken to be innocent of engagement with the subject is yet another example of the habits of American exceptionalism.”<sup>38</sup> This observation may speak more to historiography and to U.S. history as a nation-building discipline than it does to the long tradition by people of color of challenging the very terms of nation-building and exceptionalism. Not surprisingly, the most sustained thinking on statelessness in the U.S. context can be found in the work of people excluded from the nation or living on its margins. The meanings, practices, and histories of statelessness are implicitly theorized by a wide range of scholarship

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tightening immigration laws reached a high mark in the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, and then again with the immigration and deportation policies after 9/11/2001. Thousands of Dominicans, Haitians, and others, have been deported without the chance of appeal or review by a judge: an uncounted number continue to languish in privately-run immigration prisons. The 1996 law creates categories of legal residents who may be retroactively stripped of rights and deported for various reasons, including minor crimes such as traffic or immigration violations that have been retroactively reclassified as felonies. For a study on the destructive effects of deportation on Dominicans specifically, see Ramona Hernández, “On the Age Against the Poor: Dominican Migration to the United States,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Services* Vol. 2, No. 1/2 (2004): 87-107. See also Ngai’s discussion of the public appeals of sympathy for deportation cases in the 1930s and 1990s (1-3). An earlier example of the revocation of citizenship in U.S. law can be seen in the loss of citizenship extended systematically to white women citizens married to foreign nationals. These women were considered to have “voluntary” renounced their citizenship under the legal practice of coverture, which viewed wives as legally “covered” by (or “merged” with) the personhood of their husbands. Marrying a foreign national effectively revoked the wife’s citizenship for the length of the marriage. The principle of unequal citizenship via coverture began with the founding of the U.S. and continued to be legally affirmed until 1992. See Kerber, “The Meanings of Citizenship,” *The Journal of American History* 84.3 (Dec. 1997): 833-854, especially 838-841. See also the use of coverture laws in the Supreme Court denaturalization case of *Perez v. Brownell*, 356 U.S. 44, 235 F.2d 364, 31 Mar 1958. Available online at the Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School: [http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/histories/USSC\\_CR\\_0356\\_0044\\_ZO.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/histories/USSC_CR_0356_0044_ZO.html)

<sup>38</sup> Kerber 2005, 730.

and literature on the nation and sovereignty, citizenship, immigration and migration, and empire.<sup>39</sup>

Working within fields of ethnic studies and the new American studies, cultural theorists recently have provided bold yet nuanced discussions on the nation and on the changing distinctions between the citizen subject and the effectively stateless one, often described in other ways. This discussion gained momentum in the 1990s, in the context of U.S. debates over multiculturalism and anti-immigration policies as well as renewed attention to issues of sovereignty and human rights in the international context. A great deal of this work focuses on national narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when political, legal, cultural, and economic changes transformed the United States from a slaveholding republic following its supposed “Manifest Destiny” to a post-Reconstruction republic seeking overseas territorial expansion. Literary critic Priscilla Wald notes in her book, *Constituting Americans*, that histories of the United States proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such histories attest to “the extent to which historians assumed the task of narrating the nation” (Wald 172). These historians sought to define by whom the nation was, is, or should be constituted and under what terms: U.S. American nationalism demanded a recognizable national identity.

Citizens would not merely embody this national identity—they would be made substantial, be made “real” by it. Wald observes a “strikingly ontological cast” to nationalist talk of the period, as when Theodore Roosevelt claimed that “the man who does not become Americanized nevertheless fails to remain a European, and becomes nothing at all” (cited in Wald 7). But the task of creating what Wald calls “official

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<sup>39</sup> I’m grateful to Nicole Waligora-Davis for her discussions of African-American intellectual engagements with the nation, citizenship, and critical Black internationalism. Graduate seminar, *Race Matters*, English 687 (Spring 2003, Cornell University).

stories” of the nation was not left to historians, politicians, and writers alone: some of the most sweeping changes to the definitions of the nation and of the criteria for national belonging were made by Supreme Court justices of the period who constructed new and often contradictory categories of legal personhood, in the effort to write the story of the nation in its laws. As Kerber eloquently states of this period, “[t]he nation experimented with the creation of ambiguous spaces between the domestic and the foreign, between the national and the international, between sovereignty and subjugation. And in those spaces lay great potential for statelessness” (Kerber, 2005, 735).

If the term “statelessness” is infrequently invoked in the U.S. context except when the legal technical definition applies, it may be because the term refers to an absolute negative condition; again, it declares an individual as having no legal identity, as already excluded, by definition, from the nation, and thus, implicitly outside the bounds of thinking and talking about the nation. In the process of establishing inside and outside, self and other, citizen and stateless, the law more often creates in-between identities that have no clear, positive definitions: in the decades before the Civil War, slaves were both property and subject; nonwhites generally were defined as “neither citizens, nor aliens” (cited in Wald 16) and thus legal non-persons; and Indian nations were “domestic dependent nations,” their members not citizens but wards of the state, and so on.<sup>40</sup> Wald explains these contradictory, impossibly in-between legal identities, as the effects of narratives troubled by “logical inconsistencies” that could neither be ignored nor explained (23). As I’ll detail below,

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<sup>40</sup> Citizenship could also be inflicted by the state on persons. For example, in the same year of restrictive immigration policies that severely limited the numbers of people allowed entry and naturalization, the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 declared all Native Americans to be U.S. citizens, thus undermining the sovereignty of Indian nations. Moreover, rights such as voting were decided upon by each state, which led to the sort of attenuated or diminished citizenship experienced by other people of color.

much of the nation and the U.S. empire has been defined by the convoluted efforts to define legal identities or personhood. The effect, as Wald observes, is often uncanny—familiar yet strange, neither foreign nor domestic, neither citizen nor alien. Examining how conceptions of personhood are formed by the law and thus constitute a nation, Wald describes these in-between identities of doubled negatives (“neither...nor”) as “the metaphysical void wherein excluded subjects dwelled: persons de jure and de facto without natural rights, human beings whom the law would not fully and equally represent” (23). Features of statelessness combine with those of the “legal bond” that usually defines citizenship, forming subjects legally bound to a nation in some ways but excluded from the nation in others.

The cusp of the twentieth century was a formative period for establishing new categories of statelessness, not least by defining certain labor identities as exceptions to the nation. The Supreme Court Case *Robertson v. Baldwin* highlights a long tradition of regarding the sailor as a quintessentially stateless figure. The sailor figure, in the nineteenth century as much as in the late twentieth, experiences the double bind of being at once bound to and excluded from the nation. Historically, the Anglo and European merchant sailor figure lived and labored outside national territory but under the constraints and demands of sovereign nations. The merchant ship, “the engine of commerce, the machine of empire,” was by 1700 celebrated as “the Sovereign of the Aquatic Globe, giving despotic laws to all the meaner Fry, that live upon that Shining Empire.” Their labor was needed to build empires and world markets, but the work branded them (sometimes literally) as wanderers, as men of the “Shining Empire” who, at heart, were of no earthbound nation.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 150. See also Chapter Two of this dissertation for a discussion of the ship and seafaring in the service of the sovereign nation. Also, see the *Robertson* majority opinion, which referenced the fifteenth century maritime practice of



As effectively stateless but subjected to their vessel's sovereign flag, sailors were often laborers with little or no legal recourse against their employers. Near the end of the nineteenth century, U.S. sailors made great strides in labor organizing to form a union, and they successfully pushed for new legislation aimed at weakening the oppressive practices of forced labor and "crimping" while strengthening the right of sailors.<sup>42</sup> The spirit of this new legislation was tested in 1895, when four merchant mariners attempted to quit the American vessel *Arago* upon reaching domestic port in Oregon. The mariners were arrested, jailed without bail, and forcibly taken on board the ship before it was to sail to Chile.<sup>43</sup> Still they refused to perform their duties on board. They were arrested and charged with refusing to work in accordance with a federal statute concerning merchant seamen; the mariners sued, claiming they were unlawfully imprisoned and that the federal statute violated the provision of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited "involuntary servitude" except—significantly—as punishment for someone convicted of a crime.

The U.S. Supreme Court soon deliberated over the case. Could the seamen legally be punished as criminals for breaking their labor contract with the "master," and in addition made to fulfill the terms of the contract against their will? The majority opinion was that the seamen's labor contract was "exceptional" and unlike the labor contracts of ordinary citizens. The majority opinion found seamen, as an "exceptional class of men," deficient in character, to be regarded as "wards" of the nation rather

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literally branding the face of sailors who abandon their ship at port with the initials of their places of birth (as though to remind sailors of their earthbound nationality/nativity).

<sup>42</sup> Sailors' Union of the Pacific, "The Lookout of the Labor Movement," (digitized chapter of abridged, paperback version written by Stephen Schwartz in 1985, under commission by the Union) <http://www.sailors.org/history.html>.

<sup>43</sup> In 1895, a writ of habeas corpus was issued upon the petition of four seamen who, taking advantage of the Maguire Act passed earlier that year allowing sailors "the right to quit a ship while in domestic ports," quit the vessel *Arago* before its voyage to Chile. The court decision conflicted with the Maguire Act (Sailors' Union).

than full citizens, regardless of legal citizenship status. It noted the specialized nature of their labor and the importance of private merchant mariner commerce to the nation. And it upheld the harsh tradition of maritime law based on its establishment since “time immemorial.” The court made these points, among others, when explaining the decision that forced labor by seamen did not constitute a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment.

*Robertson* exposes the contradictions of the contract entered into by those deemed undeserving of human liberty, specifically in relation to laborers, who are at once recognized as possessing skills deemed economically necessary and yet lacking in the full intelligence needed to enjoy liberty. The decision further reveals the legacy of slavery and its belated afterlives in the logic of incarcerating labor and in the troubled distinction between slavery and legal and illegal forms of involuntary servitude. Legally recognized or identified by the labor they performed rather than by rights deserved on the grounds of being human, seamen were one of many groups in a legal limbo between statelessness and national belonging, often regardless of whether or not they possessed state citizenship. The body may be violated in such limbo, and past injuries cited to justify present ones. The majority opinion distinguished between the sailor and the slave and other forms of racialized labor (through “Chinese coolie system,” “Mexican peonage,” etc.) prohibited by the Thirteenth amendment. But the result of the judges’ distinctions was to assign the sailor to the same racialized and contradictory status of indentured laborers through “other and less offensive names,” as dissenting judge Harlan put it. And yet, the majority opinion noted seamen’s nationality and national duty as U.S. merchant seamen, comparing seamen to soldiers whose legal bond with the nation, called citizenship, was rightly constrained or truncated in the name of protecting national sovereignty.

Importantly, “seamen” had to be discursively defined as irreconcilable to sovereign government and by extension, the legal bond between citizen and nation. Seaman were defined by the U.S. court in terms that earlier helped to define “Africans” and “Indians” through the law. Seamen were defined as adult wards, childish and with limited intelligence, in need of protection—often, from their own immaturity. The majority opinion notes, for example, the wisdom of employers in keeping seamen’s salaries for them, as they would otherwise spend unwisely. Because they were wards and childish, however, they needed to be disciplined and could not be relied upon to understand the proper terms of the labor contract, including criminal punishment for breaking the contract. The seaman’s identity was held captive by a circular logic, which held that the *effects* of labor—the sailors’ rough grayish skin and gnarled bodies, their world-mottled speech—in fact was proof of their inferiority and what *caused* them to work at the only fit job, seafaring. And this labor identity was incompatible with a national one. As I noted earlier, not regarded as real citizens of any state, their state was the sea, their sovereign embodied by the master of the ship.

The construction of people inherently insensible to citizenship earlier served to justify the 1856 Dred Scott case. Daniel followed the majority opinion in denying slave Dred Scott’s claim to freedom because, as a black man (free or slave), Scott could not be a U.S. citizen and therefore had no right to sue in the courts. Daniel argues, “[Among Africans] there never has been known or recognized by the inhabitants of other countries anything partaking of the character of nationality, or civil or political polity; that this race has been by all the nations of Europe regarded as subjects of capture or purchase; as subjects of commerce or traffic” (Associate U.S. Supreme Court Justice Peter V. Daniel, *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, 1856, cited in Kerber, 2005, 733). Linda Kerber cites Justice Daniel’s reasoning in the *Dred Scott* case as “a chilling definition of permanent statelessness.” As Robin D.G. Kelley more dryly

observes: “Before the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment, the question as to whether African Americans were citizens of the United States had not been settled. The experiences of free African Americans during the antebellum era,” and then “the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857....cleared up any ambiguity on the matter” (1048).

The Fourteenth Amendment made black citizenship once again a question, not an actual fact. The vexing terms of national belonging for African Americans, once recognized as the literal possession and ward of white citizens, were theorized by many African Americans in the context of their international and transnational connections to other racialized people subjected to European and U.S. American colonialism. It is this history of radical internationalism intertwined with the desire for national reform that Jones evokes and updates in *Mosquito*. In her depictions of the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary Movement (a.k.a. the new Underground Railroad), Jones elaborates a story of decolonial political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic practice. The novel poses aesthetic questions of beauty, value, and form as inseparable from questions of narrative freedom and sovereign authority. It does so in large part by re-imagining statelessness as the defining practice and condition of the nation-state system: the Central American and Mexican refugees in the not-mainstream Sanctuary Movement, and the African-American Mosquito, make up only part of a wide cast of characters who are estranged from the category of the nation *and* who engage in various decolonizing tactics on social, spiritual, legal, and artistic fronts.

In the *Robertson* case, Supreme Court Justice Harlan explicitly faulted the majority opinion’s recourse to “usage” as way to call up the ghosts of legal subjection in their ruling against the seamen. Justice Harlan writes in his dissenting opinion: “Under this view of the constitution, we may now look for advertisements, not for

runaway servants as in the days of slavery, but for runaway seamen. . . . we can but be reminded of the past, when it is adjudged to be consistent with the law of the land for freemen, who happen to be seamen, to be held in custody, that they may be forced to go aboard private vessels, and render personal services against their will.” Joan Dayan’s work on the continuity between civil death (*attainder*), the legal slave, and “being judged a criminal,” points out that the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865) “made explicit the [chiasmic] doubling, back and forth transaction between prisoner and the ghosts of slaves past. Moreover, once the connection had been made, Southern slavery, now extinct, could resurface under other names not only in the South but in the North.”<sup>44</sup>

The *Roberston* case exhibits the force of analogy to consolidate definitions of labor identities that justify (as well as protest) the exclusion of sailors from the rights and definition of personhood and freedom from indentured servitude. In this case, seamen do not occupy a simply liminal space between foreign and domestic, between alien exclusion and citizen incorporation into a national “we the people.” Instead, seamen occupy a contradictory and contested status in which their indeterminate relationship to the nation and to the constitution of a “we” is delimited by their particular form of labor: not explicitly by ethnicity, race, sex, creed, or nationality, but by the sort of work seamen do, and the identification of their personhood through their labor and its close relationship to the status, function, and sovereignty of the nation. This in-between labor position, specifically as a merchant sailor, must be defined and made coherent in the U.S. courts: and it is this effort that leads the majority court opinion to distinguish the sailors’ position from that of other racialized groups

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<sup>44</sup> Joan Dayan traces the unstable duality between “the civil body—the artificial person who possesses self and property” and “the legal slave—the artificial person who exists as both person and property” through the legal fiction of the incarcerated body’s civil death. See Dayan, “Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 2.1 (2001): 3-39.

(Mexicans, “coolies,” former black slaves) even as it evokes the racialized history of sailors as not fully human, at an earlier stage of human development, as extra-national, as a foreign yet domestically vital worker for the nation. Seamen are marked by racial, developmental, and national discourse by the law. In the *Robertson* case, the minority court opinion insists upon the likeness between sailors and the now-unconstitutional status of slaves and others whose labor falls under the category of involuntary servitude. This analogy between sailors and blacks argues that the involuntary servitude of sailors amounts to a form of slavery, to a reconstitution of a population vulnerable to the conditions and imperatives of slave labor.

Legal thought on the definition and rights of seamen as a group was not shaped by a discourse of how they would assimilate to or degrade the nation. It was precisely because seamen have long served as figures are by definition outside the national land, either in its service or as its potential menace, that seamen were still considered “exceptional” and therefore not subject in the same way to the national prohibition of indentured servitude.

In fact, these sailors were U.S. citizens whose mode of labor was deemed exceptionally crucial to the political sovereignty and economic power of the nation. Judges deployed a range of contradictory arguments explaining the *merchant* seamen’s exceptional nature: like soldiers, and as nationals, their labor was necessary to the economy and thus to “national security”; their labor contracts by definition curtail their rights beyond the conventional, fictional agreement between citizen and sovereign and between the unexceptional employee and employer. Using the language of racial categorization but disavowing its applicability to the situation, judges deemed the seaman to be constitutionally inferior in intelligence; a ward in need of national protection and national discipline when (as children do) they impetuously abandon their work; deficient and degraded except in their specialized labor; and yet, *not* the

intended benefactors of the Thirteenth Amendment because it was meant to stop racialized indentured servitude of the “Mexican ‘peonage’” and the “Chinese coolie” trade (*Robertson*).

*Robertson* was partly a testing case for the young Seamen’s Union of the Pacific, which continued with mixed success to lobby Congress for seamen’s rights. Outraged by the majority decision of *Robertson*, the Union invoked the specter of slavery as a living reality, governing the lives of American seamen through the marriage of the private shipping industry and the sovereign nation-state. Referring to sailors as “bondsmen,” the Union members refused to partake in Fourth of July celebrations. “[T]he spectacle of a slave worshipping his chains,” declared Union members, “would be less ludicrous than that of the American seamen celebrating Independence Day” (Sailor’s Union of the Pacific, chapter II, online).

The *Robertson* case presented an unresolvable contradiction to the court, which wrestled over how to at once include and exclude this racialized labor class into the nation. The Supreme Court justices also argued for conflicted narratives of the nation, during a high period of racism, nativism, and immigration, and just months before the rapid growth of U.S. colonialism with the Spanish-American War. The majority opinion rests upon racialized economic and political structures foundational to the republic and to postbellum U.S. ideas of personhood and labor. And, though it is not a landmark case outside maritime law, it anticipates the continuing series of unresolvable problems encountered by the official attempt to define and clearly distinguish between the alien and the national.

Only four years later, the same court would grapple with the contradiction of a republican empire. The Insular Cases called on the Supreme Court to negotiate between defining the U.S. as a democratic republic and as an empire after it acquired the Philippines, Guam, Cuba, and Puerto Rico as a result of the Spanish-American

War (1898-1902). Like *Roberston v. Baldwin*, the Insular Cases led to the creation of another exceptional legal identity—that of the “noncitizen national.” The category of noncitizen national was a colonial identity. It described “a new status of people who lived under the U.S. flag without the full range of constitutional protections that flag normally carries” (Kerber 2007, 19), thus asserting sovereignty over new territories without incorporating their inhabitants into the body of the nation. These court decisions sought to resolve the contradictions of empire and modern republican states by holding that the acquired territories were subject to U.S. sovereignty but were “neither foreign nor part of the United States,” being defined as “unincorporated territories” of the U.S.<sup>45</sup> These territorial possessions were disavowed as colonies but also not allowed the possibility of statehood. As Amy Kaplan points out, the result would be a new legal status for U.S. acquired territories and their inhabitants, who contradictorily were defined as “foreign in a domestic sense” yet “domestic in a foreign sense.”<sup>46</sup>

Just as the sailors’ union dubbed *Robertson* “Dred Scott II,” Puerto Ricans and the other inhabitants of U.S. “unincorporated territories” drew parallels to the landmark case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. Justice Harlan also wrote a dissenting opinion in a pivotal case, *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), part of the Insular Cases. Highlighting the conflicted desire for the U.S. to identify the exceptional and excluded, he writes: “The idea that this country may acquire territories anywhere upon the earth, by conquest or treaty, and hold them as mere colonies or provinces, the

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<sup>45</sup> Christina Duffy Burnett, “The Edges of Empire and the Limits of Sovereignty: American Guano Islands,” *American Quarterly* 57.3 (September 2005): 798, 795. Cited in Kerber 2007, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Kaplan has analyzed the vexing and often suppressed relationship of the domestic and the foreign in the construction of U.S. as a republican empire (in this case, that the U.S. could possess territories that were yet “unincorporated,” territories ruled domestic in a foreign sense and foreign in a domestic sense, and that the people could be in a permanently liminal status between stateless alien to, and citizen of the U.S.). See Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).



people inhabiting them to enjoy only such rights as Congress chooses to accord to them, is wholly inconsistent with the spirit and genius as well as with the words of the Constitution.”<sup>47</sup> The legal distinctions between slave and free laborer, full citizen and ward of the nation, are blurry and thus especially difficult to control at the edges of the “nation” proper. As Kaplan and Kerber note, the terms of exclusion for those at the edges of ‘the nation’ are haunted by the nation’s internal contradictions of a free republic founded on a legal system of citizens and slaves and a form of imperialism that produced a “national” space in possession of extra-national, “unincorporated territories.”<sup>48</sup>

Haunting *The Ordinary Seaman*’s Central American crewmen abandoned on board a broken ship are, in part, these histories of the legal exclusion of racialized laborers.<sup>49</sup> The “seamen” in the novel have no definite legal identity, although their indefinite affinities with the slave, laborer, migrant, unauthorized refugee, or alien, demonstrate that exclusion from the social body affirms what legal scholar Robert Steinfeld calls the “invention” of free labor as a key U.S. American ideology in particular. The long and complicated history of the rights of everyone who was not recognized as a citizen at the founding of the U.S. Constitution show that the meanings and recognition of that “legal bond” between an individual and a nation

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<sup>47</sup> Investigative journalist Juan Gonzalez notes that the Insular Cases have provided “the principal legal backing for this country’s holding of colonies to the present day.” The “equivalent for Puerto Ricans of the Dred Scott Decision for African Americans,” the Insular Cases were decided by the same group of justices that ruled in Dred Scott. Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 61. Quotation in main text above also cited in 61.

<sup>48</sup> The status of citizenship, like statelessness, may be revoked or granted by the state. The Jones Act of 1917, for instance, imposed a version of U.S. citizenship upon all Puerto Ricans “over the unanimous objection of their House of Delegates,” (Gonzalez 62).

<sup>49</sup> On the enduring racialization of the seaman since the eighteenth century that the U.S. Supreme Court drew upon, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: merchant seamen, pirates, and the Anglo-American maritime world, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also his study of eighteenth-century spirit of radical uprising, with Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

depend upon an uneven combination of haphazard individual decisions (as when judges ruled on the whiteness of Middle Eastern claimants or the rights of citizenship for married women on a case by case basis) and institutional histories that define the nation's enemies, "wards," and foreigners.<sup>50</sup>

In the early twentieth century, state practice of assigning legal identities to individuals of European descent was dramatically altered. Nationality documents became the primary source of identification, so the state's exclusive power to manage national borders and control movement across them became manifest in "passport" and visa documents. Millions of people without these documents cannot legally work, migrate, be heard in a court of law, or gain access to institutions of education or medicine. As a recent UN pamphlet on statelessness implicitly reminds citizens who take official documents for granted, "Happiness is...official identification documents."<sup>51</sup>

Racialized immigrants were subjected to documentation by U.S. immigration authorities before European immigrants.<sup>52</sup> For example, when the United States sought new labor pools in the early years of the twentieth century, most of the European immigrants who entered at Ellis Island in New York "lacked documents of any sort" (Kerber 2007, 20). Before these immigrants needed passports, it was their bodies that officials inspected and documented as fit or unfit for entry. Entry at Angel

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<sup>50</sup> On whiteness and citizenship law, see Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: NYU Press, 1997). On Middle Eastern immigrant claims to be eligible for naturalization, see Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race" in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, eds. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000). On the history of weakened citizenship rights and statelessness for white women, see Kerber (2005 and 2007).

<sup>51</sup> "Statelessness Q & A," 7.

<sup>52</sup> As with histories of statelessness and immigration more generally, practices such as documentation and denationalization become issues of widespread notice when they are applied to subjects recognized as European and/or "white."

Island in San Francisco was a different story. Although “billed as ‘The Ellis Island of the West’” when it opened in 1910, Angel Island was known within the Immigration Service as the “Guardian of the Western Gate.” Designed to prevent Chinese entry in accordance with the Chinese Exclusion Acts, the immigration station required registration documentation and was “primarily a detention center” for most Asian immigrants and other “enemy aliens” until it was abandoned after World War II.<sup>53</sup>

Categories of status defined by national laws are highly conventional and historically shifting; to those who move easily through such categories, however, legal status is often naturalized as simply part of the “national order of things,” to use Liisa Malkki’s phrase. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act (which was officially enforced until 1965) was a comprehensive restriction law, a system of immigration quotas according to newly defined categories of national origins. Mae Ngai recounts how the system of restrictive immigration produced the now so-called “illegal alien” as “a *new legal and political subject*” that fell along a global racial and national hierarchy established by law. This “regime of immigration restriction,” Ngai notes, “remapped the nation in two important ways. First, it drew a new ethnic and racial map based on new categories and hierarchies of difference. Second...it articulated a new sense of territoriality, which was marked by unprecedented awareness and state surveillance of the nation’s contiguous land borders” (4 emphasis in original, 3).

The World War I emergency requirement of passports to enter the country became institutionalized soon after the war in the effort to keep millions of European stateless and refugee people out of the country. Although, as Kerber notes, “what contemporaries called ‘nationality problems’ entered anyway,” untold numbers of displaced persons, refugees, and stateless people were deported or turned away

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<sup>53</sup> Angel Island Association, in cooperation with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, “Angel Island State Park,” <http://www.angelisland.org/immigr02.html>.

(Kerber 2007, 21). The newly formed United Nations developed international conventions to identify and minimize the problem of statelessness in response to the plight of primarily European Jewish refugees who were stripped of legal nationality or even residency rights to any country. These refugees were not only seeking refuge from their so-called countries of origin. As “stateless refugees,” they possessed no citizenship status whatsoever. Although a history of statelessness certainly precedes the mid-twentieth century (as histories of colonialism, slavery, and gendered, racialized, and class-based civil rights show), it is the World War II European Jewish refugees that first established the meanings of statelessness in the U.S. public imaginary and in the United Nations, which established the notion of human rights in part by defining refugee status as limited to Europeans. Histories of “statelessness” have been largely Eurocentric since the term circulated, but the subjects of such histories primarily have been non-European people and those in formerly colonized territories.

With documents came new identities and cultural anxieties for citizens. The “specter” of the “person without formal legal status” now “engendered images of great danger” (Ngai 61). Liminal figures, seamen and undocumented aliens, made up an unknown percentage of the population “whose first act upon reaching our shores was to break our laws by entering in a clandestine manner” (61). The absence of documents itself became proof of the crime of crossing borders without permission of the sovereign authority.<sup>54</sup> Stateless persons, forcefully and eloquently described by

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<sup>54</sup> Ngai points out that “aliens” who were not legally authorized to reside within national borders produced a subject “barred from citizenship and without rights,” whose “inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility,” (3). Such subjects would be unlikely to call upon the nation-state from whence they came—if indeed they were even recognized by that nation-state, as many were not—and thus, were either effectively or literally stateless. Ngai chooses the term “illegal alien” for such an “impossible subject, a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved,” (5).

Hannah Arendt and frequently the objects of national sympathy and “compassion,” at the moment of their approach to the U.S. may be depicted as threats to the nation, as a potential source of trouble. The rhetoric of morality and feeling (at the heart of how to treat refugees) has, since 1991, undergone what national and international institutions have called “compassion fatigue.”<sup>55</sup> The official end of the Cold War led to official changes to refugee policy. As one journalist explaining repatriation puts it:

The United States used to have an easy rule of thumb for deciding who was a refugee. A person fleeing Communism was almost automatically considered by the State Department to have "a well-founded fear of persecution," the 1951 United Nations language that became the legal definition of a refugee. But a person fleeing civil strife in El Salvador or Haiti was more likely to be an "economic migrant" seeking access to a better standard of living. The former could be nurtured; the latter deported. Now the old refugees from Communism may have become the new "economic migrants" in flight from economic disaster.<sup>56</sup>

Added to the politics of defining identities and categories of migration, various arguments—that the U.S. should strictly protect borders, or help to solve the domestic problems of other countries that lead to migration, or carefully distinguish between political refugees and “purely” economic migrants, or welcome all who seek refuge, without distinction—reinforce the idea that stateless conditions are bumps in an

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Elliott Abrams, “Diluting Compassion,” Editorial, *The New York Times* 5 Aug 1983, Fri Late City Final Ed: A23. “Boat People and Compassion Fatigue,” Editorial, *The New York Times* 14 Jul 1988, Thurs Late City Final Ed: A28. For the issue of compassion in early 1990s UN policies, see “Solving Europe's Refugee Crisis,” Editorial, *The New York Times* 27 Jul 1992, Mon Late Final Ed: A16.

<sup>56</sup> Barringer.

otherwise working nation-state system. What this dissertation explores are more theoretically complicated and provocative notions of the meanings, forms, and implications of the stateless figure in the late twentieth century.

The stateless figure may also evoke sympathy, as when the meaning of “statelessness,” epitomized by the European Jewish lack of belonging to a state and the consequent vulnerability of Jews to persecution by European fascism, lent support to the creation of the state of Israel. Whereas nineteenth-century Zionist discourse largely relied on the vocabulary of reviving the Jewish nation within its biblically defined, geographical homeland—a discourse shaped by broader European discussions of the nation as an organic social and geographical entity—twentieth-century Zionist discourse emphasized the need for a modern Jewish state to give the Jewish nation its identity, recognition, and protection. Jewish immigration to Palestine was not a solution but merely one of the first steps for claiming statehood. Supporters of the nation-state of Israel now emphasized that Jews were not merely stateless refugees in need of citizenship from European countries but a religiously-defined ethnicity in need of a state exclusively theirs, a “stateless nation” whose statehood would guarantee their human rights. Hannah Arendt describes the continual production of statelessness in the attempts to redress it within paradigms of the nation and new state sovereignty: “the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people.” “Since the Peace Treaties of 1919 and 1920,” she writes, “the refugees and the stateless have attached themselves like a curse to all the newly established states on earth which were created in the image of the nation-state.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 290. Arendt was critical of how the stateless, especially minorities excluded from the nation, all the more fervently reaffirmed the conflation of national rights with human rights by demanding their “reintegration into a national, into their own national

Arendt's reflections on statelessness astutely challenged nation-building efforts as a solution to guaranteeing the "rights of man," which translate to "civil rights" under the paradigm of the state, by tracing the problem of statelessness back to the eighteenth-century democratic revolutions and declaration of the Rights of Man that form the basis of the modern state system and the notion of human rights (290-302).

Features of statelessness continued to be implicit in international and national struggles of the 1960s and 70s, for example, around refugee law spurred by the Vietnam War or the curtailment of dissenters' citizenship rights by government surveillance and intimidation. During this period, international organizations negotiated broader definitions of the refugee that recognized the effective, if not technical, statelessness experienced by the refugee. The U.S. passed the 1980 Refugee Act, which adopted the definition of refugee to the UN 1967 Protocol, defining a refugee as a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country." The Organization of African Unity defined refugees as "every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing the public order or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality." The Intergovernmental Committee for Migration "acknowledged two types of refugees: 'political refugees'—persons subjected to persecution and violence; and 'displaced refugees'—indirect victims

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community," (292). This criticism is coupled with her warning to the nation-state that attempts to become homogeneous by "eliminating or reducing to a minimum the dark background of difference," rather than become equal by virtue of political organization (301-2). Arendt adapts this argument to some disturbing conclusions regarding racial issues in the United States (see the "alien" as the Negro, 301), especially in her 1970 monograph *On Violence*, in which she deplores the ongoing Black Power and Black studies student movement. Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970). Thanks to Nicole Waligora-Davis for introducing me to this text.

obliged to emigrate because of the destruction of their means of subsistence” (cited in Garcia 88).

The 1980s and 90s became an important period for contesting, reshaping, and establishing new definitions of refugee in order to determine recognizable identities, who may and who may not be identified as a refugee. The very act of constructing and claiming one definition of refugee over another was a political act by national, international, and transnational organizations. But as many organizations continued to expand the definition of refugee, the Reagan and Bush administrations advocated tougher controls and selective implementation of the U.S. definition of refugee. U.S. immigration and asylum policies reflected state support for anti-communist regimes and opposition to leftist regimes: as hundreds of thousands of people sought asylum in the United States, the INS rejected virtually all asylum requests (except those from Nicaragua and Cuba) without regard for international protocols or treaties to which the U.S. was a party, including a vague commitment to *non-refoulement* (no forced return) and proper hearings for asylum requests. “Immigration attorneys and representatives from religious and human rights groups reported a systematic violation of civil liberties on the part of some INS officials. In some detention centers the list of abuses was considerable,” including sexual abuse, theft, denial of legal counsel, and the tricking of Central Americans into signing their own deportation papers (Garcia 91). The marking of peace accords and “democratic” elections also identified states as safe for the return of nationals—but as Goldman writes in a newspaper article, “[in] Guatemala, as elsewhere in Latin America, criminals and mafiosos have found in 'democracy' the perfect Trojan Horse for attaining and preserving real power inside essentially hijacked states.”<sup>58</sup> Given the official treatment, the best chance for many

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<sup>58</sup> Francisco Goldman, Commentary, *New York Times*, 3 Nov 2003, Late East Coast Ed: A19. Goldman cites Jose Ruben Zamora, the founder and editor of *el Periodico* to describe this condition. Despite several assassination attempts for his journalism, Zamora recently wrote that the transitional period



seeking refuge lay in illegally crossing U.S. (as well as Mexican and Canadian) borders. The term “economic migrant” came to distinguish the unwanted, the “illegal alien,” from the more politically desirable migrants labeled “political refugees.” Those seeking refuge had to learn what stories would result in which names, when such naming meant the difference between legal and illegal status, life or the risk of deportation. At the same time, the meanings of political citizenship shifted from civic duties and obligations to privatized structures of feeling and private enterprise (Berlant). Anthropologist Aihwa Ong, for instance, argues, “the norms of good citizenship in advanced liberal democracies have shifted from an emphasis on duties and obligations to the nation to a stress on becoming autonomous, responsible choice-making subjects who can serve the nation best by becoming ‘entrepreneurs of the self.’”<sup>59</sup>

Kerber notes that “statelessness today, in particular in relation to the borders and borderlands of the United States, is most usefully understood not only as a status but as a practice, made and remade in daily decisions of presidents and judges, border guards and prison guards, managers and pimps” (745). As I’ve noted above, one function of sovereignty is to produce categories of statelessness. The practice of recognizing someone as stateless can come to produce him or her as such (even without a legal process), as when people identified as “illegal aliens” may become subject to the material effects of statelessness. Any challenge over such productions of statelessness comes belatedly and in piecemeal fashion, as objections to extralegal

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from the guerrilla’s defeat in 1982 to the 1996 peace accords “‘served as the smoke screen with which this organization converted the Guatemalan state into the criminal state which, with complete impunity, dedicated itself to assaulting Guatemalans.’” Goldman and Zamora were writing on the occasion of the presidential candidacy of former evangelist Rios Montt, who conducted a genocidal campaign during his two years as Guatemalan dictator, and despite the Guatemalan Constitution’s ban prohibiting former coup participants from running for president (the ban was eventually lifted for Montt).

<sup>59</sup> Ong, 9.

repatriation, exploitation of undocumented or informal sector workers, or INS detention often go unheeded if ventured at all. Rice's speech on rendition clearly sets the transnational (as threat) in opposition to the national (as site of lawful citizens and as potential site of violation by the transnational) in political discourse that identifies something like an anti-citizen as the enemy of the state. As Condoleezza Rice reminds Europeans reportedly uncomfortable with the practice of rendition, the "enemies," as transnational subjects, have decided to identify as the Others to the figure of the citizen, whose protection "is the first and oldest duty of any government" (Rice). The non-citizen—those terrorists who (according to Rice) make themselves "effectively stateless" by pledging loyalty to an extremist transnational cause; those aliens who make themselves stateless by crossing "our" borders; those criminals who give up their citizenship by "choosing" to live outside its proper bounds—is always already suspect for having 'decided upon' statelessness, for breaking or for refusing to sign, by blood, birth, or name, the contract between the state and the individual.<sup>60</sup> Recounting Eliga Gould's argument that stateless people are easily placed outside law and morality, Kerber describes it in this way: "the stateless float in an immoral world" (16). If they did not choose statelessness, these stateless individuals are presumed to have chosen to live outside the bounds of morality and ethnics that presumably constitute the nation.

Statelessness is also produced through neoliberal globalization, as the effective status of undocumented workers ranging from migrant workers to technically stateless

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<sup>60</sup> Consider the similar effects of naming and legal recognition in relation to the current Bush administration's defense of the extraordinary rendition and secret detention of the so-called "stateless" and "terrorist." Here I would remind us of sites, secret as well as known, zoned for various forms of detention on a global scale. Consider Australia's reservation of a nearby island as a detention center for would-be immigrants and asylum-seekers or the U.S. naval base Guantanamo on the island of Cuba to detain Haitian asylum-seekers and, since 2001, various people termed "enemy combatants" and captured by, sold to, or kidnapped on behalf of, the United States as part of its "war on terror." For an interesting commentary on the history of Guantanamo, see Kaplan, "Where is Guantánamo?" *American Quarterly* 57.3 (September 2005): 831-858.

people who are not allowed to work, go to school, or claim any rights in the country in which they reside. Neoliberal ideologies, far from discounting the role of the state in economic affairs, harness and manipulate state powers by exploiting differences between “formal” economic practices, legally recognized by state and part of its formal organization, and “informal” ones. “Informal” economic practices thus assume the form of “undocumented” practices, which evade the formal definition, recognition, and regulation by state bureaucracy.

Those rules continue to matter in powerful ways within the global systems of political and economic practices. Like states, contemporary economic practices also produce statelessness. The “informal economy” is a form of economic statelessness, as that which evades the formal definition, recognition, and regulation by state bureaucracy. Narratives of capital that distinguish formal from informal economies already display their fictive nature: as an International Labour Organization paper puts it, “[f]ormal enterprises often have both formal and backdoor operations, registered and unregistered workers, and informally paid workers producing for the official markets.”<sup>61</sup> Following this so-called flexible economy, the imagined crew of *The Ordinary Seaman*, contracted out to Achuar, Inc., is made up of poor men who incur debts in order to pay an agent to find them employment; such employment is transnational and temporary, limited to one shipping job before returning to their home countries. In economic terms, these characters are participating in the “informalization of employment,” what some analysts identify as the process of “growing employment

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<sup>61</sup> International Policy Group, “Decent Work in the Global Economy: Discussion paper 1,” Section 2.2 IPG, International Labour Office (Geneva, 2001). The paper also notes the process of “the informalization of employment,” a phrase used to describe “[t]he process of growing employment insecurity and declining coverage of labour and social protection” as part of the increasingly “flexible” economy.

insecurity and declining coverage of labour and social protecti[o]n” (ILO).<sup>62</sup> The figure of the effectively stateless laborer, or undocumented worker, makes visible a continued intimacy between the formal and the informal economies within neoliberal economic globalization.

Difficult to measure, informal economic practices (ranging from working side-jobs without reporting income, to street vendors operating without licenses, to human or drug trafficking) may be intimately bound up with what we call formal economic practices. The term “informal economy” gained currency in the early 1970s, as social and dependency theorists sought to conceptualize “the unregulated activities of the marginal poor in Third World cities.”<sup>63</sup> The term sought to articulate the gaps in the formal, bureaucratic record of economic activity in so-called Third World countries: aporias (variously labeled “hidden,” “underground,” “unregulated,” or “black” markets) were increasingly identified as the “informal sector,” or all economic activities “lying beyond the scope of regulation, both legal and illegal...[ranging] from market gardening and brewing through every kind of trade to gambling, theft and political corruption.”<sup>64</sup> To speak of an “informal economy” as fully distinct from its formal counterpart is to deny the blurriness of practice and to reify the theoretical models upon which economics as a discipline depends (including the base premise that the economy operates as a competitive market, into which power does not enter).

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<sup>62</sup> The International Seafarer’s Union is one such organization committed to empowering and advocating on behalf of international seafarers, which I mention below. SEWA, the Self-Employed Women’s Association, is a strong and remarkably influential trade union of the “unorganised sector” of women workers in India. Organized as a union in 1971, SEWA aims to operate as both an organization and a social movement to empower the “unprotected” labor force, those women whose “work is not counted and hence re-mains invisible,” through training, services, and through outreach to World Bank representatives and other NGOs. See SEWA, <http://www.sewa.org/aboutus/index.asp>.

<sup>63</sup> Keith Hart, *Money in an Unequal World: Keith Hart and His Memory Bank* (New York: Texere, 2000, 2001), 149.

<sup>64</sup> I use the term “Third World” in this context to better indicate Three Worlds discourse widely used, particularly between the 1960s and 1980s, as part of the Cold War division of the globe.

The formal/informal binary loses its conceptual coherence even as it persists in discussions of economic policy, which attempt to contain, predict, or “correct for” the informal economy, that economy which by definition escapes regulation, or state recognition. Therefore, in order for the globalized economy to appear as anything like a coherent system, the formal economy must constantly be staged *as if* it did not also depend upon the wide range of informal practices, as if such practices could be estimated as marginal, or—most importantly—as if the formal economy did not somehow operate in a way similar to a counterfeit document that successfully (if temporarily) passes as legitimate, with all the appearance and sanction of the law, but which drives (and is driven by) forms of labor exploitation that are not or cannot be recognized by a state’s legal system. Informal and formal operate as expressions of the same system—but a system which must be *discursively* split into a binary, affirmed and repressed as counterparts, binaries, independent systems, or as opposite poles along a continuum of economic practices.

Even as labor rights organizations and scholars recognize that “[t]he formal/informal dichotomy is losing relevance as the boundaries become increasingly blurred,” economists and dependency theorists continue to contest the definition, role, scale, history, and proper responses to the informal economy.<sup>65</sup> Hart retrospectively identifies his complicity in helping to form the dichotomy by naming a diverse set of

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<sup>65</sup> ILO discussion paper. Hart characterizes the “so-called informal economy” as the “antithesis to state capitalism” and writes that “[the informal economy] could almost be described as the conceptual negation of Keynesian macro-economics, the decentralized activities of ordinary people as opposed to the economic policies of governments” (146-54). Hart goes on to incisively reflect upon the continuing popularity of a term he coined but which may have “outgrown its usefulness” as a term produced out of Cold War conditions and often applicable to state power itself. By operating as a negative, Hart points out that the term informal economy “is a passive and conservative concept that acknowledges a world outside the bureaucracy, but endows it with no positive identity. The informal sector allowed academics and bureaucrats to incorporate the teeming street life of exotic cities into their models without having to confront the specificity of what the people were really up to. In sacrificing my own ethnographic encounter with real persons to the generalizing jargon of development economics, I played my own part in this process of rationalization and cover-up” (156).

practices as lacking, passive, a deviation from the norm—informal to the formal—in order to fit such practices into “the generalizing jargon of development economics” that was itself framed by the Cold War (156).<sup>66</sup>

Arturo Escobar describes development “as an apparatus” linking “forms of knowledge about the Third World with the deployment of forms of power and intervention, resulting in the mapping and production of Third World societies,” which even came to identify themselves as fundamentally “underdeveloped.”<sup>67</sup>

Developmental discourse, then, outlines a teleology in which a “First-World” country produces knowledge and practices intervention in a “Third World” country to help it “mature,” in part by formalizing the informal features of its economy and incorporating its effectively stateless people into the nation. Famous pro-capitalist economist Hernando de Soto travels the world and works with several state governments in an effort to formalize the informal economy by designing laws that would “make the excluded feel included,” laws fostering economic growth and protecting property, that originary unit of capital.<sup>68</sup> This effort to formally

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<sup>66</sup> The term “informal sector” has generally been replaced by the term “informal economy,” which I use throughout this section. See Hart’s description of how he arrived at the term “informal” in a paper delivered in 1971 and later published as “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana” in the *Journal of Modern African Studies* (1973): 149, n39.

<sup>67</sup> For an important critique and history of development discourse and the possibilities of moving beyond “development,” see Arturo Escobar, “Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements,” *Social Text*, No. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues. 1992 (20-56): 23-24.

<sup>68</sup> “The Economist Versus the Terrorist.” *The Economist* 30 Jan 2003: [http://www.economist.com/people/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=1559905](http://www.economist.com/people/displayStory.cfm?story_id=1559905). By the 1960s, “the international economic authorities were worried about potential explosions and they felt that more attention should be paid to the peasants and to the urban poor. A vogue for promoting the ‘informal sector’ as a device for employment creation fitted in with this shift” Hart (150). This vogue persists, since opposition to 1980s neoliberal and U.S. interventionist policies culminated in violent conflicts throughout Central and Latin America. Among the recent major policy changes credited to de Soto and his powerful following of Reagan and Thatcher-style neoliberalism and pro-capitalist contemporary state leaders of the global South, the attempt to formalize the coca farmers of Peru is among the most well-known. An economist who “believes that capitalism can defeat terrorism,” de Soto and Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori claim credit for vanquishing *El Sendero Luminoso* (better known in the U.S. as The Shining Path, a Marxist terrorist organization in Peru) by formalizing the coca industry (with

incorporate poor, politically marginalized informal economic actors into state and global capitalist systems is one way of producing good citizens who respect property-rights, respond to formal economic incentives, and generally obey the authority of the state.

Development discourse also continues to elide the ways in which the informal economy has come to mean not only the activities of the so-called Third World “marginal poor” but also the institutions of global capital that intervene in the name of “development,” such as the World Bank. Within the state system, Hart notes that the “commanding heights of an informalized world economy, much of it illegal, all of it defying state regulation,” lie at the centers of political power itself—in state officials’ corrupt fortunes, through secret deals between governments and the armaments industry, in financial offshore havens, drug trafficking, and so on (154-5).

Informal and formal practices may be symbiotic, conflicted, contrapuntal, and convergent, depending on the circumstance. Similar to the stakes involved in clearly maintaining the informal/formal binary, citizenship and statelessness form a discursive binary often affirmed as clearly distinct or even mutually exclusive, in part charging the ideal of citizenship with meaning by way of its negative term, statelessness. Even granting the spatial metaphor of absolute citizenship and absolute statelessness operating as the two poles of a continuum, it is along this continuum that we find what Hortense Spillers suggests to be the range of in-between states or “states of ambiguity” that individuals actually occupy—states of ambiguous citizenship rights and statelessness most keenly manifested in the U.S. by the historically politically

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U.S. President H.W. Bush’s support, on the condition that coca farmers look to other crops over time). Legal recognition and economic incentives, so the story goes, convinced rural coca farmers to stop providing them haven, thereby pushing the Shining Path into the cities, where they were arrested. For more on de Soto’s economic ideology and policies, see de Soto, *The Other Path: Invisible Revolution in the Third World* (1989), translation from the Spanish original *El Otro Sendero* (1986), and *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (2000).

marginalized, all of us who were not what the Founding Fathers could be (male, white, and propertied). While the model of statelessness-citizenship as a continuum emphasizes the distance and the relationship between absolute statelessness and full citizenship, Eyal Amiran's suggestion--that citizenship and statelessness are not two discursive poles along a continuum but rather "expressions of the same system"—nicely describes the intimacy between formal and informal economic practices by pointing up the difference in articulation.<sup>69</sup>

Stateless laboring gets incessantly performed as obscene, as a violation of law that should be hidden from the stage proper (the Formal Economy, the Public Space), to be acted out in the backstages --the homes, streets, Walmart stores, cargo vessels, and other innumerable routes and sites—of neoliberal globalization. Statelessness in the U.S. is a condition, a status, and a practice that does not simply reveal the "dark side of globalization." Statelessness, often materially hidden and discursively hyper-visible, gets constructed as a legal non-status and then repressed by global capitalism and state systems.

In the novels of Goldman and Jones, the effectively stateless undocumented workers disrupt the teleology of stateless/informal to state/formal. The history of the national construction of the "Indian" in Mexico also highlights the racialized terms of this model of national "development." Josie Saldaña traces the "developmentalist teleology" of the Mexican nation to the construction of Indian difference "created by colonialism" and "rearticulated—indeed, cannibalized—within modern revolutionary citizenship," in which the *mestizo* (of mixed European with Indian heritage) represents perfected citizenship (294-5). In this model, the Indian is evidence of where national

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<sup>69</sup> Hortense Spillers, conversation with me, April 2006. Eyal Amiran, "Affective Capital," panel respondent to my paper, "Stateless Labors in Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman*," presented at the Global States Conference, Irvine, CA. May 6, 2006.



cohesion fails and where educational and cultural reform must be aimed. Saldaña-Portillo goes on to explain how it is “this developmentalist teleology that the Zapatistas interrupted with their insurrection, rejecting the biologized and colonial logic of modern Mexican citizenship” even as they work from *within* the “developmentalist nation-building” and “citizen-making projects” of the long-dominating Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (294-5).<sup>70</sup> In Jones’ novel, when Mosquito invokes the Zapatistas rebellion as emblematic of the struggles of people of color for independence all over the world, she envisions a challenge to racialized citizenship and their attendant models of (political, cultural, and economic) development.

Michel Foucault understood the importance of state power to construct legal identities—not merely citizen or stateless person, but “person” and “individual.” In calling for a shift in how we think about power relations, he makes an important distinction: “the political, ethical, social, and philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us...from the type of individualization which is linked to the state.”<sup>71</sup> The stateless figure embodies the problem Foucault identifies: already “liberated” in a sense from the state, the stateless figure invites us to regard the connections between the modes of knowing, being, and marking distinctions, that the state deploys. Liberation, in this sense, suggests that we are held captive by the structures and subjectivities that a world of states elaborates. Foucault adapts the decolonial rhetoric

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<sup>70</sup> Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “Reading a Silence: The ‘Indian’ in the Era of Zapatismo.” *Nepantla: Views from South* 3.2 (2002): 287-314, (294-295). See also Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Dreyfus H.L., and P. Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1983), 213-6. Also cited in Sandoval 164.

of “liberation” to issues about the power to define us as individuals. The history of Western colonialism is implicit to the problem of individualization, a point not lost on theorists of coloniality.

### *Decolonial Aesthetics*

The literature I study explores how the state has inherited figurations of national belonging, not-belonging—as well as neither belonging nor not-belonging—from Western colonial practices. A decolonial aesthetic practice experiments with how to break with various forms of unspoken agreements, with social, political, and artistic orders established by usage if not by law. Such a practice also envisions forms of inclusivity that avoid both a liberal pluralism and a radical purism. As the phrase suggests, a decolonial aesthetics describes a practice of redefining art--beauty, value, and form--in ways that de-center the Eurocentric, colonialist legacies at work within the social imagination and artistic production. At the same time, a decolonial aesthetic practice depicts decolonization as a necessarily unfinished, ongoing social process. It reveals the political implications of aesthetic concepts, such as formal unity, art as an autonomous realm from politics, and organicism as a system of distinct parts subordinated to the whole. In other words, it highlights the ideological and regulating dimension of Western aesthetics.

A decolonial practice does not abandon Western notions in the attempt to recover or cultivate exclusive non-Western forms, but it may involve combining non-Western aesthetic practices with Western ones. The effect is to reveal the ideological conventions of Western aesthetics, as they have been elaborated since the late eighteenth century. Consider, for example, George Eliot writing in the 1860s on art: “form, as an element of human experience, must begin with the perception of

separateness.” The recognition of difference and the subordinate relation of “part” to “whole” are what make artistic form meaningful. To establish and maintain distinctions between one thing and another becomes a fundamental aesthetic principle: “things must be recognized as separate wholes before they can be recognized as wholes composed of parts, or before these wholes again can be regarded as relatively parts of a larger whole...Fundamentally, form is unlikeness.”<sup>72</sup> This post-Romantic conception of form as an organic whole also served as a way to imagine the nation. Figured as an organic whole, the nation was defined by the metaphor of the organism and by its difference from other nations.

Eliot’s notion of form finds an echo in Henry James’ influential aesthetic theories of the novel form—and of the nation. Importantly, James’ organicist notion that “[a] novel is a living thing, all one and continuous” also extended to his idea of the nation. James’ concern over immigrants and the potential failure of assimilation bore a strong resemblance to his concern over the failure of composition in novel writing: both failures would produce what James has called “large loose baggy monsters with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary” (Kaye 178). In Chapter Four of the dissertation, I discuss how Gayl Jones engages with and playfully undermines Henry James’ theory of authorship as control over narrative composition and of the novel form as an organic whole.

Goldman, Acker, Jones, Alcalay, and Antoon invite their readers to view decolonization partly as a process that involves knowledge and imagination—a “decolonization of the mind,” as Nigerian writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o puts it. Historian Emma Pérez reinvisions “light” and “dark” to insist on the decolonial imaginary as

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<sup>72</sup> George Eliot, “Notes on Form in Art” in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 432-433. I’m grateful to David Sweeney Coombs for bringing Eliot’s essay to my attention and for his generous discussions with me.

acting “much like a shadow in the dark...moving and breathing through an in-between space.”<sup>73</sup> Pérez conceptualizes the decolonial as liminal, in the sense that it is an ongoing process (by definition incomplete) as well as a space between stable positions of inclusion and exclusion. Because of the emphasis on self-definition as an open-ended process, a decolonial aesthetics may not be visible to a critical gaze that looks for unified aesthetic theory or a consistent model for aesthetic practice.

A decolonial aesthetics offers new ways to approach the question of how to advance a critique of U.S. versions of Eurocentrism, as it has defined “empire” and “nation” by deploying concepts such as race, gender, capitalism, culture, and aesthetics. In distinct ways, Goldman, Acker, Jones, and Alcalay each elaborate on Anibal Quijano’s thesis that “[w]hat is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as a new global power.”<sup>74</sup> Decoloniality is partly the effort of “unthinking Eurocentrism,” in the words of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, or of “provincializing Europe,” to borrow the title of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s book of postcolonial theory. Decolonial thinking is thus a revisionary project that contests the foundationalism of Western knowledge and ideology. Latin American scholars Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter D. Mignolo have elaborated modes of decolonial thinking as part of the larger recent project by anti-colonial intellectuals to identify and counter the thought and knowledge production that treated Europe as the unspoken center. For Quijano, the European idea of race is “a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of

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<sup>73</sup> Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>74</sup> Anibal Quijano. “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” *Nepantla: Voices from the South* 1.3, Duke University Press, 2000: 533-580, (533).

global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism” (533). The classification of the world’s inhabitants according to theories of race makes up “[o]ne of the fundamental axes” of contemporary globalization (533).

