# ‘WORLDING’ AMERICAN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF LAILA LALAMI’S *THE MOOR’S ACCOUNT* AND VIET THANH NGUYEN’S *THE SYMPATHIZER* AS NOVELS OF MIGRATION

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# INTRODUCTION

The initial intention of this thesis was to zoom in on the recent developments of the debate on world literature and to apply such perspective to a selection of two novels of migration[1] within the American panorama. The debate on world literature has gathered particular momentum at the end of the 20th century with Pascale Casanova's *La République Mondiale des Lettres* and in the early 2000s with Franco Moretti's *Conjectures on World Literature* and David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* Although the notion of world literature has been present in the literary debate since at least Goethe, the globalization turn of the 20th century and the technological revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s have brought substantial scholarly attention to the effects of our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, with countless programs dealing with global issues emerging worldwide. This is true not only for the Anglo- and Francophone realities or Germany (historically the leading countries at least for literary studies, the focus of this work) but also for Italy. For example, Ca' Foscari University offers several programs gathered under "International Studies and Globalization" (Studi internazionali e globalizzazione) and is an active member of Venice International University (VIU), a consortium of 20 universities based in 15 countries all around the world. Every semester VIU offers courses in different academic fields (such as history, cultural and environmental studies, global governance, sustainable development etc.) under its "Globalization Program," taught in San Servolo by professors from partner universities to its member students. Such program — in which I have also been enrolled for two semesters — shows the relevance of these topics as well as the importance — and maybe even the urgency — to shift our perspectives from our national or continental point of view to a global one.

Although I have been lucky enough to study with professors and students from all over the world (USA, France, Germany, South Korea, Russia, Nepal, China, Israel, Egypt, Nigeria, Costa Rica, Japan, to name just a few) and had the chance to study outside Italy, the majority of my MA and above all my BA (which has been in Latin, History and Italian

[1] When I say "novels of migration" I refer to the act of migration within the novels and not necessary to their authors.

Language and Literature) has been spent in an Italian environment. I want to emphasize this because every perspective — even the one attempting to be as planetary as possible — is still a perspective *from somewhere*. This is particularly relevant for the present thesis, a research that has initially aimed at analyzing two novels solely through their global implications. Nevertheless, such global scale cannot but be composed of multiple sub-scales or layers, such as the relationship of these novels with migration literature, their American (national and local) and Western dimension and their environmental or folkloric/cultural scales. Moreover, my standpoint is the one of an Italian student observing the American literary field from outside (Italy) and from a different linguistic perspective (non-native), which is worth remembering since it further complicates the analysis.

I am mentioning all of this — perhaps running the risk of stating the obvious — because such are the reflections that months of research on world literature have led to and that have been fundamental in the reshaping of the present thesis. In fact, my initial aim was to focus on world literature debate and to fashion an analysis that took into consideration its most recent developments. However, it seems to me that a thesis on world literature should be characterized by a comparative study focusing on non-Western works, literary theories and languages (even through the use of translations). Pivotal studies such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, Pheng Cheah's *What is a World?* or Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* have been criticized exactly for their lack of engagement with authors or theories outside the Anglo- or Francophone sphere. Although my viewpoint is from Italy, a country whose literature is often considered minor even within the Western sphere, the focus of my thesis still falls on literature written from a hegemonic country in a hegemonic language. Therefore, I have decided to discuss the concept of world literature and to consider the recent developments of its on-going debate that are particularly relevant for the opening of the American Studies, in particular to a transnational, multicultural and multilingual dimension.

In Chapter One I will firstly outline the context in which these recent books take place, discussing significant historical moments and the impact that economic and social global trends have on a global scale. I will then go through the world literature debate, tracing back its origins and discussing its recent developments. Thirdly, I will talk more in depth about the state of the American studies and the relevance of the recent opening

of the field to a more comparative and transnational approach not only in regard to the newest works of literature but also as a way to undermine its genealogy and reshape its canonization. In this last part, I will highlight the aspects of the debate that are particularly relevant for the three authors that I have chosen to consider as well as the approach through which I am to analyze their novels.

The focus of Chapter Two will fall upon Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014). After outlining the origins and developments of Arab American literature, I will provide a reading of the novel based on three main points. Firstly, I will argue that the condition of subalternity presented in the book is the result of a manipulation of language through specific rituals of enslavement and/or colonization and that such manipulation aims at controlling the oppressed through the destruction of their own identity. Secondly, I will show how such mechanism can be overturned through storytelling, which, on one side, can become a means for those who have been erased in history to gain back their voice, identity, and presence. On the other side, following Pheng Cheah's teleological project of literary worlding, storytelling is a powerful tool to achieve freedom through the establishment of alternative temporalities, geography, languages, religions, etc. Finally, I will dedicate the last part of my analysis to the debunking of the 'myth of discovery,' thus undermining those traditional formations of American literary canon and nation that are based on a hegemonic and monolithic understanding of America. In this way, I will show how Lalami's *The Moor's Account* is a novel that re-elaborates the concept of America and Americanness in a transregional[2] and pluralistic key, thus being an example of that worlding of American literature discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Three will be dedicated to Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. I will firstly provide the literary and historical context of Asian America, focusing on issues of race within the community (in literature, in the academia and in social activism) and in American politics, because this is a pivotal theme that has shaped the very formation of the Asian American literary canon. I will then offer an analysis of the novel based on two points. Firstly, I will take into consideration issues of duality and representation that so strongly inform the whole work. Thought as a critique addressed to both Vietnamese

[2] In the case of *The Moor's Account* I will use the term 'transregional' instead of 'transnational' because the novel is set in the 16th century — an historical period that precedes the concept of nation.

people and Americans, the novel reveals the difficulty to correct flat representations for those who do not possess the means of cultural production, and exposes their powerlessness even when they are involved in the very process of representation. This is true for the movie industry in Hollywood and the American academia and politics. In fact, distorted and dehumanized images of the 'other' against heroic American heroes that purport that hegemonic and homogenized idea of Americanness are here proposed. Secondly, I will analyze the critique of the process of collective memory construction upon which the last chapters of *The Sympathizer* focus. Through the exposure of the inhumanity of all those who participate in warfare, Nguyen claims that at some point every victim becomes a victimizer, in a never-ending cycle of violence and abuse. The only way to break that cycle is to admit complicity and to build a form of ethical memory rooted in political action and in a firm sense of collectivity.

I will conclude the present thesis with a chapter in which I will sum up the entire work and offer a final comparison between the two novels and their different contributions to the worlding of American Studies.

Chapter One

# WORLDING AMERICAN STUDIES THROUGH THE WORLD LITERATURE DEBATE

"I am truly thankful for the chance to be here tonight and to share in the joy of this occasion, this marriage of two lovely young Vietnamese people in a Chinese restaurant on California soil under an American moon and in a Christian universe."
(Nguyen 117)

"Nancy Sinatra was afflicted, as the overwhelming majority of Americans were, with monolingualism. Lana's richer, more textured version of "Bang Bang" layered English with French and Vietnamese."
(Nguyen 222)

"This land had become for me not just a destination, but a place of complete fantasy, a place that could have existed only in the imagination of itinerant storytellers in the souqs of Barbary."
(Lalami 11)

## 1.1. A Global Introduction

### Globalization

We often hear that we live in a global age, where dynamics of interconnections and interdependences among world countries or world regions are more and more visible. The development of international institutions, mass-markets or technologies affect every aspect of our lives and every kind of products that half a century ago would have been unaffordable or did not even exist are now readily available. On our tables, rice is from India, avocados from Mexico, chia seeds from Kazakhstan; in our hands, our phone is designed in California, its components assembled in China and their Coltan chips are from Congolese mines; on our screens, Korean Dramas, Russian YouTubers, US

American talk shows; on our shelves, Japanese manga, English dictionaries, Argentinian novels. Everything, from the clothes we wear, the social media we use, the information we consume, is a product of this global trade.

To use Thomas Friedman's famous expression, it seems that the world has flattened — it has metaphorically become smaller —, meaning that technological innovations and the Internet have multiplied, strengthened and created deeper relations worldwide. At the center of this phenomenon lays the increased circulation of goods and above all of people, with a peak in the last 20 years of migration flows towards the so-called 'Global North.' However, such pervasive network is not limited to the richest regions of the world and it affecs and reshapes our economies, mobility, understanding of time and space, our environment, social life and health. A key term here is transnational, referred to all the activities that take place beyond and across national borders and regions, encompassing different areas of the globe.

As a consequence of the expansion of the Internet, transport and communication services, the way in which we purchase the immense variety of products at our disposal has been completely revolutionized. Physical shopping has given way to online shopping, which has skyrocketed in the last decade and in particular this year, with the global pandemic forcing us to stay at home. We expect comfortable experiences, fast deliveries — Amazon Prime's success has widely proven it — and products at low prices. The diffusion of low-cost means of transportation (Flixbus, AirAsia, Ryanair, DHL, to name just a few) has made travelling easier and has contributed to a substantial increase in the worldwide circulation of people and goods. In this way, distances have shrunk to such an extent that one could have a package from the other side of the planet delivered in 72 hours, or physically be in Rome, Zurich, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur on the same day, virtually meet persons from all over the world in one single Zoom call or enjoy a movie together while commenting it on Netflix party. In this sense, mobility has had tremendous impacts on our understanding of time and space, not only because we are getting used to have almost immediate access to products,[3] but also because our capitalist system has

[3] With "products" I refer to physical/material (food, clothes, medicaments, etc.) and cultural and intellectual ones (tv shows, documentaries, music, art, news, etc.). During the research I did for this thesis I have often wondered how much longer it would have taken me if I had to write it, say, 20 years ago, or even 8 years ago. Almost the totality of the works here cited have been accessed through the Internet, and in the same

established Western instruments to calculate time and to map the world (let us think of the Greenwich Prime Meridian or the Gregorian Calendar) at the expense of local measurements (Cheah 1).

The last century and in particular the last twenty years have thus brought by dramatical changes in the world and in our own lifestyle. Globalization is the term used to refer to this set of multidimensional transformations. According to Steger:

> Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant. (13)

As outlined above, it is indeed due to the recent technological development that globalization processes have exponentially accelerated and, swiftly gaining attention, have become the topic of countless studies focusing on a proper definition and investigating their dynamics. Scholars such as Roland Robertson, Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King have started to use the term "globalization" from the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In fact, although globalization processes are rooted in our world history, the term and the interest that such phenomenon has raised is recent (Juergensmeyer 24). How far back in time one must look to find the roots of this set of phenomena is still topic of debates and it will hardly find unanimity among experts. In fact, its chronology particularly depends on the way it is defined and understood. Some scholars believe that globalization, in the ways we are experiencing it today, is so different from the other forms of interdependences among world countries that have been experiencing until 1989, that it deserves to be considered as a phenomenon in itself. Some others see today's globalization as a new phase and as the most recent development, however drastic, of older processes, pointing out the end of the 15$^{th}$ century with Columbus' voyage to the Americas or even the prehistoric period as its possible birth

moment in which I have found them. This means that I did not need to physically go to the library to borrow or even book the texts or the essays without which I would have not been able to write this work. The availability of e-books has increased tremendously; as I was in high school 8 years ago, such easy access to cultural products was not even thinkable.

(Steger 18). I am more inclined to agree with this second opinion and I will use the term globalization to refer to the 16th century worldwide inter-connections and -dependencies, especially in the second chapter dedicated to *The Moor's Account*.

Although we use a single word, it is more correct to define globalization as a mixture of multiple forces (economic, political, institutional, environmental, cultural, technological) that simultaneously shape it while influencing one another. Decades of scholarship have taught that globalization is not monolithic, but it is instead a complex "matrix of processes" that shuns every kind of generalizing theory and that has unpredictable consequences on world-wide social relations (James 44), as I will discuss later. In fact, on one hand, large scale of goods, the very act of purchasing, the revolution in transport and communication industries have been beneficial in terms of economic and temporal accessibility, wealth, for the creation and maintenance of social and political relations and education. However, on the other hand, such developments can bring disastrous consequences, e.g., environmentally and in regard to the working conditions of the laborers. Initiatives such as the Zero Waste Movement, Slow Food and Slow City, Greta Thunberg's Fridays For Futures, as well as the increasingly pressuring demand for ethical and environmentally sustainable options clearly show the downside of our interdependent consumeristic societies. At the same time, issues of social justice regarding racial, religious, gender, political, classist and disability discriminations have strongly emerged. Moreover, the intense traffic of people constantly moving worldwide has strong repercussions in terms of health, both for what concerns general pollution (airplanes are the least sustainable means of transportation) and diseases. It might be worth remembering that the reason why the Covid-19 pandemic has spread worldwide and at such fast rate is exactly because of constant movement of people on a local and transnational scale (Eiran).

Although these complex global trends play a huge role on a world scale, they also have a strong impact on a local level, as the examples at the beginning of this introduction might suggest. In fact, ethnic neighborhoods are maybe the most visible result of globalization processes or of globalism (the attitude that people develop in this interactive

world), especially in cities with high concentration of diasporic communities.[4] In these areas people speak their native language, open their ethnic restaurants, shops and sometimes their religious and educational buildings. These social and cultural microcosmos, like Chinatown in Milan, Seorae Village/Montmartre in Seoul, 'Ayn Shams in Cairo or Southall/Little India in London, represent important places where specific heritages are maintained while interacting with the rest of the city. Such realities have been referred to as global cities (Juergensmeyer 24) and they are examples of globalism on a local scale or of what Roland Robertson's famously defined *glocalization* (a fusion between global and local). In the same way, global trends can be adapted locally. Big food service chains such as McDonald's or Burger King are a telling example. In countries with a significant vegetarian part of the population like India, vegetable options will be offered instead of beef burgers (25). Another example might be the spread of online dating apps such as Tinder or Bumble, which have their *halal*[5] versions for Muslims, like Alif or Muzmatch.

In these few pages I have tried to propose a general introduction to globalization and its relationship with our global reality and everyday life. I will now expand some of the economic, political and social aspects outlined above that are strictly related to migration literature and thus relevant for this thesis. Although I will discuss some global trends and propose examples on a global scale, I will mostly focus on the USA and Europe for three reasons. Firstly, because this thesis is a work stemming from the field of the American Studies. Secondly, I believe the USA and Europe to be strictly interrelated. Thirdly, the former is the country in which the authors I have chosen to discuss write/set their novels and the latter is the place from which I observe (and I have already underpinned the importance of the point of view). Moreover, since this thesis is conceived as a dialogue between Laila Lalami and Viet Thanh Ngyuen, I will give space to social issues that Muslims and Asian Americans are currently facing in the USA, although of

[4] An example from the novels here considered are the Vietnamese community in LA and the American and French districts in Saigon, in which part of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* takes place.

[5] Opposite sex relationships are matter of extremely complicated discussions among Islamic scholars, so different opinions might be valid as well. In general, dating in the Western sense is not allowed (*haram*) in Islam since physical touching and general engagement with non-family members of opposite sex is *halal* (licit) only after marriage. When two people want to get to know each other it should always happen with the intention of marriage and preferably with the involvement of the families.

course there would be more topics to discuss which are as important as the ones considered here.

**Economic, Political and Social Consequences**

In this section I will start with an economic approach to globalization in order to briefly outline power relations among countries of our extremely connected and interdependent world. I will then link it to important issues resulting from such interconnectedness and try to fix an historical event — 9/11 — that is significant both on a local (USA) and on a global scale. After discussing it, I will focus on discriminatory practices occurring on American and European soil and the process behind the creation and the stigmatization of "otherness," particularly in regard to migration and ethnic minorities. I will conclude with an overview on social justice in the 21st century and the increasingly important role that social media have in it.

In the last section I have defined globalization as a series of processes that establish and multiply worldwide interdependence and interactions. One of the main forces responsible for such interconnectedness is the spread of capitalism on a worldwide scale. Although forms of modern capitalism can be traced back in the Renaissance period in mercantilism and early forms of individualistic commerce, after WW2 technological and communication resources have been at the base of what several scholars call "informational capitalism." In fact, through industrial innovation, immediate knowledge and information exchange, this form of capitalism has spread its financial and economic project worldwide (McCann 167). It has created a form of transnational corporate globalization operating in global financial markets (178), based on competitivity and on the distribution of economic resources in few "global cities, world cities and core regions" (173), with urbanization being another globalizing force strictly connected to (and propelling) capitalism. As a consequence of the fact that power is not distributed fairly among world countries, the organization of world economy is extremely polarized and thus the establishment of global markets inevitably creates unequal relations.

As already suggested with the "dependency theory" developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in the 1950s and further analyzed later by Immanuel Wallerstein in his "world-systems" theory (11), world countries can be classified according to their state of technological and economic development. In this way, we can recognize core, semi-periphery and periphery countries, generally differentiated by the transnational division of labor. Although it is a system

based on neoliberal capitalism and thus on the activity of transnational corporations, businesses still partly depend on their own national state (as well as on the foreign ones), which, in spite of the weakening of its power, remains a regulative actor (46, 50). It is thus a hegemonic system based on an unequal center-periphery alignment in which some nations prevail on others. Theoretically, such system is characterized by a certain dynamism, since power shifts from one country to the other according to its ability to develop (58), but practically such upgrade is not easy, since two thirds of the world not only does lack access to advanced communication and industrial technologies, but it is on the exploitation of its very resources that the global economic system is based (McCann 166). In fact, 86% of the world goods are consumed by the OECD countries alone (167) and in spite of the increase in global education, access to clean water, the decline of child mortality and malnutrition and the general rise of life expectancy, inequality is still a big issue and the gap is widening (168). Between a third and a half of the world population lives in countries with poor infrastructural, sanitary and energetic conditions and a significant lack of opportunities in education and culture. Significantly, international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which should reduce the gap among world countries, have been often blamed for their contribution in such growing inequality (175). It is thus clear that such capitalist world-system is not only an economic force, but it also generates deep and complex political and cultural interactions. Although it is pervasive, it is not universal in the sense that it both influences and is influenced by local realities.

Countries that have experienced (or are experiencing) a shift from periphery to semi-periphery or even to core have undergone the so-called process of modernization,[6] which is fundamental in order to competitively access the global market. One interesting example might be South Korea. After the Korean War, the country has seen an impressive economic growth that has transformed it from an underdeveloped (periphery) country to

[6] Modernization refers to a process that, through industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization, transforms a given society from a preindustrial to industrial one with a significant technological and economic growth. It is a non-linear process that, beside political and economic consequences, also affects society as a whole. Modernization is not the same as Westernization and does not necessary bring about the democratization of a given society (Inglehart 11). I am not using theories explaining modernization patterns on a large scale (such as modernization and dependency theories) here, but I am only referring to the basic features of the process itself.

one of the most developed (semi-periphery) countries in the world within few decades, becoming one of the most competitive partners on the global market. The rapid economic boom has led to what the field of social sciences calls "compressed modernity," i.e., a modernization of a country happening in a very limited period on a small geographical space that creates a fluid social structure (Kim 66, 141). According to the value change thesis, countries that have experienced rapid economic growth have social repercussions, often developing significative intergenerational change of values (149). Such shift results in frictions between different worldviews, usually gathered under the umbrella terms of 'traditional' (tendency to focus on family, status, communal obligations, religion) and 'modern' (tendency to prefer economic and individual achievement, secular social norms) values (27).[7]

Such changes that so deeply shape societies do generate tensions. In his famous *Jihad vs. McWorld*, the political scientist Benjamin Barber discusses this very topic (tradition and modernity), the tension between particularism and universalism, or local identities and global realities, describing the challenges posed by a globalized economy. Opposing — with Huntingtonian tones — the terms "McWorld" to refer to modernity and materiality, and "Jihad" to indicate tradition, cultural identity and extreme nationalism, Barber shows that these two global thrusts are real, and they infinitely collide, oppose, intersect and complicate each other. The first one tries to bring the world countries closer, whether the second one attempts to separate them (Croucher 4). Simply put, these thrusts are yet another product of globalization and at the same time another factor that problematizes it.

An event that is both a telling example of such complicated relationship between modernity and tradition and an historical turning point that exposes some of the complexities and contradictions of globalization itself and that has so deeply influenced international policies, is 9/11. One of the targets of the airplane hijacking was the World

[7] In the country of the *chaebol* companies, where social order is and has been shaped by family-centrism and Confucianism (Chang 4), 48,6% of South Korea's elderly live in poverty conditions. Although it is not absolute poverty, larger numbers of older South Koreans, lacking familial support, do not see any other option than line up for a free meal or beg in the streets. When interviewed, an old war veteran stated: "There is no justice or fairness in modern South Korean society," a society that a few decades ago was still reserving the most honorable place to its elders (McCurry).

Trade Center in New York, a symbol, with its 110-story Twin Towers (at the time the tallest ever built), of thriving modernity in one of the most global cities in the world. In the videotape released two weeks after, Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden stated that the terrorist attacks punished international infidels for both intervening in ME affairs and for spreading modernity and secularism. However, as Manfred Steger highlights, everything, from the equipment used to record the video to the information about international developments, their weapons or even the decision to leave the tape outside the Al-Jazeera Kabul office (a Qatar-based television company that depended so much on European and American satellites), is a product of what bin Laden was condemning: globalization. The terroristic operation of his Al Qaeda group against the World Trade Center wholly depended on modern technologies, such as cell phones, the Internet, ATMs, the CNN and a system of international financial exchange (Croucher 5). In the video, even the clothes bin Laden was wearing (contemporary military and traditional Arab clothing), notices Steger, "reflect the contemporary processes of fragmentation and cross-fertilization […]; the mixing of different cultural forms and styles facilitated by global economic and cultural exchanges" (2, 5).

As I have mentioned, the events of 9/11 are relevant not only because they shed light on the complexity of globalization, but also due to their historical relevance. In fact, the response to the terrorist attacks, namely the so-called global "War on Terror" policy enacted by President Bush Jr, not only presented an oversimplified and distorted reading of reality, but practically contradicts the New World Order concept proposed shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Released after the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, Bush Sr.'s discourse to the Congress exposed the limits of US global governance and called for a broader internationalism. Although it still relied upon strong democratic idealism, it was far from proposing an Americanization of the world (Dumbrell 85-6). On the contrary, the policy adopted by Bush Jr administration after 9/11 — only ten years later — has been unilateral, focused on "globalizing American rules and principles of justice," with the result that international law and institutions have weakened, and the world has become more polarized.

Not only do the wars waged in Afghanistan and Iraq or covert operations in Yemen have caused countless deaths of innocent civilians abroad, they have also had an important impact on Western internal politics (Held and McGrew 221). The immediate

consequence of the "War on Terror," which identified the enemy in Islamic extremists, has been an increase in domestic violence. Although Bush did visit a mosque right after the 9/11 attacks stating that "the face of terror is not the true face of Islam,"[8] violence against Muslims and Islamophobia skyrocketed (+27% of religious hate crimes in 2001). Muslim women were stripped of their hijabs, kids bullied at school, Islamic centers and businesses burnt down or vandalized, and even Sikh men, who were mistakenly identified as Muslims because of their turbans, were heavily targeted (Lalami, "Conditional Citizens" 13-4). Such increase in violence and discrimination was not circumscribed to that period but is still persistent today. In 2019, Islamophobia was still the first form of religious discrimination in the US, both caused by and reinforced on a social as well as structural level (legislation, budget decisions, and law enforcement practices), as hate crimes and Trump's so-called Muslim Ban show (Mogahed and Mahmood).[9]

It is important here to consider two consequences of the globalization processes. Firstly, the fact that our realities are more and more transnational and borderless in every aspect has social and cultural repercussions, as Barber suggests. In a world that is becoming a global village and in which the conventional notion of nation-state is being challenged and global economic dynamics have real consequences (the 2008 crisis is an example), a sense of loss of cultural and social order has diffused in Western countries. This general atmosphere of threat, siege and the insecurity towards such transnational world has been combined, on a political and social level, with a second consequence of globalization, namely the substantial increase in human mobility. International migrants[10]

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[8] Claiming that terrorism is not the true face of Islam, instead of sharply separating the two, means establishing a relationship between them — and this inevitably leads to hate crimes. As President Obama (and countless before and after him) has remarked fifteen years later, "if you had an organization that was going around killing and blowing people up and said, 'we're on the vanguard of Christianity,' as a Christian, I'm not going to let them claim my religion and say, 'you're killing for Christ.' I would say, that's ridiculous […] That's not what my religion stands for. Call these folks what they are, which is killers and terrorists" (Diaz).

[9] This trend is mirrored in other Western countries, where Islamophobia has sensibly raised in the last twenty years, after 9/11 and the attacks in France, Germany and Belgium (Bayrakli and Hafez 6; Giacalone 300). The Niqab ban in France, Hanau shootings in Germany, Zurich shootings in Switzerland, Finsbury Park mosque attack in London, as well as 2019 Christchurch shootings in New Zealand, are only a few examples.

[10] According to 1951 Convention or the 1967 Optional Protocol, the correct definition of the term "refugee" is a person who has *obtained such status in the welcoming country* through legal proceedings. However, the term "refugee" is commonly used to refer to internally displaced persons (IDP), i.e., people who have

are seen as the embodiment of "the transgression of cultural, social and national boundaries," and, especially as migration flows intensify,[11] they have been depicted as the threat to the Western civilization. The increase of racism and discrimination against migrants and minority groups is thus in close relationship with the rapid social, political and economic changes brought by globalization (Tesfahuney 507-8).

Such representation, to which Muslims have been subjected especially after 9/11, is built on a rhetoric of difference, with a stigmatization of everything perceived as "other" from a supposed national standard — a narrative that has deep roots in Western history and has been often used against migrants, refugees, minority groups and against natives in colonies. This kind of discursive formation relies on a strictly binary reading of reality that aims at creating a specific asymmetry between the dominant group and a certain minority (or minorities). This is possible thanks to a process, called "othering" or "creation of otherness," that enables ethnocentric bias,[12] with the aim of opposing a certain identity against the stigmatization of difference. In the case of Western discourses, otherness has been always built on the use of positively *vs.* negatively connotated binary oppositions and on the general acknowledgement, through colonial and imperial

been forced to leave their homes because of economic, political, racial, religious, ethnic, environmental reasons but who are still living *in their own country* ("Asylum & the Rights of Refugees."). People arriving in a foreign country who apply for the status of refugee are asylum seekers. When IDPs flee their country they become asylum seekers, if, by staying in their country they face religious, ethnic, political or racial persecution, or migrants, if they *temporary* flee their country to have a better future (due to other types of violence or difficult living conditions). A migrant is different from an immigrant, since the latter makes the *conscious decision* to *resettle* in a new country. The term "migrant," in the way it is being used, comprehends a wide variety of people, e.g., the so-called "expats," economic migrants, people who want to live abroad for the most various reasons, and even people who have never been through the process of migration, i.e., the so-called second or third generations. Migrants can be legally or illegally (without passports, travel documents or permission to stay) staying in a given country ("Refugee, Asylum-Seeker, Migrant, IDP: What's the difference?"). There is both much confusion and lack of knowledge about these differences, so that very often "migrant" comes as a substitute for all the other terms. I will use the correct terms for asylum seekers, refugees and IDPs, while I will employ the word migration/migrants to refer to both immigrants and migrants.

[11] In 2020, there were 283 million global migrants (with a 2 million reduction due to COVID-19), whether they were 70 million in 1970 (Betts; Wallis).

[12] The definition of ethnocentrism I refer to is the following: "Ethnocentrism is a term applied to the cultural or ethnic bias —whether conscious or unconscious— in which an individual views the world from the perspective of his or her own group, establishing the in-group as archetypal [inherently superior] and rating all other groups with reference to this ideal." An ethnocentric approach leads to inadequate and biased understanding of different cultures (Baylor).

exportation, of the validity of Western values.[13] Therefore, "them"/the "other" is negatively marked, in the sense that it is presented as lacking the "us"/"self" identity. It is clear that the creation of such relationship is possible because of an imbalance of power between the two groups, which enables the dominant one to affirm that narrative through mediatic, political and economic control. In effect, in Western countries the purpose behind the "othering" process is to affirm white supremacy.[14] Such Foucauldian manipulation of knowledge is at the base of the construction of a particular "us" opposed to a devalued and simplistic representation of "them" (Staszak 1-3).

Let us consider the Asian American minority. Although more and more studies are suggesting their increasing assimilation in the US racial hierarchy (Li and Nicholson 3), discrimination against Asian Americans is still an important issue with at least one century and a half of history. This minority group is subjected to two main stereotypes following our othering process and based on racial homogenization reinforced by popular beliefs such as the alleged similarity among different Asian ethnicities ("all Asians look the same") (Li and Nicholson 2).

The first stereotype, considered as "camouflaged Orientalism" by a large part of the scholarship, is the "model minority," namely the fact that Asians' socio-economic success is due to their own culture of hard working (3-4). Here a hierarchy (and thus conflict) among other minorities (*they*, Asians, are the "model" while *the others*, Blacks in particular, are "problems") and with white Americans is clearly established. Asian Americans might be the "model," but they are still a minority. By casting them out of the American mainstream, the subordination of a homogeneous "Asian other" (*they*) to a white American (*us*) built on a binary opposition (superior/inferior) is ensured.

The second stereotype is the so-called "Yellow peril,"[15] which consists of the identification of all Asians as an economic, social, cultural and even sanitary threat to the

[13] This is true also for key concepts in the understanding of globalization processes, such as capitalism and democracy.

[14] White supremacy refers to "the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races" ("White Supremacy"). There are a lot of definitions of white supremacy, including those focusing more on the belief in whiteness as a genetic mark of superiority. However, I personally prefer to refer to Merriam Websters' because it shows the systematicity of the phenomenon and how inextricably related to power relations it is.

[15] The expression "Yellow peril" has first appeared in 1895 with the following meaning: "a danger to Western civilization held to arise from expansion of the power and influence of eastern Asian peoples." It

dominant group of white Americans. The Covid-19 pandemic has most dramatically shown how this group as a whole has been considered a menace to national health (4). In fact, as the peak of hate crimes in this and last year demonstrates, Chinese and Asian communities at large have been blamed for causing and spreading COVID-19.[16] Since the end of January an 84-year-old Thailand native was killed in San Francisco, a 64-year-wold Vietnamese woman has been assaulted in San José (CA), a Chinese-American woman in New York has been shoved on the concrete and other two Asian seniors have been attacked. These are not isolated cases. A national coalition against anti-Asian bigotry (*Stop AAPI Hate*), from mid-March to the end of December 2020 has collected more than 2808 denounces of violence from both rural and urban US (Bekiempis). Many critics in the US have thus talked about the "new Yellow peril," with Donald Trump's racist rhetoric of the "China virus" (Jack-Davies) showing the othering process at work: the virus is Chinese (and since Chinese are Asian and Asian are "all the same," all Asians are to be blamed for the spread of the virus), thus "we" Americans (the good ones) are being attacked by such threatening "other" (the bad one). Once again, we are talking about the creation and the maintenance of two homogeneous categories based on a binary opposition (superiority/inferiority). The consequence of the othering of Asian Americans is the same applied to other ethnic groups, through which their belonging and loyalty to the US as well as their social and even working value are often questioned (3).

It is clear that such distorted representations (both in the medias and in politics) do target a wide range of people even within the same ethnic group. In all the examples cited, the othering process did not distinguish among migrants, immigrants, naturalized citizens, second or even third generations, who are all simply considered "other." In this sense, the latest raise of xenophobia and racism partly caused by policies against immigration, has had repercussions on all of them, even on those who have never gone through the process of migration but that, through the othering of their ethnicity, are kept marginalized. In fact, some political parties have denounced an apparent necessity to protect "Western" civilization from alleged "savageries" of outsiders.

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now also refers to "a threat to Western living standards from the influx of eastern Asian laborers willing to work for very low wages" ("Yellow peril" and Li and Nicholson 4).

[16] Europe witnessed a raise in hate crimes during the pandemic, too (Stolton).

Legal migrants are not the only ones that face the repercussions of this rhetoric. In fact, those who have obtained citizenship, citizens born from migrant parents or with allegedly visible non-national ancestry are affected too. In her latest book, Laila Lalami, drawing examples from the US context that can be applied to the other Western countries too, shows how these groups of people are "conditional citizens," meaning that their citizenship is always questioned and limited. The first limitation occurs, once again, in language. As we have seen, in countries where "us" identifies with Westerners, both physically[17] (whiteness) and culturally/religiously (European/Christianity/secularism), then "them" is necessarily all the rest. The consequence is, apart from the aforementioned homogenization of people with an immense variety of religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, a hyphenation of the minority group to which these citizens belong. This concretely means that these groups are never referred to as Americans, but as Chinese-Americans, Syrian-Americans, Korean-Americans, Mexican-Americans, African-Americans and so on, even after several generations (the same goes, for example, for Italian-Japanese, French-Moroccans, Palestinian-Australians etc.). Since the othering process is a result of an unbalance of power, people who meet the "us"/"self" standards skip the hyphenation and are simply called American (or Italian, French, Australian etc.). A clear example of this dynamic is that first generation Western immigrants are called "expats," while non-Westerners are called immigrants (22, 82). This leads to the second limitation. The linguistical othering of these groups has practical consequences that affect their daily lives. Conditional citizens are policed and punished more hardly, their electoral representation and right to vote are not guaranteed, they are more closely surveilled, and more likely expatriated or denaturalized. In the US, the Muslim Ban is a clear example of conditional citizenship: only apparently directed to foreigners, this series of restrictions affects millions of Americans who have relatives in the countries blacklisted and who cannot, for example, sponsor them for a visa anymore. As Lalami remarks, "a Yemeni American in New York can no longer bring a relative to the city for medical treatment, but a Portuguese American can" (22-7).

[17] Skin color does not always determine race, which further proves that race is a social construct. Arabs, for example, at the beginning of the 20th century were considered white (Lalami 113-4).

Conditional citizens' rights can be thus limited in the pursuit of white supremacy. From slavery to segregationism, concentration camps, racial profiling and later the prison system, the US has proved itself to be a country founded on white supremacy and determined to maintain it. However, racial and social injustices have always been met with rebellion, with Native and African Americans communities as an example. However, it is from the mid 1950s and late 1960s, that the Civil Right Movement and the American Indian Movement have started to formally organize protests, acts of civil disobedience and boycotts (Ovide; Randall). Both of the movements have obtained important results, but it is in the last decade that condemnation of brutality against African Americans has gathered particular momentum, namely thanks to the successful Black Lives Matter hashtag. In fact, leaders of the movements had already understood back in the 1950s the power of exposing indifferent/uninformed white people to the brutality of systematic racism, however the means they had were limited if compared to the ones we have today (Ovide).

As already discussed at the beginning of this chapter, technology has incredibly developed in the last twenty years, deeply affecting our lives. One example is indeed the field of social movements: with the raise of social media, both transnational and national exchanges have increased to such a degree that it is possible to reach large numbers of people (Cammaerts 5). This is exactly what happened with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Born in 2013 after that the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag went viral on the Internet, BLM denounces all racially based violence against black people and in particular police brutality. Although the movement was born in the US as a response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer and it is based in the US, UK and Canada, it operates internationally. Its global dimension has been evident especially last year with the killing of George Floyd, when US institutional and systemic racism has been once again exposed and people all over the world have adhered to the protests, bringing their own national cases of discrimination and racial violence. In fact, in spite of a global pandemic going on, protesters managed to organize themselves, and, raising BLM banners, have crowded the streets of more than 4400 cities all over the world ("Black Lives Matter Protests 2020").

A big part of the success and the high rates of adhesions to the protests is mainly due to online campaigns and it did not only have a social and political impact, but also an

economic one. In fact, black-owned businesses, music, art, authors, actors, etc. have been given space and attention, especially on social media. This is an example of how, following Friedman, this new phase of globalization is characterized by the awareness of the growing interconnectivity and new possibilities of social interactions (Steger 12) that resulted in a shift of protagonists. In fact, if nations and multinational companies have been the leading forces of the preceding phases, now individuals (or groups of individuals) have gained more and more power (10).

The role of social media activism in increasing awareness about injustices has been particularly evident with the BLM movement, but it is not limited to it. In fact, discrimination does not only concern ethnicity, but it also affects every person who is not the standard (or is not on the "right" side of the binary opposition) in terms of ethnicity (white), gender (male), sexual orientation (heterosexual), ability (no impairments), intimate relationships (monogamous), religious faith (Christian), etc. Accounts representing and discussing themes such as disabilities, mental health, feminism, ethical non-monogamies, homosexuality, gender, multiculturalism and ethnicity as well as global issues such as climate change, working exploitation or animal abuse have raised significantly. A lot of people from minority groups or who face any sort of discrimination or microaggressions, are trying to fight ignorance with informative videos, posts, stories on Instagram or Facebook pages, TikTok and Snapchat accounts. Gaining thousands of followers and thus going viral on the Internet, they are often featured in magazines, newspapers, on national TVs, on podcasts, and so on, and asked to speak about their activism.[18]

It is true that internet activism can quickly become slacktivism and personalities on social media can be very controversial. The case of Kris Schatzel, the Russian influencer who profited off a BLM protest in June 2020 by taking a picture of her amid the crowd and posting it on her Instagram, immediately comes to mind (Froelic). Another example of how mediatic attention is still extremely discriminatory might be Greta Thunberg. In the last three years we have seen how a 16-year-old girl was able to transform her "Skolstrejk för klimatet" (internationally known as "Fridays for Future")

[18] Just to name a few of them: Allen Salway, Isra Chaker, Neelam Hakeem, Blair Imani, Tasnim Ali, Dayoung Clementi, Khalid Al Ameri, Sundas Malik and Anjali Chakra, Kaitlyn Dobrow, Lucy Edwards, Ed Winters, and many others.

into a global movement involving more than 10 million people, bringing climate change at the top of the political agenda in countless countries (Sabherwal and van der Linden). However, she was not the first climate activist to strongly fight against climate change and excessive environmental exploitation. The massive attention she has been granted in the last three years has been denied or strongly limited to countless of non-white activists all around the world, such as native Americans in their multigenerational struggle against the exploitation and pollution of the lands, air and waters (Smith), personalities such as Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, Ghislain Irakoze, Kehkashan Basu (Parker), countless of African climate and human (since the two are deeply intertwined) activists who brought attention to the behavior of multinational companies on African soil.

Although the diffusion of social media does not come without its dark sides, a lot of people, especially younger generations, are trying to show, explain and give a space to diversity online. In particular, as today's political, economic, cultural, etc., tensions push us to pick one side (modernity/tradition, Western/non-Western, global/local, etc.), several accounts on social media are trying to offer different perspectives to subvert global xenophobic, racist, or discriminatory practices and narratives. Moreover, they feel the need to give themselves a proper representation and to regain their voices (Cammaerts 2). To go back to both Manfred Steger and Thomas Friedman's definitions of globalization, people in a global world become more and more aware, on one hand, of the interconnectivity and interdependence among countries and on the other hand, of the power of the individual/groups of individuals — and the Internet is playing a fundamental role in the process.

In this introduction I have tried to present a general outline of the changes that we have been witnessing since the turning of the 21st century in relation to globalization and social issues especially concerning migration, ethnicity and minority groups. This short account has never had the intention to be exhaustive, since the topic itself is so rich, complex and subjected to continuous changes. However, my aim was to briefly touch upon aspects that characterize today's world and to show how and in which sense, even with a limited discussion, today's reality emerges as a matrix of interrelated processes, dependences and exchanges. This is the reason why I have discussed topics that might appear distant from a literary approach, such as economic, migratory, political, technological developments, but that shape the world in which we live and therefore so

deeply influence author's works and their reception. The present research thesis belongs to the field of literature, a discipline that, now more than ever, requires a study that goes beyond its own boundaries. In particular, I believe that a thesis that aims at conducting a transnational analysis of 21st century literature cannot avoid such references. In fact, all the topics mentioned will be further explored and deepened in the next chapters.

## 1.2. The World(s) of World Literature

### A Brief Introduction

As we have seen, the recent acceleration in the globalization process has transformed our world and our lives. It has not only had implications in the fields of economics, politics or environmental studies but also in social sciences and humanities. In fact, since the mid-1990s there has been a growing interest in this topic in the academia that has propelled the foundation of curricula in the so-called 'global studies.' These programs offer a variety of courses in different fields spanning from economics to law, social sciences or history and were adopted by a great number of universities based in Asia, Europe, North America. Despite all expectations, these institutions were able to reach an agreement on the basic features of the program. Global studies should assume a transnational/transregional, [19] interdisciplinary, globally responsible, [20] critical and multicultural approach. The first consequence of adopting such perspective is to move away from a Western-centric point of view and to analyze different nations or regions, their interconnections and the power relations among them as unbiasedly as possible. The second consequence is that a given study, although stemming from a specific field, needs to consider all the aspects of a certain topic (economic, historical, political, religious, cultural, etc.) in order to be considered truly global — hence its multidisciplinary character. Moreover, research conducted in this field addresses and analyzes contemporary problems raised by the intense interdependence and interrelations of world countries with the aim of proposing possible solutions (Juergensmeyer 15-18). It is thus a very active approach that requires constant update and needs to keep up with the evolutions of multiple disciplines.

[19] Transnational/transregional: the study of "events, activities, ideas, trends, processes, and phenomena that appear across national or regional boundaries" (Juergensmeyer 16).

[20] Globally responsible: understanding of the world in which we live in with a sense of global citizenship that allows for a perspective of problem analysis in order to develop possible solutions (Juergensmeyer 17-18).

Although global studies usually offer curricula in economics, geopolitics and law, interest in this type of perspective has spread throughout the whole academia, involving various departments, among which the humanities. Influenced by works from other disciplines, in particular Wallerstein's world-system theory, comparative literatures scholars have started to suggest new approaches that consider literatures on a broader scale. Such shift from a national to a global focus involves "world literatures," meaning one or more works by one or more authors with a certain ethnicity and nationality analyzed with transnational, intercultural and multidisciplinary approaches. Three contributions have been pivotal to the revival and redefinition of world literature: Pascale Casanova's *La République Mondiale des Lettres* (1999) and *Literature as a World* (2005), Franco Moretti's *Conjunctures* (2000) and David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003).

In the last twenty years world literature has gained more and more popularity and has been the topic of heated debates among scholars. Both the potentialities and the limits of such approach have been highlighted and discussed, and, although criticized for still lacking a strong theoretical corpus (Damrosch "What Isn't World Literature?" 0:06:26-0:06:29), world literature approaches are swiftly taking shape. A consequence of such growing interest has been the foundation of journals starting from the end of the 20th century and in particular in the last decade. A few examples are the South Korean *World Literature Comparative Studies* (1996), the Slovakian *World Literature Studies* (2009), David Damrosch's *Journal of World Literature* (2016), the Chinese American *Comparative Literature & World Literature* (2016).

Despite its contemporary popularity, world literature has been present as a concept in literary history for almost two centuries now. In fact, the term is usually associated with Goethe's *Weltliteratur* (Welt = world; Literatur = literature) who firstly used it in 1827 (Pitzer 3) and it has been variously explored since then. It is clear that the more intense the exchanges among countries are, the easiest the circulation of literary works is and thus their discussions, mutual comparisons and influences. Therefore, globalization has played and is still playing a pivotal role in the construction of literary networks worldwide. In the first two decades of the 20th century, as globalization was undergoing an acceleration phase, Indian, Chinese and Yiddish scholars opened the discussion of world literature (Damrosch 6-7). At the turning of the 21st century, with the exponential

development of globalization processes and their even deeper awareness of transnational interconnectiveness, the discussion and popularity of world literature has been brought on another level. Global issues, such as migration flows, attention to diversity, the emergence of activism devoted to social justice, the growing awareness of labor exploitation, economic inequalities, environmental issues etc., are influencing both writers and scholars. On one hand, a world literature approach — being inherently multidisciplinary — takes into account these issues and spaces beyond the boundaries of literature, but on the other hand, it focuses on issues pertaining literature as a field. In fact, a good part of the discussion about world literature is dedicated to its theoretical framework, the problems of translation, of adopting Eurocentric literary models of analysis, of presentism, relationships with postcolonialism, diaspora and trauma studies, cosmopolitanism, postmodernism, and so on.

To sum up, globalization and world literature are closely connected and reinforce each other, as it will be further shown later in the chapter. Although born more than two centuries ago, the world literature approach has become particularly relevant today because of its inherent multidisciplinary character, because it brings up and discusses new and contemporary issues and because it gives multiple perspectives. Finally, it actively tries to propose a more equal and unbiased reading of cultures and cultural products and, thus, of our contemporary reality. As I have already stated in the foreword, the present thesis does not aim at using a world literature perspective as an analytic method, but to consider it in order to open the field of the American Studies to a more transnational and comparative approach. With such purpose in mind, I will now discuss the development of the term in literary history, its relationship with other disciplinary fields and its limits and potentialities with a keen eye to those contributions that are the most interesting for the American panorama.

**Use of the Term in Literary History (19th and 20th centuries)**

As briefly mentioned above, scholarship dates back the term "world literature" to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. Although the term had been introduced some decades before, literary critics still refer to Goethe's world literature because of the relevance of the concept that he has proposed, although he did not give a detailed or cohesive explanation of the term (Damrosch 15).

Goethe believed that "the epoch of world literature [was] at hand," and that everyone must have worked "to hasten its approach" (Damrosch 16), meaning that the times were ripe to produce works taking up a transnational perspective. Context here plays a fundamental role. In fact, Goethe's statement was a consequence of the increased circulation of literature due to a significant advancement of communication and transportation technologies that encouraged international marketing networks, and to the diffusion of works in translation. Despite the fact that, at his time, literary exchanges were still pretty much limited to Europe (6), he believed that the reception of literary works was increasingly overcoming political, geographical and linguistic borders. In this way, transnational exchanges would intensify to such extent that they would lead to "the epoch of world literature" (Pizer 4-5; 10). Testimonies of his trans-European cosmopolitanism can easily be found in his own works, variously influenced by authors belonging to Ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Italian, French, Chinese, Persian or Serbian literature and culture (Damrosch 15-16). An example is his *West-östlicher Divan* (*West-Eastern Divan*), which is built on an imagined dialogue with Persian poet Hafez.

A few decades after, Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* was embraced and implemented by the Transylvanian philologist Hugo Melztl. In fact, if Goethe has never given stability to his world literature concept, Meltzl was able to theorize and institutionalize it. With the same emphasis on the importance of literary circulation and translation, he co-founded in 1877 the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, the first journal of comparative literature. With a focus on both local and global contexts, Meltzl underscored the importance of polyglottism against the intrinsic monoglottism characterized by his contemporary jingoistic nations and accused them of unhealthy nationalism (35-6). In this regard, he stated that "a people, be it ever so insignificant politically, is and will remain, from the standpoint of Comparative Literature, as

important as the largest nation" (39-40). In effect, his *Acta* had ten official languages and an editorial board representing eighteen nationalities, among which Brazil, Egypt, Iceland, India, Japan and Turkey (Damrosch "Hugo Meltzl" 15). Although Meltzl admitted that "true world literature can only remain an unattainable ideal," he was convinced that all nations should strive in its direction (40).

Another critique of the potential universalistic point of view assumed by a world literature paradigm comes from Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's encyclopedic *Comparative Literature* (1886). Imbued of positivism and influenced by the social Dawinist Herbert Spencer, he was one of the first authors to offer an academic discussion in English about the topic. With an evolutionary-scientistic view — a sort of proto-Moretti —, Posnett believed in the "relativity of literature," namely in the application of evolutionary scientistic theories to this field (50-1). As a consequence, he studied literature as a social phenomenon. In fact, in the same way humanity evolves from the tribe to the modern nation, going through the city and empire phases, literary production process is organized in evolving units ("What Isn't World Literature?" 08:59-09:15). In order to demonstrate his theory, Posnett draws examples from Arabic, Chinese, Eastern European, Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Latin, Persian, Russian and Western European literatures, which he largely reads in translation. Nevertheless, he does not place world literature is the last phase — which is reserved to the nation — but in the imperial one, in particular in the Hellenistic/Roman world. This is where he diverges with Goethe, who projected the "epoch of world literature" in the near future. With the expansion of the world into world literature in early imperial times, writers lose their organic connection with their community (he offers the example of Apuleius' deracinated work, appreciated for his wide reach but at the expenses of his own original culture), and thus their creativity, as their works of imitation largely demonstrate (10:03-15:21). As Damrosch notes, Posnett somehow shows the limits of literature written for a global audience, anticipating 21st century debates (43).

To sum up, comparative and world literature have gained more and more relevance in the debates of 19th century scholars. As briefly shown above, it was a time when the academia started to think of these two concepts in an organized way and to lay the foundations for contemporary debates ("What Isn't World Literature?" 07:48-07:54). Although I have only considered Goethe, Meltzl and Posnett, it is worth remembering a

few other names who have helped to shape the discussion about world literature. In particular, the 1899 essay "Verdenslitteratur" (world literature), in which the Danish scholar Georg Brandes shows skepticism for translation and analyzes the relationship between what today we would call minor and major literatures (Larsen 21, 26); and Richard Green Moulton's study on the "angle of perspective" of world literature, which he sees as bound to authors' point of view and therefore limited to their own — often hidden — cultural influence (Lawall 32, 39-40).

With the turning of the 20th century, the discussion about world literature extends far beyond Europe, with important contributions by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, Chinese scholar Zheng Zhenduo and the Yiddish diaspora.

With a strong humanistic emphasis, Tagore insists on the universality of *vishwa sahitya* (world literature). In his 1907 lecture to the Indian National Council of Education, he affirms that "literature is not the mere total of works composed by different hands," but that every literary piece is a whole in itself. In fact, the essential character of literary workmanship lies in "man's universal creativity," which is particularly evident when taking up the global perspective of world literature. In this way, it is possible to both give justice to the individuality of national or regional expressions and to find supranational universalities (Tiwari 41, 43-4, 47). With such lecture, Tagore manages to dismiss both strict nationalist discourses and the British policy of encouraging regional and cultural fragmentations in order to control its colonial India (Damrosch 6).

With the same emphasis on the importance of a cross-regional approach, Zhenduo believed that only the study of world literature and of foreign literary systems could bring the renovation of Chinese literature, culture and even language that his May Fourth Movement so strongly advocated (58). According to Chinese intellectuals belonging to this movement, such renewal was fundamental not only in the humanistic field, but above all for the modernization of their country. It was thus of prime importance to translate works of *shijie de wenxue* (world literature) — a term that made its first appearance in 1907 that contrasts classical Chinese production in such desperate need of revitalization (14). Zhenduo himself was not only an expert in history of Chinese literature, but also a scholar of world myth and folktales and a prolific translator from Russian, Latin, Greek and Indian. In fact, he included his translations in *Shijie wenku* (The World's Library),

his world literature series, another testimony of his openness towards foreign literary works (59).

In the same time span, another contribution to the world literature debate came from Yiddish scholarship. As a consequence of the acceleration in the globalization process that took hold at the beginning of the 20th century, diasporic communities, seeing the number of their members growing substantially, were encouraged to improve and intensify their networks. In this lively context, a debate about the role of Yiddish language and literature and of its promotion swiftly emerged. Issues of its decentralization, origin and declination in relationship with their pervasive worldwide presence are raised by the modernist poet Melekh Ravitsh. In the same token, literary critic and journalist Borekh Rivkin defined the process of Yiddish literary creation as the foundation of a *kmoy-teritoriye-literatur* (literary quasi-territory), a concept that reflects the Jewish deterritorialization in Yiddish cultural production and circulation (71-2).

Other important contributions to world literature that are worth mentioning before landing into the ultracontemporary debate come from René Étiemble and Edward Said.[21]

Despite disagreeing with the universality of translated poetry, which, in his opinion, can only be appreciated by those who master its original language, and stating that "the most universalistic art" can only be prose, Étiemble is a fervent supporter of Goethe's *Weltliteratur* (86). Addressing a poignant critique to the self-proclaimed major literatures, guilty of reproducing colonial power relations in the literary field, he advocates for literature — without the need to use the adjective "world" — understood as the "totality of all literatures, whether alive or dead, of which there remain written, or even only oral, traces, without further discrimination as to language, politics or religion" (87-89). Étiemble is aware of the excessive amount of available literature, especially in a time in which the worldwide circulation of literary workmanship is so pervasive, but he hopes that such choice will encourage new generations to go beyond their "birth determinism" and expand their libraries far beyond Europe (93-4).

[21] There is, of course, a long list of other equally important scholars that, for reasons of space, I have not considered here. I have chosen Étiemble and Said because I find their contributions particularly relevant for the purpose of this thesis. Other authors might have been considered as well, e.g., Richard Meyer, Albert Guérard, Erich Auerbach, Qian Zhongshu, Dionýz Durišin or Claudio Guillén (D'haen Damrosch Kadir).

It is this relationship between circulation of literature and Western jingoism, through which too often minor literatures are filtered and even appropriated, that is at the center of one of the essays contained in Edward Said's collection *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). On one hand, Said welcomes the travelling of theories because of the potential benefit that they can have in intellectual formations, but, on the other hand, the circulation of literary theories and ideas throughout time and space more often than not leads to their politicization once absorbed beyond their context of origin (115). The potential benefit of travelling ideas can happen on a worldwide scale only after geographical decentralization and with a twofold "acknowledgement of large-scale relationships of political power and also of human-scale circumstances of individual lives" (Arac 119).

The debate on world literature has thus been going on for almost two hundred years. In spite of different cultural, historical, geographical and literary contexts, there are some points shared by the small selection of scholars here presented. *In primis*, there is a common sense that advancements in communication and transportation technologies since the 19th century have been progressively expanding literary networks including writers and thinkers that were not before available. In the creation of this interconnected literary space, the willingness to welcome foreign authors in their national literary space obviously plays a fundamental role. The second point is that such expansion is at the same time inclusive and exclusive, meaning that the power relations between "major" and "minor" literatures are more and more visible when literature is considered on a global scale. In fact, they also reflect colonialist dominion and become an instrument of control and oppression. Thirdly, in order for books to circulate and being successfully accessible, translation activities are needed. Although translations are essential to the diffusion of foreign works not only among common readers but also among scholars, they cannot but manipulate the original text, especially poetry, as Étiemble has remarked, which heavily relies on formal aspects. The debate addressing translation will continue and expand in the 21st century, especially with works of Susan Bassnett, Emil Apter or Rebecca Walkowitz.

**Seminal Works (Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti and David Damrosch)**

In this section, I will focus on the contributions that have significantly shaped the contemporary debate on world literature. In fact, in the last two decades there has been a newfound interest in the concept and comparative literature scholars have greatly dedicated themselves to this topic, shaping its theoretic background and addressing its relevance in our globalized world and literary space as well as its limits and potentialities. The three scholars responsible for reinvigorating the interest in world literature are Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti and David Damrosch.

The 1999 book *La République Mondiale des Lettres* is Pascale Casanova's most influential contribution to world literature. In this fundamental work, in which the theories of Immanuel Wallerstein and Pierre Bourdieu wield particular influence, Casanova focuses on the literary space and its relationship with the "ordinary world," arguing that literature is not an abstract and theoretical place, but an "unseen" world governed by its own rules and dynamics (3-4), with its own temporal and geographical space. At the same time, it cannot be completely severed from the real world, on which it is relatively dependent. In fact, she criticizes literary history for having deemed these two universes mutually exclusive, forcing critics to choose between them. The kind of criticism that she encourages focuses on a twofold analysis that creates a dialogue and an overlapping of these two perspectives. In order to do that, literature has to be considered as a temporal object, which does not imply its reduction to mere history, but to create a "dual temporality," i.e., to "pla[ce] it in historical time and then show how [it] gradually tears itself away […], creating in turn its own temporality, one that has gone unperceived until the present day" (350). In a few words, literature is initially born in history — primarily politically and nationally — but then it manages to carve out its own space of freedom, escaping history's dynamics and temporality and creating its own. In fact, Casanova shows how, in spite of the subjugation of literature to the creation of national identity, an independent literary space has managed to form, a space in which political and national issues do find their place, but in accordance with literature's own "aesthetic, formal, narrative [and] poetic" terms and to its margin of confirmation or denial (85-6). As a consequence, understanding a literary work means to position it, on one hand, in relation to its instrumentalization on a national and political level, and on the other hand, in

relation to its purely literary character, i.e., its place in the world republic of literature. Therefore, the work of the critic is "to continually shift perspective, to change lenses," (351) namely to look at it from afar "to contemplate the ensemble of texts that form what is called the 'history of literature,'" and only after studying its "global configuration," the critic can and must recognize its own specificity and irreducibility (2-3). The critic must provide a literary and historical interpretation to the text, reconciling internal (text only) and external (historical conditions only) criticism (4-5).

The focus of *La République Mondiale des Lettres* falls upon this complex relation of dependencies and independencies of the literary world in regard to the ordinary one, and upon the analysis of the dynamics within the republic of literature. Casanova reveals the hierarchies upon which the literary space is built and the national instrumentalization used to maintain such unequal relations. In this way, the republic is governed by dominant and dominated forces, the former being the "most richly endowed" national literary spaces and the first to enter the transnational competition, while the latter are the newest literary regions, politically and/or literary controlled or colonized by other nations (82-4). Casanova argues that, in this world-system on a literary scale, 20th century Paris plays the role of the center, regulating such competitive literary circulation (30). In this fierce antagonism among nations' literary capitals, the creation of a worldwide canon plays a pivotal role. Recognition is based on the republic's temporality, which is both past- and present-oriented — the value of a given work is based on its capacity of being modern,[22] which, in turn, is dependent on the antiquity of its national literature (90), and on the number of its works which made it in the universal canon — and is granted by the creation of specific authorities, the greatest of them being the Nobel Prize (112). Therefore, the more endowed, modern — but with an old repertoire — and recognized national literatures are, the more literary autonomy they can enjoy. Nevertheless, this hierarchic republic is relatively fluid, since literary revolutions can break out by reclaiming and rethinking the independency of their own literary capital. In fact, this is possible through the introduction of works, circulating in translations, that distinguish themselves for their

[22] Casanova uses the term modern to refer to up-to-date literary innovations, which establish themselves as new only by outmoding the present, a sort of "more present present" (91).

exceptional modernity (see note 13). In this way new genres and forms are conceived and popular languages make it in the literary space (176).

The second contribution to the world literature debate comes from Franco Moretti's essay *Conjectures on World Literature*, who, one year after Pascale Casanova's *République*, proposes a method to study literature as a "planetary system." In fact, focusing on world literature does not imply resorting to the same theoretical tools used for national literatures, i.e., to treat it simply as a "bigger" literature, on the contrary, Moretti calls for the creation of different categories, new methods (54-5). Through the application of Wallerstein's world-system theory to literature, Moretti argues that the literary field is one and an unequal system, where core-cultures alter periphery-cultures without noticing it (56). Then, what does it mean to study this literary system and how to do it, namely, with which method? Moretti proposes a change of perspective, to abandon close reading, the small range of canonical works, to consider all the rest through a distant reading. Such method requires to focus on "units that are much smaller or larger than the text," to study "devices, themes, tropes, or genres and systems" (57). Since Moretti's own research field is the modern novel (1750-1950), he uses it as an example to explain his theory. Through the application of his distant reading method as he considered tens of studies analyzing novels from four continents, Moretti came to the conclusion that there seems to be a "law of literary evolution" governing the rise of the modern novel, in the sense that its implementation in a given culture is "*always*[23] a compromise between foreign [western] form and local material." This finding is particularly interesting because the rise of the novel in the Spanish, French and British cases did not produce the same local-foreign formal mix, which means that these three European examples are not the rule, as commonly believed, but the exception (59-61). However, if the outcomes of Moretti's experiment are a negotiation between western and local elements, it is immediately clear that such compromise is unique for every culture. Therefore, the system of world literature is one, but it is uneven, a "system of *variations*," in which the western influence was not uniform (64). Concretely, it means that these novels are characterized by "foreign *plot*, local *characters*, and local *narrative voice*," and that "this foreign presence interferes with the very *utterance* of the novel," becoming part of the

[23] All the italics in Moretti's part are his.

text itself (65). Using the metaphors of the tree (ramification symbolizing discontinuity) and the wave (continuity) to describe the different mechanisms of — respectively — national and world literature, Moretti argues that the modern novel follows the same principle: "certainly a wave […], but a wave that runs into the branches of local traditions and is always significantly transformed by them" (67).

The third contribution is David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?* — nevertheless, his work on the concept has not stopped since 2003, as his countless anthologies, essays and his co-founded *Journal of World Literature* amply testify. With an analysis ranging from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to Rigoberta Menchú, Damrosch presents world literature as a huge space with an immense variety of texts, a space in which readers make highly personal selection of works. Damrosch proposes a definition of world literature built on three points based on its main characters, the world, the text and the reader (281). Firstly, he defines world literature as an "elliptical refraction of national literatures." In fact, all literary workmanship — without any distinction of time nor space — is born within local/ethnic/regional/national configurations, whose peculiarities inevitably shape the texts. The further these works circulate, the "more sharply refracted" their original traits become. At the same time, as works enter the world literary field, they inevitably have to negotiate with different host national/regional traditions. The image of the elliptical refraction serves well Damrosch's definition, as world literature is about the circulation of original national/regional cultures and their reception in host cultures as well as host values and needs (283). It is clear that what enables literature to enter the worldwide circulation is, once again, the work of translators. This brings to Damrosch's second point: "world literature is writing that gains in translation" (288). On one hand, he recognizes the difficulties of transferring texts into different linguistic, cultural, political, geographical, semantic, philosophical contexts, and that such work is not possible for some texts which would go through a substantial loss (289), but on the other hand, he shows how too often in the academia these difficulties have been used as an excuse to refuse to resort to effective translations and thus to quickly dismiss important works just because of a lack of mastery in their original language (285). When a text loses in translation, argues Damrosch, it stays in its national/regional space and does not make it into the world literature space. On the contrary, when it gains in translation, i.e., a balance between stylistic losses and an increase in its range and depth is possible, it becomes

world literature. Of course, comparatists should be encouraged to learn as many languages as possible — in particular of significantly different cultures from their own —, but a world literature approach should make more use of translations (289-90), since such travelling movement is its intrinsic characteristic. It involves both the text (linguistically) and the reader (culturally), and it is part itself of the notion of world literature (292). This reflection brings about the third point of his definition. Although on a national level we are used to the existence of a canon of 'major' works, world literature does not work in the same way. In fact, it is "not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own." This type of work creates a space characterized by an everchanging flux of texts (297) that readers and scholars put on a dialogue with their own culture and with other different texts both in provenience and in time. Therefore, such approach does not seek "identification or mastery but the discipline of distance and difference" (300), especially if considered that a truly global approach "remains a perspective *from somewhere*" (27).

What emerges from these three seminal works is a clear tendency to analyze the literary field as a unified place, where a global approach presupposes the existence of national/regional spaces with their own indigenous literatures, which are subjected to foreign influences as literary works circulate through the international market. As a consequence, the literary world is built on hegemonic hierarchies, which emerge even more clearly when analyzed with a global approach. The three scholars tend to claim how relative the process of canonization of literary works is, which is highly Westernized and again subjected to power relations. In order to grant a global circulation of literary workmanship translation is inevitably required — especially for those works belonging to 'minor' literatures which will unlikely spread in their original language —, but its effectiveness is debated. The first two scholars tend to study the literary field as a system with rigid laws, especially in accordance with Wallerstein's theory, namely Casanova's literary system circulation and Moretti's law of literary evolution. Therefore, a more distanced perspective is required to understand global trends and developments (of genres, themes, devices, etc.) — together with a thorough analysis of texts for Casanova. In this respect, Damrosch particularly stands out for two reasons. On one hand, he does not try to systematize the literary space, stressing the fact that world literature is a perspective which does not require one way of reading but multiple. On the other hand, he is the only

one to actively include truly global examples, drawing from a plethora of geographically, historically and culturally diverse texts, while, for example, Casanova still remains very Franco-centered.

I will dedicate the following section to the criticism of these three contributions and to the debate that they have generated and that is still going on.

## The Contemporary Debate

As mentioned above, the debate generated by Casanova, Moretti and Damrosch has been incredibly lively. In fact, countless of critiques as well as studies expanding their contributions have appeared since their studies have been published, giving new shape to world literature approach. A few examples might be Moretti's Center for the Study of the Novel and the Stanford Literary Lab, Damrosch's Institute for World Literature and his already mentioned co-founded *Journal of World Literature*, or Casanova's legacies in Jing Tsu, Magdalena Răduță or Thirthankar Chakraborty's most recent studies (Sapiro Ungureanu 164).

In a lecture at Harvard university in 2016, David Damrosch discussed some of these legacies and gave an overview of the quick development of the world literature scene.[24] Firstly, the debate has gone so far beyond their contributions that world literature itself is not what they have tried to define twenty years ago.[25] In fact, in spite of Casanova and Moretti's explanations of the dynamics of a global literary field/world through the use of system theories, world literature seems to resist systematicity. An interesting example is Delia Ungureanu's *From Paris to Tlön* (2017), in which Paris' core position and its regulation of literary circulation proposed by Casanova is challenged (14). In this study, where network theory is combined with Bourdieu's sociology of literature, surrealist ideas and practices immediately emerge as the result of complex transnational networks of mutual exchanges, including Belgrade, Bucharest, Buenos Aires, Istanbul, New York and Tokyo (16, 18). Instead of a struggle against dominant and dominated cultural capitals, Ungureanu shows how the expansion of surrealism rejects the unidirectional hegemony of centers claimed by Casanova, thus undermining her world-system *République* (15).

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[24] I have decided to use Damrosch's speech as the structure of this section because he brilliantly addresses the critics of world literature, its developments, its present limits as well as its still unexplored potentialities.

[25] "So, [these are] the three things [that] world literature isn't: for one thing, it isn't *What is World Literature* anymore. Been there, done that, fine, but that was over a dozen years ago. It isn't even our adorate friend Franco Moretti's *Conjectures on World Literature*, going back to 2000… again, it's a decade and a half. Nor is it even our wonderful Pascale Casanova's *République Mondiale des Lettres*, again going back to the turn of the millennium. And it's slightly distressing to see how often critics of the field talk as if these works were the last thing that happened… 15 years ago. People were just not reading anything in the last decade!" (0:01:07-0:01:45).

As Damrosch had already stated in 2003, world literature should be pluralistic, offering a wide range of different perspectives and modes of reading. In fact, every regional/national/local situation has its own selection of literary works, which confirms the fact that even the most global perspective remains a perspective from somewhere. In this sense, different countries produce different world literature anthologies, e.g., both the Longman Anthology of World Literature (2003) and the Beijing University Press' ten volumes anthology (2016) are organized chronologically, but the latter focuses more on American and French literature, whether the Japanese *World Literature Anthology* (Sanseido 2019) has a thematic organization.

Three lines of critique hailing from national philology and literature, comparative literature departments and postcolonial studies have emerged in the last twenty years.

Critics belonging to the first strand argue that in order to truly discuss world literature, a much more rooted knowledge of cultural and linguistic specificities is required. It is not only a matter of scholarly honesty, but also a question of accessibility and above all translation — simply put, if there is a lack of cultural and linguistic grounding, how is it possible to make a selection of the materials available?[26] Pivotal contributions come from Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* (2013), which focuses on political and linguistic untranslatability by criticizing world literature's "bulimic" integration of heterogenic literary culture without sufficient grounding (12, 16); Susan Bassnett's works, which show how, in our globalized world, translation activities based on a mutually enriching approach encompassing all disciplines dealing with literary transfer, are fundamental if grounded in an appropriate cultural, historic, linguistic and social investigation (238-9, 241, 244); Gisèle Sapiro's analysis of the relationship between translations and the book market, which highlights how small-scale production, operating with a "strategy of resistance," has tried to counter the Anglophone hegemony through the encouragement of translations from a variety of languages (210-11).