For Helen Tiffen, de-coloniality involves a dialectical relationship “between European ontology and epistemology, and the impulse to create or re-create’ local reality.”<sup>75</sup> Feminists of color such as Chandra Mohanty, Chela Sandoval, Emma Pérez, Angela Davis, and Maria Lugones have complicated theories of coloniality to account for conceptions of gender inherent to Eurocentrism and Western colonial practices since the sixteenth century. Lugones draws upon Quijano’s notion of the coloniality of power while showing how his model of gender is “too narrow and overly biologized,” limited to bimorphic models of sex and to women as sexual and reproductive resources for men (193).<sup>76</sup> As she notes, “the gender system is heterosexualist, as heterosexuality permeates racialized patriarchal control over production, including knowledge production, and over collective authority” (206), yet gender remains an undertheorized concept in decolonial theories of state systems and control over production. Lugones challenges Quijano’s “logic of categorical separation” by elaborating on how race and gender intersect in models of oppression (193). Quijano’s treatment of race, gender, and class as separate categories that add up to distinct forms of oppression “distorts what exists at the intersection, such as violence against women of color” (193). Taking intersectionality as the center of her analysis, she cleverly focuses on intersexuality in racialized, non-Western societies and the consequent imposition of Western heterosexist gender categories through

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<sup>75</sup> Tiffen quoted in Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) n6, 186.

<sup>76</sup> María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007): 186-209.

colonialism.<sup>77</sup> Lugones examines gender as a colonial concept, intersecting with race, class, and heterosexuality, in what she terms “the modern/colonial gender system” (187). In this system, both “light” and “dark” sides are produced by the heterosexuality of “global, Eurocentered capitalism” (202).<sup>78</sup> Her insistence that decolonial, liberatory projects theorize how race and gender intersect in the context of Western colonialism and state systems echoes the insistence of Black feminist critics that the Black Arts and Black Power movements examine how race *and* gender contribute to a “matrix of domination” that cannot be challenged by anti-racists who reaffirm gender hierarchy (however implicitly) or feminists who reaffirm a racial one. Neal’s manifesto on the Black Arts Movement, for example, is indicative of how completely the “Black Artist” is properly a “Black man” and how centrally the recuperation of “black manhood” is to the project of a Black aesthetics.<sup>79</sup>

The state system, which produces statelessness, not only establishes gendered notions of the nation and citizen but also invents the binary gender system of male and

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<sup>77</sup> As Lugones also notes, there is a large body of literature on feminist theories of intersectionality. In addition to Collins (2000) mentioned earlier in this introduction, see also Kimberlé Crenshaw Collins, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color,” in *Critical Race Theory*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> Lugones distinguishes the two sides in this way: “The light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically, ordering only the lives of white bourgeois men and women and constituting the modern/ colonial meaning of men and women. Sexual purity and passivity are crucial characteristics of the white bourgeois females who reproduce the class and the colonial and racial standing of bourgeois, white men. But equally important is the banning of white bourgeois women from the sphere of collective authority, from the production of knowledge, from most control over the means of production. Weakness of mind and body are important in the reduction and seclusion of white bourgeois women from most domains of life, most areas of human existence...The dark side of the gender system was and is thoroughly violent. We have begun to see the deep reductions of anamales, anafemales, and ‘third gender’ people from their ubiquitous participation in rituals, decision making, and economics; their reduction to animality, to forced sex with white colonizers, to such deep labor exploitation that often people died working,” (206).

<sup>79</sup> The heavy-handed masculinity of Neal’s language is apparent throughout his essay, but his reading of LeRoi Jones’s plays *Dutchman* and *Slave Ship* are especially noteworthy (34-39).

female.<sup>80</sup> Feminists of color have reconceptualized models of oppression and liberation in inter-relational terms that challenge mainstream feminist models, which have taken the (white, middle-class) woman as the absent center of attention and the subject of colonial and national allegories. In her book *Allegories of Empire*, literary critic Jenny Sharpe makes her case against the Euro-American feminist tendency of “treating race and gender as interchangeable functions.”<sup>81</sup> Through insightful literary readings of rape allegories in nineteenth-century British fiction, Sharpe shows how this tendency pervades literary fiction as well as twentieth-century feminist thought: “Presuming a shared identity between European women and the colonized, Euro-American feminism reduces the overdetermined contradictions of colonialism to its patriarchal structures alone. In this manner, the Western sexed subject serves as a privileged signifier of Otherness” (11). Rather than focus on the similarity, correspondence, or identity between axes of race, class, and gender, as established by the chain of substitutions that is allegory, Sharpe focuses on the “difference” and “dislocation” between axes of race, class, and gender.

This insistence on the intersectionality of oppression, including the blurring or even collapsing of binary categories such as “male” and “female,” finds an unusual expression in Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*. Thivai is a white male character who enjoys various positions of male adventurer—pirate, assassin, and biker, culminating in his position as Huck Finn—whose confluences are persistently oppressive to his

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<sup>80</sup> She cites Oyéronké Oyewùmí, who describes the “imposition of the European state system” as “the most enduring legacy of European colonial rule” in Africa—a legacy that excluded females, newly “categorized and reduced to ‘women,’” from “the newly created colonial public sphere.” Colonization transformed state power to “male-gender power,” subjecting females to “a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination” that excluded pre-colonial female leaders from state structures and thus destroying societal traditions that did not operate under the modern/colonial gender system (123-125, cited in Lugones 197). Lugones draws on the work of Paula Gunn Allen to describe the development of Iroquois and Cherokee heterosexist models of political power (see Lugones 195-206).

<sup>81</sup> Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

female counterpart, Abhor, whom he describes as “my partner, part robot, and part black” (3). To Thivai, Abhor is triply marked as “part” (made whole by him) and as “other,” as a raced, sexed cyborg body; at one point, he complains that “nothing (not even womanhood) was natural in her” (193). In the chapter on *Empire of the Senseless*, I argue that Acker employs the method of conflation—which collapses the pattern of distinction and correspondence that constitutes allegory and metaphor—to multiple, sometimes contradictory effects. In the case of characters Thivai and Abhor, conflation has the effect of undermining the allegories of race used in Euro-American feminism, and it does so by revealing the series of confluations implicit in allegorical substitutions.<sup>82</sup> Acker’s confluations, while deliberately messy in method and meaning, reveals an array of ideologies and practices that together form matrices of oppression (from patriarchal and heterosexist state power to anti-colonial national liberation struggles to neoliberal multinational corporate power). Collapsing race and gender “otherness” as constructed against the naturalness of the white male, for example, Acker then posits the raced, sexed, cyborged woman figure in a scene (1980s Paris, as overtaken by Algerian-Haitian zombi(e) figures) built out of the confluations of multiple narratives of oppression and liberation.

Challenging Eurocentric practice and thought is a crucial aim of decolonization movements in U.S. history, from nineteenth century critical black internationalism to the Black Arts, Chicano, Native, and Asian Pacific American movements. By the 1960s and 70s, anti-colonial revolutionary writings (from what had come to be called the “Third World”) had inspired the political discourse of various oppositional, counter-nationalist, and civil rights movements. This discourse was used to describe the U.S. and the nation as literally or figuratively defined to the core by an unfinished

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<sup>82</sup> I’m grateful to Mary Pat Brady for her reading of Acker’s method of conflation as a response to mainstream white feminist use of allegory.



history of colonization, both within and outside the national space. Decolonial movements expose the relationship between economic, political, and social forms of oppression, and have criticized the function of “aesthetics” in regulating and defining white civilized society. The 1960s invocation of a “Black aesthetic,” while labeled by its critics as narrow, essentialist, and “sloganeering,”<sup>83</sup> was a way to identify aesthetics as an implicitly Western, white concept. By claiming an independent aesthetics, the Black Arts Movement revised the Western conception of the principles of composing art, redefined the principles of reception, and built new criteria for such principles as “beauty,” “wholeness,” “form,” “value,” and appreciation of what counts as art. As musician Fred Ho, an activist in the Asian Pacific American movement who studied with members of the Black Arts movement, describes it, “the ‘Black aesthetic’ embraced a pan-African scope, asserted and affirmed the presence of African American traditions, forms and idioms, and, by its very assertion, exposed and countered a ‘white aesthetic’ based upon racist Eurocentrism.”<sup>84</sup>

The Black Arts movement cultivated multiethnic and cross-genre artistic expressions. But it also fostered a predominantly masculinist, heteronormative model of racial unity that constrained the participation of black women, whose gender identity “complicated their position as the racial subjects of black nationalist discourse,” as literary critic Madhu Dubey puts it (13).<sup>85</sup> Although black nationalist discourse informs Gayl Jones’ notion of the “decolonized novel,” she highlights the

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<sup>83</sup> Houston Baker, cited in Winston Napier. For an account of Baker’s criticisms of the Black Aesthetic, see Napier, “From the Shadows: Houston Baker’s Move toward a Postnationalist Appraisal of the Black Aesthetic,” *New Literary History* 25.1, *Literary History and Other Histories* (Winter, 1994): 159-174, (160).

<sup>84</sup> Fred Ho, “Fred Ho’s Tribute to the Black Arts Movement: Personal and Political Impact and Analysis,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* 1.3 (2006): 9.

<sup>85</sup> Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 13.

problem of gender for a Black aesthetic by way of an anecdote in *Mosquito*. The eponymous character Nadine “Mosquito” Sojourner Johnson tells us the story of when she and her friend Monkey Bread became radicalized— only to be misrecognized, misunderstood, and ridiculed by other militant student radicals. Mosquito arrived at the students’ “revolution party” dressed as Sojourner Truth, but they all thought she was dressed as Aunt Jemima. Castigated by the students, Mosquito (and by extension, Sojourner Truth) was misread as embodying the mammy stereotype. Even when Monkey Bread retaliates by dressing up like an outlandishly stereotyped image of a pygmy “savage,” bone in her nose and all, the students fail to recognize the irony of their actions.<sup>86</sup> But this story underscores the point made by scholars of the Black Arts movement, in which women, “cast or envisioned...as the kind of matriarchal caricatures found in American literature since the decline of slavery...thus became symbolic of an oppressive past of racial stereotype that threatened to derail the prospective mission of the Black Aesthetic.”<sup>87</sup> Acker and Jones, whose novels depart from political and aesthetic conventions in more radical ways than the work of Goldman, Alcalay, or Antoon, also engage more explicitly with the gendered legacy of 1960s liberation movements. I would argue that these two women writers more boldly reconceptualize aesthetic and social decolonization. They do so by depicting colonial structures of thought and feeling as they define legal, racial, and gender identities.

As the term Black aesthetic as opposed to a “white” Aesthetic implies, these anti-racist, anti-colonial movements tended to elaborate binary oppositions that

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<sup>86</sup> Jones’ distance from black nationalist programs is prominent in all of her writings and has been a major cause of her controversial status in African American writings. See Dubey for an extended reading of Jones’ engagement with black nationalism and black feminist criticism. Dubey, “Introduction” and Chapters Four and Five in *Black Women Novelists*.

<sup>87</sup> Gene Jarrett, “The Black Arts Movement and Its Scholars,” Review, *American Quarterly* 57.4 (2005): 1243-1251, (n6, 1251).

devalued non-binaristic ways of thinking about the intersection and confluence of race, class, and gender. Disrupting the familiar binaries of decolonization discourse, radical feminist women of color in the 1970s and 80s performed a critique of race, gender, and the nation. They have shown how binaries do not fix identities but instead describe positions of relative power. For instance, whereas theorists of “internal colonialism” reaffirm a masculinist form of nationalism and subsumed figures and relations of power within the purview of the nation-state, cultural theorist Chela Sandoval is resolutely anti-national. For her, “decolonizing the social imagination” (183) does not come through the literal dismantling of the nation-state system or the creation of some other political structure. Instead, inclusionary acts of imagination can lead us out of the double bind of the nation-state system, on the one hand, and neoliberal globalization, on the other. It is through such imaginative acts that we could “become activists for a new global psychic terrain” that builds “new, post-Western-empire alliances” of subjects within and across nation-states.<sup>88</sup> She writes, “the new countrypeople who fight for egalitarian social relations under neocolonial postmodernism welcome citizenry to a new polity, a new homeland. The means for entry is ‘the methodology of the oppressed,’ a set of technologies for decolonizing the social imagination” (183). Sandoval’s theories of the technologies and differential ways of knowing comprise this “methodology of the oppressed.” She inventively re-appropriates and modifies terms hijacked by the state since its inception—“countrypeople” (modified from “countrymen”), “citizenry,” “polity,” and “homeland.” She even takes the language of the fundamental feature of sovereignty, claimed by states in their international relations as the right of entry: the “means for

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<sup>88</sup> Sandoval mobilizes her thoughts partly in relation to neocolonial globalization events, such as NAFTA in 1994, and to the indigenous Zapatista uprising that responded to NAFTA and to the Mexican government by political, military, literary, and philosophical means.

entry,” she writes, are the means that would transform the workings of political and social imagination and cultural practice. Lisa Lowe reminds us that the contradiction between an economic need for “cheap, tractable labor” and the political need to constitute a unified national culture was “resolved” through legislation that constructed racial categories in order to stratify levels of citizen and non-citizen laborers.<sup>89</sup> Sandoval’s language suggests that what should be imagined in response is a sort of “dissolution,” a dissolving of the stratification between economic and political identities within contemporary globalization.

In this sense, Sandoval calls into being a very different sort of imagined community from what Benedict Anderson means by the phrase: it is not the official nation that is the imagined community; instead, it is the use of liberating methodologies by the oppressed that, when deployed as tactics and thus translated into love, social, political, and mobile love, creates the polity that exists *through* the actively decolonial imagination.<sup>90</sup> To insist on claiming citizenship as activism and the polity for the oppressed, as Sandoval does, is to invert the move I argue Goldman, Acker, Jones, and other writers make, which is to largely abandon that lexicon in favor of a world made up of characters who rarely recognize themselves as “first-world” or “third-world” or any sort of “citizen” at all.

In Chapter Two of the dissertation, I discuss how Goldman complicates binary and linear paradigms by figuring the relationship between history and the present as palimpsestic, as a layered text formed by the incomplete process of rewriting and

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<sup>89</sup> Lisa Lowe, “The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique” *Cultural Critique* 40 (Autumn, 1998): 31.

<sup>90</sup> I borrow the language of “tactics” to describe oppositional and resistant literary moves from Michel de Certeau and the influence of his concept on such theorists as Sandoval, Mary Pat Brady, and Ross Chambers. Marianne DeKoven offers an insightful account of 1960s utopianism as generative of postmodernism and its emphasis on limited moves, tactics rather than strategies, fragmented narratives rather than totalizing or “master” ones. DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Duke University Press, 2004).

erasure, that is “read” from different characters’ perspectives. The palimpsest is a figure for one mode of decolonial aesthetic practice, because it, too, is formed by the liminal space between legibility and erasure, between the trace of a historical past and the blank slate of the entrepreneurial future. Goldman also refigures authorship as a form of literary, cross-national hybridity. Goldman’s test of the limits of convention occurs more subtly, through slight narrative twists and structural adjustments to realist conventions, in a way that lends itself to an enthusiastic reception by contemporary literary audiences and prize committees.

A U.S. Latino writer of mixed “Guatemalan mestiza Catholic” and “Russian Jewish” parentage, Goldman translates his binational heritage into national literary traditions and thus creates an occasion to experiment, to perform a “doomed search for a flagrantly perfect new hybrid” of the novel form, one that “took very seriously the idea that a novel could be the offspring of two distinct literary traditions: North American-Jewish, driven by the “I” . . . and the so-called total novel of the Latin American Boom, in which entire societies speak.” For his novel, figured as a child of mixed literary nationalities, Goldman pursues an “imaginary homeland,” one that is made “new” through literary innovation and revision at the same time that it is shaped by the authorial experience of the “real world,” as it “takes place”—for Goldman, as it took place in the Isthmus or Central American region during the 1980s, when he also worked as a journalist.

Chapter Three looks to an earlier critique of the nation-state system and neoliberal globalization—one that is at once insightful and messy—in *Empire of the Senseless*. Acker’s long list of aesthetic violations in the effort to undermine Western conceptions of beauty, rationality, and value, have given her a “bad girl” literary outlaw status. In *Empire of the Senseless* specifically, Acker uses conflation as a technique that collapses distinctions between colonial and neocolonial, neoliberal

figures and historical narratives. The figure of the zombi(e), as a conflation of U.S. versions and Haitian versions of the undead, acts as a deliberately messy but quintessential figure of political statelessness. I discuss how Acker's method underscores the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within the coloniality of power. My reading then turns to how Acker modifies C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* and other histories of anti-colonial revolution to deflate teleological, masculinist narratives of decolonization even as she attempts to salvage their liberatory potential in the form of myth.

Chapter Four discusses how Jones elaborates her version of a decolonial aesthetics in *Mosquito* as well as in a 1994 essay written from the perspective of a "decolonized novel" and entitled "from *The Quest for Wholeness: Re-Imagining the African-American Novel: An Essay on Third World Aesthetics.*" In the novel, Mosquito's political involvement with the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement parallels Jones' aesthetic project of creating the decolonized novel. I read the stateless figure here as vital to the multifaceted and playful rebellion that takes shape in Jones' parody of the colonial trope of the encyclopedia. Exploring how Mosquito's participation in the Sanctuary movement (which assists effectively stateless people) is interrelated with her keeping of the Daughters of Nzingha oral archive (which potentially includes all the stories of the African diaspora) makes clear how Jones' practice of a decolonial aesthetics entails a critical reworking of political and aesthetic forms of individualization.

The epilogue to this dissertation discusses the process of ghostwriting as a decolonial trope and aesthetic practice in the work of Alcalay and Antoon. Conventionally, the ghostwriter acts as an unseen shadow to a named author. I suggest that the work of Alcalay and Antoon explores authorship by reconceptualizing the process of ghostwriting as a decolonial trope, and focus on their literary techniques

as well as thematic exploration of ghostwriting, especially in the context of Iraq. The ghostwriter no longer a writer who sells his position as author to someone else, becomes figured as an author who dwells in the shadows of political authority, who challenges such political authority by mediating between the words and worlds of others, and who explores the irresolvable ambiguity of language as a challenge to the power of the state to control meaning.

## Chapter 2

### Tracing the Venture: Legal Phantoms and Maritime Tropes of Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman*

The image of a massive ship and three minuscule human figures illustrates the cover of Francisco Goldman's 1997 novel, *The Ordinary Seaman*. The image belongs to photographer Sebastião Salgado's photographic documentary *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*. Hailed by Gabriel García Márquez as "the photography of humanity," *Workers* is vast, featuring three hundred fifty large duotone photographs, shot between 1986 and 1992, of laborers from twenty-six countries in an effort to construct a global vision of manual labor at the cusp of its disappearance. The cover image is part of a series of photographs that document the ship-breaking industry, which has waned over the course of the 1980s due, as Salgado informs us, to the rising costs of demolition.<sup>91</sup>

Eulogizing what globalists such as Thomas Friedman celebrate, Salgado presents the book as "a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing and a tribute to those men and women who still work as they have for centuries...provid[ing] the central axis of the world" (Salgado 7). By capturing both past and future forms of labor—the manual labor of the workers and the so-called immaterial labor of the cultural producer-photographer—these photos aim to contain the contradictions of the present in transition, of the present as a future whose past is fading away.<sup>92</sup> Salgado's oddly elegiac and nostalgic documentary mode converges

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<sup>91</sup> Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (New York: Aperture, 1993) captions, 12.

<sup>92</sup> Immaterial labor is a concept used by globalization theorists to describe "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity." See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor,"



here with a celebratory discourse circulating since the 1980s and intensified since the mid-1990s—that the intensification of economic globalization since the 1970s heralds a new economic “revolution” in which manual labor becomes vestigial to the new, high-tech global economic body.<sup>93</sup>

Shot at the shores of Chittagong, Bangladesh, the ship breaking series focuses on the sandy deathbed of massive ships deliberately run aground to be demolished, reconverted piecemeal into raw materials by manual ship breakers. Salgado focuses on a massive ship just run aground, awaiting its demolition. Massive mooring chains descend from its nostrils and across the image, toward the camera’s location, as if the viewer were gazing up at a giant, rusted beast restrained. It is only after some time that the chains lead the eye to three human figures in silhouette standing by the shore. Whereas Salgado’s most famous images focus on human subjects at work, this image takes the object of the labor, the cargo ship, as its subject. The ship in this image has lodged itself past the limits of its proper bounds, run aground to begin the process of recycling. In a caption, Salgado describes this recycling in the way that whale hunters would of their kill: “Everything from that huge animal lying on the beach has a use. Iron and steel will be melted down and given new roles as utensils. The entire ship

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eds. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133-147.

<sup>93</sup>The technology magazine *Wired* has contributed to a rhetoric of celebration and newness on globalization that became familiar in privileged business and new venture capitalist discourse by the early 1990s—a rhetoric Salgado largely accepts even as he displays nostalgia for that which the rhetoric refers to as the past. “When we talk about the new economy,” say *Wired* editors, “we’re talking about a world in which people work with their brains instead of their hands. A world in which communications technology creates global competition . . . A world at least as different from what came before it as the industrial age was from its agricultural predecessor. A world so different its emergence can only be described as a revolution.” John Browning and Spencer Reiss, *Encyclopedia of the New Economy: A Complete Reference Guide for Business in a Networked Economy* (San Francisco: Wired, 1998). For a critical understanding of global capitalism since the 1970s, see Marxist geographer David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: B. Blackwell, 1989), 201-308. See feminist geographer Doreen Massey for her critique of Harvey’s disavowal of the colonial and gendered conditions of fragmentation, alienation, and displacement that predate what Harvey identifies as contemporary conditions of postmodernity. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

will be turned into what it once carried: machines, knives and forks, hoes, shovels, screws, things, bits, pieces” (Salgado 7). The raw materials of this animal demonstrate the miracle of transformation, its economy perfectly without waste. Its stilled mass is portrayed in contrast to the three figures alongside it, framed as they are by the ship to the left and the mooring chain to the right, and posed as if to heighten the viewer’s sense that the vessel is scaled to the globe of an earlier capitalist era.<sup>94</sup> The industrial thus naturalized, its death makes the birth of something called globalization also seem natural, even inevitable.

This cover image does a good deal of work to locate Goldman’s novel within a contemporary iconography of apparently disappearing forms of industrial labor and transport. The novel upends much of the pervasive rhetoric of both inevitability and newness in the discourse on globalization—and on its relation to labor migrations—through recourse to the political-economic past of the present, in the visible and invisible forms of the palimpsest, the recycled commodity, and the spectral trace.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which *The Ordinary Seaman* traces the historical, textual layers of the economic venture, specifically through the contrapuntal portrayal of the shipping venture—as palimpsestic, as recycled, as phantom-like, or as fully renewable—as emblematic of the workings of globalization and inter-American migrations. Goldman does not simply remind us that these new ventures are not new, or even that they are structured by historical systems of the colonial and statist political economy. Rather, he uses the novel form to explore the legacies of colonial

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<sup>94</sup> See an important discussion of the global scale as “a construct of the circulation of capital,” established during the imperial market expansion of the nineteenth century, in Neil Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale,” *Social Text* 33 (1992): 76. For more discussion of scale, see geographer Sallie Marston, “The Social Construction of Scale,” *Progress in Human Geography* 24.2 (2000): 219-242. For an insightful reading of the narrative articulation of scale, see Mary Pat Brady, “‘War Again, or Somesuch’: Narrating the Scale and Scope of Narcospatiality,” in *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

slavery that haunt the latest mode of economic globalization. The social and discursive structures of colonial slavery haunt the narration, feed it, but do not explain or put a name to the situation of the men onboard the *Urus*. Goldman's rhetorical figures and narrative structure give shape to the labor of imagination and to the affective commitments that go into making such "new ventures" in the first place. In doing so, he also pursues the question of how the haunting legacies come to elaborate contemporary legal structures that enable capital to bind men to labor without a recognized status as rights-bearing persons. Without such status, laborers are consigned to effectively stateless categories—such as that of the sailor and undocumented worker. They do not have the language to describe their plight before the law because the law makes it difficult for a sailor or an undocumented worker to make a criminal charge against an employer—a point underscored in the novel by the fact that the crew's employers are legally unidentifiable. Furthermore, effectively stateless people have little to no visibility to the law, and, as legal phantoms, would not be recognized in court as fully as would a citizen, if at all. In the absence of legal language for the crew's plight as effectively stateless laborers, the narrative portrays the imaginative and affective work performed by the male characters involved with the ship, and their different perspectives on the ship help to shape how each of them eventually manages to disengage from it.

The palimpsestic figure of the *Urus*, then, suggests that contemporary neoliberal globalization is fundamentally indebted to the legacy of Western colonialism. This decolonial approach of figuring the ship as colonial palimpsest also extends to the crewmen, who are figured as effectively stateless persons produced and disavowed by modern systems of civil and human rights. The crew, outside the system of legal status and recognized nationality but bound to the system of capital

and the State, illustrates that the figure of the sailor, as among the earliest versions of the stateless person, comes to resemble that of the undocumented person.

Goldman's novel is in part a test of the ideological power of globalization to "[define] itself by naming a future as an apparent projection of a present, which is sharply distinguished from the past," as historian Frederick Cooper writes.<sup>95</sup> Instead, it takes as its implied premise philosopher Anibal Quijano's concept of "the coloniality of power," by which he refers to the fundamental structures and organization of Western society as forged by Western colonialism and still indebted to it. The practices and rhetoric of contemporary economic globalization, then, presupposes a colonial element that survives the colonialism in which globalizing economic practices were forged.<sup>96</sup>

At the level of plot, *The Ordinary Seaman* interferes with the globalization talk of speed, clean futures, and the "dance of the flows and the fragments"<sup>97</sup> of people and capital by turning off the engine, so to speak, and slowing one economic venture to a standstill. The story takes place at the margins of New York City's financial district, as "the world became the 'oyster' of a transnationalized capitalism" and manufacturing jobs, such as port and shipping jobs, declined.<sup>98</sup> The plot dilemma of the novel is that a cargo ship (with fifteen newly hired seamen onboard) is inoperable, and this problem yields the more significant problem for the characters of "figuring

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<sup>95</sup> For an insightful critique of the tendency for the term "globalization" to obscure the historical interconnectedness of economic, migration, and state systems, see Frederick Cooper, "Globalization," in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 97.

<sup>96</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" *Nepantla: Voices from the South* 1.3 (2000): 533.

<sup>97</sup> Cooper, 94.

<sup>98</sup> Cindi Katz, *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 156.

out” the meaning of the ship and their purpose on it as they wait for an answer to come. The crewmembers, especially, must figure out this problem by negotiating their effective statelessness while on board, subject to multiple sovereign spaces of exclusion—they are stuck on a ship anchored in Brooklyn Harbor but registered under nominal Panamanian jurisdiction, and the owners do not process the paperwork that would legally confirm their status as seamen and thus render their presence on the ship as “legal.” Eventually, even the ship’s Panamanian registry lapses to render the ship and the men on board effectively stateless in legal terms. In one sense, the ship in the novel serves as a metaphor for the sovereign state within the global market-- a sign to be applied strategically by multinational capital ventures, which may be detached from “the nation,” as in the case of the Panamanian sovereignty purchased for the ship, and which continues to produce material effects for those subjected to its nominal jurisdiction, even after the so-called death or irrelevancy of the sovereign state.

Every effort on the part of the ship owners to get the venture started, to register the ship with a new name under a new sovereign flag, to hire a crew, demands “new” (or recycled) names—*Urus*, *Panama City*, *Achuar Corporation*, even fifteen men dubbed “seamen,” all but two of whom are so new to seafaring that they have never been on a ship.<sup>99</sup> The experienced old ship waiter Bernardo is the first to perceive the shipping scheme as a false performance of new names and new identities: he thinks, “[t]he muchachos didn’t know what a true ship, a true capitan, was like and acted as if they had no choice but to believe that when the ship was fixed, she’d sail.”

Exasperated, Bernardo recounts the men’s insistent belief in the apparent purpose of

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<sup>99</sup> In the absence of the traditional seafaring labor and adventures that conventionally characterize seamen’s identities, the men initially form a “crew” through the creation and use of nicknames and, later, through the promotional titles Elias awards them. Originally referring to any augmentation of a band of armed men, the word “crew” came to mean a supervised squad of workmen bent to a particular purpose, [making up] all the men of the vessel (*OED*).

the economic venture: “Look at all the tools onboard! The hundreds of cans of antirust solvents, primers, and paints!...Why else are we here?” (58). If only he “had a few hundred dollars to his name,” thinks Bernardo, he would have turned around and gone back home. Names, of course, are not only older and newer but also richer and poorer.

Despite the tools for making the ship as good as new, it is insistently described as haunted, and the ship’s palimpsestic surface shows that every naming is in fact another naming, an only partial overwriting of some earlier name. What emerges is a rich exploration of how the uncovered or deciphered signs of history both disrupt and underwrite the contemporary capitalist venture, and of how the marking or naming of certain identities and the unmarking of others to render them invisible is how international identificatory systems of people and corporations are produced. The narrative world of *The Ordinary Seaman* is laced with a colonial and neocolonial presence that the palimpsest makes partly legible. In this chapter, I explore how one feature of Goldman’s decolonial aesthetic practice in *The Ordinary Seaman* is to figure the ship as a palimpsest, one that bears the partially legible traces of colonial power relations in the Americas that have formed contemporary economic practice and a discourse of progress. The palimpsest in the novel, as one feature of a decolonial aesthetics, is a figure formed by the liminal space between legibility and erasure, between the trace of a colonial historical past and the blank slate of the entrepreneurial future. The effects of naming and the uses of anonymity are put to different uses by the characters. In this chapter, I consider the narrative shifts between characters and the impersonal narrator as they perceive the venture and cast it in the figural terms of the palimpsest, the recycled commodity, and the haunted or the cleaned slate of capitalism in the Americas.

*The Ordinary Seaman* tracks the story of fifteen male laborers, five from Nicaragua, nine from Honduras, and one from Guatemala, who have paid job agents and purchased plane tickets in order to work on a shipping voyage set to sail from Brooklyn Harbor. A motley crew, the men quickly dole out nicknames to each other before they arrive at a section of Brooklyn Harbor only to find that the ship they are to live and work on is a “broken eggshell”—the floating remains of potentiality, in need of electricity, unseaworthy and un-homely. Directed to the ultimately impossible task of restoring and maintaining such a ship, the crew must depend on two U.S. Americans, Captain Elias and First Mate Mark, the secret ship owners. Bumbling middle-class entrepreneurs Elias and Mark originally hire the men—“our little brown guys,” “seamen-slaves,” as Mark bitterly describes them in retrospect—in the hopes of using cheap migrant labor to give the ship a makeover and sell it at a profit, a scheme exemplary of multinational capital games that make use of the “flexible” workings of sovereignty, speculative capital, and the unequal relationship of owners versus laborers to legal labor status, to form an entrepreneurial venture.

For most of the narrative, the crewmen spend their months listlessly, sometimes laboring during the day to repair the ship or cook rancid food but spending their nights lying awake, reflecting and recounting personal anxieties and fantasies that haunt them throughout their time on the ship. Winter approaches, and the Ship Visitor is alerted to the abandoned crew just when the men find their ways off the ship. Some of the men risk living in the surrounding Brooklyn Latino/a neighborhoods without legal status. The first to do so is the young veteran of the Sandinista army, Esteban. A few others are eventually deported (at the expense of the international seafarers’ organization) willingly, in pursuit of romantic returns home, or unwillingly, because their newly formed addiction to paint solvent made them people Esteban would not informally sponsor in Brooklyn. One, the old ship waiter Bernardo, suffers

a bad oil burn on his leg, and First Mate Mark eventually leaves him unregistered in an emergency waiting room, where he dies anonymously. These are the possible solution to the major plot dilemma: immigration without legal sanction, non-governmental deportation, and disappearance or death.

The narrative is frequently focalized through the male characters and the stories they tell about their relationship to the ship: these characters include the fifteen Central American crewmembers, especially Esteban and Bernardo; “Captain” Elias and “First Mate” Mark; and John the Ship Visitor, an international seamen’s advocate alerted to the undocumented crew’s dire entrapment on board. At other times the narration subtly adjusts its realist style, as when it draws attention to its focalization, or when it calls attention to itself as it shifts verbal gears from present to past, to the future perfect. One effect of these shifting registers and perspectives at the level of character and at the level of narration is to highlight the practice of naming, its politics, its rhetorical effect when practiced by certain characters in order to persuade the others of a reality contradicted by everything else in the narrative world. For nearly every naming act that goes on at the level of character action, there is a belated narration of the psychic state of the character that names, and the messiness, the randomness, the emotional motivations that engender the naming.

One dimension of the problematic of naming is explored through the story of the U.S. “entrepreneurs” Elias and Mark. In their game, the history of anything can be made or erased with a name and a document: names, even legally registered names and sovereign state names, are manipulated signs. Statelessness in this case means the ability to invoke or to disappear from the law, to “hide from God” according to the interests of the capitalist venture. Elias and Mark exploit multinational economic and state documentation systems to create false names and write their own names out of the story of the *Urus* vessel and its abandoned crew. The crewmembers, who know



each other mostly through informal nicknames, are the ones who most creatively attempt to make meaning of their situation on board the *Urus*, not through the manipulation of names but through processes of narration that are relational and attentive to the layering of memories over time, to the traces of history that form the ship as a palimpsest rather than a new venture simply because it is newly named.

*The Ordinary Seaman* offers a set of questions about the terms and conditions of how to represent statelessness in a fictional storyworld governed by neoliberal, neocolonial, and multinational economic and political systems that resemble real systems of the late twentieth century. The practice of naming--and of being named or identified in terms of legal status—is a fundamental feature of these systems. Naming becomes a problem to be “figured out” through the narration, and particularly figured “in” through the inscription of imperial and national histories from the perspective of characters excluded (or granted exemption) from legal recognition by a state. The problem of naming generates questions that get elaborated in the novel, questions about how stateless conditions of laboring are identified, manipulated, and emotionally felt. I argue that the narrative structure and plot of the novel explore how the named and unnamed conditions of legal statelessness both animate and are produced by the late twentieth century capitalist venture. The first main section of this chapter suggests that the ship in the novel gets figured through two contrasting perspectives, that of the owners, who view the ship as a clean slate, and that of the impersonal narrator and especially Bernardo, which perceive the ship as a historical palimpsest. Elias and Mark possess the ship as a “dream made real,” insensible to history, to be made real and to be remade into their desired image by naming the ship as new and by trying to stage it as something new, with fresh coats of paint and a new crew. From the perspective of some of the characters and of the impersonal narrator, the attempt to make the ship new only adds another layer to a multilayered surface of

names, memories, and histories only partly legible to anyone. A palimpsest partly legible, the ship is a haunted place for these men (especially Bernardo), and their own memories leave their traces on the ship, at least at the level of narration. The ship, figured by multiple layers of meaning that ultimately evade any stable identification, thus works as a figure for a decolonial aesthetics. Complementing these two figurations of the ship is the depiction of the crewmembers and the problem of giving name to their condition as they wait and speculate about their future after waiting in the doldrums. Through a close reading of the old ship waiter Bernardo as a figure of haunting and speculation, I show how the representation of affect and storytelling become key vehicles for expressing the relationship between statelessness, forms of labor, and the multinational capital venture.

Stories, narrative fragments, anecdotes, and witness accounts proliferate in the reported speech between characters and in the novel's third-person narration. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the imaginative and political status of storytelling and the uses to which it is put. The novel at times reads as an endless series of variously imagined ways to articulate stories or their fragments, with a playful positioning and repositioning of the narrator, narrative, and audience, in the act of storytelling. The novel's abundance of messy narratives, within the diegetic narrative world of undocumented residents and unauthorized refugees, flouts obedience to certain narrative conventions that help to determine one's ability to be granted legal status as a refugee or political asylee. For if the novel evokes the endless and labyrinthine stories haunting the cargo ship in Brooklyn Harbor, surrounding those stories is one rule of the asylum narrative that achieves legal status for its narrator—that there can be only one (true) way to tell a story. Importantly, Esteban's move into Brooklyn provides a counterspace to the stateless ship and to the possibilities of affective attachments to a collectivity: Brooklyn serves as a sort of

non-national space, produced by the mix of working Latina/o immigrants, and in which Esteban finds romantic love but also an affective attachment to the other immigrants through the forms of storytelling that the non-national space invites.

*The Ordinary Seaman*'s engagement with the processes of naming and identifying and with the use of narrative as a status-making venture explores the narrative possibilities for imagining the historical relations of the U.S. and Central America in relation to global capital. Operating in a mode of indirection, of residual associations, continually invoking by way of allusion, calling up flashes of history remembered by characters, indicting via what Kirsten Silva Gruesz calls "vacated references,"<sup>100</sup> gesturing toward the situation rather than clearly defining it, and deploying names as unstable intertexts between the metaphorical and material, the narrative world of *The Ordinary Seaman* is laced with a ghostly form of indirect historical presence within the text. Storytelling between characters, radio news reports, and the relentless memories and fantasies that sneak on board during the nights of insomnia, come to articulate the historical violence of the Central American wars that haunts, marks, leaves its traces upon each of the laborers on the ship.<sup>101</sup>

Goldman sets the men's labor of waiting between the fall and winter of 1989, the time of apparent breaks and hidden continuities between the Cold War and the so-

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<sup>100</sup> Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "Utopía Latina: *The Ordinary Seaman* in Extraordinary Times," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.1 (2003): 67.

<sup>101</sup> Revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala became international crises by the 1980s, but they erupted after longstanding struggles over land, resources, and power. In Nicaragua in 1979, the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) eventually overthrew the right-wing dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whose dictatorship was substantially financed, trained, and supported by the U.S. government and its military. Honduras served as a staging ground for the U.S. supported secret paramilitary war against the Sandinistas, thereby turning it into an extension of the battlefield. In El Salvador and Guatemala, where right-wing, anti-communist dictatorships held power and pursued internal leftists guerrilla movements, U.S. support took the form of huge aid packages, military training, and the support of security forces and death squads responsible for a devastating system of massacres, kidnappings and torturing of people in Guatemala, particularly its large indigenous population. For a brief summary of the Central American wars with respect to their effects on migration, see María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

called “New World Order.” To secure the continued dominance of the United States in global affairs, the Reagan administration enacted an interventionist policy in Central America. There, the CIA actively (though largely covertly) organized, supported, trained, and funded right-wing militias and anti-communist dictatorships.<sup>102</sup> The period of massive civil wars and violent dictatorial regimes in Central America haunts the novel and—along with the related effects of neoliberal policies for global capital—provides the foundations of its narrative world, a world of ambiguous transnational migrations and a city whose participation in the global economy depends largely upon its undocumented workers.<sup>103</sup> The narrative structure of *The Ordinary Seaman* frames the *Urus* between two other sites, the city of Managua in Nicaragua, and the city of Brooklyn in the United States: material traces of the recent wars similarly cross the borders from Nicaragua to the Brooklyn waterfront.<sup>104</sup>

Goldman writes in the novel’s afterword that he “spent the 1980s dividing [his] time between Central America and New York” (384), working as a journalist reporting on the wars and their afterlives—especially in Guatemala. In many ways, the ship and the harbor’s surrounding projects are repeatedly figured in the novel as battlezones, and the men as the various soldiers and civilians caught in a war displaced from the Central American states to the New York Eastern Seaboard. Red Hook, like other U.S. urban projects, is figured as the site of violent gunfights, a node of the

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<sup>102</sup> See Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>103</sup> For a discussion of the rise of the “global city” in contemporary globalization, see Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents: Selected Essays 1984-1998* (New York: New Press, 1998).

<sup>104</sup> Avery Gordon notes “the ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there . . . makes itself known or apparent to us.” Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

international narcotics trade, and a site of illicit drug consumption.<sup>105</sup> The waterfront in the narrative, framed by both ship and housing projects, becomes an un-homely site of the nation-state.<sup>106</sup>

The novel opens with the first of Esteban's transnational migrations within Nicaragua, thus exposing the traces of global conflict, the nexus of psychic and political history, and the migration within Nicaraguan state borders. The narrative's opening line reads, "When Esteban finally reached the airport in Managua it was nearly three in the morning and the airport was closed and he sat down on his suitcase on the sidewalk in the humid, buggy night to wait for it to open" (3). The line's paratactic syntax links associative clauses that provide their own internal movement, as if propelling Esteban to his first period of uncomfortably waiting for the night to end and his work to begin. Opening with a conjunction of anticipation ("when"), the

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<sup>105</sup> The 1980s drug trade operated, with a contested measure of CIA complicity, as a crucial source of funding for the Contras and other groups important to U.S. political interests, another way that the wars in Central America played out in the U.S. On CIA involvement with the illegal drug trade, see Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003). See also Gary Webb, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998), and Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs, and the Press* (New York: Verso, 1998).

<sup>106</sup> The once-bustling Brooklyn waterfront suffered under competing interests over its future economic and spatial development. Urban development plans (such as the large-scale Red Hook housing project, freeways and a tunnel that divided the neighborhood into isolated enclaves) were underway as the shipping industry moved elsewhere. Once notorious for its corruption and violent drug trade, Red Hook renewal has been anticipated since the early 1980s. The biggest transformation has occurred in just the last few years, after the narrative time of the *Ordinary Seaman*: in 2005, a renovated Brooklyn Harbor became the docking site for luxury cruise ships (instead of cargo shipping); the area has undergone dramatic gentrification, and now is home to luxury coffee shops, art galleries, gourmet grocery stores, an Ikea, and a booming brownstone population of young Manhattan couples, artists, and entrepreneurs. For selected articles on the waterfront's gentrification and redevelopment, see Suzanne Hamlin, "On the Waterfront in Brooklyn, an Enclave Regains Its Energy," *The New York Times* 15 May 2005, Sun Late Ed: S11, C1; 13. Sarah Karn Asiewicz, "Reinvention in Red Hook," *The New York Sun*, 5 May 2005: 22. Patrick Gallahue, "Red Hook Reborn - 'Hood Overcomes Its Rough History," *The New York Post* 29 Jul. 2004: 27. David W. Dunlap, "A Shift in Rules Guiding Growth Along the Water," *The New York Times* 3 Oct. 1993, Late Ed.: S10, C4, 1. Jesus Rangel, "Revival Changes The Face Of Red Hook," *The New York Times* 13 Dec. 1986, Late City Final Ed: S1, C2, 29. Molly Ivins, "Red Hook Survives Hard Times Into New Era," *The New York Times*, 16 Nov. 1981, Late City Final Ed.: S B; C1, 1.

novel begins in media res of one character's migration from coast to coast and from the apparent periphery to the apparent center of global capital—from his Pacific coastal town of Corinto to the Atlantic coastal powerhouse of New York city—only to have the sense of moving back in time and space—or moving out, into a space outside homogenous clock time—once he boards the cargo ship “*Urus, Panama City.*” Esteban endures each of these migrations as a period of waiting---disorienting and uncomfortable in Nicaragua, grueling and distressing in Brooklyn Harbor. The next several lines suggest the disorienting simultaneity of uneven technologies driving global capital network, as Esteban encounters the dizzying spatial relations that collapse center and periphery, inside and outside. Esteban recounts the trip from his childhood town, the Pacific port town of Corinto, by bus and then by colectivo toward the Sandino airport,<sup>107</sup>

a long way from wherever it was he'd gotten off the bus in that invisible city of sprawling night that didn't seem to have any center or outskirts, here and there a cow standing at the edge of the highway, a stretch of slogan-decorated well, the disc jockey on the colectivo's radio dedicating romantic ballads to the wide-awake war dead (3).

The spatial disjointedness amplifies the multiple untimely spatio-temporal markers, most vividly represented by the radio dedication to the “wide-awake war dead.” Their figured resuscitation suggests the dead not only continue to haunt the living but that the “dead” continue to be haunted by the war they witnessed, and continue to witness (nobody bothering to close their eyes). Nineteen-year-old Esteban himself is figured as something like a walking war dead, after his time as a Sandinista soldier in a BLI unit leaves him numbed and traumatized by the war and especially by the loss of his lover

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<sup>107</sup> Like ships, the Sandino Airport and the John F. Kennedy Airport, set just outside the boundaries of major urban areas, are sites of international encounters that signal national allegiances through naming.

la Marta, a Sandinista volunteer killed in a Contra raid.<sup>108</sup> Marta, the lost lover, becomes the figure that propels Esteban to leave Nicaragua for a ship, and then to leave the ship for Brooklyn and to find there another woman whose love facilitates his escape and healing.

The novel's thick atmosphere of temporal stagnation, waiting, and neglect lifts as Esteban, the young nineteen-year old Sandinista veteran, begins to conduct nightly raids for goods along the waterfront. Southern Brooklyn becomes a lifeline for Esteban, and eventually, for the other crewmembers who follow: the commercial port with containers of goods for the global market help them survive, but the more important lifeline comes in the form of a love story. Esteban falls in love with Joaquina, a young Mexican woman who works as a manicurist; in the process, he is welcomed into the Latino/a residential neighborhoods. The welcome is not simply based on ethnicity or language—when Esteban just begins to venture into the neighborhoods, “[n]obody looks at him in a friendly way” (209). It is primarily through his relationship with Joaquina, a manicurist from Mexico, and through the practice of storytelling and listening among Esteban and the residents, that Brooklyn becomes a sort of non-national space that offers material and psychic refuge from the scarring effects of national revolutions and state authority. Esteban and the men who follow him into the multi-ethnic, especially Latina/o, Brooklyn neighborhoods, however, come to participate in the cultural work of staging an “encounter with ‘newness,’” as a liminal space without a proper name that, in Homi K. Bhabha’s characterization, “does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes

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<sup>108</sup> B.L.I. (Battalone de Luchar Irregular) refers to special brigade units of the Sandinista military.

part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.”<sup>109</sup> Such a liminality also animates the crewmen’s awareness that they live in the “historical present,” as Kirsten Silva Gruesz insightfully argues by using Walter Benjamin’s concept to read Esteban’s transformative escape from the ship.

### *The Palimpsestic Vessel*

The portrayal of the ship in Goldman’s narrative heightens the atmosphere of anachronicity or transition suggested in Salgado’s photograph. The narration makes repeated and often redundant reference to the *Urus* as lifeless and ghostly, as “a dead ship, a mass of inert iron provocatively shaped like a ship” (38). In Goldman’s novel, the ship’s condition is at odds with its shape and its ostensible function, and descriptions such as the quotation above highlight this contradiction through redundancy: a ship is dead, a mass, inert and thus unmoved by human will, in the shape of a ship but inoperable as one. Goldman depicts the ship not in terms of its neutral defining function (to move across bodies of water) but in terms of its historicity as a vehicle for imperial capitalism in the “New World” since the fifteenth century. Thus, the narration repeatedly draws upon a limited lexicon to describe the ship in terms of death, spectrality, and non-nationality, “a phantom ship,” a “stateless vessel” (97, 154). The ship is dead to the world, to the law, to the crewmen abandoned on board, to the African Americans who gather in the harbor and name the ship—and yet, those terms represent the ship as still very much materially present in the world, a problem, a revenant or an embodied return, a haunting that, over the course of the narrative, appears caused by the ship as much as the ship bears spectral witness to the same old story of “fucked up marineros” in an informal iron prison (38).

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<sup>109</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.



In *The Ordinary Seaman*, the ship—in its apparently anachronistic and yet insistently contemporary figuration within the novel—is in the doldrums, bereft of future winds. Yet Goldman employs a range of literary allusions and critical discourse to portray the ship as a figure that circulates widely within the American imaginary. For Michel Foucault and Paul Gilroy, for example, the ship is both an exceptional place and an imaginatively and historically articulating one, a spatial vehicle outside national societies but whose vital social work is to join together different times and geographies. Foucault’s “heterotopia par excellence,” like Gilroy’s “chronotope,” is a paradoxical maritime otherworld that is bounded yet open; a microcosm whose movement creates global encounters, as at once “the greatest instrument of economic development” and “the greatest reservoir of imagination.”<sup>110</sup> Foucault ends his contested essay on heterotopia with the ship and a prediction: “[i]n civilizations without ships the dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police that of the corsairs” (185). With this perhaps ironic flourish that shifts power from sea routes to dry land, Foucault oddly signals the onset of sinister Cold War surveillance and information warfare by loading the ship with the heavy imaginative cargo of a European colonialism, rich with dreaming. Gilroy instead locates the ship as the time-space articulator that invites us to “rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the western hemisphere.”<sup>111</sup> For both writers, the ship also is an exceptionally rich symbolic-material space whose power lies in its taken-for-granted mobility and its dominance in a time before our own.

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<sup>110</sup> Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: New Press, 1998), 185.

<sup>111</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17.

I mention these two deployments of the figure of the ship because they participate in the rich spectrum of meanings evoked by the ship in European and American imaginaries, be it the dreams and nightmares of the Jolly Roger or the Middle Passage. At once confining and mobile, the large ship became a signifying and material driving force of world markets and contemporary globalization, even as it has become erroneously figured as a past or leisurely form of transoceanic mobility. The Western ship evokes the world beyond the state as well as the world as its purview: outside of land and country, the ship's liquid realm defines the limits of terra and territory even as it overrides such limits. As merchant ships became, by 1700, what maritime historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker call "the engine of commerce, the machine of empire," one celebrant of the maritime state named the ship "the Sovereign of the Aquatic Globe, giving despotic laws to all the meaner Fry, that live upon that Shining Empire."<sup>112</sup> Extending the fiction of national sovereignty as a globally legible universal system, ships were named as agents, or at least carriers, for their nations through the sign of the sovereign flag. The ship, in its mobile relations to the state on the one hand, the expanse of the sea and its threat to the coherence and borders of the nation-state on the other, allows for a range of human identification in relation to transnational belonging and exclusion—from statelessness to citizenship, from the piracy "against all nations"<sup>113</sup> to the high cosmopolitanism of the "world citizen."

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<sup>112</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 150. First quotation is taken from Linebaugh and Rediker directly. Second quotation is attributed to Edward Ward and also cited in Linebaugh and Rediker, 150.

<sup>113</sup> For a discussion of eighteenth-century piracy as an ideological and material threat to the legitimacy and viability of the nation and empire, see Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

*The Ordinary Seaman* refigures conventional associations with the ship by making two simple alterations: Goldman's ship is a contemporary of neoliberal globalization, not its prehistory; and, the ship gains its powerful symbolic and material significance precisely because it does not move. The ship is anchored in Brooklyn Harbor, situated with a view of Ellis Island and next to housing projects. In the effort to restrain the men on board from leaving "Panama," the ship's sovereign jurisdiction,<sup>114</sup> Elias warns the men of their vulnerability in the rough surrounding neighborhoods, and in fact they get beaten and mugged when they try to do what seamen do and enjoy themselves at port. Most of their attempts at behaving like storied seamen result in their abjection as border crossers advised to "stay in Panama" (57). Ironically, their new identities as seamen reinforce their effective statelessness on board the ship. Once the men's four-day seamen's transit visas expire, the danger doubles with the threat of INS detention and deportation: to leave the ship would make them so-called "illegal aliens" in U.S. territory, and to stay on the ship would make them prisoners with nobody, much less a State, to notice them.

Perhaps once the image of Gilroy's ship as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion," the ship in Goldman's novel is an anchored corpse, harboring histories of what the ship has meant for the Americas as the vehicle of the "discovery," middle passage, global trade routes, invasion, empire, revolution, and piracy. These histories leave their traces on the figure of the ship. Stagnant when its structure is built for dynamism, an apparently "floating anachronism"<sup>115</sup> that was once

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<sup>114</sup> Captain Elias assures the men: "Onboard they were in Panama, contracted seamen protected by that country's sovereign laws. Onshore they were in the United States, where, of course, for the next four days, until their seaman's transit visas expired, they were perfectly legal," Goldman 25-26. On the significance of the Panama as the representation of "a lawless space where capital proliferates virtually unhindered by the regulations of a nation-state, the last redoubt of the nineteenth-century robber barons and their hemispheric empire cloaked under the name of 'free enterprise,'" as well as the site of multiple attempts for a transisthmanian passage, see Gruesz, 66.

<sup>115</sup> Gruesz, 67.

the embodiment of progress through ever expanding geographies of the global market, the *Urus* is a site without a future, a “ship that doesn’t move” (177), in contrast to conventional seafaring narratives, in which the ship voyage propels the narrative through various ports, countries, and adventures. As Bernardo “never passes up an opportunity to remind them,” they are marooned on a ship that simply cannot serve as a vehicle to propel the narrative forward. Likening the ship to the “island prison” and the symbol of immigrant freedom, Bernardo claims that the ship will sail when the Statue of Liberty walks, emphasizing that the statue is similarly marooned on an island off the Eastern coast. *The Ordinary Seaman* takes a stagnant ship as its premise; the narrative movement must occur through the stories and decisions of the crewmembers.

The fifteen men end their first transnational migrations at a neglected section of the Brooklyn waterfront, where they encounter the massive iron vessel that will serve as home: “*Urus* painted high up on the prow against a dark smear covering up what must have been its previous name; *Urus, Panama City* on the stern. But there were no lights onboard; everything looked painted with shadows” (20-21). Here and throughout the narrative, *The Ordinary Seaman* calls up the ghost of Herman Melville’s novella, “Benito Cereno,” which itself marshals the specters of slavery--the Haitian Revolution and slave revolts on ships—in the narrative of a slave revolt, its discovery, and the legal narrative of its violent resolution as crime.<sup>116</sup> On Melville’s ship,

Rudely painted or chalked...was the sentence, ‘Seguid vuestro jefe,’ (follow your leader); while upon the tarnished head-boards...appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship’s name, ‘San Dominick,’ each letter streakingly

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<sup>116</sup> See Gruesz’s helpful reading of the significance of Melville’s work to Goldman and to C.L.R. James before him, as writers engaging with Melville’s concerns over freedom, bonded labor, nationalism, and imperialism in the Western hemisphere.

corroded with tricklings of copper-spike rust; while, like mourning weeds, dark festoons of sea-grass slimily swept to and fro over the name, with every hearse-like roll of the hull.<sup>117</sup>

In Melville's story, the mystery begins with U.S. American Captain Amasa Delano's inability to identify an approaching ship, for both flag and name are missing or hidden. The "stranger...showed no colors... [as] was the custom among peaceful seamen of all nations" (Melville 35). The narration generates suspense through the mystery of the ship's dilapidated condition and Delano's apparent inability to figure out the cause of the poor condition and odd behavior of the small European crew and African cargo. Both *The Ordinary Seaman* and "Benito Cereno" take up, through narrative, the problematic relations of nation, identity, global trade, and the law, in part by figuring the ship as a vessel whose identifying markers reveal at every turn potentially "false," spectral, written over, illegible signs, signs that pose as singular but are in fact part of a series of signs, each leaving a partially-revealed trace upon the ship. Such signs come to produce the people on board as, in turn, deceptive, ultimately illegible. The ship operates as a mysterious palimpsest, to be named and renamed as its ownership changes, as it falls in and out of national identities, and as the characters adjust their perception of the ship in the effort to understand the mystery of its identity and who controls the vessel.