The second strand of critique hails from comparative literature department, which accuses world literature of being a collection of a large variety of texts offering an analysis without sufficient theoretical grounding — partially in line with Emily Apter's

[26] I will briefly mention some of the most important names belonging to this critique since translation issues are not pertinent to the two novels analyzed in the following chapters.

critique. On one hand, it is true that such mode of reading is still going through significant developments and is taking a more definite shape in these last years, on the other, there have been other attempts of proposing theoretical frameworks that can be effectively applied to the study of world literature — after Casanova and Moretti. One example is Delia Ungureanu's already discussed book, where network theory really plays a key role in her global approach on surrealism. Another important theoretical framework has been elaborated in Alexander Beecroft's *World Literature without a Hyphen*. In this essay — then developed into a book — Beecroft points out the weakest parts of Casanova and Moretti's theories and proposes his own. He suggests to base world literature analysis upon an environmental organizing principle, i.e., to study the relationship between literatures and their political and economic environments primarily considering local realities without trying to provide one encompassing theoretical framing that works globally (182-3). In this sense, his aim is to formulate a world literature theory without the hyphen — without considering all world literatures as part of a system, which has proved ineffective. Beecroft underscores the necessity to actively engage with diverse literary productions rather than base theoretical formulation on a core tradition canon (189). Such necessity of theoretical grounding of world literature into non-Western traditions is an urgent matter on which scholarship is still debating today ("10th Institute" and Damorosch's fourth chapter in *Comparing the Literatures*).

Margaret Cohen proposes another mode of reading world literature through the perspective of oceans — which is particularly relevant here since one of the novels that I will analyze takes place in a *terraqueous* setting. In her *Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe*, she understands the maritime world as a socio-ecosystem deeply influenced by technological innovations, and she explores their relationship and representation in the novel. Assuming an oceanic perspective implies new spatial scales (islands, archipelagoes, coasts, continents, the sea, etc.) that have a specific translation in fictional works (657-8). In particular, sea travels before steam transport, the marine chronometer and the use of vitamin C to fight the scurvy were considered an exceptional enterprise in a dangerous frontier, and those who survived were heroes, "cultural icons," who found particular recognition in novels (659). In such inhospitable places, the celebration of heroes depends on their capacity to use practical reason in skillful ways to survive great dangers (660), and much of their fascination comes from their freedom to

travel — today, as Cohen remarks, a basic condition of international law. Such works of fiction are based on what Cohen calls "the adventure complex," i.e., "a discourse, a practice, a narrative, and a structure of feeling" that has consequences both in modern epistemology and aesthetics and thus requires a remapping of the genre (661).

Finally, from the department of postcolonial studies comes the third critique to world literature, a much more political-oriented line that especially focuses on the risks of consuming world literature in a neoliberal way. Already in 2003, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak denounces the homogeneity of Comparative Studies in her much-debated *Death of a Discipline*. In the first chapter, she argues that, in spite of the rising attention toward cultural diversity and postcolonial issues of the last decades, the field is still Euro-US centric and thus too much oriented to the cultural dominant that still pervades literary studies. She underscores the importance of combining the so-called Area Studies with the linguistic and literary tools of comparative fields in order to really study the "other." Since otherness has been too often considered homogeneous (the other is everything outside the West), Spivak calls for a rigorous "planetary" investigation that directly engages with non-Western literatures and their cultural and political backgrounds (chapter 3).

The second important figure in postcolonial studies criticism is Pheng Cheah. In his *What is a World?* (2016), he criticizes the fact that the 'world' in world literature has always been understood as a spatial term inextricably bound to the global market. Such conception of 'world,' according to Cheah, is flawed because considering the world as a global place/container where literature is evaluated, produced, consumed and where it circulates among subjects, implies that literary processes reflect global processes. Consequently, literature occupies a "reactive position." On the contrary, Cheah sees the 'world' as primarily a temporal category with a normative/teleological dimension,[27] and suggests that, by seeing the world of world literature as a temporal category instead of a spatial object, literature becomes an active force of world-making (worldling) that can contrast the destructive force of capitalist globalization. However, this does not mean that literature creates a world "with its own consistency:" its ontological status is "one of virtuality," a possible alternative world (4-5) that transcends spatial limitation by the

[27] Cheah's contribution will be explained in detail in Chapter Two, where I will use it to analyze Lalami's *The Moor's Account*.

given of time and that is thus open to “the emergence of peoples that globalization deprives of world” (19) and that can safeguard subaltern worlds.

It is clear that there are many other contributions to the world literature debate that I could not mention here but that are important witnesses of the vitality of the topic. What seems to emerge from two decades of analyses is that a systematic approach encompassing all its complexity is not possible. On the contrary, the study of world literature should be pluralistic in every aspect — from its theoretical frameworks to its politics to its teaching —, plurilinguistic, and should rethink literary canons through a much wider exploration of local literatures and their relationship with the world — in terms of circulation but also considering their ability to contrast destructive processes of capitalist globalization. Consequently, scholars should widen their readings beyond the Anglophone space — whether in their original languages or in translation accompanied, as we have seen, by a critical analysis — in order to contrast the still-permanent hegemony of Western literature and theories on a global scale. It is true that, with Moretti’s words, the literary field is unequal, but more should be done to reach those unequal parts. Finally, more poetry and more literature outside the modern or contemporary period should be taken into consideration, since, although the concept of world literature is modern, its production has deep roots in time. In order to do that, it is fundamental for every scholar to create their own canons and archives, even though such work requires a political, intellectual and pedagogical process that takes time and a fair amount of creativity.

### 1.3. World(l)ing American Literature

While last section has closed my discussion on the world literature debate, I will now focus on the recent developments of the American Studies and argue, in line with the world literature debate, that the discipline is experiencing a shift to a transnational and comparative approach. Such trend is a consequence of the last globalization processes and of the opening of the academia to global perspectives, so that a re-organization of the American Studies itself and a problematization of the colonial and white foundational myth of the US national space and narrative are becoming more and more urgent. In this sense, I will argue that the genealogy of the American canon can be revised in a transnational, multicultural and multilingual way and that a clear political and social standpoint of the scholarship emerges.

The first point I would like to reflect upon is the notion of space as a definite category. As seen earlier in this chapter, globalization processes have problematized the understanding of the nation state as a definite cultural, political, linguistic and even geographical space with clear borders. In fact, contemporary transnational dynamics undermine the homogeneity of traditional formations that, at least in the last two centuries, have been at the base of the creation of national identities. In fact, studying the national literatures' characteristics and drawing comparisons among them have been the main focus of area departments. The selection of a canon of national literature and language has served the purpose of linking together traditions of certain communities to a specific territory. However, both these traditions and the communities to which they have been associated have proved to be an invention, a result of an artificial selection and not an embodiment of a certain Romantic "national spirit." When explaining imperialism and the exportation of Western culture in colonies in his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said reveals how such invented traditions have been presented in temporal terms (a past of "national and ethnic purity"), but that, if analyzed spatially and in particular in relation to mobility, they reveal their hybridity, heterogeneity and non-monolithic character. In this sense, the effects of globalization have shown how such bond between national territory and cultural formation is weak, and how "global" the "local" can be, with a consequent blurring of the boundaries between such spatial and cultural notions (Mariani 11-3).

In this respect, Paul Giles' study on the deterritorialization of American literature might shed some light on the need to reconsider the current geographical boundaries of the US in relation to the notion of America itself.[28] In fact, Giles argues that such association is limited to a specific historical time spanning from the American Civil War to the 1980s, when globalization made us rethink of the US national identity (39). Questions such as "what is America?," "where is America?," "what is an American?" or "what does it mean to be American?" are here fundamental. The first point that Giles makes to undermine the relationship between American identity and national space consists of deconstructing the idea of the USA as a stable territory. In particular, if we think that as late as the 1840s much of its current South (Texas, California, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and Nevada) was Mexican and that the westward movement, propelled by the idea of the Manifest Destiny, ceased in the late 1880s, the US seems to be more a "hypothetical or imaginative conception," rather than a mapped and regulated territory (41). In fact, in the early 19th century, American culture still seemed to be far from a definite local grounding and in closer intertextual relationship with classical (European) authors (42). On the contrary, after the Civil War and the unification of the territory, geographical boundaries served the purpose of creating nationalistic sentiments. In fact, locality in literature was understood as a mark of nationalist authenticity and patriotism more than a reference to a specific American place. The end of the 19th century was also a time when migration flows started to intensify and a policy of homogenization and assimilation of migrants into American citizens was applied, strengthening the mythology of the American nation as the promised land (44-5). At the same time, its diversity, both ethnic and regional, became part of a national exceptionalism that strived to position and "integrate […] local variation within a larger national matrix." From the end of the Civil War, the US has been thus presented as a

[28] The correct way to refer to the geopolitical space is US/USA. However, I will use here the technically wrong term "America" (wrong because America is not only the USA, but also the Latin American states and Canada) to refer to the way the US has always represented itself and that is at the base of the American studies themselves. In fact, as Donatella Izzo remarks in her essay, "the history of the American studies in the US corresponds to the history of the cultural elaboration of the word 'America' through the creation of symbolic universes that have accompanied socioeconomic and political processes of the global expansion of the country" (78, my translation).

unified (geographically and politically) and unique (culturally) entity, based on its own understanding as a sovereign national state.

The intrinsic decentralizing and deterritorializing forces of that phase of globalization that took hold in the 20th century, resulted, in the US, in a dramatic change of its economic infrastructure during the 1970s and 1980s and in a more aggressive presence on the global marketplace ("the realm of outsourcing and transnationalization"). It is clear that, after changes of such entity, the notion of nation-state as a sovereign power with its own circumscribed national identity started to be undermined (48-9). As a consequence, tracing borders (domestic/foreign, national/non-national, outside/inside etc.) became arduous if not impossible (which borders? geographical? what about transnational activities of the media, on the television, radio etc.?). Therefore, issues of American exceptionalism or of strictly national politics and culture have become obsolete — especially after 9/11 (pag. 10-1) — and have been substituted with a much specific focus on issues of diversity and transnationalism in American literature (50).

In effect, from the mid-1990s there has been a shift in the organization of the study and of the very teaching of American literature in a post-national[29] direction, with an encouragement of the use of methods stemming from other disciplines — mirroring, thus— one of the points of the world literature debate. Studies employing a postcolonial critique of American authors, a comparative approach on the deconstruction of borders, a critique of American nationalism and with a focus on non-national geographical categories have been at the center of the recent disciplinary debate (Irr 601). Nevertheless, as Caren Irr laments in her essay, no work with a clear post-national disciplinary call and a magistral exemplification of it has appeared yet (603). Through her analysis of George Yúdice's *The Expediency of Culture*, Irr argues that American Studies cannot be post-national if a critical dialogue among different views from different societies is not established with the aim of confirming American diversity and their relation to the position of minorities in the USA. Moreover, with Yúdice, she notices how the "labor of reproducing institutions has become the work of culture," and thus Americanists should be preoccupied with the recognition and explanation of such labor. In this sense, American studies should consider the consequences that the existence of different cultural

[29] I am here using 'post-national' as a synonym of 'global/world perspective.'

institutions have as they cross (and even confirm) national boundaries (604-6). Such post-national reshaping of the American studies might as well be better understood as the dissolution of the idea of America in universalistic and exceptionalistic terms. In this sense, the emergence of pluralistic traditions inside the American national space have erased "the isolation, the autonomy and autoreferentiality typical of the self-representation of the USA as a nation destined to achieve the promises of its foundation" (Izzo 95).

If the US literary panorama is to be studied in a post-national way, then non-national categories or scales should be considered. As I have already explained at length, the globalization turn of the late 20th century has encouraged the use of broader perspectives to the analysis of economic, political, cultural, social etc. phenomena and the "world" has emerged as a scale through which works of literature are studied. In this thesis I have talked about the worlding of the American Studies, namely an opening of the field to a world scale. However, some questions still need to be answered. What does "the world" mean and which kind of transformation does the "worlding" of American literature entail? And why "worlding" and not "globalizing" of American literature?

To answer these questions, it might be useful to begin with an explanation of the difference between *globus* (and thus globalization) and *mundus* (and therefore the French *mondialisation* or the English term chosen here, worlding). The former refers to the globe, evoking a geographical and geometrical category with strictly spatial implications — we could also say cartographical. Therefore, globalization refers to the act of giving a global shape, the shape of the earth, and it has both a connotation of entirety and homogeneity. On the contrary, *mundus* entails a dimension that goes beyond the spatial category and enters in the temporal one. In fact, it does include historical, social, cultural, philosophical and religious meanings in which geography is only a part. Therefore, worlding implies a transfer of certain aspects (historical, linguistic, etc., as written above) of a given community to another community around the globe (Sorinel 28), with much more heterogeneous and dialogic outcome.

Such distinction seems particularly relevant when speaking of literature, since recent theories have tended to focus more on an understanding of the literary field in terms of spatiality (circulation of works with transnational movements), as Cheah has lamented in his already quoted *What is a World?* (3-5). On the contrary, worlding should

be understood as a process that transcends spatial networks and that brings about an exchange among different *mundi*.

As we talk about literature, the notion of 'world' does refer to both fictional and real one(s). In fact, the literary work contains a world within itself, whose creation needs a certain deal of "referential density" (Damrosch's expression), namely the amount of information about the fictive world that the reader is given. The nature and density of such referentiality depends on the purpose of the author. For example, writers who aim at proposing a reality effect have to build their narration on specific referential details. Every work of literature (even the most "realistic" one) is based on the creation of a fictive world with a certain independency but with porose borders and thus complex relations with the "real" one (Damrosch, "Comparing the Literatures" 254, 258).

In Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*, for example, we have a fictive world with its own context (e.g., Mustafa's memories, his mother's stories, his own stories), space (Azemmur, Seville, Central America) and temporality (first half of the 16th century), which intersects with the 'real' world (e.g., multilingual America, slave trade, history of the conquest of Azemmur, colonization of America). In turn, our social, political and cultural reality is influenced by the worlds of fictions.[30] In this sense, there is a dialogic relationship between such worlds.

Fiction itself, therefore, is a process of worlding that entails a specific normative character that largely — but not solely — depends on the choices of its author (Cheah 10-1). However, when I write about the worlding of American literature I do not specifically refer to the ability of literary workmanship to create fictive worlds, but rather to the opening of the field to different worlds[31] that go beyond the national restrictive understanding of the field. Since we have seen that national implies artificiality, the worlding of the American Studies can be understood as an effective way in which, through a transnational, transcultural, translingual and post-national critical re-examination of its canon, the very notion of "America" and "American" can be re-

[30] This contrast between 'real' and 'fictional' world is particularly important in Lalami's work and I will analyze it in depth in Chapter Two.

[31] The opening that I propose here does not entail an exoticization of those worlds. On the contrary, I argue that it is the process of exoticization (which it can be called otherization) that, through the establishment of superior *versus* inferior type of binary oppositions, makes unequal power relations possible.

elaborated and — perhaps — better understood. To world American literature does not, thus, mean to universalize it, but to move America itself outside its imagined community (to use Benedict Anderson's popular definition) and national space, and to establish a dialogic relationship with a much broader scale: the world.

To measure American literature against the grain of the "world" category also means to undermine the US policy of monolingualism. As Werner Sollors has highlighted in the introduction of his *Multilingual America* (1998), linguistic diversity is seen as a potential cause of cultural fragmentation and thus it is discouraged both on an institutional and on a social level (2). Although Sollors writes in 1998, the situation does not seem to have changed. In fact, only 20% of Americans can speak two or more languages in contrast to the 56% of Europeans. Moreover, cases of hostility towards non-English speakers are not rare, with the 22% of Hispanics stating that they have been criticized for conversing in Spanish (Matthews). This seems paradoxical in the age of transnationalism in one of the countries most affected and mostly affecting globalization and in which even multiculturalism does not comprehend multilingualism (Sollors 4). But above all, it seems paradoxical in a country that, historically, has always dealt with multiple languages. The field of American Studies itself was originally devoted to the study of Native American languages and later American literature comprehended the works in the different languages of the colonies and of the US ("works in Native American languages, Arabic slave narratives, letters by Swedish maids, antislavery writings by German Americans, Spanish-language writing […], multilingual radical newspapers, […] the non-English part of the Asian American tradition," 5).[32] After World War I the multilingual aspect of US language and literature was still present and studied (5), and it is only after World War II that the emphasis on the "English Only" policy, in part influenced by the process of Americanization on a global scale, has taken hold. Such consideration cannot but bring back to David Damrosch's critique of the persistent monolingualism of much of world literature scholars and of comparative departments in the US.

An example of the presence of contemporary multilingual America is offered in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. In fact, as the Narrator reaches LA, he rents a

[32] It might be important to mention, in this respect, the work that the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990) has done to downsize canonical authors and books through the inclusion of ethnic and women writings and of works conceived before the colonization (Izzo 91).

modest apartment in the Vietnamese district of the city (Little Saigon) — where people speak Vietnamese, the menus are written in Vietnamese and the food is imported from Vietnam. In LA, the Sympathizer is invited to one of those nightclubs where he enjoys musical performances mixing Vietnamese with French and English. In particular, such Vietnamese nightclubs were so popular during the 1970s that they gave life to the musical variety show *Paris by Night* which is still ongoing (Nguyen "Viet Thanh Nguyen: The Sympathizer" 00:04:53-00:05:19). In Los Angeles, the Vietnamese community does engage with other Asians, like Chinese and Japanese. Such mixture of languages does question American monolingual politics. It is true that Los Angeles is one of the most global cities in the world and the final destination for many migrants, and that thus it does not mirror the broader situation in the US (and for this reason it might also be an interesting analysis that takes into consideration a sub-national space). However, it might be fruitful to read it with the lenses of Sollors' fight against monolingualism that partly emerges here.

Rethinking the US in light of its multilingual past forces us to reconsider its genealogy and its canon. If America is built on "made-up histories," stories of "discovery and founding," standing, echoing Giles, as "a temptation to the imagination," as a story made up out of nothing, then it means that America can be unmade, it can be re-discovered and re-founded at any time (Marcus and Sollors xxviii). Consequently, its national literature can be questioned and its canon re-elaborated, especially since the red thread that seems to go across the centuries of its literary history concerns its very genealogy ("the fable of discovery and the fable of founding," xxiv). In this sense, the introduction of personalities like Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Castilian explorer who wrote the recount of his shipwreck on the coast of today's Florida, in an anthology of the literary history of America does actively reshape the borders of the American canon. In his *La Relación*, Cabeza de Vaca describes his journey, lasted eight years, from *La Florida* to Mexico City through much of the North American South (today's Texas, New Mexico and Arizona), dedicating much space to the description and comment of several indigenous communities that he encountered.

Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*, largely based on Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *La Rélation*, can in effect be read in this context. Although situated far before the moment of the creation of the nation-state, the book can be associated to the mythology

upon which the very concept of America lies. *The Moor's Account* undermines the American foundational myth that sees the "discovery" of the "new" continent and the European colonial settlement as a progress for all mankind in prophetic tones (Heike 43-4). The misadventures of Mustafa/Estebanico and his Castilian companions, who shipwrecked on the coasts of *La Florida* and wandered for eight years before reaching Mexico City, do, however, tell another story. The fact that out of six hundred men only four survived and that not only were they not successful at finding the gold of the 'New World,' but also almost starved to death, ended up enslaved or held captive by the Natives and suffered countless forms of violence, seems more a story on the consequences of greed than a prophetic tale of a chosen people. Moreover, their journey within the Southern part of North America inevitably puts them in close contact with multiple indigenous communities with very different cultures and languages they are often forced to learn to survive. Moreover, the protagonist of Lalami's novel is not a European, as the foundational myth wants, but a Moroccan slave, who was in effect one of the members of the expedition and one of the four men that survived. Here, the borders of our America are not the only ones to be questioned: in this novel, the line that separates conquerors and conquered, past and present, life and death, native and foreigner, civilized and uncivilized as well as master and slave is constantly blurred.

*The Moor's Account* thus presents an America outside the 'discovery myth' in which its geographical as well as cultural and linguistical borders are re-elaborated, where national scales are substituted with Atlantic and regional ones. Such reflection cannot but be included in the work of reshaping the American 'myth of discovery' as well as of the opening of its canon to multilingual and multicultural considerations beyond the national discourse.

The redefinition of America in a pluralistic, multilinguistic and multicultural key — which also confirms an important political dimension of the field (Izzo 92) that I will discuss at the end of this section — does entail a comparative perspective. In line with the whole debate on world literature that I have discussed at length, Americanists might consider different scales in their analyses in order to contrast the homogeneous and unitary tradition based on clear cultural as well as geographical borders.

If we think of migration literature, that is, a group of works that are inevitably built on in-betweenness in terms of culture, geography and language, its contribution to

the opening of the American literary canon in a transnational sense might be particularly relevant. It is true that substantial differences and thus conflicts also arise when migrancy[33] is understood as the mobility between borders that are inside the national space, such as the city and the country, the province and the capital, North and South, Mid-West and West Coast; however, such struggles are intensified when measured against the world scale, e.g., regions, continents, oceans, and even religious ones (for example the Islamic *ummah*) (Rosendahl Thomsen 61). In spite of having been often excluded from any specific national literature, migrant writings present insightful reflections on the tension between local and global materials and their hybrid outcomes, offering important contributions both on a formal and historical level. Moreover, they challenge the artificiality of *the* national culture, exposing its limits and blurring its boundaries as well as the ways in which it permeates and is in turn permeated by "ethnic" cultures inside its national space and by the transnational activities in which it participates.

This is the case, for example, of Viet Thanh Ngyuen's *The Sympathizer*. Built on the tension of living on the fault line between two different cultures (we might as well say, two different worlds) where identity is subjected to constant revisitation, Nguyen presents an America full of Vietnamese and Asians and a Vietnam besieged by Americans. Neither recognized as American nor Vietnamese, the protagonist lives that in-betweenness ("a man of two minds") that is typical of works of migration literature and that enables him to see everything from a twofold perspective. His relocation in Los Angeles after the fall of Saigon witnesses both the lively Vietnamese and Asian community in grocery stores, restaurants, dance halls and bars (the quotation at the beginning of the chapter is from this part of the book), and the transnational activities of South Vietnamese trying to overturn the Communist regime from abroad.

With its witty and elegant prose, the Sympathizer (his name is not revealed in the book) is particularly skilled in highlighting the contradictions and limits of America as a myth and as the land that was complicit in the destruction of Vietnam. A land in which big entertainment industries like Hollywood capitalize on the Vietnam war by presenting it in a romanticized American way (a critic against *Apocalypse Now* is here, for example, addressed). Perhaps Ngyuen's work is the one that most heavily relies on the concept of

[33] Condition of being a migrant.

nation, but it is exactly for this reason that it constantly challenges both American and Vietnamese borders and the relationship between national belonging, culture and the land itself. Moreover, it problematizes the very notion of nation and nation building in light of the traumatic experiences of war, torture, exile and rejection both inside and outside the country. Ngyuen's novel can be read as an attempt to carve out a place for Vietnamese American fiction in the canon of American literature, but it does also place itself in a broader, transnational, and maybe even post-national perspective, with its last image of the Sympathizer among boat people with nothing left but the manuscript of his confession.

Migration works might be, in effect, one of the best candidates to conduct analyses with a post-national perspective, since, as seen above, the national border is merely one of the many borders that migrant writers have to deal with. In line with Caren Irr's suggestions, their relationship with literary institutions and the (national and international) book market might lead to interesting outcomes both in terms of mutual influences and belonging. Moreover, their success can be read both with a more specific and historical point of view when related to their national frame and in relationship with the international literary space, in particular the relevance of the discussion of certain themes important for the evolution of the transnational literary discussion and of their ability to carve out a place for themselves in a much broader field, e.g., the world literature one (62-5; 100-1).

The last point I would like to make is that, in accordance with Markha Valenta, such transnational shift in the analysis of American literature does imply on the side of the scholarship an engagement that has to go beyond an intellectual exercise in order to extend beyond its own field. In particular, a clear standpoint with a project characterized by egalitarian, pluralist, anti-racist and anti-imperial sentiments seeking a just globality seems to be required. With Valenta's words, the point is "to structure the field as we seek to structure the world" (165-7). Such project may be understood in terms of a normative or teleological worlding of the American Studies with Hegelian tones (with Cheah, see pp. 34-5), or simply towards a more just and equal organization of the field and against the rule of power that regulates our globalized world. What should be here desirable is an overlap between the "'scholar' and the 'citizen'," both read with a transnational connotation, and therefore a scholarship devoted to social and political activism (163-5).

*The Sympathizer* does in fact contain such clear standpoint. Built on the idea of revealing people's inhumanity during war, Nguyen's novel is an insightful reflection about history, dualities and representation. The author shows the darkest sides of each character, even and maybe especially the Sympathizer himself. The novel contains a strong denounce of warfare and of the way national memories are reconstructed to maintain specific images its country that eventually reinforce unequal power relations. Through the denounce of manipulated representations of the 'other' and the recuperation of stories about forgotten victims, Nguyen proposes to rethink of history in an ethical way.

Nguyen's call for an ethical memory should be combined with his own participation in the Vietnamese American community and in his academic research about the Vietnam War that is beautifully gathered in his *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016), a reflection that exposes the flawed reconstructions of collective memories in different countries. In this sense, paraphrasing Valenta's words, the writer becomes the citizen — a citizen engaged with a specific kind of activism.

Such engagement does not only define the way I am to approach the two novels selected but it is also, I believe, the same standpoint from which both authors write. This last section of the chapter should be seen as the starting point of the broader analysis that I will conduct in the next chapters of the present thesis.

## 1.4. Conclusion

This introductory chapter had a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it aimed at providing a context on the most recent global developments that are relevant for the present thesis. In fact, extended attention has been given to those political and economic global forces that have had a significant social impact, especially on minority and ethnic groups. Issues of discrimination and marginalization, of mechanisms of exclusion and power relations as well as counteractive forces seeking social justice have also been discussed in the first pages. On the other hand, it has tried to position the debate on world literature in relation to the field of the American Studies with the aim of opening it, that is, to move its boundaries on much broader scales. In this sense, I have selected those contributions to the world literature debate that are more interesting and in which transnational, linguistic, deterritorialization, circulation of knowledge, colonial powers and imperialistic issues were considered.

A worlding of American Literature entails a journey in the re-discovery of the transnational, multilingual and multicultural past and present of the USA. In this regard, an activity of deconstruction of the American canon, genealogy and of the very understanding of what is America(n) is necessary. Therefore, the homogeneous and exceptionalist tradition upon which the very idea of America has been based is challenged. However, if it is true that such endeavor leads us to move America outside the boundaries of its imagined community in order to measure it against non-national scales (continental, oceanic, planetary, or even regional, provincial or urban scales), it does also imply a return — revisited — to the concept of America as well as to its national category. It seems that the choice of works of migrant literature, which naturally deals with the crossing of borders and boundaries, may lead to particularly interesting outcomes. In fact, in the works by Lalami and Nguyen, which I will analyze in the following chapters, put into question the very idea of what America means and of its national canon and monolingualism, thus highlighting its contradictions and limits.

Some of the contributions to the world literature debate will be used to analyze the novels considered in the present thesis. In particular, I will go back to Pheng Cheah, Margaret Cohen and to that strand of the critique stressing the importance of multilingualism and pluralism of voices and sources. The opening of American literature

here suggested does not take into consideration issues of literary circulation as mirroring (or contrasting) the dynamics of the global market, which is a topic that more strictly pertains the world literature debate. In fact, in spite of offering a reflection about the capitalistic influence on cultural productions in Chapter Three, I will not specifically consider the literary field as "one and uneven" system — in Moretti's words — mirroring the world countries economic and political inequalities. In fact, if a consistent part of world literature debate is dedicated to issues of geographical circulation and accessibility through translation, I will distance my analysis from it since it does not concern the 'worlding' of the American Studies here proposed.

To conclude, worlding America means to take the distances from its hegemonic and even isolationist standpoint in order to reposition and redefine it in a transnational, comparative and more ethical way even if — with Markha Valenta's words — "it may mean, at least at moments, to abandon 'America.'"

# Chapter Two
# LAILA LALAMI'S *THE MOOR'S ACCOUNT*

"He will [believe your story] if the messengers know how to tell it."
(*The Moor's Account*, 335)

"The price of my belonging cannot be my silence."
(*Conditional Citizens*, 28)

The present chapter will focus on the analysis of *The Moor's Account* by Laila Lalami and its contribution to the debate that I have outlined in the previous pages. I will dedicate the first section of this chapter to the development of Arab American literature from the beginning of the 20th century till the present day, taking into consideration issues of transnationalism, assimilation, identity and belonging. I will then dedicate the rest of the chapter to the analysis of Lalami's work, dividing it in two parts.

Firstly, I will focus on the themes of the book that are particularly relevant for the understanding of American literature against the grain of nationalism and hegemonic discourses of national tradition. I will pay particular attention to language as a tool to establish unequal power relations, highlighting the similarity between enslavement and colonization processes, and language as a means to counteract subalternity. In fact, *The Moor's Account* can be read as a rewriting of history in postcolonial terms, where silenced bodies and voices escape the marginal position they have been relegated to by dominant discourses and are finally given a space to affirm their presence and tell their stories on their own. I will thus analyze the role of storytelling as a powerful tool to reclaim freedom and belonging.

In the second part of the analysis, I will focus on the 'myth of discovery' and its role in shaping a specific traditional narrative conceived in terms of cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic homogeneity. Through the comparison with the story of the Narváez expedition told in *The Moor's Account*, I will show how fabricated and inaccurate the

representation of America in traditional discourses is. On the contrary, Lalami's work highlights the heterogeneity of the American origins and of its borders — may they be cultural, geographical, etc.

## 2.1. Arab American Literary Context

This first part of the chapter is a short introduction to Arab American literature, which will provide a background to Laila Lalami's work and will position it in the American literary landscape. This section will revolve around the origins of Arab American literature, the ways in which it has evolved over time, its recurrent themes, and its position in the broader universe of American literature. In particular, I will take into consideration the most significant authors that have shaped the field while giving more space to the themes that are relevant for the present thesis.

Before starting to discuss its origins, I will briefly address the problem of defining what Arab American stands for. In fact, Arab American is an umbrella term under which all Arabs are brought. Such designation conveys a sense of unity among a wide range of countries that, however, have clear national, geographical, historical, cultural and religious boundaries and a general lack of cohesiveness. Although these patterns of difference are present in the US diaspora in a less stark way than in Arab countries and Arab Americans usually show a stronger pan-Arab sense, it is important to keep them in mind. In fact, the risk of homogenizing the group is to produce narrow or oversimplified representations that limit or erase the differences among the numerous cultural, ethnic and national identities. Secondly, the criteria that a literary production has to meet to be included into the Arab American universe are not clearly defined and there is no consensus whether its literature should be specifically concerned with Arab American themes or if the belonging of the author to the community is enough. While this question might seem banal at first glance, but it does entail issues of literary creativity and expression (Fadda-Conrey 17, 24). In fact, arguing that only ethnic topics can be accepted into a given minority literature implies a very limiting understanding of it "as merely sociological and ideological" (Shultermandl 1216). Other authors prefer more open understandings of Arab American literature, with Carol Fadda-Conrey suggesting a more generic Arab background or heritage (24). Although still open to debates, such discussion might give a first idea of the centrality of identity in Arab American literature (and, I would say, in minority literatures in general) as well as of its complexity.

The origins of Arab American literature can be traced back to the late nineteenth-century, with the first important migration flows to the US.[34] These early communities were mostly composed of Arabs leaving the Syrian, Mount Lebanon and Palestine provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and settled in big cities such as New York and Boston. Upon their arrival, Arab Americans, as other immigrant groups, had to face two main issues, strictly intertwined: the concept of race and the strong American assimilationist politics of the time (Majaj 1).

As already largely discussed in the first chapter, race in the US is tightly intertwined with a specific idea of American identity and citizenship. In fact, if in European countries social and civic status depends on ethnocultural standards, in the US it is based on 'physical' race (i.e., skin color). Exclusion and inequal treatment of non-white people were enacted from the very founding of the USA and follow the othering process exposed in Chapter One of this work. In fact, although the Declaration of Independence of 1776 states that "all men are created equal," it practically allowed the institution of slavery by granting each state legislative freedom in such matter. Citizenship was hardly mentioned in the Constitution and no directions in regard to the naturalization procedures were given, so that the regulation of citizenship conditions was entrusted with Congress. According to its Naturalization Act of 1790, immigrants eligible for citizenship were "free white person[s]," which thus excluded African descendants, Asians and Native Americans (Gana 13-4). Racist legislations targeting specific ethnic groups such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or the Immigration Act of 1924, which established a discriminatory quota system affecting not only Asians, but also Southern and Eastern Europeans, Jewish and Arabs, mirrored the common belief that non-whites and in particular all migrants except those hailing from northwest Europe were a threat to American identity and culture (Fredrickson 25-31; Lalami "Conditional" 113). Criteria for citizenship eligibility thus depended on geographical origins and cultural and religious distance from an extremely homogeneous and standardized "Western world."

The case of Arab Americans is somewhat particular because they have never had a separate category in the census, as Hispanics, Asians or blacks did. In fact, according to

[34] Arab migration to the US did began before the 19th century, but it was starting in the 1880s that it started to be characterized by consistent flows (Fadda-Conrey 190).

court cases from the first half of the 19th century, Arabs could be variously declared as white, non-white, or Asian. It was only from the 1940s that the US Census Bureau started to consistently classify Arab Americans as white. Nevertheless, such decision prevented them from applying for the legal minority status that would grant them both minoritarian rights and protection from racial and ethnic discrimination. Such tendency is particularly ambiguous if we consider the way this community is subjected to the "othering" process and the fact that its members, especially starting from the 1990s and after 9/11, have been continuously subjected to racial profiling and other widespread discriminatory practices (Fadda-Conrey 14-5; Gana 13).