Melville drew from Captain Amaso Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817), an historical account of Delano's discovery of slave revolt aboard the *Tryal* in 1804, lifting lines wholesale from its 18<sup>th</sup> chapter for the legalistic addendum that ends "Benito Cereno." Among many significant alterations, Melville renames the ship from *Tryal* to *San Dominick*,

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<sup>117</sup> Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 37.

signaling Melville (like Goldman) as participants in the palimpsestic activity of “writing over” the historical record, of partially revealing while partially obscuring the historical narrative. The writers then imagine their characters putting down another layer of writing; in Melville’s case, when the revolutionary/mutinous slaves aboard the *San Dominick* literally rename the ship with the skeleton of their murdered master and the declarative name that is also an imperative speech act—“Seguid vuestro jefe,” (follow your leader).”

The *Urus* has a visible name and national identity, but one that proves as mysterious and deceptive as the hidden name of the *San Dominick*. Painted on the ship’s surface is its current name and registration, “*Urus, Panama City*,” a “dark streak” blotting out the ship’s previous identity. During the gradual abandonment, the *Urus* is renamed by black Brooklyn residents who “seemed to know something about the *Urus*,” this modern day *San Dominick* whose Master’s skeleton has vanished from the bowsprit, a late twentieth century ghost ship evocative of the histories of revolution in the Americas, most recently those revolts against oppression that had taken place and were being suppressed in 1980s Central America. “Los blacks,” as Elias calls the African-American residents who gather at the waterfront, name the ship by spraypainting the grain elevator (and makeshift latrine) “Caguero de la Muerte,” which Esteban translates as “Shitter of Death” or, allowing a slippage in the graffiti, Carguero, “Cargo of Death” (49-50). If the name refers to the ship’s grain elevator turned latrine, it ironically comments on the waste and wasted condition of the ship, or it suggests that it’s where a crew of the living dead, or even Death personified, sits to use the latrine. If the name refers to the ship’s crew as cargo, its evocation of the *Tryal* is quite clear, and the name refers to the men as a load of goods for an economic transaction that has not yet been completed: the cargo either is renamed as the property of Death or is marked for death, but it has a future of sorts in being destined

for the market. Goldman portrays the black residents' ambiguous naming of the ship as simultaneously a "reading" of the ship as a palimpsest of slavery; a participatory act in the construction of another layer of meaning to be partially legible on the surface (reinforced by the ambiguous meaning of the graffiti); and a condemnation of the effort to erase the palimpsestic text, some of which is only legible to certain observers, and make the ship "like new." As one of the residents blurts out in sudden prophetic judgment on the crew as they strain to understand him: "fucked you fucked you po mothuhfucks fucked" (49).

As the crewmembers wait, they gradually, discursively layer the figure of the ship with thick strata of meanings. Their attempts to figure out the meaning of the ship—why they are there and what the ship is for—don't lead to names as much as dim recognition that the ship carries layers of meaning. Thus, their descriptions repeatedly invoke the ship's deadness, its ghostliness...but they lack more specific names to attach to the condition of the ship. In one of Bernardo's uneasy dreams, which move like reveries through his daily life on board, he is on a "ghost ship stone silent" (105, 114). To Esteban, betrayed by both the capitalist venture and the Sandinista revolutionary war, the *Urus* is that future over which the war was supposed to be fought... "and now the future is here and, hijueputa, look at it: a ship that doesn't move" (177).

The palimpsestic representation of the ship occurs at the level of characters who layer names and meanings over the figure of the ship, as well as at the level of the narration, which depicts Elias's and Mark's venture as contributing to the palimpsest of meanings when they believe they are replacing those earlier meanings with their own. An extended passage focalized through Mark recounts how Elias and he viewed the ship as a "dream made real." Continuing the language of romance and true love, Mark figures the partners as the heroes of a damsel ship in distress, a vessel "only

acting dead, just waiting for someone to come along, recognize her true worth, and rescue her from scrap” (295). The Frankensteinian ambitions of creation through reanimation, and the delusions that one can make an utterly new (or newly recycled) creation that can be fully possessed and free from any history but that of its creation, as Frankenstein wanted of his monster, soon become apparent. The narration suggests that this power to name and to (re)make something new is not only deluded but also itself another layering of meaning on the figure of the ship. The ship as a vehicle of the imperious and mercantilist will contrasts with the insistent descriptions of the crew’s improvements to the ship as little more than the dressing up of a corpse: “the new cables and wiring have been threaded up and down the ship’s length like a whole new set of veins in an old body. But the ship still has no self-generating electrical power” (95). Mark and Elias identify the ship as a dream of resurrection worth underwriting, as they become “phantom owners” or ghostwriters to this shipping fraud purchased on credit, in the temporal and economic sense.

The narration figures the ship as a palimpsest to the capitalist compulsion to name it and to own it as a way to control its meanings. The strong allusions to Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” and the streak blotting out the previous name of the *Urus*, suggests that the ship continues to evidence the endurance of this pattern of capitalism in the New World, as it gets named and renamed, falls in and out of national identities, and calls up or writes over the rich historical meanings conveyed by the figure of the ship in the Americas.

The narration makes no remark on the strange name of the *Urus*, which points to multiple invocations of excluded and excluding figurations of law and belonging, but its meanings seem to determine the ship that receives it. The name functions implicitly in the narration at multiple associative levels. As Gruesz notes, the word may present an ominous address to the reader of the crew’s universal condition (“you



are us”) or the primal foundation of contemporary U.S. dominance (an Ur of the U.S.).<sup>118</sup> “*Urus*” perhaps most importantly invokes hemispheric history by referencing the Uros, or *Urus*, people, who largely continue to live on man-made floating islands since their pre-colonial displacement from land. Elias, as secret owner of the ship and enthusiast of South American indigenous spirituality, also presumably has named his cargo ship for the indigenous Uros people and their “islas flotandas,” or floating islands. The Uros live on lake Titicaca, divided by Bolivian and Peruvian sovereignty. I suggest that the name also references this real namesake, intimating thematic connections and commenting on the naming as an imperious renaming, an appropriation of the name but an incomplete recycling of it, as the name is taken but not transformed beyond recognition for its new use. A “floating island” on which the novel’s crewmen are marooned, the ship is an inhospitable home that demands the constant maintenance of its crewmembers, particularly of Bernardo, Esteban, Jose Mateo, and other crewmembers that help in their survival on board. The *Urus* name also indirectly calls up contemporary indigenous relationships to the nation-state and the global economy, which is often akin to a colonial relationship that takes indigenous peoples’ displacement and threatened social and economic order as stages within the national narrative of progress and development.

Elias, in his various economic, educational, and narco-spiritual adventures in the Amazon, simultaneously celebrates, consumes, and appropriates Amerindian cultural experiences and cosmologies. Elias frequently exhibits what Renato Rosaldo has called “imperialist nostalgia,” a “compelling, contradictory, and pernicious” affective ideology that “uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s

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<sup>118</sup> Gruesz notes the word play and the *OED*’s basic definition of *Urus* as “an extinct wild ox, the ancestor of modern European cattle,” 67. The *ur-* may even suggest, as a prefix, the ship as the hidden tail of the U.S. economic organism or its waste product (the prefix for tail and for urinary is “uro-,” which becomes “ur-” when attached to a vowel).

imaginings and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.”<sup>119</sup> Elias not only “valorize[s] innovation and then yearn[s] for more stable worlds” (Rosaldo 108); he poses as a spiritual student of the Amazon while harnessing its names and cultural practices in order to enhance his economic progress and establish his personal superiority over his teachers.

But something more than imperialist nostalgia occurs in Elias’s naming of the ship, which finds a counterpart in the name of the “dummy corporation” set up by Elias and Mark as the legal owner of the *Urus*—“Achuar Corp. of Panama City” (136, 371).<sup>120</sup> Elias’s power to name is just as indebted to what Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel claims to be the originary instance of modern Western subjectivity—the Spanish-Portuguese “I” of *ego conquiro*, “I conquer,” instantiated practically through the Spanish and Portuguese imperial invasion of the “New World” since 1492. For Dussel, *ego conquiro* “imposed its will (the first modern “will-to-power”) on the indigenous populations of the Americas” (471).<sup>121</sup> “I conquer” establishes the modern subject as split from the other (people, territory), which is to be possessed.

Anticipating the Cartesian *Ego cogito* (“I think”), *ego conquiro* serves as the

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<sup>119</sup> Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” *Representations* 26 (Spring, 1989): 108. Rosaldo carefully notes his own susceptibility to imperialist nostalgia, along with anyone who, however indirectly, and however good one’s intentions, acts within networks of power even as they long to preserve that which those networks of power are at work to change. Salgado’s photography would serve as another example of an exhibit of imperialist nostalgia.

<sup>120</sup> The Amerindian Achuar tribe lives in the Amazon, another space (like Lake Titicaca) whose transnational borders do not follow the borders of the nation-state, and the corporation is sentimentally named for Elias’s Amazonian guide from the Achuar tribe. Financial corporation appropriates the social incorporation of the tribe, and, in Mark’s disillusioned account of the venture, imperial conquest engenders contemporary migrations: the “secret slave ship” has displaced “[o]ur little brown guys, property of Capitán Elias Cortés and First Mate Mark Pizarro...everywhere [Mark] goes he sees them...yackety-yacking in Spanish, dark glare of their eyes, squat Napoleon builds and proud, serious Aztec (whatever) faces,” Goldman, 305, ellipses mine.

<sup>121</sup> Enrique Dussel, “Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000): 465-478. For a sustained engagement with Dussel’s philosophy, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

foundational affirmation of the ego positioned as central through conquest, which finds philosophical expression in “cogito ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am). In this context, the peripheral “other,” the “Indian, for example, the African, the Asian is reduced to an idea, but even then not as something exterior but as an idea internal to the system ‘I’ set up.”<sup>122</sup> Elias is clearly indebted to this legacy of western subjectivity and the U.S. capitalists who followed:<sup>123</sup> he has the power to name, to launch economic ventures, to hire and control the legal identities and lives of fifteen poor Central Americans, and to assume a subject position of worldliness, expressed by a mixture of cosmopolitan elegance and macho sea stories. However, Elias’s slickness on the surface thinly covers the series of bumbling antics that lead to the crew’s abandonment and his own failed entrepreneurial venture. More importantly, his acts of naming creates his authority by disavowing his relational position within the venture.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978), 159. Citation taken from Eulalio Baltazar. “Liberation Philosophy And Theology And Culture, Human Rights And Peace In Central America,” Chapter IX, in *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Life Series V, Latin America*, Vol. 2, eds. George F. Mclean, Raul Molina, and Timothy Ready (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy), <[http://www.crvp.org/book/Series05/V-2/chapter\\_ix.htm](http://www.crvp.org/book/Series05/V-2/chapter_ix.htm)>.

<sup>123</sup> Elias’s appropriation of the Uros and Achuar Amerindian tribal names for his global capital venture signals his indebtedness to what Ana Patricia Rodríguez identifies as “the legacy of filibustering and mercenary adventurism that has driven many white male entrepreneurs to intervene in Central American politics and history...[including] William Walker, filibuster; Samuel Zamurray, banana corporate venturer; Cornelius Vanderbilt, train baron; Oliver North, arms racketeer.” Rodríguez, “Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 73.2 (June 2001): 403.

<sup>124</sup> Elias is also anxious about what he fears is a feminized position, as a man dependent upon his academic wife’s money and social circles and to his partner Mark’s financial investment. I say feminized, too, because it seems that a central preoccupation of Goldman is the relationship of the venture to masculine identities. The novel is populated by male characters sketched in fine psychic and physical detail, anxious about their masculinity; by contrast, readers have no access to the feelings of female characters, who are depicted as peripheral or as absent centers of the plot. For example, each of the crewmen take this job on the *Urus* because of some relationship to a woman, Elias and Mark pursue their venture in part to make themselves attractive to women, and the stand-in audience position for both the Ship Visitor and Esteban to tell their stories are female characters.

Created as fronts for the entrepreneurial venture that Elias sets up, the names *Urus* and Achuar participate in a masquerade to be played out as part of the operations of contemporary capitalism, which relies upon interdependent legal channels and gaps between national laws that are never made explicit in order to maximize the ownership's flexibility, often at the expense of the worker's rights. The names *Urus* and Achuar become unstable signs within the narrative plot, thinly covering over what is finally revealed to be unidentifiable/ anonymous—a stateless vessel without owners and a corporation without any identifiable individuals responsible for its operation.

Key to the shipowners' fantasy of washing the history out of the venture is the system of open shipping registries, more often referred to by its critics as “flags of convenience,” which generally “do not require citizenship of shipowners or operators, levy no or minimal taxes, allow ships to be worked by non-nationals, and have neither the will nor capability to impose domestic or international regulations on registered ships” (Desombre). Providing the spatio-temporal, economic, and emotive conditions of possibility for the novel's plot, the Panamanian flag of convenience establishes the venture as transnational while calling up the historical relationship between Panama and global capital, from the colonial designs on an isthmanian passageway to the dominance of the U.S. in establishing Panama as a state, constructing the canal, and maintaining effective control over the government and the canal zone. As Kristen Silva Gruesz notes, *The Ordinary Seaman* seizes hold of “the history of domination and intervention...[which] has made Panama the dead center of US hemispheric hegemony” (79-80).

While the flagged cargo ship quintessentially points up the legal fiction of sovereign territory and its relation to capital, the modern systems of flags of convenience sharpens the fiction into a masquerade entertained through structures of distance, anonymity, and the always unstable status of the legal document. Seafarers

and ship owners are both marked (or unmarked) by anonymity—seafarers are out of sight and out of law (made vulnerable), and flag of convenience ship owners, too, are made textually invisible and therefore legally unrecognizable (freed from responsibility).

The dilemma of the crewmen, made stateless after being hired to work as seafarers, highlights the historical status of seamen as stateless but bound in service to state and economic interests. Sailors have a long history of social exclusion and exceptional legal status that depended upon the identification of their bodies, first through the markings of the working class that often led to a seaman's initial impressment, and then through the markings of seafaring experience that made him perpetually vulnerable to subsequent impressment. In his history of the eighteenth-century Anglo-American maritime world, Marcus Rediker writes that “crimps” and impressments gangs needed only to scout around taverns to immediately see and hear what the eighteenth-century sailor could not hide—the thick, grayish skin, tattoos, injuries, and the world pidgin linguistic variety of the seas would mark their flesh with its labor.<sup>125</sup> Often begun through forced labor, the seaman's life became captive to a circular logic that held seamens' bodies, marked by maritime labor, as evidence of their identity as men fit only for the sea.<sup>126</sup>

No longer racialized by way of the visible marks of seafaring experience on their flesh or tongues, seafarers undergo racialized conscriptions by other names, as flags of convenience ships hire the cheapest laborers from the racialized global South vulnerable to situations of forced and unpaid labor, violence, and other forms of

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<sup>125</sup> For a lively study of seafarers' social practices and material conditions, see Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*.

<sup>126</sup> See my discussion in Chapter One of this dissertation on the 1897 Supreme Court Case *Robertson v. Baldwin* and the sailor as an early version of the stateless figure.

subjection through the production of statelessness for the workers. Under the burden of vague and contested definitions of what constitutes a “seaman” or seafarer, what is the relation of the “seaman” to the law? How has the “seaman” as a legal identity shared in the histories of effectively stateless figures, such as the convicted criminal, the slave, and the ward, as subjects who may be confined legally and forced to labor, and who are excluded formally from the nation yet bound to it?

Joan Dayan’s work on the continuity between civil death (*attainder*), the legal slave, and “being judged a criminal,” points out that the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865) “made explicit the [chiasmic] doubling, back and forth transaction between prisoner and the ghosts of slaves past. Moreover, once the connection had been made, Southern slavery, now extinct, could resurface under other names not only in the South but in the North.”<sup>127</sup> The legal distinctions between slave and laborer, citizen, alien, sailor, ward, pirate, entrepreneur, blur into illegibility largely partly because their definitions are mutually constitutive and haunted by the internal contradictions of a free republic founded on a legal system of citizens and slaves.<sup>128</sup>

Deliberately included in the Fourteenth Amendment to extend to those former slaves and free blacks excluded from citizenship, legal personhood became an identity of the corporation, that abstract body or corporeal-capital machine, which fought to

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<sup>127</sup> Joan Dayan traces the unstable duality between “the civil body—the artificial person who possesses self and property” and “the legal slave—the artificial person who exists as both person and property” through the legal fiction of the incarcerated body’s civil death. Dayan, “Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 2.1 (2001): 3-39.

<sup>128</sup> Anthropologist Aihwa Ong argues that “the norms of good citizenship in advanced liberal democracies have shifted from an emphasis on duties and obligations to the nation to a stress on becoming autonomous, responsible choice-making subjects who can serve the nation best by becoming “entrepreneurs of the self.” Kerber notes that “Ambiguous borders cloud the margins between Ong’s “mobile homo economicus” and the trafficked, between the trafficked and the refugee, between the refugee (subject to multiple *refoulements* despite its illegality in international law) and the stateless,” (Ong 9).

extend its claims to the *rights* of personhood while escaping the corporeal responsibilities and threats of personhood (such as incarceration, physical punishment, biological death). The legal fiction of corporations as enjoying inhuman “personhood” allows a kind of human rights to extend to abstract bodies; in the case of the *Urus*, the undocumented humans come to *embody* the effects of the corporation’s disembodiment.

Under the Flags of Convenience, a ship owner like Achuar Corporation may be based in the United States, register a ship in Panama, and assemble a multinational crew: the ship flies under a flag that identifies the ship as under Panamanian sovereign jurisdiction, but the flag is purchased with the understanding that Panama will maintain such jurisdiction in name only, through the appearance of the flag and state bureaucratic documents central to the definition of the formal economy. In this way, power is wielded by the captain or shipowners (in this novel, they are one and the same), who are shielded from sovereign law: the man in charge is given free rein to rule over the ship. In other words, the economic transaction of registering a ship under a flag of convenience is a transaction that takes place within the formal economy but whose value as a transaction comes from the formal cover it provides for a ship owner to operate within the range of informal economic acts, from hiring undocumented workers to withholding wages to using violence as a means to control the labor force. The cover of sovereignty continues to be mobile, flexible, sold, and contingent upon the purchaser’s desires: as Elias and Mark realize that their enterprise is doomed and the ship will never be seaworthy, they allow the ship’s Panamanian registration to lapse, and the *URUS* itself becomes a stateless no-place place housing a crew rendered alien on board as well as on land. Flags of convenience depend upon the freedoms of a certain kind of position outside the bounds of any state—a certain statelessness—that allows ship owners to choose a ship’s state identity. The understanding here, of

course, is that the incorporation of the ship into a state's sovereign jurisdiction is only in name.

The flag of convenience ship becomes a premier site for revealing sovereignty as a masquerade on at least two counts: one, flags of convenience mask seafaring capitalist practices with sovereignty's protective drapery while vacating its laws and regulation from the flagged ship; and two, flags of convenience seek to mask the limits of sovereignty and its intimacy with capital. The naming of the ship "*Urus*," and registering it in "*Panama City*," have the effect of producing stateless laborers out of workers who arrive to the ship through legally sanctioned channels. The problem of identifying the vessel figuratively stages the problem of identifying what the vessel contains. Nicole Waligora-Davis has pointed out the politics of recognition in the cases of the *Amistad* and the *Tryal*, which turned on whether the slaves were rightly identified as pirates, mutineers, fugitive property, or human beings wrongly kidnapped.<sup>129</sup> The *Urus*, in its ambiguous status as Panama and not-Panama, as a technically legal venture and a scam, constructs ambiguous states that escape clear recognition of the identities of both crew and owners. Are the crewmen lawbreakers for working without papers (a violation within the U.S. as much as within Panamanian jurisdiction), or are they victims of a fraud? Are they slaves or sailors? Would Elias and Mark be recognized by the law as frauds, legitimate entrepreneurs, slaveholders, or pirates? These are the questions the narrative world refuses to answer, although the crewmen and the owners often preoccupy themselves with such questions. Unlike the court document transcriptions appended to "*Benito Cereno*," in which the law is brought to bear fully upon the slaves for their revolt, *The Ordinary Seaman* ends with

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<sup>129</sup> I am indebted to Nicole Waligora-Davis here for her discussion of "*Benito Cereno*" in her graduate seminar, *Race Matters* (English 687, Spring 2003, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY). See also Waligora-Davis, "Phantom Limbs," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 56.4 (Fall 2003): 657- 675.



the Ship Visitor's meditation on the nature of work and poetry. Both narratives, however, call upon the law and its limits—court trial or no court trial. In “Benito Cereno,” neither the white characters nor Melville's readers can penetrate the mystery that surrounds the alleged mastermind of slave revolt, contained within the head of the executed Babo: the law's failure to put slaveholding society's fears at rest come to be the haunting trace of the narrative.

In *The Ordinary Seaman*, the human owner evades identification: it is Achuar, Incorporated, that owns the ship—no named individual owns Achuar, Incorporated, and Mark simply provided the human signature “on behalf of” the corporation. There's no trace of the real entrepreneurial genius of the two--Elias. Mark, who “was smart, he's kept his personal credit cards out of all *Urus* transactions” (321), distances himself beyond the possible reach of the law by moving, ironically, to the Yucatán (thanks to the belated operations of debt/credit). The owners are characterized by extreme mobility and dissimulation: Mark and Elias, posing as the First Mate and Captain, respectively, can board the ship and leave it whenever they like (as U.S. citizens). They are able to conceal their ownership and even their full names. In the novel's view of global capital, “anonymity is built into the system.” As the Reverend Kathy Roundtree of the Seafarers Institute says after learning that the vessel's Panamanian registry lapsed and the crew never signed shipping articles, making them unlicensed seafarers aboard a stateless vessel with no identifiable owner, “Nowadays any scum can hide from God. All you need is, whatever, a flag of convenience, brass plate incorporation. You don't even have to be rich anymore” (155).

Insofar as hiding from God is hiding from the Law, from judgment, to hide under a cloak of economic anonymity is to be freed from the responsibility to account for another and so for oneself. It is the “master” who now escapes the category of the human. This evasion of legal identifiability is made possible by the conflation of legal

personhood and particularly the rights of citizenship with human rights<sup>130</sup>. The master, in turn, haunts the concept of ownership itself: there are “phantom owners” who can “hide from God,” let alone the law, and who lay claim to ownership without responsibility by registering corporate names which, as legal persons, become stand-ins for human persons who may lay claim to the corporation or abandon it as they please. In this sense, the ship is not haunted so much as owned by invisible actors that produce material effects. If Elias were the Wizard of Oz, the curtain hiding his identity would be the legal channels of capital and documentation that structure contemporary globalization (and revealing the identity of that man behind the curtain would involve much more than sliding back some fabric).

Elias’s final appearance in the novel comes in the form of a long passage of free indirect discourse exposing his attempt to absolve himself of guilt through excessively selfish and entrepreneurial logic, punctuated by direct speech to his wife Kate on the occasion of his next venture as the father of a son named Hector. At one point, he reinforces the language of legacy by salvaging the *Urus* as an “honorable” effort, one that “ties you, binds, connects you to all those who’ve come before who’ve made such an effort also, the successes as well as the failures. Because it’s what the world’s been fucking built on” (374). Goldman gives the imperial white male legacy a makeover, making its latest instance (Elias) a little more fallible and feeble, while maintaining the disparity between the consequences of the venture for the owners, who rely on the rights of citizenship without being nationally bound by them, and the

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<sup>130</sup> Deliberately included in the Fourteenth Amendment to extend to those former slaves and free blacks excluded from citizenship, legal personhood became an identity of the corporation, that abstract body or corporeal-capital machine, which fought to extend its claims to the *rights* of personhood while escaping the corporeal responsibilities and threats of personhood (such as incarceration, physical punishment, biological death). The legal fiction of corporations as enjoying inhuman “personhood” allows a kind of human rights to extend to abstract bodies; in the case of the *Urus*, the undocumented humans come to embody the effects of the corporation’s disembodiment.

consequences for the undocumented workers, their legal papers withheld by Elias, caught between the sea and Red Hook. Mark and Elias venture, name, hire, and travel freely, and legally hide all ties to the broken ship and the men they brought to live in it.

The fortunes of Elias and Mark eerily parallel those of Esteban and Bernardo, but with starkly inverted effects. Elias becomes haunted by the venture, whereas the venture becomes an occasion for Esteban to make peace with the ghost of his lover, la Marta. Mark disappears by hiding out in the financial and U.S. tourist haven of Cancún, whereas Bernardo is hidden in an emergency waiting room, where nobody knows his name.

Hidden ties form the mystery for characters to figure out, and they form a partially legible palimpsest that continues to accrue layers of hidden and not-so-hidden meaning over the course of the narration. Bernardo the old ship waiter is the first to recognize the ship for the haunted hulk of metal that it is and is most acutely attuned to its spectrality. Bernardo also recognizes before the others that the problem of identifying the *Urus* is the problem of defining themselves. The novel's title, *The Ordinary Seaman*, takes up this vexed relationship between naming, identity, and labor. Elias informs them that they are seamen on board and illegal aliens on land. Their status, however, is much less certain. The men arrive on U.S. issued seamen transit visas, but in order to produce fifteen stateless laborers, Elias the entrepreneur simply has to wait for their documents to expire and never mention the shipping articles that would have declared them contracted seafarers. Elias then stages a meeting and promotes everyone, symbolically of course, to the rank of "ordinary seamen," though the crewmembers lack all the experience of seamen except perhaps that of waiting together. Considering that most of the crew have never worked on a ship, that the *Urus* contradicts the basic definition of a ship, that their situation is

exceptional and undefined at the same time, and that they are hardly at sea (except in the figurative sense of being confused), Bernardo and the other characters are aware that their title as “ordinary seamen” is a piece of black humor.

But Esteban, and I would say most of the other crewmembers as well, come to deserve the title of “ordinary seamen,” which is the lowest rank earned by any laborer who gains seafaring experience by working on a ship. The crewmembers have implicitly defined their status by virtue of their indefinite postponement on board the ship and the emotional and physical marks of experience they endure. They are also “ordinary” seamen in that this presumably exceptional case is anything but, under the flags of convenience regime. This quotidian state of affairs characterizes their induction into the multinational economic order, evoking the etymology of “ordinary” from the Latin *ordo*, meaning order and thus also suggesting communal orders, such as for the Church, in which figures are ritually incorporated into an order. The question that most persistently haunts Bernardo and the other men, however, is not how they can be rescued but how to define themselves through their waiting, the most constant labor on board the ship.

This order is at once communal and solitary. The languages of insomnia, war, and displacement converge to characterize the men’s solitary acts of narration: to send themselves out on “forced marches through the same interior landscapes” suggests that for the crewmembers, narrative is simultaneously a penal labor that enacts one’s own displacement, an extraordinary militant exertion for survival in battle, and a journey into the affective geographies of the self as refuge. Like the madman aboard the Ship of Fools, the crew experiences the temporality of the “prisoner of the passage” par excellence. Outside measured time (soon nothing “keeps time” on board but a Mickey Mouse watch, which former Sandinista soldier Esteban keeps as a secret possession of his dead Sandinista lover, la Marta), the crew labors interminably, purposelessly, and

sleeplessly toward an impossible future—one that many of them felt would never arrive but to which promise they were condemned to perform and appear to believe—the moment of embarking on their voyage.

Nowadays life on the *Urus* almost feels like the middle of a long ocean crossing on a real ship—the lassitude, people keeping to themselves, bored with one another, not much to do but play dominoes and tinker around or endlessly chip and paint. [Bernardo] lays the clothes out to dry on the rear deck, trying to remember the words to the poem Doña Maruja had recited.

Pass on, slow steamship. Don't stay. Get out of my heart. Lose yourself in the distance...*Sí* pues, in God's distant mist. (122)

These lines from Fernando Pessoa's poem, *Oda Marítima*, find their way from the epigraph into the graph of the narrative and this character's memories when Bernardo, infused with a double sense of being haunted and being in a dream, encounters a well-heeled, elderly, spectral Argentine couple strolling along the dilapidated pier. After Doña Maruja recites a stanza from the ode to Bernardo, he asks her and her husband to alert the Seaman's Institute to the crew's abandonment, which Bernardo likens to being "stranded...as much as any shipwrecked sailors on some remote island" (120).

This section of the novel, focalized through Bernardo, is an extended sequence of reverie, dream, encounter, and haunting, and it is within this surreal mode of real-unreal encounters that the Ship Visitor is led to find the plight of the crew aboard the *Urus*. The scene is the convergence of an untimely and timely encounter: the elderly Argentine couple is comically out of place—they appear to Bernardo as ghosts hovering between real and unreal, dilapidation and elegance. The old man and woman make unlikely witnesses to the hidden abandonment, evocative of the ghosts of Argentina's "dirty war" (1976-1983), the many people who were "disappeared," and

the social attachment to Europe that formed its dominant national narrative. Their stroll itself is belated: they are looking for someone suffering from the same rare blood disorder as the old man, and the abandoned ship reminds the anciana of her youthful days of watching ships sail through the harbor of the Río de la Plata. In effect, they are spectral latinos in search of another ghost, and who they encounter is Bernardo, himself haunted aboard the ghost ship by the disappearance of his adopted stray cat turned crew mascot, Desastres (the only female to board the *Urus*), by his spectral dreams of New Orleans and a ship without officers, and by the spirits of his mother and his wife.

Pessoa's slow steamship, figured as an insensible object of desire, loses itself in heavenly mist even as it harnesses water's energy and propels itself by steam. The ship of life, passing from this world into the next, it traverses the greatest scale, from the human and technological to the planetary to the aura of immateriality, and it does so in a mari-time that seems otherworldly to the one observing. The ship appears to dissolve, to lose itself, through distance and the anonymity that comes from moving beyond land and nation, past the observer's horizon of the visible and into the ultimately inaccessible realm of God. The connective mental tissue between a self and the world, distance produces the doubled feelings of connectedness and estrangement, and, in this poem, the passage toward dissolution of the self.

Bernardo elaborates on Pessoa's image of dissolution when he re-imagines the ship in a state of economic dissolution—of its breakup and recycling, to be more precise—and re-positions the observer so that he is inseparable from the vessel rather than at an ever-increasing distance from it. Indefinitely detained on board the “broken eggshell,” no longer possessing the proper papers to step onto U.S. territory, and dependent upon the Captain and First Mate for their food and any word of their future prospects, the men have all the time in the world to consider the mystery of their

continual postponement. Jose Mateo, an experienced ship cook numbed by depression, flatly relates the common fate for abandoned crews: they must wait, “stuck on a ship forever while all the legal pendejadas get resolved, [before] auctioning the ship off for scrap to pay everybody off, melt[ing] a ship like this down to make razor blades, beer cans, refrigerators...” Bernardo, the old ship waiter and the only other experienced seafarer on board, transforms Jose’s list of commodities into an image of his emotional condition carrying on, embodied by the ship, and to be transformed with the ship’s anticipated demolition. He “pictures gringos shaving with his tears, pulling cold cans of his bile from gleaming white refrigerators made of his hatred. A perfect immortality” (183).<sup>131</sup>

As if altering Salgado’s description of the uses of “that huge animal lying on the beach” about to be transformed through the efficient economy of recycling, Bernardo imagines his afterlife to be incorporated into the scrap material of the ship. He uses the image to write himself into the future of the ship, so to speak, by figuring his labor through a *synechoche* in which tears stand in for heartache but also razors, and bile for bitterness but also beer cans. The future to his time of waiting finds its purpose and product in the consumables of the U.S. American iconic rituals of masculine domestic life. What he imagines is his physical end at the hands of the market is materialized and immortalized through the commodity circulation that, had the venture been legitimate, would have fulfilled the purported ends of capital—getting paid and off the boat. That end, imagined as part of the productive and formal economy, contrasts with the men’s current condition as stateless laborers in a stateless location.

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<sup>131</sup> Salgado writes of a similar process for the ship in Bangladesh: “Everything from that huge animal lying on the beach has a use. Iron and steel will be melted down and given new roles as utensils. The entire ship will be turned into what it once carried: machines, knives and forks, hoes, shovels, screws, things, bits, pieces,” 7.

They and the ship have, after a while, fallen out of circulation and legal recognition, and the meaning of their labor comes under creative construction. Bernardo's reading of the ship demolition revises Karl Marx's definition of labor as "essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles,"<sup>132</sup> suggesting instead that labor be understood in terms of affect. Labor, in his imagined scenario, is the outflow of human desire and psychic states, and recycling is the transformation of emotional labor beyond recognition for a future market. Bernardo's depiction of his emotional traces living on in recycled metal figuratively re-incorporates him into the global economy from which the crew apparently has become occluded, and so, comments on the broader junctures and disjunctures between laborer, consumer, and capitalist that make virtually every product a product with untraceable histories.

Recycling suggests a perfect economy that runs on the circulation of goods between consumers and capitalists—the labor performed for the recycling is usually absented from this economy. And while the commodity has no history or apparent network of social relations for the citizen-consumer (exemplified by Bernardo through the "gringo"), Bernardo's emotive afterlife is depicted as immortalized, smuggled into future commodities and consumer markets, through the potentially endless sequence of use, transformation, and new use that is recycling.

It is the imagined and visual distance between the northern, Anglo, masculine consumer and Bernardo that the old sailor tries to subvert (though not overcome) through a mental picture; precisely because the consumer cannot see the laborer and his material and emotional fragmentation in their razor blade, their consumption does not look like the consumerist cannibalism that it is. His emotional fragmentation and

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<sup>132</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, tr. from the third German edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. by Frederick Engels. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library <<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MarCapi.html>> Vol. 1, Section 4.



its invisibility to the consumer he imagines as a “gringo” highlights his status as legal phantom and as a not entirely willing ghostwriter of the globalizing economy.

Bernardo’s “immortality” through the commodification of one’s affective products also suggests the sort of “living on” that the writer might imagine for herself through her published work, but it also comes to suggest the eternal existence of the anonymous, those who attain a strange immortality because they are not recognized by a proper name or a defining term. The ship’s metal, and Bernardo’s tears, will be transformed beyond recognition: melted down to cleanse them of formal specificity, they become melded with other scrap, others’ tears, as part of a process that indefinitely recycles them as unending resources.

Bernardo is an exemplary figure of the work of waiting. As the “waiter,” he also persistently tries to make the other men aware that their ill-defined situation amounted to one in which the employer asks them to be “slaves,” to wait without any control over their time, status, mobility, or pay. Arguing that “it was work just being there,” Bernardo reclaims a measure of agency for the crew when he encourages crewmember Panzón to count each day as a full workday in his work log, regardless of what particular labor they do on any given day. The ship waiter also transforms the time of postponement into the time for performing the labor of maintenance gendered feminine: he serves the crew’s material and philosophical needs, attends to their well-being through cooking, laundering clothes, picking out rat feces from rancid rice, transforming a stray cat he wryly names Desastres into a source of entertainment and affection (though Desastres returns to haunt him). In a parental attitude toward the younger crewmembers, he advises Esteban to escape the ship and pleads with the men who took to paint solvent sniffing over the course of their abandonment.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Bernardo’s speculative ending contrasts with forms his labor take while working on the ship: like ordinary sailors on oceanic vessels, especially on flags of convenience vessels, their labor extends into conditions of statelessness. The crew on board the *Urus*, apparently exceptional, represents the

The narrator of “Benito Cereno” describes the slave ship as an enchanted place able to “hoard from view [its] interiors till the last moment.”<sup>134</sup> Such hiding depends, of course, on whether the viewer is on board the ship or outside it, but it also depends upon whether the viewer is initiated within the ship’s secret or excluded from it, aware only of its mysteriousness. The *Urus* is kept off-stage, an obscene yet legal economic venture that depends upon the inextricability of formal and informal dimensions of the global economy, and thus, upon the doubletalk involved in naming and not-naming those dimensions in order to hide and expose to best advantage. Furthermore, the economic structuring of the *Urus* scheme also works to produce an affective level hidden from full understanding even by the men onboard, whose view of the ship is unavoidable, because the ship “hoards,” or secretly stores away for some unknown future use, the crewmembers’ “interior landscapes” of the self, each haunted by recurring desires, fantasies, and histories. Meanings accumulate over the course of the narration, but they lack legible names, helping instead to figure the ship as ghostly.

Much later, the narrative reveals the prehistory of the *Urus*, whose previous name was the “Seal Queen, port of registry Monrovia” (275). In a narration that chiasmatically echoes the plight of the *Urus* for the reader as if, in the future perfect tense employed at key moments by the narration, it “will have been” a foreshadowing of the ship’s fate, the Seal Queen, “dark and without power,” had been “stranded” outside St. John Harbor, New Brunswick, with its crew still onboard.<sup>135</sup> Belatedly foreshadowing

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historically exceptional position of seafarers with respect to other laborers. Predominantly male laborers, they resemble the service industry more than the manufacturing industry. As Walter Cohen asked me in a 2006 conversation, “Can they be laborers if they don’t produce any commodities?” The job of sailors involves traversing distances between regional market ports to give the impression that those distances were simply “collapsed.” Seafaring labor is largely the labor of maintenance and conveyance, and like other service work historically recognized as “women’s work,” it does not seem to be include in a strict Marxist definition of work.

<sup>134</sup> Melville, 166.

<sup>135</sup> See Gruesz on the future and present progressive tenses in the context of a philosophy of history, in relation not only to *The Ordinary Seaman* but also to U.S. Latino Studies.

Bernardo's disappearance and the men's abandonment and injury on board the *Urus*, two seamen on the Seal Queen had been badly burned by an engine plant fire that broke out during a storm; with one dead engineer, the crew had to wait for the blizzard to calm before rescue helicopters could evacuate them (275). When Elias tracks down the ship's operator and arrives at the St. John shipyard, he sees that shipyard workers "had already begun removing everything of salable value from the ship," which was not even worth demolishing for scrap. The story of the *Urus*, in this sense, had happened before it began: the ship, in its naming and renaming, become newly christened by the entrepreneurial spirit while being haunted by the trace of its old names. It is given the makeover of a name even as its dismemberment had already begun. Here as elsewhere, the impetus of global capital is to participate in the proliferation of profitable networks, in increasingly new configurations: once the old names of previous ventures lose their economic value, they are unceremoniously buried at the sea of world markets.

The *Urus* and its story also might come to happen again, even after the crew's deliberate grounding and final abandonment of the ship. In Goldman's "Acknowledgments," written as a narrative account of how he came to write the novel, Goldman relates his initial discovery of the November 1982 *New York Daily News* story on abandoned sailors that he claims first inspired him to pursue this story as a project.<sup>136</sup> Living in New York City, he immediately drove to the harbor to find the

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<sup>136</sup> In a significant move to both gesture beyond and to control the boundaries of the narrative world he has created, Goldman refers to extratextual sources but does not include them, such as the *Daily News* article, the real-life Bernardo's twelve-page account of the crew's trials, whose title translates to "The Last Days of an old Sea Wolf" ("Los ultimos dias de un viejo lobo de mar"), and some of the differences between historical accounts and his fictional narrative. Also referenced is Paul Chapman's informative and sensitive book-length study, *Trouble on Board: The Plight of International Seafarers* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1992); a detailed account of the case of abandoned sailors reported by the *Daily News*; and many others Chapman witnessed and on which he worked. Goldman acknowledges Chapman, who works at the Seafarers' Institute, as a model on which he based John, the Ship Visitor.

ship evacuated but for one man who claimed to be a crewman but who offered to sell the ship to Goldman and a friend, who posed as interested buyers. Goldman believes he had met the owner, who promptly disappeared.

The “phantom owners” of that ship escaped legal prosecution, but they were banned by the Liberian Registry from ever again registering under that flag of convenience. Amazingly, the ship, once seized and auctioned off as scrap to a machinery company in Brooklyn, was repurchased by those hapless owners; sometime later they were caught trying to work the same scam, with the same ship, in Staten Island; and then again in the Caribbean. (Perhaps the *Urus* is on her way to a similar destiny.) 385

In the naming compulsion that drives such repetition, capitalism operates on the belief—reaffirmed by legal channels—that naming makes anything new and that histories thus are to be erased through language rather than perpetuated as haunting linguistic traces.<sup>137</sup> To “make it happen,” as the entrepreneurial phrase goes, you also have to start as if you had a “clean slate,” as Toni Morrison has described the white American imagination.

The novel’s description of the unseaworthy ship’s towing from New Brunswick to New York captures the perversity of forming new ventures from the funeral of previous ones: suggesting a marriage with a corpse, “the tug’s wake

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<sup>137</sup> Such operations are most evident in the foundational history of private property in the United States, in which settlers conquered space and then drew up deeds and land titles where there were none before, and thereby became legal owners of property (the law itself drawn up to legitimate theft and act as a partner to violence). Historian Francis Jennings writes fittingly, “The American land was more like a widow than a virgin. Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather, however involuntarily, they made one.” Cited in Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 10. Common contemporary examples of the use of documentation to erase the histories of property and capital include washing out the title registration for flooded or stolen automobiles and money laundering.

foaming back toward the ship like a luminous, lacy bridal train trailed all the way from New York” (298), as Elias presides over the union with tales of profitable shipping fraud for his friends. Treating the ship as a palimpsest throughout the novel helps highlight the ways in which the novel suggests the ship’s various namings as moments in a historical record composed of a repeating series of new venture, failed venture, exploitation, naming, and new venture. Even as the heights of colonial and industrial international commerce are revealed by dilapidated signs written over Brooklyn Harbor and its empty warehouses (most literally by the “Wienstock Spice Company” in faded Arabic, English, and French letters), the harbor provides the space within which the ship, long after it appears to be wrecked, continues to embody yet another promising venture under another name.

Of the multi-faceted scam that is the *Urus* venture, it turns out that Elias and Mark only commit one crime—they fail to treat Bernardo’s injury, a requirement of the Jones Act that applies to any worker regardless of status. This failure leads Mark to hide out in Cancún and leaves Elias haunted by the thought that Bernardo may be injured but alive somewhere and able to identify him. Elias does not know where Mark took Bernardo; he does not know whether Bernardo lives to tell his tale or whether he was even properly registered in any hospital.

He made sure that the ‘Oath of Officer or Agent of an Incorporated Company’ was signed on behalf of Achuar Corp. of *Panama City* by Mr. Mark Baker. And Mr. Mark Baker has apparently vanished off the face of the earth. And who’s going to force the Panamanian Registry to turn over even that piece of paper?

“It’s easy to hide. Ayahuasca can make you feel invisible. In the rain forest people saw ghosts, the spirits of the ancestors, tunshi

they called them: elongated shapes of pale mist floating out of the jungle at night. And if you see one, it can give you a case of manchari—fright. Longlasting fright, inside you like a wasting disease...I keep waiting to see his [Bernardo's] tunshi. I'm wasting away with fright." (371).

The *Urus* venture effects several disappearances—not only Mark's magic vanishing act but also the "two parallel disappearances" of Bernardo and Esteban (and the cat Desastres) (237). As I described above, the Panamanian registry effectively secures these disappearances not only through documentation but through the sovereign right to ignore that documentation. Elias finds it easy "to hide," as Reverend Roundtree also asserts, from the law, creditors, and the state (which doesn't seek), but his invisibility becomes less certain when he moves from the document to the rain forest. Elias elevates his initial worries—"where'd the old waiter go? Bernardo...He's been waiting for six weeks now...feeling sick with fright" (371)—by casting them as spiritual.

Elias' statement may be taken as part of Elias' deluded identifications with the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon, but I find it more interesting to take his easy appropriation of the tunshi story seriously. To suggest that Bernardo is a tunshi is to make him an ancestor. Elias figures Bernardo as an ancestor, a familial predecessor in a way that implies a hemispheric and transhistorical family with which Elias must reckon. "Ancestor" also refers to someone from whom one receives an inheritance. I suggest that Goldman figures Elias as haunted by his *Urus* venture in such a way that disrupts the rhetoric of entrepreneurial spirit, multinational capital ventures, and proactive cleaning of slates. Inheritance is a "coming into, or taking, possession of something," and in this sense, Elias imagines Bernardo as forever witnessing his ownership of the *Urus* (OED). To imagine Bernardo as a tunshi is to grant him a

different sort of the “perfect immortality” he had envisioned in terms of his tears, bile, and hatred. Elias becomes subjected to the perspective of the *Urus* as an enduring textual venture that continues to gather meanings and to haunt him because the only thing he is reduced to doing is “waiting” and “wasting away.” By Elias’ final appearance in the novel, he comes to view the *Urus* as a palimpsest whose layered meanings come to haunt him: he realizes that the story of the *Urus* is not yet finished, that the ship is a text that may well be written over and read beyond Elias’ control. Elias figures this as an unfinished, dreaded inheritance. In that sense, he does not need to see Bernardo’s tunshi to be consumed by a paralyzing, consuming fear: just “waiting” is enough.

What we find onboard are fifteen men whose inner lives surface as self-narration. The crewmen recursively explore their psychic geographies, attempting to provoke sexual desire, fear, anxiety, and hope, as antidotes to the numbing entrapment they face daily. In one passage of the novel, the narration shifts between the consciousness of several crew members (either through a shift to first person or by focalizing the narrative through the character) as they resurrect the ghosts that haunt them, or as those ghosts interrupt their conscious fantasy-building—for the characters in the passage, the ghost is a sexual lover somehow lost.

Elsewhere onboard that night as every night, in every dark and silent cabin, desire rummages obsessively through the same old trunk, digs at memory with a dog’s frantic claws...until all that’s left is the empty bottom of this trunk where you get to see yourself coming home after your glorious time at sea, penniless, still in debt, and will she still be waiting and what will she think of me then? (160)

Insomnia is experienced by the men in solitude but rendered collectively for the reader through shifts in narration between each character’s consciousness. The

crew's nights of insomnia become the time of waiting alone, during which they stage cinematic porn fantasies that quickly fade into more melancholy and intimate narratives, like letters penned in invisible ink, addressed to an absent lover. As they recount the memories that motivated them to desire refuge through work at sea, stories of war, dead lovers, and debt surface and wait, each night, for the promise whose fulfillment would satisfy their desire. During these nights of insomnia, the process of making and recounting stories becomes a defining experience for the confined crewmen.

Insomnia, as a form of waiting, exposes the failure of the men's intended use of the refuge of sleep: whereas physical exhaustion through labor tends to ensure the body sleeps and the mind temporarily forgets, insomnia is a symptom of the fatigued mind that in its exhaustion cannot shut itself down. The insomnia passage restages the desires, memories, traumas, and anxieties that keep the men awake all night; and in this way, insomnia allows the men to privately stage and restage those narratives that will keep them waiting for the promise. Each of their continual nightly stagings rehearse those moments that compelled them to take the job aboard the *Urus*. The condition of waiting, and of their family and friends awaiting their return as economic success stories, reinforces the men's stakes in waiting for the Captain's promise to materialize: except for Bernardo and Esteban, the nightly private ritual of insomnia for each of the men underscores the humiliation and poverty that giving up on the Captain's promise would seem to ensure. It is the day that leaves its traces upon the men's nights: haunted by both the day's stagnation and the haunting trace that keeps them dreaming while awake all night and "hungry daydreamers" come sunrise, the men stay on board the ship for months in which even the day/night dichotomy blurs and becomes indistinguishable. The crew's perpetual spectral dreaming, confined to a



no-place place and an indistinct temporality, becomes a figural account of statelessness.

This figured imagination of statelessness and confinement finds its complement in the visual textual marking on the flesh: during El Tinieblas's time in a literal prison, "tattooing was against the prison rules, but every day prisoners had new tattoos as if images from their dreams at night revealed themselves on their skin by day" (178). Insomnia becomes the time to narrate desires and personal histories while waiting in the figurative prison of the *Urus*; but, instead of inking flesh, insomnia comes to write on their bodies in the language of exhaustion. The ship as palimpsest to capitalism becomes a counterpoint to the men's bodies as palimpsests formed in the language of endurance and the marks of experience, of their time on the *Urus* as a convergence of incarceration and sailing. To the experience on board the *Urus*, which defies even the symbolic articulation of a tattoo, the men struggle to identify themselves and their condition. Wondering what tattoo they would get drawn on their bodies to symbolize the story of their time on the ship, the men argue whether or not el Tinieblas could get a tattoo of a ship, whether or not it was true or not that they qualified as mariners if they didn't go anywhere in the ship. El Barbie recommends not to tattoo anything—to "sink the fucking ship....Don't tattoo anything, and then you can say, Ve? Underneath here?"—and he tapped his own chest—"there's a sunken ship" (179). Whether "tattooed on your heart" or "up [your] culo," the legibility of the tattoo fails to articulate their experience symbolically—instead, the articulation is rendered affectively, hidden in the interior. El Barbie and el Tinieblas discuss a form of sign making that contrasts with the imperious sign making of Elias and Mark: their speculation about how to signify their experience on board the *Urus* acknowledges that any effort to literally delineate the ship through a tattoo would fail. The image of a "sunken ship" figured within the body suggests that the men do not participate in an

economy of naming: the ship sinks, and there it stays weighed down by the men's desires for the future, tied up as they are in the sinking investment of the *Urus*. As with Bernardo's speculation on his "perfect immortality," the tattoo discussion brings together the ship and the laborers' desires, figured metonymically through the body. Whereas the owners hide the ship through paperwork, names, and abandoned sites, the laborers hide the ship through a figural narration of their affective states: el Tinieblas and el Barbie bury the ship, and Bernardo's thoughts dissolve it and recycle it back into the formal market.

### ***Refugees from a Ship***

The men's emotional ordeal, caused only in part by their uncertain status, is depicted in the narrative; however, it is not recognized by either the Ship Visitor or the lawyer he visits with some of the crewmen in order to determine whether legal action against the owners was possible (it wasn't, the owners remained unnamed). The legal channels that helped to produce the men's ordeal on the *Urus* is useless to help them, as is redress through an appeal to the protections of the governments that helped to create the conditions that led the men to the ordeal in the first place.

The narrative portrays such appeals for formal recognition as useless, and their uselessness implicitly gives rise to the men's anxieties about their legal and financial status, and their memories of disaffection from the category of the nation and its official narratives, whether it be Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Honduran, or U.S. American. Such disaffection finds its counterpoint in the affective ties that Esteban establishes with Joaquina and the other Latina/o residents in Brooklyn. Together, they participate in informal storytelling and listening as a mode of inclusion within what Goldman portrays as a community formed by the members' desires to escape formal

governmental, nationalist, and national revolutionary narratives and events from Cuba to Mexico to Nicaragua to the United States and so on. Esteban's storytelling, listening, and sharing, succeed in establishing an informal status as someone in need of refuge. "Many people, there in the restaurant on Friday nights, and elsewhere in Brooklyn, when they learn of Esteban's ambiguous refugee status from a phantom ship on the Brooklyn waterfront, offer him a temporary place to stay" (362-3). In Goldman's novel, informal hospitality is not a permanent but a temporary refuge, one that many people personally create for Esteban. Ambiguity—in refugee status or in the objective condition of the ship—is also an aspect of Esteban's story that residents accept and to which they respond.

The narrative ambiguity and affective attachment that characterize Esteban's storytelling in Brooklyn reverses the official narrative conventions for (unambiguous) refugee status. Judy London, public interest lawyer and Los Angeles Director of Public Counsel (which provides pro bono legal services to Los Angeles County, site of the largest concentration of Central American immigrants in the U.S.), recounts the narrative demands made on those seeking asylum and refugee status in the U.S.: "In the real world things don't work out neatly. The B.C.I.S. [Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services] wants it neat—one day you get a death threat, the next they come to your house . . . it doesn't work like that...All sorts of bizarre things happen."<sup>138</sup> How do we interrogate the desire of the B.C.I.S. for narrative order—wanting it “neat”—as a basis for conferring status, including the legal status that classifies someone as deserving of refuge, asylum, detention, or deportation? When it

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<sup>138</sup> Cited and quoted at length in Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer, "Representing Trauma: Political Asylum Narrative," *Journal of American Folklore* 117.466 (2004): 405-406. An organization called Public Counsel, provides free legal counseling and representation to "indigent and underrepresented children and adults throughout Los Angeles County," is an affiliate of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. Public Council <<http://www.publiccounsel.org/>>.

comes to establishing the status of the storyteller based on the narrative s/he constructs, how do material consequences depend upon the audience's (in this case, politicized) expectations and assumptions of how narrative works? In the real world and the imagined one, what are the uses of stories marked by disorder and negotiated as the intersection of national narratives, public policy narratives, and personal narratives of displacement? I suggest that these questions haunt the frames of *The Ordinary Seaman*, a novel so centrally concerned with statelessness, the politics of recognition, the intersection of personal and public (legal, national) narratives, and the process of constructing, telling, and responding to stories.

The messiness of narrative—its formal and affective entanglements in both “the real world” and the fictional one—complicates narrative as a status-making venture. As London suggests, the asylum application process compels the asylee's “real world” history to obey the demands charge of linear narrative, one that details an easily identifiable sequence of events, politically legible characters (clearly drawn up in the color of persecutor, hero, or victim), the appropriate narrative climax and timely affective cues, cultural values legible to the Anglo-American legal system, and just enough believable detail to give this narrow formula the smack of authenticity and individual—even singular—truth needed to make a convincing claim.<sup>139</sup> One study of the asylum application process focuses on the “competition for what an asylum narrative ought to look like,” and describes “the application process itself as a cultural performance in which applicants, B.C.I.S. officials, lawyers, and others who assist in

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<sup>139</sup> The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State during the 1980s wrote in an editorial, “It is not enough for the applicant to state that he faces the same conditions that every other citizen faces. [Under the terms of the 1980 Refugee Act we ask,] Why are you different from everyone else in your country? How have you been singled out, threatened, imprisoned, tortured, harassed?” Laura J. Dietrich, “Political Asylum: Who Is Eligible and Who Is Not,” Editorial, *The New York Times* 2 Oct 1985, Late City Final Edition.

the process (such as ourselves) renegotiate identities and reconfigure differing conceptions of trauma, of suffering, and, especially, of what asylum means (396, 410).

By framing the application process in Western, legal terms, the policies of the B.C.I.S. often eliminate or ignore the very complexities that structure the experiences for the applicants. Inconsistencies in applicants' narratives are best explained by attention to issues of memory and dimensions of narrative representation, rather than fact and linear narrative progression. A world torn by persecution cannot easily be represented coherently... Instead, as we saw in several interviews with applicants, individuals portrayed themselves as victims as well as heroes and as people living ordinary lives that turned unimaginable. The narratives are necessarily dialogic, with multiple, sometimes conflicting voices.<sup>140</sup>

Imaginatively and self-reflexively gesturing toward such “real world” narrative disorder, the fictive world of *The Ordinary Seaman* is constructed out of characters who are, like their narratives, contradictory, complicated, and out of place—outside stable national identities, national narratives, or the legal status promising to reward good citizens with the good life. These characters’ stories flout the narrative order and the value system of the well-constructed refugee claim while complicating national and international narratives of the Americas. *The Ordinary Seaman* continually performs the proliferation of stories—not simply the main narrative but the dense texture of stories remembered, shared, invented, dreamt, and in some way conveyed

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<sup>140</sup> Shuman and Bohmer, 410.

by most of the characters or the narrative voice that stays close to one of them at a time.

*The Ordinary Seaman* investigates the problematic of storytelling as a status-making venture—the ways in which status gets established for both narrator and listener, and the uses to which storytelling gets put by the novel’s characters. The novel performs an obsessive inquiry into the various conditions for storytelling and the attendant ethics of responding: the narrative is thick with description and with partial stories mostly hidden or barely glimpsed. Nearly every page of the novel includes some event or everyday object that triggers a memory, a joke, a forgotten story that is then recounted, privately or to the other characters. The narration repeatedly claims this superabundance of stories with meta-commentaries on storytelling, often signaling the desires attached to certain narrative genres: at the barbecue, for example, Bernardo comments on the party as a performance of sailors’ stories, “stories like cooped up, alcohol-lathered bulls breaking through midvoyage monotony and nostalgia. Brothels and whores, brawls, clever escapades with contraband, screwy capitanes—does anything else of interest ever happen to real seamen?” (74). When Elias tells the story of his brief affair with an alluring Japanese harbor pilot, his story and the desire to script an exotic film help sustain a multiplicity of sexual fantasies during the nights of insomnia: “for a while, after Capitán Elias told his story...on any given night as many as a dozen drop ladders lowered from the edge of sleep so that the provocative harbor pilot could climb up into a dozen separate insomnias and wriggle out of her jeans. It was el Capitán’s mention of holing up with her and Japanese porno that had really done it, incited this florescence of Yorikos. Japanese porno, what’s that like? And so they imagined...as much as they could” (159). And when the Ship Visitor’s encounters with international seafarers fail to captivate the mildly bored audience of his girlfriend’s elite cosmopolitan graduate student friends, he’ll “feel, God, frustrated.

How can he make them see? A thousand stories and images moiling inside him,” and proceeds to recount one of those stories and its attendant images (152). In these and other examples, the desire for storytelling is as strong as the desire to achieve status (related to masculinity and class) from others through such storytelling.

I have considered the importance of legal status for the novel, and the characters’ various storytelling modes that establish, confer, or in various ways imagine their good standing (for example, consider that Elias constructs his status in all aspects of his life by rehearsing fictional narratives for his wife, his financial partner, his workers, his lovers). Multiple meanings of status are relevant here, including someone’s relative position or standing in a group or society, a high rank or standing, and a condition or state that is subject to change. Under the law, status operates as a core classification of the human being in relation to the state: it refers to “the legal standing or position of a person as determined by his membership of some class of persons legally enjoying certain rights or subject to certain limitations” (*OED*). The fifteen men that make up the *Urus* crew, and John the Ship Visitor, the international seafarers’ advocate, present pointedly untidy, entangled life narratives that formally (as well as politically) confound the proper narrative appeal for the legal recognition of people “without (the proper) papers,” *sin papeles*.

Filled with proliferating narratives told by and about its many characters, *The Ordinary Seaman* explores the relation between storytelling and the status it attempts to make for the storyteller. A Salvadoran restaurant that “draws Centraoamericanos from all over New York” becomes a key public place for Esteban--as Joaquina’s intended antidote to Esteban’s “faraway,” silent depressive moods and as the site for his new alliances and connections with other “nicas” (361). In these encounters, Esteban’s story intersects with the messy familial, political, and affective networks that form endless configurations of each immigrant’s narrative. There, three

generations of Nicaraguans argue politics “with the same ardent vehemence they might have skewered each other with at home if they were all one family,” and “One of the cooks in back, slapping out a perpetual train of pupusas, was from Nicaragua too: she had a son who’d died fighting in a BLI, another still living in the contra camps, and two more children with her in Brooklyn, and she’d wept and embraced Esteban when he was taken back into the kitchen to meet her, introduced as a survivor of the war, a former soldier in a BLI” ...the restaurant becomes the site of engagement through the hospitality of storytelling, food, music, and dance, but one that functions as a perpetual site for narrating and remembering the wars and those compelled or inspired to participate in them (the owner herself was a “barracks chef in Salvador” before starting a restaurant in New York) (362). These stories differ strikingly from the sensational and yet highly conventional stories told by the crew, the owners, or the Ship Visitor on the *Urus*.

Esteban is variously introduced as a survivor, a veteran, a mariner, and a refugee of “ambiguous” status, and the ambiguity suggests uncertainty in the face of multiple potential meanings, a “charge of multiple implications.” The cook’s position as a Nicaraguan mother in exile, her children scattered between Sandinista, Contra, and immigrant U.S. conditions, operates in a semi-allegorical way (as do many of these transitory, fleeting stories that bubble up in the narrative), evoking the national, nurturing mother crying endlessly for her children, who are dead, warring, or exiled. She embraces Esteban according to his status as a survivor and a former Sandinista fighting in a BLI (special brigade) unit. His presence calls up her children as narrative counterparts to his own story: one killed by fighting in a BLI unit, another captured presumably by Contras, and two who escaped to Brooklyn.

In this fictional neighborhood, refugee status is informally recognized through the act of telling and listening to each other’s personal narratives; refuge comes in the



form of hospitality to the stranger who—importantly—is made familiar through his own messy story, that narrative marked by disorder rather than constrained by documentation. His exceptional refugee narrative is highlighted by his flight from a “phantom ship on the Brooklyn waterfront,” relocating the moment of becoming legally stateless to a U.S. waterfront rather than Nicaragua, where he left with proper papers in hand. Imagining Esteban as a candidate for legal asylum easily points up its impossibility: he would be not only on the wrong side of the war as a Sandinista “communist,” but he would be classified as an “illegal alien,” present at the U.S. waterfront as an “economically driven migrant.”

The narrative arc of *The Ordinary Seaman* suggests that Esteban’s experience in Brooklyn, dependent on the hospitality networks of people without papers, counters the official system of granting legal status to those who most effectively constrain their narratives according to the expectations of the state (a system in which the legal identity of refugee or legitimate seeker of asylum is made by the state’s conditional approval of the applicant’s narrative. Gonzalo, a Cuban refugee from the Mariel boatlift whose identity as a homosexual and dancer led him to flee Cuba, is the second Latino Esteban encounters after Joaquina. Gonzalo owns the beauty salon where Joaquina works as a manicurist; he agrees to give Esteban the haircut he so badly wanted (and was raising money to buy) as a gift to a fellow refugee of “the communist countries.” When Esteban insists upon distinguishing his exceptional position as “a refugee from a ship” and not from communism, Gonzalo advises him to revise his narrative to fit the desires of the state: “It will be much easier for you to get legal status here when you tell them you’re fleeing those maldito Sandinistas. If you say the opposite, chico, you won’t stand a chance” (266-67). Gonzalo and the other Latino characters pointedly flaunt socio-political distinctions when it comes to defining an

individual as a “deserving alien.”<sup>141</sup> Gonzalo also jokingly puns on Esteban’s insistence that he seeks refuge from a ship: “But you’re from Nicaragua and I’m from Cuba. Same boat, as they say here, no?” to which he adds, “the same rapidly sinking boat, I hope” (266). The novel’s immigrant characters form informal refugee and hospitality networks—outside legal regulation and the bureaucratic codes for assessing alien rights--thereby enacting a politics of recognition that rejects the state’s coded evaluations of a migrant’s status. Such networks affirm the broadest definitions of what makes someone a “refugee,” accepting each person’s narrative as participating in the unofficial national and transnational narratives of turmoil and devastation.<sup>142</sup> These characters implicitly critique the very system of definition, and the murkiness surrounding each attempt at establishing the sense of a term, the identity of an individual.

Esteban’s “ambiguous refugee status” is literally not so ambiguous; as simply a seeker of refuge, Esteban comes to find a space structured by Joaquina’s love and, collaterally, his emotional affinity within this migrant, non-national space that exists within the U.S. There, refuge comes through a sociality that forms meanings through an unconstrained use of realist, confessional testimonio forms of narration. In the real world that Goldman models in his novel, public refugee and asylum discourse makes the odd demand that “reality” be represented through non-realist narrative conventions, which must then be adopted as templates to recount the “true story” that would prove the storyteller as deserving of refugee or asylum status.

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<sup>141</sup> García, 88.

<sup>142</sup> Likewise, non-governmental organizations ranging from churches and human rights groups to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) also adopted increasingly broader definitions of what constitutes a refugee. Clashing with the Reagan and Bush Administrations, the UNHCR “generally favored a more lenient response to the so-called nonconvention refugees: those who did not meet the strict definition of the term but who had fled their homes, crossed an international border, and were living in refugee-like conditions,” (García, 88).

Goldman presents his challenge to refugee discourse, with its narrative demands and the exclusive right of a state to determine whether or not one is a (deserving) seeker of refuge, in part through an unlikely quirk of Esteban's lover. Joaquina is a lover of leaky vessels. Esteban is one; in their lovemaking, she delights in her "Esteban the Swamp Monster" (358), and in their time together, she obsessively collects kitchen utensils with holes in them—colanders, slotted spoons, tea balls, anything, especially metallic and with holes. Joaquina provides a commentary on the pleasure of messiness, of the story that is a leaky container dotted with holes, or, to invert the metaphor, on a story that escapes the effort to contain it.

### ***Refugee Stories, Narrative Desires***

I'd like to turn from the crew's interested narratives to that of John, the Ship Visitor. The narrative venture is the Ship Visitor's life work and a meta-commentary on the status of the relationship between fictional narrative, labor, and love. The novel ends with the Ship Visitor once again addressing his lover when she (the muse) is not there to hear his musings:

Think of a pier, Ariadne, any old pier, maybe one as old as the century...all the ships that have ever berthed there and all the ships that ever will, and all the faraway ports those ships have come from and are headed to, and all the hidden lives on those ships. And then think of that pier again when it's empty...Kind of like love without lovers. Because in a way that's what love's like, Ariadne, like that pier, and you and I, our love, our love is just one of the ships that have called there. ...A ship visitor's gotta find his poetry where he can get it, right?  
(381)

Ariadne is the name of the Ship Visitor's lover; it is also the name of Theseus's lover in Greek mythologies, who helps him escape King Minos's labyrinth with the help of a thread to trace his way back after slaying the Minotaur. She dies many different deaths and suffers different fates according to the multiple mythic versions of her life; but in this, too, she is close to Aphrodite, entwined with the spider-weaving Arachne, the betraying princess and the jilted lover, and is entered into the labyrinthine economies of love and capital in *The Ordinary Seaman* as the voracious, cosmopolitan consumer, daughter of a venture capitalist, and lover of the Ship Visitor and his labor stories.<sup>143</sup> "Somehow, his job as a ship visitor will have become integral to the organized chemistry of their small, dual world—her way of conceiving of it as a strangely fantastical yet heroic occupation, which he can share only with her" (147). Interestingly, the Ship Visitor draws upon the masculine aura of the generations of dock workers in his family without acknowledging the irony of his own position as shaped by the decline in manufacturing and shipping jobs at New York port and his resulting position of assisting international seafarers, of narrating their stories as material for his romantic relationship with Ariadne.

It is her very distance from the lives of those laborers the Ship Visitor tries to protect that makes his stories desirable and consumable: without the middle man, the mediating storyteller, Ariadne would not have a narrative product to consume. Her distance from the laborers at sea (on cruise ships, smuggled in shipping containers, and so on), then, is not really made more proximate by her relationship to the Ship Visitor so much as it guarantees an illusion of proximity and intimacy with the Ship Visitor via the narratives he tells her, narratives that function like intimate lovers'

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<sup>143</sup> See J. Hillis Miller's essay, "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line," *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 (Autumn, 1976): 57-77.

secrets between them: it is her exclusive consumption of these narratives, recounted only for her, that help to make these narratives a promising venture for the Ship Visitor. To this end, he himself is a “venture” upon which she can speculate and assume ownership: the daughter of a venture capitalist, she speculates on the “impossible future” of their love (154).

John, the Ship Visitor, consistently styles himself as a hard-boiled detective and a poet; as a laborer-storyteller, he gestures at the position of Goldman himself. But he also points toward Bernardo, too, whose “stories like cooped up, alcohol-lathered bulls breaking through midvoyage monotony and nostalgia” (74); and Esteban, who is “full of nothing but stories, no?” (365), among others. Ariadne becomes one figure for the audience in this romance between storyteller-laborer and listener-consumer, but she is only one in a veritable sea of storytelling and story-taking.

Yet with all her obvious trappings of elite cosmopolitanism, multinational family and fortune, and exotic worldliness, Ariadne is less the desiring consumer than a foil for John, the Ship Visitor who desires the audience that would position him as a worker-poet, as a storyteller. The convergence of narration and labor in the job of an international seafarers’ advocate produces an altered version of the legal asylum application process. She herself is rarely present in the narrative scene. Her presence most often takes the form of addressee to the Ship Visitor’s musings—her presence in the narrative depends upon her absence from the Ship Visitor, on the exclusive purchase his stories will have because she is absent and yet present as a desired object.

In one of the few uncanny coincidences of the narrative, the Ship Visitor discovers that he and Ariadne first met during the same week that the fifteen men arrived to board the *Urus*. Throughout the chapters focalized through the Ship Visitor, he anticipates that the story of the *Urus*—the story he has kept as a secret to share just

between Ariadne and himself-- will feed their vampiric relationship (so needy it is of narrative as its lifeblood) and keep it going for a while longer. It is when the Ship Visitor sees the empty pier and eventually realizes that the men ran the ship aground that the narration shifts from his thoughts to Ariadne's: "They can say good-bye to their pay. Losers, a completely mediocre situation, I just don't see how, Johnny, you can spend your life around people like that, complete dupes, people so incapable of helping themselves—that's what Ariadne said the other night, when he was telling her the story of the *Urus* and her abandoned crew and the kid who'd found a novia" (379). The entire narrative becomes empty, small, pathetic, Ariadne's response echoing in the Ship Visitor's mind in a way that suggests he, too, sees how pathetic the story really seems.

The Ship Visitor's ostensible narrative desire all along has been to give Ariadne a narrative that fuels their romance, and he makes much of the fact that the crew boarded the *Urus* during the same week that Ariadne and he met. From the first moment he sees the ship, a flattened leaf in a frozen puddle leads him to fantasize "hold[ing] it out to her in a globed hand like some rare jewel, let her lick it, lay it on her brightly bare, arched belly and watch it melt" (129); when he drives away from the pier for the last time, he offers a meditation on love, poetry, and labor, in the mode of a lover's address: "that's what love's like, Ariadne, like that [empty] pier" (381). The Ship Visitor metaphorically transforms the leaf, an element of the crew's distress, into a precious jewel; his hand, into the global; and Ariadne, into the sensual, sexual, feminine consumer within empire.

After the Ship Visitor takes a few of the men to the lawyer for a preliminary consultation, he carefully corrects for the lawyer's optimism regarding the case. The crew's response is then narrated from an ambiguous perspective that hovers between

the Ship Visitor's desired self-perception and the crew's ironized skepticism/desire to believe.

The Ship Visitor really is *muy Buena onda*,<sup>144</sup> and so is *la Reverenda*, and so all this more or less unfortunate news is not their fault... So who can doubt the Ship Visitor's integrity, after all he's already done? But when the Ship Visitor is leaving the ship, Pínpoyo, stumbling forward with his blanket still wrapped around him despite the new clothes, blocks his way in front of the gangway. He's raving about gringo hijos de puta stealing his pay and calling the Ship Visitor a liar and a bunch of other *babosadas*... the Ship Visitor looks around at the crew with a baffled expression, while Pínpoyo goes on raving. But then *El Barbie* steps forward and firmly pulls Pínpoyo out of the Ship Visitor's path and throws him down on the deck, and Pínpoyo lies there as if he's dead, though of course there's nothing the matter with him except for paint solvent fumes. The Ship Visitor, with an embarrassed smile.... stands there blushing, with an almost apologetic smile, until they're done [applauding him], and then he thanks them, waves good-bye, and goes down the ladder to his van. (350-351)

The narration portrays this moment with heavy irony, as Pínpoyo's deviation from the unspoken script interrupts the smooth back-and-forth gestures of appreciation and respect between Ship Visitor and crewmen, operating as Pínpoyo's revelation of a truth hidden or unacknowledged by the other characters. He becomes the "fool"

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<sup>144</sup> *Onda* literally means "wave," "fluctuation," "agitation." In this context, "Buena onda" is a positive reference to the Ship Visitor as a man of good character. Thanks to Ariana Vigil for this point.

character whose truth escapes clear articulation, much like the taunts of “los blacks” on the pier in the first few weeks of the crew’s arrival to Brooklyn harbor.

The main narrative represents the Ship Visitor as a hero, a performer (again, the men clap and cheer each time he ascends or descends the stage of the deck), a detective, and an impotent failure (he fails to recover the men’s wages or solve the *Urus* mystery, he is impotent in any legal capacity to help them). The Ship Visitor is also in love with the narrative thread itself, and it is a narrative “poetry” he is able to salvage and cultivate from the experiences of the men aboard the *Urus*. Poetry in *The Ordinary Seaman* has a suspect status when it is most explicitly invoked, as it is by the Ship Visitor as well as by the Sandinista military superiors Esteban recalls for all the talk of poetry in order to understand the revolution and its battles. Goldman complicates the status of narrative and of the poetic image of economy or of war as romance—the empty pier as love without lovers, or to the Sandinistas, revolution as the grand gestures of poetic love. Such poetry is cast as an aestheticization of brutality and systemic injustice that responds with bafflement, a “baffled expression,” when confronted with the truth. The Ship Visitor and Pínpoyo don’t speak the same language in more than one sense—in the sense that comes from seeing or from not seeing the coloniality of power at work on the *Urus*, from understanding or eliding international relations as they come to bear on the lives of men in this novel, specifically, and from encountering the profound frustration of being unable to put a name to a situation, to make sense of an event by naming it, from two distinct positions—that of Pínpoyo, whose excess of language that is unintelligible to the Ship Visitor, and that of the Visitor, whose legal understanding of the situation leaves him speechless.



## Chapter 3

### “Death-In-Life”:

#### The Stateless Zombi(e) and Messy Aesthetics of Kathy Acker

Claustrophobia's sister to my worst nightmare: lobotomy, the total loss of perceptual power, of seeing new. If [I] had to force language to be uni-directional, I'd be helping my own prison to be constructed. There are enough prisons outside, outside language.

—Kathy Acker, “Dead Doll Humility”<sup>1</sup>

In *Empire of the Senseless*, two partners begin a series of unfinished quests through bleak worlds of “disgust,” otherwise known as the 1980s, in the effort to find a society “which was beautiful.”<sup>145</sup> Acker translates this yearning elsewhere as “the beginning of a movement from no to yes, from nihilism to myth,” a movement signaling Acker’s move from destructive and deconstructive writing to a more hopeful attention to writing as a constructive act that can help make fresh meanings out of unreasonable modes of storytelling.<sup>146</sup>

In a period of neoliberal economic restructuring and drastically revised meanings of citizenship encouraged by several proclaimed “revolutions” of the right—

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<sup>145</sup> Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York: Grove, 1988), 227. Acker’s idea of a “beautiful” world draws from the language of utopia as a work of beauty, especially utopian communities imagined and even built to produce a harmonious whole. Acker also echoes Merle Woo, who describes U.S. third world feminism as a “human and beautiful framework,” “created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.” Woo, “Letter to Ma,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981), 147.

<sup>146</sup> Acker, “A Few Notes on Two of My Books” in *Bodies of Work* (New York: Grove, 1997), 13. She refers to *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) and her Pushcart-Prize winning short story “New York City in 1979” (1980, 1981), reprinted in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991) and in *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker* (New York: Grove Press, 1981).

including those of Ronald Reagan in the U.S., Margaret Thatcher in the U.K., and François and Jean-Claude Duvalier in Haiti—Acker constructs a similarly ugly world through which the characters, the female biracial cyborg Abhor and the white male Thivai, encounter a version of urban misery and disenfranchisement that leads to an anti-colonial revolution in Paris. Critics frequently note this fictional revolution in the narrative but tend to ignore Acker’s extension and revision of anti-colonial and postcolonial narratives, and her use of such narratives to portray a fictional counterpart to conditions of disenfranchisement and statelessness within U.S. and Europe, as people become subjected to networks of multinational economic and governmental security systems. This chapter considers how Acker figures the moment between the colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal state in the effort to locate what Emma Pérez calls the “decolonial imaginary.” Whereas Pérez, relying on Homi K. Bhabha’s thinking on belatedness, locates a “time lag” between the colonial and the postcolonial as the interstices within which oppositional forms of imagining and narrating can occur for subaltern subjects, Acker imagines a conflation of temporalities as the interstitial, ever-liminal revolutionary moment.<sup>147</sup> How this revolutionary moment does and does not succeed at the narrative level is one of my concerns.

Partly as a response to what I see as a crucial but neglected dimension to Acker’s work, I show how the fictional scene of an Algerian revolution in Paris explores statelessness as a mode of non-being, and with multinational networks of governance, through a conflation of at least two important narratives of anti-colonial revolution, Gillo Pontecorvo’s stirring cinematic portrayal of *The Battle of Algiers* and

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<sup>147</sup> See Behdad (1994) for an engagement with Bhabha as part of Behdad’s thinking on postcolonial belatedness.

C.L.R. James' historical analysis of the Haitian Revolution for Independence, *The Black Jacobins*.<sup>148</sup>

Rather than simply read Acker's well-known positions against the state and other patriarchal structures of control as well as discipline, I consider how she tests the radical political and aesthetic potential of anti-colonial but masculinist revolutionary narratives of national liberation to envision a "society which was beautiful" but which, in Acker's narrative, only returns stateless figures to a society of "just disgust." Acker's vision in *Empire* is focused on the process of constructing narrative, anti-statist myths as a process that must be enacted, and when interrupted, reconfigured, in an indefinite process of making meaning against forms of governmentality that claim the power to identify, define, manage, and discipline social relations.

Acker's fictional Paris, as the site of colonial governance, a revolution, and its post-colonial effects, deliberately evokes urban crises of the 1970s and 80s and the effects of impoverishing and disenfranchising raced, gendered citizens subjected to security-based governance and economic restructuring.<sup>149</sup> In an essay, Acker explains her portrayal of an Algerian revolution in *Empire* not through her conflation and rewriting of James and Pontecorvo (among others) but rather through a stark

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<sup>148</sup> These narratives refer to the Haitian Revolution for Independence (1791-1804) and the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962). The account of the Haitian Revolution is primarily drawn from C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Vintage, 1989), originally published in 1938. The depiction of the Algerian Revolution partly is indebted to the film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, with Jean Martin, Yacef Saadi and Brahim Haggiag.

<sup>149</sup> Note that U.S. cities might be seen as undergoing racial and economic crises since the 1960s. Film reviews for the first theatrical screening of *Battle for Algiers* in the United States, for instance, tended to note, with great uneasiness, the analogy between the Algerians and the people of color, especially African-Americans in U.S. cities. First screened in the U.S. in late summer of 1967, just weeks after the series of urban riots that engulfed the summer of '67, one reporter noted that "Negro" boys in the audience would laugh when Frenchmen got killed; their identification with the Algerians led that commentator to fear for the future of his nation. The film was also reputed to be "required viewing" for Black Panther members. See Joan Mellen, *Filmguide to The Battle of Algiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) for a brief discussion of the film's immediate reception.

distinction between corporate-driven globalization and its resisters toward the end of the Cold War.

as the “Great Powers,” as they were formerly known, meet and meld economically, then culturally, as more and more of the known world goes Coca-Cola and McDonalds, only the Muslim world resists... I thought, for Westerners today, for us, the other is now Muslim. In my book, when the Algerians take over Paris, I have a society not defined by the oedipal taboo. (“Notes” 12)

Acker’s account of globalization already was beginning to fray by the late 1980s, as was the hope that a Muslim counterforce would effectively resist consumerism.<sup>150</sup> Acker oddly anticipates and inverts Samuel P. Huntington’s 1993 post-Cold War prediction that a “clash of civilizations” would fracture global politics along the cultural “faultlines” of East and West; the fictional revolution in *Empire* represents Acker’s effort to imagine what such a resistance might do, what it might effect once it gains power.<sup>151</sup> Despite its quasi-talismanic attributions to the non-West and a presumed opposition between the West and the Muslim rest, Acker’s commentary on the Western “Great Powers” aptly suggest that to meld or to conflate also means to restructure economic and cultural power. In *Empire*, Acker recasts this conflict and

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<sup>150</sup> A word on Acker’s discussion of the Muslim world, as it depends upon the sort of political conflation that Acker mimics as a partly parodic, partly counter-political force. Melanie McAlister notes that the cognitive mapping of the Middle East in U.S. public culture shifted with the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis, from understanding the region incorrectly as “the Arab world” to understanding it, again incorrectly, as “the Islamic world.” See also McAlister for a reading of Ronald Reagan’s presidential inaugural address in 1981 declaring that “terrorism” would replace “human rights” as the nation’s primary foreign policy concern. McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 200.

<sup>151</sup> For Samuel P. Huntington’s widely criticized but influential essay, see Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (Summer 1993). Huntington later expanded his thesis in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

extends her analysis of it by constructing an “other” force, one that depends upon and dismantles the West/non-West binary and interferes with the progress narrative of colonial to post-colonial independence, through Acker’s rhetorical method of conflation.

Acker’s partial and limited knowledge of international politics and race may be open to criticism, but her political understanding motivates her provocative and, I think, powerful textual effect of getting things “wrong” through conflation, which exposes the potentially pernicious effects of logical correspondence while it signals the potentially liberatory effects of unexpected fusions. This chapter shows how conflation, by which I mean a fusing together of concepts that erases the distinctions between them, serves in *Empire* as a principle of the textual and theoretical construction that is both anti-rational and a form of knowing and feeling through myth as an alternative to more conventional, analytical modes of theorization. It analyzes conflation as an important rhetorical method in *Empire*, a method that effectively parodies the confluences put in the service of governmental and economic orders. Conflation also advances affective and political meanings of statelessness in *Empire*, and Acker uses conflation to construct decolonial aesthetic practices out of multiple stories of decolonization and liberation. In reading conflation as a method that, in Acker’s work, is part of an effort to construct anti-colonial, textual, imaginative possibilities, I contend that Acker’s confluences should not be dismissed out of hand as sloppy or irresponsible postmodernist actions. Acker’s confluences do not simply produce a generalized ‘otherness;’ rather, they form textual networks and nodes of solidarity from multiple texts, geographies, and histories that make their claims to the global scale and decolonization.

I begin with a discussion of conflation as a rhetorical tactic within Acker’s counter-rational rhetorical strategy. My discussion considers Acker’s use of

conflation as part of a narrative strategy of making myth, a strategy that I suggest extends and amends Roland Barthes' semiotic project in his later work, *Empire of Signs* (*L'Empire des signes*, 1970). Section two consists of a textual and cultural reading of the fictional Algerian Revolution in Paris by way of Acker's tactics of conflation. I begin with Acker's depiction of 1980s Paris as a city governed by convergent colonial and anti-terrorist systems of control, systems that similarly result in stark urban divisions along racial and economic lines that Acker's conflations depict as continuously produced since before the eighteenth century. As a place signifying Western civilization and eloquence within imperial discourse, along with a history of French radicalism and racialized urban divisions, Paris in Acker's novel is claimed by the Algerians as a space of anti-colonialist representation, "as they imagine new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices" and then realize those possibilities, in a sense, by materially destroying the city.<sup>152</sup> The character Abhor narrates this scene of an Algerian takeover using the language of what Françoise Vergès calls the colonial family romance, underwritten as it is by systems of division (and coercion)<sup>153</sup>; in *Empire*, such systems inadvertently lead to the breakup of the colonial family by its figurative children, the raced figures of exclusion that revolt against the social order.

I then turn to the "revolting" characters (characters depicted as being in revolt and as objects of abhorrence to the white colonials), primarily referred to as "Algerians" in the narration, as figures that embody multiple conflations. Focusing on Acker's conflation of the Haitian *zombi* with the U.S. cinematic zombie figure, section

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<sup>152</sup> I quote Harvey in his summary of Henri Lefebvre's notion of spatial practice as having three interrelated dimensions—the experienced, the perceived, and the imagined, or "spaces of representation," 218-219. See also Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>153</sup> Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 5.

three of the chapter explores how the narrative engages with multiple concepts of statelessness through the zombie, which is a figure of social exclusion and economic instrumentality that runs counter to the sentimental ideology of liberal humanism, an ideology Lauren Berlant identifies in her critique of citizenship under Reaganism. Indeed, Acker's writing in *Empire* centers on postcolonial and decolonial tropes in part to frame a dystopic vision of the Reagan 1980s.<sup>154</sup> The zombies in Paris are revolting in that they both feel disgust (with their situation) and arouse that feeling in others (most pointedly, in the white Parisians): they effect a takeover of Paris through the interrelation of political revolution and affective revulsion.

In *Empire*, one leader turns the zombie revolt into a successful political revolution. Acker's portrayal of the revolutionary hero Mackandal forms the subject of section four in the chapter. Through a close reading of Acker's engagement with James in relation to the Mackandal figure, I show how Acker revises James' masculinist narrative of revolution in part by conflating colonial and postcolonial leaders and national narratives. Acker welds together the discursive power of narratives by Pontecorvo and James even as she deflates their masculinist, Marxist-historical prophetic modes. She thus directs us *away* from the narrative of a progressive unfolding of freedom in the world even as she directs us toward the desire for freedom, a desire guaranteed to last because impossible to satisfy. The conflation of such narratives, however, becomes a productive method and analytic for the disruption of nationalist, governmental, and capitalist public narratives as well as for

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<sup>154</sup> Acker defines this context in various ways, most clearly by invoking Reagan's name at several points (he is president of the U.S. in *Empire*) and by mentioning particular dates, as in the narration of the revolutionary leader Mackandal building his organization from 1981 to 1985 (75). This chapter does not focus on Reagan partly because Acker's explicit attacks on Reaganism have been clearly discussed by Nicola Pitchford, among others. I refer to Reagan occasionally, however, in order to show how Acker aligns anti-colonialism with anti-Reaganist ideologies. See Nicola Pitchford, *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, Associated UP, 2002).

the construction of a potentially (though not inherently or inevitably) decolonial mode of mythmaking.<sup>155</sup>

Before delimiting Acker's use of conflation and myth, I'd like to describe briefly her work and its contexts. While *Empire* takes up the notion of constructs and psychically, socially constructive narratives, it does so using many of the same methods Acker had used in earlier texts. Acker engages, violates, and transforms the narrative conventions that make up the traditional novel form. Describing her desire to write a send-up of the novel in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, for example, Acker says she did it primarily for money but also to "stick a knife, a little one, up the ass of the novel."<sup>156</sup> First-time readers encounter in Acker's texts a writing that offers a "fuck you" to the most cherished elements of realist storytelling--characters that act like "real" people; a story that has a beginning, middle, and end (even if the narrative does not follow a chronological order in the text); images that serve to illustrate the text; or, an imaginary world governed by a set of ground rules (as in fantasy, which involves a

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<sup>155</sup> Critical attention to the status of myth in *Empire of the Senseless* tends to focus on the myth of piracy, and the pirate as an exceptional and singular subject within Acker's late works, especially *Empire of the Senseless* and *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (New York: Grove Press, 1996). Two essays that depart from feminist, psychoanalytic, punk anti-capitalist, performative, and poststructuralist approaches to Acker's work shift the critical focus toward current theoretical discussions about the concept of sovereignty and the possibilities of capitalism after the Cold War. Alex Houen deliberately "uses" Acker's literary writing as a case study demonstration of Foucault's theories of sovereignty (Acker has widely noted Foucault's influence on her work since the 1980s). Michael Clune's essay, "Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker," makes the bolder (yet ultimately unconvincing) argument that Acker's late work reveals her "commitments" to an idea of the market freed from sovereign national controls, and to a society that knows "no limit but the economic." Such readings of Acker's work in relation to theories of sovereignty and capitalism focus on Acker's engagement with political and economic systems and their possible alternatives, but in doing so, they tend to ignore Acker's messiness—her insistent confluences, her deliberate confusion of signs, and her engagement with anti-colonialist writings that represent, in her work, possible (and ultimately impossible) exit strategies from the disaster depicted as the western world. Alex Houen, "Sovereignty, Biopolitics, and the Use of Literature: Michel Foucault and Kathy Acker," *Theory & Event* 9.1 (2006). Michael Clune, "Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker," *Contemporary Literature* 45.3 (2004): 486-515.

<sup>156</sup> Edwidge Danticat, "Preface," *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 (2004): vii-viii. Danticat locates this quote in a 1989 stage interview of Kathy Acker by friend and fellow writer, Jeannette Winterson.



set of ground rules that gets violated in the course of the narrative). Attached to Acker's writing are numerous keywords meant to explain her style—postmodernist, post-structuralist, cyberpunk feminist, pla(y)giarist, William Burroughs-esque (in its experiments with writing method and with representations of language as a bodily virus), and literary terrorist are just a sampling.<sup>157</sup> More to the point, her participation in the literary and art punk scene in New York City's Lower East Side (and in the contemporaneous punk scene in San Francisco) during the 1970s and 1980s proved vital to her narrative experimentation; her engagement with the French theory that proved influential there; and her familiarity with the violence of so-called urban revitalization programs, particularly the mix of industrial decline and increasing gentrification; and, by the mid-1980s, her concern with the languages of the body and with the AIDS crisis.<sup>158</sup>

Acker combines, conflates, and writes over historical and literary narratives in order to figure out how specific narrative forms relate to social forms. The narrative of *Empire of the Senseless* enacts this process of figuring as a wandering, at times quest-like and at others, apparently aimless. *Empire*, if you choose to read it from beginning to end (and it is a choice), reads as a sometimes more, sometimes less connected sequence of distinct story worlds in which the two main characters, Abhor

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<sup>157</sup> See, for instance, Kathryn Hume, "Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction" *Narrative* 13.2 (May 2005): 105-124. Karen Brennan, "The Geography of Enunciation: Hysterical Pastiche in Kathy Acker's Fiction," *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 21.2 (1994): 243-68. Carla Harryman, "Rules and Restraints in Women's Experimental Writing," in *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, eds. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 116-24. Naomi Jacobs, "Kathy Acker and the Plagiarized Self," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9.3 (1989): 50-55.

<sup>158</sup> My account of the New York literary scene in the 1980s is drawn from Brandon Stosuy's helpful introduction in his book collection, *Up is Up But So is Down: New York's Downtown Literary Scene, 1974-1992* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 93-100. See Stosuy's account for more information on white artists' debates over their complicity in gentrification, the introduction of French theory, and independent presses, as well as interest in the relationship between body and language, all of which has helped to shape Acker's literary interests and publication.

and Thivai, negotiate various problems of narration and freedom. The first part of the text begins with the story of the female character, Abhor, as spoken “through” the male character Thivai, in an oedipal world (*Empire 3*). These two main characters are opposites of each other caught in some unresolved dialectic of attraction and repulsion as they alternately narrate short sections of the novel marked “Thivai speaks” or “Abhor speaks.” Thivai is an unsentimental white male who wants to be a pirate, and he describes Abhor as “my partner, part robot, and part black” (3). Abhor is triply marked by her partner as a conflation of otherness to him, as a raced, sexed cyborg body. At times she is abhorred by Thivai, as when he complains “nothing (not even womanhood) was natural in her” (193), even as she attempts to find a world that would not define her by her abhorrence, her revulsion and disgust to it—to find an aesthetic, beautiful world which “wasn’t just disgust” (227). This section uses as a loose narrative skeleton the plotline and characters of early cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, which follows the exploits of a cyberspace hacker for hire and his female cyborg assassin hired to guide him in the job of his life, in a postmodern world of bodily invasive technologies, global capital, and loneliness.

The second section, “Alone,” serves to focus my discussion—Acker describes it elsewhere as a section in which she tries to describe the “place” she wants to get to, outside taboo, and it is no surprise that she locates that place in texts from the postcolonial world, figured as it is for Acker against and outside the (hegemonic) West. In this section, Abhor and Thivai encounter an imagined Algerian Revolution in 1980s Paris, in a scene that shifts from the masculinity of Gibson’s cyberpunk to that of C.L.R. James’ anti-colonial revolutionary narrative, *The Black Jacobins*, and Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*, an important film that made an urban battle in the Algerian revolution against French rule iconic of leftist revolutionary struggle. After the revolution, Thivai and Abhor narrate separate stories of CIA experiments,

imprisonment and tales from *1001 Nights*, and in a hopeful moment, Abhor in drag witnesses a brief, profound, and poetic moment of writing on the body, when the Cuban sailor Agone gets tattooed. But, as Nicola Pitchford notes, Abhor's "utopian moment of witnessing a body claiming the right to write its own definition" is "only temporary."<sup>159</sup> In the next and final section, Abhor and Thivai clash as they take on the roles of Huck Finn and the runaway slave Jim in a rewrite of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Thivai's (and his new pal Mark's) elaborate pirate games often take Abhor's fugitive, raced, and gendered body as the object of adventure—imprisoning her, elaborately drawing blueprints to free her, making her play the game of great writer by cutting her fingertips and coaching her to learn to write in blood.<sup>160</sup>

The image incorporates Abhor's literal writing of the body into the text of *Huck*, whose hypercanonical status in U.S. schools became the subject of a major controversy in the 1980s over who gets to write for whom and why, as many African-Americans continued to protest the required reading of *Huck*. Acker's use of canonical, "seminal," or popular genre texts almost exclusively written by men as material to plagiarize, critically revise, parody, deconstruct, and cannibalize, subjects these texts to Acker's instrumental use of conflation to produce unexpected results.

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<sup>159</sup> Pitchford, 101.

<sup>160</sup> For an insightful reading of the controversial place of *Huck Finn* in shaping U.S. national identity since 1948, see Jonathan Arac's intervention in the debate. Jonathan Arac discusses the cultural uses of *Huck*, its "hypercanonization" by literary critics who matured just after World War II, the "idolatry" of *Huck* by the press, and at heart, the function of *Huck* for white liberals to disavow contemporary racism by looking to a fully corrected past, seen through the eyes of the character Huck Finn as the quintessentially American boy and "our" moral compass. Twain's novel traces the adventures of Huck, a runaway white boy on the cusp of adolescence who fakes his death to escape his father, and Jim, a runaway slave, as they drift down the Mississippi River on a raft. Its repetitious use of racial epithets, especially the "n-word," has been the most infamous issue in the controversy. Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997). See also Eric Sundquist, who reads *Huck Finn* in relation to his broader claim for the "biracial" cultural tradition of the nineteenth-century "American Renaissance," arguing that the ideological and aesthetic engagement with the issue of slavery produced a common literary tradition by both black and white writers. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1993).

After writing over *The Black Jacobins*, for instance, she fuses it to *The Battle of Algiers*. Over-riding these anti-revolutionary narratives, she then fixes upon hero characters in the two texts, fuses them together, and then adds a surplus of meaning by conflating that composite figure with historical characters such as Haitian dictator François Duvalier and fictional characters such as the zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*. These complicated actions not only deflate or deconstruct canonical texts but also open them to fusions and confusions, or unintended meanings, with other texts and specifically with canonical literary and historical narratives.

Representing a strange version of radical decolonial and non-alignment ideals, Acker's imaginary worlds divide themselves between the sanctioned social power of the owners and the prohibited desires of the outcasts, those who don't or can't buy into the social contract between a sovereign nation and its citizens, along with its attendant economic romance of the happy middle-class life. In Acker's work, the more hopeful varieties of these outcasts are those who want a freer sociality and articulate this desire through their bodies, dreams, and forms of sign making. Or as Acker aptly stipulates in an interview—" [n]ot just outcasts—outcasts could be bums—but people who are beginning to take their own sign-making into their own hands. They're conscious of their own sign-making, signifying values really."<sup>161</sup> Their liberatory impulse, translated as an impulse to narrate, leads to the continual process of *almost* reaching that utopic (no-place) place, of an unfinished moving over time and across space, so that the desire never stalls but also never gets fulfilled. The leader of a band of girl pirates in Acker's last novel, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, suggest as much when she

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<sup>161</sup> Quoted in Ellen G. Friedman, "A Conversation with Kathy Acker," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* vol. IX no. 3 (1988). Available online at the Center for Book Culture <[http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview\\_acker.html](http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview_acker.html)>. Acker's description evokes Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *la facultad*, what Sandoval describes as "the learned capacity to read, renovate, and make signs on behalf of the dispossessed," 60.

declares, upon finding the secret treasure: “If me and my girls take all this treasure, the reign of girl piracy will stop, and I wouldn’t have that happen.”<sup>162</sup>

*Empire* advances a narrative perspective that is thoroughly anti-statist in its search for ways of acting and feeling political against nationalism and the state. It thus challenges the conceptual framework of citizenship that quietly underpins other notions of belonging. Acker’s constructive writing leads not to a static utopian model or blueprint but to a set of methods for writing, and her striking confluences highlight this effort to enact a process not reducible to logic or reason. Rhetorical confluences refuse distinctions, unmask false distinctions, and thus create a complex of associations normally kept separate.

Not surprisingly, conflation is a method for performing “stupidity” in the Acker style, which includes deliberately “bad” writing—unruly, unreasonable, flagrantly defiant of conventions for “good”—and “bad” thinking—illogical, fallacious, disorderly, anti-rationalist.<sup>163</sup> Conflation is often defined pejoratively, as a mistake arising out of the confusion or willful manipulation of at least two presumably

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<sup>162</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane; preface by Michel Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). See also Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). The substantial critical literature on Acker largely note her engagement with Deleuze and Guattari. See especially the Deleuze and Guattari critique of Freudian Oedipus complex, the “body without organs,” “rhizome,” and “desiring machines.” Also, see the ending to Acker’s last novel, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. In this playful girl-version of *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, the girl pirates finally reach the treasure and refuse ownership, deciding not to take the discovered treasure because possessing the object of desire would, of course, end the desire that keeps the girls in their roles as pirate adventurers. But Acker’s interest in productive desire joins her attention to the constraints of need. Two characters in *Pussy* don’t join the pirates—they take the money and head out. For more on Acker’s pirate mythmaking in *Empire* and *Pussy*, see Daniel Punday, “Theories of Materiality and Location: Moving Through Kathy Acker’s Empire of the Senseless,” *Genders* 27 (1998).

<sup>163</sup> See Pitchford and Avital Ronell for more on Acker, stupidity, and the “perverse reader” as a critique of rationality. Ronell, “Kathy Goes to Hell: On the Irresolvable Stupidity of Acker’s Death,” in *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*, eds. Amy Scholder, Carla Harryman, and Avital Ronell (New York and London: Verso, 2006).

distinct terms. In *Empire*, conflation willfully interrupts the coherence of a singular narrative by fusing together multiple ones. Whereas metaphor structures some relation of x to y, conflation resembles parataxis gone wild. Each concept becomes an other and itself at the same time. Unstable in its syntactic coordination or subordination, a concept invades and infects or encompasses other concepts with its meaning. Unlike metaphor, conflation collapses syntactical distance so that there is no evident comparison between two words: their associative power is left unacknowledged, if hidden in plain sight.

Through conflation, Acker's narrative folds events, characters, places from multiple times into the same imaginary world. To conflate is, appropriately, to blow or fuse together, to make up from various sources or various elements, and to produce (*OED*). Conflation etymologically refers to a bodily act of drawing breath or blowing (*flatus*) and literally describes a mode of constructive reading, a "combination or fusion of two variant readings of a text into a composite reading" (*OED*). Textual editors have conflated variants of William Shakespeare's plays, for instance, to preserve the notion of authorial voice.<sup>164</sup> By contrast, Acker subverts the regime of authorship by introducing textual incoherence and disrupting authorial voice. Rather than "merge sources silently under the surface of benign editorial convenience," Acker highlights her acts of conflation as constructions of ironic pastiches.<sup>165</sup> She draws

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<sup>164</sup> For a discussion of the rationales for conflation in textual reproduction, from the preservation of authorial voice and textual coherence to the more recent considerations of the process of conflation as revision, see *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York and London: Norton, 1997).

<sup>165</sup> The quotation is drawn from Stuart Davis in his insightful comments on my description of conflation in textual editing in contrast to Acker's conflation. Davis also reminds me that rationales for conflation as a practice of textual editing has a long history and may operate under less conspicuous names, as in the case of making a "diplomatic edition" of a text by producing a single coherent text out of one "control" text and another whose differences are then incorporated as "variants." Email to me, May 2007.

attention to her stagy performance of a hackneyed narrative script, directing us away from a suspect narrative that would view history as a progression from slavery toward freedom in an unfinished project of modernity. From the imagined position of oppression, conflation may work as a tactic with ironic and potentially emancipatory effects. The effect of conflation, however, depends on how one makes use of it.

Acker's mythmaking is shaped by her tactics of conflation, but its theoretical aim is indebted to French theorist Roland Barthes' notion of myth in *Mythologies* as a form of speech that naturalizes historical, political, and social acts and concepts. If Acker's task had been to attack the ideological power of hegemonic myths through deconstruction but also a more reckless textual destruction, in *Empire of the Senseless*, myth-making becomes an attempt to continue destroying those oppressive myths while using some version of the form in order to supply the discursive community with a generative counter-myth. Barthes' work loosely informs Acker's attempts to recuperate a form of myth and a process of mythmaking for the necessarily ever-unfinished project of fully decolonizing human society, the flesh, and imagination.<sup>166</sup>

Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, I suggest, alludes to *Empire of Signs*, a text that signals Barthes' departure from his earlier conceptualization of sign and myth in *Mythologies* (1957).<sup>167</sup> A quick account of Barthes' work might help elucidate Acker's use of geopolitical signs and language in *Empire of the Senseless* in her effort to create decolonizing, rather than ideological, Occidental myths.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, transl. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972; originally published 1957). Barthes writes that this process of naturalization "is exactly that of bourgeois ideology": the world gives myth historical material to work with, and "what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality," 142.

<sup>167</sup> Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs* (*L'Empire des Signes* c. 1970), transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). Acker's title also evokes the film *Ai No Corrida* (1976) (literal translation, *The Bullfight of Love*), directed by Japanese filmmaker Nagisa Oshima and distributed by a production company in France in order to avoid Japanese censors due to the film's graphic sexual content. The film's French and English titles, "In the Realm of the Senses" and "Empire of the Senses," may be allusions (and responses) to Barthes' experiment with "Japan" as pure spectacle.

In 1957, during the height of the Algerian war,<sup>169</sup> Roland Barthes had introduced his methods for studying myth as a mode of cultural analysis that sought to break apart the dominant ideology of Western society, which constructed social meaning for the good bourgeois citizen-subject of the (imperial) nation. If Barthes had used geopolitical signs of the non-West in order to reveal the Occidental myths of everyday life—recall Barthes’ famous analysis of a 1953 *Paris Match* magazine cover of a black youth in French colonial military dress, a testament to African gratitude and loyalty to France, and so, a justification for empire—by 1970, Barthes claimed to pursue a more radical project.

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<sup>168</sup> Acker has noted her growing interest in radical French thought since her participation in the New York art scene of the 1970s. Michel Foucault, Georges Bataille, Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet, Antonin Artaud, Marguerite Duras, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are among her influences. The Surrealist movement leaves its traces on Acker and her influences, particularly in a European internationalism aesthetically and politically allying itself with the colonized, non-Western parts of the world. See Michael Richardson’s introduction to *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* for a good overview of the encounters between Francophone Caribbean writers and French surrealists between 1932 and 1946, marking “an important moment in the anti-colonial struggle” against the French empire. Richardson, “Introduction” *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, transl. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (New York: Verso, 1996). Before returning to a discussion of conflation, I would like to briefly (and very selectively) sketch Acker’s engagement with French intellectual writing that remains indebted to, or shaped by, the French colonial relationship to Algeria and to the ideology of colonialism. Geopolitical and cultural notions of the East and Near East also played a crucial (if largely overlooked) role in the development of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language between the 1950s and 80s, theories that were major influences on Acker’s work. The Orient resurfaces as a crucial “other” to the Occident in philosophies of language, as diverse critics such as Sandoval (2000), Haun Saussy (2000), Ranjana Khanna (2005) and others have noted. Readers familiar with Acker’s French intellectual and artistic influences may recognize the significance of Algeria to social and cultural life in twentieth-century France, whether named or suppressed (Haiti and Morocco had been similarly important to the anti-imperialist Surrealists). French intellectuals and artists were galvanized by their wide-ranging (though fractured and, at times, conflicting) opposition to the French colonial war in Algeria (1954-1962). Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Haun Saussy, “Outside the Parenthesis\* (Those People Were a Kind of Solution)” *MLN* 115 (2000): 849-891. Ranjana Khanna, “Frames, Contexts, Community, Justice” *diacritics* 33.2 (2005): 11-41.

<sup>169</sup> Readers familiar with Acker’s French intellectual and artistic influences may recognize the significance of Algeria to social and cultural life in twentieth-century France, whether named or suppressed (Haiti and Morocco had been similarly important to the anti-imperialist Surrealists). French intellectuals and artists were galvanized by their wide-ranging (though fractured and, at times, conflicting) opposition to the French colonial war in Algeria (1954-1962); in French anti-colonial public discourse, Algeria signified not only a territory subjugated by the French Empire and a thorn in the side of French national identity, but also the very possibility for a radically decolonized political future, not only for France and Algeria, but seemingly for the world. The Surrealist movement leaves its traces on Acker and her influences, particularly in a largely European internationalism aesthetically and politically allying itself with the colonized parts of the world. See Richardson.



No longer interested in exposing the hypocrisy and myths of everyday life by breaking down the sign into its signifier and signified, he attempted to break down “the very idea of the sign” and “Western discourse as a whole...In our Occident, in our culture, in our language(s), we must engage a duel to the death, a historical struggle with the signified.”<sup>170</sup> *Empire of Signs* appears as a sort of illustrated travelogue of Barthes’ visit to Japan, but Barthes warns his reader that image and text do not correspond or illustrate each other; moreover, Japan provided the occasion for writing, but the writing provides no knowledge of Japan. In his attempt to break apart the very form of the sign, Barthes constructs a semiotic system he calls “Japan” that bears no correspondence to that worldly entity called Japan (or so he insists), and whose signs do not reveal social, political, or cultural meaning but simply the sign, as an empty form, a surface, a spectacle written with the “emptiness of language.”<sup>171</sup>

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Signs* demonstrates the “clear-headed innocent arrogance” of Barthes, in his assumption of an “I” who can will an other to serve as the grounds for difference.<sup>172</sup> Haun Saussy notes Barthes’ evidently “cheerful irresponsibility,” which has exasperated Japan scholars in their attempt to determine to what extent his book is or is not “about” Japan. Barthes explicitly refuses the geopolitical and historical Japan even as he continually evokes such reality (often in

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<sup>170</sup> Cited in Saussy, 866, n45.

<sup>171</sup> Barthes, 4. Barthes’ introduction to *Signs* is often cited at length: “If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garbagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature)...Hence Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as ‘realities’ to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation—whose invented interplay—allows me to ‘entertain’ the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own,” 3.

<sup>172</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 345.

terms of Occidental narcissism and ignorance of “capitalist Japan, American acculturation...Japanese urbanism,” and so on, 4). A disclaimer is offered on behalf of the ‘real’ Japan, as if to save its integrity from Barthes’ experiment of forming a closed semiotic system: while he appropriates the name for his own semiotic fantasy, unlike Orientalist confluences of Occidental fantasies and geographical, cultural realities, Barthes claims to detach fantasy from reality—“to compromise no real country by my fantasy.” The compromise occurs instead by subjecting his fantasy to “the signs of literature,” to writing itself.

The ‘real’ Japan provides Barthes a situation for writing, a situation in which “a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object’s ever ceasing to be significant, desirable” (4). Writing becomes “the Zen occurrence,” a “seism” that creates an “emptiness of language,” which in turn constitutes writing. In this “exemption from all meaning,” writing/Zen “writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence” (4). In Barthes’ refusal of the expressive power of the sign and of subjectivity, signification, and understanding, he attempts to escape the prison houses of meaning he so meticulously mapped in *Mythologies*. For, if there is only surface, only spectacle, then there is no mask to hide the face, no hypocrisy, no subterfuge or meaning to be divined or “expressed.”<sup>173</sup>

*Signs* is a form of political writing that invokes the political even as it refuses the regime of knowledge and of politics (whether or not Barthes’ experiment fails or takes him in the wrong direction). Barthes’ invented use for “Japan” loosely, partly

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<sup>173</sup> I draw from Saussy’s lucid reading of Barthes in order to make this point. See Saussy for an extended reading of the importance of “China” (as well as the Orient, East, and Japan) to structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language and art.

resembles Acker's use for "Algeria" as the name for an invented revolution that does and does not call up the historical Algerian Revolution of 1954-1962. Like Barthes, Acker is not concerned with representing the Algerian Revolution accurately or expressing its historical meanings in a national context; she invents a fictive revolution and cobbles together its script by conflating multiple political narratives under the sign of literature. But, if Barthes insists on the "emptiness of language" in his political writing, Acker relentlessly invests language and signs with an *excess* of geopolitical meanings in her political writing. Put differently, Barthes' sensual/aesthetic system of signs whose invented name is in fact a borrowed one, leads to a thought experiment that dares one not to confuse or conflate the "fictive nation" with the reality of Japan, while Acker invokes signs as political but mixes up the social meanings and histories of each sign to create a sort of myth.

Under the sign of literature, Acker relentlessly invests the Paris revolution with an *excess* of geopolitical meanings, invoking political signs but mixing up the social meanings and histories of each sign to create a liberating myth from the ruined myths of liberation. Abhor, for instance, describes the revolution in Paris as "Algerian," but the scene aptly draws more heavily from *The Black Jacobins*. Acker uses historical scripts of events that really happened, but she makes use of those narratives written about the script of real events. Notably, she gets at the Haitian revolution through James, who intended his historiographic narrative to serve as history in the service of prophecy: *The Black Jacobins* is a history and a manifesto for the future. By conflating the vexed associations with imperialism and revolution that Paris possesses, Acker does not properly remember or preserve histories to pass on. Instead, she produces a temporal blur that gains the aura of myth, a blur of nearly two hundred years of fighting the same fight, of "owners" versus black slaves, revolting zombies, poor workers, and all outcasts rising up to attack the society that controls them. Acker's

writing about revolution is tied to the hope of prophecy, of writing revolutions for the future, but without the faith that a real world manifesto, blueprint, or map can lead to a fully decolonizing revolution: all the more reason, then for past manifestoes, “handbooks,” or “instruction manuals” (both for social control by the powerful and for radical resistance to the powerful) to get mixed up with fiction as a way to imagine revolution, and all the more reason to mix up celebratory narratives of revolution with the real world mess of actual, nationalist revolution that follows.