The migration from the Arab states towards the US can be divided into three periods: the first one took place between 1880s and 1925; the second one between 1945 and 1967; and the last one from the late 1960s till today (Fadda-Conrey 12). Between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, classifying Arab Americans was particularly difficult because the first migrants did not reclaim a national identity, but rather familiar or sectarian belongings. Although there was a common intention to preserve their social and cultural heritage, they did try to conform to the pressuring requests of assimilation and in effect the majority of naturalization cases before 1920 were successfully resolved. Being largely light-skinned and Christian, they consciously sought to be identified as whites and in official documents they were referred to as "foreign-born white population" (Majaj 1-2). If, on one side, it is true that such designation granted them the right of citizenship based on the convenient belonging to a racial category considered superior and their religious proximity to the "West," on the other side it pushed them to tighten the gap between their native culture and what was perceived as the American standard. Such need to gain acceptance has been surely influenced by the assimilationist politics of the early nineteenth century, which brought Arab Americans to "lobby for white status" (Fadda-Conrey 13, 16) and adapt so deeply to American culture to the point of erasing their roots.[35]

Preoccupied with the preservation of their Arab identity, particularly for new generations born in the US, such issues were intensively debated in Arab American

[35] The relationship between US racial structures and the consequent ability of some Arab American to "pass" as white is thoroughly analyzed in Lisa Suheir Majaj's "Boundaries: Arab/American." In this autobiographical essay she raises the issue of invisibility as a form of violent silencing of one's identities.

journals and newspapers (Majaj 1-2). The tension between Arab heritage and the strong demand for integration is mostly evident in early twentieth-century authors and literary groups such as *Al-Rabita Al-Qalamiyya* (The Pen League), with Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani as leading spokespeople, and its *Mahjar* school of Arab American writing. On one side, they upheld transnational stances by maintaining the concept of homeland strictly connected to the Arab world. Worth of mention is the fact that they considered their productions as part of the Arab literature rather than contributions to the American panorama and in fact they did not directly engage with their expatriate experiences (Fadda-Conrey 18). On the other side, they were openly committed to bridge that distance between East and West. Nevertheless, the inclusion in their works of cultural and religious references from both traditions betrayed the need, on Arab American writers' side, of proving themselves on the same level of their Western counterparts. In practice, this necessity was translated into an adhesion to those elements likely to be approved and accepted by Americans (e.g., Christianity, the Holy Land) and to distance themselves from those seen as too Arab or incompatible with Americanness (e.g., Islam). Such anxiety further developed, at least between the late 1930s/beginning 1940s and the 1960s, into a refusal to engage with their heritage without irony, self-denigrating tones, a sense of shame or even in its complete erasure (Majaj 2-3). In fact, the literary production itself substantially decreased and it generally mirrored the assimilationist tendency of the time, as William Blatty, Vance Bourjaily or Salom Risk's autobiographies show (Fadda-Conrey 18).

It was only with the end of the second and the third waves of Arab migration towards the US and their conjunction with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 1960s that Arab Americans started again to discuss their identity in literary works without the widespread sense of shame that had characterized previous writings. On one side, the momentum gathered by the struggle for social justice attracted the interest both of publishing houses and the public, leading to a flourishing of ethnic literature. On the other side, the arrival of new flows of Arab immigrants, often Muslim, politically engaged, educated, and who did not have any intention to assimilate in the way the previous wave did, encouraged a journey of rediscovery and affirmation of ethnic, cultural and religious roots that replaced the sense of shame of the previous generation with a strong feeling of pride (Majaj 3). Such fight for a more just and multi-dimensional representation was

surely intensified by the impact that Orientalist and colonialist discourses had on the US neo-imperialist agenda of the time — a theme that has been largely explored by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) (Gana 14).[36] Arab and Muslim[37] men were portrayed as lascivious, violent, ignorant, religious extremists, misogynist, while women were seen as oppressed, silenced, overly sexualized (let us think of the common stereotype of the Arab woman as a belly dancer) or oppressed harem girls. It is clear that such misrepresentation is yet another product of the creation of the "Other," in this case barbaric/negative Arabs and Muslims against civilized/positive white and Christian Americans. In order to counteract such stereotypes, the Arab American community began, from the 1960s onwards, to re-engage with its heritage in order to make their presence visible, especially after significant political events such as the Six-Day-War (1967) and 9/11. In effect, one important feature of Arab American literature (Suheir Hammad, Diana Abu-Jaber, Lawrence Joseph, and others whom I will mention later) is this strong engagement with political events which, despite occurring in the Middle East, were directly or indirectly connected to the US (Majaj 8, 11) — it might be sufficient to think of the Suez Crisis, or the various military interventions in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, the creation of the state of Israel, the Lebanese Civil War, etc. American involvement in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area is still a matter of heated debates both abroad and in the US and it has a relevant impact on Arab Americans and on Arab immigration and shaping the image that Americans have of them, as outlined in the previous chapter (Fadda-Conrey 2). Starting from the end of the second wave of mass migration, the community has maintained strong connections with the political reality of Arab countries, which, in spite of being commonly seen as irreconcilable with the dominant understanding of what being American means, played a fundamental role in their identity construction process. In fact, such transnational engagement is inextricably linked with the cultural as well as civic and political awareness of Arab Americans that, starting from the mid-twentieth

[36] In his groundbreaking book, Said shows how the idea of the 'Orient' is a Western political construction that serves the purpose of establishing power relationships based on superiority/inferiority terms. In this sense, the East/Orient has always been represented in distorted and stereotyped ways.

[37] The terms "Arab" and "Muslim" are used interchangeably regardless of the geographical origin or religious belonging. In this way, all Muslim people are referred to as "Arabs," even though only 20% of Muslims is Arab (Desilver and Masci), and all Arabs can be called "Muslim," despite being Christian, Jew or belonging to another religion (Fadda-Conrey 11).

century, has defined their "position within US legal, civil, and social structures" and encouraged the fight for their rights (13-16).

The social exclusion, discrimination and general criticism that the community has faced have been responded in several ways in literary works. It is between the late 1960s and 1980s that some authors started to immerge themselves into a quest for self-identification that required a rediscovery of their Arab roots. Writers between the second and third migration wave such as Eugene Paul Nassar, Jack Marshall or Sam Hamod celebrated Arab traditions and culture (Majaj 4). In opposition to the sense of shame that pervaded Arab American literature before the 1960s, these authors' works were characterized by a strong sense of pride that was at the base of their fight for a place in the American literary universe for their community. In fact, it is in this period that an Arab American identity specifically linked with the US context (and not simply as Arab literature abroad) began to take shape. In this way, the transnational perspective that was already present in the *mahjar* poets is transformed: if before Arab countries were conceived as "the first and final home," now, although still important places with which writers constantly connect, they are not seen as home anymore. Unlike the first generation, authors writing after 1960s are solidly grounded in the US. As a consequence, these authors engaged with a critique of US foreign policy in the MENA area and their participation in armed conflicts (Fadda-Conrey 18-9).

If these authors' pioneering publications did carve a place for Arab heritage in the constellation of American literary works after a period characterized by its suppression, their contributions often betrayed a nostalgia for patriarchal structures and presented a rather limited view of gender relations. It is especially with the emergence of the feminist movement in the late 1960s and the spread of feminist organizations in the 1980s that Arab American authors shifted from a need to re-engage with and re-affirm their traditions, even at the risk of idealizing them to a much more conscious and critical representation that began to lay the foundations for the strong self-critical tendence that has characterized Arab American literature starting from the 1990s (Majaj 7-8). In fact, the publication of the groundbreaking anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994), in which both authors and editors presented a clear literary and political stand against patriarchal norms but also exposed internal divisions of political and religious nature, was the natural result of this process. If the relative quiescence after the 1930s had been

interrupted by authors who claimed the right of existence and celebration of the Arab presence on the American soil, the feminist movement firmly shifted the focus of literary productions on an internal critique of the community while still fighting against stereotypes and discriminations hailing from the American mainstream. Nevertheless, addressing and exposing such issues did not only provoke external criticism according to which Arab American feminists' struggle to fight patriarchy and sexism was proving their need to be liberated from an oppressive culture, but it also drew criticism by the community itself who accused them of betrayal (Ludescher 105-7). Moreover, *Food for Our Grandmothers*, together with the other two pioneering anthologies of this period, *Grapes of Leaves* (1988), which focused on 20th century poetry, and *Post-Gibran* (1999), which gives consistent space to new literary experimentations, largely seek to investigate Arab American identity and its evolution within literature. All of them directly engage with the intersection between Arab Americanness and US racial structures, both on a national level, within the community itself and in relationship with other minorities.

Especially from the 1990s, authors such as Joseph Geha, Naomi Shihab Nye, Etel Adnan, Diana Abu-Jaber, Lawrence Joseph and Pauline Kaldas together with contemporary poets Suheir Hammad and Moja Kahf, have contributed to the evolution of the discussion about identity from a specific quest into traditional values and customs to a "many-layered, multi-dimensional" and above all "open-ended" understanding of identity, a never-ending process rather than a specific state, "just another way of being human." This process of becoming and discovery is now oriented towards the affirmation of a much stronger Arab American identity (rather than only Arab) and thus more focused on the tension between Arab (communal) and American (individual freedom) values (Majaj 5-6, 8). Moreover, these authors' contributions mark the current and latest phase of Arab American literature for following reasons. Firstly, these works are grounded on social, ethnographic and historical studies on Arab immigration of the 1980s that were considered particularly groundbreaking (e.g., Sameer and Nabeel Abraham's, Alixa Naff's or Gregory Orfalea's). Secondly, since the US involvement in the MENA area significantly increased in the 1990s, these works are characterized by an even deeper political engagement against hegemonic understandings of belonging and citizenship. Lastly, the publication of these literary contributions together with the anthologies above mentioned, did have a major influence in the creation and strengthening of connections

among Arab American intellectuals and thus in the consolidation of their sense of collectivity (Fadda-Conrey 21).

Beside the focus on the friction between Arab-ness and American-ness, more and more literary works are contributing to another strand of critique that focuses on US racial categories, such as Diana Abu-Jaber and Pauline Kaldas. In fact, both authors analyze the impact of whiteness when applied to Arab Americans. The first one problematizes the fact that many can "pass" as white while others are subjected to violent discrimination that can often result in physical violence. Such difference in treatment only pushes the community to further assimilate through an erasure of characteristic features, both physical (lighter hair, thinner lips, Western clothes, etc.) and cultural (hiding the accent, religion, literary heritage, etc.). Assimilation is thus presented as process of identity flattening in order to satisfy a certain standard. In fact, as Kaldas remarks, in spite of being recognized as "white," and thus being apparently granted relative privilege, such classification does not reveal inclusivity but a lack of recognition of specific differences. This is yet another kind of violent attempt to nullify Arab identity. However, the solution to such pressures is not to find refuge only in Arab-ness, but to learn how to move between the two cultures and to find a balance within such hybrid sense of self. Such journey of self-discovery is therefore at the center of the literary agenda (Majaj 9-10).

Today, Arab American production is thus inscribed into a specific literary tradition that has more than one hundred years of history and that has seen a shift from tendences of defensiveness to a clear demand for recognition of its presence and peculiarities, with a general focus on both fighting stigmas attached to the community and addressing its ambiguous invisibility. At its core lies the elaboration of Arab American identity through a transnational approach, which has shifted from an almost exclusive engagement of literary production with Arab home-countries to a specific focus on US as the ultimate homeland. With the third migration wave, the raise of feminist movements, the publication of ethnographies and sociologic studies focusing on the experience of Arab immigration to the US and the increasing American interventions in the geopolitics of the MENA area with their repercussions back home, Arab American production has consolidated its status of minority literature. Such consolidation happened through a strengthening of the network among its own different authors and through the establishment of a dialogue with American and other minorities' works largely focusing

on cross-ethnic and cross-racial struggles (Fadda-Conrey 23). In fact, from the 1990s there has been an important increase in literary production that, in spite of the persistent prevalence of novels and poetry, ranged from non-fiction to graphic narratives, from critical texts to stand-up comedy. Latest anthologies such as *Post Gibran* (1999), *Dinarzad's Children* (2004) or *Inclined to Speak* (2008), feature a number of cross-genre and experimental works. In particular, the emergent genres are drama[38] and spoken poetry, with important names such as the playwriters Yussef El Guindi and Sam Younis, or the poet and performer Suheir Hammad. The increasing number of publications as well as the flourishing of their debate sparked inside and outside the community in the last three decades has brought significant attention to Arab American literature both on a national level, as courses on Arab American literature mushrooming in universities show, and on the international panorama (Fadda-Conrey 1). The focus of current works falls upon the negotiation and celebration of Arab heritage, its relationship with the US as permanent homeland, the in-betweenness or hybridization of identity, the racialization and discriminatory practices against Arab Americans (especially after 9/11 and the War on Terror), the problematization of US military intervention in Arab lands and the consequences for the community, as well as the expression of concerns about gender roles, sexual norms, religious belonging of the Arab American community. It is important to remark once again how such themes, even when they encompass an internal critique or engage with transnational spaces, are always inscribed into the American panorama in a way that challenges the hegemonic and essentialist understanding of US citizenship and belonging. Consequently, the reader of Arab American literary works will be confronted with the limits of nationalist discourses and, at the same time, encouraged to deconstruct these frameworks (Schultermandl 1340).

[38] It might be interesting to note that drama as a genre is fairly new not only to Arab Americans but also to Arab literature itself, which traditionally resorted to poetry and music as its prime forms of expression (Alqahtani 394).

## 2.2. *The Moor's Account*

### The Author and the Novel

In this section I will open the discussion about Laila Lalami and *The Moor's Account*, my main focus in this work. Conceived as a background introduction before engaging with the analysis of a few selected themes, I will discuss Laila Lalami's idea of literature in relation to her other works, interviews and her last book, *Conditional Citizens* (2020). The latter could be seen, to some extends, as a programmatic text because, although discussing the specific topic of citizenship without consistent references to her writings, it does take into consideration many themes that are dear to the author and that are present in her works. Finally, I will try, both in this section and in the following, to position Lalami in relation to Arab American literature, the broader context of American contemporary literary directions, and world literature theories.

Laila Lalami was born in Rabat, Morocco, in 1968, in a Darija speaking home. She studied Standard Arabic and French at school, the latter one wielding particular influence on her since it was the language of all her childhood books and of her first writing attempts. She later obtained her BA in English at Mohammed V University in Rabat, her MA in Linguistics at University College London and pursued her studies in Los Angeles, where she graduated with a PhD in Linguistics. She is a naturalized American citizen, currently lives and teaches in California, and is married to a Cuban American. Throughout her life she was thus exposed to various languages, cultures, and places that significantly influenced the understanding of her own identity as well as her work (Lalami "Conditional," 45). She firstly moved to the US without any intention to stay permanently and she considered herself as a foreigner. However, she started paying more attention to the way she was perceived by mainstream Americans after she obtained her citizenship (6) and has since begun to discuss issues of migration, representation, assimilation, identity conflicts, in-betweenness and discrimination in her books *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), *The Moor's Account* (2014) and *The Other Americans* (2019). Many of her own personal experiences are gathered in her newest non-fictional work "on belonging in America," *Conditional Citizens*, in which she discusses the limits

of American citizenship held by all those people who do not correspond to the standard image of how an American should be. In particular, she focuses on Arab Americans' and Muslims' experiences with specific attention to their exotization and politization after 9/11, offering an insightful analysis of the processes behind the demonization of this minority group.

*Conditional Citizens*, which is so deeply connected to the themes of Lalami's fictional works, is worth mentioning because it is a poignant analysis that exposes the contradictions of a system that, in spite of granting the same legal status to all American citizens, it practically allows different treatments according to that hegemonic standard that, as seen before, occupies a central place in the criticism moved by Arab American writings. Such citizens[39] are described as "conditional," meaning that their status is not of full citizenship because they are constantly targeted, suspected, and subjected to different treatments. Therefore, they are expected to show allegiance to the US in a stronger way than those who satisfy the hegemonic criteria (16), which means to detach themselves from those characteristics (cultural, religious, linguistic, etc.) that make them stand out from the mainstream. In fact, such differences are not only marked by suspicion but are also perceived as traits that show their supposed inferiority (7), enabling and justifying the othering of these conditional citizens and their discrimination. The deconstruction of such understandings of Americanness is therefore a key point that exposes how behind essentialist representations of Americanness lies a xenophobic imaginary. One example that is worth mentioning since it is further developed in *The Moor's Account*, is the debunking of the common belief that everything outside the Western model of citizen (white, Christian, of West-European descent) is "strange or exotic," and thus unfamiliar to America (36). Such conviction is nevertheless grounded in historical ignorance, since the earliest evidence of Muslim presence in America precedes the foundation of the US as a nation state and even Jamestown colony. Quoting various Muslim testimonies, such as Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, Omar ibn Said, Silvia King, and Abdulrahman ibn Ibrahima, Lalami shows how Muslim identities were indeed present but mostly silenced through bondage. In fact, although up to thirty percent of

[39] Lalami's *Conditional Citizens* addresses issues pertaining the treatment of certain groups of American citizens. However, a lot of the experiences contained in the book do mirror the conditions of all those who live in the US without holding the American citizenship.

slaves abducted from their African lands were Muslim, Islamic traditions and religious practices were almost impossible to preserve because of the conditions under which these people were forced to live (36-8). The exploration of one of these experiences, Mustafa/Estebanico's in *The Moor's Account*, is inscribed in this context and is particularly interesting as an attempt of revendication of presence and of opening American identity to non-hegemonic representations that keep Lalami's work in line with the contemporary Arab American productions. Moreover, this is also a prime example of the process of worldling of American literature that I have discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, positioning an historically grounded Muslim narrative at the time of European explorations of the American continent means to undermine one of the most powerful traditional formations upon which the notion of Americanness is built: the original myth. If in other works (such as *The Other Americans*), Lalami's deconstruction occurs through the engagement with private lives of contemporary Arab Americans struggling with big issues (negotiation of different identities, discrimination etc.), but also with their everyday concerns (work, money, housing, social relations), in *The Moor's Account* there is a clear intention to disassemble the monolithic construction of Americanness from its very origins. In fact, the undermining the original myth both temporally (rewriting of the past) and spatially (calling into question the rigidity of its borders) means to reveal the heterogenous origins of America. The different languages spoken by the native populations that the Narváez expedition encounter, by the Spaniards and by Mustafa/Estebanico himself, the variety of cultural and religious practices, as well as different ethnicities, are witnesses of the heterogeneity of American origins.

What Lalami is doing here can be inscribed into the efforts to open the American canon to non-traditional (multi-cultural, -lingual, -ethnic) works that scholars have been particularly carrying on since the 1960s (Gray 91; De Cusatis 59-60) and that is particularly stressed in recent world literature debates. In fact, *The Moor's Account* is conceived as a correction of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *La relación y comentarios* ("The account and commentaries," 1542), the official recount of the Narváez expedition. This book has gone largely unnoticed in the US for centuries (while it did circulate in Spain) for several reasons. On one side, Cabeza de Vaca does not provide a moral recount in which natives are seen as brutal and uncivilized people; on the contrary, he does show the good and bad sides of both European and indigenous societies. A telling example

(present in *The Moor's Account* as well) might be the episode about cannibalism to which some of the Narváez men resorted to as they found themselves on the verge of starvation. In contrast to common stereotypes about indigenous people, the reaction of the natives to cannibalism is described as extremely negative, and their shock and repulse overturns the binary opposition European/civilized and primitive/uncivilized. In this sense, Cabeza de Vaca's recount, with its ethnographic character, distances itself from 16th and 17th century celebrations of European conquests of the 'New World,' which could be one of the reasons for its sinking into the oblivion for centuries. Furthermore, it clashes with the traditional narrative of national formation beginning with the *Mayflower* landing in America, a myth that rejects everything before the English arrival (indigenous, French, Spanish presence); and in part because a good percentage of the territories described in *La relación* have been part of Mexico till mid 19th century. In fact, it was after the Texas Revolution and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, when it became necessary to extend the national narrative to the new territories, that Cabeza de Vaca's recount was translated into English (1871) and gained attention. Today, it has acquired the status of classic and appears in many anthologies in several English translations, each of them highlighting different aspects of *La relatión*, such as its historical context, the controversial national past of the US, or the proof of the stable presence of Spanish-speaking people in the US (Stavans 13-5).

The second point I would like to raise before engaging in a more detailed analysis of the book, is the question of representation that inevitably plays a huge role in minority literatures. As said at the beginning of this chapter, ethnic authors have been often pressured to offer a certain image of their communities for the sake of fighting common stereotypes about their people. Caught in the already mentioned 'write or be written imperative,' many writers have been appointed as spokespersons for entire groups, whose diversity, however, can be hardly caught by the perspective of a single author. In this way, giving space to non-essentialist voices can lead to a further homogenization of the entire group. In an interview, Lalami has stated:

> As far as representation, it's an interesting word. It conjures up some kind of necessity. For me, I write what I know. I'm Moroccan so I write Moroccan characters. I write in the specific, not with the burden of representing an entire

> Moroccan immigrant experience, but just those of my often very-flawed characters. I write in their specificity, with their unresolved conflicts and flaws, and that is how I expect to have any hope of reaching readers and showing some kind of truth that resonates with them. (Lalami "To Leave")

In effect, all of Lalami's books engage with displaced characters who find themselves to start their life anew somewhere unfamiliar and who end up being deeply changed by this new unfamiliar place — an experience that the author herself went through. It is true that the situation of Mustafa in *The Moor's Account* is extreme, being a novel of survival or, as Lalami defined it, "an historical epic" (Lalami "To Leave"), which is very distant from its author's own life, but it can still be circumscribed to the themes that she is comfortable enough to deal with.

In this section I have discussed Lalami's background in relation to *The Moor's Account*. In particular, I have highlighted the aspects of her personal experience as a migrant that are relevant for the present analysis as well as the recurrent themes in her writings. I have also dedicated an important part to the main source of the book, Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*, and its significance in the American literary context. After a brief summary, I will dedicate the rest of the chapter to the analysis of *The Moor's Account*.

**Summary**

*The Moor's Account* is the memoir of Moroccan-born [40] merchant and explorer Mustafa/Estebanico,[41] a fictional character based on the historical figure of Mustafa Azemmur, one of the four survivors of the Narváez expedition that took off the harbor of Seville in 1527. The enterprise had the objective to claim the Gulf Coast for the Spanish crown and to find gold, but as they landed in Florida (today's Tampa Bay area) a series of ordeals that cost the lives of most of the men took place. The story, told by first-person narrator Mustafa, is a recollection of the adventures and misfortunes that the members of the expedition went through during their 8 years of wandering in Central America (today's Southern US and Mexico) intertwined with flashbacks of Mustafa's own past in his Moroccan hometown, Azemmur, and in Spain.

Born the son of a notary, Mustafa enjoyed relative wealth and received a good education in his hometown Azemmur. The memoir is filled with many nostalgic episodes of his youth, his house, his family and his younger siblings, his love for his profession and his hometown. Although expected to follow his father's steps, he showed from a young age interest in the *souq* (market) and decided to undertake this professional path, becoming a successful and wealthy merchant. However, the combination of the Portuguese siege of Azemmur with the consequent fall of the city and a famine caused by drought, quickly reverses Mustafa and his family's fate throwing them into misery. Mustafa thus resolves to sell himself into slavery hoping to save his loved ones from starvation. After a few weeks he is brought to Spain, baptized, renamed Estebanico and sold to a Sevillian merchant named Rodriguez. He stays in the Rodriguez household for four years before being given to a new master: Andrés de Dorantes.

This nobleman, in the wake of Cortés' successful overseas conquests, decides to join the expedition in the 'New World,' led by Pánfilo de Narváez, and to bring along his servant. In this way, Mustafa, together with other 600 men, finds himself on a ship bound to America. It is after setting foot on American soil (La Florida, immediately claimed as

[40] In Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*, Mustafa is described as black and scholarship generally refers to him as the first Black Arab to reach America.

[41] Although his original name was Mustafa, he is better known with his Christian/slave name, Estebanico. I will use his original name from now on.

part of the Spanish empire) that the misadventures of the explorers begin. After a year in which they face shipwreck, disease, starvation and hostile natives, the number of the survivors shrinks to four: Mustafa and his master Dorantes, Cabeza de Vaca (the treasurer) and Alonso del Castillo (a nobleman). From this point on, the novel focuses on their journey throughout the Southern part of today's US and the North of Mexico, a 9-year period in which the four men struggle to survive and experience violence, bondage and exploitation by the natives. However, they also get to know new societies, languages, cultures, they learn how to deal with some of the tribes and end up being accepted, occupying high social ranks and even getting married to locals.

Their life with the natives ends when they finally encounter some European explorers who bring them to Mexico City, where they are asked to deliver an official account of their experience. After years of living together as equals, Dorantes agrees to legally set Mustafa free, but their return to the European society makes him doubt his decision and he delays the fulfillment of his promise. For this reason, Mustafa manages to convince Dorantes to sell him to the Viceroy, who sends him and his pregnant wife to an expedition northward. During the exploration he succeeds in faking his death and, finally free from bondage, he sets off with his wife to her native village.

**Deconstructing the 'Myth of Discovery'**

In the last section I have focused on internal aspects of *The Moor's Account*, such as the power relations within it, the topic of presence, erasure, affirmation of sub/alternative identities in relation to storytelling as a creative force. With this analysis in mind, I will here take into consideration the 'myth of discovery' and I will show how it is a product of a very limited understanding of the origins of the US. In particular, I will compare it with the recount of the Narváez expedition told by Mustafa and how it pinpoints the weakest aspects of this myth. This analysis is thus inscribed into the efforts of recent scholarship and minority authors to call into question the national tradition of the United States as mono-lingual, -cultural, -religious, -ethnic and with definite geographical and cultural borders.

As seen before, *The Moor's Account* is set between 1527 and 1536, the period of the first European explorations westwards. In fact, it is from the 16th century that Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French and British powers started to look for new sea routes to expand their trades as well as their political influence beyond the European continent (Steger 28-9). Technological advances, in particular the widespread use of the maritime compass and the developing of navigation techniques, were fundamental to the success of their commercial enterprises (Cohen 657). This remarkable expansion led to the creation and consolidation of important interregional networks that many scholars identify as the first forms of globalization. Consistently supported by their governments, these entrepreneurs established a global market based on "individualism and unlimited material accumulation" that will be later known as the capitalist world system. Such economic trades, together with their social, cultural and political influence, laid the foundations for later European colonial rules. Slavery was one of these trades (Steger 29).

The Narváez expedition, which occurred in this period, took part in the so-called 'Columbian exchange' that created an intense traffic of human beings, goods, plants, animals, diseases, technologies, etc. in the Atlantic region (MacDougald xxi). In fact, following economic as well as political interests, the Spanish Kingdom encouraged the expansion westwards by financing such explorations in the 'New World.' Pánfilo de Narváez was appointed *adelantado* of La Florida on 5th December 1526, a territory that had been 'discovered' and 'named' only 13 years earlier by Juan Ponce de León. La

Florida included “lands west of the Delaware Bay” and “today’s Southeastern US including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and also Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas and Northern Mexico.” Narváez’ mission was to explore the land as well as to found settlements, and in effect he sailed with five ships, 400 men, ten women, eighty horses and many slaves (the only one identified by name was Estebanico) (2-3).

Probably following Hernán Cortés’ or Alonso Álvarez de Pineda’s map of the Gulf of Mexico (in which entrances on the west coast of Florida were signaled), the Narváez expedition managed to reach Cuba, but unfavorable weather conditions prevented them from going ashore in Havana. After two months at sea, the ships managed to finally land in Boca Ciega Bay on 14th April 1528 and on 15th they read the *Requerimiento*. Here they met the natives (Tocobaga Indians) and started to explore the inland, reaching today’s Old Tampa Bay. However, the efforts of the Castilians to dominate the Tocobaga natives were met with hostility and Narváez decided to try to settle elsewhere. Convinced to be in the proximity of an important harbor, the *adelantado* ordered to split in two groups: 100 of his men and the women were to proceed by sea, while the rest would follow them on land. They would never see the ships again. After a 300-mile journey northward where they had several conflicts with natives, only 242 Narváez’ men managed to survive. Arrived at St. Marks River in July 1528, they built rudimental boats hoping that, by following the river, they would reach Pánuco (eastern coast of Mexico), which was their initial destination. However, Pánuco was 1400 miles away and, by November, other 160 men had died. The rest of the expedition scattered in present day Galveston and Galveston Island coast and many of them died of starvation, diseases, drowned (like Narváez), were killed or fell into slavery. The surviving men, Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillio, Dorantes and Estebanico, lived with the natives for the following eight years; and they were enslaved, adapted to the new societies they met, became traders and finally medicine men. Being the most skilled in languages, Estebanico became interpreter and was often the first to be sent to deal with natives. After having traveled more than 3000 miles they reached Mexico City on July 25th 1536 (MacDougald 4-10).

It is likely that the four survivors were the first Europeans and African to explore the American west and to encounter many Native American tribes, and yet the Narváez

expedition's story is little known (MacDougald xiii, 8). Aside from the founding fathers myth that positions the origin of the US within a specific imagery that I have already outlined, American mythology does present a previous foundational story set in a distant past, which revolves around the 'discovery' of the 'New World,' in the age of the first explorations, and brings with itself a precise symbolic landscape of America as a land of utopic bounties. The 'myth of discovery' is associated with the figure of Christopher Columbus, whose enterprise in America is read in prophetic terms that resonate with the 19th century concept of Manifest Destiny. Since his journey to America, Columbus has been identified as "the agent of discovery," a definition that supports both the idea of a 'discovery' and of the 'New World' (51). The embodiment of heroism and of a superior culture and religion, Columbus' figure has been consolidated at the end of the 18th century, when anti-colonial sentiments against the British rule were at their peak. Seen as a patron and an ancestor, his figure was celebrated in poetry and in political discourses that recognized him as the first American hero (52-3).

Despite the recent controversies, Columbus is studied as an American hero in schools and the Columbus-day is still a national holiday widely celebrated (MacDougald 43-4). Yet, one might ask how it is possible that someone who has never been in the territories of present-day US nor did know that the land on which he stepped was not India could be included among the founding figures of America. The reason behind his success as a national hero is that Columbus was the perfect historical figure to pick as a Founding Father during the struggle for independence. Firstly, he was not British, which implied a non-English heritage for the US. Second, a parallel between American colonies under the oppression of the British empire and Columbus' dependency on the Spanish Crown was established in order to represent him as a revolutionary figure. In fact, his enterprise was clearly distinguished from Spanish colonialism and its brutality; his expansionist ambitions westwards were seen not as a symbol of greed but in prophetic terms that identified him as a precursor of the American frontiersmen. Moreover, Columbus' was constantly praised for his steadfastness in times of great hardships — an attitude at the base of American individualism (57). During the 19th century, he was described as *homo americanus*, as a "scientist, scholar humanist, a profoundly religious man, an Enlightenment figure ahead of Enlightenment, and thus a tragic figure," despite all historical evidence. His transformation was so radical that it was clearly possible to

distinguish the "historical Columbus" from the "heroic Columbus," which is usually not easy once the process of mythmaking begins (60).

By the end of the 19th century, when immigration flows to the US became consistent, Columbus' heroic figure started to lose popularity as a symbol of national unity. In fact, many migrants (especially Italians, Irish, and Jews) inscribed themselves into his tradition to claim their place in "America" and saw him as an "ethnic hero" (MacDougald 63, 67-8). In this period, nativist intellectuals expressed themselves against Columbus, discrediting his figure and revising his myth, and presented him as a "pirate and a slave trader" (62). More criticism hailed from Native scholarship during the 20th century, who saw Columbus not only as the beginner of European colonization of Native Americans and their destruction, but also as a figure symbolizing the very idea of Eurocentric history, the embodiment of 'discovery' and 'New World' concepts (74).[42]

Today, there are many different versions of Columbus — some still portray him as an American hero and others as a villain. What is important here is to note how the fictional character of his figure is a product of a specific narrative that can be constructed and debunked according to the political needs of a specific historical time. Such narratives expose the artificiality of national sentiments and how easy it is to manipulate history to serve a certain purpose. In this case, the Columbus ''discovery myth'' was used to create a strong national image through the identification with a specific genealogy. Such process exposes the mechanism behind the construction of nations and how they are built on "imagined communities," to use Benedict Anderson's famous expression. Nations are never spontaneous formations, on the contrary, they are always artificial creations that share three fundamental elements. Firstly, they are imagined as limited, because they have precise borders, both physical and cultural; secondly, as they are imagines as sovereign, because they are conceived as free to rule themselves within their territory; thirdly, they are imagined as a community because, even if only theoretically, they presuppose "horizontal comrades," which ultimately means that their citizens are willing "to die for such limited imaginings." The pivotal element that grants such cohesiveness is indeed the creation of shared roots (32-4), as the Columbus myth shows. The creation and

[42] An important collection of literary and pedagogical works that focus on this topic and that is worth mentioning is *Rethinking Columbus* (1998).

reproduction (cultural, religious, linguistic, racial, etc.) affinity and continuity are key elements for the construction of national unity (39), and they also explain the tendency towards homogeneity that seen in recent discourses against migration.

In the Thirteen Colonies, the need for the creation of such imagined community was particularly strong, since they understood themselves as "parallel and comparable to […] Europe," and therefore needed to draw a clear line to differentiate themselves from their European counterparts (Anderson 411-2). The stress on democracy (the "republican independence" of the Declaration), the 'Manifested Destiny' myth as well as the myth of the frontier or the American individualism are to be inscribed in this effort of building a specific American tradition that was clearly distinguishable from the European ones. In particular, the Independence set an historical precedent that was specifically American (415-6).

The Columbus myth thus reflects this double tendency of, on one side, recognizing a specific European genealogy while, on the other, distancing from it through the establishment of specific American features. However, as seen before, this is a highly selective narrative that establishes a genealogy that is not grounded in historical evidence. A comparison with *The Moor's Account* (as well as Cabeza de Vaca's travelogue), together with the analysis already conducted, further highlights the limits of the original/'discovery myth'.

The first point that I would like to make concerns the national perspective through which the Columbus myth is read. As pointed out above, Columbus landed in several Caribbean islands and never touched the present-day US. In fact, the first expedition (after the Norses' in the 10$^{th}$ century) to reach North America and to explore it was likely the Narváez one, which however presents a very different image of the first contact with the land and the natives that undermining the concepts of 'discovery' and of 'New World.' Both terms do not imply an encounter among different communities (Native Americans and non-native explorers) on a previously inhabited soil, but the understanding of America before Columbus' arrival as *terra nullius*, a virgin land ready to be conquered. The European explorers of the time, and in particular the Spanish ones, did indeed uphold this attitude in regard to the land and its people. The act of renaming and the *Requerimiento* itself show the intention to erase everything that was there before the European arrival and to take possession of it, to mark it as an extension of the "Old World."

The desire to homogenize the "new land" according to European customs and traditions can be once again inscribed in that paradigm of power relations based on inferiority/superiority claims. The progressive subjugation and destruction of indigenous people follows the othering mechanism that has been largely analyzed and thus shows how that *terra nullius* was a creation of the colonizers.