How and why do “Algeria” and “Haiti” signify as “other” to the West in *Empire of the Senseless*? What does an Algerian revolution in Paris signify within the narrative world and as an instance of Acker’s political writing? In *Empire of the Senseless*, the Algerians who take over Paris signify a long and indistinct set of conflated positions and identities. The narration identifies the Algerians as Arabs, blacks, North Africans, Muslims; associates Algeria culturally with Haitian Voudoun, Farsi (the Persian language), Arabic, Africa, and Perso-Arabic script; and politically, with pirates, gypsies, the postcolonial police state operating in U.S. interests, the anti-colonial revolutionary society, the non-oedipal society, the mythic one, and a range of other positions dreamt up by that construct called “the West” which so desires to have an “other.”

Acker’s Algeria refers much less to the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria than to the promise and portent of the Algerian Revolution, as represented in narratives of anti-colonial revolution, radical politics, and the potential for transnational solidarity among the world’s oppressed.<sup>174</sup> The “Algerian Revolution”

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<sup>174</sup> Conflation is a crucial method in Acker’s engagement with postcolonial historiography. Acker makes the presence of “Algeria,” for example, both bound to and unbound from the geo-political region known as the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria. “Algeria” acts as a sign which had become (by the 1950s and 1960s, especially among the U.S. and Western European leftists and radicals) a dynamic, traveling, unstable, and transnational sign of revolution—as Frantz Fanon, Gillo Pontecorvo, and others hoped for, affirmed, and helped to ensure through their own works, as part of the larger anticipation of an overthrow of imperialism throughout the world. Throughout the 1980s, “Algeria” also condensed the

in Paris collapses multiple national historical narratives of anti-colonial revolution and statist oppression, from the eighteenth century to the 1980s. It is not simply that Acker uses historical scripts of events that really happened, but that she is making use of the textually mediated stories about the historical events that “really happened.” It’s notable, then, that Acker gets at the history of the Haitian revolution through C.L.R. James, who explicitly wrote *The Black Jacobins*, in its multiple printed editions and especially in its 1963 appendix “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” as a history in the service of prophecy, as a historical analysis that is also a manifesto anticipating the political decolonization and full independence of all colonized nations.<sup>175</sup>

### ***Paris is Burning Again***

“The history of French expansionism has left shadows and reflections all over the city of light.”  
--Moustafa Bayoumi<sup>176</sup>

In his account of the *Grande Mosquée* of Paris, which was built during the 1920s, Moustafa Bayoumi notes that the colonial logic governing urban planning projects in the colonies returned to work itself upon this newly modernized imperial metropole. Even as French officials publicly celebrated their ostensible gift of the

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violent conflicts and political contestations over immigration and minority populations in France.

<sup>175</sup> David Scott, in his engagement with James’ *The Black Jacobins* as part of a broader critique of the narratives of revolution for our “postcolonial present,” notes that the 1963 U.S. Vintage edition reasserted James’ classic 1938 text within what Scott calls the “altered imperial moment,” with “the cold war, the ambiguous climax of constitutional decolonization, the collapse of the project of the federation of the West Indies, the exhilarating victory of the Cuban Revolution.” See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 123.

<sup>176</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi. “Shadows and Light: Colonial Modernity and the *Grande Mosquée* of Paris,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13.2 (2000): 267-292.

mosque to the loyal “children” of France (as official speeches never tired of repeating), to her colonial subjects who labored, fought, and died for her during the Great War, the French government was engaged in a large-scale suppression and segregation of Muslim immigrants in Paris as well as Muslim dissenting colonial subjects in Algeria and Morocco. Bayoumi insists on the irony of the apparent contradictions between celebration and oppression enacted by the mosque building, deliberately built in the urban center and far from areas designated for Muslim neighborhoods. He writes,

While the middle-class French enjoyed massages, steam baths, and Turkish coffee, and the colonial collaborators rested within the walls of the Muslim institute...the bulk of the North African population in Paris lived in squalid slums, hidden from public recognition, and were subjected to intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and control. (284-286)

French state efforts to define, produce, and thereby manage “cultural difference” in Paris through a colonial logic that produces visible signs of benign difference, such as the Paris mosque, also become a labor of creating the “invisibility” of what Bayoumi calls “dissenting identities.” He continues, “[i]n Paris, the paranoia or fear that attaches itself to Islam has a history that comes not only from postcolonial struggle but also from the heart of colonial practice itself” (Bayoumi, 289).

The heart of colonial practice may reveal itself as the colonial family romance, the affectively charged relationship between La Mère-Patrie, with her promise of *fraternité, liberté, égalité*. The colonial family romance, a story that is itself a “child of the French Revolution,” suffuses colonial relations with familial metaphors and attendant republican ideals of brotherhood. As Vergès writes, the colonial family romance, created by the “colonial ‘parents’ ...invented a single parent (La Mère-

Patrie), a character mixing the feminine and the masculine,” inventing a new family for the colonized, who would be the “little brothers” and sisters to the sons and daughters of France (5). The colonial immigrant travels to this distant parent only to encounter the rejection of a nation repulsed, terrified, and tyrannical in its attempt to isolate what it cannot, for other reasons, expel from its borders. The disintegration of the colonial family romance occurs at official and informal encounters, as when “the fact of blackness” strikes Frantz Fanon in the ringing words, “Look, a Negro!”<sup>177</sup> Acker portrays the revolution in part as a revolt against the racist logic of the family colonial romance, as I will elaborate below, following a discussion of Paris just before the revolution.

Before the revolution, Abhor describes that in Paris, “[t]he urban sections inhabited by Algerians were literally areas of plague to the Parisians who knew how to speak properly” (75). Abhor’s deadpan delivery of racist imperial discourse rehearses the conflation of the colonial non-citizen with cultural inferiority and bodily disease, mapping the spatial and social divisions of the city through a blurring of literal and figurative registers. Figuratively, the Algerians’ “improper” use of speech figures as a colonial return of the repressed, ruining the city and driving down the property value of the French language, that valued medium of national identity and high culture. As permanent social outsiders to the French national body but used and trapped within the city, the Algerians (also known in the novel as Arabs, blacks, Africans) contaminate social space and embody the conflation of literal with figurative contagion. What better place but Paris—celebrated site of Western culture, forged by urban planning systems under an imperial, capitalist system, and site of dis-ease between citizen and

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<sup>177</sup> Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, transl. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

non-citizen from the colonies—to play out these culture wars as a colonial “plague” in the metropole?

The Algerian sections are—and are not—“literally” plagued. The French government has conflated the colonial subject with contagion quite literally, as in its designation of the heavily populated North African outer districts of Paris as unsanitary neighborhoods, *îlots insalubres*.<sup>178</sup> In *Empire*, revolution spreads like a plague, and the height of white Parisian panic occurs when the Algerians refuse distinctions between permitted and prohibited space, when their mobility can no longer be managed through ID cards, curfews, and zoning laws:

Paris was in chaos. Thousands of Algerians were walking freely. Ragged. Dirty. Sticks. Dolls. Voodoo. Blood flowed eyeballs out. Hatred distaste from mistreated on every level desecration of human being botched up face. Blood flowed out of wound cornea resembled mad dog’s or AIDS’ case fingers extended into ivory carved razor blades. The uses of primitive art. White scholars have written essays. Once again a modern reminds us that the Ancients...unanimously recognized that they borrowed that civilization from blacks on the banks of the Nile: on these bones the North Africans’ human flesh hung like rags or banners of emotion...Though the whites had cut out their tongues, though they had neither been allowed nor been able to speak for themselves even as children, though only drool and vomit had ever

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<sup>178</sup> Abhor’s narration may recall images of urban zoning, unofficial and official, that kept French Parisian citizens segregated from North African residents throughout the 1980s, when North African youth and other non-citizens revolted against the present fruits of long-term state practices to control, subjugate, marginalize, and distinguish its postcolonial im/migrants from its national citizens, a practice massively expanded and institutionalized after the oppressive *code de l’indigénat* was relaxed in order to coax North African migrants to come to France with their strong bodies for laboring and soldiering during the first World War and the decades following. See Neil MacMaster, *Colonial Migrants and Racism: Algerians in France, 1900-62* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).



dropped out of their mouths: from out of these mouths of these old women whose cunts were now caves, the banners of war emerged...I could hear the old women. My grandmothers (68).

If the word is a virus, as Burroughs insists, revolutionary language is viral, passing through and between (mostly) living, (mostly) human bodies. The chaos of Algerians unbound from their quarters and walking through the city is signaled here by a set of biological, cultural, and linguistic confluences and the language of bodily excess. The revolution unfolds like a plague on both the black (Algerian) and white (Parisian) populations. Narrating that moment when the Algerians take over Paris by walking freely, bad speech signals bodily excess—"Hatred distaste from mistreated on every level desecration human being botched up face" (15), which mimics the simplified talk of the reanimated dead, made famous by Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster, and visually evokes zombies from U.S. film culture while acting out the linguistic incoherence of suffering.<sup>179</sup>

Social suffering ("mistreated on every level") manifests itself in the body ("botched up face. Blood flowed out of wound") and results in "the uses of primitive art." The image of "[f]ingers extended into ivory carved razor blades" suggests that the black hand contains (or *is*) the colonial artifact, the carved ivory resembling fingernails. The "uses of primitive art" are not limited to appropriation and categorization by anthropologists, art historians, 1980s U.S. culture warriors, or even the Surrealists and other critics of Western rationalism who desired to harness the presumed virility of the "primitive." Here, the functional form of "ivory carved razor blades" wounds the Western body and turns the bodily artifact into a weapon. Affect

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<sup>179</sup> *Frankenstein*. Dir. James Whale. 1931 (USA)

and flesh find their meeting point in the language of the colonized. Their bodies act as signs, and the revolution appears in this form of body language: the Algerians' human flesh resembles "banners of emotion," and physical symptoms of illness and rejection (vomit) give way to speech, "the banners of war." Abhor describes cultural appropriation or theft by the west, reclaimed by the blacks in Paris who evoke a composite of transnational urban outcasts.<sup>180</sup>

When Abhor claims the women as her grandmothers, she rejects the amnesia cultivated by France during and after the height of its empire. Abhor is a fitting narrator of this remembering: as a "partner, part robot, and part black" (3), she is an exemplary figure of the *métisse*. The *métisse*, or *mulatta/o*, is the key figure of racially mixed origins within the colonial family romance. Vergés offers a fascinating account of the history of the concepts of *métis* and *métissage* that I cannot elaborate here, but I cite her observation that the French term originally meant that "which is made half from one thing and half from another," and was used to refer to ambivalence and internal division before it was used in colonial discourse—with tensions and contradictions attendant to particular contexts—to refer to the mixed origins of colonial populations.<sup>181</sup> Abhor, as the impure partner-narrator in *Empire*, shifts registers from being a narrator-observer of the revolution to a participant when she claims possession over the black women—"my grandmothers." She undoes the ideology of the colonial family romance, which invents the Mother Country as the single parent of all colonial subjects (and in doing so, elides the history of mixed race sexual relations among the colonial population of settlers, administrators, slaves, and

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<sup>180</sup> The theory of AIDS as a Haitian disease had wide currency and was used to justify the refusal of Haitian refugees, from the "boat people" to asylum applications. See, for example, Jake C. Miller, *The Plight of Haitian Refugees* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 154-56.

<sup>181</sup> Vergés, 28-29.

so on). Instead, Abhor participates in this hopeful and terrible moment in the revolution when she claims the women as family.

### ***Death-in-Life***

Driving Abhor's claim on the Algerian women (a personal claim that is rare throughout her narration of the scene) is her intermittent reflection on Voodoo as a crossroads that unmasks false distinctions—between mind and body, death and life, pain and pleasure. Acker picks up on both the U.S. fascination with vodoun and its important place in James' narrative as a New World Africanist spiritual system whose construction was also a political project of conquering white slaveowners.<sup>182</sup>

Voodoo's religious syncretism is itself a narrative of enslavement, colonialism, and resistance, as it arose from the encounters between slaves from different geographical, tribal, and linguistic backgrounds, and between slaves and Christian Jesuits and slaveowners; contributed to the slave revolts and the development of the Haitian Revolution for independence; and served political ends during the Duvaliers regime, in which vodoun was cynically harnessed and instrumentalized by "Papa Doc" Duvaliers for his violent political exploits against Haitians; and has circulated in the U.S. cultural discourse, not least as the sign of the zombie.

The zombie, as the undead or living dead, is generally a conflation of life and death, expression and paralysis, menace and vulnerability, and production and consumption. In the Haitian and U.S. contexts, the zombie stands at the crossroads of

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<sup>182</sup> For example, James notes the "midnight celebrations of Voodoo" in the island of "San Domingo" (what would become Haiti and the Dominican Republic) would sing words that translate thus: "We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow." James, *The Black Jacobins*, 18. In *Haitian Voodoo*, Alfred Métraux writes that these myths come from "the fear which reigned in the plantations... which troubled the sleep of people in 'the big house,'" 15. Métraux, *Haitian Voodoo*, transl. Hugo Charteris (New York: Schocken, 1972).

disenfranchisement and instrumentality. Several zombie narratives and cultural associations come together in the Algerian revolution in Paris, but Acker chiefly conflates the U.S. cinematic zombie figure with the Haitian mythic “zombi” or zombie, which has a long, complex history of representation in national narratives.<sup>183</sup> The zombies in *Empire* are transnational figures of revolt, both in the sense that they arouse disgust and try to overthrow the existing national order of things. Zombies not only embody a sort of figurative social death in political, economic, and psychic terms; they also signal, for Acker, ownership as cultural rigor mortis.

“Culture” is one way by which a community attempts to bring its past up out of senselessness and to find in dream and imagination possibilities for action. When culture isn’t this, there’s something wrong in the community, the society...We are now, in the United States and in England, living in a world in which ownership is becoming more and more set: The rich stay rich; the poor stay dead. Death-in-life. (“Notes” 4-5)

The poor are figured as literally stateless, emotionally and politically. If under capitalism, “[m]oney is a kind of citizenship,” then anyone without money owns nothing and becomes a person without a country (39). The contrast between ownership as “set” and poverty as death-in-life underscores the monstrosity of such culture. The zombie, formed at the crossroads, evidences human misery and cultural monstrosity. In *Empire*, the zombie figure is animated and threatens either to engulf

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<sup>183</sup> On the relationship between vodoun and Duvalierism, and the role of Christianity in vodoun, see brief accounts in Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See pages 125-6 on Duvalier and the use of vodou, and page 71 on the Jesuits. See an extended account of Duvalier’s use of vodoun and secrecy in Paul C. Johnson. “Secretism and the apotheosis of Duvalier,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74.2 (2006): 420-445.

the category of citizen or to destroy the social order that produces dispossession and ownership.

Acker conflates the U.S. zombie figure of pure consumer with the Haitian zombie figure of pure producer, both emotionless yet unwilling, caught at opposite ends of the capitalist system in a way that leads to fragmentation and alienation of the individual and social body. As cinematic monster, the zombie is “a cultural body” figuring the nation’s not-yet-buried past.<sup>184</sup> As the material effect of consumerist culture, the Hollywood zombie especially is the human made inhuman, a senseless stranger to itself through the soporific life of consumerism. In Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, humans take refuge in a shopping mall only to find that the zombies, too, are drawn to that place; they come because of “instinct...[m]emory, of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives.”<sup>185</sup>

In U.S. film culture, zombified people are often ex-citizens whose relationship to the state proves fatal. Earlier, in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie is the material effect of Cold War apocalyptic politics: brains of the newly dead become reanimated minutes after death, possibly a side-effect of the arms and space race.<sup>186</sup> As zombies emerge to feed on citizens and thus the collective national body, the state

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<sup>184</sup> For a mode of reading culture through “the monsters they bear,” see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 14. Neither Cohen nor the book’s contributors deal with zombies specifically, but several of his theses resonate with my interest in the zombie, such as Cohen’s theses statements that “the monster’s body is a cultural body,” “the monster is the harbinger of category crisis,” “the monster dwells at the gates of difference,” “the monster polices the borders of the possible,” and “the monster stands at the threshold...of becoming,” 3-25.

<sup>185</sup> George Romero, dir. *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

<sup>186</sup> *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, remade in 1990 and 2006), George A. Romero’s first feature film and a low-budget independent picture, quickly became a classic in the horror genre and rejuvenated a series of new zombie films and their remakes. While the zombie figure in U.S. films is largely borrowed and freely adapted from the Haitian zombie, some passing references are made to vodoun: in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Peter says “You know Macumba? Voodoo. My granddad was a priest in Trinidad. He used to tell us, “When there’s no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth.” The last line has become the film’s famous tagline. Available online at <http://imdb.com/title/tt0063350/>.

attacks its undead via national security measures and a declared state of emergency. The army, the scientists, all the “normalizing institutions” (*Empire* 134) of the state transform citizens into either living or undead versions of bare life.<sup>187</sup> In a zombie nation, everyone can be sacrificed but not murdered: the distinction between human citizen and reanimated corpse falls away: everyone can be sacrificed but not murdered. The zombie cannibalizes the citizen-state relationship. Hunger for human flesh is perhaps the most striking feature of the U.S. zombie—a hunger that shifts from flesh to brains in film. When the *Neuromancer* quest leads Abhor to the “code,” it reads: “Get rid of meaning. Your mind is a nightmare that has been eating you: Now eat your mind” (*Empire* 38). Acker’s anti-rational statement reflects the relentless consumption impulse of the U.S. zombie. The U.S. zombie is stuck in an endless rerun of its senseless condition; it cannot do the creative work of culture, what Acker describes above as the work of imagining possibilities. In Haiti, by contrast, the zombie figures both enslavement and potential liberation: zombification can be caused more easily than in U.S. scenarios, but it may also be reversed more simply.

The Haitian zombie is held not in a cycle of consumption but of production; the zombie has been robbed of mind and soul and left “only the ability to work.”<sup>188</sup> Figured as “a momentary and reversible transformation of life,” the zombie is “in reality, the legendary, mythic symbol of alienation: of a spiritual as well as physical alienation; of the dispossession of self through the reduction of the self to a mere

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<sup>187</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>188</sup> Maximilien Laroche, “The Myth of the Zombi,” in *Exile and Tradition: Studies in African and Caribbean Literature*, ed. Rowland Smith (London: Longman, 1976), 59. For a rich treatment of the theme of zombification in Haitian literature, see Rafaël Lucas, “The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature,” *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 *Special Issue: Haiti, 1804-2004: Literature, Culture, and Art*. (2004). For a more anthropological study of the zombi figure, see Hans-W. Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier, “The Ways and Nature of the Zombi,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 104.414 (Autumn, 1991): 466-494.

source of labour” (Laroche 56). René Depestre traces the zombie from its African religious contexts to its anti-colonial mythic potential: “The history of colonization is the process of man’s general zombification. It is also the quest for a revitalizing salt capable of restoring to man the use of his imagination and his culture” (Depestre qtd. in Laroche, 59). In its most hopeful versions, the Haitian zombie myth returns to self-awareness and as such, represents a spiritual and economic story of being brought “up out of senselessness.” This quest for creativity resonates with the unfinished quest structure of *Empire*, in which characters are perpetually just beginning to take “sign-making into their own hands.”

The Haitian zombie is one who “moves, eats, hears, even speaks, but has no memory, and is not aware of his condition”—until a taste of salt “arouses in [zombies] an immense anger and an uncontrollable desire for revenge. They hurl themselves on their master, kill him, ravage his goods, then go off in search of their graves” (Métraux, qtd. in Laroche 51). “Uncontrollable” desire drives cultural transformation and erupts by consuming or producing salt with the body. Thivai passes time in post-revolutionary prison by imagining a dialogue between an Arab male and Arab female. Addressing “America,” the female refers to salt’s transformative power: “It won’t be vengeance, it’s cause-and-effect...The tears of the blacks are becoming volcanoes because pain doesn’t die but transforms” (*Empire* 165).

For a moment at least, the disenfranchised Algerians in *Empire* appear creative, defiant, and rejuvenated, motivated partly by a character named Mackandal, a major but elusive leader who appears and disappears, often unnamed, throughout the revolution. Acker draws upon the historical figure Mackandal and James’ account of this maroon chief who staged a revolt in St. Domingue nearly a century before the revolution would fully take hold. Acker adapts from James a legendary story of Mackandal’s transformation from figurative zombie to revolutionary leader. As a

child slave, he was injured by a cane mill shaft that “crushed his arm to its shoulder” (*Empire* 74). Industrial colonial sugar production regularly wounded slaves, who could be accidentally processed through the same machinery as the sugar cane. This conflation of the body with the products of its labor, both of which turn into capital for the owner, occurs through the site of the machine and thus suggests a strange version of the cyborg, the body turned self-propelling machine (de)formed by industrial machinery. Abhor, herself “part robot, part black,” recounts: “With every force he had the tiny child pulled the mangled fragments out of the machine. Delirious he remembered something—Africa.” Acker’s Mackandal, like the character Omar in her short story “Algeria,” had been living a “robot life,” a spiritual deadness evoked by the modern laborer’s subjection to machines or reduction to an instrument of the owners’ will. This is the life of the zombie, the automaton—a “thing imbued with spontaneous motion; living being viewed materially; piece of machinery with concealed motive power; living being whose actions are involuntary or without active intelligence.”<sup>189</sup> For Acker’s Mackandal, his enslavement and mutilation spark a vision of natural unity with “Africa,” which had been forgotten or dis-membered. Mackandal’s envisioned integration into the natural and ancestral world become the condition for his revolutionary desire: “From then on, the child did not name. Not until. He wanted to unite his people and drive out the white Parisian owners. Once he knew unity, he would begin to name. Until then, his words were the words of hate ” (*Empire* 74). Acker’s Mackandal remembers a collective past life, and the revolution comes out of his search for unity. “Now began the new naming of things”: naming here is a creative

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<sup>189</sup> *OED*. Cited in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff. “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4 (Fall 2002). Comaroff and Comaroff write on the connection between a resurgence of zombies in South African public discourse (news reportage, government documents, and rumor) and “the implosion of neoliberal capitalism” and immigrants, “pariah citizens of a global order,” who have borne the brunt of hostility and violence in a South Africa plagued by high unemployment rates and serious economic hardship for its citizens.



rather than destructive act, and it demonstrates Mackandal's transformation from slave to revolutionary.<sup>190</sup> Naming here, as opposed to speaking "words of hate," suggests a cultural and political transformation of Mackandal into a revolutionary. Acker's Mackandal moves from inarticulated anger against white supremacist social order to an empowered attitude reminiscent of negritude, an embracing of blackness as superior to whiteness and of black people as united despite the experience of diaspora and enslavement. The language of artistic and political beginnings in the Americas is sometimes described as a newfound unity of the self through language, of finding one's individual or collective voice through the act of naming.

Followers of Acker's Mackandal resemble zombies numbed by misery at certain moments and recently awakened zombies at others. Abhor describes the discontented in racist language reserved for postcolonial, racial minority, and "Arab" terrorist figures, as if they finally become what colonialist discourse have been calling them for centuries. Mackandal's followers were all those "who were not content only to be alive by dying, slowly...Being ambitious vengeful burning with pride fierce as any blood-stained beast these remnants of oral history sought more than their own survivals. They sought revenge for the past and paradise for the future. They lived in camps in the squalor...If you could call it *living* (75). The revolting "Algerians" threaten with their speech acts as much as with their so-called "Arab minds," a synonym in public discourse for mindless bodies that only "understand force."<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> I quote Derek Walcott in his account of the black poetic tradition as beginning with the reclamation from the slave masters of the power to name. Walcott, *The Muse of History*, in *Cafifesta Forum: An Anthology of 20 Caribbean Voices*, ed. John Hearne (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica and *Jamaica Journal*, 1976), 118-119. Qtd in Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*.

<sup>191</sup> See, for example, Rafael Patai, *The Arab mind* (New York: Scribner, 1973), widely read and republished in 1983 and 2002, for a representative example of the perniciously essentialist and pervasive, racist rhetoric that has influenced news media, governmental policy, and popular discourse on Arabs (read Muslims). The enduring language of *The Arab Mind* can be found recited by U.S. military officers stationed in Iraq during the present occupation. This denial of the enemy others' capacity for reason or thought is part of a broader history in the U.S. and in European imperialist ideologies, but it has re-emerged with special force against Arabs since the 1973 OPEC oil crisis. For

Their speeches insistently re-center language on the body. Their speech announces an end to colonial and neocolonial relations as they conflate labor with product, body with capital: “[t]he Algerians who were so thin they were skeletons were screeching. “No longer do you love to build ships out of our flesh and sail around our hearts. No longer do you construct huge masted boats out of our spines. Gone are the glorious days of sailing when white men, by marketing slaves, ruled the entire earth” (*Empire* 70-71).

Richardson describes the zombie in language that might describe all of Acker’s disenfranchised characters: “a being trapped in a state without identity and denied the right to a means of life that is rightfully its own...and acts upon [the world] as an unspoken condemnation” (27). In *Empire*, the miserable condemn Paris in a political act of uncontrolled feeling, for “[w]hoever was of the disenfranchised and unsatisfied the poor those so wallowing in misery they were almost mindless, what the white call ‘zombie,’ followed him [Mackandal] and did not know why” (76).<sup>192</sup> The sentence proceeds inexorably, mechanically, only taking a breath of punctuation to define the evoked misery. By attributing the use of the term “zombie” to “the white,” Acker reads the zombie figure as a way for the owners to relegate suffering to the monstrous. Yet, in writing mostly filled with unqualified statements, this “almost” is worth noting, as Acker’s Algerian revolutionaries are beginning to take possession of themselves, even if possession means that “[n]ot knowing was their only possible way” (*Empire* 76).

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an early critique of Patai and anti-Arab discourse, see Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

<sup>192</sup> James similarly defends the slaves’ use of violence: “The slaves destroyed tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquerie or the Luddite wreckers, they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much,” 88.

The zombies in *Empire* are distinct from the zombie figures in Acker's earlier writing. They are either people who have no emotions or feelings because they are incapable of political action within a society enamored of death; or, who are no longer freely human because they have been turned into machinery, with its endless capacity for production; or, less often, who fall into the deathlike trance of consumerism, with its tedium of daily middle-class consumption. These dimensions of zombie life are defined by a national forgetting of pleasure or creativity: as Acker writes in *My Mother: Demonology*, "[i]t was the days of ghosts. Still is. Not the death, but the actual forgetting, even of the death of sexuality and wonderment, of all but those who control and those and that which can be controlled. Since an emotion's an announcement of value, in this society of the death (of values) emotions moved like zombies through humans" (*Essential Acker* 312). In *Empire* the society of death is white, an old white Parisian man dressed in an Arabian djellaba and in love with death. Along this stark divide between those who control and those controlled, Acker's revolution begins. However, rather than use the term "zombie" as a simile for the death of human value, or emotion, the "zombie" in Paris accesses the revolutionary possibilities of the Haitian myth, which revives the zombie's miserable rage.

The literal "plague" in Acker's Paris is spread by fire and by poison in the water, not the ragged flesh. Acker condenses James' descriptions of colonialist torture and slave resistance in order to collapse the rhetorical distance between the two. Abhor explains that slaveowners "forced their unwilling servants to eat Jamaican 'dumbcane' ...irritating the larynx and causing local swelling, made breathing difficult and speaking impossible. *Unwilling to speak* means *unable to speak*" (*Empire* 74, emphasis in original). Acker displaces the hallmark of zombification, the literal or figurative inability to speak one's own mind (let alone breathe) onto the Parisians. Acker's Mackandal discovers a similar technology of biological terrorism: he finds

that a person eating “a small amount of the tetrodotoxin of the puffer fish or fugu feels pale, dizzy, and nauseous. Insects seem to be crawling just beneath the skin...it is almost not possible to breathe” (*Empire* 77). Acker here plagiarizes from Wade Davis’ claim that tetrodotoxin is the elusive ingredient in “zombie powder,” suggesting that Mackandal reverses the positions of Parisian and colonial slave by using the weapon of zombification against an unwilling national body.<sup>193</sup>

Among Acker’s collective Algerian voices is one named “Papa Death,” who calls out the hypocrisy of the first French Revolution: ““alienated from your government, isolated from knowledge...Tell me, then, masters, more about your RIGHTS OF MAN and your CONSTITUTION. Tell me what my freedom is.””<sup>194</sup> Acker’s conflation of the anti-colonial and the postcolonial-neocolonial moment occurs perhaps most obliquely but significantly through this leader, who performs the position of zombie through his eloquent addresses to France. If doctors are death in Acker’s logic, then I suggest Papa Death is François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, former physician and “president-for-life” in Haiti from 1957 to 1971, with an arranged dynastic rule of his son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier until he fled the country in 1986.<sup>195</sup> In *Empire*, it is Papa Death who is the principal speaker for the revolution;

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<sup>193</sup> This account not only literalizes his acts of bioterrorism in 1980s Paris as a return of the *oppressed* but also calls up the pharmacological “solution” of the mystery of the zombie, as proclaimed by Wade Davis in his popular, pseudo-scientific and ethnographic popular account of his search for a pharmacological source of zombification, in order to help powerful financial backers looking for an alternative anaesthetic for U.S. patients. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Davis claims that the elusive “zombi powder,” supposed to transform a free-willed being into a zombi slave, is made of tetrodotoxin. Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Warner Books, 1984) 134.

<sup>194</sup> *Empire*, 71. In a tone at once sarcastic and earnest, Papa Doc plays on U.S. liberal sentimentalism through a cutting remark at Sally Struther-like charity drives for starving children in Third World countries. He wails in the streets: “Look at this helpless old man...Give alms to one dying Algerian. Just as you raised tons of money to give to the starving Ethiopian children who were starving because you had decimated their lands, now out of the wisdom of your white hearts give to Papa Death,” 70.

<sup>195</sup> For a focus on the history of Haiti as bound to the political economy of the United States, and the current crisis of the Haitian poor in the 1980s and 90s, see Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994). For an analysis of how the Duvaliers dynastic, neofascist totalitarian state (in Trouillot’s words) was made possible by the history of Haitian politics, and how the

in his speeches, the post-colonial dictator is an anti-colonial revolutionary, in a bleak continuity of power made visible by the collapse of two hundred years.

The historical “Papa Doc,” too, did just that; he claimed to be possessed by, and be one *with*, the founding leaders of Haiti; and, in his totalitarianism, he promised to be President for Life as well as in Death.<sup>196</sup> The historical Papa Doc also deliberately assumed the guise of Gede spirit Baron Samedi, the vodoun spirit of death associated with zombification. Baron Samedi “is a keeper of the dead” and “controls the border between life and death” (Johnson 438). Like Baron Samedi, Papa Doc wore large black glasses and adopted a nasal speaking tone, similar in tone to the Baron and his zombies. Acker’s “Papa Death” evokes the state as patriarch and administrator of life and death, and multiple relations collapse into the slippage of “Papa Death” and “Baron Samedi” (*Empire* 70-71). And yet, Acker’s Papa Death begs in the street: sarcastic and earnest, he appeals to the ignorant liberal sentimentalism of Sally Struther-like charities. “Look at this helpless old man... Give alms to one dying Algerian. Just as you raised tons of money to give to the starving Ethiopian children who were starving because you had decimated their lands, now out of the wisdom of your white hearts give to Papa Death” (*Empire* 70). Papa Death. Like the historical Papa Doc, adopts a populist “*noiriste*” attitude but underwrites his power through the corrupt international cycle of aid and destruction.<sup>197</sup>

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Duvaliers regime created new forms of power unlike any previous regime that turned the state (government, informal militia and direct beneficiaries, such as the powerful elite) against the nation (the Haitian people without beneficial access to state power), see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

<sup>196</sup> Johnson, 437. Johnson describes that in 1964, after upgrading his status to president-for-life, Duvalier issued the Catechism of a Revolution: “Who are Dessalines, Toussaint, Christopher, Pétion and Estimé? Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion and Estimé are five founders of the nation who are found within François Duvalier . . . Is Dessalines for life? Yes, Dessalines is for life in François Duvalier,” 437.

<sup>197</sup> Trouillot notes that the Duvaliers “played the anticommunist game to gain U.S. support for their crippling policies,” 202-203. See also Farmer for Duvaliers’ cooperation with the United States.

Despite their differences, U.S. and the Haitian zombies do share a key definitional property: both are senseless in that they do not “feel” as the citizen-subject is presumed to “feel,” but they are disturbingly present in the nation nonetheless. The zombie shows no capacity for sentiment, unlike the good citizen, whose capacity for feeling sympathetic towards an abject subject produces a certain “feeling” for the nation, through a politicized, affective way of thinking about citizenship and suffering. The zombie stands in contrast to figures that ‘deserve’ sympathy or enable affective identification with other members of the national body—the zombies look awful, but they are monstrous bodies insensible to their own suffering, without a conscious and feeling self to translate injury into conscious suffering. In the U.S. form, zombies lose all ability to communicate except through the visual state of their decaying body and their vague moans, which sound like suffering but get explained as pure hunger for humans. Cinematic zombies are rarely re-integrated into human life: plague-ridden, they must instead be killed off to secure the national body.<sup>198</sup>

In the Haitian form, the insensible zombie has the potential to regain its full humanity, but, as with the U.S. form, zombies are frightening because they could be you. The zombie is your potential non-self. Zombies neither make a nation out of sentiment nor evidence a suffering worthy of provoking sympathy from the good citizen: the zombie, an utterly indifferent figure, turns sentiment—and the forms of citizenship and nation built through sentimental politics—into a non-issue. Zombies are one of Acker’s many constructs that disrupt the conflation of sentiment and

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<sup>198</sup> There are important exceptions, pre-1968. The 1930s zombie movies of Victor Halperin borrow more directly from Haitian and African figures of zombie as worker. In a displacement of zombification onto the recoverable body of a desired white woman, his *White Zombie* (1932) features an evil Haitian plantation owner whose sugar mill runs on zombi power. He helps another plantation owner turn a white woman, betrothed to another, into a zombi lover. While all the other zombies follow their leader to their collective deaths, the white woman awakens in part by the force of true love. His *Revolt of the Zombies* relocates the tempting art of making zombies to the Angkor province of Cambodia.

politics in a Reaganite discourse of “national sentimentality,” what Lauren Berlant calls a “rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy.”<sup>199</sup> The nation has been built instead, Berlant argues, on a “privatized state of feeling” (*Queen of America* 11). By contrast, Acker’s zombies expose the nation as a fiction of emotional indifference and exclusionary sociality.

Acker deflates both the sentimental and charismatic politics of the Reagan revolution as well as sentimentalized narratives of anti-colonial revolutionaries.<sup>200</sup> Significantly, James and Pontecorvo end their narratives at the first moment of clear revolutionary success, that is, statehood. In Acker’s postrevolutionary Paris, by contrast, state institutions reemerge from the ruins of anti-colonial revolution. They take their U.S. domestic torture and covert lobotomy operations international, to the Algerian “land of the free” (47). The American Medical Association and the Central Intelligence Agency operate on people to test various methods for zombification. Zombies in *Empire* are not only figural victims of colonization and capitalism: they are produced deliberately by the state, which turns its instruments of governance and scientific research onto “socially despised groups” (143) in order to perform zombification, drug, and lobotomy experiments. The narration ironically employs the

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<sup>199</sup> For the figure of exploited child labor as it provokes painful feeling in order to make a political world built on “the rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy,” or what Berlant calls “national sentimentality,” see Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling,” in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, eds. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53. See also Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), 11. In *The Queen of America*, examples of the iconic fetus or the “infantile” citizen (figured as a young, innocent girl) in the Reagan revolution, the subject’s awareness of its or her own suffering does not enable sentimentality for the franchised adult citizen; rather, it is the iconicity of these figures (fetus, young girl), their status as “dead metaphors” in conservative right rhetoric, that make them so usable in evincing national sentimentality.

<sup>200</sup> See Pitchford for a reading of Acker’s 1984-1988 novels as responses to “the period of full-grown Reaganism in the United States—a time marked by deindustrialization and the ascendance of charismatic politics,” 60.

logic of analogy to describe the correspondence between globalization and zombification as systems in perpetual need for obtaining new markets: “Just as the USA now desperately needed new economic markets for its coke (the mild variety) and McDonald’s, so the American CIA needed new drug-test victims” (144). Soon, zombification operations are exported overseas—to post-revolutionary Paris, where the MK-ULTRA doctors and CIA operatives move to set up shop. As one might expect, the re-established state is once again a world of death-in-life, and Abhor and Thivai must keep moving.

### ***Revolutionary Leaders***

Histories of leaders are often the driving force of narratives of the revolution, which swells beneath them and inevitably exceeds the leaders that helped give shape to them. CLR James’ *The Black Jacobins* and Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* gather much of their sense of temporal development, their driving strength, through representations of revolutionary figures of leadership and their dynamic relationship to the masses. Acker’s revolution in Paris borrows that narrative energy through representations of revolutionary leaders but troubles the teleology of revolution in two main, related ways: first, by creating composite characters comprised of multiple historical actors; and second, by collapsing the colonial and postcolonial-neocolonial moments into one narrative of revolution, so that, as I suggested in the section above, heroic anti-colonial leaders are also post-colonial dictators, and rhetorical distinctions between guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and torture become meaningless in the face of their identical effects on the body.

The elusive Mackandal appears and disappears, often unnamed, throughout the narrative of Acker’s revolution. Abhor first notices him amidst the “chaos” erupting



in Paris, unusual for his “wig of brown hair which was so straight it stuck straight out of every angle of his head” (71-72). He is thereafter sometimes named, sometimes recognizable by his tall, thin black body amid fire, death, ash; or by top hat and hair, which either is a wig or only seems to be, depending upon Abhor’s unstable perspectives (71-72, 74, 78, 80). His words are often cryptic or epiphanic, prophetic, vaguely visionary. The narrative points up Mackandal’s slightly kooky theatricality, as if the legendary Mackandal (which encompasses multiple legends, such as that of the famous American nationalist leader who “wore a top hat and was as thin as anyone’s shadow,” Abraham Lincoln, as well as the Vodoun Gede Baron Samedi, loa of death, and the persona adopted by Papa Doc Duvalier) were performing his role as a myth, in a spoof of the same nationalist narrative of revolution that created the legend, or the myth, of Mackandal in the first place—the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804.<sup>201</sup>

The historical Mackandal is a minor, though significant, figure in the narrative of *The Black Jacobins*: brief mention of him is important in that Mackandal embodies the budding radical, rebellious spirit of slaves and former slaves that would take nearly a hundred years to bloom into a successful revolutionary movement with Toussaint L’Ouverture. Whereas James locates Mackandal as a heroic glimmer of the slaves’ radical potential but not their full actualization, Acker represents Mackandal as a condensation of revolutionary leaders who emerge from the poor and criminal.

In James’ account, his youth as a slave leads Mackandal to escape the plantation. Acker modifies the legendary masculine charisma of Mackandal, who according to James was the “greatest” of maroon chiefs, an amazing orator and organizer whom men followed blindly and with whom the “best women” slept.

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<sup>201</sup> The terms “myth” and “legend” generally carry distinctions that do not hold (surprisingly!) in regards to Acker’s literary method.

Maroons, slaves who have fled from captivity and formed fugitive communities in mountainous, wooded regions, historically have been celebrated by the African diaspora as the ultimate, masculine outlaws and major threat to the colony.<sup>202</sup> The masculine fight for collective freedom from slavery entails more than formidable cunning and strength, and the maroon chief Mackandal was also a superior leader by the standards of European civilization. Describing Mackandal's legendary eloquence from a closely copied passage in James (21), Acker writes,

Mackandal was an orator, in the opinion even of Mitterand, equal in his eloquence to the French politicians and intellectuals, and different only in superior vigour. Though one-armed from the childhood accident, he was fearless and had a fortitude which he had and could preserve in the midst of the cruellest tortures" (74).

Acker most notably changes "a white contemporary equal" to "Mitterand" and "European orators" to "French politicians and intellectuals." When Acker does 'name names,' she conflates them, naming indiscriminately and imprecisely rather than identifying a proper name with responsibility for a particular act. Her tone, serious and mocking, playfully deflates the high rhetorical tone of James in this passage in making such replacements at a time when Le Pen was fomenting anti-immigrant

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<sup>202</sup> The etymology of "maroon" in English is complicated, and competing versions exist. Both French *marron* and Spanish terms *cimarron* suggest wild (feral) or fugitive. The *OED* notes that "Spanish *cimarrón* occurs earlier in an English context in form *Symeron* denoting the members of a group of runaway slaves and native Americans in Panama who assisted Sir Francis Drake in raids on the Spanish in 1572 and later, and is subsequently applied (in various forms) to similar communities elsewhere." In an essay on the figure of the Caribbean outlaw from the eighteenth century to the contemporary moment, Erin Mackie writes, "The practice of leaving people stranded on uninhabited islands, a favorite discipline of pirates, was named after those African people, the Maroons, stranded by the European slave trade on the Caribbean frontiers." Mackie cites George Woodbury, who writes that the "word became incorporated in the West Indian vernacular until it came to be the verb for piratical punishment, the deliberate abandonment of an expendable person upon a desert island" (Mackie n8). Woodbury, *The Great Days of Piracy in the West Indies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951), 128. Mackie, "Welcome The Outlaw: Pirates, Maroons, And Caribbean Countercultures." *Cultural Critique* 59 (2005): 24-62.

feeling, the nominally socialist Mitterand was Reagan's principal ally in continental Europe, and Jean Baudrillard reigned as French celebrity intellectual.<sup>203</sup> Acker conflates 1980s news reportage of the post-colonial immigrant 'backlash' (and the political discourse it both recorded and reflected upon) with the colonialist oppression of San Domingo in the eighteenth century and Algeria in the nineteenth and twentieth.

The conflation of leaders and narratives makes imperial powers indistinguishable from each other and the social "trash" (75) impossible to differentiate. Mackandal as revolutionary leader becomes one figure around which Acker's temporal confluences cohere:

From 1981 to 1985, for five years, Mackandal built up his organization. But revolutions usually begin by terrorism. His followers poisoned both whites and their own disobedient members. But this wasn't enough terror to start a revolution in such a bourgeois city. 75

To write that Mackandal led the outcasts, mostly "Algerians, and even other black Africans" in 1980s Paris in the effort to poison all the whites ("and their own disobedient members," an important part of at least the Haitian and Algerian wars for independence, 75) is to mix up the language of historical narratives. Abhor implicitly characterizes Mackandal, an historical forefather of the Haitian Revolution, as the U.S. archetype of an angry black man, engaging in "petty violence" and strutting through the "city of the whites as freely as he pleased." He is named Mackandal but also acts like Ali la Pointe of *The Battle of Algiers*<sup>204</sup>—an "habitual offender" turned

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<sup>203</sup> For Acker's criticism of Baudrillard and what she defines as postmodern, see *Bodies of Work*.

<sup>204</sup> The historical figure of Ali la Pointe was apparently a rougher petty thug than his depiction in *The Battle of Algiers*, but he is introduced to the audience with the following voice-over: "Education: Illiterate. Occupation: Manual laborer, farm hand, boxer, presently unemployed. Former convictions: 1942 -- Oran Juvenile Court, one year of reformatory school for acts of vandalism. 1944 -- Two years

revolutionary leader in Algiers, a major urban site of conflict during the historical Algerian revolution—as well as the North African male youth menacing white Parisians throughout the 1980s.<sup>205</sup>

Acker also condenses the spirit of revolutionary potential by conflating Mackandal with a subsequent slave revolutionary, Boukman, a High Priest in Le Cap whose revolutionary plan “aimed at exterminating the whites and taking the colony for themselves” (James 86), as well as with Ali la Pointe from *The Battle of Algiers*. James locates the start of the revolution with Boukman’s revolt, involving maybe 12,000 men and women slaves who planned to set fire to the plantations, at which point the slaves in town would massacre the whites while slaves on the plain would finish the destruction. The revolt’s large-scale organization and ambition “shows Boukman to be the first of that line of great leaders whom the slaves were to throw up in such profusion and rapidity during the years which followed” (86).<sup>206</sup>

To prepare the way for Boukman and Toussaint, James structures his biographical sketch of Mackandal as if he were a tragic Greek hero, gifted and destined for greatness, but for one fatal character flaw: “His temerity was the cause of his downfall. He went one day to a plantation, got drunk and was betrayed, and being

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of reformatory school for theft. 1949 -- Court of Algiers, eight months for compulsory prostitution and resisting arrest. Habitual offender.” Franco Salinas, *The Battle of Algiers*, The Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDb.com). Online <<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Battle-of-Algiers.-The.html>> see also Mellen.

<sup>205</sup> The period “1981 to 1985” also signals Reagan’s first term—in which he declared “war on terrorism” to be the nation’s first priority—and the last years of “Papa Doc” Duvaliers’ dynastic dictatorship in Haiti, whom I suggest appears in the narrative as a black revolutionary orator in Paris named “Papa Death,” a character to which I will return. Haiti left its traces in U.S. mainstream news media during the 1980s around issues of immigration and disease. Images of blacks approaching U.S. shores in inner tubes, of being detained at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, circulated as images of poverty but not economic and political exploitation under the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, which was forced to flee after popular resistance and military force in 1986, the same year as Irangate’s debut on the world stage.

<sup>206</sup> Toussaint Bréda, better known as Toussaint L’Ouverture, joins the revolt that becomes known as the Haitian Revolution one month from its start. See James, 90.

captured was burnt alive” (James 21). In James’s account, Mackandal’s “temerity” was his downfall, but it was the betrayal by his fellow slaves that signals the slaves’ revolutionary prematurity in the narrative—in other words, James suggests that Mackandal’s fall was both the result of a flaw in moral character and an inevitable historical progression, an Hegelian-Marxist unfolding of the spirit of freedom.

James distances Boukman from Mackandal in time: the slaves “had traveled a long, long way since the grandiose poisoning schemes of Mackandal” (86). Through Acker’s conflation of leaders, she undercuts the strong tradition of paying homage to patrilineage and the inevitable historical telos that structures so many retrospective narratives of national revolution. The conflation, then, also condenses the narrative of the Haitian Revolution—the poisoning scheme is almost immediately followed by Paris ablaze, and these two modes of destructive consumption continue simultaneously until Paris and its body politic are literally consumed by poison and flame to leave a city of ash.

For James, Boukman becomes so important as the first of a line of great leaders in large part because the revolt’s successful initiation, if not its completion, signals the slaves’ collective readiness-in-unity: “That so vast a conspiracy was not discovered until it had actually broken out is a testimony to their solidarity” (86).<sup>207</sup> This form of solidarity is anathema to Acker’s narratives: the most powerful and the most powerless characters in her novels are rarely, if ever, bound to each other through a sense of solidarity (they are rather drawn to each other through the push and pull of desire, of sexual desire and repulsion).

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<sup>207</sup> In fact, Acker borrows another scene from James to set the stage for the little girl’s betrayal of Mackandal: in relation to the Boukman-led revolt, “some sort of rising” was “vaguely” suspected in 1791, and the Governor of Le Cap conducted his own effort to extract the names of the leaders—the slaves would not yield, and the whites, doubting the organizational capacity of black slaves, shrugged off the rumors. See James, 87.

Acker's representation of betrayal—naming names one is supposed to keep secret—comes at the apparent turning point of the revolution, the betrayal of Mackandal by a young child. Reminiscent of both the U.S. Marines in Lebanon and the French paratroopers during the Algerian War, American forces trap three teenage Algerian boys and one six-year old Algerian girl into the American Embassy. The Americans ask for the name of the leader and proceed to systematically torture and kill one resistant boy at a time. The oldest boy warns the youngest “never tell Americans anything cause all they know how to do is kill,” the youngest is methodically tortured and then murdered. The girl witnesses all of this when they finally turn towards her and interrogate “Slut...Don't you want to grow up?...Do you know how much pain your friends felt?” (80). “All she knew was that the world, totality was terror. She screamed out Mackandal's name, all the other names of leaders which she could remember, and then they killed her” (79). Revised as “such hideous perceptions of the totality of terror” (80), betrayals of a leader's name—the secret code of the Algerian and Haitian revolutions—converge onto this moment. Something like solidarity is desired and needed, but there can be no sentimentalized view of solidarity in the face of torture, and the one who betrays cannot be used as a scapegoat of revolution or as the image when a grand solidarity suffers a crack.

As a prophet figure in James' and Acker's narratives, the betrayal of Mackandal also allows him to be a figure for Voodoo, Muslim, and Christian myths of convergence/conversion, transformation, and salvation. James briefly suggests a connection between Mackandal and Islam, likening Mackandal to “Mahomet [in that] he had revelations” (x). The heart of colonial practice, transplanted to Paris and populated by Algerian/Haitian colonial confluences, engenders in *Empire* a fear and paranoia of an Islam infused with Vodoun, that sign of fear but also desire and powerful spiritual constructive practices. In Abhor's narration, Mackandal is an

Algerian Muslim akin to a Christ figure who is guided by the Voudoun goddess of love as sexual desire: he unites the people, is betrayed by naming, mocked by American soldiers and burned alive by them, only to mysteriously disappear amidst his spasms, screams, and shaking “not not as if from flames, but as if possessed [by “Erzulie, the spirit of love”...“of all unrealizable desire”]” (80). The poisonings continued, the city burned with consumption as if Mackandal, being consumed by flame, refracted the flame from his body onto the entire city (and thus enacting the historical Boukman’s plan of setting fire around Le Cap and exterminating all whites). James impresses the scene of Boukman’s interrupted revolt upon the reader: while it was not completed, slaves murdered swiftly as the “famous North Plain was a flaming ruin. From Le Cap the whole horizon was a wall of fire” (James 88).

The twentieth century discourse of the U.S. and French wars on “terror” and terrorism becomes refigured through this convergence, this imagined narrative that does not seem “real” or “truthful” unless it is seen in its simultaneity of multiple narratives, in its totality: the terror of history (and the present tense of history) is its totality. It is not merely the death of grand narratives and a celebration of fragments that Acker’s narrative strategies advocate—it is rather an attempt to identify the horrific totality of such grand narratives, the shocking truth that totality is a political reality. The CIA, the U.S. military, Papa Doc Duvalier: each claims total control, whether secretly intervening throughout the globe or explicitly claiming totalitarian state control over the most minute thoughts of an ordinary person.

This view at once revises the relationships between national narratives and alters the moments of apparent failure and apparent success within each revolution. Here, a political revelation induced by torture renames moments of weakness. Mackandal drunk at a plantation, the not-yet-fully conscious masses blabbing names, or those Algerians responsible for the French paratroopers in Algiers, or the white

American soldiers' victory in Paris achieved by torturing children—all converge in *Empire* to produce an apparent defeat of the revolutionaries: “with this [identification, location, and elimination of a leader] the whites seemed to have regained the city” (Acker, 80).

In James' and Pontecorvo's revolutionary narratives, leaders like Mackandal and Ali la Pointe are figures of the revolution's spirit of potentiality, all the more affirmed by their apparent failure. The Haitian Revolution occurs about one hundred years after the spark incited by Mackandal, and Algerian independence comes only *after* the apparent French victory over Ali la Pointe and the general destruction of the FLN. In narrative representations, these leaders are the forerunners and the manifestations of what will come, what will be beyond them but come *in small part* from them nonetheless. James ends his narrative proper of the successful statehood of Haiti with his own analyses of the *potential* for anti-colonial revolution throughout Africa and beyond, leaving for the Appendix the narrative of post-independence Haiti. Pontecorvo more pointedly ends *The Battle of Algiers* at the moment of rapturous/euphoric freedom, with a stirring scene of Algerian women, dancing and triumphantly ululating in the streets for independence, in 1962. Pontecorvo leaves it to his next film, *Burn!* to consider the neocolonial relation and the troubles of post-colonial independence. In *Empire*, the Mackandal/Ali la Pointe/Boukman construct vanishes from the narrative soon after the apparently successful revolution, and the neocolonial multinational neoliberal globalization revolution, which signals a resurgence and proliferation of the monstrous society no longer defined by the father but through a viral network without a head—a senseless network that survives no matter which head one lobotomizes, cuts off, or destroys, whether it's Reagan's or that of the CIA.



And yet, as with James's narrative of the Haitian Revolution and Pontecorvo's narrative of the Algerian Revolution, this moment of the apparent snuffing of the revolutionary spirit is only an optical illusion—it is the senseless, the invisible “guiding spirit” of love as unrealizable desire (Erzulie) and as what motivates revolution (to paraphrase twentieth-century revolutionary Che Guevara) that continues to consume Paris until the entire city lay in its ruinous ashes, white with death. Mackandal just as mysteriously reappears (three pages later) to speak aphoristically to Abhor about the post-revolutionary moment as a repetition of intertwined historical facts: “Dead men have bosses,” and “This city is death...but death and life are fucking each other” (82).

Just after the revolution, a “ghoul” (in the shape of Mackandal, after his mysterious escape from the Americans) leads Abhor to a bridge, to give her a view of the city in ashes. She blabbers, “My father's no longer important cause interpersonal power in this world mean corporate power. The multinationals along with their computers have changed and are changing reality...they've attained immortality via bio-chips. Etc. Who needs slaves anymore? So killing someone, anyone, like Reagan or the top IBM executive board members, whoever they are, can't accomplish anything” (83). “The Father” is a complicated name in Acker's work, duplicitous/multiplicitous, unstable, and yet the absolute patriarchy in all its guises—at the end of the revolution, Abhor and Thivai meet again and discover that the old Parisian man in a djellaba was Dr. Schreber was the “real” father of Abhor's “two fathers” was the Boss (“ ‘a real one and a false one.’ I was getting my mother and father mixed up. It didn't matter...my father I had never known was dead.”) (82-83). Acker repeatedly equates doctors with death in *Empire*, as with Dr. Schreber, whose professional work (like the historical Dr. Schreber) consists of inventing elaborate

torture devices.<sup>208</sup> Abhor or the Revolution kills the Father; but even the ‘dead white men’ have bosses, signaling the current shape of power, now exposed as running in a decentralized complex of capitalist, intelligence, bodily, and computer networks (the extended riff on *Neuromancer* resurfaces here). At the moment of the revolution’s immediate aftermath, and having killed Dr. Schreber, Abhor and Thivai “looked at Paris which was now a third world... There was nothing left to do. So Thivai and I went and got tattooed. Carved into roses” (82, 86). The post-revolutionary moment is a mean one, full of violence, rape, and “The New Revolutionary Arab Police” (90). The search for “something” to do--and for some myth to make for themselves to live by—leads them to split.

### ***Conclusion***

Conflation, as the method to Acker’s messiness, unmasks false distinctions making the familiar language of national belonging, state power, empire, and capital strange and estranging to its readers. Critic Rebecca Saunders suggests:

we [postcolonial critics] need to interrogate more fully the implications to postcolonial ethics of repressing the foreignness in language. Indeed, postcolonial studies’ avoidance of this alien territory is largely a result of its commitment to ethics, of a desire to be able to stabilize meaning and thereby

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<sup>208</sup> The doctor, the ruler, the father, all live with “an accurate picture of God” in mind: “A despot who needs a constant increase of His Power in order to survive. *God* equals *capitalism*. Thus God allows a smidgen of happiness to humans. His victims. For He needs their love. Humans who do not love (God) suffer” (45-46). When the Korean War leaves Schreber dismembered, the Pentagon easily turns the doctor into the patient, using him as a “guinea pig in their tests of an endorfin cure for terminal despair,” a quintessential American capitalist enterprise (47). He finally escapes to Algeria, “the land of the free” to resume working for the AMA, which resembles the CIA (47). Acker’s Dr. Schreber conflates a famous father and son pair. Dr. Daniel Gottlieb Moritz Schreber, a leading nineteenth century German physician who invented restraint devices for children (for example, to prevent masturbation), whose middle name is coincidentally that of another crazy doctor in *Empire of the Senseless*, Dr. Gottlieb. Dr. Schreber’s son, Daniel Paul Schreber, wrote *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* and became a famous subject of Freud’s retrospective case study.

distinguish between right and wrong (in both epistemological and moral senses), to be able to name, identify, and make accountable in the interest of regulating oppression and injustice.<sup>209</sup>

I suggest that Acker uses conflation in order to explore this “foreignness of language,” as part of her commitment to critique colonial structures of society through writing. It is the resulting messiness of conflation that has led some readers to dismiss the significance of Acker’s political and aesthetic project.

What sort of decolonization gets imagined through the use of “bad” language and “wrong” thinking (in this case, conflation)? What threat or possibility does Acker’s confluences pose to the sensible foundations of a postcolonial ethics? Conflation, as a mode of critique, interrupts and frustrates the disciplinary desire to define, to name, to identify—to mark out an ethical relation, a correspondence built between two stable names. Conflation makes the distinct unsteady, the familiar strange, the precise erroneous—both at the level of story, when two (public, historical, fictional) narratives are conflated, and at the level of the word, when two concepts, terms, or meanings are conflated. Deliberate conflation produces a “dislocation of referents from meanings and from signs” in the attempt to regain control over one’s own sign-making, meaning-making, that refuses the sorts of distinctions that have bound society to figurative and material forms of colonialism.

When Abhor witnesses the tattooing of Agone’s body, she narrates an oft-cited passage on the political possibilities of language: “an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren’t

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<sup>209</sup> Saunders, Rebecca. “Risky Business: Edward Said as Literary Critic,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.3 (2005): 528-9. Saunders does cite Spivak as the most notable exception to this claim, but also points out that other postcolonial theorists who draw heavily on poststructuralist thought, such as Homi K. Bhabha, ultimately “invokes linguistic indeterminacy as a *metaphor* for other modes of ambivalence,” n20.

acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes (*Empire of the Senseless* 134). Abhor's reasoning could apply to one of the most multi-faceted confluences in *Empire of the Senseless*—the use of Perso-Arabic linguistic script, as a sort of “forbidden” “code” and signifier of the enemy to U.S. nationalism, in a literal enactment of “speaking” the enemy's language (the narrative, after all, is structured as an alternating series of narrations by Abhor and Thivai). Acker's use of Farsi has been misread or gone unnoticed by many of her readers, but it expresses the “foreignness of language” quite literally.

The Farsi takes on a chiasmic, back and forth (or call and response, or echoing) movement with English when Thivai first attempts to get out of prison by letting his imagination soar. Thivai explains that prison makes one imagine/be imaginary: “The fact is that all prisoners should be killed by the state and , since they haven't been, they're in actuality beyond death. Thus, prisoners are sacred. Their lives are imaginary, *imaginary* as in ‘imaginary number’, not rationally possible” (148). Where prisoners are sacred and so are beyond death, Thivai dreams up stories in English and Farsi. Some critics mistake the Farsi for Arabic (only four characters distinguish Perso-Arabic from Arabic), thus conflating “Arab” as a cultural identity with the Arab-looking foreign language.<sup>210</sup>

The Farsi text in *Empire of the Senseless* is an/other twin to the English. The Farsi text shadows its English counterpart. It lies somewhere between sense and

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<sup>210</sup> Clune is representative of many critics when he mistakes the Farsi for Arabic: “The revolutionary Algerian community is defined by the use of Arabic, a language that strikes Abhor as full of mysterious potential until the translation of characters spray-painted against a wall robs it of the cloak of exotic otherness: ‘Ali is pretty,’ but ‘Anarchy always kills a kid off’ (54),” (510). On the basic elements of the Farsi language and script, see Sulaymān Hayyīm, *The Larger English-Persian Dictionary* (Tehran: Farhang Moaser, 1984).

nonsense, a joke and an offense to the language—in short, it works something like Acker’s written English, if one can read it; or else its meaning is produced depending upon the affective, aesthetic response of the sensual, sensible reader. While the Farsi is, with a few exceptions, usually echoing or preceding a meaning conveyed in English, its mistranslation is a productive travesty, a grammatical mess that has frustrated two kind translators while conveying “more or less” proximate lines in English. Literal translation of the Farsi suggests that an English-Persian dictionary was the mediator between the two languages; in this sense, the dictionary—normally *the* text for establishing distinctions between words and strictly delimiting the “sense” of a language—comes to act as a sort of code book for writing in a language one doesn’t know (a language one can’t use “properly” and whose meanings do not lead primarily to linguistic sense). This sense of a code book is emphasized when you look at a bilingual dictionary: the only corresponding term to any word you recognize is its foreign other, side by side, as if equivalent, with neither offering a meaning outside this strange mirroring of the presumably domestic and foreign image. Each sentence one forms in a foreign language appears as merely a foreign, visual image to some, and a signifying monstrosity to others.

Acker’s work, at one level, has been built by conflation. Acker’s confluations represent continuities, convergences, normally masked formations, confusions, and misquotations. But conflation, as a sort of mode for questioning distinctions by disrespecting them to see what happens, also attends to the work of thinking about the differences between modes of narrative and ways of feeling (about) stories and the prisons or the dreams of flight they can make, at the same moment. The fictional Algerian Revolution in Paris represents one key moment in which conflation becomes a key method for constructing narratives of anti-colonial revolution and of political statelessness.

I suggest that conflation in *Empire* is a narrative and rhetorical method that contributes to Acker's version of what Chela Sandoval calls a "methodology of the oppressed," enacted with the goal of "decolonizing the social imagination" (183). Acker's writing about revolution is tied to the hope of prophecy, of writing for unrealized psychic and social revolts, but without the faith that real world leaders, or a manifesto, blueprint, or map, can lead to a fully decolonizing revolution: all the more reason, then, for zombies and revolutionaries, manifestoes, "handbooks," or "instruction manuals" (both for social control by the powerful and for radical resistance to the powerful) to get mixed up with fiction as a way to imagine revolution, and all the more reason to mix up celebratory narratives of revolution with the real world mess of actual, nationalist revolution that follows.

Acker's stateless or anti-statist myth-making produces conflation as one method for anticipating a fully decolonial world that is also an aesthetic project, or more precisely, an aesthetic projection—"a society that was beautiful, which wasn't just disgust." Unlike Sandoval, however, Acker does not articulate a methodology of the oppressed that operates as love—"love as social movement...enacted by revolutionary, mobile, and global coalitions of citizen-activists who are allied through the apparatus of emancipation" (183). This love—articulated as the love of language but also the love that Sandoval describes—finds its expression in one Nadine Jane "Mosquito" Johnson, the narrator of Gayl Jones' novel *Mosquito*.

## Chapter 4

### “Theories of Everything”:

#### Decolonial Sanctuary in Gayl Jones’ *Mosquito*

I’m only telling y’all as much as I am telling y’all because this is supposed to be kept in the archives of the Daughters. The archives keeper is supposed to be trustworthy, but being a hidden agenda conspiracy specialist I have still employed everything that I’ve learned. My first love is the love of language, though, and whilst I defends the rights and privileges of the new Underground Railroad and maintains as much of they secrets that they ain’t revealed they ownselves, I wants to maintain they privacy, conquer my own ignorance, and to tell y’all a story about South Texas.

--Gayl Jones, *Mosquito* 600

The eponymous narrator of Gayl Jones’ 1999 novel, *Mosquito*, is a character of many literary talents. As loquacious and digressive as Tristram Shandy and as well-versed in coded speech as the best “hidden agenda conspiracy specialist,” her stories run nearly as long as her memory, which, after six hundred pages of narration, we learn is potentially infinite. *Mosquito* eventually reveals that she is an archivist for the mysterious “Daughters” and stores the archive in her perfect auditory memory by narrating stories aloud to us “all” and, in the process, to her memory banks. She is “supposed to be trustworthy, but” not necessarily to her audience—so we also should have expected the sort of story worked over by a specialist in hidden agendas. A borderlands truck driver, she can be trusted to maintain the secrets of the new Underground Railroad, a radical movement that protects the refugees of governments,

but her first and most constant beloved is language, evinced in part by her polyphonic narration and incessant play with words. Mosquito's rhetorical style abounds with tautological phrases ("I'm only telling y'all as much as I am telling y'all"), references to story elements that remain somewhat cryptic even after 599 pages of narration, and a sometimes kaleidoscopic, sometimes digressive organization that often seems to follow no discernable order.

In the quotation above, Mosquito's rhetorical convolutions set up a simple and enduring claim that the purpose of storytelling is to educate and entertain the reader (addressed conversationally as "y'all") as much as herself, to "conquer my own ignorance, and to tell y'all a story about South Texas." This desire to educate and entertain entails highly complex narrative negotiations with knowledge-gathering and with storytelling. A mixture of rhetorical and structural narrative approaches animate this tension between saying a lot to an unidentifiable public "y'all" and keeping a lot unsaid, private.

Critics of the novel rehearse this story about South Texas in a remarkably consistent way, as synopsis: Mosquito, an African American woman and independent truck driver based in Texas, gets involved with the Sanctuary movement (a.k.a. "the new Underground Railroad") by transporting undocumented refugees to different hideouts. Reviewers and critics of the novel largely recount such a synopsis only to discount its importance, especially the importance of the Sanctuary movement, which gets dismissed as a foil for either the narrative styling or the thematic multiculturalism of the novel, depending on the focus of the criticism. What strikes me about Jones' creative treatment of the Sanctuary movement, however, is that the Sanctuary movement generates, even sustains, formal and thematic innovation in the novel. It does the important work of supplying Jones' formal concerns with a thematic subject that, in turn, spurs formal experimentation. Formal structure and thematic content of



the narrative are mutually transformative in *Mosquito*. The quotation above suggests one example of what I mean, as when Mosquito's involvement with the Sanctuary movement or new Underground Railroad places formal constraints upon her narration, only some of which she explicitly notes, as with her secret keeping and coded speech. In *Mosquito*, theme is not subordinated to form (indeed, is it ever, in metafictional narrative?), and no one aspect of the narrative is clearly subordinated to the other.

My reading of *Mosquito* suggests that the array of rhetorical and structural narrative tactics in the novel—including but not limited to secrecy, code switching, heteroglossia, and digression—along with its variation on the encyclopedic tradition, represents the interrelation of aesthetic and political efforts at decolonization, a concept that Jones uses flexibly and in reference to individuals and collectivities. I contend that Jones depicts the Sanctuary movement and the Daughters of Nzingha as apparently distinct political and aesthetic decolonization projects, respectively, but that the narrative then explores their interrelated political and aesthetic dimensions. The novel explores how the figures of the indigenous revolutionary, the refugee, and the diasporic subject pose collateral questions about forms of social reproduction and what aesthetic possibilities may come from such relations. It is in the narrator, archivist, and worker Mosquito that refugee and diasporic subjectivities become interrelated dimensions of the same quest for living freely, specifically through what Emma Pérez calls the “transformative mobility” of diaspora, its possibilities for forming a creative “oppositional subjectivity” for women specifically.<sup>211</sup> The novel depicts decolonization as at once broad and covert in its operations (through the Sanctuary movement and Mosquito's work transporting refugees) and uncompromisingly personal (through the Daughters of Nzingha and Mosquito's work as archives keeper

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<sup>211</sup> See Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999): 19, 79.

and narrator). I argue that these political and aesthetic concerns about narrative get explored in *Mosquito* through two major concepts, that of the Sanctuary movement and the idea of sanctuary more broadly, and that of the Daughters of Nzingha archives and “archive” more broadly. The Sanctuary movement and the Daughters of Nzingha archive are rich conceptual terms with material, historiographical, national-political, and figurative dimensions that Jones explores in her effort to create a decolonial narrative aesthetic practice. This practice would free up narrative from political or ideological effects enforced by certain conventions—for instance, the convention of a single narrator to produce a coherent individualistic worldview—but it also would explore narrative and rhetorical tools that would decolonize the way “the beautiful” is talked about, judged, and represented. This formal effort cannot be separated from the desire to decolonize material and historical practice, because people who must negotiate their official subjection to dominant ways of knowing and narrating are aware of the political effects of form, perspective, method, and the idea of beauty and selfhood that are effected through language.

In *Mosquito*, I do not see Jones subordinating her thematic to her formal concerns. Neither do I see the Sanctuary movement (or the Daughters of Nzingha) as incidental, a convenient foil for her formal play, or merely thematic. Rather, I see Jones’ literary efforts, as I’ve introduced them above, as animated by her formally and thematically creative depiction of the Sanctuary movement, which converges in important ways with the Daughters of Nzingha, the other fictional construct I examine closely for Jones’ aesthetic project. Jones’ depiction of the Sanctuary movement and the Daughters of Nzingha archive invites a reconsideration of the notion of inclusivity, of “wholeness,” as Jones writes in her essay on aesthetics entitled, “From *The Quest for Wholeness*: Re-Imagining the African-American Novel: An Essay on Third World

Aesthetics.”<sup>212</sup> For Jones, to reconceptualize inclusivity, especially through her polyphonic and very purposeful entanglement of African, “Third World,” “New World,” and indigenous art forms, is to effectively redefine the principles of aesthetic and political inclusion that have come to shape “the nation” and the “body politic.”

The introductory section of this chapter reviews the tendency for critics to assign the Sanctuary movement a marginal status in readings of the novel. It then discusses Jones’ essay on aesthetics, “from *The Quest for Wholeness*,” the title of which begins the play between the aesthetic status of the part to the whole. I read Jones’ essay as a playful declaration of aesthetic independence that is also relational, and which draws from multiple cultural theories of storytelling that comment on “wholeness” as an aesthetic and psychic process.

The next section of the chapter reads *Mosquito* in light of the aesthetic project outlined in *Quest*. It examines the importance of Jones’ representation of the Sanctuary movement to the aesthetic and political project of decolonization that gets played out at the levels of character action, rhetorical figures, and narrative structure in the novel. I show how Mosquito’s two major commitments to the Sanctuary movement and the Daughters both articulate transnational possibilities for individual and collective liberation rather than national ones, possibilities that are imagined through acts of “minding the word”—not simply obeying but also tending to, caring for, the word. The Sanctuary movement, particularly the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement in which Mosquito participates, comes to figure as a political, material decolonization movement that finds an aesthetic, spiritual, and frequently uproarious counterpoint in the Daughters of Nzingha, a paradoxically unbound, non-organized collectivity of survivors of the African diaspora (and their friends). The political,

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<sup>212</sup> Gayl Jones, “From *The Quest for Wholeness*: Re-Imagining the African-American Novel: An Essay on Third World Aesthetics,” *Callaloo* 17 (1994): 507–18.

material, aesthetic, and by turns spiritual and irreverent dimensions of decolonization animate Mosquito in her relationships, as wary participant and as narrator, to both the Sanctuary movement and the Daughters of Nzingha. Mosquito describes the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement and the Daughters as being two unrelated parts of her life for most of her narration; part of my aim is to show how the two exist in relation to each other. I aim to show that Mosquito’s Sanctuary work and her work as archivist are two aspects of the same Zapatista-inspired charge of “minding the word.”

In the section on Jones’ depiction of the Sanctuary movement, I consider a nexus of meanings around the term “sanctuary” in the novel. Conversations between Mosquito and the attractive Father Raymond, an underground Sanctuary worker who poses as a priest and seeks to recruit Mosquito for this “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement, introduce the possibility of love and reading to Mosquito. Mosquito agrees to participate in what she calls Ray’s movement, which Jones depicts as a counter to the religious nationalism surrounding the historical Sanctuary movement. As part of my effort to show how digressions structure the narrative so as to advance multiple ways of defining and of understanding the aggregated subjects of digressive sequences, I track Mosquito’s digressive sequences around the term and concept of sanctuary in the opening chapter of the novel. The pattern of digression becomes a way to rhetorically put forth multiple, sequential but also relational and implicitly potentially infinite, meanings of a given word or concept. This rhetorical move—digression—then structures the form of the novel while also complicating the dual status of “sanctuary” as a “sacred place,” in the religious sense of a part of the church building, as well as a “safe” space, in the sense of the space that harbors fugitives from the law. Through digression, Jones suggests that “the nation” figured as sanctuary (from both the Central American and U.S. states) by the historically publicized Sanctuary campaigns is itself in need of revision. “Sanctuary,” under Jones’ treatment,

gets de-linked from the Christian and nationalist rhetoric informing the public discourse of the historical Sanctuary movement and becomes instead an unfinished series of meanings shaped by Mosquito and her relation to other characters, especially seekers of refuge.

The final section of the chapter discusses the relationship between Mosquito's involvement with the Sanctuary movement and with the Daughters archives, as Mosquito at once narrates and archives the Daughters stories in her "long memory." Like the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement, the Daughters is figured as transnational and engaged in using words as weapons for liberation. The two movements require a "guerrilla personality" evocative of the actual Zapatistas rebellion (426).<sup>213</sup> I discuss examples in which the Daughters explicitly supply the motive for Mosquito's storytelling about the Sanctuary movement and help Mosquito claim herself as one of the "keepers" for decolonized stories. The "trickster storyteller of an African-American folk tradition who is a living archive of stories that history has elided,"<sup>214</sup> Mosquito includes the Sanctuary movement, the Zapatistas rebellion, *and* the story of her own spiritual sources for waging freedom wars through words within one story (and my main example for this section), the story she narrates of how she got her auditory memory. Most importantly, I suggest in this final section that the

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<sup>213</sup> I do not detail the significance of the Zapatistas to *Mosquito*, but Jones clearly draws upon the hopeful decolonizing potential of the Zapatistas that Leslie Marmon Silko anticipated in her novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. The actual Zapatistas are complex and their programs work on many registers. The most intriguing aspect of the Zapatistas to artists and intellectuals has been its creative use of internet and performance media, its decolonial perspective that joins indigenous with non-indigenous forms of knowledge, and the prolific and playfully serious manner of storytelling by subcommandante Marcos. For writings, see Subcommandante Marcos. *Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001). For a social-scientific account of the Zapatistas that counters the emphasis on the literary and charismatic figure of Marcos, see George A. Collier with Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello. *Basta!: Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, foreword by Peter Rosset (Oakland: Food First Books, 2005, 3rd ed).

<sup>214</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen, "Speaking in Typeface: Characterizing Stereotypes in Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49.1 (2003): 143.

Daughters figure as Jones' experimentation with authorship, with the survival of multiple relational authorial voices that exist as alter egos of each other.

Despite Gayl Jones' prominence as one of the leading Black novelists of her generation, criticism of *Mosquito* remains scant.<sup>215</sup> Jones' experiments with aspects of narrative including perspective, character, and theme, all of which test conventions and try for new outcomes or effects, have often produced a mixture of notoriety and grudging recognition of her literary brilliance. Whereas her two spare, tightly written novels of the 1970s sparked intense controversy for their depiction of black heterosexual relationships, *Mosquito* has elicited reviews that admonish Jones for the text's formal confusedness but comment very little on its subject matter.

Several features of *Mosquito* contrasts sharply with the 1970s novels for which Jones is best known, among them, its evocation of the encyclopedic narrative, which results in the very long, digressive, heteroglossial narration of *Mosquito*. Jones' engagement with encyclopedic narrative is important to my argument about how the ideas of "sanctuary" and "archive" animate Jones' political and aesthetic concerns about knowledge, coloniality, and power.<sup>216</sup> As Molly Hite observes, in the "older tradition of encyclopedic narrative...the entire range of knowledge and beliefs peculiar to a culture is comprehended and systematized."<sup>217</sup> Encyclopedia means "to

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<sup>215</sup> The collection of essays *After the Pain* attempts to redress this absence of criticism on *Mosquito* and Jones' other understudied works (notably, *The Healing* and her 1981 narrative poem *Song for Anninho*).

<sup>216</sup> Knowledge, coloniality, and power are widely identified as the common concerns of the vast and heterogenous critical work conducted under the category of postcolonial studies. For an introduction, see *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005). See also Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1.3 (2000).

<sup>217</sup> Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989). For a discussion of encyclopedic narrative, Hite refers to Ronald T. Swigger, "Fictional Encyclopedism and the Cognitive Value of Literature," *Comparative Literature Studies* 12 (Dec 1975): 351-66.

know everything,” but as importantly, it is to organize that “everything” into a whole, whether a perfectly “circular” entirety or organism, through the organizer’s awareness of the spiritual connectedness of different branches of knowledge.<sup>218</sup> Such projects, regardless of their success, assume a colonialist mode of knowledge ordering and gathering, of defining kinds and ways of knowing, and of deciding what counts as knowledge. The project to include and organize “everything” also suggests a protective impulse and an anxiety of gathering all parts into the whole: the encyclopedia, in this sense, operates as a sort of textual preserve, a textual sanctuary with clearly defined borders, and a sacred cultural archive developed for the protection and regulation of a national culture.

*Mosquito*, presented as the selectively narrated contents of an archive, but which *Mosquito* suggests might also be the entire archive of an imaginary polyphony of authors called the Daughters of Nzingha, is a novel that participates in an epistemological battle over knowledge and its decolonization through narrative as the weapon of choice.<sup>219</sup> Jones engages with the concept of encyclopedia in multivalent ways—*Mosquito* is a voracious learner and tirelessly narrates the process of learning and of what she’s learned, thus incorporating her knowledge into the Daughters archive. The incorporation, however, is a heteroglossia not wholly mediated by an organizing perspective, that of *Mosquito*, but through a multiple and polyphonic authorship of alter egos (as I will go on to explain below). *Mosquito* reads as both a parody of the encyclopedia and a serious effort at rethinking what and how narrative

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<sup>218</sup> I take the quoted terms from the Italian surrealist writer, Alberto Savinio (*Nuova Enciclopedia*) cited in Kevin Daniel Attell, *Encyclopedic Modernisms: Historical Reflection and Modern Narrative Form*, Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 2003, 1.

<sup>219</sup> I use the language of battle to anticipate *Mosquito*’s charge of “minding the word,” her evocation of Subcomandante Marcos’ claim that, as Zapatistas, “our word is our weapon,” and, since I have already introduced Savinio’s thoughts on encyclopedia, his contention that encyclopedia is “a polemical weapon.” On Savinio, see Attell, 1.

treatment of knowledge aims to either construct or challenge a “we” that is homogenous, pure, “whole” in a way that controls and subsumes its parts. Mosquito is an archivist narrator who wants to include “everything” in her story but operates on entirely different principles of inclusion and exclusion than many archivists or narrators. She is not guided by a homogenizing perspective and hierarchical organizing principle but by the relation of multiple perspectives to each other, multiple cultural forms of storytelling and listening, and multiple ways of determining what stories should be told and which kept secret. The narrator Mosquito—and the implied author’s occasional insertion of text that Mosquito may not be “telling” us—disregards many conventional rules of storytelling even as she includes a seemingly indiscriminate mix of “everything” into her narrative.<sup>220</sup>

This impulse to include “everything” will be detailed in my discussion of “*Quest*” and a decolonial aesthetics below. Within the story-world of the novel, Mosquito’s narrative principles are guided, in good part, by her seemingly unbridled “love of language” and by her participation in the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement and its partly secret, partly archivable, heterogeneous stories. Significantly, the beginning of Mosquito’s narration—her story of South Texas—is the story of how she became involved in the Sanctuary movement, and one question for me is how those frequent digressions read as part of the story of how she found Maria “Barriga”

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<sup>220</sup> Not surprisingly, perhaps, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ends his review of the book with the wish of order and selection: “Would that an editor like [Toni] Morrison had helped Jones locate where she wanted her narrator to be, and to bridle in this sprawling, formless, maddening tale.” Gates describes Toni Morrison as “the midwife” of young women writers during her time as senior editor at Random House publishing, when she supported several young women writers including Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, and Angela Davis. Gates, “Sanctuary.” Greg Tate, in his review, titled “Going Underground” or “Gayl Jones’s Literary Sanctuary,” similarly longs for the by now more familiar type of women’s writing from the younger “Gayl,” “a reclusive and enigmatic sister from Kentucky who wrote books that explored scar tissue from the inside” (“Going Underground”). He ends his review with a call to “[a]ll those who believe in keeping the faith...to say a little prayer for Gayl.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Sanctuary,” *New York Times Book Review* (14 Nov. 1999). Greg Tate, “Going Underground,” *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (Feb. 1999) <<http://www.villagevoice.com/vls/160/tate.shtml>>.



(belly) Ramirez stowed away in the back of her truck, asking for sanctuary.<sup>221</sup>

*Mosquito* is structured by continual digressions, embedded texts typographically set apart from the principal narration, and a generally non-linear, incorporative, and twist on the encyclopedic drive to take “everything” as its focus.<sup>222</sup> The result is a book that critics, with the important exception of Deborah McDowell, have faulted for its length, its seeming formlessness, its “stilted” political content and wildly heterogeneous discursive content.<sup>223</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for instance, describes the novel as “a late-night riff by the Signifying Monkey, drunk with words and out of control, regurgitating half-digested ideas taken from USA Today, digressing on every possible subject.”<sup>224</sup> *Mosquito*’s inconsistencies, excesses, and her “hidden talents,” are taken

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<sup>221</sup> Each new topic or digression *Mosquito* begins is nested within a previous digression. Riffs, encyclopedic drives, indirection, “signifying,” and parody do not comprise “a practical way to tell a story,” and some critics dismiss the narrative as a failed attempt at realism rather than as a successful nonrealist narrative (Gates, “Sanctuary”). In “*Quest*” Jones attributes the claim that “the novel is the most flexible of forms” to Henry James (510). The essay’s narrator, however, warns, “I am not your idea of the ‘well-made Jamesian novel.’ I am the very idea of being human in a complex world, or complex universe” (510). For an earlier discussion of Jones’ experimentation, see her interview with Michael Harper, “Gayl Jones: An Interview,” *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 692-715.

<sup>222</sup> Jones, “*Quest*,” 96. See also Bramen for a reading of Jones’ subordination of plot to description.

<sup>223</sup> See Deborah McDowell, “The Whole Story,” *Women’s Review of Books* 16.6 (March 1999). Madhu Dubey points out that Jones (along with Morrison) “consistently employ[s] nonrealist modes of characterization that are unreadable within the terms of images-of-black-women criticism.” Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5. In contrast, co-reviewers Dorothy Cole and Kelle Schillaci fault *Mosquito* for wavering between a working-class truckdriver with “hidden intellectual brilliance prompted by life experience” and “a well-read and erudite individual masquerading as ‘just folks.’” Dorothy Cole and Kelle Schillaci, “Speed Reader,” *Weekly Wire* (1 Feb 1999), <[http://www.weeklywire.com/ww/02-01-99/alibi\\_speeder.html](http://www.weeklywire.com/ww/02-01-99/alibi_speeder.html)>.

<sup>224</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. leads a chorus of reviewers who fault *Mosquito* for its thematic and formal experimentations with orality. Conducted mostly in an ostensibly Black Kentucky vernacular, *Mosquito*’s narration has been described as difficult to ‘read’—difficult to read the words on the page and hard to figure out in terms of Jones’ textual deconstruction of orality. *Mosquito* clearly does not give its readers the “illusion of speech,” as Gates would have preferred. He expresses irritation at Jones’ aesthetic theories of improvisational and polyphonic narration, which are expressed frequently by characters, as when *Mosquito* wonders if “it be possible to tell a true jazz story, where the peoples that listens can just enter the story and start telling it and adding things wherever they wants. The story would provide the jazz foundation, the subject, but they be improvising around that subject or them subjects and be composing they own jazz story” (93). Gates, “Sanctuary.” Gates’ writing on the set of narrative strategies and linguistic stylings called “signifying” have been influential, even as Gates draws upon other scholars focused on “signifying.” Gates, “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey” *Critical Inquiry* 9.4 (Jun. 1983): 685-723.

by Gates to indicate Jones' failure at characterization, as if Jones intended to recreate a living, breathing, realist character/person. Mosquito's characterization and style of narration have an explicit purpose in the novel that Gates does not address.

Mosquito's principal "hidden talent," her auditory memory, is crucial to her involvement in the fictional Sanctuary movement and the fictional Daughters. Her "hidden talent" motivates her narration, as her archive is literally the memory of what she hears. Her auditory memory, then, joins the political to the aesthetic quest for a decolonial aesthetics.<sup>225</sup> If "Mosquito refuses to shut up," as the favorable critic Deborah McDowell notes in contrast to Jones' earlier women characters, perhaps it is because the process of decolonization must be narrated and yet incomplete, always oriented toward unrealized possibilities.

At issue is not only length and digressive style of narration but also Jones' use of multiple literary traditions to represent a transnational imaginary. Gates, whose theory of Black vernacular and oral narrative forms has been seminal to African American literary critics, faults Jones for trying to write her own "dissertation about orality" (Gates). Reviewer Greg Tate reproaches Jones for her lengthy engagement with Latina/o culture by way of the Sanctuary movement plot and Delgadina, Mosquito's girlfriend, described in another review as a "paper cutout of a Chicana who exists only to voice stilted political views."<sup>226</sup> Tate finds in *Mosquito* a new but not improved Jones, who not only speaks for African-Americans in an unauthorized

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<sup>225</sup> Bramen reads Gates' hostility to *Mosquito* through his "political investment in realism" (129). I would qualify Bramen's explanation by noting the particular trouble that gender stirs, as black women novelists negotiated both the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s (after all, Gates does not *always* have "conservative aesthetic moorings" rooted in realism, as he champions the anti-realist narrative parody *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed at length in "The Blackness of Blackness." The radical Black nationalist plays of Amiri Baraka are also not "realist" in the conventional sense). See Bramen, "Speaking in Typeface," esp. pp 127-134.

<sup>226</sup> Cole and Schillaci.

way, but whose unleashed inner “Racial Authority...[speaks] on behalf of our Latin American brothers and sisters too and [does] it at a length that might kindly be called self-indulgent, if not incredibly demanding of even her most sympathetic readers' time, tolerance, and intelligence.”<sup>227</sup> Critics such as Tate and Gates bristle at Mosquito's excessive sense of authority, to create a ““multicultural, multilinguistic, multi-vernacular novel and at the same time...a self-defined African American novel, that is *la verdadera historia*, an African novel born in the New World” (“*Quest*” 509).

Few reviewers of the book have considered what its treatment of political concerns with “sanctuary” has to do with its lengthy play with realist, satirical, parodic, and fantastic narrative modes. Moreover, the fictional Sanctuary movement may appear insignificant to the story-world of the novel partly because no particular element of the narrative is clearly privileged over the others. Tens, and at times, hundreds, of pages of narration come between one sentence that advances the political Sanctuary movement plot and the next, and Mosquito's narration frequently gives way to other characters' voices or their writings at some length, including letters between friends, journal entries, songs, even text by Gayl Jones' mother, Lucille Jones.

If readings that privilege Jones' formal experimentation tend to obscure her engagement with “sanctuary,” so too do readings that displace “sanctuary” from the narrative and onto the biographical level. Gates' review is the most prominent, but several others read the novel through the recent news of the dramatic suicide of Jones' husband in the months leading up to the publication of *Mosquito*.<sup>228</sup> This dubious

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<sup>227</sup> Greg Tate. "Going Underground." *Village Voice Literary Supplement* Feb. 1999. <<http://www.villagevoice.com/vls/160/tate.shtml>>.

<sup>228</sup> Gates, “Sanctuary,” 14. Few reviewers take the time that McDowell does in contemplating Jones' experiments with language and storytelling. Of Jones' personal life, McDowell writes, “[c]ritics who have habitually pondered the connection between Jones' fiction and her life couldn't resist the speculation that, with *The Healing*, Jones had broken the spell, had ‘healed’ herself...and headed toward a more affirmative vision” (McDowell).

critical tendency (to demand that women's writing yield easy biographical and psychological readings of the woman writer) leads to implied definitions of "sanctuary" as what writing the novel might have meant for Jones, or as what Jones still needs to find so that she can return to her "old" self again (Tate). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, reviewers strained to "discern" in the novel, as Gates writes, "clues to Jones's feelings about the recent tragic events of her personal life" ("Sanctuary"). Such detective work is apparently unfazed by the fact that Jones would have completed the novel before the tragic events of 1998.<sup>229</sup>

Whereas initial reception of the novel faulted its heterogeneity and multicultural experimentation at the level of character and narrative structure, recent critical essays on the novel focus primarily on the cultural intersection of primarily African American and Latin American cultures and characters.<sup>230</sup> Such critics rightly identify *Mosquito* as a continuation of Jones' interest in hemispheric America and its histories of racism, slavery, colonialism, liberation struggles, and cultural syncretism.<sup>231</sup> Oddly enough to me, the novel's related and more prominent

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<sup>229</sup> Jones appears to have completed most of *Mosquito* by late 1996, and worked on the novel as she was writing *The Healing*. For a detailed and largely sensitive news article on Jones' personal and publication history in the 1990s (despite its location in the "Mental Health" section of the *NY Times*), see Peter Lanso, "Chronicle of a Tragedy Foretold," *New York Times* (Health. 19 Jul 1998).

<sup>230</sup> On *Mosquito* as an Afrocentric novel, see Casey Clabough, "Afrocentric Recolonizations: Gayl Jones's 1990s Fiction," *Contemporary Literature* 46.2 (2005): 243-274. See also Jill Terry, "'reads kinda like jazz in they rhythm': Gayl Jones's Recent Jazz Conversations" in *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*, ed. Fiona Mills and asst. ed. Keith B. Mitchell (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 117-136. See also the following essays in *After the Pain*: for *Mosquito* as a multicultural neo-slave narrative, see Sarika Chandra, "Interruptions: Tradition, Borders, and Narrative in Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*" (137-155); on Afro-Chicano and Latino connections, see Fiona Mills, "Telling the Untold Tale: Afro-Latino/a Identifications in the Work of Gayl Jones" (91-116). For a nuanced reading of characterization and *latinidad* in the novel, see Brammen. For a reading of Jones' hemispheric vision in *Mosquito*, see Ifeoma C.K. Nwankwo, "The Promises and Perils of US African-American Hemispherism: Latin America in Martin Delany's *Blake* and Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*," *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 579-599.

<sup>231</sup> See especially Jones' novel *Corregidora* and her long narrative poem, *Song for Anninho*. Jones, *Corregidora* (New York: Random House, 1975). Jones, *Song for Anninho* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1981). For a study of the inter-American commonalities and engagements in these texts, see Stelamaris Coser, *Bridging the Americas: the Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones* (Philadelphia:

engagement with the Americas by way of its treatment of the Sanctuary movement receives little attention from even these critics, and essays on US African American and Latin American connections in the novel often describe the movement vaguely and incorrectly. Examples of this neglect may be found in nearly all reviews and essays on the novel, which regard the Sanctuary movement as a movement entirely of Jones' invention that helps "Mexicans" or people fleeing all of "Latin America" (Mills). These descriptions obfuscate the broader and inclusive movement that Jones represents in contrast to the historical Sanctuary movement, and these critics thus miss aspects of Jones' decolonizing aesthetics and politics in the novel. Sanctuary, in these reviews, is everywhere and nowhere, self-evident (as plot) or evidence (as symptom) that an authorial self has taken refuge in digression. What these readings of the novel miss is the importance of "sanctuary" in Jones' engagement with knowledge, coloniality, power, and aesthetics as part of her attempt to write a novel that attempts to perform its own decolonization. Critical accounts of the novel that reduce the Sanctuary movement to the plot and consign the plot to the margins of critical attention make it easy to miss the relationship between the Sanctuary movement and Jones' aesthetic project in the novel. The significance of the Sanctuary movement and "sanctuary" in the novel is not reducible to plot summary, but its significance as plot should not be dismissed, either. Mosquito may deliberately defer the "plot" sequence, for example, as part of her "plotting," her planning to tell a story that is in some ways secret or subversive and must be coded precisely by those digressions.

The Sanctuary movement, or "new Underground Railroad," supplies the novel with a plot and subject matter that helps Jones redefine the U.S. Southwest as part of

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Temple University Press, 1995).

the Americas, as Carrie Tirado Bramen and Ifeoma Nwankwo note.<sup>232</sup> Jones creates a fictional “mainstream” Sanctuary movement that corresponds to the historical Sanctuary movement (especially the well-publicized Tucson, Arizona Sanctuary), a religious and political movement in the 1980s composed of mostly U.S. Christian religious organizations who mobilized to provide sanctuary for undocumented Central American refugees, in open defiance of U.S. foreign and immigration policy. The historical Sanctuary movement conceived its work in largely religious, moral, national, and global terms.<sup>233</sup> Historical Sanctuary work publicly and actively contested U.S. state power, regularly dealt with and provoked the INS, and sought to challenge the conservative Christian alliance with President Ronald Reagan and the state in favor of the vision of a “*global church*” whose values and actions “surpassed the boundaries of nationalism” (Cunningham 206).

At one level, Jones’ depiction of the “mainstream” in contrast to the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement is a critique of the historical U.S. Sanctuary movement. The well-publicized work of the movement sought not only to provide refuge for Central Americans fleeing war but also to affirm the moral terms of the nation. As anthropologist Hilary Cunningham notes in her important study of the U.S. Sanctuary movement, “like their right-wing counterparts,” Sanctuary church

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<sup>232</sup> Additionally, *Mosquito* depicts countless hemispheric connections. The narrator’s nickname “Mosquito” itself belongs to Spanish and English, as “a diminutive of the Spanish *mosco* which means fly and from the Latin *musca*,” and “there’re people in Honduras and Nicaragua called Mosquitos and mosquito’s a language too” (*Mosquito* 242). The international Mosquito Coast is populated by the indigenous Miskito people, among others, whose culture and Miskito language reflect a long history of incorporating outsiders, both through cultural encounter and violence. For more on Miskito society in relation to Sandinista Revolution, see Philip A. Dennis, “The Costenos and the Revolution in Nicaragua,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 23.3 (Aug. 1981): 271-296. On Miskito’s friendly relations with English buccaneers and history of slaving, see Mary W. Helms, “Miskito Slaving and Culture Contact: Ethnicity and Opportunity in an Expanding Population,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39.2, *New World Ethnohistory* (Summer, 1983): 179-197.

<sup>233</sup> For a thorough and insightful study of the Sanctuary movement, see Hilary Cunningham, *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

committees “tended to view state as a moral entity that produced policies with moral implications” (Cunningham 206). Jones is critical of this point; she also critiques the dominant story of the Sanctuary movement, which drew parallels to the Underground Railroad for the purpose of heroizing the participants while minimizing the role of people of color within both movements.

In contrast to the story of the historical Sanctuary movement that Jones appears to be using, Jones depicts a “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement as an underground, radicalized network largely of people of color for whom sanctuary work involves the transport, legal assistance, and harboring of refugees as part of an enigmatic and non-centralized, indefinable, loosely collective quest for full decolonization of people in the Americas. The “not-mainstream” Sanctuary thrives on its invisibility to both state power and “mainstream” discourse, as it is comprised of politically marginalized people of color who have learned to use the effects of their enduring exclusion from the nation, a condition portrayed by Jones when Mosquito and other people of color are more likely to be confused with the refugees themselves and ignored altogether by the national press, to form a “guerrilla personality.”

Rooted in Christian definitions of the church as a sacred place from fourteenth-century Europe, “sanctuary” refers broadly to any place, understood by law or established custom, to provide immunity from the law to fugitives who enter that place. In the late nineteenth century, its usage extended to refer to any area of land that protects and encourages the growth of wild animals or plants (*OED*). Jones takes these potentially conservative as well as conservationist meanings to articulate a liberatory aesthetics at the level of the word, of language and meaning. As part of her engagement with “sanctuary,” Jones seeks to transform aesthetics, which she defines as “ideas of beauty, value, and form,” because such ideas help determine what’s

included and protected or excluded and othered, who's kept inside or left outside, how wars for independence should be fought, on which aesthetic bases, and by whom.<sup>234</sup>

In order to understand Jones' aesthetic experiments with "sanctuary" and narration in *Mosquito*, it is helpful to look at an earlier essay written by Jones on the novel form, entitled "From The Quest for Wholeness." Published five years before *Mosquito* in the journal *Callaloo* purportedly as an excerpt from a book-length essay, "*Quest*" is written from the perspective of an African American novel that describes its decolonizing aesthetics. The essay imagines the narrator persona of a novel freed from the authoritarian control of its author. The novel presumably speaks for itself in the essay— tells its own story, advances its own claims about decolonization and self-definition, declaring, "I am both novel and (story)teller" (510). Jones creates a novel just as "real" as any character-narrator, and thus, making literal the claim by novelist Henry James that "[a] novel is a living thing, all one and continuous," though James would have feared such a literalization of his claim.<sup>235</sup> In "*Quest*," the novel assumes the masculine pronoun as it narrates its "search for identity," which involves the difficult project of "untangl[ing] the complications of society so he can see what he really is, what his relationship with others ought to be, and what he can become."<sup>236</sup> In other words, the novel, like the author, is figured as a creative organism in search of self-decolonization, which occurs when one defines oneself and finds a sense of one's possibilities, outside authoritarian control. The novel may be written by an author, but

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<sup>234</sup> The language of control and the labor of freeing oneself from another's control preoccupies Jones' writing. Often this struggle is cast in terms of heterosexual relationships structured by slave, colonial, and gender relations. In "*Quest*" a discourse of control, imposition, and dominance identifies the colonialist of a "colonized" novel. She writes simply, "What is a colonialist? A colonialist controls," (511).

<sup>235</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>236</sup> Jones, "*Quest*," 508. For "untangl[ing]...become," Jones quotes John S. Brushwood, *Mexico in its Novel: A Nation's Search for Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 42.



it lives independently of her or him. Evoking the language of self-help and spiritual guides, the novel declares, “[a]ll novels must first understand themselves before they can understand authors or other novels” (508).<sup>237</sup> Jones displaces the persistent tendency of certain critics to equate the fiction writer, as a woman of color, with her writing, and then to equate her writing with non-fictional sociological realities of the collective the writer presumably represents. The decolonized novel is ostensibly freed from the author’s control even as the author is liberated from the burden of being defined by the novel she writes.

The decolonized novel of the essay is an “Afrocentric, Afro-eccentric” novel (510). This joke defines the Afrocentric novel as centered on Africa and diaspora subject matter even as it is, in an Afro-centric way, de-centered, always aware of and engaged with what appears marginal or peripheral from any one perspective. The decolonized Afrocentric novel is eccentric, as it whimsically shifts away from its center, as well as ex-centric, as it moves beyond identifications based on a perceived center. Insisting on its centrality *and* marginality, the “decolonized novel” in “*Quest*” finds one resolution to the problem of the “freed voice” in African American literature and in what Jones calls Third World Aesthetics more broadly.<sup>238</sup> She writes in “*Quest*,”

Aesthetics is central to any conception that you have of us. You may call this aesthetics an African/African American or Third World Aesthetics. Aesthetics, as you know, has to do with the ideas that one has of beauty, or value, or form. To be free, to be liberated, an

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<sup>237</sup> The “novel” reads and frequently references other texts; it is in conversation and collaboration with the author (510), as when the novel makes offhand comments such as “[m]y implied or real author here reminds me” of something (n.8, 517).

<sup>238</sup> Jones first identifies and addresses the problem of the “freed voice” in an earlier book, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).

aesthetic must come from oneself, be defined by oneself, not others.

The outsiders become insiders, so to speak, and the insiders outsiders.

Aesthetic revolutions, too, are wars of independence. (509)

In this statement, aesthetic, political, and psychic independence are metaphors for each other, and they are inextricable aspects of decolonization (509). Jones' aesthetic theory is more complex than the "decolonized novel" suggests. An aesthetic revolution entails a reversal of power: outsiders become insiders and insiders outsiders. Such reversals, however, could repeat without end, with insiders and outsiders switching places, if it were not for an emphasis on independence as self-definition.

Jones insists on liberation through self-definition. Rather than be defined by one's position in relation to the other as outsider and insider, the definition in this mode emerges independently, from whatever one calls "the self." Decolonization is a matter of language because it is a matter of definition, of a process that establishes meaning and renders a form for oneself.

A decolonized novel may not actually be fully decolonized—as the decolonized novel admits in "*Quest*," decolonization is a matter of degree and of imagined possibilities. In this sense, Jones defines decolonization as Helen Tiffen does, as a "process, not arrival."<sup>239</sup> This process entails both self-definition and a relational way of being—individual and insider/outsider. In its endnotes, the decolonized novel of Jones' essay describes liberation in terms of one's desire for self-definition and for an exploration of one's relational possibilities:

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<sup>239</sup> While for Tiffen, de-coloniality involves a dialectical relationship "between European ontology and epistemology, and the impulse to create or re-create' local reality," Jones' decolonized novel tries to define decolonization as a process of being and exploring that does not depend on Europe, or any "other," as a necessary part of that process. Tiffen quoted in Chela Sandoval, n6, 186.

What is decolonization? It is simply to be independent from outsider models. Decolonization is also an exploration of a novel's possibilities, a sense of possibility, to use [Ralph] Ellison's phrase. Every novel is interested in what he/she could be, even if the colonizer is simply an authoritarian novelist vs. one who believes in a novel's freedom, individual or collective. (n9, 517)

For Jones, decolonization in political and cultural terms extends to the relationship between novelist and novel. The essay's novel persona insists on the "exploration" of "possibilities," rather than simply the realization of a novel's potential or fulfillment of those possibilities—in other words, decolonization entails an exploration of the conditions that make possibilities possible. Experimentation emphasizes the continual testing out of some of those possibilities and comes from a novelist's belief in the freedom of her writing, as an aesthetic subject of possibility in its own right whose structure emerges over time. This approach to the novel, Jones implies, leads the novelist to a decolonization of the writerly self as well. This notion is not so self-evident from the perspective of the author: this definition of decolonization asks the author to position herself in relation to the novel as though it were another living thing with as much complexity and future possibility as the author, rather than an artificial construct traditionally treated like a child, or a creation born of the fatherly author.

Jones complicates ideas of self and definition in "*Quest*" and *Mosquito* through different metaphors that represent a decolonized relation of the individual to the collective and to the universe. Extending and twisting James' notion of the novel as a living thing, the parts of the universe not only coexist but also find themselves within each other, such that each part is inseparable from the other but none are subordinated to the whole. The novel is imagined as a living entity whose totality comes not from the coherence of its body but from its awareness of the never-

totalizable complexity of the universe and its polyphony (“*Quest*”). Despite his observation of the flexibility of the novel form, James nonetheless insists on “absolutely premeditated art,” on composition that must never fail to assert control over its subject matter of experience.<sup>240</sup> When the novel persona in “*Quest*” warns, “I am not your idea of the well-made Jamesian novel,” it is worth remembering that James’ living thing is a novel wholly subjected to the author’s composition and to principles of art that subordinate the part to the whole. In James’ view, the failure to subordinate the part to the whole in the composition of a novel produces “large loose baggy monsters with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary” (Kaye 178). In *Mosquito*, the self is drawn from multiple selves and the individual is at once personal and collective, and it has no clearly bounded lines that define it. The narrator Mosquito is always in flux and not necessarily even a narrator in the singular. Some description of the relationship between characters in *Mosquito* will illustrate this point that the decolonized novel is independent but also relational, multicultural, transnational, potentially infinite, and polyphonic (Bakhtin). Multiculturalism and transnationalism challenge the category of a homogeneous national culture and the legitimacy of the nation-state category, respectively. *Mosquito* is multicultural in its narrative techniques, drawn from African/American, Latin American, Chicana, Asian/American, Native American, and more generally what Jones refers to as Third World storytelling traditions (“*Quest*”). In *Mosquito*, “Third World aesthetics” is joined by a tactical definition of “Third World” in the radical Sanctuary work of “Father” Ray, in which he speculates that anyone who needs the help of the new

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<sup>240</sup> Though James originally referred to the novels of Tolstoy, Dumas, and Thackeray, Jones’ *Mosquito* (along with many other late twentieth century novels) fits the description. Henry James, cited in Peter Kaye, *Dostoevsky and English modernism, 1900-1930* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 178. Kaye helpfully locates the “loose baggy monsters” expression in James’ preface to *The Tragic Muse*.

Underground Railroad or Sanctuary might be considered “Third World.” For Ray, the enduring colonial and neoliberal modes of governmentality, which construct “the Indian” and the “refugee,” also produce the ideological construction of the “First World” citizen, a construction challenged or undermined by the many people excluded from First World citizenship but subject to it and living within its reach. The dialogue between Ray and Mosquito implicitly sets up statelessness as an expanded political category that implicitly defines the “Third World” within the “First.” Multiple experiences with statelessness also form a shared identification among the people involved with the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement. While all versions of the Sanctuary movement, fictional and historical, arise to challenge the governmental state over how best to define people already within or seeking to cross state borders, the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement insists that freedom be imagined as independent from the definition of oneself made by others, and this holds true for the refugees, conscientious objectors, and not-mainstream Sanctuary workers themselves.

The multicultural cast of characters has various transnational affiliations, as well. While Mosquito participates in an underground network to assist undocumented refugees, she also engages with several friends who try, in various ways, to redefine storytelling/story-listening as a liberatory, transnational, and relational process that connects all the people of the “Third World.” The cast includes strongly drawn women refugees who are, nevertheless, featured only once in the novel, as well as women writer friends depicted more frequently. For example, Mosquito’s friend Delgadina Rodríguez is a Chicana nationalist and writer who bartends, and Mosquito’s childhood friend, nicknamed Monkey Bread, lives on what the Daughters call “the plantation” as a housekeeper (or, as Monkey Bread refers to her position, as “personal assistant”) to a Hollywood celebrity (67-68). A writer and editor for the Daughters Free Speech Press, Monkey Bread urges Mosquito to join the Daughters. All these

characters play out the relationship between storyteller and listener/reader in various configurations and through various media and interlocutors. Mosquito's "auditory memory," counterpart to common descriptions of photographic memory as the ability to memorize whatever one sees, gathers these multiple voices together through her voice while "keeping" their independence from her. The fiction of an auditory memory, at least, is that Mosquito incorporates but does not alter other voices and languages, and there is no single ideological position put forth by all the stories in the narrative. Mosquito's inclusive drive works as heteroglossia, what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson defines as the "ability to speak in the multiple languages of public discourse."<sup>241</sup>

Mosquito's heteroglossia draws upon (and in turn shapes) what she repeatedly described as the "mainstream," and she includes current events, immigration laws, documentaries, TV shows, celebrities, advertisements, and even junk mail in the archives. Such inclusionary tactics construct a polyphonic novel that is nonetheless driven by the commentary, judgments, and stories of one narrator. The joke here is that the narrator herself may be many. To keep the archive, Mosquito narrates all the stories she's been told and then her own, but it's not clear which stories are theirs, which her own, and which she imagines to be theirs. While an individual narrator, Mosquito, manages an inclusion of "everything" in the narrative, she is a polyphonic self who narrates a polyphonic world.

What "everything" is to the Daughters archives is ambiguous, though it is nominally all the stories of (female but also male) survivors of the African Diaspora

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<sup>241</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 353. Originally published in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

Holocaust or anyone who identifies with Africa. Are these stories the complexity of the whole universe, or an impression of such complexity? An expressive term that signals the desire to include more than the things included? What is whole and fragmented, worth including, circulating, remembering, and protecting from oppressive elements? If so, for which listeners/readers and to what end? How do its inclusions by definition effect exclusions? Jones' playfulness explores these dualisms in part through an explicit double-talk. Take the title of the essay for example: she embeds the claim for wholeness within a fragment. The essay reads as a complete piece and is not excerpted from a published work, but is named a fragment in search of wholeness. That search or quest is named as the larger work, but in fact it appears within the fragment. Jones similarly claims eccentricity and centrality. For every claim or principle, Jones jokingly leaves an escape hatch. Her double-talk in this way playfully moves between binary poles or dualisms, not to collapse them (as Acker does) but to give Jones some tactical "room for maneuver" in between.<sup>242</sup>

These questions take no definite answers, though they are worth more thought. One question to address in this chapter, however, is what does this inclusionary impulse have to do with sanctuary, much less statelessness? As a narrator, Mosquito becomes the vehicle for what Jones describes in "*Quest*" as a "multicultural, multilinguistic, multi-vernacular novel and at the same time... a self-defined African American novel, that is *la verdadera historia*, an African novel born in the New World" ("*Quest*" 509).<sup>243</sup> In Jones' essay, the narrating persona of this statement is a

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<sup>242</sup> I take the phrase "room for maneuver" from literary critic Ross Chambers in his book on oppositional narrative tactics. Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>243</sup> For a complaint that Jones' depictions of cross-cultural encounters occur at all, let alone at the length they do, see Tate. In her article on Jones' experiments with character and stereotype, Braman cites Tate's review under the title "Gayl Jones's Literary Sanctuary," (154).

novel; here, the novel defines its own birth as an impure New World nativity, the true story/history of the African diaspora in its hemispheric context of (North, South, Central) “America.” The novel, a fictional persona, has a birth but no citizenship. The birth is not defined by the U.S. or even the world of a national literature. The “decolonized novel,” which is never a fully finished process, searches for multiplicity of language, of culture, and resists enclosing itself or that multiplicity within a singularizing national tradition, a national identity, or a state authority. The novel is not a sanctuary and does not seek out ostensibly protective enclosures of status or homogenous community. It is not in search of preservation, in terms of maintaining itself in an unchanged condition, so much as it seeks survival in forming connections with other elements without asserting control over them. A tricky form of wholeness for literary art to aspire to, something between incorporation and relation, between compositional boundaries and the spirit of potentially infinite associations with “everything.”