The recount of the Narváez expedition is indeed a testimony of a world inhabited before the arrival of Europeans, a world with its social structures, languages, cultures and different tribes with their complicated network of alliances and conflicts. If this heterogeneous landscape is linked with the other settings presented in *The Moor's Account*, such as the north west part of Africa, the city of Azemmur or Seville, it seems reductive to read the novel only as the exploration occurred within the geopolitical borders of the present-day US. In fact, all expeditions of the 'Columbian exchange' are to be read in the broader context of the Atlantic area, in particular because colonial enterprises were active participants in the slave trade, as seen in *The Moor's Account*. Moreover, both Cabeza de Vaca's recount and Lalami's book can be ascribed to the literary genre of sea narratives, which requires us to consider such works in the context of Oceanic or Atlantic studies. If it is true that such tradition focuses on the mariners' abilities to overcome dangerous situations and emphasizes their heroism — a virtue that could be easily recognized as American individualism —, the creation of these cultural icons is specifically linked to maritime landscapes that distance themselves from specific national paradigms (Cohen 659, 661). The book thus encourages us to pick up a more global perspective that indicates, through intense transregional[43] exchanges of the time, the fragility of today's understanding of cultural and political national borders. Such connections are primarily the result of economic interests — which enable mobility of goods and people — but they do also have social consequences. In fact, the four survivors of the Narváez expedition do encounter and live many years with different tribes, getting used to their costumes, traditions and stories, learning new languages and new social structures that, as years go by, become more and more familiar. These cross-cultural

[43] I use here transregional instead of transnational because *The Moor's Account* is set in the 16th century, a time that precedes the formation of national states.

exchanges that characterize the entire permanence of the last survivors especially undermine the idea of 'discovery' and 'New World' associated with the first explorers.

It is true that part of the myth of Columbus successfully facing all odds is reflected in the survival skills of the four survivors of the Narváez expedition. However, their misadventures are much more complex and do not follow the typical binary oppositions at the base of national mythologies. In fact, as I have already discussed in the previous section, even Cabeza de Vaca's chronicles do not portray the Castilians as civilized and pious people facing the savagery of natives. The recount does show a much more nuanced approach to a land which is clearly not new nor virgin. Moreover, homogeneity seems to escape both the natives and the group of explorers itself. In fact, although the expedition hails from the Kingdom of Spain, it is composed of a very heterogenic group of people. Many of its members were slaves likely from the Atlantic coasts of Africa, like Estebanico, and the rest of the men were probably not only from the Spanish Kingdom, but from all over Europe, as Cabeza de Vaca's mention of the first Greek known to reach America suggests (MacDougald 8).

The misadventures of the Narváez expedition show how cross-cultural exchanges and the development of a cosmopolitan sensibility defined the encounters between explorers and natives. In fact, instead of transforming (or attempting to transform) the land and its inhabitants according to their wishes, it is the land that transforms them. They arrive to America with a precise idea about the natives:

> I had heard […] so many stories about the Indians. The Indians, they said, had red skin and no eyelids; they were heathens who made human sacrifices and worshipped evil-looking gods; they drank mysterious concoctions that gave them visions; they walked about in their natural state, even the women—a claim I had found so hard to believe that I had dismissed it out of hand. Yet I had become captivated. This land had become for me not just a destination, but a place of complete fantasy, a place that could have existed only in the imagination of itinerant storytellers in the *souqs* of Barbary. (11)

However, the encounters that take place once the explorers are not in a position of military superiority force them to rethink the stereotype that they had been told back in the "Old World." This new condition forces them to change:

> Even my appearance began to change. […] Now I allowed my hair to grow and began to braid it in tight plaits along my scalp. I made myself a deerskin vest and a pair of slippers, in the style worn by people of the tribe.
> […]
> Life among the Indians had tempered both [Castillo's] candid belief that he was right all the time and his constant need to have the approval of others. Now, free of those pressures, his true nature blossomed; I discovered he had a good sense of humor and a great resilience, qualities that were most helpful in our new environment. (223-4)

If in the first years of wandering the survivors adapt to the natives' costumes for the sake of survival, after a while they start to integrate themselves by actively participating in their social life. In this way, this foreign land starts to become familiar ("Little by little, the Land of the Indians, which I had viewed first as a place of fantasy and later as a temporary destination, became more real to me, and I began to take greater notice of its beauty," 223). During their stay with the Avavares tribe, they become healers and three of them get married. Having lost hope to return to Seville or Azemmur, they begin to consider this 'New World' as their definitive home. For Mustafa in particular, who is the only one who will permanently resettle in America, the concept of home is constantly negotiated throughout the entire novel. If his life back in Azemmur and in Seville is often recalled as a support for his hardships and to assert his silenced presence, Mustafa holds onto his memories hoping to eventually go back. It is only at the very end that he finally accepts that he will never return to his original homeland and he will never see his family again. Such decision coincides with the erasure of Estebanico the slave and the reappropriation of Mustafa's agency: accepting America as his new home allows him to stop dwelling in the past and to start thinking in future terms. Nevertheless, this new life as a free man does not imply an erasure of his past. On the contrary, it shows a willingness to embrace his diasporic identity in America and his resolution to preserve his Arab

heritage through his lineage, so that his story and roots will never be forgotten. Mustafa's development throughout the book shows the transformation of his transregional sensibility from a means to maintain his homeland in connection with Azemmur to the identification of home with the American land. His desire to pass down to his child both his own heritage and his wife's shows his willingness to find a balance between these different cultures and to affirm heterogeneity over a singular understanding of belonging.

The comparison between the 'discovery myth' and Mustafa's recount of the Narváez expedition shows the limits of essentialist representations of America and how they are constructed to create a sense of national unity. Not only has the 'discovery myth' been constructed with specific political purposes, but it also lacks historical accuracy. In fact, a brief reconstruction of its development and reception from the end of the 18th century till today has highlighted some major flaws. Firstly, the myth is built upon the figure of Christopher Columbus, who never landed in the present-day US. Secondly, Columbus was depicted as a hero, but it was a highly controversial figure to whom were attributed exceptional traits embodying American individualistic values were attributed. Thirdly, the myth is built on a Eurocentric understanding of pre-Columbian America as a 'new' land 'discovered' by Europeans, which implies an erasure of everything that was there before their landing. *The Moor's Account* deconstructs these traditional understandings by showing the heterogeneity of the different native tribes and of the explorers themselves. In fact, against a mythology that gives space only to the figure of the colonizer, Mustafa opposes a constellation of voices that have been erased by history and silenced in culture and literature. Above all, *The Moor's Account* gives an alternative representation of the origins of the US as a place that has always been characterized by constant movement of people and cultures, as a space of transregional exchanges and of plurality. The encounters between the explorers and the locals show how cultural, linguistic, religious and geographical boundaries are intrinsically permeable, and they encourage to consider multiple perspectives and sources.

*The Moor's Account* can be thus read as an attempt of revising the cultural formations based on a traditional understanding of American nation and thus a remapping of its literary canons. In fact, opening literature to non-hegemonic and subaltern presences means to deconstruct that monolithic representation of America as a cohesive and homogeneous nation that has been at the base of the creation of canons and of American

literature itself. In this sense, Mustafa's story is conceived in opposition to Grand Narratives, as a story that resists single discourses that are still present today (Elboubekri 1-2).

**Reclaiming a Narrative, Reclaiming a World**

*The Moor's Account* is a survival narrative and an 'epic history,' but it is also a novel that inscribes itself into the efforts of Arab American and other minority writers to carve a place into the American cultural, literary and historical panorama. Lalami's novel takes place before the founding of the US and it shows how the national past, traditionally identified with the arriving of Europeans in America, reflects colonial power relations of centrality and marginality. This idea of US history with its homogenous imaginary is a cultural formation that does not recognize the presence of non-whites and non-Europeans and therefore erases it. The account of Mustafa is conceived as a counter (hi)story, as a narrative that exposes the marginality to which so many have been relegated and thus forgotten. In fact, the historical figure of Mustafa Azemmur himself has gone through the process of erasure, from his name (he is referred to with epithets such as "el negro" or called with his slave name, Estebanico) to his voice (he was not allowed to deliver his testimony after 8 years of wandering along with the Castilian noblemen) and presence (he is hardly mentioned in *La relación*). Lalami's rewriting of Cabeza de Vaca's chronicles is a way to counteract this erasure, to show how Muslims, Arabs as well as Islam have always been part of America's history, and to break their invisibility removing them from that marginal position. In this section I will analyze key passages of the book that expose the mechanism of subjugation and marginalization of subaltern voices through the power of storytelling.

Before starting the analysis with the *Prologue* of the book, I would like to briefly dwell on the title. Lalami, while underlining the fictionality of Mustafa's recount (Lalami "Interview"), seems to encourage us to take her historical novel as a serious interpretation of past events (Awad 193; Shamsie 197). As Seher Rabia Rowther remarks, the title itself points out at the doubleness of the word "account," especially when related to its Spanish equivalent. The term "*cuenta*" as well as the verbal form "*contar*" can refer to historical as well as fictional writings (story/history) and they mean to tell/to relay and to count. Rowther notes how Estebanico is "never allowed or asked to relate (*contar*)" his story (in Spanish is *historia*, that translates as both history and story) so that "his perspective is omitted in the official history (*historia*, again). Estebanico's story does not count (*no cuenta*)." In fact, as Rowther remarks, because of its subaltern condition and his

impossibility to fit into the Eurocentric standard that informs Cabeza de Vaca's mindset and work, Mustafa does not count as a human being but only as one of the Castilians' possessions (246-7). Therefore, the title itself carries Mustafa's struggle to be recognized (or, to count) as a testimony of the Narváez expedition as well as the ambiguity of what we consider history, since everything that is remembered — even the recounts that claim to be objective — inevitably becomes a story.

The reason behind the choice to write a parallel account of the Narváez expedition is already anticipated in the title of the book, but it is made explicit in the *Prologue* (8-9). Mustafa "intend[s] to correct" Cabeza de Vaca, who is defined as the "rival storyteller," because his recount lacks faithfulness to the events happened during the eight years in America. While Cabeza de Vaca did "omit," "exaggerat[e]," "suppress," and "invent" some details due to political reasons, Mustafa is free to tell the truth since he is not "beholden to Castilian men of power, nor bound to the rules of a society to which [he] do[es] not belong." Although Cabeza de Vaca's chronicle is a narrative lacking a "triumphant moral" and a simplistic depiction of the natives as uncivilized beasts (Stavans 14), it does indeed present many omissions, and it has a political dimension that might jeopardize (at least in part) its faithfulness to the events. In fact, the Castilian explorer felt the need to clarify his position to dismiss potential charges of insubordination that had been spreading all over Spain. He often criticizes Pánfilo de Narváez's poor decisions, the *adelantado* (governor) of La Florida and second-in-command of the expedition, whose incompetence is emphasized through stark contrasts with the Christ-like image that Cabeza de Vaca sometimes gives of himself. Moreover, despite the ill-fated adventure in America, he still hoped to receive the governorate of La Florida (12-3).

If we compare Cabeza de Vaca's *Prohemio* with Mustafa/Lalami's *Prologue*, such political intention is even clearer. Firstly, Cabeza de Vaca, although he does mention God twice, puts *Vuestra Magestad* (His Majesty) as the first recipient of the account and spills much ink in his praise. The *Prohemio*'s first words are "sacra, cesarea, catholica Magestad" (sacred, Caeserian, caholic Majesty) (3), while the *Prologue's* are the first two *'āyāt* (verses) of the Quran ("In the name of God, most compassionate, most merciful.

Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds")[44] with a version of the *Salawat* ("prayers and blessings be on our prophet Muhammad and upon all his progeny and companions"), which is a straightforward affirmation of Mustafa's Islamic identity (8).[45] In *The Prologue* there is no mention of higher authorities (except for God) and the first name that appears is Mustafa's. The intention is to reclaim a space and assert the presence of someone whose identity has been suppressed through bondage and whose voice has been erased even after all the years spent wandering in extreme conditions with his Castilians companions (Awad 194). In fact, as we are immediately told, Mustafa, unlike the other three survivors, "was never called upon to testify to the Spanish Viceroy about [their] journey among the Indians" (8). Hence his desire to change this injustice by writing a rival account of the Narváez misadventures, especially as he feels that "[Cabeza de Vaca's] sterile account of [their] travels would always be considered the truth—no matter what had happened" (328). The need to tell the story is thus strictly connected with identity, with the act of remembering, and the importance of one's name and freedom. These concepts immediately appear in the *Prologue* and they lay the foundations for the entire narrative.

Storytelling is the only way to "survive the eternity of darkness" (9), it is a space where Mustafa is finally free to make his presence visible, to tell the story of his life, to counter Cabeza de Vaca's colonial chronicles in which he is mentioned only six times (in 144 pages about eight years of shared life) and to finally exit the marginality to which he has been relegated. As already mentioned above, the condition of Mustafa is one of subalternity: he is not considered a person, but a possession of the Castilians. In the first chapter, Mustafa says:

> Estebanico was the name the Castilians had given me when they bought me from Portuguese traders—a string of sounds whose foreignness still grated on my ears.

[44] The first two *'āyāt* of the Quran contain the *Basmala* or *Bismillah* ("*bi-smi* [in the name] *llāh* (of God) *a-r-raḥmān* [the Most Compassionate/Gracious] *a-r-raḥīm* [the Most Merciful]"), which is an important expression in Islam, since almost every *surah* (chapter) of the Quran begins with it. Moreover, it is repeated several times during the *Salat* (the five obligatory daily prayers in Islam) and is generally used in daily life (for example, before eating), before 'good deeds,' or before starting something important.

[45] The *Salawat* is a salutation used every time Prophet Muhammad is mentioned. The most common expression is "peace be upon him," but variants such as the one in *The Moor's Account* are used as well.

> When I fell into slavery, I was forced to give up not just my freedom, but also the name that my mother and father had chosen for me. A name is precious; it carries inside it a language, a history, a set of traditions, a particular way of looking at the world. Losing it meant losing my ties to all those things too. So I had never been able to shake the feeling that this Estebanico was a man conceived by the Castilians, quite different from the man I really was. (12)

The re-naming of Mustafa is an act of erasure, of affirmation of power that places him in a condition of subalternity. Names are not accidental, they do bear witness of one's tradition, past, family history, they are fraught with meaning and therefore they help defining us. Because they are strictly connected with one's identity, the loss of names is a recurrent theme in minority works. Although Mustafa's change of name is due to his condition of enslavement, the process behind the substitution or distortion of original names follows the same logic based on superiority/inferiority oppositions that allow the creation of subalternity. In this sense, assimilation does have in common that element of invisibility that characterizes the condition of slavery.[46]

Depriving someone of his/her name thus plays a major role in the erasure of one's identity and visibility. The act of re-naming occurs through rituals of possession, namely a performance with sacred or official tones in which the power of language and its capacity to shape reality are most evident. In Mustafa's case the transformation in Estebanico occurs through the ritual of the Christian baptism: without even realizing what

[46] The passage about Mustafa's name cannot but remind of Sam Hamod's landmark poem "Dying with the wrong name" (19-20). Both Mustafa (M) and Hamod (H) lament a loss that begins in language but that goes beyond it. The change of name starts with a necessity felt by the part in power, the masters for Mustafa and the authority in "blue uniform at Ellis Island" for Hamod, to homogenize the otherness and adapt it to their own standard (H: "it's easier, you can move / about / as an American"), to hide that mark of difference that, however, helps to define one's individuality. The effects of language are real, and they have consequences on one's everyday life: the linguistic loss corresponds to the impossibility to trace back one's roots (M: "it meant losing my ties to all those things too;" H: "there was no way to trace / him back even to Lebanon"), it partly severs the relationship with one's family (M: "I was forced to give up […] the name that my mother and father had chosen for me") and thus with oneself (H: "the loss of your name cuts away / some other part"). The consequences are "unspeakable" (H) and create someone conceived artificially and "quite different" from the person "[they] really [were]." The theme of names is still relevant today and it is not discussed in literature only, but it is also a hot topic in transnational online communities on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (@yesimhotinthis, @muslimtiktok1; @gamaleldinshahd, @beekhaled @ramaghanayem03).

was happening ("The priest's fingers traced a cross in the air. […] I looked at him unblinkingly, all the while wondering what the action meant and why he repeated it with each one of us. It was not until much later that I understood the significance of the sign on our bodies," 115) nor understanding the language spoken ("[the priest] spoke an ancient tongue I did not understand," 114), Mustafa's name is taken away from him ("I entered the church as the servant of God Mustafa ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori; I left it as Esteban. Just Esteban—converted and orphaned in one gesture," 115). In these rituals, language is used as a tool to gain control over the oppressed — a control extended to every part of one's life (Gonzales Nieto 236). In fact, Mustafa is not only deprived of his name, but he is also prevented from speaking his mother tongue or to practice his religion. After baptism, Mustafa becomes a "silenced body" (Rowther 247), together with his fellow slaves' in Seville and, later, the American land itself.

A similar ritual of submission is performed during the first exploration of La Florida. The following episode shows in more details how rituals of possession — in this case not of enslavement but of colonization — firstly happen in words and how they follow specific rules. In this case, the ritual coincides with the declamation of *Requerimiento*[47] after Mustafa finds a gold nugget. In fact, the objective of the expedition was to find gold and to create a settlement in its proximity, so that as soon as Narváez is informed about the finding, he decides to disembark the whole Armada and to officially claim the land as part of the Spanish Crown. After three days of preparation in which everyone has finally "congregated" on the beach, the notary is called upon and the official scroll is unrolled.

> On behalf of the King and Queen, […] we wish to make it known that this land belongs to God our Lord, Living and Eternal. God has appointed one man, called St. Peter, to be the governor of all the men in the world, wherever they should live, and under whatever law, sect, or belief they should be. The successor of St. Peter in this role is our Holy Father, the Pope, who has made a donation of this *terra firma* to the King and Queen. Therefore, we ask and require that you acknowledge the Church as the ruler of this world, and the priest whom we call Pope, and the

[47] Spanish Requirement, i.e., a document stating the legal declaration of Spanish sovereignty upon lands of the 'New World,' here reported modified, as in Lalami (337).

> King and Queen, as lords of this territory. […] If you do as we say, you will do well […]. But if you refuse to comply, […] we inform you that we will make war against you […] and shall make slaves of [women and children], and […] shall do you all the mischief and damage we can […]. Now that we have said this to you, we request the notary to give us his testimony in writing and the rest who are present to be witnesses of this Requisition. (14-5)

After reading the document, the notary bows his head and gives the scroll to Narváez, who signs it and announces that the village "would henceforth be known as Portillo." As "the captains inclined their heads and a soldier raised the standard" (16), the ritual is complete. Reading the *Requerimiento* was a fundamental step in the Spanish colonization process because it established the source of their legal authority (i.e., the Spanish sovereigns by means of the Pope) over the conquered lands by requiring the natives to acknowledge the religious and political superiority of their conquerors. It was of no importance if the text itself was convincing or not, the *Requerimiento* was a part of the procedure that the Castilians had to follow in order to make their dominion legal. Because it contains a possible declaration of war, the document is both political and military, which was a unique trait of Spanish colonization (Seed 70-1).

Like in the scene of the baptism, we have a solemn atmosphere (the church, the scroll, the standard, the explorers neatly gathered), a spokesperson who functions as mediator (the priest; the notary), a specific code (ecclesiastical Latin, the *Requerimiento*) and the act of re-naming (Mustafa and the slaves; Portillo and, *in extenso*, the land of La Florida). From that moment on, the *conquistadores*, now owners of the land, are legally allowed to exert their authority. After this kind of rituals, every trace of past presence (may it be of people, like in the first village they find, or in the land) is suppressed and submitted to the Castilians. In fact, in another passage, as they find unknown animals and plants while exploring the hinterland of La Florida, the Narváez men begin to "[give] new names to everything around […], as though they were the All-Knowing God in the Garden of Eden" (24). The rituals of possession are thus an important step in the developing of traditional cultural formation based on homogeneity. To analyze them means to reveal the artificiality and the violence behind ideas of America based on a definite national identity.

Mustafa looks at the scene of the *Requerimiento* from the external point of view of someone who, in his subalternity, is not meant to be part of the ritual but only to occupy its margins — he is nothing more than a silent observer. However, as the moment is recalled in his memory and told through his own words, his presence becomes visible (Elboubekri 5-6). For example, when the notary interrupts the speech to take a sip of water, Mustafa notices that Narváez is annoyed with his gesture but does not protest because "he [does] not want to upset the notary," who plays an important part in the legitimation of his position as governor. After the notary resumes to the reading of the *Requerimiento*, Mustafa comments the ritual as follows: "How strange, I remember thinking, how utterly strange were the ways of the Castilians—just by saying that something was so, they believed that it was. I know now that these conquerors […] gave speeches not to voice the truth, but to create it" (15-6). Mustafa's sharp comments undermine the legitimacy of the document by revealing the mechanisms of power behind it and how fabricated the justifications for the Castilian colonial enterprise are. The colonizers' truth is "create[d]" in the same way the village of Portillo and the slave Estebanico are, i.e., through an establishment of unequal structures of power that grant the oppressors/colonizers/masters the control over the oppressed/colonized/enslaved. In this sense, the ritual of enslavement and of colonization mirror each other and follow the same logic. The desire to impose their authority over things and people seems to appease only when the Castilians struggle to survive ("When we came upon a river, none of the Castilians thought to give it a name, I noticed; they had stopped thinking of themselves as unchallenged lords of this world, whose duty it was to put it into words," 193), but it immediately comes back as they find themselves in positions of power, e.g., when they start being respected by the natives for their ability as healers ("the boy's father […] gifted Dorantes five hundred hearts of deer. […] When he spoke of that village later, Dorantes called it Corazones. […] My Castilian companion had returned to the habit of giving new names to old places," 257). Although the Castilians experience marginality during their struggles for survival, they exit it whenever they have the chance, going back to their old attitude of superiority, most evidently once they return to the European society in Mexico City. On the contrary, Mustafa's constant marginality, his perspective from a position "located outside of the Eurocentric center of colonial discourse," is what allows him to

constantly unveil this mechanism and to give visibility to all of those silenced bodies, to decolonize them (Rowther 250).

Visibility is achieved through the act of remembering and fixing the memories of subalternity on the page, memories that witness the violence perpetrated by the oppressors. In this way, Mustafa does not only retrieve his presence and agency but, through his writing, that of other forgotten victims too. In fact, there is a whole chapter dedicated to Ramatullai (baptized as Elena), a woman abducted from her village in Southern Morocco and sold to the Castilians, whom Mustafa meets at Señor Rodriguez' (his first master) household. Not by chance, their friendship begins when they reveal to each other their real names and, in secret, start sharing their stories. In the three years spent together at Señor Rodriguez' house, such bond is the only support they have to endure hardships, since their condition of slavery constantly reduces them to silence, almost completely erasing their agency. One night, Mustafa witnesses the rape of Ramatullai by Señor Rodriguez: "She turned her face toward me. We stared at one another over the back of our master. […] Every slave knew this could happen, but no slave believed it would, until it did" (148). Mustafa describes the intrinsic powerlessness of the condition of the slave, who, even in such a situation, cannot do or say anything: "pain, anger, and rebellion bubbled inside us. But in the end fear won out; she turned her face away and I lowered my eyes and returned to my closet" (148). The only way they have to rebel to such violations is through "discreet measures of vengeance, […] reprisals by the weak" (149), small gestures, like tainting Rodriguez' food and drink or damaging his goods, although that would sometimes cost them punishments.

The silence that is forced upon Ramatullai and Mustafa can be broken only through storytelling. In fact, since language plays such a pivotal role in the establishment of power relations, it must be again through language that Mustafa can find a way to retrieve their voices. Therefore, Mustafa gains back control of his identity, his memories, his traditions, and ultimately his freedom. In Ramatullai's chapter, Mustafa becomes a means of empowerment through which she can carve a space for herself and escape that "eternity of darkness," to defeat that process of erasure that turns all the dominated into a blurred group of forgotten names, stories, individualities. In this regard, the fact that Ramatullai does not know how to write makes Mustafa's decision to dedicate her an entire chapter even more significant.

In the last pages I have shown how *The Moor's Account* is a novel that heavily depends on the concept of storytelling and on its relationship with subalternity and in/visibility. I have discussed how colonization and enslavement are built through rituals of possession that establish unequal power relations, and the role of language in such procedures. At the same time, I have shown how language can be used to reverse colonial and slavery erasures by creating spaces of remembrance, rebellion, presence and, ultimately, agency. In this second part of the section, I will argue that the whole book can be considered as a teleological[48] project that moves towards the normative end of freedom.[49] In effect, at the beginning of the *Prologue*, Mustafa describes his life and travels as "an attempt to return to freedom" (8) and the narration itself stops once Mustafa manages to finally set himself free, killing Estebanico the slave for good. The analysis that follows is grounded in Pheng Cheah's *What is a World?*, his work on postcolonial literature as world literature that I have already outlined in the first chapter (page 48-9).

The focus of Cheah's analysis is to define what the "world" in world literature theories is. He argues that considering it only through spatial categories based on the circulation of commodities (may they be literary, human, economic etc.) confines the literary space in a "reactive position," i.e., as a mere product of transnational exchanges rather than a force of world-making.[50] On the contrary, Cheah shows that if we consider literature firstly as a temporal — and not geographical — category based on teleological time, literary works become active forces of world-making. Concretely, it means that this kind of narratives refuse the capitalist world-system established by colonialist and imperialistic projects by opposing their own "ideal images and norms" (199), e.g., precolonial oral traditions, religions, folk practices, different temporal understandings and measurements, etc. (13). Such dimension is particularly evident in postcolonial literary works, which resist imperialistic/colonial forces that, considering everything

[48] Teleology implies the existence of a universal end towards which the world is moving (Cheah 6).
[49] "Normativity refers to what ought to be." A norm is a projection of certain values or ideals onto reality in order to transform it. Norms, such as freedom, claim universal validity (Cheah 6).
[50] Cheah uses the terms "world-making" and "worldling" interchangeably. Here I will refer to "world-making" as "the normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethicopolitical horizon it opens up for the existing world," i.e., the ability of literary works to create virtual teleological worlds that can impact the understanding of our contemporary world (5). However, I will use "worldling" in the same way I used it in the first chapter, i.e., as an opening of the field of American Studies to transnational and interdisciplinary approaches.

before European conquest as "*terra nullius*," physically and culturally destroy them (8). Postcolonial literature can recuperate these worlds and inscribe them into its normative project. Their survival is fundamental for the "constitution of a larger world of humanity that is truly plural" (12). Therefore, understanding literature as a temporal category means to divert from the focus on the consequences of global circulation for the study of literature (how transnational movements impact "the production, reception and interpretation of literary texts," 3), as recent works of world literature have done (let us think of Moretti or Casanova), but to analyze its transformative character that, from within the literary field, contributes to understand and remake the real world (5).

I argue that Cheah's theory of literature as a force of world-making can be applied to *The Moor's Account* as the entire book could be read as a teleological journey towards the achievement of freedom. The recuperation of Mustafa's world and its recreation does indeed shape the whole narrative. In my analysis, I will try to answer the following questions, proposed by Cheah (214). How does the novel create alternative realities based on solidarity where postcolonial communities "can achieve self-determination by the constructive interpretation and critical mimesis of the existing world?" How does Mustafa, who initially takes part in the exploitative capitalist system, reject it and undergoes a "transformation of consciousness"? How does storytelling create new worlds through the reappropriation of other temporalities? (214)

Let us consider the structure of the book in relation to its topic. As we have seen, *The Moor's Account* is conceived as a rewriting of Cabeza de Vaca's chronicles of the Narváez expedition and a space where Mustafa, who has been prevented from testifying, can finally give his version of the events. The topic is thus the colonial exploration and conquest of La Florida. However, since the beginning it is clear that the narration deals more with Mustafa's personal growth and journey towards self-determination through his condition of slave and the adventures in America rather than with the simple recount — however in postcolonial terms — of the expedition. It is a narration that springs from an historical account of events that have really occurred and from historical figures, but that distances itself from them as it creates a possible alternative world in which people who have undergone processes of colonization and/or oppression can reaffirm their own world (of lost traditions, family ties, names, identities, etc.). His character is not relegated to the margins as "el negro alarabe" ("the black Arab") in Cabeza de Vaca's chronicles is, but

he is an all-round man, with his beliefs, his weaknesses, his curiosity, his struggles and his joys. The whole narration can be read as an attempt to give Mustafa back his humanity, to set him, and, by extension, the other subaltern voices free from the rows of possessions of their masters.

The first half of the book is built upon a contrapuntal structure in which chapters about the Narváez expedition are interrupted by stories of Mustafa's past in Azemmur and in Seville and even chapters set in America are fraught with resurfacing memories. Here we get to know the details of his life, from birth to adulthood and the first period of his slavery. His ill-fated expedition in La Florida, which has granted him a place — albeit marginal — in history as the first black and Arab explorer of America, is only a part of his life and thus it does not occupy the entire book. In fact, we are immediately projected into Mustafa's world: *The Moor's Account* is conceived as a book by an Arab for an Arab audience (Lalami "Interview"), a book that is shaped by a non-dominant/alternative perspective, understanding of the world, cultural and religious heritage. His use of Arabic for places, measurements, or expressions that Arabs or Muslims immediately recognize[51] and of the Hegira calendar (Lalami "Interview") does set the foundations for the recuperation of a world that refuses European colonialism and its destructive structures. In effect, by employing the Hegira calendar, Mustafa affirms an alternative understanding of temporality while taking over Cabeza de Vaca's historical time. This choice is especially relevant if we think of the origin of the calendar itself, which was created after the migration of the first Muslims who were forced to leave Mecca because of religious persecution. In fact, the Islamic calendar does combine the significance of this religious and historical migration with the ideals of freedom and right to life against oppression and violence (Rowther 263). Using the Hegira calendar brings both an affirmation of Mustafa's identity as a Muslim and of a journey towards liberty as the normative force of

[51] These expressions are particularly important as they heavily shape the whole narrative and help creating Mustafa's alternative world. A few examples follow. The already mentioned first two verses of the Quran and the *Salawat* ("blessings be on *our* prophet Muhammad") and the expression "our Messenger" referred to Muhammad; the expression "this servant of God" when Mustafa refers to himself, which is typical in Islamic writings; the word "wallahi" (roughly translated as "I promise by God that what I say it's true"); the expressions "God willing" (translation of *In sha' Allah*), "praise be to God" (translation of *alhamdullillah*) and "God is Great" (translation of *Allahu Akhbar*); the expression "All-Knowing," one of the 99 names of Allah; the mentioning of Islamic scholars, etc. All these elements are still used by Muslims all over the world (even by non-Arabic speakers) and are immediately recognizable.

the alternative world created in *The Moor's Account* — a literary world that does indeed reflect Cheah's understanding of literature in teleological terms.

Orality and writing as vehicles of cultural and religious heritage are another element that play an important role in shaping Mustafa's world. As Rowther remarks, Mustafa embodies the duality of these two means. On one side, there is writing, embodied by his father Mohammed, a skill that he learns at the notary school where he spends years studying how to write legal recordings to follow his father's steps. On the other side, there is orality, represented by his mother Heniya, that shapes Mustafa's imagination through stories and tales. Fascinated since childhood by the *souq*, Mustafa rejects both of them and decides to become a merchant. His decision to buy three slaves and resell them to the Portuguese marks his participation in the capitalist system. In fact, Mustafa lets the prospect of high and easy profits seduce him and ignores his morals and Islamic teachings ("I opened my mouth, but instead of an admonition to release these men from bondage, out came a price," 68). In retrospect, he says:

> I felt that I had finally realized my dream, that I had become exactly the sort of man I wanted, a man of means and power, a man whose contracts were recorded by flattering notaries. But as time went on, I fell for the magic of numbers and the allure of profit. I was preoccupied only with the price of things and neglected to consider their value. So long as I managed to sell at a higher price, it no longer mattered to me what it was I sold, whether glass or grain, wax or weapons, or even, I am ashamed to say, especially in consideration of my later fate—slaves. (67)

The narrative presents the participation in slavery as the beginning of Mustafa's downfall. In fact, he understands his mistake in the hardest way, by witnessing his own bondage, Ramatullai's and his fellow slaves' in Seville, the enslavement of locals at the beginning of the Narváez colonial enterprise, before the Castilians went through almost complete annihilation, slavery again within some of the indigenous tribes and its threat when the Castilians in Mexico City shared their plan to enslave the natives for manpower. That mistake is painfully brought back several times in the book, as a constant reminder of its evilness ("I had once traded in slaves. I had sent three men into a life of bondage, without pausing to consider my role in this evil," 54; "One day you could be selling slaves, the

next you could be sold as a slave," 111; "I had passed [the slaves] and gone about my business […]. Later, out of sheer greed for more gold, I had sold slaves myself. But now it was I on the auction block, while, in the distance, people went about their business without giving me a second look," 117). In particular, towards the end of the book, the viceroy, Antonio de Mendoza, sends him, his pregnant wife and some other *conquistadores* on a mission to find the "Seven Cities," a mythical place abundant with gold. Mustafa reflects:

> Mendoza had all the gold of Tenochtitlán, I thought, and yet he wanted more. In my younger years, such greed would have seemed ordinary to me, desirable even, but nowadays I found it only distasteful and destructive. It was greed that had led me to leave the notary's life for the trader's life, it was greed that had convinced me to sell men into slavery. (313)

His own experience as a slave, which led him to this extraordinary journey — almost a redemptive one —, comes to conclusion only here, at the very end of the book, when the overlapping of storytelling and freedom becomes most evident. Mustafa, on his "Seven Cities" mission, skillfully manages to get rid of most of his companions and to convince the others to let him and his wife go before them to the next town, finally setting himself free from the Castilians ("At last, I was free […]. And my involvement with the empire was finally over," 331). When he and his wife reach the settlement, Mustafa knows he has to find a way to maintain his newfound freedom since the Castilians were bound to reach the town and rejoin him there. When he meets the cacique Ahku, he explains to him that there is only one way to stop the Castilians from attacking their settlement:

> I explained […] that his only means of salvation was to create a fiction.
> A story?, Ahku asked.
> Yes, I replied. Send a group of men, some bearing injuries of battle […]. They can tell [the Castilians] that [Ahku's tribe] killed Estebanico.
> […]
> What if the white m[e]n […] do not believe your story? Ahku asked.
> [They] will, I said, if the messengers know how to tell it. (334-5)

With this ruse, Mustafa manages to break his bondage once for all: “Estebanico would be laid to rest. But Mustafa would remain, free to live a life of his choosing” (335). This passage shows the ultimate power of storytelling and its affirmative character. If language can be used as a colonial/imperialist tool to subjugate people, to destroy identities and traditions, to erase differences and presence, it can also be employed as a creative force to save lives, gain freedom, preserve heritages. In this last passage, Heniya’s orality converges with Mohammad’s writing. In fact, Mustafa uses his mother’s skills as a storyteller to create a tale, the tale of Estebanico’s death, and his father’s mastery of writing to fix it on the page. These two forces converge to affirm silenced identities and project them into a future of liberty.