In “*Quest*,” Jones frustrates the distinction between inclusion and exclusion, and between focus and background, when the “decolonized novel” baldly declares, “I take for my focus everything” (96).<sup>244</sup> Jones made a similar remark decades earlier, in her 1973 dissertation, “Toward an All-Inclusive Structure,” which introduces her short stories with the proposal for an aesthetic model that

would theoretically include *everything*: experience and imagination, autobiography, history, legend, myth, ritual, metaphor, dream (essentially all forms both linguistic and experimental); it would make

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<sup>244</sup> Jones’ use of first person narration to mean “I/we” shows that the individual novel speaks for itself and for a collective as part of African American and Latin American narrative traditions. As the novel wryly asks, “I’ve heard the rumor of a novel in which a whole town speaks in first person, and so why shouldn’t I?” perhaps alluding to Gabriel García Márquez’s fictional Columbian town Macondo (and influenced by William Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha county in Mississippi) (“*Quest*” Prologue n.3, 514).



use of specifically black forms, both musical (blues, jazz, work songs, spirituals) and linguistic (the sermon, playing dozens, signifying, jive); it would see the erotic as an authentic method of expression.<sup>245</sup>

“Everything” in this earlier statement refers to imaginative forms of art, experience, and knowledge, rather than some amount of information. Jones takes the effort to incorporate “everything” through narrative to new heights in *Mosquito*, which may be seen as a continued transformation and extension of Jones’ decades-long experiment to test the possibilities of political writing and to find new ways to represent psychological and psychic refuge, sanctuary, and asylum through narrative form.

The dissertation statement, combined with her manifesto of self-definition for the multicultural, multilingual, Afrocentric decolonized novel, suggests that *Mosquito* is an exploration of the process of keeping a potentially infinite, inclusive “archive,” one that takes as its focus “everything” but especially stories for survivors of the “African Diaspora Holocaust.” Everything, which is the *idea* of the *complexity* of the universe—that is, not the amount of information in it but the structural and formal interrelationality of its elements—is protected and affirmed by the storyteller as archives keeper. In this way, storytellers work toward the decolonization of themselves and of their stories (427).<sup>246</sup> As the Daughters Newsletter Not for Members Only Edition, published by the Daughters Free Speech Press, says of its editor, “Monkey Bread offers us theories of everything, but in the form of stories. She does not tie the loose ends of any of her stories together, for that is not the nature of

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<sup>245</sup> Gayl Jones, “Toward an All-Inclusive Structure.” Diss. Brown U, 1973. Providence: privately printed, 1973 (1). Quoted in Clasey Clabough, “Toward an All-Inclusive Structure: The Early Fiction of Gayl Jones,” *Callaloo* 29.2 (2006): 635.

<sup>246</sup> Jones defines terms such as “decolonization” and “Afrocentric” most explicitly in the endnotes of “*Quest*,” while the main text seeks to enact and define such terms more indirectly. Jones refers to Afrocentrism as the project of putting Africans and African American storytelling and stories on “center stage,” but without suppressing or denying African connections with other cultural stories (n.9, 515).

free speech” (427). Theories of everything come in the form of the unfettered purpose of speech, the ends of stories “released from ties, obligations, or constraints.” Monkey Bread’s stories hover between officious professionalism and an inside joke, as the Free Speech Press is not for sale and most likely written by Monkey Bread about herself for Mosquito to read.

Monkey Bread also makes an aesthetic statement that refuses the distinction between political and aesthetic freedom, and, at the same time, refuses Black Aesthetic-like programmatic controls that oblige a writer to observe the proper way to represent the political-aesthetic project of decolonization. The fictional Sanctuary movement leads Mosquito to make the same refusal, as her initial wariness that Sanctuary work or membership in any group would constrain her freedom eventually gives way to an expansive awareness of her freedom as minder of the word for the Sanctuary movement, the Daughters, her many other auditory obligators, and for herself as a lover of language.

Along with the auditory obligations that lead Mosquito, like the “decolonized novel,” to take as her focus “everything,” come obligations to evade, mask, defer, and otherwise keep details of the story from her listeners/readers. Through seriocomic and parodic narrative experiments with digression, intertextuality, and the imperatives of protection in *Mosquito*, Jones proposes a way to imagine sanctuary and archive that reveals their potential implications for a decolonial aesthetic process of writing.<sup>247</sup> To do that, some things (such as everything worth including) must be withheld from outsiders, and both the Sanctuary movement and the Daughters require some secrecy and some storytelling, including some storytelling about secrecy. Or, as Mosquito

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<sup>247</sup> Afrocentric novels are novels that move toward decolonization: “[i]n Afrocentric novels, such as I am...marginal people step from the margins into the center of their own worlds, of their own texts and fiction, invent and re-invent themselves (as I invent and re-invent me) and begin to see themselves for themselves and not as subordinates,” (“*Quest*,” 508).

says at one point, “If this were just my own story and I ain’t become involved with the new Underground Railroad as well as the Daughters, I could tell y’all everything, except for all the love scenes, ‘cause I don’t believe in being too sexually explicit” (551-2).

Political, psychic, and literary rebellions constitute both Mosquito’s Sanctuary work and her work as an archives keeper, although these rebellions occur differently in both. Importantly, Mosquito’s Sanctuary work is incorporated into the archive, and it is as an archives keeper that Mosquito reveals herself as a “warrior” whose struggle comes in the form of “minding the word.” For Mosquito, the process of keeping an archive is the process of narration, and this form of minding the word forms the core of Jones’ project toward a fully decolonized novel and human society.

The portrayal of the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement in *Mosquito* links the movement to a decolonization of the individual and the collective, and Jones addresses the significance of the Sanctuary movement in both historical and fictional terms. Sanctuary, defined partly as a protective and sustaining place, might also extend to literature through Jones’ experimental approach, in which the desire to provide sanctuary may be translated as a process of constructing narrative through a hopeful approach to certain principles of inclusion, secrecy, and protection. “Sanctuary,” a term caught up in a nexus of meanings, narratives, codes, and histories (“confabulatory” or triumphant, written or unwritten), also comes to shape the possibilities of narration, as represented by Mosquito’s role as keeper of the Daughters archive.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Ray explains the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement to Mosquito in part by recounting important actions of people of color excluded from “official histories.” In response to Ray’s story of the Native American “code talkers” during the first and second world wars, for example, Mosquito responds, “[t]hat sound like a confabulatory history,” confabulatory as in informally spoken and as in fabulous, not real.

### *Sanctuary Movements*

How can sanctuary be a dream and a human being too?

But maybe that Sanctuary can be whatever you wants it to be.<sup>249</sup>

Flipping through a book on the mainstream Sanctuary movement, Mosquito reads two paradoxical metaphors for “sanctuary”: “Sanctuary is a human being... Sanctuary is a dream” (226). These quotes taken from Elie Wiesel have been uncritically adopted by the historical Sanctuary movement and subsequent religious organizers for peace. Mosquito’s comment—“maybe that Sanctuary can be whatever you wants it to be”—helps free “sanctuary” from being narrowly defined as a sacred place within a church even as it questions the sanctuary metaphor, which defines “sanctuary” as a noun. To Mosquito, Wiesel’s metaphors are contradictory: if sanctuary is both a human being and a dream, she asks, does it follow that a human being is a dream? Why define sanctuary as a material, living human being, and at the same time the intangible result of human imagination and desire?

Rejecting the structure of metaphor to “define” sanctuary—“Sanctuary is a dream, Sanctuary is a human being”—Mosquito’s narration suggests that sanctuary “is” not part of a stable correspondence, even a surprising or potentially expansive one. Rather, the definition of the term “sanctuary” is as elusive, polyphonic, and indeterminate as the identity of a self. Jones uses digression and hieroglyphics or codes to free up “sanctuary” from its religious and political definition. She does this by expanding its range of definitions but also by expanding what counts as “definition” or making meaning.

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<sup>249</sup> Mosquito, 226.

The not-mainstream Sanctuary movement and the Daughters employ a more associative and open mode of definition. The most important meanings of “sanctuary” come not from stable definitions but from its emergence and its movement, its growing out of interpersonal relationships. Sanctuary moves on the Underground Railroad, sanctuary emerges from Mosquito’s conversations with others, sometimes represented as dialogues and other times as if Mosquito could access the other characters’ thoughts and narrate them in the form of a dramatic monologue.<sup>250</sup>

Mosquito’s involvement with the Sanctuary movement begins when she finds Maria “Barriga” Rodríguez,<sup>251</sup> a pregnant woman apparently from Mexico, hiding in her truck behind barrels of industrial detergent. Maria simply repeats one word, “sanctuary,” which eventually leads Mosquito to contact Father Ray, a not-mainstream Sanctuary worker who conducts Maria to a new location. Over one hundred pages of narration later, Ray and Mosquito meet again. Ray hopes to recruit Mosquito for the Sanctuary movement, and this conversation between them parodies an awakening of revolutionary consciousness. It also provides Jones material for her critique of the historical Sanctuary movement and its public representation. Father Ray wants Mosquito to join the movement because he recognizes her true name, Nadine Sojourner “Mosquito” Johnson. She has the “potential of being Sojourner,” has “proven [her] ingenuity...[and is] trustworthy” (237, 238). Ray means here that

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<sup>250</sup> The Daughters’ use of the term “African Diaspora Holocaust” implicitly critiques Wiesel’s desire to copyright a term, or to claim a historical event, for a single ethnicity or nationality. In contrast, Wiesel’s “sanctuary” metaphors paradoxically serve to preserve an exclusive definition of his true subject, the Jewish Holocaust. For a critique of Wiesel, see Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso, 2003).

<sup>251</sup> Women’s stories, as told through Mosquito’s narration, make a key link between the Sanctuary movement and the Daughters. The Sanctuary movement sections features women recounting their personal stories, which fall outside conventional categories of the refugee or woman of color. The Daughters, in contrast, relate all stories in humorous or parodic registers and represent an expansive approach to the whole universe rather than a focus on personal experience. I see these two modes of storytelling as complementary and part of Jones’ notion of decolonization.

Mosquito has the potential of living up to her given name, after Sojourner Truth; the irony here is that Mosquito already is Sojourner, at least in name—moreover, she is a common-noun sojourner, a traveler without permanent membership or home with any one group.

When Father Ray shows Mosquito several books on the Sanctuary movement, she skims through a few and thinks, “seem like there be a lot of scholarly-type people in that movement: philosophers and theologians and historians and shit” (226).

Mosquito represents the female, working class pupil and Father Ray the educated male teacher in this dialogue, and for every lofty rhetorical move Father Ray makes to question or enlighten Mosquito (what Mosquito calls “all that preachification”), Mosquito responds with a digressive, dismissing, or unspoken comment, in part to prolong her conversation with Ray, who captivates her with his “hieroglyphic eyes” (127, 213).<sup>252</sup> Mosquito finally agrees to participate but not really join in the movement—not for all the ideological reasons Ray offers, but only to be “thumbing my nose at them...border patrol sons of bitches” who are always “harassing me and shit” (239, 238). Throughout the talk, Father Ray and Mosquito seriously engage in the dialogue and at the same time, self-consciously, play out their roles in the dialogue.

These conversations between Mosquito and Ray also sustain an erotic subtext, and Mosquito’s responses to Ray also prolong her flirtation with him while she resists his efforts to recruit her for the movement. Mosquito repeatedly describes Ray’s

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<sup>252</sup> Mosquito thinks, “all that preachification ain’t the true him,” (238). Ray laughingly figures out that Mosquito’s a “jokester” (241) after she says, “I’m ignorant about everything except” but then goes on to qualify at length, ending with her critique of James Weldon Johnson: “I agrees on some things with the ex-colored man, but I still considers myself colorful. I ain’t shitting you, Ray, excuse my French...I remember reading that preachifying, though, and thinking why they keep all that preachifying in that book, because it seem like to me it would have been a better book without all that preachifying” (241). Jones’ own novel, of course, is full of preachifying, even if it is done with tongue in cheek.

“hieroglyphic eyes,” as when she recounts her come-on line to Ray at the restaurant: “Father Raymond. Is it Raymond or Raimundo? I asks, leaning towards him. Like I told you, he got them hieroglyphic eyes” (213). Mosquito is drawn to him in more ways than one. At first, Mosquito uses the term “hieroglyphic” humorously to exoticize “Raimundo.” Using the imagery of Egypt and Latin lover-language in the name “Raimundo,” Mosquito playfully accesses the aesthetic recuperation of Black as beautiful. But there is more to Ray than meets the eye, so to speak, and the mystery of Ray’s hidden meanings intrigues Mosquito as a challenge to decipher.

To call Ray’s eyes “hieroglyphic” is to refer to something “of the nature of a hieroglyph,” that is, “having a hidden meaning; symbolical, emblematic.”<sup>253</sup> Mosquito tries to decipher Ray’s racial and ethnic identity, difficult to read from his color and “hieroglyphic eyes.” As Ray explains in response to Mosquito’s flirtatious question, he is multilingual, biracial, multiethnic, and, as part Filipino and part African American, multiply indicative of U.S. imperial and slave history. He explains that his travels around the world have led him to conclude “[t]he more mixed up you are the more you discover, as someone said, that race is a myth” (214). Mosquito is skeptical, but Ray here contests the validity of race as a defining marker used on others or oneself by referring to the politics of racial identification and his own shifting place in racial categories depending on where he is in the world. For instance, Ray ironically subscribes to a dialectic of Western and what he calls “Third World” thinking when he remarks that “[i]t’s really enlightening” that he is regarded as black in the U.S. but white in the Caribbean (215). He favors his transnational perspective, gained through travel, education, and a multiethnic genealogy, which result in a productive confusion

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<sup>253</sup> The term “hieroglyphic” most narrowly refers to something written in Egyptian “pictures,” which literally or figuratively represent words in the ancient Egyptian picture-writing system, but the term is also literally descriptive of similar “non-western” writing systems, (*OED*).

toward identity instead of a dogmatic stance: “the more mixed up you are, the more you discover.” Mosquito also evokes the Black nationalist and internationalist claim on Egyptian civilization, largely regarded as black and as the ‘original’ civilization, in contrast to the European and U.S. American claim on the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. With those Egyptian “hieroglyphic eyes,” Ray is Afro-centric yet not defined by national or racial categories.<sup>254</sup> The Rai-mundo’s eyes, then, suggest a worldliness and a consciousness about race that attracts Mosquito to Ray, despite her skepticism toward his politics.<sup>255</sup>

Critic Barbara Christian identifies the hieroglyph as “a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.”<sup>256</sup> The eyes in Egyptian art are stylized, almond-shaped eyes, thickly lined in black, as if with kohl, and a dropped spiral below the eye to represent the markings of the falcon. Since Elizabeth Taylor’s performance as Cleopatra in the 1963 cinematic pageant of the same title, the Egyptian eyes in contemporary U.S. culture may be de-scribed in terms of the proto-femme fatale, an association with her beauty, decadence, cunning, and death.<sup>257</sup> But the pharaoh figure, immortalized by the mummy’s tomb of King Tut, is an equally pervasive image circulating in U.S. public culture. The pharaoh’s lined eyes symbolize a feminized masculinity when attributed to Ray. His name,

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<sup>254</sup> Mosquito responds, “You know, the Spanish word for Mosquito is *mosquito*... Well, it seem like to me that language is a myth too. I mean, Mosquito being the same everywhere and shit,” (242). Much later, Mosquito tells Delgadina that a friend has said, “myth is a race.” Delgadina responds, “Race ain’t no myth, chica girl,” underscoring race as a mode of identification (490-1).

<sup>255</sup> “Mundo” is Spanish for “world.” My account of Ra as a sun deity is vastly simplified; notable here is that Ra became the deity into which other deities were incorporated in Pharaoh Akhnaten’s effort establish Egyptian religion as monotheistic.

<sup>256</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 6, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (Spring, 1987): 52.

<sup>257</sup> *Cleopatra*. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1963. For a broader reading of U.S. Hollywood and museum Egypt-mania from the 1960s to the 1980s, see McAlister.



homologous to the Egyptian deity “Ra,” further evokes a mythic undercurrent that signals wholeness, healing, and protection. A single “hieroglyphic eye” refers to the eye of Ra, a powerful deity associated with the sun. In ancient Egyptian myth, Ra’s right eye is the sun; his left eye was destroyed by another deity but was restored as the moon. As a pair, the “hieroglyphic eyes” refers to wholeness, healing, and protection, and to the wholeness of masculine and feminine qualities. The loss and regaining of sight is rendered in the myth in circular time, by the waning and waxing of the moon; moreover, the eye has a regenerative and protective power on others, as when it restores Osiris to life. As an amulet, the *wedjat* eye symbolizes “the process of ‘making whole’ and healing,” and the word *wedjat* literally means “sound” or “the sound one.”<sup>258</sup> Mosquito, then, reads the idea of a complex universe and a healing world in Ray’s eyes.

The flirtatious and mythic associations of Ray’s eyes may suggest that the “hieroglyphics” of decolonial politics can be deciphered by love--not ascetic, religious love but sexual and textual love. As Ray soon reveals, “he ain’t no real padre” (302), and his own political awakening was inspired by love. Formerly an immigration agent, Ray “realized” he “was on the wrong side,” to which Mosquito quickly guesses his hidden meaning: “That say love. Talking about that subversive love” (308). In fact, Ray’s realization did come about when he “fell in love with somebody on the right side” (309). Mosquito’s own scene of political awakening is similarly driven by erotic flirtation, and the scene of their subsequent lovemaking in Mosquito’s truck is intertwined with a political discussion between women in the movement, through Mosquito’s narration. Their lovemaking leads to a growing intimacy with each other

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<sup>258</sup> My brief account of “hieroglyphic eyes” is drawn, in part, from the British Museum Egyptian holdings, itself a legacy of British colonialism. <<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk>>.

that Mosquito narrates through letters sent or even just imagined between Mosquito and Ray. Their commitment to “the revolution” and to love is created from a relational *and* independent mode of being in the world, since the relation does not result in Christian marriage, the joining of two into one, but of two whose independence frees them to envision themselves and their possibilities in relation to each other. Mosquito’s guerrilla memory returns throughout the novel to join decolonial rebellion to love as it comes from two people who are “separate parts but the same whole” (571) and who become “all things and each other... We’s the entire universe and usselves” (570).

Mosquito’s independent spirit, even in love, makes her no easy convert to any cause besides the cause of her independence. As she says, “not to say I ain’t got no social conscience and shit, or ain’t ambitious, but I’m just not a joiner of movements, you know” (225). Mosquito’s uneasy relation to political movements and “rebellion Itself” (494), with a capital “I,” gestures towards Jones’ major engagement with the problem of how to truly liberate oneself and others from oppression without losing one’s freedom to a programmatic form of political movement, one that remains committed to abstractions. Significantly, the scene of political awakening does not lead to the expected political conversion, and Mosquito remains committed to working out the problems of commitment and independence through her accounts of love and “rebellion” to the end of the narrative.

Mosquito also finds expanded notions of “sanctuary” in Ray. Her repeated description of Ray’s “hieroglyphic” eyes underscores the origin of the term “hieroglyphic,” the adjectival form of the word originally adapted from the Greek words for “sacred” and “carving.” Ray’s “hieroglyphic eyes” provide sanctuary and redefine it in the process—or rather, free it from definitions by defining it in terms of possibilities. Sanctuary emerges out of the relation between people; a human being is

not inherently a sanctuary, but the possibility of creating sanctuary as a relational process enacted by the process of reading, of making out their coded texts. Ray offers a relationship that has a spiritual significance for Mosquito, complementary to the Daughters. Mosquito deciphers in Ray's eyes, then, two important meanings: sanctuary, which emerges from a relationship rather than a physical place, and textuality, which only becomes meaningful through the relationship between a reader and the text, between narrator and reader/listener. Ray must be figured out, read, deciphered, but through mutual desire and a decolonial love, for Mosquito to help make love/to help make and sustain sanctuary. Jones' metafictional insistence throughout the novel is not simply a reflexive comment on writing but also a metacommentary on the "love of language" in a search for full political and psychic freedoms for the individual and collective.

Mosquito foregrounds the textual aspect of decolonial politics and language in her image of hieroglyphic eyes, as the term "hieroglyph" broadly refers to writing or thought-picture systems that do not resemble Western ones. Zora Neale Hurston writes, for instance, that "'the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics,'" <sup>259</sup> by which she suggests that black expression is dramatic, metaphorical, and active rather than abstract and symbolic. Jones complicates such a claim when she employs frequent textual and linguistic metaphors, from Ray's eyes to the story of how Maria Rodríguez names her U.S. born baby boy "Journal" when she (mis)hears Mosquito's "true name," Sojourner, after the great feminist, abolitionist, and former slave Sojourner Truth. Mosquito's "true name," meaning traveler and temporary visitor, translates to "journal," which in everyday use means a book or daily record in writing. But interestingly, obsolete meanings of "journal" include "a

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<sup>259</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston A. Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 32. Originally published in Nancy Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology*, in 1934.

journey” and a “day’s work,” from the common root *diurnum*, meaning daily or day (*OED*, “journal,” “sojourner”). In these instances and throughout the novel, the characters’ multiple and interrelated quests for sanctuary are represented as textual and as quotidian and processual, a daily process of narration.

Among the multiple hidden meanings of Father Ray and his “hieroglyphic eyes” is his coded communication with those who know how to “read” his meaning: we return, then, to the secrecy of the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement. Ray’s veiled remark to Mosquito, that “there are certain ways that we’re known to each other,” evokes the underground or coded language of the antebellum underground railroad.<sup>260</sup> Ray’s movement, also called the Underground Railroad, leads Mosquito to withhold information that she should not share to “y’all,” her readers--“y’all gots to remember that I can’t tell y’all everything for security purposes” (551). Mosquito must keep some things secret from even Monkey Bread, even in a “coded letter” to her. Responding to Monkey Bread’s request that she describe her truck, Mosquito writes, “they is security reasons that I can’t describe my truck. I can’t tell you the reason for even the reasons for they being security reason is a security reason” (561). Mosquito freely parodies the discourse of national and corporate security, which leads to a receding line of unspoken reasons in the name of “security,” a euphemistic code word for secrecy, bolstered by “reason,” which falsely legitimates the need for secrecy. The parodic register at once highlights the different politics of announced secrecy, its necessity and its teasing effect.

At first, Mosquito’s wariness toward Ray’s Sanctuary movement stems from her knowledge of the mainstream movement, and one political subtext to her

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<sup>260</sup> A famous example is Harriet Tubman—a.k.a. the “General,” Ray’s shared nickname—whose code songs signaled whether all was clear to leave or the railroad would not run that night.

recruitment is to re-envision the liberatory possibilities ignored by the historians and actors of the historical Sanctuary movement. From what Mosquito remembers of television documentaries, the movement is about white religious people helping Mexicans (63). Father Ray is her first big surprise—“’cause I’m expecting a white priest and this a African-American priest. Leastwise on television when they tells you about the Sanctuary movement, they’s always some white priest” (74). Historically the Sanctuary movement was publicized by workers and journalists as a national struggle over (U.S.) America’s conscience and ultimately, its soul, and the most publicized actors were Anglo citizens.

Journalist Ann Crittenden affirms this vision of an America whose citizens fight for the freedom of others and maintain the essential national tradition of hospitality when their government falters:

Ordinary citizens, coming face-to-face with the refugees, stepped into the government’s shoes and welcomed the sojourners in their midst. In this they represented their country at its best. As the *Arizona Daily Star*, a Tucson daily newspaper that was sympathetic to the underground railroad, commented, “America at its greatest has always been America as a refuge from persecution, as a protector of the helpless, and a voice for justice. America has won wars and flexed its military power, but it’s the enlightened attitude toward basic human freedom that gives us our special status in the world.”<sup>261</sup> (xvii)

Crittenden reflects, “In the end the sanctuary story is about a battle between Americans, between two radically different visions of the kind of country we are [one

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<sup>261</sup> Ann Crittenden, *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988). *Arizona Daily Star*, quoted in “The Right of Sanctuary,” *Washington Spectator*, vol. 12, no. 12 (June 15, 1986), 2.

based on law or one based on morality] and our place in the world” (xviii). The *Arizona Daily Star* invokes the need of the “persecuted” for refuge, protection, and a voice, but finds this need fulfilled by “America.” The *Star* writer goes so far as to implicitly justify U.S. military aggression by attributing the country’s “special status” to its enlightened attitudes, suggesting its brawn is an occasional force in the world, but its mind and heart are the enduring benevolent factors in world affairs. The metaphor of citizens stepping into “the shoes” of the state suggests that the citizen and the state are interchangeable partners in maintaining good moral governance. Major national conflicts over slavery and civil rights are often fitted into the ideology of liberal exceptionalism: the big shoes of national tradition are always filled, sometimes by citizens and sometimes by the state. The shoes march to the beat of freedom regardless of whose feet fill them.<sup>262</sup>

“Ordinary citizens” who step “into the government’s shoes” don’t always welcome their unprotected fellow neighbors, of course, from Indian hunting to Jim Crow to contemporary Minute Men at the U.S.–Mexico border, histories absent in Crittenden’s glowing treatment of ideological attachments to U.S. citizenship. Such narratives even by Sanctuary workers presume protective powers of citizenship that Jones complicates through her stories of U.S. people of color in the novel. Mosquito frequently turns the distinction between citizen and foreigner into an unsolvable national question: who is an American citizen and who a “sojourner” in America, and what do the answers say about what “America” is? For example, Mosquito complains repeatedly of the chain of misrecognitions of people of color, as a result of the image of U.S. citizens as “white.” The Border Agents sometimes think Mosquito is Mexican

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<sup>262</sup> Jonathan Arac’s reading of the hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn* helpfully spells this out in his critique of literary scholars who, especially during the Cold War, helped to establish the character Huck Finn as representative of the true American spirit even when the state had faltered. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a brief account.

and sometimes a smuggler, and later, when Ray introduces her to not-mainstream Sanctuary workers, one of them mistakes her for a refugee. The misrecognition goes all around: Mosquito, too, mistakes an Asian American citizen for a foreigner. As Nadine “Mosquito” Sojourner Johnson writes to Monkey Bread, people don’t know what America really is because they do not see it as multilingual, multinational, hemispheric, and transnational. Here, Mosquito most likely refers not to the Americas but to the object of U.S. governance, its nation, an “imagined community” that Mosquito and others frequently fail to recognize in their everyday lives because its imagined version excludes the social relations between the diverse people that shape it.

Jones, clearly critical of the politics of the historical Sanctuary movement and its representation, creates a fictional “not-mainstream” Sanctuary movement as part of her effort to refigure national history through a focus on working-class people of color, within and outside the U.S., who have been marginalized in mainstream historical accounts of the 1980s “Underground Railroad” and its antebellum precursor. If historical Sanctuary workers and journalists took an opportunity to make transnational identification and organization and used it to re-affirm national identification and (U.S.) American exceptionalism instead, Jones imagines a way to re-envision what has been a nationalist story of statelessness in the Americas as an anti-nationalist story of decolonization, of helping counter or evade the everyday oppressions structured by modes of governmentality, which in this case refers to a logic of governance that makes use of the state and its system for delimiting and producing certain kinds of citizens and aliens in the construction of national subjects.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> See Michel Foucault for his coinage and theorization of “governmentality.” *The Foucault Effect: Studies In Governmentality: With Two Lectures By And An Interview With Michel Foucault*. eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

Ray redefines the refugee and the Third World in terms that recognize and counter the governmental work of defining identities: he explains, “[we] help all sorts of people. The Mexicans, for sure. But also Haitians, political refugees of all sorts. Conscientious objectors even. Not just the Third World. Well, I guess anyone who needs to be a refugee sorta becomes part of the Third World, you know” (225). Ray’s “group,” as Mosquito calls it, helps anyone seeking to free themselves from oppressive ideologies and practices. Ray is a conductor within a fictionalized composite of multiple historical networks more inclusive, radical, and transnational in their purpose to provide sanctuary to conscientious objectors, Salvadoran refugees, and disenfranchised people in need of legal advice or psychological healing of the wound caused by their status as undocumented, as much as the “guerrilla personality” types looking for a movement (426).

Ray does draw upon the names and publications of the mainstream movement, as when he tells Mosquito, “[w]e’re sort of like a modern Underground Railroad. In fact, there’s a book I’ll let you read called *Sanctuary as Metaphor: The New Underground Railroad*. I’m not the mainstream Sanctuary movement, though” (225). Ray’s book reference plays on the title of a book titled *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad*, published in 1986 by two prominent, radical, and Chicago-based Sanctuary workers in the midst of the movement, Renny Golden and Michael McConnell.<sup>264</sup> Ray reveals his complete identification with the not-mainstream movement by insisting that he is “not” the mainstream one. Ironically, Jones takes several lines directly from the mainstream book and gives them to Father Ray, and it

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<sup>264</sup> Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books [Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America], 1986). Golden and McConnell are part of the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America, at times in conflict with the Tucson movement.



becomes impossible to determine precisely how the not-mainstream movement operates differently or independently of the mainstream one, when it uses their tools, publications, and rhetoric. The defining contrast, it seems, is perspectival—how does one approach “movement,” from which position, for what and for whom.

Historical Sanctuary movement activists openly appropriated what Golden and McConnell call the “original underground railroad” of the antebellum period as their common heritage.<sup>265</sup> The first half of the book’s title, *Sanctuary as Metaphor*, gently mocks the historical Sanctuary movement rhetoric while describing Mosquito’s own narrative riffs, which make extended use of the metaphorical reserves of “sanctuary” through her various digressions and speculations. *Sanctuary as Metaphor: The New Underground Railroad* comments on the analogical reasoning that Sanctuary workers were to refugees what conductors were to slaves—a promise of freedom based on the alliance of citizen and non-citizen to force the U.S. to live up to its true ideals of human equality and freedom. The title also makes plain the uses of metaphor, reminding us that the Underground Railroad itself is a code name for the flexible network of temporary hiding places for runaway slaves fleeing the South. The railroad was run by metaphorical language and coded talk as much as anything else.

Jones claims the “new Underground Railroad” for the not-mainstream movement and, in the process, implicitly critiques its prevailing historical narrative. Like the historical Sanctuary movement, the real Underground Railroad was retrospectively celebrated and adopted as part of the United States’ national story of courage and morality. Historian Charles L. Blockson’s *Underground Railroad* may offer a double critique of both the historiography of the Underground Railroad and its

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<sup>265</sup> Critics mistakenly attribute the phrase “the new Underground Railroad” to Jones rather than note her engagement with history and historiography in the novel.

adoption by the historical Sanctuary movement.<sup>266</sup> Blockson's book challenges dominant narratives that center on Anglo and religious organizers of the Railroad: one of the strong assertions of this book is that "the most assiduous organizers of networks to freedom were black freemen... They organized their own network quietly and well" (4). This "quiet" organization represented a different approach toward freedom, according to Blockson, that used survival tactics in contrast to that of the "throng of lecturers" engaged in what Blockson discounts as the sort of talk disconnected from urgent and organized action.

Conductors and riders could not be bothered to publicly debate the soul of the nation through its laws, though I would say that the Underground Railroad employed survival tactics, strategies, quotidian practices, and lots of theorizing. Mosquito tells us about the need to do things "quietly," in Blockson's term: "my mama didn't raise the sorta fool that would tell y'all the whole story, 'cause that would be like if I was a fugitive during the time of the old Underground Railroad I got myself free, then I comes telling everybody all the secrets. I got to defend the rights and freedoms of them that ain't got they freedom yet" (601). From the perspective of fugitives on the Railroad, secrecy protects others' possibilities for freedom, and yet narration that withholds some things is part of the struggle for rights and freedoms.

Mosquito tells us part of the story and part of the reason for not declaring the rest. Her declaration contrasts with the historical Presbyterian minister John Fife, who ignited the Sanctuary movement by "declaring sanctuary for undocumented refugees"

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<sup>266</sup> The Underground Railroad assisted slaves fleeing the South, both before and after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Blockson wrote on the railroad for *National Geographic* before publishing his book in 1987. He draws his own material largely from a history of the Underground Railroad written by the black historian William Still, who published a volume of his interviews with fugitive slaves in 1872, but whose work was overshadowed by Wilburg H. Siebert's *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* (1898). Blockson, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987).

as a way to “get the story out to the American people.”<sup>267</sup> In his second extended conversation with Mosquito, Ray further distinguishes the not-mainstream movement and explains the reason for stories and people to remain undeclared: “the mainstream Sanctuary thinks that the more they’re known the safer they are. That’s why most sanctuaries declare themselves. We’re more like what they’d call the Nicodemuses of the movement. We don’t declare ourselves, though there are certain ways that we’re known to each other” (307). Mosquito, at this point not an insider, retorts, “Say what? What’s a Nicodemus?” To which Ray repeats, “[t]he ones who believe the more secret we are the safer we are.” (307). Nicodemus pops up in Mosquito’s subsequent narration as a kind of secret code, as when Mosquito wonders whether characters like Delgadina, Maria, and Monkey Bread are “Nicodemuses”—though of course she “ain’t so ignorant” to let any one of them “know that I know that she a Nicodemus, or at least I think I know that she a Nicodemus” (500). Nicodemus refers primarily to a biblical figure marked by “indeterminacy,” “ambiguity,” “liminality,” and “marginal[ity];” he resists classifications but has been used to suit the interpretive purposes of his readers.<sup>268</sup> Nicodemus sought out Jesus at night to have conversations

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<sup>267</sup> As Crittenden describes it, “[t]he rancher [Corbett] had always been an advocate of openness; secrecy, he believed was first cousin to the lie. He wanted to build a grassroots faith community that would empower people to act in accordance with their consciences, and in his view, secrecy would smother the opportunity to develop such a consensus,” (62).

<sup>268</sup> Other historical references to Nicodemus may be relevant. The oldest continuously occupied black town west of the Mississippi River is named Nicodemus in honor of the first freed slave in the U.S., whose slave name was said to be Nicodemus. Freed blacks founded the town Nicodemus following Reconstruction, and Nicodemus was poised for economic success when the (literal) railroad skipped over the town, causing its economic ruin. The Kansas town of Nicodemus is now a national historical monument. In a humorous move, the section of the novel describing the problem of Maria’s jailed cousin in “Middle America” is titled, “This Ain’t Nicodemus,” which sounds like a play on Dorothy’s famous phrase, “We’re not in Kansas anymore” (345). The biblical Nicodemus is represented with dark brown skin by the major African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, and his conversation with Jesus has been recounted by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his speech on the interrelatedness of America’s oppressive domestic and foreign practices. King addresses the U.S. when he says, “Your whole structure must be changed.” See *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide* for an image of Henry Ossawa Tanner’s *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, 1899, <[http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn\\_04/articles/brad.shtml](http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn_04/articles/brad.shtml)>. See also Martin Luther King, Jr. “Where do we go from here?” Tenth Anniversary Convention of the S.C.L.C. in Atlanta on August 16, 1967. Taken from

regarding faith while Jesus spoke to him of darkness as evil; Nicodemus apparently believed in Jesus but would not declare himself a disciple “for fear of the Jews” and so is called a “Jew” for not declaring his faith; and, he visited Jesus’ burial tomb with apparent belief in his coming resurrection but brought funeral spices to attend to Jesus’ body. These aspects lead one biblical scholar to suggest that Nicodemus is a “marginal,” a “proximate other.” Because the gospels insist that people publicly declare their faith, live openly in light rather than “darkness,” and not lavish attention on the body in this world, Nicodemus’ ambiguity or ambivalence is condemned as cowardly fear and doubt (646). Jones imagines in *Mosquito* an open assemblage of Nicodemuses in a shadow Sanctuary movement—one that uses its marginal status and its partial invisibility to its advantage--and this comes to describe all sorts of survival and rebellious tactics of marginalized people in ‘real’ life who know ways to reveal or to communicate with each other. The uniqueness of this fictional Sanctuary movement is that it depends on so much being undeclared even within the movement—its members are undeclared and use false names even when they know each other, its official mission is not centralized or authorized and thus is not dogmatic, and in place of dogmatic literature, they use the mainstream publications as a reference and code. Much like the Daughters, the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement is only declared to one’s own self, which is part of an open and undisclosed collectivity, or rather links one to another through undeclared affinities. Indirection, code, and other forms of double-talk are as necessary to the vitality of the “movement” from within as it is to the protection of the “movement” from outsiders. *Mosquito*’s belief in “Nicodemus” as a codeword leads her to test whether her friends recognize the word—but the response is usually, “Nick who?” (494). For *Mosquito*, codes are

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Philip S. Foner, *The Voice Of Black America* (New York, 1972)  
<<http://www.indiana.edu/~iviewweb/mlkwhere.html>>.

not secrets one has to “keep”—codes can be spoken aloud because they confuse outsiders while they identify insiders.

In *Mosquito*, thematic associations can also act like code-switching. *Mosquito*’s associative style of narration revises and transforms ideas of sanctuary and freedom over the course of narration. Demonstrating her narrative “freedom of movement,”<sup>269</sup> the process of narration resembles a potentially endless process of decolonization that is driven by forms of indirection. The effort to free up the novel itself and to liberate the individual from controlling forces is depicted as the same quest. Statelessness, represented as the condition of one’s exclusion from the nation by virtue of exclusion from (or abjection by) the state system of recognition, also becomes the condition of seeking to be “free” from the state. Freedom from the state involves a guerrilla consciousness that rejects the terms of a state, the defining terms used by the state—and uses them when necessary, as do the “not-mainstream” Sanctuary workers and some of the refugees that work toward liberation in its psychic, philosophical, and political forms.

*Mosquito*’s digressions have ever-changing, often multiple purposes and effects, depending on the moment in narration. Focused on the effect of digressions on characterization, Bramen writes, “[i]n this excess of words, one would tend to associate prolixity with disclosure, but verbosity here is a shield that protects, conceals, and distances. Talking isn’t always about confiding, nor is it necessarily about sharing secrets. Speech can also be used to construct borders and prevent intimacy” (146). But it is worth keeping in mind the many other uses of digression in *Mosquito*, one being the use of the double-valence in speech as part of a code to block certain expectations of transparency to ‘outsider’ readers while conveying *something*,

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<sup>269</sup> Jones writes that “jazz offers a metaphor for freedom of movement—spatial, temporal, and imaginative” (*Liberating Voices*, 121).

however ambiguously, to ‘insider’ ones. This use of signifying to code and decode speech is crucial to Mosquito’s narration of the Sanctuary movement, its relation to the Zapatistas in Chiapas, and to the Daughters archive.

To demonstrate the thematic coherence of Mosquito’s “sanctuary” riffs, I briefly outline Mosquito’s major narrative moves in the first chapter and then note subsequent moves that sustain the riff on the politics and aesthetics of sanctuary. Mosquito begins to narrate the way anyone might begin a story: “I was on one of them little border roads in South Texas” when—except that Mosquito doesn’t say when. She moves into a sketch of the geographical, financial, and colonialist landmarks of the Southwest, “a landscape full of power.” Her apparently random break in the narration to read “me some of my mail” is merely a shift in registers, as her mail reviews Southwest borderlands politics and the politics of citizenship, statelessness, sanctuary, and freedom. As a rarity in the trucking world, an African American woman trucker receives unlikely junk mail. Mosquito implicitly traces much of the politics around sanctuary: there are the Texans who declare their independence from “imperial Mexico” and the “corporate United States” and try to set up their fictional Texas as a refuge from history. There is the union flyer she accepts that says “una union fuerte incluye a todos” even though the man who hands out flyers “knows that I’m not recruitable.” And there are the institutional sanctuaries—Marineland, where Mosquito focuses on the glass that protects and holds back the marine life (“Got to be a mighty powerful glass to hold back the ocean like that”), and the “new Nature Sanctuary” Mosquito and Delgadina visit, a sanctuary for desert plants sponsored by a wealthy “gringo” couple appropriately named Powers, and visited by tourists who come to visit a staged version of authenticity (Mosquito and Delgadina overhear a Dick-and-Jane-type couple chatting, “everything they have here is natural, Dickey, no artificial lakes like that other sanctuary,” and comparing the food and souvenirs at the

“Mexican village,” the “Zulu village,” etc. 46-47). The museum is an institution created by colonialist modes of order and knowledge production. At an African art exhibit in a Toronto museum, an African man waxes eloquently about African aesthetics as he lectures to Mosquito on the museum’s powers of preservation and on the originality and singularity of Africa. Even when “you African Americans talk about jazz,” he says to Mosquito, the African masks on display show that jazz is derivative, that it is already present in the masks (333). This “dissident and disillusioned African in exile” warns Mosquito, whom he names “Beautiful,” to resist colonization. “Don’t let anyone invade your essential self, your transcendental self. Them or us. We’re both of us, Beautiful, exiles in the New World,” Mosquito deflates such appropriation and bristles at his rhetoric—he speaks for her and at the same time addresses her as a representative of all Africans and as an exile. Obsessed with a singular origin, he finds all the elements of black culture in an ancient African mask, thus denying the dynamic cultural creativity of African Americans. “I am not sure which them he means or which us. I be thinking he a strange man...Exiles in the New World.” What Mosquito notices about the museum is the mancala or African game board she starts to pick up before noticing the display telling her, “DO NOT TOUCH” (334). The African exile resembles the authoritarian novelist Jones refers to in “*Quest*” in his attempt to coopt Mosquito in the effort of decolonization, in contrast to Ray, whose engagement with Mosquito was based on conversation and sexual attraction. All of these natural and cultural sanctuaries of staged authenticity, in short, leave Mosquito skeptical. These are ideologies for preserving living and aesthetic forms as things, sanctuaries in the sense of a confinement or embalming. Mosquito’s long list of Sanctuaries exhausts the definitions of “sanctuary” as some thing or some place in order to suggest that “sanctuary” is not a place you can visit.

“Sanctuary” comes directly to Mosquito in the form of a furtive question from Maria, the woman hiding in the back of her truck who repeats the word “Sanctuary” in so many different ways. Before Mosquito recounts that moment, she recollects that she heard “this commotion in the back of my truck. Sounded like a coyote or something, or maybe one of them prairie foxes. I think they call them prairie foxes, don’t ya?” This digression includes another round of associations, which move between human, animal, sex (“aphrodisiacs”) and mythic love (“Aphrodite”). For instance, Mosquito plays on the term coyote as wild animal, as mythic spirit, animal self-protection, both animals and humans that play at camouflaging or changing color for protection or survival but also for love, as when Mosquito thinks about those animals changing colors at Marineland as part of their mating ritual (21). Mosquito peers into her truck with the flashlight and a stun gun and spots the pair of sandaled women’s feet, which reminds her of the shape shifting *nayatls* Delgadina told her about, “humans that can really change themselves into coyotes and coyotes that can change themselves into humans too” (23). *Nayatls* remind Mosquito of *coyotes*, meaning human smugglers, at the moment Mosquito discovers the beautiful Indian woman hiding, having smuggled herself into Mosquito’s truck. These and similar thematic digressions lead to Mosquito inspecting the back of her truck for the stowaway: “Don’t look like no coyote feet, I says out loud, signifying, you know...I know you ain’t no prairie fox. And you shore ain’t no chameleon” (24).

At the end of the chapter, Mosquito mentions that she sees a prairie fox on the road,” suggesting that the digressive narration is subordinated to Mosquito’s narration but she is also mindful of the conventions of good storytelling, coming back to the prairie fox as she describes Maria like a hungry furtive animal, “darting her head around... scurry[ing] back into the back of the truck, the woman not the prairie fox” (38). Using the language of animalistic behavior to describe Maria’s actions,



Mosquito also describes her physical appearance as disheveled, with wild hair and with an apparently instinctual knowledge of nature, on which Mosquito remarks when Maria eats wild mustard growing on the side of the road. Mosquito narrates the effect of Maria's border crossing in figurative terms, as if it transforms Maria's behavior and appearance into that of hunted prey. Mosquito returns to this language of vulnerability when she recounts that "Maria's cousin" also had wild hair and eyes after suffering imprisonment somewhere in "Middle America," a psychologically damaging experience that stayed with Maria's cousin even after she was freed from prison with the help of a "guerrilla lawyer." Jones depicts Maria and her cousin as shifting not from citizen to alien but human to animal—as a defensive tactic, in the case of Maria, and as an effect of abjection by the legal system, in the case of Maria's cousin, either literally or figuratively. The two characters are figured as forms of prey as a result of the border system that has become "a proving ground not simply for citizenship but for humanness as well" (53).<sup>270</sup> Jones here depicts the "tactics of government" that assign the state the power to produce legal national identities, and the defining and informal modes of governmentality that produces the "Middle America" citizen subject and the attendant fear, loathing, and de-humanization of what the citizen recognizes as the "criminal alien" but who, from the perspective of Mosquito, is recognized in terms of familial solidarity as "Maria's cousin."

To counter the border system and legal system that would produce abject "aliens," Mosquito's work for Ray's Sanctuary movement involves her use of doubletalk, "coded" and "real" (Mosquito's distinction). Coded epistolary writings in particular come to make Mosquito's "love of language"—along with the love of her

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<sup>270</sup> Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), 53. See Brady for an insightful discussion of the border as "abjection machine" and of Chicana border-crossing narratives that explore the desire to "double-cross the border," (49-53).

truck--central to her involvement in the Sanctuary movement. It also joins her Sanctuary work to her obligations to the Daughters archives through her love of language. Mosquito is mindful of her obligations to the movement as to what to narrate, to put into the Daughters archives, and what to 'tell' her readers she is withholding. An expert in signifying, including digressing, her use of code becomes extensive as her involvement with the Sanctuary movement grows. She learns to be a "hidden agenda conspiracy specialist" (552-556, 600) and as part of her training she practices writing and reading "coded letters," which are also "real" letters in ordinary, meaningful English. These codes use "almost any book as a official code manual...They say that it is okay for me to tell y'all this, unless they is countries that starts banning every book and newspapers...but we can even make official books and newspapers subversive" (560). Though she does not tell us how to read the code, she suggests that encoding and decoding refers more to a way of reading or listening, deconstructing, and telling unintended stories through "official books and newspapers" than to an invented system of symbols and correspondences used to communicate secret messages.

The list of thematic riffs and digressions is open and potentially endless, running throughout the narrative in multilayered, sometimes convergent, fused, or divergent ways; but whatever the ever-shifting tone of the narration--serious, playful, speculative, desiring, satirical—"sanctuary" and freedom are central themes that also help build the narrative structure through variously coded associations. Mosquito's narration, all of which become part of the Daughters archives, embraces this narrative structure, and the Daughters organizational structure, newsletters, and the aesthetic theories of Monkey Bread (as published in the Daughters newsletters) work against any structure that builds sanctuary as a place, as a bounded and hierarchical thing intent on fixing status, identity, or language. Importantly, Mosquito's "riffing" on a

theme (as in a musical theme), her continual digressions, are coded ways of telling a story: some readers will see these moments as interruptions or deferrals of the story, as if the story walked in a line (even a crooked or looped one). But sometimes—since there are lots of ways Mosquito uses the same storytelling tools to different ends—each anecdote, each digression or associative riff may be an aspect of the story, one little thread joining “many little threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made...”<sup>271</sup> Mosquito’s narration shifts in perspective and stylistic register, and it wears various aspects—masks, faces, parts, perspectives—suggestive of a narrator always camouflaging, masking, and shapeshifting through the symbolic word or image.

In both the Sanctuary movement and the archive, and in their metaphorical relationship to storytelling, Mosquito meditates on the fundamental problems of who and what gets included, excluded, and something in between; and, of how the processes of collection, protection, and the making of polyphonic fictions (historical and confabulatory) of transnational networks and relations help to form critiques of the nation and state citizenship. To discuss the figuration of “sanctuary” in the novel, then, I also must consider the Daughters. In the next section of the chapter, I will outline some confluences between these two major commitments Mosquito has, one to the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement and the other to the Not for Members Only Daughters, as part of Jones’ broader project to imagine liberation for stories and their tellers/writers.

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<sup>271</sup> Jones includes this quote by Leslie Marmon Silko on “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective” in her essay “From *The Quest for Wholeness*,” (511, ellipses in Jones).

### *Minding the Word*

Ray say some solutions come from the imagination, and others you's got to use reason and judgment for. / Seem like I have learned more about using my imagination and reason and judgment driving my truck for Ray's fugitives than driving it for myself.

—*Mosquito* 564

I am an archives keeper and I have been submitting to my own ignorance since preschool.

---*Mosquito* 613

Ray's Sanctuary movement becomes a physical and creative labor of learning for Mosquito. Her work with the Sanctuary movement gains its most significant meaning for Mosquito not when she's on the road but when she's telling the story of self-learning by being on the road—and when she thus incorporates the movement into the archives of all the stories of the African diaspora and those who identify with Africa. The Daughters archives is the fiction Mosquito uses to explain her responsibility for others and their stories, and her relation to others as a project of learning how to learn, of paradoxically submitting to one's own ignorance by keeping in mind the sense of other stories and their possibilities.

For Mosquito, the Daughters acts as a counterpart to Ray's Sanctuary movement, which mobilizes Mosquito by appealing to her love of language and to her anger at racist, nationalist conditions. Ray's Sanctuary movement and the Daughters loosely resemble two interrelated aspects of the 'real' Zapatistas struggle in Chiapas, Mexico—its militant-political aspect and its anti-dogmatic, decolonial storytelling

aspect, respectively. Ray's Sanctuary movement is the struggle to actively decolonize the Americas through coalitions of freedom movements that reject the nationalist, politico-military versions prevalent in the so-called decolonization period of the 1960s and 1970s. Ray's movement primarily transports refugees (some of whom hail from Chiapas), sends coded messages, advocates for the legal and political rights of the unprotected, and helps move goods back and forth across the U.S.-Mexico border for the Zapatista uprising, what Ray simply refers to as "the revolution."

The Daughters is an imagined collectivity whose primary method of decolonization is through language, through parody, humor, creativity, and spiritual mythmaking, and it is the Daughters archives that oblige Mosquito to use her range of disruptive, protective, and humorous narrative tactics. Both Ray's Sanctuary movement and the Daughters seek out people with a "guerrilla personality," and Mosquito's guerrilla tactics are waged primarily through her narration. But her guerrilla tactics significantly include her work as an archivist, which obliges her to collect and care for all the stories that will create an archives ostensibly for the survivors of the African Diaspora Holocaust and those "who identify with Africa." Here, narrative digressions might suggest Mosquito's choice to include certain stories in the archives, an archives with potentially limitless numbers of "keepers," each with multiple and unique selves. Mosquito not only includes in her archives the polyphony and heteroglossia of multiple and potentially discordant stories, languages, and voices within the narrative; she also importantly includes the hemispheric Sanctuary movements into an Afrocentric archives. The Sanctuary movement story is the only story that runs from the first page to the last page of the novel, from Mosquito's first line about the border road in Texas where she met Maria to her last love letter to Ray, in which she tells him more of her stories and family history of an interracial America "for the purposes of the revolution, you know what I mean, Ray" (616). In this parody

of the digressive and encyclopedic novel, *Mosquito* forms a transnational story that refigures national, diasporic, and racial identifications. Ray's transnational Sanctuary movement becomes an important part of the Afrocentric story, along with "all the other stories in my auditory memory," as *Mosquito* hints at the potentially limitless memory she possesses (616). But Jones uses humor and parody to prevent such a transnational vision from becoming a stable or finite totality with rules for what to include or exclude. As she writes in "*Quest*," an Afrocentric novel is also an Afrocentric novel.

The Daughters explicitly refuse to define themselves as a group—the newsletter insists that contrary to its members' opinions, it is not a social or political organization. The Daughters may be described as an Afrocentric, imagined collectivity of all the survivors of the African Diaspora Holocaust who work toward psychic, social, and economic independence and who promote the circulation of stories from survivors all around the world of the African diaspora and colonial genocide. It may be *Monkey Bread*'s "confabulatory invention," a piece of fiction that emerges from the mostly epistolary conversation between two friends, which makes each one both storyteller and reader. Or it may be even the collective creation of *Monkey Bread* and *Mosquito*, in collaboration with the "real or implied author" Gayl Jones, all three of whom may be alter egos of each other. *Mosquito* occasionally derides the Daughters as a "cult," but it's worth noting that both cult and culture mean to cultivate, attend to, or to worship.

*Mosquito* has "auditory obligations" to the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement or underground Underground Railroad and to the not-an-organization, sort of spiritual Daughters, but she never fully belongs to or identifies as a member of either one. Before her childhood story, *Mosquito* insists that her commitments emerge out of her relation to individuals for whom she cares. Although Maria thinks that

Mosquito joined the Sanctuary movement, Mosquito stipulates: “I be Ray’s rebel, I be Maria’s rebel, I be Monkey Bread’s rebel, I be Delgadina’s rebel, I be little Journal’s rebel. Maybe I add some more to my list of rebellions, but them is people I know...I ain’t reformed to rebellion Itself. You’s got to put a name to my rebellion” (494). Mosquito approaches “rebellion” from the cause of personal friendships rather than from the rigidly defined or dogmatic perspective of someone who is shaped by a commitment to abstraction.

Mosquito is and is not a “joiner of movements.” She does not *belong* to any movement or rebellion, but she “joins” them together through her “first love...the love of language” and storytelling (600). Mosquito explains the spiritual and political origins of this love of language in a story she imagines telling Ray, toward the end of the novel, about her girlhood. Sacred and comical, her story reveals the origins of Mosquito’s hidden talent, which is the surprising source and radical potential of her convergent commitments to the underground Underground Railroad and to the Daughters archives. Mosquito’s story of how she came up with her hidden talent suggests a potentially all-inclusive gathering up of sanctuary and archive stories. The story takes place in a literal sanctuary, a church, and yet her transformation comes from the confluence of her mother and a root woman, both of whom read Mosquito’s potentiality—“versions of who they wants me to become”—and then transform her and her friend into jokester minders of the word.

Mosquito’s story of her hidden talent parodies both the African American ex-slave narrative tradition of secular literacy as a tool for political empowerment and the African American tradition of “visionary literacy,” in which literacy was acquired by “supernatural means” and served as the sign of a miraculous gift to a spiritual

visionary.<sup>272</sup> Stories of visionary literacy had the effect of figuring the Bible as the sacred text and God as directly bestowing a person with the power to read its signs.