> What story should I tell our child? she asked. I remembered the stories my mother had told me so often when I was a young boy. I had taken them with me when I crossed the Ocean of Fog and Darkness. I had fed on them in the terrible years of deprivation and I had used them to find my way whenever I was lost. I told them when I needed comfort or when I wanted to give it to others. The words pressed themselves against my lips now, begging to come out. I wanted to tell a story to my child, so that he might share the joy or the pain it contained, that he might learn something from it, that he might tell it after my death or after his mother’s death, even if only to pass the time. I wanted to tell him a story that he might remember me.
>
> Above all, he would learn not to put his life in the hands of another man. (335)

The teleological project has been successful; the normative end of freedom has been achieved. The world that Mustafa has created through his writing has been filled not only with the testimony concerning his own fate, his identity and humanity, his traditions, temporality, but it has included his fellow slaves’ and the American natives’. This world is one of heterogeneity, multiplicities; it is made of pluralities and plurals: tradition*s*, language*s*, culture*s*, individualiti*es*, and ultimately — and many most importantly— stori*es*.

> In this relation I tried to tell the story of what really happened […] The servants of the Spanish empire have given a different story […]. The Indians with whom I lived for eight years, each one of them, each one of thousands, have told yet other stories. […] Maybe if our experiences, in all of their glorious, magnificent colors, were somehow added up, they would lead us to the blinding light of the truth. (336)

In this section I have opened the discussion about *The Moor's Account* by focusing on two aspects of the book. Firstly, I have tried to outline how dominant/subaltern relations are established through specific rituals in contexts of enslavement and colonization and how these positions can be subverted. In particular, I have stressed the importance of names and acts of renaming as means of both oppression and affirmation of identities. I have shown how storytelling can be employed as counter-hegemonic tool to give space to individualities that have been firstly silenced and then erased by history or official recounts, as Cabeza de Vaca did. Secondly, I have inscribed Mustafa's story into a larger teleological project of freedom achievement. Following Pheng Cheah's theory of postcolonial narratives, I have highlighted the aspects of *The Moor's Account* that converge to create an alternative world in which the recognition and affirmation of non-dominant identities, temporalities, geographies, traditions, religions, languages, cultures play an essential role. There can be no freedom, nor truth, if there is only one voice, one story. To the singularity of colonization and slavery, Mustafa opposes the necessity of plurality, of different presences, lives, heritages that deserve to be remembered and told. Here lies the power of words, language and storytelling as an active (and not reactive) means of rebellion, self-determination and transformation for all of those who have been told that their subaltern voices *no cuentan*.

## 2.3. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* as a work that opens the concept of America and Americanness to transnational and pluralistic understandings. The book shows continuity with the latest developments of Arab American literary productions that focus both on a critique of mainstream representation of America as a white, Christian and Western nation with clear boundaries and borders and on the re-elaboration of Arab American identity as inextricably tied to the US context rather than an experience of Arabness abroad. Such approach upholds an understanding of identity as a process rather than a static way of being, as a constant journey of negotiation that is mostly evident in Mustafa's narrative of self-determination. The book opposes processes of identity flattening that characterize assimilationist politics as well as slavery and colonialism with a constant re-elaboration of the self through transregional mobility and encounters. *The Moor's Account* overturns exotic and unfamiliar images of otherness by showing how these identities have been part of America, way before its creation as a nation. In fact, Mustafa's power lies in his abilities of storytelling that give a voice to all those who have been silenced and erased. Although its main focus is Mustafa's own cultural, religious and ethnic heritage, his narration creates a space for other subaltern voices who have been marginalized and forgotten by Eurocentric narrations and history. In particular, Mustafa's testimony is understood as a correction of Cabeza de Vaca's recount of the Narváez expedition, as a narrative that, through the affirmation of non-essentialist presences and heritages, opposes to the erasure of subalternity. Moreover, freedom from marginality that colonialism and enslavement impose on non-dominant individualities, together with the affirmation of alternative temporalities, cultures, lifestyles, and traditions, positions *The Moor's Account* into a broader world literature perspective. In fact, the book presents that clear anti-racist, anti-imperial, pluralist and egalitarian bent essential to restructure the field of (American) literature as well as our global world. In effect, if we consider *The Moor's Account* together with Lalami's *Conditional Citizens*, her latest book on belonging in America, the ethical and political standpoint of the author clearly emerges. As Markha Valenta suggested, it has become desirable — if not necessary — to converge the scholar and the citizen in an effort to

integrate literature with concrete social and political activism — and such overlap is most evident in minority authors such as Lalami.

The last part of the chapter, I have analyzed how Lalami's historically grounded narrative explicitly counteracts one of the most powerful traditional formations upon which the notion of Americanness is built, the 'discovery myth'. The character of Mustafa shows how America was not a 'New World' nor it was 'discovered,' and how its image as *terra nullius* is the result of violent repression and of xenophobic discourses. The elaboration of such myth is thus subordinated to political interests that see in the creation of a homogenic past a source of national unity and stability. Works such as *The Moor's Account* expose the fictiveness of those hegemonic discourses and call into question the validity of traditional literary canons.

By choosing to write the story of the first black Arab to explore America, Lalami embarks on a project of deconstruction of those cultural formations that have determined the perception of Americanness from its very origins. Claiming the necessity and the validity of multiple stories and voices to disassemble this monolithic national construction shows how Lalami's book is an important example of that worldling of American literature that I have discussed in the first chapter.

# Chapter Three
# VIET THANH NGUYEN'S *THE SYMPATHIZER*

"As Hegel said, tragedy was not the conflict between right and wrong but right and right, a dilemma none of us who wanted to participate in history could escape."
(*The Sympathizer*, 102)

"We have nothing to leave to anyone except these words, our best attempt to represent ourselves against those who sought to represent us."
(*The Sympathizer*, 346)

In this chapter I will focus on Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and its contribution to the debate outlined in the previous pages. Firstly, I will give an overview of the Asian American context to which his work belongs, with a time span ranging from early Asian American presence in the US towards the end of the 18th century till today. In particular, I will focus on issues politics and racial discrimination that have so profoundly shaped the creation of the Asian American literary canon. I will conclude this first section with an outline of Vietnamese American literature and its latest developments in relation to Asian American literature. I will then dedicate the rest of the chapter to the analysis of the novel.

After having provided a short summary and a general introduction to the novel, I will proceed with my analysis. Firstly, I will focus on issues of cultural, ethnic and political hybridity and representation. In particular, I will argue that the in-betweenness and duality that mark the Sympathizer as well as the novel are a firm stand against discourses of essentialization that characterize both American and Vietnamese societies. I will dedicate a consistent part of the analysis to the critique moved against Hollywood as a memory industry that manipulates history in order to pursue its political means. In this first part of the analysis, I will show how the transnational dimension of the novel, primarily embodied by the Sympathizer himself, is a fundamental tool to criticize

American traditional discourses and to, hopefully, move towards a more ethical direction as a society as well as in the literary field.

In the second part of my analysis, I will focus on the tropes of remembrance and forgetfulness in the production of memory. I will consider the re-education process that the Sympathizer has to go through in the communist camp as a moment of personal as well as historical accountability. In fact, although this last part of the novel is more explicitly addressed to a Vietnamese audience, it also a powerful reflection on the intrinsic inhumanity of war. Against misrepresentation and historical forgetfulness, Nguyen proposes an ethical memory that goes beyond sympathy and towards concrete action.

*The Sympathizer* undermines essentialized understandings of Americanness and denounces monolithic representations of the "Other" as means to perpetuate unjust power relations. Abandoning America for the Philippines and then Vietnam, *The Sympathizer* is a powerful example of worldling, of opening the narration to transnational perspectives that, through the exposure of US imperial power on a global scale, reveals the contradictions of American society and its cultural productions.

## 3.1. Asian America

### Historical Context

As for Arabs, Asians have been living in the US before its establishment as a nation. The second half of the 1700s was characterized by the first migrations of Asians towards America, which would turn into wide and stable communities during the 19th and the 20th century. In fact, the first traces of Asian presence on American soil date back to 1763, when Filipino sailors, working for the Spanish in the Manila trade, landed in Louisiana and established the first Asian settlement, St. Malo. In 1851, records of celebration of US independence in the Fourth of July parade report the participation of Indians — the descendants of a group of slaves who were freed from their bondage in the British colonies sixty years before (Song and Srikanth 6). Finally, after the establishment of US-China trade (1784), Chinese goods as well as migrants started to move to the United States (Parinkh XV).

In spite of these early communities, it is in the mid-19th century that the first mass migrations towards the US took place, firstly of Chinese people who joined the 1849 California Gold Rush and were shortly followed by Japanese. As Ronald Takaki remarks in his seminal work *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1989), when Walt Whitman celebrated all those who contributed to the colonization of western deserts through the establishment of the transcontinental railroad, factories and farms, Asians made up a significant number of that workforce (4). Upon their arrival to the US (particularly in California through Angel Island), not only did Chinese people find themselves excluded from the right of citizenship,[52] but they were also heavily exploited and discriminated. Although the majority of people in California was composed of migrants, popular racist theories of the time considered them not voluntary immigrants but slaves, casting them into an inferior category of people (Waxman). These xenophobic practices culminated firstly in the Chinese massacre of 1871, in which 17 men were brutally beaten and hanged

[52] As already discussed in Chapter Two, in the mid 18th century the Naturalization Act — which granted citizenship to free white men — was still in effect.

by a group of whites and Hispanics (Johnson), and then formalized in anti-Asian laws. Although scholars usually refer to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as the first legal measurement against Chinese ("Ulysses"), it was the Page Act of 1875 that lay the foundations of lawful discrimination against Asians. The Act, which is addressed to "any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country," but that was specifically thought for Chinese, forbade "the importation into the United States of women for the purposes of prostitution" and imposed the limitation of "coolie" labor (477). This law took its name after rep. Horace Page who intended to "end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women" through law enforcement (Peffer 28). While the Page Act failed to contain immigration of Chinese men, it did prevent women from reaching the US shores. In fact, between 1876 and 1882, there was a drop of 68% in the number of Chinese female migrants, compared to the previous seven-year period (29).

The Act is important because it intertwines ethnic exclusion with hyper-sexualization of Chinese (and in general Asian) women and it confirms and exacerbates the stereotype of the "Oriental" female as subservient and a seductress. As a consequence, it creates a narrative that inevitably leads to violence, hate crimes and discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans, still pervasive today (De Leon and Li 00:02:20-28). In fact, in the recent Atlanta shootings (03/16/2021), where eight people were killed, the perpetrator claimed that his act was motivated by a sex addiction ("it [was] a temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate") and it was not a racially based crime (00:01:06-22). However, six out of eight victims were Asian women. As the video journalist and filmmaker Dolly Li remarks, this crime shows a clear association between a sexual addiction and Asian bodies (Asian fetish) that cannot be separated from racial stigmatization (00:01:26-36). Such connection is rooted in representation of Asian women, specifically in fantasies that white men have about them that can be found in works such as *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti (1887), *Madame Butterfly* by John Luther Long (1898), or Puccini's *Madama Butterfy* (1904). Asian bodies, as well as Middle-Eastern and North African ones, are subjected to the same mechanism of otherization, which Edward Said has famously described in his already-cited *Orientalism*. Oriental bodies are understood in opposition to the West: "if the West is strong, the East is weak; if the West is rational, the East is irrational; if the West is masculine, the East is feminine." This last binary opposition does not only affect Asian women, but also men

who are considered feminine and therefore emasculated and, for that reason, have been given works in the domestic field, traditionally considered a female domain (00:02:48-00:04:41).[53] The influence of Orientalism in the creation of stereotypes against people of Asian descent follows the same pattern of otherization described in the previous chapters, in which Westerners are the positive standard and the rest is an exotic, inferior category and ultimately a threat. Such binary opposition is fundamental in keeping a firm image of ethnic communities as perpetual foreigners.[54]

The stigmatization of the Asian American community has commonly revolved around two stereotypes: the "yellow peril" and the "model minority." The first one dates back to the mid-18th century and identifies East Asians with "dishonesty, disease, invasion, as well as cultural and political inferiority" and filth; it depicts them as "primitive and savage" (Del Visco 1, 7). Although the term became popular after Wilhelm II used it to refer to the threat of Asian expansion in Europe and it was used by Russia to express its own fears about Chinese and Japanese increasingly strong military and economic power, discourses marked by the "yellow peril" trope can be found as early as in medieval Europe's preoccupation with Genghis Khan's imperial conquests (3). Such depictions of Asians are therefore not unique to the US, being already present in European history, and have now become part of "a global racialization process." Strong anti-Asian discourses based on the "yellow peril" trope had their peak during the first Chinese mass migration and throughout the Cold War period (2) and they generally resurface during times of crisis (Li and Nicholson 4), as the rise in hate crimes against Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown. Another example that demonstrates how the use of the "yellow peril" trope is pervasive in times of crisis is the murder of Vincent Chin. In 1982, the convergence of a raise in unemployment caused by the recession of American auto

[53] Interestingly, in *The Sympathizer* there is a character, named James Yoon, that shows the association of Asians with emasculated domesticity. Described as "the Asian Everyman, a television actor whose face most people know but whose name they could not recall," he is the passe-partout character that can "assume the mask of any Asian ethnicity." Despite his many roles on television, Yoon is mostly remembered for a dishwasher soap commercial. Here, he offers different housewives "not his manhood but his ever-ready bottle of Sheen [the soap]" (153).

[54] An example of such juxtapositions is present in *The Sympathizer* when the Narrator is asked by a university professor to make a chart of binary oppositions between the West and the East — a passage I will discuss it in the following section.

industry with the increase in Japanese auto manufacturers in the US led to a raise in anti-Japanese sentiments. Such widespread discontent resulted in hate crimes such as the killing of Chin — who was not even of Japanese descent, but a Chinese American (Wang).

The second stereotype that affects the Asian American community is the "model minority," i.e., the "Asian American ability to be good citizen, productive worker, reliable consumer, and member of a niche lifestyle suitable for capitalist exploitation" (Nguyen "Race" 10). In particular, this trope revolves around the idea that Asian Americans' economic success is a result of their own culture of hard work, "self-sufficiency and up-by-the-bootstraps pragmatism" without governmental aids. Such culture extends to children of Asian immigrants who, especially in the 1980s, started to be praised in newspapers for their excellent performances in schools and universities (Song and Srikanth 15). This stereotype is not only detrimental to other Asians (South and South-East Asians) but also to other minority groups, such as Blacks, Hispanics, and Natives, because it creates a hierarchy among them and reinforces the idea of "good" and "bad" immigrant based on racial categories (Li and Nicholson 4). Only apparently in contrast with the "yellow peril," the "model minority" stereotype does reinforce the status of Asian Americans as unassimilable foreigners and maintains the mainstream perception of them as perpetual others (5).

**Literary History and Canon**

Discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans has been met with criticism from the beginning of the Chinese mass migrations in the mid 18th century, as Chinese American writer and Yale-educated Yan Phou Lee's works show. In fact, in an article in the *North American Review* he commented that the US was "depart[ing] from its high ideal" of equality and from its "manifest destiny of being the teacher and leader of nations in liberty" (Takaki 4) Appealing to American principles or to the Founding Fathers to delegitimize discriminatory and exclusionary practices was already common among Asian Americans and, although Lee was largely ignored, protests by Asian Americans did not cease to ask for equal rights in a land they felt they belonged to (5). In this perspective, serving during the Second World War constituted an important moment in Asian American history because it set a glaring precedent of Asian allegiance to the US, especially if considered that at the time several families of Japanese American soldiers were being imprisoned in concentration camps authorized by the US government (6).

The raise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the protests for racial and social equality led to the abolishment of national-origins restrictions on migration and allowed new flows of Asians to the US. It is indeed in this political climate that the term "Asian American" was coined. The first ethnic groups to take part in the struggle were East Asians (Chinese, Koreans and Japanese) and Filipinos, who were later joined by Southeast Asians, South Asians and West Asians. In spite of counteracting their marginality in US history, politics, literature and cultures, at the time the community itself tended to draw clear internal boundaries, excluding the members of the last group. However, as new flows of migrants from South Asia and Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos arrived, these boundaries started to be challenged. Literature was one of the ways they used to reclaim both full recognition as active members of the US and of their contributions to the country (Song and Srikanth 2, 5).

Political concerns were thus put at the center of Asian American literary production, which, shying from the conception of art for art's sake, was firmly intertwined with struggles for social justice. It does not come as a surprise, then, that, in the delineation of a specific Asian American canon, literary critics of the time pointed out Edith Eaton (who published as Sui Sin Far) as the primogenitor of Asian American

literature (end of the 18th and beginning 19th century), while her more popular sister Winnifred (Onoto Watanna) was largely ignored. In fact, although both of them were Chinese-English raised in Canada and working in the US, only the former did publicly recognize her lineage "at a time when being Chinese was literally criminal," while the latter opted for a fictional Japanese identity. Intertwining literature with political activism was the most important character considered during the creation of a canon in the 1960s and 1970s and it still shapes the work of Asian intellectuals. In fact, in contrast to what the scholarship post-1968 considered Winnifred's opportunistic decision, Edith's choice was seen as heroic, authentic and in line with their values of resistance and rebellion to mainstream stereotypical representation of Asian Americans. Following this line, although her works have been recovered and critically re-analyzed by more recent scholarship, Winnifred's novels were read as a confirm rather than a distancing from that stereotypical depiction of Asians as exotic and foreign (Nguyen 33-4).

The first attempts at selecting an Asian American literary canon were thus characterized by a tension between literary creation and the broader context of Asian American struggles as a minority in a nation that had always been hostile towards them, and it focused on productions aligned with the community's endeavor to go against the grain of dominant discourses of the time. In their effort to counteract mainstream representations of the Asian American community, these writers resorted to prose (Maxine Hong Kingstone, Frank Chin, Milton Murayama, or Le Ly Hayslip) and poetry (Arthur Sze, Meena Alexander, Mitsuye Yamada, Marilyin Chin, Erik Chock or Julie Otsuka) but also to different kinds of literary forms, such as theater (Wakako Yamauchi, Frank Chin, Hiroshi Kashiwagi, Edward Sakamoto, and later David Henry Hwang) and music (most notably, Chris Iijima's influential folk group *The Yellow Pearl*/*A Grain of Sand*) (Song and Srikanth 3-4).

In their literary production, they sought, on one side, to establish their literature and give it a specific shape, and on the other side, to influence and reshape American tradition (Song and Srikanth 5). However, even though they did contribute to the building of the US and in its history as well as society, Asian American writers were hardly recognized, and their literature did not feature in the dominant US tradition (6). The denounce of such erasure and a clear claim for recognition have been at the center of the landmark anthology *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* of 1972. In fact,

the introduction/literary manifesto written by Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Hsu Wong targeted American racism and exclusion against an ethnic group that was still othered after seven generations living in the US. Moreover, it exposed the "self-contempt and self-rejection" caused by internalized racism inside the Asian American community, against which they opposed a "whole voice" that talks back to racial stereotyping and exclusion (6-8). Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) are inscribed in such effort. In particular, Maxine Hong Kingston's work starkly opposed the masculinist bent of that "whole voice," that, in the effort of overturning the stereotype of effeminate Asian men (the emasculation mentioned above), characterized several writers of the time, Chin included. *The Woman Warrior* was in this sense a pivotal book, since it gave birth to a sharp exchange between Hong Kingston and Chin — one of the most important debates in Asian American literature. In effect, Frank Chin accused Hong Kingston of confirming Western stereotypes about Asians by portraying women as victims of patriarchy and by presenting Asian culture in exoticized ways, but she remained steadfast in her denounce of sexism within the community and the empowerment of women "in her own family and in Chinese mythology." *The Woman Warrior* has also been a landmark book because it has established a dialogue between mainstream and ethnic feminist writers (9).

As said above, Asian American literature as well as Asian Studies were established as a tradition in the 1970s and its canon comprehended authors who wrote before the heyday of the socio-political unrests of the 1960s. Works such as Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912), Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1946), and John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) were selected as prime examples of this newly formed tradition. These works were characterized by common themes and concerns: they are all highly politicized, they engage with racial difference, injustices, identity, and above all stress the importance of resistance, of belonging to America and challenged the meaning of America itself (Song and Srikanth 11, 14).

The politicization of Asian American literature and the consequent construction of a canon that ignored important writers is addressed by Viet Thanh Nguyen in *Race and Resistance* (2002). In this seminal essay, Nguyen argues that, after 1968, Asian American literary critics and Asian American studies have manufactured a specific Asian American

racial identity around the concept of political resistance to capitalist exploitation. Although Asian American literature has always reflected historical and political preoccupations of Asian Americans, its critical interpretation by intellectuals has tended to be compliant with the image that the academia itself sought to propose about Asian America, rather than the one really put forth in literary texts. However, such unified reception of Asian American literature clashes with the diversity of its works and it is in contradiction with academics' own participation in the commodification of racial identities — a practice that what Yen Le Espiritu has defined "panethnic entrepreneurship" (3-4).[55]

Although capitalistic exploitation of race has led to social and political fights for equality, it has also resulted in the commodification of the very concept of race. Simply put, Asian American intellectuals (artists, activists, academics, critics) build their own work on racial identity as a form of resistance to capitalist exploitation but at the same time it is precisely such endeavor that makes them active participants in capitalism through the accumulation of symbolic capital (5).[56] Therefore, the construction of a unified Asian American identity, conceived as an anti-capitalist struggle against race exploitation, has created the conditions for Asian Americans to join the American political panorama, but it has also reified Asian American identity and culture both into "a commodity and a market." The problem, according to Nguyen, is not so much the participation in global capitalism but the disavowal, on the part of Asian American intellectuals, of their panethnic entrepreneurship and the consequent organization of Asian American literature into works either of resistance (celebrated and canonized) or accommodation (condemned and ignored). The exclusion of Onoto Watanna from the canon is to be read through this lens: because her work is seen as accommodating whites' expectations about Oriental landscapes and bodies, and thus failing to reflect the political agenda of resistance that the academia has adhered to, it has gone largely ignored (4-7).

[55] "Panethnic entrepreneurship is a product of the dialectical relationship between a capitalism that exploits race and the democratic struggles that have fought for greater racial and economic equality. The entire concept of panethnic entrepreneurship, with its basis in race as a product or function of economic capital and its connotations of "selling out," is antithetical to Asian American academia specifically and to Asian American intellectuals generally." (Nguyen "Race" 4-5).

[56] The concept of symbolic capital comes from Pierre Bourdieu and it refers to those social aspects such as prestige or authority which eventually generate economic benefits.

The contradiction lies in the fact that, according to Nguyen, academics have built Asian American studies on the criticism of the capitalization of race through the concept of resistance, but at the same time it is their participation in the racialization of Asian America through their panethnic entrepreneurial practice that grants their own survival within the academia.

As Nguyen suggests, Asian American studies should now "confront Asian American populations that find in this racialized capitalism a positive form of cultural exploitation" and, in particular, the existence of forms of consensus to dominant/hegemonic politics. Moreover, the connection between the raise of political pluralism and multiculturalism after the 1970s that "celebrated minority racial identities" and racialized capitalism is still to be explored. In fact, it is through the political representation of race that "racial identity has become a cultural icon and commodity in the marketplace of multiculturalism" and that the stereotype of the "model minority" has been created (10). Although such representation of Asian American communities is built in opposition to the "yellow peril," it still perpetrates the idea of Asian America as a uniform entity that can be easily classified through monolithic stereotypes. In selecting a canon that does only comprehend works of anti-capitalist resistance, Asian American intellectuals have presented a homogeneous literary panorama, which, however, is often in contradiction with that part of Asian America that supports the dominant body politic (11).

The rigidity of Asian American literary critics thus does not reflect the variety of strategies used by authors in their own works. In fact, the social, political and racial dimensions considered in Asian American texts are explored through "flexible strategies" that are difficult to be read as either examples of resistance or accommodation to American racism. What Asian American intellectuals refuse to acknowledge is thus an "ideological heterogeneity of the Asian American body politic," which is reflected in literary strategy that vary greatly from author to author. If this rigidity has allowed the creation of "Asian America" as a "diverse but unified" space "engaged in a struggle for racial equality" — which is a truism —, it has however insisted on the existence of shared "methods and ideologies" and on a clear definition of "equality," which is however debatable. Moreover, as the controversy over *Miss Saigon* and *Blue's Hanging* has

shown,[57] the unified representation of Asian America crumbles when interethnic — rather than racial — discrimination is at stake (9). Indeed, the field is not exempt from hegemonic power relations, as its domination by Chinese and Japanese Americans has shown.

It is for these reasons that the early formation of Asian American canon ignored all the writers who did not conform to specific political views, such as the already mentioned Onoto Watanna/Winnifred Eaton, Monica Sone, Jade Snow Wong, Chin Yang Lee, Amy Tan or Bharati Mukherjee (17). Once the Asian American canon gained critical attention and entered the academia, it started to be criticized for its narrow selection of authors. Debates about the nature of Asian American literature among scholars who urged a rethinking of the entire canon became widespread. Questions about the meaning of Asian American literature, to whom Asian America belongs, the independence of the literary from the political, the textual forms, even about the very term Asian American,[58] the relationship and distance between past and present contributions, started to be raised. In particular, as works such as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* (1991), Chang Rae-Lee's *Native Son* (1995), Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of the Maladies* (1999), gained mainstream attention both by Asian American and American audiences, the debate around such question became more and more urgent.

These works show both coherence and distance from their predecessors. For example, Chang Rae-Lee continues to discuss themes of belonging or the importance of claiming one's voice, but he also shows refrain from political commitment and community belonging. Other authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, who spearheads the post-1968 generation of Asian American writers, do not feel the need to prove their Americanness — and in effect this is felt by many others, Nguyen included ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History") — while at the same time they tend to adhere to a sense of cosmopolitanism. Lahiri detaches herself from previous writers such as John Okada, who saw the first generation of immigrants with "pity and disgust," to which she opposes admiration and

[57] The two works move a harsh critique against communities belonging to Asian America, namely Japanese and Filipino. The depictions of the two ethnicities have sparkled a huge debate, as Nguyen explains in the introduction of his *Nothing Ever Dies*.

[58] Such question is relevant for Nguyen, who addresses it in its critic of political pluralism that I will outline in the next pages.

wonder. In general, more contemporary writers still engage with themes that were dear the earlier authors, but often distance themselves from them in many ways that are too personal to be generalized (18-21). However, what more contemporary writers seem to have in common is a re-elaboration of the perpetual foreignness they have been identified with. Resisting its negative connotation, Asian Americans have started to position themselves as mediators between the US and the rest of the world, in order to encourage a transnational approach that can lead the US to "break free from its insularity and engage with the global community in meaningful and transformative ways," especially emphasized in the critique of US imperialism and its capitalistic model (22). Moreover, they are "more comfortably bicultural and/or biracial," and thus more oriented towards transnationality. Their works are conceived as a dialogue (content- and form-wise) between Western and non-Western heritages, but they present themselves as "autonomous writers, beholden to no coercions — neither those of the mainstream audience and publishing industry nor of the Asian American political or ethnic communities" (34). Such tendency is clear in Viet Thanh Nguyen's work, which is indeed characterized not so much by a struggle for recognition of Asian Americans but as a re-reading of American involvement beyond its borders and a reflection upon its historical and political responsibilities.

**Vietnamese American Literature**

Before closing this section, I would like to offer a brief insight into Vietnamese American literature, since Viet Thanh Nguyen's works are inscribed both in this and in Asian American literary contexts. The Vietnam War has and still plays a huge role in American national culture, and it has often been the object of works of literature, of movies, documentaries, pieces of art and popular culture. However, the depiction as well as the experiences of the war have been mainly provided by mainstream American authors rather than by Vietnamese Americans. As a consequence, the war has been treated as a "surreal backdrop to a US psychic wound," rather than an acknowledgment of Vietnamese experiences and trauma. In earlier writings (from 1960s till the late 20th century), such focus on American perspectives that resulted in Vietnamese invisibility has been contrasted with works that reclaimed Vietnamese points of view and experiences. These texts engaged in sharp criticism both towards South Vietnamese and Americans and at the same time they sought to redefine Vietnam beyond the military conflict. From the end of the 20th century, Vietnamese American literature has tried to convert the negatively marked figure of the "gook" into the positively-connotated "critical refugee." From the 1995 (with the establishment of diplomatic relations between US and Vietnam) authors have started to focus on different themes such as US racial categories, capitalistic economy, popular culture and a redefinition and critique of hegemonic literary forms and identities with a clear transnational bent. Moreover, Vietnamese American literature is entering the realm of mainstream with, for example, Viet Thanh Nguyen winning the Pulitzer Price in 2015 (Janette 1-3).

The first generation of Vietnamese American literature written in English was spearheaded by Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai ("Electioneering Vietnamese Style," 1962) and Tran Van Dinh (*No Passenger on the River*, 1965), who specifically addressed their work to the American public and were mainly concerned with contemporary historical events in Vietnam (the war, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, etc.). These works, as well as the Vietnamese American memoirs published between the 1970s and 1980s, were written in hopeful tones that focused on reconciliation, dialogue, and healing from the traumatic experience of the war. In particular, this kind of texts stemmed from the need to overturn the image, in Americans' imaginary, of Vietnamese people as Vietcong, as dangerous

enemies and invaders. On the contrary, Vietnamese American literature of the same period written in Vietnamese was fraught with "wrath and anger" and starkly denounced American involvement. In this perspective, early Vietnamese American writings in English were aligned with Asian American literary efforts to break stereotypical images and false prejudices that affected Asian Americans' daily lives (Janette 7).

As Michele Janette points out in her essay, the 1.5 (born in Vietnam but raised in the US, like Viet Thanh Nguyen) and second-generation Vietnamese Americans of the 21st century are still concerned with their own (direct or indirect) experiences of the war, but they are also literary professionals who engage with American mainstream or canonized literature — which is in effect the case of Nguyen. Their production is very heterogeneous both geographically and genre-wise, including "traditional novel (Bich Minh Nguyen, Dao Strom), experimental fiction (Monique Truong, Quan Barry, Dao Strom), children's picture books (Qui Nguyen, Tran Khanh Tuyet, Huynh Quang Nhuong), adult graphic novels (G.B. Tran and Thi Bui), plays filled with rock and roll music, martial arts, and popular culture references (Qui Nguyen), mixed media combinations incorporating poetry, song, and photography (Dao Strom), historical fiction (Kien Ngueyn, Lan Cao, Nguyen Phan Que Mai), hard-boiled detective stories (Vu Tran, Andrew Lam)," but also queer fiction and story (Monique Truong, Ocean Vuong, Hieu Minh Nguyen) (10-15).

Contemporary writings have been more oriented on experiences of Vietnam reunification rather than the war, focusing on the "re-education camps" (Nguyen dedicates the last five chapters of *The Sympathizer* to this theme), on the condition of mixed-race (American and Vietnamese) children (again an important topic in *The Sympathizer*) and on the rejection of refugees by host countries (Janette 9). Vietnamese American authors have also started to discuss themes dear to traditional or contemporary American literature, such as the parent-child conflict, quest for self-discovery, critique of the "American Dream," as well queer experiences. What is more evident in Vietnamese American literature (as well as in Asian American writings) is a tendency to "expand the scope […] into transnational identity, multicultural reference, experimental form," and global American militarism (10-14).

In this section I have outlined the historical context that has characterized the development of Asian America and its literary production. I have firstly taken into

consideration important moments in the history of Asian immigration to the US, especially regarding the creation of racial stereotypes. In particular, I have discussed the "yellow peril" and the "model minority" tropes and their relationship with hate crimes and discrimination against Asian Americans. Such analysis has provided the context in which Asian American literature has developed and its understanding as a prime form of resistance against racial marginalization. For this reason, a specifically politicized Asian American canon has been established in order to support the community's struggle for social justice and to create a sense of unity in Asian America. Its literature has focused on themes of belonging, identity, visibility/invisibility, and resistance as well as accommodation to racism. In particular, Vietnamese American writers have engaged with Vietnam War and its consequences, claiming a space to discuss their own experiences. If on one side the rejection of capitalistic exploitation of race has been at the center of its canon formation, on the other side there has been a part of Asian America (especially the intellectuals) that has profited from the commodification of race that it supposedly denounced. Part of the challenge of current literary critics consists of a reshaping of the canon that takes into consideration flexible strategies (of accommodation, resistance, and everything in between) applied by authors who have however been excluded. In general, the field is moving towards a more global and transnational direction, and its very nature is being put into discussion. Questions about what is required for a work to be considered Asian American literature, about the opening of the canon to accommodation or about other strategies used by authors (apart from resistance), are becoming more and more central. Finally, as Asian American writings enter the mainstream, their relationship with the American audience needs to be further explored.

## 3.2. *The Sympathizer*

### Audience, Author, Narrator and Title

Before starting my analysis, I will briefly outline the relationship between the title of the novel, its audience, the narrator and the author, as they are elements which are strictly connected and are worth a few words before beginning my analysis. In particular, I would like to suggest in which ways *The Sympathizer* can constitute an example of worlding of American Studies.

Firstly, the book primarily addresses a Vietnamese and Vietnamese American audience (I will talk about it in the next pages) and it does assume the Vietnamese American point of view Nguyen felt was lacking in Vietnamese American novels. In particular, the author wanted to write a sharp, angry critique of the role of the US in the Vietnam War and to reject the usual position grateful and conciliatory position that I have discussed earlier in this chapter ("Viet Thanh Nguyen: Anger" 359). However, *The Sympathizer* is also conceived as being "able to function in different kinds of traditions," and "hopefully […] on an international context." Against the idea of writing the "great American novel," Nguyen proposes a work that is "more skeptical of this American way of being," and that significantly refuses "to end on a note of Americanization."[59] In this sense, Nguyen defines himself not as an American or Asian American but as a "universal writer," and in effect he lists a variety of writers as sources of his book: Adam Johnson, António Lobo Antunes, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ralph Ellison ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History"), Tiziano Terzani, Truong Nhu Tang, Huynh Sanh Thong, Tran Tri, Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh, among others ("The Sympathizer" 349). These sources, together with the plethora of intertextual reference that I will cite later, immediately position the book in a comparative perspective that takes into consideration not only works of dominant literatures, but also of those from the margins. As discussed at length in Chapter One, critics such as David Damrosch have often insisted on the

[59] In effect, Nguyen underlines that the boat people the Sympathizer joins at the end of the book are not heading off the "the promised land," the US, as it would be expected by the American audience ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History").

importance of a pluralistic as well as plurilinguistic perspective in the literary analysis. This is the approach at the very base of the composition of Nguyen's debut novel. In short, although the novel does find its place within the Asian American canon and even the American, Vietnamese and European ones, it could be argued that it does also claim a space in a broader one, the world.

Although *The Sympathizer* is not a memoir, Nguyen's personal experience and his career as an Asian American scholar in the American academia are fundamental to understand his fictional production. As he states in an interview with Gish Jen, his writing firstly originates from the necessity of sharing and discussing his own experience as a refugee from the Vietnam War. In fact, writing is a means to contrast the erasure that his and other refugee families were facing when they left Vietnam, and to reclaim the meaningfulness of their stories ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History"). A part of these experiences is channeled in the Sympathizer's own story, who presents traits in common with his author. As Nguyen himself, the Sympathizer "was born in Vietnam but made in America," since he moved there to spend his university years, and multiple times he proves that, again as Nguyen, he "count[s] [him]self among those Vietnamese dismayed by America's deeds but tempted to believe in its words" ("Nothing" 42). Although not always credible,[60] his Americanness is a prominent trait of his personality and the struggle between his attraction to the US, his Vietnamese origins and his adherence to communism is meant to partly reflect the Asian American experience of duality. In this way, the entire novel encompasses a marked transnational perspective about which the reader is constantly reminded. The Sympathizer shifts from one perspective to the other (American, Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, Japanese American, etc.) highlighting their contradictions as well as their positive traits. In particular, the Sympathizer seems to have the ability to make us see the contradictions as well as the injustices of "America" from outside its geopolitical boundaries. In fact, the strongest critique to the US is the whole shooting of the Auteur's film, which takes place in the Philippines, literally "abandoning America" in order to reconsider its implications in the Vietnam War as well as its role in cultural imperialism.

[60] Despite spending only his university years in the US, the Sympathizer speaks perfect English without foreign accent and is able to move within American society like a native. Such abilities, although not very realistic, are necessary to channel some of Nguyen's own experiences and remarks about US society.

As the Narrator explains oftentimes, his sympathy plays an important role in his condition of cultural, ethnic, ideological and political duality, and this is why it is referred to in the title. Sympathy is here understood as a form of "affinity," of "a sense of fellow feeling and suffering together" (Liu 543), and at the same time it has a political and ideological dimension (e.g., a communist or democratic sympathy/sympathizer). As Jing Tsu suggests, this idea is almost a "philosophical premise," a "prominent condition […] on which [Nguyen] prove[s] what it really means to live in a world that is so horrifically torn" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen: "The Sympathizer," 00:23:34). Sympathy is what prevents the Narrator to fully commit to one side, but it is also a powerful tool to contrast "polarized frames," namely "either East or West," as the Chair asks him to do (Liu 543). Moreover, it gives the Narrator that ability to move relatively easily within and between worlds. In this sense, sympathy is what makes the Narrator a good spy, but it is also presented as a useless ability if it does not have a concrete implementation. In fact, in the last chapters the Narrator is confronted with the dramatic limits of emotions and feelings when they are not channeled into concrete actions, and he is forced to admit the negligence that made him a passive spectator (but not less guilty) of the horrendous rape of his communist colleague. Another example of the limits of sympathy is the murder of the crapulent major, the innocent man that the Sympathizer points out as a spy in order to maintain his coverage. Despite the feeling of guilt, he does not do anything to protect the major and lets Bon kill him just before his house. Although the Narrator gives to the major's family some money after the funeral and half of his earnings from the job for the Auteur, his sympathy is not clear enough — and in effect the ghost of the major will haunt him for the rest of the novel.

Sympathy does not only show on the level of characters and plot, but it is also evident in the establishment of connections with other literary works within the text, as mentioned above.[61] In this regard, Caroline Rody remarks, "literary 'sympathy' becomes [in *The Sympathizer*] a kind of intertextual porosity" which engages with American and above all Asian American authors. The book is fraught with quotations and paraphrases of works by literary personalities such as T.S. Eliot, Blake, Nabokov, Ralph Ellison,

[61] Above I have mentioned the texts that Nguyen has pinpointed as his sources/inspiration for the composition of *The Sympathizer*, but which are not explicitly referred to in the novel. Here I list those authors whose works are directly quoted in the novel.

Philip Roth, Junot Díaz, Maxine Hong Kingston, Carlos Bulosan, Frank Chin, John Okada, Chang Rae Lee and the Vietnamese American filmmaker Trubh T. Minh-ha (398-400). Such elaborate network of references is both an acknowledgment of Nguyen's precursors and a clear positioning of his novel into a specific context. In fact, as he states in the interview with Gish Jen, his major in Ethnic Studies has fundamentally shaped his understanding of literary endeavors (both as a novelist and as an academic) as framed in the idea of belonging to a collectivity, of recognizing himself as a part of something, as a group in solidarity that has a lineage of resistance and of revolution ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History"). This idea of community is strictly connected with an adherence to a form of activism that begins in literature and art but that is "in conjunction with political and cultural movements" (Phan 32). The theme of political action as completing literary endeavors is, in effect, a prominent one in the novel and it mirrors the importance of translating sentiments of sympathy into interventions.

If it is true that the majority of intertextual references involves Asian American writers, the novel is also deeply rooted in the American context. The fusion of both heritages is yet another reflection of the Narrator's "sympathy" and its limits. The Narrator is the product of historical and literary contradictions, "a dislocated, refugee-immigrant subject […] [who] seeks to forge an articulate, literary "I," and who "opens [t]his uniquely porous "I" to a diverse collectivity, and the Americanness he claims is minoritized, interethnic, and clamorously defiant" (Rody 399-400), a transnational Americanness. This collective dimension becomes particularly evident in the last chapter, when the Narrator switches his pronoun from "I" to "we."[62] However, to assume such collective perspective does not mean that the Sympathizer has become a spokesperson for all Vietnamese. In fact, the entire novel is based upon the impossibility to be reduced to essentialized representations (let us think of the Sympathizer, Ms. Mori, the Vietnamese in the movie, Man/the Commissar, etc.): as Nguyen himself, he is not "giving voice to the voiceless," because "Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Americans have voices," although "Americans as a whole tend not to hear them" (359). The Sympathizer starts talking as "we," because he has embraced his inherent duality, and because he has finally taken a stand that goes beyond sympathy and actively commits to a collectivity.

[62] I will further analyze this passage later in the chapter.

Through the discussion of the literary context of *The Sympathizer*, its audience, the connection between the Narrator and the author, and the title, I have outlined those thematic threads that are important to have in mind throughout the rest of the chapter. In particular, I have shown in which ways the novel's transnational approach makes it a good example of the worldling of American literature. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the novel through the exploration of issues of duality, representation and war remembrance and forgetfulness.

**Summary**

*The Sympathizer* is Viet Thanh Nguyen's debut novel. Published in 2015 and recipient of 2016 Pulitzer Prize, it is a fictional confession written in first-person by an unnamed Narrator who is held captive by a Commandant, whose identity will be revealed at the end of the book. The protagonist is an undercover communist spy of mixed ethnicities (his mother being Vietnamese and his father French) who studied in the USA. He is a junior officer and advisor to the General, a high-ranking member of the Vietnamese intelligence who considers the Narrator among of his most trusted men. The book begins in 1975, shortly before the fall/liberation of Saigon, when the Narrator relocates with other members of the South Vietnamese army in California. Among the people who manage to reach the US there is Bon, who, together with Man, is the Narrator's best friend. Although they have grown up together and consider each other blood brothers, Bon does not know that his two best friends are communists and does genuinely believe in his democratic struggle. Before leaving for the US, Bon's wife and kid are killed during the escape. The rest of the group manages to leave Vietnam safely and it is relocated in a refugee camp in San Diego and eventually in LA.

Once in US, the Sympathizer keeps on secretly communicating with Man, who has stayed in Vietnam, while working for the General. Here, the General informs him that there is a mole among them and asks the Narrator, who points at a harmless "crapulent major," to get rid of him. A few weeks later, after having observed the major's routine for a while, Bon and the Narrator kill him. In Los Angeles, everyone finds a job: the Narrator occupies a clerical position for a professor of the Department of Oriental Studies at Occidental College (his alma mater), the General and his wife ("Madame") open a liquor store and Bon becomes an employee for the Church of Prophets. At the university, the Narrator meets Sofia Mori, a secretary of Japanese descent with whom he begins a casual relationship. When the Narrator leaves for the Philippines, Ms. Mori will start another romantic relationship with Sonny, a journalist and former university colleague of the Narrator, who, because of his articles against the Vietnam War, will be murdered according to the General's will.

Despite being a refugee in the US, the General does not give up his revolutionary ideas and starts gathering a group of Vietnamese soldiers who would be sent back to

Vietnam to enact the counterrevolution. In order to raise money for the mission, he befriends a congressman who wants to support the growing Vietnamese community in California in exchange for electoral votes. By means of the congressman, the Narrator is offered a job as an authenticity consultant for a Hollywood movie production. However, the director, referred to as the "Auteur," does not want the Sympathizer to interfere with his own depiction of Vietnamese people. The movie is filmed in the Philippines, and, despite the Auteur's promises, the production fails to adequately represent the Vietnamese. The tension between the Auteur and the Sympathizer grows until the latter is involved in an "accidental" explosion on the movie set. After being paid compensation money, the Narrator goes back to LA and gives half of the settlement fee to the family of the crapulent major, whose ghosts keeps on haunting him.

Back in LA, Bon decides to join the General's mission to Vietnam. The Narrator, who cannot let his best friend go alone, accepts to kill Sonny in order to be prove himself worthy of joining such dangerous endeavor. After the General's approval, the group leaves for Thailand, from where they will infiltrate in Vietnam. However, they are soon caught by the communists, and Bon, the Sympathizer himself and some other survivors are sent to a communist "reeducation camp."

At this point, the reader finds out the reason why the protagonist is writing a confession and why he is imprisoned. The Commandant and the Commissar (the two authorities of the camp) are not satisfied with his writing and make him constantly revise it, in spite of knowing that the Narrator is a communist himself. After one year, the Commandant informs the Sympathizer that the Commissar is almost satisfied with his confession and that wants him to begin the final part of his reeducation. At this point, the Narrator finds out that the Commissar is Man, who will brutally torture him for "his own good." In fact, he is asked to remember a repressed memory that is fundamental to complete his re-education process. After days of sleep deprivation and torture, the Narrator finally manages to remember: not only has he failed to save a communist agent, but he also helped to arrest her and assisted to her brutal gang rape. After admitting his compliance, the Narrator, driven mad by the torture experience, is set free and placed among the boat people at open sea.

**Duality and Representation**

The focus of this first part of my analysis will fall upon issues of in-betweenness and representation that so starkly shape *The Sympathizer*. I will argue that, although Nguyen's novel contains a sharp critique to contemporary America, it also — and maybe predominantly — engages with issues that pertain to dynamics and problematics emerging on a global level. In particular, in this section I will deal with the problematization of cultural productions that circulate on a global level (a theme dear to the world literature debate), their inevitable political dimension, and their (often dangerous) relevance as representational tools that strengthen unequal power relations. I will argue that *The Sympathizer* is informed by a transnational approach that makes the novel an important example of the new directions of the American Studies. Starting from this first analysis, I will then dedicate the last section to the tension between remembrance and forgetfulness in the creation of historical as well as personal memory.

I will start my analysis by taking into consideration the trope of doubleness as an inherent character of the Narrator and, consequently, of the novel itself. In particular, the protagonist's condition of doubleness is caused, on the one hand, by his ethnic and cultural hybridity and, on the other, by his job as a spy. The Sympathizer is thus a man who constantly moves among cultures, languages, and geographies, both physically and mentally. He embodies the tensions between the dominant and the dominated, between mainstream and margins; it is thanks to such position that he is able to offer insightful reflections and a critique of the US as well as Vietnam. At the same time, his duality is what makes him a flawed and contradictory character that "complicates any straightforward understanding of authenticity" (Britto). In fact, the issue of authenticity, which is directly connected with the problem of representation, is a prominent one in the book. What Nguyen seems to suggest is that what is important, more than authenticity or universal truths, is to acknowledge the variety of experiences that different people live in various — and even contradictory — ways and to read them not in essentializing or binary terms but in all their multidimensionality and complexity. In this sense, the Sympathizer presents himself as follows:

> I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides. Sometimes I flatter myself that this is a talent […]. [W]hen I reflect on how I cannot help but observe the world in such fashion, I wonder if what I have should even be called a talent. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you (19).

The Sympathizer firstly describes himself in relation to his job as a Communist mole ("spy," "sleeper," "spook"). This role is inherently marked by doubleness since he works simultaneously for the capitalists and the communists, his character being a reflection of an historic duality — the division, during the Cold War, of the world in two opposing leagues. At the time, while people were forced to take a stand, many were caught in that gray area where the borders of the two sides blurred, as in the case of the Sympathizer. Although he formally belongs to the communists, his position is constantly undermined by his attraction to US culture and lifestyle, so that his political ambiguity matches his cultural hybridity. The Sympathizer is a protagonist who embodies such split — a duality that is so commonly felt in the Asian American community. As Nguyen himself remembers, at that time Vietnamese were often pointed out as spies/observers ("At home I was an American observing Vietnamese and outside I was a spy observing Americans," "Viet Thanh Nguyen | History").

The term "spy" brings in itself both visibility and invisibility, as the words "sleeper" (like a sleeper cell) and "spook" (which means both "spy" and "ghost") suggest. Such connection is highlighted in chapter 11, when Man gives the definition of 'mole:'

> To think of a mole as that which digs underground misunderstands the meaning of the mole as a spy. A spy's task is not to hide himself where no one can see him, since he will not be able to see anything himself. A spy's task is to hide where everyone can see him and where he can see everything. (166)

This alternation of visibility and invisibility does once again relate to the experience of minority groups. In this sense, by choosing a spy — someone who so starkly lives two

contradicting lives and plays two roles — Nguyen manages to create a character that embodies many of the experiences of Asian Americans in the US, linking political and cultural duality.

The second element that marks the Sympathizer's doubleness is his own heritage as the son of a Vietnamese girl and a French priest. Although mixed children were very common during the French colonial rule and especially during the US presence in Vietnam ("A small nation could be founded from the tropical offspring of the American GI," 29), they were not accepted both inside and outside family boundaries. As mentioned earlier, this theme has become a prominent one in Vietnamese American literature, as it mirrors a real social issue that has gained more and more attention in the last years. In fact, the Sympathizer often recalls moments in which he has been marginalized, especially when he was called "bastard" by other soldiers or schoolmates. Even at family gatherings, he was treated differently from his full-Vietnamese cousins and would not, for example, receive the red envelops with pocket money that were traditionally gifted at New Year's, or, when he did, he only got half of what the others were given ("I discovered that my sums of lucky money were but half of theirs. That's because you are half-blooded, said one calculating cousin. You're a bastard," 137). Even though being reminded of his hybridity is not pleasant ("I confess that the name [bastard] still hurts," 29), he acknowledges that it is this very condition of duality that gives him a unique point of view and makes him the perfect person to play the role of the spy ("My weakness for sympathizing with others has much to do with my status as a bastard," 44).

The Sympathizer's clashing duality is dissected in the fourth chapter, when the Narrator is asked, by the Chair of the Department of Oriental Studies for whom he works, to write down a list of his eastern *versus* western traits. He suggests that this exercise might be "beneficial" for someone who, like the Sympathizer, is "forever caught between worlds […] never knowing where [to] belong" and suffering a "constant tug-of-war inside […], between Orient and Occident" (69). Quoting Kipling, the Chair states that "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." With an ironic effort, the Narrator produces a list of opposing characteristics between Orient and Occident, respectively:

> self-effacing/occasionally opinionated, respectful of authority/sometimes independent, worried about others' opinions/now and then carefree, usually

> quiet/talkative (with a drink or two), always trying to please/once or twice have not given a damn, teacup is half empty/glass is half full, say yes when I mean no/say what I mean, do what I say, almost always look to the past/once in a while look to the future, prefer to follow/yet yearn to lead, comfortable in a crowd/but ready to take the stage, deferential to elders/value my youth, self-sacrificial/live to fight another day, follow my ancestors/forget my ancestors!, straight black hair/limpid brown eyes, short (for an Occidental)/tall (for an Oriental), somewhat yellowish white/somewhat palish yellow. (69)

Although the scene is fraught with irony on the Narrator's side ("I thought he was playing a joke on me, since the day he gave me the exercise was the first of April," "I cleared my throat of a sour taste, the gastric reflux of my confused Oriental and Occidental insides," 69-70), the professor is very serious. In fact, he presents himself as an expert, both out of personal (he has an "Amerasian" child with his Asian wife) and professional experience (he is the head of the Department of Oriental Studies). When the Sympathizer completes his exercise, the Department Chair praises him, saying: "You are a good student, as all Orientals are." He explains to the Narrator that this identity crisis (his being "split down to the middle") is due to the fact that his Oriental characteristics are in opposition to the Occidental ones, so that they are the source of his "feel[ing] out of place" (70). The Chair tells the Narrator that in the future he will be "the average," and that he could therefore become the "ideal translator between two sides, a goodwill ambassador to bring opposing nations to peace." This role belongs to Amerasians (or Eurasians) because they "embody the symbiosis of Orient and Occident, the possibility that out of two can come one," preferably if they "cultivate those reflex that Americans have learned innately, in order to counterweigh [their] Oriental instincts" (70).

The creation of unity ("out of two […] one") is in contrast with the Sympathizer's mother words ("Remember, you're not half of anything, you're twice of everything!" 136) and with the way the Narrator presents himself (mole, two faces, two minds, etc.). By claiming a possible unity, a coherence, the Chair is not suggesting a way out of the painful condition of in-betweenness that recognizes value to both (allegedly opposing) sides, he is asserting the superiority of one (stereotyped) identity over the other. He displays, in Pnina Werbner's words, the "naturalizing tendency of cultural racism to perceive culture

as being organically, innately different," and thus irreconcilable (10). On the contrary, the book asserts doubleness not only against all odds but also as a means to recognize — and hopefully correct — one's and others' inhuman behavior. After the re-education process that the Sympathizer undergoes in the last chapters, he states: "Some might say I was seeing things, but the true optical illusion was in seeing others and oneself as undivided and whole" (340). At the end of the novel, the Sympathizer refuses to be reduced into one, symbolically starting to refer to himself as "we" and not "I." On one side, he asserts his right to "inhabit the different versions of himself," and on the other, he embraces a larger collective (Prabhu 394). At the end, although often reminded that "the only cure for being a bastard is to take a side" (288), the Sympathizer reaffirms his doubleness, this time consciously. Such critique is addressed both to the essentialization operated by dominant discourses (embodied by the Chair) and by Asian American intellectuals. In fact, the creation of this anti-hero is an example of the adoption of those flexible strategies Nguyen was talking about in his *Race and Resistance* (pp. 99-101). The Sympathizer is indeed a character that cannot be reduced to "the rigid binaries of identity politics" (Liu 546) and that challenges the tropes of "either resistance or accommodation" that have characterized the reading of the Asian American canon.

Another character that defies the stereotypes attached to racial categories is Ms. Mori. During her job interview with the Department Chair, she is asked about her Japanese language skills, since she is of Nipponese descent. Ms. Mori recalls the episode as follows:

> I explained that I was born in Gardena. He said, Oh, you nisei, as if knowing that one word means he knows something about me. You've forgotten your culture, Ms. Mori. […] Your issei parents, they hung on to their culture. Don't you want to learn Japanese? Don't you want to visit Nippon? (80)

Ms. Mori confesses that she "felt bad" at the beginning and wondered why she was not interested in learning Japanese and why she "would rather go to Paris or Istanbul or Barcelona rather than Tokyo" (80). After giving it some thought, she observes:

> *Who cares?* Did anyone ask John F. Kennedy if he spoke Gaelic and visited Dublin or if he ate potatoes every night or if he collected paintings of leprechauns? So why are *we* supposed to not forget *our* culture? Isn't my culture right here since I was born here? (80)

The example of Kennedy is interesting since Irish — as well as Italian and Jewish — people do have a history of racial discrimination in the US. In fact, especially in the 19th century, they were considered non-whites and their alleged inability to assimilate was a matter of public concern (Gerber and Kraut 162), so that it is not unlikely to imagine them being asked, at the time, to do an exercise similar to the one that the Department Chair gives the Sympathizer. Ms. Mori's example shows how such binary categories change over time and according to the race considered. Because in the 1970s being of Irish descent was not considered as problematic as being Asian American, no one would believe it likely to accuse Kennedy of having "forgotten his culture."

Although Ms. Mori has "given up" to her "Oriental" side, her choice is still disruptive because she refuses to be represented by someone who is not herself. She behaves differently from how she is expected to ("I can't help but feel he's a little disappointed in me because I don't bow whenever I see him," 79) and resists definitions like the Chair's one, maintaining her own understanding of herself:

> Ever since I got it straight in my head that I haven't forgotten a damn thing, that I damn well know my culture, which is American, and my language, which is English, *I've felt like a spy in that man's office*.[63] On the surface, I'm just plain old Ms. Mori, poor little thing who's lost her roots, but underneath, I'm Sofia and you better not fuck with me. (80)

She claims identity as something too personal to be defined — the contrary of what the Chair does, neatly separating it in two columns on a paper — and shows how it can be negotiated in different — even opposing — ways by people belonging to the same racial group. In her feeling like a spy, Ms. Mori reveals the intrinsic character of simultaneous

[63] Italic is mine here.

visibility and invisibility of those people who are not recognized as full Americans: her race makes her visible, but because of that visibility she is expected to behave in a certain way that does not take into account her own preferences or choices, making her invisible. Her position is of a spy because in the Department Chair's environment she has an undercover identity that is invisible to someone who considers himself an expert on the matter and who prefers to dictate rather than observe (Liu 544). In another passage of the book, the Sympathizer poignantly describes this visible/invisible paradox: "Even if she could hear me, she still saw through me, or perhaps saw someone else instead of me" (126).

Not only do these episodes show how pervasive racist and essentialist views can be, but also how they are fueled by people in power, people who present themselves as authorities and occupy a position that actively legitimates their discourses. Above all, it brings attention to the difficulty of challenging monolithic constructions and devious xenophobia in comparison, for example, to overt racism. In this case, the Department Chair uses the theme of duality to strengthen binary oppositions and to eventually connotate them positively or negatively in order to assert the superiority of "Occidental" ways ("cultivate those [American] reflex" 70). His position of power delegitimates other (counter)perspectives, so that the representation of "otherness" (in this case, the "Oriental") is in the hands of such authorities who reinforce their own position through the control they exert on those representations.

The Department Chair is an example within the academia, but the Sympathizer comes across two other characters who follow the same behavior: the Auteur and the Congressman. The former is a famous movie director in Hollywood who is working on a new film on the Vietnam War. Needing an authenticity consultant, he hires the Sympathizer. The entire part of the book dedicated to his film (four chapters) is a bitter denounce of the manipulation of the War by the movie industry, which has wielded a huge influence not only on the way the US has re-elaborated his memory of the war, but also on its painful consequences on Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans. In fact, in the interview with Gish Jen, Nguyen remembers how, as a child, he would be profoundly disturbed at the violent, stereotyped representation of Vietnamese people in such movies. Wherever he travelled — even outside the US — he would be dismayed at the fact that everyone had watched *Apocalypse Now*, without, however, having ever seen a

Vietnamese movie ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History"). As the Sympathizer insightfully states: "this was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created [Hollywood]" (131-2). Hence why the control of representation is such a big theme in the book and why it dedicates much space to the critique of a movie that is very similar to *Apocalypse Now*, but that is "more like a compendium of all those Hollywood movies" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History").

Although the Auteur has hired the Sympathizer, he has no intention of welcoming his suggestions ("Authenticity's important. Not that authenticity beats imagination. The story still comes first. The universality of the story has to be there," 127), so that when the Auteur is told that he "didn't get the details right," he aggressively answers as follows:

> I researched your country, my friend. I read Joseph Buttinger and Frances FitzGerald. Have you read Joseph Buttinger and Frances FitzGerald.[64] He's the foremost historian on your little part of the world. And she won the Pulitzer Prize. She dissected your psychology. I think I know something about you people. (128)

In this passage the Auteur is discrediting the Sympathizer through a confrontation with people who are recognized as authorities. Firstly, he does not address the Narrator in a way that acknowledges his position as an expert, disrespectfully calling him "my friend" — an expression that he would certainly not use for Joseph Buttinger or Frances FitzGerald. Secondly, he further undermines the Sympathizer's right to criticize the Auteur by comparing him to people whose authorities are rooted in public recognition ("foremost historian" and "she won the Pulitzer Price"), since he considers mainstream success more valuable than direct experience. He belittles the Narrator downgrading him into an inferior position, in the role of the studied ("*your* little part of the world," "*your* psychology," "*you* people") rather than the one who studies and therefore has the right to express his opinion. After having proved the Sympathizer's lack of credibility, the Auteur proceeds demonstrating his lack of experience in the film industry, too ("How many

[64] The Auteur does not use question marks.

movies have you made. None. That's right. None, zero, zilch, nada, nothing, and however you say in your language," 130).

The Sympathizer's remarks concern the way Vietnamese are represented in the movie. For example, the villagers depicted by the Auteur do not have any speaking parts that can be intelligible for the American audience ("Do you think it might not be decent to let them actually say something instead of simply acknowledging that there is some kind of sound coming from their mouths?" 130). Although the Auteur eventually agrees to add speaking parts and to take better care of details concerning Vietnamese (proper reconstruction of villages, streets, billboards with correct Vietnamese spelling, dresses etc.), the Narrator realizes that he did not "undermin[e] the enemy's propaganda," as he thought he would be doing before leaving for the Philippines to shoot the movie. Instead of affecting the way his peoples were represented, he did provide a realistic setting to be "consumed by the wealthy white people of the world," and, because of lack of power, he fails to make sure that "the truly important things […], like emotions or ideas" would be portrayed (171). As he bitterly realizes, since it was them who owned the means of production, they also owned the means of representation — and that this representation was more important than the "three or four or six million dead" of the conflict and "the real meaning of the war" (170). The Auteur states:

> I made a great work of art. A great work of art is something as real as reality itself, and sometimes even more real than the real. Long after this war is forgotten, […] this work of art will still shine so brightly it will not just be about the war but it will be the war. (170)

The creation of reality out of simulacra is another theme attached to the representation issue. The power of images and language in creating reality (a motif explored by Lalami, too) is what makes representation both so important and dangerous. Such power is exemplified not only in the production of the movie and in the reflection on its impact on world's audiences, but also on a personal level. In fact, when the Sympathizer lands in the Philippines and reaches the movie setting, he discovers that scenic design includes a cemetery ("built for authenticity's sake" 149) with a reconstruction of Vietnamese graves with names of real people on it — although most of them have been selected out of the

Los Angeles phonebook and were presumably still alive in California. The Narrator asks for the permission to have one grave for his own use. On it, he paints his mother's name and attaches the reproduction of the only photo of hers that he possesses. Although his mother, who had passed away during his studies in the US, already had a tomb in her native village, the Sympathizer feels the need to give her "a resting place fit […] for a woman who was never more than an extra ["extra" is the word used to refer to the actors playing the Vietnamese] to anyone but [him]," even if it could only happen in that "cinematic life" (149). When the Auteur decides to blow up the entire site for the last scene, the Narrator is unexpectedly upset:

> It was only a fake cemetery with its fake tomb for my mother, but the eradication of this creation […] hurt me with unexpected severity. I had to pay my last respects to my mother […], who was due to suffer one last indignity for the sake of entertainment. (172)

The power of the movie lies in its ability to blur the boundaries between what is fake and what is real. Hollywood simulacra can become an occasion for real feelings to emerge, as the genuine sadness of the Sympathizer kneeling before his mother's fake grave show. The problem of the movie industry (as well as other representational means, literature included) is its potentiality in creating monolithic truths that are too often fabricated through historical manipulation and that grant the survival of mechanisms of oppression. In this way, what is real becomes fake and what is fake becomes real, affecting lives of millions of people.

The Sympathizer is distraught at his powerlessness and at his own collaboration in "helping to exploit [his] fellow countrymen and refugees [who would play the roles of Vietnamese]" (148). He is bitterly disillusioned after having believed that he could "divert the Hollywood organism from its goal, the simultaneous lobotomization and pickpocketing of the world's audiences" (131). In such movie "the best [Vietnamese] could ever hope for was to get a word in edgewise before [their] anonymous deaths," and the Sympathizer bitterly realizes that that kind of film "was just a sequel to our war and a prequel to the next one that America was destined to wage" (171). He reflects:

> Hollywood did not just make horror movie monsters, it was its own horror movie monster, smashing me under its foot. I had failed and the Auteur would make *The Hamlet* as he intended, with my countrymen serving merely as raw material for an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people. I pitied the French for their naïveté in believing they had to visit a country in order to exploit it. Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit. (131)

The importance given to the realization of the Auteur's film shows how the theme of cultural productions and their circulation on a global level is prominent in *The Sympathizer*. Although it is not discussed through the analysis of literary works,[65] but through the critique of cinematic productions, it is still important in its denounce of inequalities in the circulation of cultural products. In fact, it highlights their commodification and their ability to influence and even change history. The dominant representation of the Vietnam War is a prime example of the power of culture in the re-elaboration of history in the sense that, in spite of losing the war, the US did "triumph in terms of memory, dominating narratives […] through the global influence of its culture industries." Such productions assert and perpetuate racial hierarchies by positioning them in the "collective memory" through media and culture (Tran). Nguyen's denounce has thus a double dimension: on one side, it specifically targets the US in its Hollywoodian distortions of history; on the other side, it is a critique of the global market of cultural productions.[66] Both critiques are elaborated through a transnational perspective (the movie is conceived in the US, shot in the Philippines with American, Vietnamese, Korean American and Filipino actors).

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[65] *The Sympathizer* firstly focuses on the shooting of *The Hamlet*. However, Nguyen does take into consideration "book publishing, fine art, and the production of historical archives" ("Nothing" 15) in his scholarly work. In particular, *Nothing Ever Dies*, published only one year after *The Sympathizer*, is a reflection on the creation of collective memory that can be read as completing and reinforcing his debut novel's argument about global cultural industries (Liu 542).

[66] Such critique of cultural productions circulating on a global level is better exemplified in *Nothing Ever Dies*, which, as already said, can be read as completing *The Sympathizer*. Of particular interest is the chapter dedicated to the elaboration of historical memory in South Korea, a country that has failed to deal with the consequences of its participation in the Vietnam War (chapter 5).

The relationship between cinematic misrepresentation and politics is embodied in the connection between the Hollywoodian Auteur and the Congressman — a politician who has understood the potential of the Vietnamese community in California as a source of votes. When invited to give a speech during the celebration of a Vietnamese wedding in LA, he presents himself as the protector of the "émigrés to his Orange County district," stating that he "could do nothing finer with [his] life than sacrifice it in the cause of [Vietnamese'] hopes, dreams, and aspirations for a better life" (117). Immigrants are "the promise of the American Dream," and they are welcome in a "land of patriots, […] a land of heroes who will never relent in the cause of helping [their] friends and smiting [their] enemies" (118). The Congressman's speech gives a clear representation of Vietnamese as "fellow Americans," who share "the common cause of democracy and liberty" (117-8). The Vietnamese community, convinced by his charismatic figure, cannot but cherish the Congressman, and is more than glad to have someone who is "always true," as his campaign slogan claims, to represent them since they are unable to do it themselves (140).

The relationship between minority groups and its representation in American politics is an example of commodification of race that Nguyen analyses in his already mentioned *Race and Resistance*. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, the Congressman puts forward an image of the Vietnamese American community as "the promise of the American Dream," that makes the Vietnamese look not as unfamiliar strangers but as "fellow Americans" (118). The representation that the Congressman proposes does not present the Vietnamese as deserving to be represented *a priori*, but because they are participants in the most American of struggles ("a land of patriots […], of heroes, […] a land that welcomes people like you, who have sacrificed so much in our common cause of democracy and liberty!" 118). In this way, not only does he present the Vietnamese community in a monolithic way, but he also exploits their struggle for his own political gain. As for the Auteur and the Chair, the Congressman's position of power grants him the control over that representation that so deeply affects the represented, both on a national and a global level. The Congressman, the Auteur and the Department Chair, with Pnina Werbner's words, "resort to strategic essentializing," so that "these instrumental inventions come ultimately to be reified as realities via […] state policy practices" (9), that, in return, maintain and strengthen those unequal power relations upon which they are built.