Mosquito's parody of divine and secular literacy stories also draws on their apocryphal and legendary registers. For instance, Mosquito says that the story began when she was "only four years old" but was already big and with a deep voice. The story begins with the boast of exaggerated size, but also significant is that her young age makes her pre-school and pre-literate, just on the cusp of the age when children start to learn how to read. Gifted with song, four-year-old Nadine sings her version of this spiritual at her Baptist church service:

*I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield  
Down by the riverside down by the riverside  
I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield  
Down by the riverside  
Study war no more*

"Down by the Riverside" was a song of the Civil Rights movement. Nadine alters the traditional line "ain't gonna study war no more," which makes a future declarative sentence about oneself, to an imperative sentence that commands the congregation: "study war no more!" Disrupting the murmured approval of the congregation, one woman—Mizz Cajun, the root woman—stands up and points her finger at Nadine and is about to "read" her.

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<sup>272</sup> Harryette Mullen, "African Signs and Spirit Writing" in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier, 623-643. Mullen critiques Gates' theory of the "speakerly text." She notes the tradition of visionary and sacred literacy in African American art and discusses the overlooked role of African sign-writing systems in notions of Black orality. Mullen worries that an emphasis on the "speakerly" text "will inevitably exclude certain African-American texts that draw more on the culture of books, writing, and print than they do on the culture of orality," and the general reception of *Mosquito* affirms this claim for me (624). See also Mullen's discussion of Nat Turner's account of his ease with words as a sign of his prophetic, revolutionary leadership.



*Now my mama she don't want Miz Cajun to read me, and although she knows the power of Mizz Cajun from all the narratives in which Mizz Cajun is the force and power...she gets up to shield me from Mizz Cajun...but Mizz Cajun gives me my reading anyways. She says to me, Sojourner, I'm going to tell you who you was back in Africa...[when] you started singing that song, then I remembered who you is. You is the one of us warrior womens that usedta do battle back there in African when they was trying to bring us over here for slavery. I knowed you before the Middle Passage and I know you now...That's who you is. You is the warrior class. You don't take no shit. You is the warrior class. You don't take no shit. (566)*

The root woman's strength derives from her practice of African spiritual and healing techniques; the "root" refers to multiple meanings relevant to Mosquito's story. Poet and critic Harryette Mullen notes that the root in ritual practice might "indicate the strength that comes of being rooted in a coherent culture and kinship structure," but the magic of the root might also lie in "the power of language to aid in visualization as a healing technique, or as a psychological tool for self-affirmation" (633). Mullen considers the root-doctor's art as an art of "survival for slaves" who rely "upon their own visionary powers of imagination to 'make a way out of no way' and thus conjure a better future for their descendants" (633). Here, Mizz Cajun "reads" Mosquito by rooting her in a warrior culture and by implicitly identifying her kinship to Nzingha, the most well-documented and legendary African Queen of the eighteenth-century, romanticized by Angolan and African American nationalists in the 1960s and 70s as a legendary "proto-nationalist" heroine who valiantly fought Portuguese colonization

and slave trade.<sup>273</sup> Mizz Cajun asserts that Sojourner (Nadine) was “*a warrior women to keep us from slavery,*” from both white slavers and the Africans who were “*enslaving us ownselves.*” Mizz Cajun did not know “*they*” had even “*captured you...*” *But they is going to come a day...when you is going to have to pick up your sword and shield and study war again*” (566).

Nadine becomes the object of a contest between two mothers over what Sojourner is going to study, war or the word/Word (“*I don’t know if she say word with a small w or a large W*” 568). The figurative mother Mizz Cajun claims Nadine as a warrior, and Nadine’s birth mother claims her for studying the word. This contest is over both what Nadine will become and over whether African Americans should engage in armed rebellion or institutional dialogue in the common struggle for rights. When her (real) mama says that “*Words is mightier than the sword,*” Mizz Cajun responds, “*Only when you controls the medium and the message.*” But then her mama one-ups her, “*When you takes the s off the beginning of sword and puts it at the end you’s got words*” (567). The people hush again, because it sounds like a serious challenge to the powerful Mizz Cajun. Her mama’s cleverness not only scores a point for words, it finds “sword” already encoded in “words.”

Mizz Cajun laughs and then declares her judgment on Mosquito: “*If she is going to have to mind de word she is going to have to remember all of dem dat she hears*” (568). Mizz Cajun turns and turns, like one of “them whirling dervishes,” as she transforms herself “into all the different colored peoples” of the world and repeats

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<sup>273</sup> Scholars since the 1970s have presented a more complex and de-romanticized history of Queen Nzingha (a.k.a. Njinga, Nzinga). John K. Thornton writes, “pre-colonial Africa’s most famous, and certainly her best documented queen. She is also surely the most romanticized...By the 1960s and 1970s she had become firmly entrenched in Angolan nationalist and much of liberal Africanist historiography as a proto-nationalist heroine” (25). Thornton, “Legitimacy and Political Power: Queen Njinga, 1624-1663,” *The Journal of African History* 32.1 (1991): 25-40. For a challenge to celebratory accounts of Nzinga, see Joseph C. Miller, “Nzinga of Matamba in a New Perspective,” *The Journal of African History* 16.2 (1975): 201-216.

a chant that includes the lines, “*Peaceable she’ll be / Until the words come forth / Enough is Enough / Then she’ll do her warrior stuff*” (568). Mosquito follows this hokey chant by lending this story of Mizz Cajun’s war song a legendary quality in its power, suggesting that Mizz Cajun’s chant is enduringly manifest, pervasive and elusive at the same time. Mosquito recounts that some say Mizz Cajun “renewed” the decolonizing period, “ ‘cause it were around that same time that all over the world the colored peoples started new freedom movements and they wasn’t all them nonviolence neither.” Some even claim that “whenever Mizz Cajun sings that song...the colored peoples starts to pick up they swords and shields and to study war.” Mosquito agrees and thinks about Mizz Cajun somewhere singing whenever she hears “about colored peoples anywhere saying Enough is Enough! Like them peoples I heard you talking about” (570).

Recounting the story ostensibly to Ray, Mosquito interrupts to address her readers, “*Y’all know that Enough is Enough! Is that expression of them Chiapas rebels. How she know them Chiapas rebels’ language all them many years ago?*” What is the meaning of Mosquito’s story, and why would she narrate it to Ray in an italicized passage usually reserved for her daydream narratives? Did Mosquito make up the story retrospectively, to explain her involvement with Ray’s Sanctuary movement or the Daughters? Does the story explain the relationship of her obligations to the “guerrilla personality” she has?

Mosquito attributes the Chiapas reference to Mizz Cajun’s prophetic power, but the reference might also be a playful way to provide Mosquito’s audience with an origin story that, like myth or legend, may be used to explain the origins of something but has no discernable authorial source itself. As Mizz Cajun turns into the aspects of all the people of color from all over the world, she calls out the common motive of decolonial rebellions throughout history—that “enough is enough.” “Enough is

enough” is an English translation of *!Ya Basta!*, the Zapatista rallying cry, which literally means “enough already.” The English translation used by Mosquito emphasizes its conceptual circularity, the tautology and opacity of the phrase. As a vague expression of warning or dissatisfaction, it conveys no one particular meaning and so potentially refers to all rebellions. However, Mosquito pointedly explains Mizz Cajun’s prophesy in the context of “them Chiapas rebels,” and the root woman specifies that Mosquito will be peaceable “Until the words come forth / Enough is Enough.” The word that first signals “Enough is Enough” to Mosquito is Maria’s word, “sanctuary.” Sanctuary begins Mosquito’s guerrilla rebellion: the story of her involvement with the Sanctuary movement may be understood as the story of how Mosquito begins to show her “warrior stuff,” both as a word warrior and as a conductor on the new Underground Railroad, through her relation to Maria. The fact that Maria makes little dolls, has indigenous features, has lived just north of Chiapas, and has a revolutionary for a husband, suggests her involvement with the Zapatistas. *!Basta!* Or *!Ya Basta!*,<sup>274</sup> the not-mainstream Sanctuary movement, and the Daughters archives each tell interrelated stories of a transnational rebellion formed through love and that is decolonial but not dogmatic.

From the day Mizz Cajun read her, Mosquito started “remembering every word and Monkey Bread started writing as her way of minding the word” (569-570). Mosquito expresses the relationship between her and Monkey Bread and their complementary responsibility toward minding the word. The two girlfriends act as literary alter egos, as oral and written minders of the word in symbiotic but independent relation to each other. Monkey Bread says in a printed interview with the Daughters in the newsletter, “Nadine is sorta like my own personal archives.” The

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<sup>274</sup> *Basta!* Is also the name of an historical Sanctuary movement newsletter in the 1980s, clearly drawing from a longer tradition of the call.

matter of alter egos gets more complicated if we move from the level of plot and character to the form (or rather, format) of the book and its note of authorship. The epigraph labels the book as part of the archives and constructs a genealogy between Jones' mother and grandmother that Jones identifies as her own in the "Author's Note" at the end of the book. It seems that Jones, Monkey Bread, and Mosquito are each "daughters" of spiritual mothers who charged them with keeping a protective archives that is also aware of a sense of possibility.

Another story Mosquito tells identifies her with Nzingha, suggesting that she in some sense "is" her own "spiritual mother." Mosquito spends the night in the sanctuary of Nzingha's house, or temple. There she has a dream encounter with Nzingha that is reverent and hilarious. Asleep in the Africa room, Mosquito sees an African-looking woman who says proudly, in the "accents of Africa America, of Caribbea, of Africa itself": "I salute you, Mosquito. I am Nzingha, warrior queen. Do not think of me as your leader. There are no leaders here. We are here to serve each other" (417). Mosquito, entertained but skeptical of such a stereotypical character, repeatedly asks Nzingha: "who are you?" Nzingha responds, "I am who you imagine me to be...Perhaps I'm your own exemplary self" (417). Nzingha believes everyone has "many selves," and one "was an exemplary self" among the other selves, a belief she draws from African philosophy. Later, Mosquito thinks, "if it is her [Nzingha], it is in the form of my own thoughts talking to me. Nzingha? I ask. I am here, she says. We know who we are, don't we, Sojourner?" Mosquito transforms the story of a dream encounter within herself to become the story of her many selves.

Mosquito ends her dream story with the warning, "I should not tell you this. For some among you will think I'm a nut"(417). As Mosquito suggests, the Daughters deflate or reverse every officious or mystical aspect they cultivate. Self-parody may be their defining feature and version of a decolonized aesthetics. The Not for

Members Only membership card, for instance, is only valid if unsigned, and cards are valid even if you choose not to carry them—“that is, you do not have to be a card-carrying member...to be a Daughter of Nzingha” (413, 439). The newsletter is a hilarious tongue-in-cheek parody of societies, foundations, any number of non-governmental organizations, and social clubs. The humor, teasing, parody and satire between Monkey Bread and Mosquito, through personal letters and the Daughters newsletter, help constitute the imaginary ideal principles of the archive and of storytelling for the survivors of the African Diaspora Holocaust all over the world. The newsletter’s officiousness is part of the joke and is part of its serious philosophy too, as are the multiple tricks about the Daughters and the authorship of the newsletter.

Here the Daughters and the Sanctuary movement share features in common that parody institutional spiritual and political organizations. At the same time, they extend the potential of spiritual and political organization to become a freed and freeing, imaginary ideal of a decolonial sense of collectivity that is also open and uncoerced.

The Daughters come close to a potentially endless reference source for other organizations, foundations, and businesses, some real and some “confabulatory” (a word that means informal or between friends, but which Mosquito aptly misuses to mean fabulous or fictional). The Daughters is both parodic and satirical of multiple targets, including the exclusionary politics of militant black nationalist groups. Besides loving Oprah and recommending romance novels by “Nefertiti Johnson” and satires such as *Fuck the Fucking Fuckers and Their Fucking Fuckery: A Neo-Caribbean Novel* (431), one common imperative repeated in the Daughters newsletters is for Monkey Bread to “leave the plantation!” as she is housekeeper to a blonde Hollywood celebrity (who exoticizes difference in her décor, film roles, and choice of domestics). When the never-disclosed Daughters claim in a letter to Monkey Bread to

have received requests from the League of Campus Revolutionaries Reunion Committee “asking us not to admit you to the Daughters,” however, the letter to Monkey Bread explains, “They mistook us for an organization and thought that we hold meetings to which you should not be admitted. However, we believe that you are a reformed person now. Even if you aren’t, you do good work with our archives and we like your stories and poems” (445). Later in the novel, Mosquito tells a story about her and Monkey Bread’s attempts at getting radicalized only to be misrecognized, misunderstood, and ridiculed by other militant student radicals. Mosquito arrives at the students’ “revolution party” dressed as Sojourner, but they all think she’s dressed as Aunt Jemima. Monkey Bread retaliates by dressing up like an outlandishly stereotyped image of a pygmy “savage,” bone in her nose and all.<sup>275</sup>

Mosquito’s story of her girlhood and the newsletter suggest a complex polyphonic identity figured through friendships between different warriors “minding the word.” The Daughters may indeed be Mosquito’s “literary sanctuary,” but precisely because her narrative imagination is free to face the idea of the complexity of the universe in herself and herself in the universe. More to the point, the “Daughters of Nzingha” may exist within the story-world as a code name and an occasion for Mosquito’s literary “quest for wholeness.” If so, the “wholeness” she finds is in one sense the multiple authorial identities that are thoroughly interrelated yet irreducible to any one authorial presence. The conception of authorship in *Mosquito* extends Bakhtin’s notion of the “polyphonic novel” to the level of metafictional and material authors in unresolved tension with each other, and

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<sup>275</sup> Jones’ distance from black nationalist programs is prominent in all of her writings and has been a major cause of her controversial status in African American writings. See Madhu Dubey’s *Black Women Novelists*, Introduction and Chapters Four and Five, for the most extended reading of Jones’ engagement with black nationalism and black feminist criticism through its displacement onto “fictional worlds.”

employing voices and fragments in dialogic relations that do not subsume the fragments to an authorial consciousness. As I suggest, the seemingly unifying force of the narrative, its narrator, Mosquito, is not a single recognizable authorial consciousness within the story-world.

In some sense, *Mosquito* reads as representing the universe and the world of Gayl Jones. The real or implied author Gayl Jones also notes in the Daughters epigraph as well as in the “Author’s Note” at the end of the book a complicated self-referential genealogy that mixes Jones’ mother and grandmother with the characters and texts that they have written. These latter texts come to figure as part of a matrilineal genealogy in the Daughters archives, as stories that mostly have not been published by Jones’ mother or grandmother, and the texts serve as part of the mysterious “Electra project” in the novel (see 440-446, for example), further suggesting complex bloodlines displaced onto literary lines that go on “keeping” the word. The Daughters newsletter make references to Jones’ earlier texts but also Jones’ mother’s texts, and her mother’s mother’s texts. Though *Mosquito* does not center on family or genealogy, the mother-daughter relationship is here invoked and transformed in multiple ways, especially through Jones’ incorporation of her late mother’s work into her own. Jones creates a whole literary network through letters, which figure mother-daughter friendships and woman-woman friendships. While it’s true that Mosquito says little to nothing about her family, kinship is present in the metafictional aspect of the novel, in which Jones shifts her personal familial kinship from bloodlines to a familial kinship along literary lines, which she does by incorporating the writings and character inventions of her mother and grandmother into her own writing.

After reading the newsletter, Mosquito comments, “To tell the truth, I think it’s a confabulatory newsletter and that it’s really a story written by Monkey Bread but in the form of a newsletter, and that she added that seemingly real letter to herself



[accompanying the newsletter] to make it seem like it were a more realistic story when it is probably more surrealism than reality” (447). Both Mosquito and Jones are trickster storytellers, and it seems very likely that Mosquito “is” or makes the Daughters, and maybe Mosquito, Gayl Jones, and Monkey Bread are all alter egos of each other. Mosquito’s evidence for her charge includes names in the newsletter that belong to characters she’s played in plays; the reader may recognize names from Jones’ earlier fiction, such as Joan Scribner Savage (*The Healing*) and news from Palmares (*Song for Anninho*). McDowell, who notes that Mosquito adds “Nzingha” to her signed name at the end of the narrative, asks “[w]ho writes here--Gayl Jones? Her late mother Lucille Jones? Kate Hickman [character created by Lucille Jones]? Electra? Delgadina? Monkey Bread? They all come together to tell a polyphonic story, but it's impossible to tell them all apart” (“The Whole Story”). Jones complicates the relationship between author, narrator, character, and reader through a potential series of characters who may be alter egos of the real and implied author and each other. The Daughters become an imagined transnational collectivity defined by self-parody and Afro-centric friendships. Its decolonizing potential becomes apparent through a relationship between narrator and the world, in which the archives keeper is a narrator whose memory potentially stores the idea of all the stories in the world, and at the same time submits to the ignorance of being merely one character in a universe full of stories that have their own unknowable sense of possibilities. The Daughters may be a sign of a multiplied notion of authorship that Jones articulates in response to Roland Barthes’ 1968 announcement of the “death of the author,” which he asserted, with Julia Kristeva, the radical intertextuality of all texts, an intertextuality that replaced intersubjectivity and that liberated the reader as it spelled out the death (that is, the social irrelevance) of the role of “author” in making texts meaningful. Where there

was an author, there is now the scriptor.<sup>276</sup> Well, what would the narrator and archivist Mosquito be in this case—author or scriptor? A narrator obsessed with metafictional concerns, she sometimes imagines her authorship of future novels; however, she frequently refers to herself as an archives keeper. If her narration comprises the Daughters archives, the “archive” becomes a protection of stories rather than a mechanism of law, an ordered repository, or un-authored discourse.

The Daughters is, in some sense, an experiment that responds to the “death of the author” and to the question, “what is an author,” by pointing out the individualist assumptions that continues to shape the debate. The Daughters is multiple, made of authorial parts that may be fragmentary but not fragmented, subjected to fragmentation. The psychic fragmentation of the schizoid character of Miguelita finds its counterpoint in the multiple authorial alter egos of Mosquito, Monkey Bread, Gayl Jones, Lucille Jones, Joan Scribner Savage, and so on, exist in relation to each other, part of a paradoxically open and unfinished wholeness in which each author shares in the making of the narrative. Intertextuality does not replace intersubjectivity, because substitution or replacement is not necessary. Wholeness takes on another meaning in the multiple polyphony not only at the narrative level, as those heterogenous voices and conflicts that survive the novel (Bakhtin), but at the authorial level.

### ***Conclusion***

As Mosquito’s involvement with the Daughters and Ray’s Sanctuary movement suggest, *Mosquito* is both a parody of preachification and a spiritual quest to decolonize the self and the story. I have tried to account for Jones’ rich theorizing on

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<sup>276</sup> Alongside the “death of the author” comes Michel Foucault’s response to Barthes, “What is an Author?” in which Foucault traces the creation of the modern author through his relationship to the text as well as to societal power relations. For a helpful discussion of these theories of authorship, see Donald E. Pease, “Author,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 105-117.

the relationship between ideas of sanctuary, archive, and humor as part of the decolonization of novels and people.

Besides an archive, the Daughters offer Ray's Sanctuary movement something it needs to become a truly decolonizing movement: playfulness and humor. Mosquito's playfulness contrasts with Ray, who often misses it or gets thrown off by it, and rarely joins her. Mosquito "reads" Ray as someone who, as a person of color in white mainstream society, "rejected they humor and playfulness so's not to be confused with the stereotype" (571). One of Mosquito's warrior tactics is to "face my audience and play with them, I says, even if they does think I'm a stereotype" (572), despite the angry readers in that audience. Here and elsewhere, Mosquito's archive keeping is part of a prophetic and visionary process of transforming ideas about the sanctuary and the archive that is also insistently playful. It is a process that laughs at itself before it sobers into a completed archive, or a closed fictional world, or a revolution party that mistakes Mosquito's version of Sojourner Truth with Aunt Jemima and keeps a woman with many hidden talents outside the revolution party. In *Mosquito*, the role of humor and mirthful parody becomes crucial in distinguishing the decolonial novel about "everything" from its colonizing counterpart.

## Epilogue

### Ghostwriting Iraq: Decolonial Tropes of Authorship

The situation after 9/11 is that there is interest in Arab culture for what I like to call forensic reasons. Texts are read only [to unlock] the mysteries of the Arab mind.

–Sinan Antoon, Interview, *The Daily Star* (July 24, 2007)

The cover of the novel says only that it is “by its author.”

-from *the warring factions*, 141

In the spring of 2001, *The New York Times* published an article about the Central Intelligence Agency’s latest effort to gather intelligence on Iraq. C.I.A. agents had “discovered” a novel whose rumored author was then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Set in the Babylonian era, the novel appears to be an allegory of Iraq’s recent history, especially the 1990-91 Gulf War. The agency translated the novel, entitled *Zabibah wal Malik (Zabibah and the King)*, because they viewed it as “an intriguing window into Mr. Hussein’s thinking.”<sup>277</sup> As the *Times* reporter explains, “[i]n a closed government like Iraq’s...studying documents like novels can be an important tool for the United States government.” To the C.I.A., the novel revealed itself as both an allegory and a seemingly transparent medium.<sup>278</sup> Thus translated into

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<sup>277</sup> Elaine Sciolino “C.I.A. Sleuths Study a Novel for the Thinking of Hussein,” *The New York Times*, 2001.

<sup>278</sup> *Zabibah* readers treat “allegory” as a rigidly established set of correspondences between fictional and historical narratives, and they imagine this double narrative of Iraqi history as written from the imagined perspective of Hussein. The C.I.A. reading *Zabibah and the King* to get inside the head of a dictator is a story that itself might be read as an allegory of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

a window, the novel frames a view of the mind that, once properly “scrutinized,” promises the U.S. government a textual map to Iraq.<sup>279</sup>

Though perhaps a one-time stunt, the C.I.A.’s reading of *Zabibah and the King*, publicized months before the September 11, 2001 attacks and two years before the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, is in keeping with broader efforts to gather international intelligence and shape public rhetoric on Iraq since the very late 1980s. Often, these efforts were to psychopathologize “Saddam the Madman,” to “penetrate the workings of Saddam’s mind” until Hussein was executed in the final days of 2006, after a disorderly televised court trial.<sup>280</sup> The C.I.A. experiment in psycho-literary intelligence is a clear example of how ideological conceptions of nation, state, and culture shape paradigms of individuality, authorship, and the uses of a text for readers. What the agency reveals, not surprisingly, is not Hussein’s psyche as an individual so much as an approach to reading that aligns the literary word with the figure of the sovereign, individual author and that elides the processes of ghostwriting that would trouble such an alignment. In the case of Saddam Hussein’s authorship and sovereign authority, the C.I.A. affirms the sovereign, individual author in the service of contemporary forms of U.S. intervention and imperial domination, which assume the legacy of earlier forms of colonialism and adapt them to late-twentieth century neoliberal, neoconservative practices.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> *The New York Times* reports that the C.I.A. was first alerted to the novel after “spotting” an article in “Saudi-owned” London-based Arab daily newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*.

<sup>280</sup> Countless news stories, television documentaries, political think tanks, and books of the early 1990s made Hussein’s mind their primary subject. “Penetrate...mind” quote taken from Sawyer’s introduction to Israeli handwriting analyst. See, for example, even the relatively muted portrait of Saddam Hussein in an ABC News special interview of Hussein by Diane Sawyer, which includes documentary-style interviews with U.S. actors such as Donald Rumsfeld (and the Israeli intelligence handwriting analysts). For recent commentary, see Erica Goode, “The World; Stalin to Saddam: So Much for the Madman Theory,” *The New York Times*, 4 May 2003.

<sup>281</sup> Picking up on the C.I.A. reading project, other commentators have responded to Hussein’s possible authorship of *Zabibah and the King* with a variation on the well-worn themes of ridicule and contempt

The claim that *Zabibah and the King* serves as a window into Hussein's thinking depends upon some traditional notions of authorship while dismissing others, such as the notion that an author is one who writes. The agents do admit that the novel was most likely not written by Hussein but must adapt that to their theory of individual authorship. Even after becoming "convinced that Mr. Hussein probably did not write it, but that he carefully supervised its production and suffused it with his own words and ideas," the *Times* reporter explains, "United States officials have pored over every detail of the book and then some" (Sciolino). In this way, Hussein's authorship lies in his political authority over the writers and in his aura as sovereign, as dictator, and as self-described symbol of Iraq, which "suffuse" the novel.

Agents, along with reporters and interviewed officials, ignore the multiple fictions of authorship they themselves bring to light. The figure of Hussein the author—as presumed source of intention, if not of invention—highlights the double meaning of dictator as the one in control of politics and writing. If the novel did not spring directly from Hussein's consciousness and out of his pen, he must have done what dictators do—made others "suffuse" a national story with his presence. The "others" that had some hand in writing the novel are not the objects of attention: they, like the novel, are regarded merely as a transparent medium between Hussein and his words or ideas. Ghostwriters are easy to ignore, since by definition they write texts but act invisible so that another can claim authorship. The effect of reading authorship in this way is that the ghostwriters' involvement is noticed just before they are made to

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for Hussein. The *Times* article, for example, opens with the lines, "Winston Churchill painted landscapes. Mao Tse Tung wrote poetry. Bill Clinton played the saxophone. But Saddam Hussein a novelist?" And an American "businessman" self-published a translated version of the novel, available for sale on Amazon.com, with a tawdry pink cover, the image of a disheveled Hussein after his post-invasion arrest, and the credit line "*by The Author Saddam Hussein,*" altered from the original, which simply noted that the book was by its author. The crude joke that (sadistic) political leaders would have (effeminate) literary ambitions aside, it's worth remembering how closely political authority over a state is related to notions of authorship over a text. Amazon, <http://www.amazon.com/Zabiba-King-Saddam-Hussein/dp/1589395859>.

disappear into air. Significantly, the C.I.A.-style of reading *Zabibah and the King* ignores the challenge that ghostwriters pose to notions of authorship and authority, and it reaffirms the aura of the author as an individual of absolute authority over the text.<sup>282</sup>

Investing the author of a text with the authority of a dictator, such readings of *Zabibah and the King* only reinforce Hussein's practice to coerce readers into aligning a model of authorship with his model of secular nationalism and political authority. During his rule, Hussein demonstrated his absolute authority not only by "authoring" the state and its laws but also by "signing" Baghdad and all of Iraq with his name, with the image of his face, with the pictures placed prominently in every residence and business in the country. As Sinan Antoon aptly notes, "Saddam's desire to inscribe his name and face onto [Baghdad's] history and streets was insatiable...[His] murals, monuments, statues and sayings deface Baghdad like rampant scars."<sup>283</sup> Such authorship was carefully engineered and managed through secret police and party informant intimidation, imprisonment and torture, and Ba'ath party membership as a condition for gaining access to jobs and institutions such as education. Hussein would not need to "sign" his name by his own hand—many artists and writers served their patron, willingly or not. People learned their lessons and put up his pictures, participated in compulsory celebrations around newly installed monuments, and so on. The cost of not playing along and thus refusing Hussein's claim to authorship of Iraq was high: as Hussein explained to Diane Sawyer in 1990, the president of Iraq is the "symbol of country [or nation]," and any insult to the national symbol amounts to

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<sup>282</sup> Paradoxically, it was Hussein's silence on the subject of the novel, coupled with its celebration by reviewers within Iraq, that led commentators to presume Hussein the probable author.

<sup>283</sup> Antoon, "Dead Poets Society," *The Nation Magazine*, 26 May 2003, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20030526/antoon>.

treason.<sup>284</sup> Baghdad, but also all of Iraq, became marked by Hussein's effort to credit himself as author of the state. Insulting the president to a cousin, defacing any of his images or words, or even unwittingly failing to pay the proper respect toward his images, usually amounted to death without trial. As a dictator, he was one who dictated the state of things—to the army, to the government, to the citizens, and to the writers.

Hussein's practice of rendering his authority visible throughout the streets of Baghdad (and in every home in the country) suggests that Iraq, like the allegorical novel, and like other countries, is the work of unacknowledged others.<sup>285</sup> The ghostwriters, denied by the credited author, nevertheless may haunt the text they have written. These ghostwriters sometimes affirm their presence through unauthorized writing, thus challenging the authority of the state and trying to redefine the political subversiveness of authorship under the constraints of a dictatorship. As the anonymous mediator between a text and its credited author, the ghostwriter is there to be not-there. The ghostwriter acts as an unseen shadow, usually to the named author. Mediation is denied by all parties. How might we reconsider the relationship between authorial figures and ghostwriters—the writers who are supposed to write to deny that

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<sup>284</sup> Stories abound of people arrested and killed for unwittingly insulting the president. My father often tells the stories of two businessmen in Baghdad, one a small restaurant owner and the other a shoemaker. Relatives of the two men told his story after leaving Iraq for Michigan's metropolitan Detroit area. The restaurant owner, ordered by the Department of Health to repaint the walls and clean the restaurant, had prepared the walls for repainting when the Secret Police came to give their own inspection. They demanded to know why no pictures of the president graced the walls. Explaining himself, the owner showed them the many presidential and other party-approved images temporarily removed before painting. One of these images was tucked into the bathroom area. The president next to the toilet was an insult that carted the man to prison. Luckily for him, his employees told the family, who knew a high-level official in the government, who then pulled strings to get the man released after some days in jail. The shoemaker, who customarily wrapped repaired shoes in old newspapers for his customers, was not so lucky. A Secret Police had received his shoes in newspaper that featured Saddam's image, an image covered by the sole of the shoe. For his offense, the shoemaker was arrested and never heard from again. I am grateful to Basim Naimou for his discussions over the years with me.

<sup>285</sup> By suggesting that Iraq is ghostwritten, I do not mean that the country has been written over by ghosts, or that Iraq is haunted by death, although that may be true.



they are the ones writing, who write to attribute their words to another, to the one who functions publicly as author and authority?

Two recent texts grapple with the theme and figure of the ghostwriter, especially in the context of Saddam Hussein's authority in Iraq. Ammiel Alcalay samples the *NY Times* reportage on *Zabibah and the King* in his book-length poem, *from the warring factions*, as part of a larger effort to contrast an authoritarian form of writing with a form that explores mediation as a way of bearing witness to injustice. The principle narrator of Sinan Antoon's novella, *I'Jaam: an Iraqi Rhapsody*, is a writer in 1980s Iraq who is imprisoned and, inexplicably, given paper and pen during his time in solitary confinement.<sup>286</sup> His secret manuscript is unreadable, for reasons I will explain further on, and a state bureaucrat becomes responsible for "correcting," but in effect ghostwriting, the narrative. I suggest that these two textual explorations of authorship as mediation help to redefine the figure of the ghostwriter, so that the ghostwriter is not a writer who sells his position as credited author to someone else. Instead, the ghostwriter is an author who dwells in the shadows of political authority, who challenges such political authority by mediating between the words of others, and who explores the irresolvable ambiguity of language as a challenge to the power of the state to control meaning. In what follows, I consider how Alcalay and Antoon take up the figure of the ghostwriter and focus on its shape among the shadows, as part of a literary decolonial practice against the mode of authorship that affirms models of the individual sovereign author, which reinforce the authority of the state over how we use language to tell stories.

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<sup>286</sup> Sinan Antoon, *I'Jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, transl. from the Arabic by Rebecca C. Johnson (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007).

### *Mediation between “the warring factions”*

Ammiel Alcalay is a poet, translator, and professor of Middle Eastern and Balkan literatures at the City University of New York.<sup>287</sup> As suggested by the title *from the warring factions*, his poem, published in 2002, explores themes of conflict and mediation. Alcalay dedicates the poem to the town of Srebrenica, a United Nations “safe zone” where Bosnian Muslims were massacred by Serb forces as Yugoslavia broke apart.<sup>288</sup> Indeed, the wars of the 1990s become the most developed motifs in the poem, which catalogues the effects of the Cold War as well as the warring factions created by earlier imperial legacies.<sup>289</sup> The poem weaves details from

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<sup>287</sup> Alcalay was born in Brooklyn but identifies as a Mizrahi Jew. He was involved with the Israeli Black Panther party in the 1970s and other young radical movements that fought against political and cultural oppression. “Mizrahi,” or “Mizrachi,” means “oriental” in Hebrew. The word refers to Jews who trace their ancestry to Arabic-speaking regions of the Middle East and North Africa. Mizrahi Jews—whom Ella Habiba Shohat calls Arab Jews (Yehuda Arabi)—have been declared oxymoronic by all political states and nationalist factions. The name was invoked in the 1970s, by the first generation of so-called Oriental Jewish youth in Israel, as part of a political youth movement to challenge the discrimination and suppression of Oriental Jews in Israeli national discourse and ideology, which affirmed a Zionist narrative of Jewish exile from (and persecution in) Europe. See Ella Shohat, “Reflections of an Arab Jew,” *Emergences* 3.4 (1992): 39-45. Arabic-speaking Jews like Shohat’s family lived in Baghdad and were active in city and national life until their mass migration to Israel in 1950-1.

<sup>288</sup> As Muslims yet “white” Central Europeans, Bosnian Muslims made for strange subjects of sympathy in U.S. media discourse, which consistently conflated “Muslim” with “enemy” since at least the 1970s and especially with the creation of Israel. Alcalay engages with how a public discourse defined by political states conflates ethnic with national identification and religious practice. As part of his dedication to Srebrenica, his poem forms a constellation of other figures and other narratives that contain the contradictions of defining and identifying along the lines set by any nation-state project, especially projects that create binaries of ethnicity and religion in ways that have constituted international politics concerning Arab, Muslim, and Jewish identifications.

<sup>289</sup> Alcalay presents textual fragments on the Bosnian war and the 1990-91 Persian Gulf war in relation to fragments on empires—Babylonian, Persian, Roman, but most importantly, U.S. American. He makes geographical and historical connections between “factions” to highlight how imperialism produces similar effects, as when he highlights the now-familiar analogy of the U.S. to Israel and the American Indians to the Palestinians by, among other examples, selecting lines and scenes from the screenplay version of James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*. Alcalay highlights his act of mediation by simultaneously eclipsing and highlighting the source texts as already-mediated versions of other texts, as when he takes from the 1992 film script instead of Cooper’s novel—only to modify the excerpts so that they read as if it were novelistic prose. With a few significant exceptions, the poem is also tightly focused on events within a short period that bear largely unacknowledged resonance—just as “Operation Desert Storm” waned from U.S. television screens in 1991, *The Last of the Mohicans* waxed in theaters near all of us in 1992. As part of his commentary on militarism and the legacy of

a history of violent conflict into a broader meditation on those whose ethnic, religious, and national identities break the formal we as well as unspoken rules of twentieth-century national belonging. Caught between the warring factions, such figures populate the poem and traverse time and geography, from the ancient Babylonian to the contemporary U.S. American empire. The theme of mediation extends to the literary techniques and compositional method of the poem as well. Alcalay writes almost no “new” words in *from the warring factions*. Instead, he orchestrates citations of multiple texts, from his personal letters to United Nations documents.<sup>290</sup>

By exploring authorial mediation as both theme and technique, Alcalay’s work reconceptualizes ghostwriting as a political and literary trope that undermines authorship as a position of authority over his own words. In a section of discussion and commentary that follows the poem, Alcalay explains his compositional method by suggesting that he rejects the writer’s authority in favor of a sense of “responsibility” to words that he acknowledges as not his own: “[b]y using the words of others, I was opening up a way of taking greater responsibility for them than if they were ‘mine’” (187).<sup>291</sup> By using the words of others, Alcalay seems to have compiled a poem ghostwritten by “others” (who do not get paid for their words), even when that “other” is Alcalay’s younger self. Yet, he does not accept authorship of a ghostwritten text in

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empire, he also places testimonies from victims and veterans of war alongside long word lists made up of the different nicknames for military and paramilitary forces in the U.S., Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and so on.

<sup>290</sup> As in his professional life, Alcalay assumes multiple critical positions in *from the warring factions*, including poet/mediator, intellectual/reader, and politically engaged scholar/translator.

<sup>291</sup> Alcalay also hopes that readers “recalibrate themselves to the nuances of texts whose innovations are not technical” (197). Such an adjustment would invite an approach to “poetry as a return to knowledge”—to historical, cultural, and political knowledge, specifically (200). This knowledge should be put to work in nurturing a decolonial, democratic, and multicultural imagination that draws on old colonial tropes but reshapes them: as Hollander points out, the partial quotations and citations that Alcalay orchestrates in the poem “speak as witnesses among witnesses from the warring factions...a way of giving us a map and redrawing it at the same time” (200).

the usual way. Instead of suppressing the fact of ghostwriters to claim authorship, he direct our attention to his poetry as a poetry made by others. Alcalay effectively tropes on ghostwriting, not by hiring ghostwriters, but by explicitly arranging the words of “others” as ghostlike characters in the poem, so that they seem to echo, embrace, contradict, or bear witness to, each other. While Alcalay claims the poem by copyright, then, he explicitly presents textual fragments by unnamed witnesses “from the warring factions”—and these fragments are insistently presented as the murmuring of “ghosts.” The trope of ghostwriting emphasizes the presence of the “ghost” not as relegated to the past but as a sort of mediator and translator between two worlds, and authorship becomes meaningful as a mediating position between the reader of the written text and the words, memories, and experiences of others. Alcalay “mediates” in multiple senses of the word: he acts as a medium that transfers the words of others from one source to another; in a spin on the meaning of “poetic justice,” he acts as a sort of arbiter in the poem between the “warring” fragments, between the words of war aggressors and the victims of aggression; and, as the author of a poem made from others’ words, he is between two worlds and two theories of authorship. Moreover, he manipulates the layers of mediation visually by choosing different ways to present textual fragments on the page. Alcalay’s approach to sampling evokes the open-endedness of Acker’s patchwork pastiche, but it refuses her textual messiness in favor of “responsibility” to the community of citations he creates, a community made possible by the context of the poem. *From the warring factions* explores this method as a political-engaged practice of making art, with art as a way of taking “responsibility” for social discourse rather than of seeking refuge in the realm of the individual.

Whatever this responsibility means personally for Alcalay, it results in the curious effect of developing a theory of authorship that undermines the univocality of

the author. Alcalay's method is directly opposed to that of the authoritarian author, who appropriates the words of others in an effort to assert control over them and the text (and by extension, how that text is read by others). Alcalay develops a theory and practice of poetry that is multilingual, multicultural, and that envisions poetry as a way to testify to the *need* to reshape the political and historical imagination that produces factionalism. The trope of ghostwriting becomes a way of mediating textual fragments so that they attest to the need for decolonizing the artistic and political imagination that has served to naturalize imperialism and its legacies (186). Alcalay's poetic practice of mediation, as he himself points out, is akin to his work as a translator: as he explains to Benjamin Hollander in the discussion section, "[t]he issue was not to 'say something' or impose an order upon the world but to recalibrate the relationship of existing materials to new conditions and interpretations dictated by events, current or otherwise." (187). Literary innovation departs from, comments on, and potentially interrupts conventional practice—not only of technique but also of subject, composition, and genre. By "recalibrating" the relationship of found text to new realities, Alcalay creates overlapping contexts that do not "impose an order" from above so much as suggest newly made and multiple relations between existing textual fragments.

The poem may be read as a loosely narrative assemblage of textual fragments that resonate with each other in open-ended, incomplete ways, often set off by quotation marks that suggest disembodied voices conversing from beyond the page. Such citation slows down the pace of reading, often with large swaths of white space on the page to indicate long pauses, to render quoted prose evocative in meaning simply by presenting the fragments in relation to each other. For example, consider this page in the poem, blank but for one line, two-thirds of the way down: "they should be soaking in oil." The next page, floating near the right margin on the same

line two-thirds down the page, contains only one word: “olives?” and the next page, “birds?” (22-24). It seems that the first statement begs elaboration; if it is a call and response, the solitary words “olives?” and “birds?” suggest that “they” refers metonymically to Palestine, or the Exxon oil spill, or the birds slick with oil leaking into the Persian Gulf during the 1990-91 war. The question remains unresolved and thus, resonates in at least three ways. “Sampling” is an unmooring of text from context, and it frees fragments from being determined by any single context, except the context provided by *from the warring factions*. These fragments stand as witnesses to earlier contexts from which they have become unmoored, and this assemblage suggests new ways of generating and relating historical and literary knowledge.<sup>292</sup> Once again, the techniques of decontextualizing and recontextualizing fragments, of opening fragments to multiple possible meanings and arrangements, complicate the question of who is speaking (is it Alcalay the author? the ghostwriter-sources?) and undermine the supposed univocal intentions of the author.

Here we might remember the C.I.A.’s portrayal of Saddam Hussein as an author with a single voice, possessing an authority over *Zabibah and the King* that resembles his authority over all of Iraq. As a textual response to reading authorship in this way, *from the warring factions* uses the news coverage on *Zabibah and the King* to trope on authority and on ghostwriting in its fifth and final section. Entitled “Night of Unity,” which refers to an Egyptian Jewish commemoration of the parting of the Red Sea (208), this section features longer blocks of quotations and works as a “political and literary commentary on all that has preceded it” (“Discussion” 209).<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Besides quoting from testimonies and other texts, Alcalay also “samples” by generating word lists from texts and then arranging those words, often in the form of a prose poem. Alcalay’s formal decisions become more apparent when we see what he samples and what he leaves out from the textual record of the poem.

<sup>293</sup> Unlike previous sections, the last section features full blocks of quotations; but, as with the first four sections, it also features direct quotations as well as unquoted citations that are arranged on the page in

It features what appears to be a love story between the good-hearted, wise village woman Zabibah and the King of Babylon. In the following excerpt from the poem, the king belatedly finds his beloved Zabibah raped and beaten by her husband:

One night, while returning to her cottage from the king's palace, Zabibah is gagged and dragged into a forest where she is raped by a man who conceals his identity. He turns out to be her estranged husband. Afterward, Zabibah says to herself, "Rape is the most serious of crimes, whether it is a man raping a woman or invading armies raping the homeland." The enraged king vows revenge by opening a war "that will not end until victory or death." During the ensuing battle against the husband and his supporters, Zabibah is killed. Her husband, who is killed the same day, is buried beside her so that the people can throw stones on his grave to desecrate it on the anniversary of his death.

The long quote above enters the poem as though told by another voice among the many voices in *from the warring factions*. *Whose* voice, the name of the storyteller, are not longer the important questions to answer in order to make meaning of the story. By contrast, most commentators on *Zabibah and the King* read this section of the narrative only for its allegorical correspondences. The love story, which relies on a misogynist use of the female character as willing property of her king, whose claim supercedes even her husband's, and as symbol of the voice of the Iraqi nation, has been read as an allegory of the U.S.-Iraq Gulf War of 1990-91. The date of Zabibah's rape and death is the first day of U.S. military assaults on Iraq, Zabibah represents "the people," the King represents Saddam Hussein, and so on. The story is thus also read

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relation to other bits of text from such sources as personal testimonies, public documents, and scholarly histories.

as a political allegory that seeks to reconcile the nation with the sovereign. Zabibah loves the King, and, as a symbol of the people, becomes his wise advisor. As the “U.S. official” describes it, “when [the king] asks Zabibah, ‘Do the people need strict measures’ from their leader,” she answers, “‘Yes, your Majesty...The people need strict measures so that they can feel protected by this strictness’” (Sciolino). Before Zabiba’s rape by her cruel husband (which according to the allegory refers to the United States), she attests to the natural love of her sovereign and her forced union to her husband: “I love you, I don't love my husband...I'm married in name only” (Sciolino). Zabiba’s allegorical function is to represent the people’s portrait of the real subject, their beloved king, the man who protects them by constraints and is loved for it.

Significantly, Alcalay does not sample these details, which are featured prominently in the news reportage on Saddam as novelist. Instead, he reconstructs *Zabibah and the King* by modifying the version of the story recounted by the C.I.A. agents. Alcalay modifies quotations from the article so that blocks of text, such as the one above, read as a story presumably told directly from the source. Alcalay increases the levels of mediation even as he gives the illusion of immediacy: much of the novelistic prose in the poem is taken from the C.I.A. account of the ghostwritten Hussein novel, but the poem masks itself as though it were unmediated. These excerpts are among the few that Alcalay does not put in quotation marks, so that there is no indication that the text is attributed to any specific voice or person. Translating the *NY Times* reportage into the form of narrative fiction, Alcalay creates an illusion that the story is being told directly to an audience rather than channeled through national intelligence agencies and news media organizations. Moreover, he frees the story from its use as an instrument to access the workings of Saddam’s mind in the



name of U.S. interests, be they strategic or propagandistic.<sup>294</sup> When “its author” is in fact identified as a political dictator, the novel becomes instrumental in explicitly political ways even as its existence is reduced to its “author” by commentators within and outside Iraq. Thus freed from the presumed authorship of Hussein, the story is returned to anonymity, and its details are freed from the demands of rigid allegory.<sup>295</sup>

Of course, this experiment with mediation also explores its necessity—precisely because authorities have the power to manage and control access to certain voices, knowledge, and texts. While voices in the poem at times seek a return to some original source that bears witness to history—the bodies in mass graves, the testimony of survivors—the story of *Zabibah and the King* explores new levels of mediation as a way to counter such authoritative power. For instance, when Alcalay does include direct quotes from the news story, they are of the unnamed official commenting on the end of the novel, when the King is speculating on how the country will respond to his eventual death. Without attributing the source, the following lines float on an otherwise white page:

“The book is kind of a dirge.

The king is talking about his death.

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<sup>294</sup> Among the many arrangements that implicitly comment on U.S. American empire in the Middle East: paired with the descriptions of *Zabibah and the King* from the news story are descriptions, also from *The New York Times*, of reporter Mr. Love’s failure to break the story of the 1953 U.S. engineered coup of democratically-elected President Mosaddegh in Iran.

<sup>295</sup> Notably, the allegory eventually falls apart for readers of *Zabibah and the King*, further suggesting that the text is more complicated and contradictory than a simple propaganda piece by a dictator, even a mad one. One “US official” nonetheless explains this breakdown in allegory as proof that Saddam Hussein, disguised as the character of the King, “imparts his inner self...even his anger and frustration” (Sciolino).

Everytime I read the book I feel for the king.” (137)

By selectively sampling from a longer quotation, and by arranging the quotation as though it were the poetry of reflection, Alcalay suggests that the love story turns out to be between the unnamed C.I.A. agent and the unnamed dictator, both of whom presumably identify with the figure of the sovereign, with the king. He does this in part by cropping the full quotation of the official, who attributes his sympathy for the king as the response engineered by the propaganda: “This is what Saddam wants the people to do — to feel for him” (Sciolino). In the poem’s sampled version, the speaker’s “feeling” for the king suggests that his sympathy is for the sovereign as well as for himself, as all individuals and empires will eventually face death and the question of how their legacy will be received by the living.

Alcalay makes an important move not only in relation to post-structuralist critiques of authorship but also as a critique of our political imagination (nowhere, for example, did media commentators on Saddam’s “dic-lit” or “dictator literature” seem aware of their own complicity in the U.S. propaganda that made reading a novel a C.I.A. mission). Alcalay’s textual mediations allow a sense of ambiguity, and they invite us to consider what poetic and political possibilities lie in the unmooring of the novel from the dictator, and of how the textual constellations of violence, love, and memory generate new ways to mediate and translate into literature the multiple voices that bear witness to the historical present.

***“I awake to find myself (t)here”: Linguistic Ambivalence and Indeterminate Authorship***

Revealing the process of ghostwriting, as a decolonial trope that challenges the interests of authoritarianism in political and literary terms, finds one of its fullest expressions in a novella by Sinan Antoon. A young poet, translator, and professor of Arabic-language literature who left Iraq for the U.S. in 1991, Antoon has been a vocal critic of U.S. foreign policy and public discourse. His novella, *I'Jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, was translated from the Arabic original (published in 2004) and published by San Francisco's City Lights Books in 2007. Here, I read the framing devices of the narrative as a critique of authoritarian models of authorship.

Multiple levels of text introduce the main narrative in *I'Jaam*, a prison narrative set in a 1980s Iraq ruled by an authoritarian dictator par excellence, someone only identified as “The Father-Leader.” Epigraphs immediately focus our attention on the politics of writing: the first is a saying by the Father-Leader himself. “Write without any concern or hesitation that the government may or may not be satisfied with what you write,” he advises, an imperative to write freely that, in catch-22 style, cannot be heeded.<sup>296</sup> Another epigraph, attributed to 14<sup>th</sup>-century historian Ibn Khaldun, offers a response to this imperative to write without hesitation: “To write is to risk being misread or misunderstood. Words that survive their author are cut loose. They drift, take new shape, sprout new meanings. And there is always their ordinary ambiguity.” The “ordinary ambiguity” of language is what defines the main framing device, which conventionally is used as a literary device that ostensibly authenticates the veracity of the main story, or, if it is a document “found” or left in the hands of the

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<sup>296</sup> The main narrative, Furat's manuscript, includes other sayings of the “great Leader,” such as: “The pen and the gun have one barrel” (*I'Jaam* 3).

narrator of the frame story, vouches for the integrity of that document. This ordinary ambiguity of language also becomes thematized as an anti-authoritarian compositional practice of Furat, the writer of the found manuscript, a poet and student of English literature, during his imprisonment.

The frame device consists of two government documents, one preceding and one proceeding Furat's main narrative. The initial document is "classified" and comes from the "Ministry of the Interior, Directorate of General Security" in Baghdad on August 22, 1989. It details a "personnel" request to "add the dots and write a brief report" on the contents of an "enclosed manuscript," which was found during the general inventory of a prison complex. Employee Talal Ahmad reads, dots, transcribes, and thus, effectively rewrites Furat's manuscript in an effort to "clarify" it.

The first level of ambiguity that drives the narrative lies in how the Arabic language is written. The history of Arabic writing may be seen as a struggle with ambiguity. In a note about *I'Jaam*, Antoon explains that Arabic script was initially written without the diacritical marks and dots that distinguish half of the letters of the alphabet from each other. Such markings and dots were borrowed from Nabatean Aramaic and applied to Arabic script as an act of "elucidating" and "clarifying," as a way to "eliminate ambiguous readings" ("A Note"). The possibilities for ambiguity in leaving text undotted is much greater in Arabic than the analogy in English of crossing one's "t's" or dotting one's "i's," as Antoon notes. It is this method of writing without dots that Furat employs when pen and paper mysteriously appear in his cell and he decides to write—not "without concern" that "the government may or may not be satisfied" but with the aim of using ambiguity as a weapon against the government and its readers, its minders, its authoritarians.

Frequently, Talal Ahmad asserts his presence as the re-writer of the text we read, as when he preserves an irresolvable ambiguity in the manuscript by adding

footnotes: for example, he notes that “The Ministry of Rupture and Inflammation” could also read as “the Ministry of Culture and Information” (3). In this way, he protects the narrative he writes, one of remembered love, nightmarish dreams, and recounted antics (which most often use humor and eroticism as a way to resist the government’s authority over meaning), but which devolves into impossibly ambiguous boundaries between what’s “here” and what’s “there,” and between what is reality and what is fantasy.<sup>297</sup> As his journal progresses and he grows increasingly desperate, Furat mentions a friend in the jail—a man he refers to as “Ahmad”—who he thinks had given him the papers to write. Ahmad may or may not be the product of his hallucination, and he may or may not be the same Talal Ahmad assigned to evaluate and clarify those papers. In the final pages of Furat’s manuscript, he writes of Ahmad’s final visit and news that a group called “Free Iraq” took over power following a coup d’etat and granted amnesty to all prisoners of the old regime (91). As Furat writes on his last sheet of paper, waiting for Ahmad to return and take him home, he uses his last words to ask, “Where are you, Ahmad?” (96).

The question seems to be left unanswered but may, in fact, find its response in the second half of the narrative framing device. Following the main text is an addendum written by Talal Ahmad in accordance with government instructions. He describes the manuscript as “a record of the unrelated thoughts and illogical recollections of a prisoner” (97). He details his rationale for preserving the profanity and derision that the prisoner intended, especially in his play with the double meanings of undotted words, by noting that “this could help to identify the writer and anyone who facilitated this disgraceful transgression.” He also notes the manuscript’s

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<sup>297</sup> The line “I awake to find myself (t)here” (53) is repeated throughout the novella, as it punctuates the psychic movement between the narrator’s conditions in prison and his mental flights of escape. The narrator makes small variations on the word “awake”—for example, “I awoke,” (8), or “I woke up,” (10)—but the rest of the sentence is not changed.

inclusion of multiple local dialects, including the Christian dialect, and the fact that it is “extremely deteriorated and difficult to make out” (97). In other words, the government Addendum written to clarify the language and determine its author fails spectacularly—and in doing so, amplifies the ambiguities inherent in an undotted manuscript presumably written by an absent prisoner but also written by a government employee, one who may or may not be a faithful servant of the Father Leader and the Party. Who is writing, to what ends, and in what ways, become questions that the text entertains but pointedly does not resolve. Furat’s and Ahmad’s writing ultimately elude the surveillance and control technologies of power deployed in the name of the Father-Leader by a bureaucratic, authoritarian state. The state depends, as well, on the elusiveness of the Father-Leader, whose ability to be both everywhere and nowhere at once defines authoritarian forms of state power.

By focusing on ghostwriting as a process to be recognized, a process still carried out within the overlapping shadows of ambiguity and outside the conventions of the individual, sovereign author(ity), the texts of Alcalay and Antoon reconceptualize the figure of the author. Thematically and at the level of composition, the found words of Alcalay’s poetry, the ambiguity of ghostwriting in Antoon, the conflations and borrowings of Acker, the ambiguously multiple authorial identities in Jones’ *Mosquito*, and the hemispheric palimpsest of Goldman, each suggest alternate forms and functions of authorship not confined to the category of the individual authority, which has been central to the establishment of modern Western aesthetics.

The concept of the individual, which theorists of coloniality and decoloniality trace back to the European enlightenment and contemporaneous colonial projects in the Western hemisphere, informs the meanings not only of literary identity but also of legal identity, of citizenship and statelessness especially, as the twin expressions of the national and state system.

The authority of the writer has been important to the definition and evaluation of the literary in modern Western aesthetics, but it also has been claimed by anti-colonial literary movements that conceived of the author as a heroic individual who fights colonization in the realm of culture, by helping people to develop a national consciousness. And postmodern as well as post-structuralist theories extend the notion of the fragmented self or of the coherent, unified self as a fictional construct to the figure of the author, leading to a crisis in what is the “author,” if it “is” at all, in society. The late-twentieth century U.S. literature I’ve discussed draws from these theories of authorship and the self but also responds to them in innovative ways, and importantly, in ways mindful of the political implications of such theories to decoloniality. What I hoped to show in this dissertation is some of the complexity and inventiveness of these literary texts, which tussle with the questions of how artistic practices might redefine notions of art, beauty, and form—and their political relationship to notions of authority, the individual, and the nation—by engaging with the colonial legacy that continues to shape the Western social imagination.

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