Against the silence forced upon the represented, the Sympathizer finally opposes a voice, his fragmented voice, which finds its power in collective action:

> We have nothing to leave to anyone except these words [his confession, the book itself], our best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us. Tomorrow we will join those tens of thousands who have taken to the sea, refugees from a revolution. (346)

In this first part of the analysis, I have focused on the trope of doubleness as an inherent character of the Narrator and of the novel itself. I have then shown how hybridity leads to the creation of stereotypes and of biased representations that are used in politicized cultural productions as well as in domestic political discourses. In fact, the passages analyzed show, on one side, the effects of hybridity in a society that is culturally and ethnically essentialized, and on the other side, the manipulation of the Vietnam War and of Vietnamese by "powerful white American male academics, politicians, and moviemakers" (Wu 238). *The Sympathizer* is a novel that makes us rethink the construction of Americanness — in its heroism, exceptionalism, its ideas of democracy and liberty — through a sharp critique of its participation in the Vietnam War and of the (mis)representation of the conflict and of its people. Moreover, it exposes the power relations behind the cultural productions of its memory industry circulating all over the world and the influence that they wield on a global audience, placing the novel on a broader scale. In this section, I have particularly focused on such monolithic representations, and on the ways in which the novel reclaims heterogenic rather than homogenized identities. Finally, Nguyen exposes the power dynamics behind a country that still insists on imagining itself within the frames of patriotism, liberty and democracy, while at the same time exploiting minorities to reaffirm those mechanisms that perpetuate racial and power inequalities.

Constantly moving along cultural, geographical and ideological borders, the novel does also blur boundaries and problematize the universality of concepts such as truth, authenticity, and even right- and wrong-doing. Such corrective journey does not, however, only concern America, but also Vietnam itself, as it will be more evident in the next section. The issue of representation here discussed shows how moving away from the US

territory can be a means to expose American contradictions and, hopefully, a way to call for historic responsibility. In this sense, through the character of the Sympathizer, Nguyen plays the role, as many contemporary Asian American writers do, of a mediator between theUS and the rest of the world, of someone who embodies the potentialities of assuming transnational perspective that can help to redefine the position of the US in the global community.

**Ethical Memory**

In this last section I will analyze the motifs of remembrance/forgetfulness in the elaboration of the Vietnam War and in the creation of historical memory. Earlier, I have shown how the war has been elaborated by Americans, in which ways they have read it focusing on the experience of American soldiers and how they have distorted the representation of the Vietnamese. In this last section, I will focus on the Vietnamese re-elaboration of the war through the analysis of the Sympathizer's permanence in the communist camp.

In contrast to works calling for an ethics based on the remembrance of universal humanity, the *Sympathizer* focuses on the importance of acknowledging "one another's inhumanity, of our collective capacity to commit acts of atrocity" (Wu 238). Such capacity does not only concern Americans, who have so starkly tried to portray themselves as heroes as well as the real victims of the war, but also the Northern and Southern Vietnamese. Nguyen's book is thus an attempt to disrupt manipulated representations of the Vietnam War in order to hold everyone accountable of their actions. In the first part of the novel, and in particular through the chapters dedicated to the Auteur's movie, Nguyen denounces the manipulation of the industry of memory by Americans, according to which the war's true heroes and victims were Americans themselves. In this representation, the Vietnamese played a distant role in which they were denied any sort of recognition, both linguistic (before the Sympathizer's intervention, they would be speaking an incomprehensible language) and individual (they are seen as an "indistinguishable group," as the choice of Korean American James Yoon, aka "the Asian Everyman," to play the role of a Vietnamese shows). In this way, they are unintelligible both by English-speaking and Vietnamese audiences. Nguyen reverses this representation in the last chapters of the book, where, through what Ben Tran calls "literary dubbing,"[67] the Vietnamese characters are finally intelligible and given an individual dimension. Moreover, by using English even when he could have used Vietnamese since he primarily addresses to this audience (especially in this re-education

[67] "When an author translates characters' speech and thought from the implied or referenced language […] to the language of representation or the reader's language" (Tran 414).

part), Nguyen includes the English audience without giving it priority, addressing it as "secondary readers." In this way, Nguyen "prioritizes the minority perspective while disorienting the American experience," treating them as "secondary readers" in a way that mirrors Hollywood treatment of Vietnamese that relegates them to an indistinguishable background (Tran 414, 416). Through literary dubbing Nguyen is able, on one side, to reach a wider audience than the Vietnamese-only speaking one, and on the other side, to reverse the subalternity of Vietnamese characters. In this way, he avoids the problem of publishing in Vietnamese and thus limiting the circulation and consequently the impact of his novel while at the same time directly speaking to Vietnamese.

In the last five chapters, Nguyen firstly addresses his critique to the Vietnamese: focusing on the Sympathizer's re-education, Nguyen denounces the "passivity of the war's spectators," retrieving the "forgotten violence of the war" (414). Through the re-education of the Sympathizer, Nguyen transforms passivity and historical manipulation into "ethical memory," a process that is fundamental to "recall the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten, the excluded, the oppressed, the dead, the ghosts" ("Nothing" 68; Tran 414). In this way, Nguyen effectively undermines the socialist Vietnam's selective memory of war (Tran 418) by shedding light on its own crimes.

The Sympathizer's permanence in the re-educational camp is divided into two moments that take the form of a confession: the first is a written one, consisting in the writing and re-writing of his story (the book itself till chapter 18) and the second one is oral, namely the forceful remembrance, through torture, of a lost memory that should have been included in the written confession. This memory concerns the sexual abuse of a fellow communist agent by South Vietnamese policemen. Not only has the Sympathizer failed to save her, but he has also assisted to her rape — a fact that makes him compliant with the crime. In fact, the entire part dedicated to the re-education is a denounce against all those who have failed to take a stand against war abuses, causing, with their lack of action, the suffering and death of countless of people.

The re-education of the Sympathizer consists of a period of isolation (one year) in a cell of the camp. His treatment is different from the one reserved to the democratic militants, who are imprisoned together and subjected to physical violence, because the Narrator's re-education focuses on the decontamination of its revolutionary spirit. He

needs to be "cured," and in this first part of the confession he is significantly called a "patient" (284). In the year of "quarantine," the Sympathizer keeps on correcting his confession because both the Commandant and the Commissar/Man (the two authorities of the camp) judge it flawed. The Commandant criticizes him as follows:

> Your confession is full of moral weakness, individual selfishness, and Christian superstition. You exhibit no sense of collectivity, no belief in the science of history. […] In practice, you are a bourgeois intellectual. […] The good news is that you show glimmers of collective revolutionary consciousness. The bad news is that your language betrays you. It is not clear, not succinct, not direct, not simple. It is the language of the elite. You must write for the people! (292)

He is accused of being "an American," who needs to be "transformed into a Vietnamese once more" (293). In spite of the commandant's words, the re-education process will not turn the Sympathizer into a Vietnamese; on the contrary, through the confession of his crime he will assert once for all his intrinsic doubleness. In fact, subjected to torture, his mind will finally split into two, embracing his multitudes instead of fighting them or choosing one over the other, as he has been told to his entire life.

After one year, the Sympathizer is finally brought to the Commissar/Man, who reveals his true identity, and begins the last stage of the re-education. The Narrator is convinced that he has already confessed everything, but the Commissar insists on repeating that there is something that he is leaving behind. Hinting at the broader theme of remembering as an act of historical accountability, he tells the Sympathizer that "human memory is short," but nonetheless it must be corrected. The Sympathizer turns here from "patient" to "pupil," as he is led to the "study group's final session," signaling that, despite the violence perpetrated against him, the act of remembering is an act of re-learning, of correcting history (310). In order to "access to that safe hiding the last of [his] secrets," the Commissar prevents the Narrator from sleeping, tying him to a matrass and keeping him awake by hitting him with his foot and lighting the room with tens of light bulbs. Being awake is fundamental to firstly remember and then admit his historical compliance ("to be a revolutionary subject [the Sympathizer] must be a historical subject who remembered all, which he could do only by being fully awake, even if being fully

awake would, eventually, kill him" 310), which the Sympathizer denies even when the Commissar brings up the name of the communist agent. In fact, he does not initially understand in which way the agent is related to his confession ("But I did nothing to her"), and it is the Commissar who has to explain how "doing nothing" is a form of participation ("Exactly. […] You indeed did nothing. That is the crime that you must acknowledge and to which you must confess" 308).

The thematic complexity that intertwines re-education, confession, remembering, trauma, and violence is paralleled by a complexity on the formal level. As stated above, the novel is written in the first-person narrator; however, the final interrogation (chapter 21), which brings the Sympathizer to the lost memory is written in third person in the interview style (in effect, the conversation is being recorded), with "Q" marking the Commissar and "A" the Sympathizer:

> Q. Who was in the movie theater [the interrogation room in which the communist agent was raped]?
> A. The three policemen. The major. Claude.
> Q. Who else was in the movie theater?
> A. Me.
> Q. Who else was in the movie theater?
> […]
> A. The communist agent.
> […]
> Q. What did you do?
> A. I watched.
> Q. What did you see? (317-8)

At this point the interview is interrupted and the story goes fast forward "in the bright future," when the Commissar puts on the tape of the confession in the presence of the Sympathizer, who, together with the reader, listens to "this stranger's voice" finally recalling the lost memory. The style changes again to the first-person narrator: "I saw everything" (318). After the confession, time goes back to present (chapter 22) in the "screenplay format." Such narrative complexity plays a pivotal role in the representation

of the darkest sides of the war: on one hand, it effectively represents the way in which the Sympathizer's brutal confession takes place, and on the other, it reminds us of the fact that such confession is "produced under constraint and compelled to exist in the service of a structure of power that sets the terms of representation itself" (Britto). In the same way the Vietnamese in the Auteur's movie cannot choose how to be represented: the Sympathizer has no power upon the representation of his own confession. Although the recuperation of the memory is necessary to hold the Narrator accountable of his lack of action, the way in which it is retrieved mirrors the ways of Hollywood and it perpetuates the circle of mutual abuses.

The Sympathizer, together with the reader, listens to his recorded confession. At the beginning, he tries to convince the major to stop the rape from happening, but once his attempts fails he sits in the movie theater and watches the entire scene in silence, Coke at hand (319). Before the violence, the agent is asked her name:

> She said nothing, but when she repeated the question, something primitive awoke in her, and when she opened her eyes to look at the policeman, she said, My surname is Viet and my given name is Nam. (320)

The tendency to use women's bodies to represent the Vietnam War is, as Nguyen states during his interview with Ben Tran, widespread. In this passage he wanted to refer to a scene in Trinh T. Minh-Ha's movie *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), in which a young woman says the same sentence of the communist agent. In this way, Nguyen wanted to establish once again a parallel with the movie theater and with the way women are "depicted cinematically" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen: Anger" 363). In fact, seeing/watching within cinematic settings as representing the lack of action in situations of violence or oppression as a form of participation in the act itself is one the themes of the novel. Earlier in the book, the Sympathizer goes to the movie theater to watch the Auteur's film (which also features a rape scene), which represents the Vietnamese in a stereotyped and inhuman way. Watching the movie (and paying for it) makes the viewers compliant with the misrepresentation of the Vietnamese in the same way the Sympathizer is guilty of watching the agent's rape.

The communist agent does stand for all the hidden victims of the war while also being an allegory of the entire country that had been ravaged firstly by the French, then by the Americans, but also by Vietnamese. Here Nguyen wanted to focus on the latter, thus erasing the American presence:

> I wanted to show that this was something that wasn't simply happening in terms of what the West was doing to Vietnam but what Vietnamese were doing to themselves. […] The rape of Vietnamese women was also being done by Vietnamese men. The Vietnamese are at least partially responsible for what they did to themselves. […] I wanted this to be very specifically a moment of Vietnamese-on-Vietnamese confrontation and responsibility. ("Viet Thanh Nguyen: Anger" 363)

The agent's rapists are described as "average specimens of national manhood" (318), so that they stand for Vietnamese men in general. Their crime makes it clear that everyone who participated in the war has some degree of responsibility in the perpetration of violence against the country and its people. As Karl Ashoka Britto remarks, against the tendency of those in power of "shaping the raw material of traumatic history to [their] own ends," the novel is conceived as a space in which everyone is held accountable for their actions, namely, for their inhumanity. In fact, if Nguyen denounces American intervention in the war and their own heinous crimes, he does not present Vietnamese people as simple victims ("We [the Vietnamese] are victimizers as well," "Viet Thanh Nguyen: Anger" 363). In fact, *The Sympathizer* highlights the compliance and actions of Vietnamese people themselves — exposing all those who have exerted their power in the wrong way, may they be Vietnamese, American or French. Moreover, the novel stresses the fact that everyone who abuses power is at the same time subjected to it, in an eternal circle of exploitation and violence. In chapter 22, the Commissar comments: "Now that we are the powerful, we don't need the French or the Americans to fuck us over. We can fuck ourselves just fine" — with the last sentence hinting in a grim way at the communist agent's rape.

It is in such situation that everyone's inhumanity emerges. Towards the very end of the book, the Sympathizer reflect on the cycle of violence that turns the victim into the victimizer:

> What do those who struggle against power do when they seize power? What does the revolutionary do when the revolution triumphs? Why do those who call for independence and freedom take away the independence and freedom of others? (346)

Such reflection is connected to the question that the Commissar has kept on asking before and immediately after the Sympathizer's confession: "What is more important than independence and freedom?" The answer, which refers to Ho Chi Min's famous slogan, is nothing. However, it is only after his confession that the Sympathizer is able to fully understand its meaning. If nothing is more important than independence and freedom, nothing is also what remains after the revolution that should have brought independence and freedom. The circle of abuse and violence is not broken, and it is destined to start over again and again.

So, what is the solution? At the end of the novel, the Sympathizer states: "in the face of *nothing* — we still consider ourselves revolutionary. We remain the most hopeful of creatures, […] revolutionary in search of a revolution" (347). This revolution is "simply wanting to live," together with those "who suffer" towards which the "compass continually points" (346). Fully embracing his doubleness, the Sympathizer abandons his position of isolation and finally goes beyond the mere feeling of sympathy to adhere and actively participate within a collectivity. Bringing his manuscript with him "wrapped in watertight plastic" (his testament of humanity, inhumanity, sympathy, mistakes, crimes, acknowledgment, his own representation), he finally joins the boat people, who are the "thousands" who are "staring into the darkness like" him:

> And even as we write this final sentence, the sentence will not be revised, we confess to being certain of one and only one thing — we swear to keep, on penalty of death, this one promise:
> *We will live!* (348)

Although the book is very prominently grounded in the Vietnam War and is addressed to the Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans (and Americans indirectly), it is in its re-elaboration of historical memory towards an ethical dimension that the book acquires a marked worldling dimension. While denouncing the role of Americans in the war (and of the French in the colonization), Nguyen also refuses the Vietnamese self-representation as victims. Such denounce does not only target history but also cultural productions. On one side, he opposes Americanized depictions of the war (such as the Auteur's movie), and on the other side, he distances himself from the trope of humanity on which so many minority writers have insisted. In the interview with Ben Tran, he states: "the book starts from the assumption that we are human, and then goes on to prove that we're also inhuman at the same time." In particular, he stresses the fact that dominant culture is willing to acknowledge both humanity and inhumanity "as part of [its] subjectivity," but it does not extend this multifaced dimension to all those outside the mainstream, the so-called "extras" (like the Vietnamese in the Auteur's movie), who lose their individuality when represented. In this sense, "claiming humanity was an insufficient and condescending gesture. Being able to present a narrator who's both human and inhuman was [his] way of challenging our subordination in dominant culture" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen: Anger" 361). Acknowledging this inhumanity in the participation in horrible crimes to correct manipulated elaborations of historical memories, is the only way to build a more human future and, possibly, to avoid committing the same crimes again.

This sharp critique of the Vietnamese construction of memory is strongly connected with the Hollywoodian representation of war and it sheds light on the influence of cultural products on the re-elaboration of the war. In particular, it denounces how political and economic power play a fundamental role in the circulation of such products on a global level, particularly extending the Vietnamese and above all American understandings of the war outside their national borders. Denouncing the crimes of both sides, the book itself becomes a powerful tool to resist such subordination (of Vietnamese victims by Americans and of Vietnamese ones by the Vietnamese themselves), especially if we consider its commercial success.

For what concerns American literature, the novel is an effective example of the efficacy of reshaping understandings of Americanness (patriots? white people saving

good yellow people from bad yellow people? war heroes? brave defenders of liberty and democracy?) from outside America itself, according to its actions beyond its national territory and from the way they relate to essentialized "others." In this case, it occurs in relation to the war waged in Vietnam. Reversing the subordination, the dehumanization, and the relegation to the background of Vietnamese people by dominant representations, Americans are nameless, seen from afar, often flat characters who serve as tools to criticize rather than all-rounded human beings. Vietnamese people, on the contrary, are the protagonists and the first audience. Such disruptive choice is what makes the novel a powerful example of the worlding of American literature, which literally takes the reader on a journey outside the US in order to reconsider its own and the Vietnamese's flawed memory constructions in a more ethical way.

### 3.3. Conclusion

The present chapter has focused on the analysis of those elements of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* that make it an example of the worldling of American literature. Firstly, I have given a historical and literary context of Asian and Vietnamese America, two categories to which the writer belongs since Nguyen's work as a novelist and as a scholar is rooted in this long tradition. In fact, the need of asserting minorities' Americanness was prominent in the generation of Asian Americans writers who published in the 1980s and 1990s, but it started to decline at the turn of the century. After important works such as Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* or Gish Jen's *Typical American* which discussed such topic, Nguyen, as many other contemporary Asian American writers, "did not feel the need to do that work." Instead, he wanted to "write from the perspective of someone who was not clearly an American, someone who was ambiguously Americanized, but who was also very clearly Vietnamese" ("Viet Thanh Nguyen | History").

In effect, in *The Sympathizer* the process of rethinking Americanness does not concern the Narrator's need to belong to America (a theme that instead is still dear to Arab American literature and Lalami, for example), but it is a process that involves issues of developing an ethic historical memory that entails an acknowledgement of political and cultural misrepresentation and of inhuman war crimes. For these reasons, the novel is rooted both in its American literary context, and in the Asian American one, in which he felt there was a lack of a proper, angry denounce of the Vietnam war that did not uphold a conciliatory perspective. In this sense, more than challenging the canon of American literature — in which Asian American have more visibility than Arab Americans — the novel demands, through its transnational stand, to acknowledge historical accountability, of the Americans, of the Vietnamese and, more in general, of all those who participate in warfare — as Nguyen's claim of being a "universal writer" shows.

The global dimension of the novel also lies in its very construction. In fact, *The Sympathizer* is conceived in dialectic relationship with Vietnamese, American, Asian American, French, Russian, etc. literary, cinematic, and cultural works. As shown earlier, it does contain an intricate network of cross-literary and cross-cultural references from a plethora of sources in various languages. On the one hand, through these direct and

indirect quotations the writer positions his novel within a specific (Asian American) tradition and, on the other, he establishes a truly transnational literary dialogue.

The first part of the analysis has concerned issues of doubleness and representation within the novel, with a specific focus on the relationship between dominant discourses and American cultural products, such as Hollywood movies. Although not his main goal, Nguyen's enterprise brings about the disruption of Americanness as a monolithic identity both by reclaiming a space for hybrid consciousnesses and by criticizing its involvement in a war in which they have committed serious crimes. From such critique, moved by an Americanized Vietnamese, we detect a new importance of questioning dominant cultural meanings and excluding essentializing practices, which are "actively and dialectically negotiated, in practice, and formulated strategically" on a political level (Werbner 8).Through the figures of the Department Chair, the Auteur and the Congressman, *The Sympathizer* directly engages with such practices revealing how they are built in order to maintain unequal power relations. However, the book also shows how easily reversed (but not corrected) these power inequalities can be: the victims become the victimizers and vice versa, in a never-ending cycle of abuse and violence.

The only way to correct distorted re-elaborations of history is to create what Nguyen calls "ethic memory" (*Nothing* 298) a theme that I have addressed in the second part of my analysis. In fact, the Sympathizer is confronted with his own forgotten participation in a horrible crime. Through deprivation and torture, he is finally able to retrieve that lost memory of the communist agent's rape. Although not directly participating, the Sympathizer has done nothing to stop it, thus becoming a victimizer. In this way, he is forced to admit the limits of his sympathy "talent" (*The Sympathizer* 19), as he defines it: having a "compass" that "points towards those who suffer" is only a first, although necessary, step towards accountability and ethical behavior (346). What is really necessary is for the Sympathizer to uphold an active sense of community that results in (political) action.

To conclude, the whole discussion about the manipulation of memory is also a powerful reflection on historical accountability that transcends national borders and that

should encourage the reader to put into question all collective memories.[68] Above all, Nguyen does not only remark the necessity to act against inhumanity on a personal level, but also on an institutional one, in particular, stressing the importance, for writers and scholars to always go beyond literary production to root it in concrete, collective actions. In this way, *The Sympathizer* is a powerful example of the worldling of the field.

[68] This is, in fact, currently a hot topic; let us think of the controverses about Columbus and Indro Montanelli statues, the Korean "comfort women" issue, etc.

# CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

"The core values and ideas of the nation emanate not from
the mainstream but from the margins."
(Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstream*, ix)

The focus of the present thesis has been the reading of two novels of migration that exemplify the new directions towards which the field of American Studies is moving. I have divided this work into three main chapters, dedicating the first one to the globalization phenomenon with its socio-cultural, political and historical consequences, the discussion of the world literature debate and the so-called worlding of American literature; the second and the third chapters have focused on the analysis of the two selected novels, Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, respectively. The key term that has connected the discussions about globalization, world literature, the worlding of the American Studies and the analysis of the two novels has been transnationality, namely all the activities that take place beyond and across national borders and regions, encompassing different areas of the globe. In this sense, a transnational approach highlights the consequences of the intense interdependence and interrelation among countries that characterize our global world, today as well as in the past.

For what concerns globalization, scholars pinpoint different phases that span from the prehistoric period to today, among which Columbus' voyage to the Americas and the post-WW2 period — the historical backgrounds of the novels selected — constitute two important phases of acceleration. Both periods are characterized by significant technological progresses, an increase in economic exchanges among world countries, and a peak in the circulation of goods and people. In fact, mass migration is one of the results of globalization, as the waves from the 'Global South' to the 'Global North' and the consequent creation of diasporic microcosmos show. In this sense, choosing two novels of migration does give a further insight about the globalization processes that have been so starkly shaping and still shape our contemporary world. Moreover, such processes

intertwine with local realities modifying them while, in return, being influenced. In fact, migration has had a strong impact on local and national spaces, undermining the very understanding of what, in the case of the US, is America and what it means to be American.

If it is true that narratives claiming homogeneous and hegemonic images of Americanness have always been used against diversity, it is in the last decades, especially after 9/11 and because of new migration waves, that such narratives have become more and more pervasive. For this reason, I have dedicated a consistent part of this thesis to the concept of othering, namely that process that creates binary oppositions characterized by a superior 'us' *versus* an inferior 'them.' Both oppositions are polarized, monolithic representations used to establish and maintain unequal power relations between a dominant and a dominated part. Americanness has been thus identified with whiteness, Christianity, West-European cultural and ethnic roots, democracy, patriotism, and exceptionalism. On the contrary, all those who do not conform to these standards have been relegated to a position of subalternity, as a homogeneous and highly stereotyped 'other.' In particular, the process of otherization does not only affect new migrants but also those who have been living on American soil for generations — as Lalami has discussed in *Conditional Citizens*. The power of otherization lays in its efficacy not only in the creation of a distorted image of the other, but also in its maintenance for long periods of time — possibly forever. The 'yellow peril,' 'model minority' and the image of Arabs as violent/terrorists (for men) or subjugated/sexualized victims/seductresses (for women) analyzed in the previous chapters are shown to be powerful stereotypes that have deep roots in history and that are still relevant today. The consequence of such process is the production of a biased homogeneity at the expense of diversity and humanity, and thus the lack of proper representation — in the media, politics, literature, etc. In this sense, the relegation of entire communities to a position of marginality is a fundamental step in their control through dominant discourses.

Such relegation to a position of marginality does not only occur on a local but also on a global scale. Since the mid-19$^{th}$ century, world literature debates have focused on the ways in which the circulation of literary works occur and the relationship among different literatures. Already at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century, scholars such as Georg Brandes, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett or Hugo Melztl analyzed the concepts of major

and minor literatures, issues of translation, polyglotism, cultural relativism and jingoism. At the turn of the 21st century, Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti and David Damrosch, among others, proposed a reading of the global literary field in which political and economic power relations among countries are reflected. The works of the three seminal scholars tend to study the literary field as a unified place, where a global approach presupposes the existence of national/regional spaces with their own indigenous literatures, which are subjected to foreign influences as literary works circulate through the international market. As a consequence, in their readings, the literary world is built on hegemonic hierarchies, which emerge even more clearly when analyzed with a global/transnational approach. In order to expose and correct this inequality, world literature scholars are to use more pluralistic and plurilinguistic perspectives that go beyond the Western sphere and to re-elaborate literary canons.

Although the study of the circulation of literature on a global level pertains to the world literature debate specifically, its transnational and comparative perspective is what grants the opening of the American Studies field that has been put forward since the end of the 1990s. Such 'worlding' approach has brought about a re-thinking of American foundational myths, of its literary as well as ethnic genealoies and, as a consequence, of what 'America' means, which are its borders and if they are as clear as they have been traditionally presented. Scholars like Paul Giles have indeed focused on the deconstruction of 'America' as a stable territory, exposing the fictiveness of its geographical and cultural boundaries and of its clearly circumscribed national identity. Through studies that stress the cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity within the US, recent scholarship has tried to undermine the idea of America in universalistic and exceptionalistic terms. In this sense, as many intellectuals argue, the field of American Studies may open to transnational and even comparative approaches in order to redefine its own structure. In this way, scholars should uphold, in their works, clear standpoints that aim at the achievement of social and political justice. The novels that I have chosen to analyze do, in fact, uphold a clear transnational/transregional approach that stems from a need for equality and recognition of all those who do not belong to the dominant part of society.

Before offering a conclusive discussion about the two novels, I would like to briefly dwell on Arab American and Asian American literatures at large. In fact, although

both fields often deal with similar themes, there are also some important differences that are worth mentioning. Firstly, Arab American literature is quantitively smaller than the Asian American one. On one side, this is due to the difference in the numbers of people belonging to the two communities: Arab Americans are 3.6 million (1.1% of the national population), while Asian Americans are more than 23 million (7% of the national population) ("Arab American Demographic"; Budiman and Ruiz). On the other side, Asian Americans have started to consistently migrate to the US before Arab Americans and, if the latter have been sometimes recognized as white — especially before 1920 —, the former have always been racially identified and discriminated. Specific laws against Asian American immigration, and in particular against people of Chinese descent, have been issued starting from 1875. Therefore, there are more Asian American anthologies, scholarly essays and literary works than Arab American ones. However, the first thing that has personally struck me was the name 'Asian America:' I have never come across any paper nor anthology referring to 'Arab America,' while scholarship often talks about 'Asian America' — an important term that reclaims not only a literary but also a physical space within the US. Finally, Arab American literature is characterized by a strong political connection with Arab countries, even after the first generation of immigrants, while Asian American literature, although highly politicized, tends to engage with the politics of the US area.

Both literatures currently focus on issues of racial hierarchies, American imperialism, gender roles, social norms, the importance of claiming one's unique voice and autonomy, and a more comfortable understanding of their bi- or multi-cultural identity, and both are always inscribed into the American panorama in a way that challenges the hegemonic and essentialist understanding of US citizenship and belonging. Finally, recent debates about the futures of Asian American literatures have focused on the possibility of including the works of Arab Americans and Muslim Asian Americans, especially after "the detentions and deportations of South Asian, Muslim, and Arab Americans following 9/11" (Song and Srikanth 33). In fact, the boundaries of Asian America have been blurred by scholars who have included works of Arab Americans (Mohja Kahf, Naomi Shihab Nye or Suheir Hammad) in their discussions of Asian American writers and poets. Such trajectory might lead to interesting outcomes in the future for both fields (32-34).

I have dedicated Chapter Two and Three to the analysis of Lalami's *The Moor's Account* and Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. Both novels focus on the redefinition of America and Americanness through a transnational/transregional and pluralistic perspective in two important moments of American history: the age of the first explorations and the Vietnam War. Lalami's work undermines the idea of America as a culturally and ethnic homogeneous place that has been 'discovered' by Europeans, and Nguyen's one focuses on a re-reading of American history in an ethical way. By writing a fictional memoir based on the historical figure of Mustafa Azemmur, a black Arab Muslim, Lalami overturns the image of the first white explorers who reached the 'promised land' of America. As for the Narrator's confession in *The Sympathizer*, Mustafa's account is conceived as a counter history, as a narrative that exposes the erasure of those who have been silenced through the selective process of collective memory creation — Mustafa, Ramatullai, the indigenous people in America, the slaves in Seville, Ms. Mori, the Narrator's mother, the communist agent, etc.

By reclaiming a space for those voices, both novels stress the importance of individualities and the impossibility of using one single voice as the representant of all the oppressed. In particular, the Sympathizer uses the trope of in-betweenness and of cultural/ethnic duality as a means to blur the boundaries between those radically opposed 'us' and 'them,' which are used by traditional narratives to maintain unequal power relations. Against homogeneity, *The Sympathizer* reveals how nuanced human beings are, as they contain in themselves both human and inhuman traits, at the same time loyal and traitors, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, American and non-American. Above all, both Lalami and Nguyen's novels show the uniqueness of every individual identity and experiences and the impossibility to be reduced to a shapeless and anonymous 'other.' Such unique experiences subverting oppressive practices and fighting against silence are understood as part of a collectivity — not the homogeneous community that the masters/colonizers/owners of the means of production present, but a heterogeneous one. In fact, the novels end with a sense of community, both using the first-person plural:

> Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague reflections of what *we* saw and what *we* heard, what *we* felt and what *we* thought. Maybe if *our* experiences,

> in all of their glorious, magnificent colors, *were somehow added up*, they would lead *us* to the blinding light of the truth. (Lalami 336) [69]
>
> And even as *we* write this final sentence, the sentence will not be revised, *we* confess to being certain of one and only one thing — *we* swear to keep, on penalty of death, this one promise:
> *We will live!* (348)

This sense of community is firstly carved out the page, in the act of writing and storytelling. In fact, *The Moor's Account* is thought as a memoir and *The Sympathizer* as a confession — which can however be read as a memoir, too. The act of writing informs both novels and it is a powerful tool to achieve freedom and a more just reading of history. In this sense, I have analyzed *The Moor's Account* through the lens of Pheng Cheah's theory of postcolonial narrative, according to which Mustafa's story can be understood as a teleological project of freedom achievement. In fact, the novel establishes alternative temporalities, identities, traditions, languages, geographies, etc., which undermine the dominant idea of America as a monolith characterized by a single culture, religion and language. In the same way, *The Sympathizer* shifts the perspective from outside the US (in the Philippines and in Vietnam) to show how its own image of Americans as heroes, always standing on the right side of history, brave patriots and democracy fighters is nothing but a manipulation. Nguyen uses his Narrator's elegant prose to expose the atrocities committed by Americans and the Vietnamese during the war and the unjust and racist creation of stereotyped 'others' in the movie industry. In this way, in both novels language becomes a powerful means to speak up against injustice and to redefine Americanness in ethical terms: colonization, slavery, imperialism as well as plurilinguism, multiculturalism and ethnic and religious diversity are part of the history of the US and therefore they must be acknowledged.

*The Moor's Account* challenges the idea of America as a geographically stable territory and of its origins described in the 'myth of discovery.' In fact, the entire novel debunks the idea of Columbus as the first to arrive to America and as America itself as a

[69] Italics is mine in both quotes.

'virgin land' 'discovered' by Europeans. By showing several indigenous tribes and the complexity of their society as well as of the relationships among them, Lalami gives an alternative representation of the origins of the US — a place that has always been characterized by constant movement of people and cultures, a space of transregional exchanges and of plurality. Moreover, a brief description of the Narváez expedition, taken from Cabeza de Vaca's chronicles, immediately shows the ethnic, cultural and religious variety of the *conquistadores*, the settlers and the countless slaves brought along. In this way, Mustafa's story becomes an attempt at revising the cultural formations based on a hegemonic understanding of the American nation and thus a remapping of its literary canons.

Lalami's *The Moor's Account* can also be read as a clear standpoint against those post-9/11 narratives that depict Muslims and Arabs as perpetual foreigners and enemies — possibly terrorists — that will never belong in the US. By presenting Mustafa, a character based on a historical figure, Lalami shows how Arabs and Muslims have been there since the beginning of the creation of 'America' and reminds the readers of how nuanced Arabness and Islam are. On the same line, in his *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen highlights the analogy between the Vietnam War and the American military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as Yemen, Pakistan, etc., and shows how America's war waging, racism, and economic exploitation are all connected (51-7). In effect, Nguyen compares Hollywood's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) — against which he moves a stark critique in *The Sympathizer* — to *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *American Sniper* (2014). The three movies are part of the "memory industry" that "exploit[s] memory as a strategic resource" to create "kitsch, sentimentality, spectacle […] and mass-produced fantasies" that "reproduce power and inequality" (237-242). It does not matter if these distorted representations affect Vietnamese people or Arabs; they are all served the "same propagandistic treatment" in order to affirm a manipulated version of history that sees Americans as heroes and the true victims of the conflict (231). Against such control of representation, Nguyen presents an ethical version of history that shades light on the horrors perpetrated by both parts of the conflicts. Making use of those "flexible strategies" that he describes in *Race and Resistance*, Nguyen uses the same capitalistic means exploited by the industry of memory — in his case, embodied by the English book market and the prestige of the Pulitzer Prize — to counteract those historical representations

manipulated by American means of production. Although in different ways, both Lalami and Nguyen effectively propose two powerful narratives that give space to oppressed individualities, opposing heterogeneity to homogeneity, and thus challenging traditional and mainstream discourses of Americanness.

To conclude, the aim of the present thesis has been to discuss the opening of American literature to transnational and plural approaches — what I have called the 'worlding' of American literature. The novels selected offer an insightful reflection on the meanings of Americanness and of what America itself is. Through a journey outside America, Lalami and Nguyen have challenged mainstream narratives that insist on essentialist ideas of America that exclude its ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistical diversity. Above all, they claim their own narratives against the brutal power of history and memory-making that so starkly tries to represent them in its own terms. Remarking the individuality of human beings while stressing the importance of belonging to a collectivity, both novels are a powerful example of the importance of writing and of its ability of shaping our reality through the creation of literary worlds.

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