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Final Thesis

**John Keene's "Counternarratives":
An Act of Narrative Power**

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INTRODUCTION

"We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narratives--- stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors" (Bruner, 1991, 4)

Without this quote coming from Jerome Bruner's 1991 essay "The Narrative Construction of Reality" this thesis probably would not exist.

When embarking on the task of analyzing a text the title of which is *Counternarratives*, my first concern has been that of consolidating the definition of the original concept of narrative in the first place. The work of the American psychologist on this complex issue has been fundamental for me in this first stage of my research.

The idea according to which a narrative is a tool through which human beings would shape reality rather than simply interpreting it, is at the base of this dissertation.

The interpretative effort of making something coherent of what is happening around us, puts us in the position of seeing events through a personal point of view, which is inevitably influenced by our personal experiences and the social/cultural context in which we were born and we live; or as Bruner would put it: "Knowledge is never point-of-viewless".

Presenting the central aim of his essay Bruner states how his interest is not in analyzing how an abstract narrative "turns into actual text, but rather "how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality".

Bruner Answers these question in the following section of his essay where he outlines what he calls "The Ten Features of Narrative"; these are concepts such as Narrative Diachronicity, Particularity, Canonicity and Breach, or Genericness.

that have helped me define the concept of narrative, and, consequently, that of Counternarrative.

How do the concepts I have just presented come into play in the context of John Keene's work? What is the difference between a narrative and a Counternarrative? The idea of cultural transmission of narratives plays a key role in this distinction. The cultural hegemony of the historical and social context in which the standards for fiction as we intend it were born was fundamentally white and eurocentric. This self-evident truth has shaped the concept of narrative, resulting in literary canons that inevitably adhere to these dynamics.

The literary genres that have spawned naturally from these canons (gothic novel, detective story, historical novel, plantation novel, picaresque novel, expedition reports...) are consequently connotated by this cultural hegemony: they follow white/European characters in mostly European settings, or in the act of exploring and seizing the "New World".

This canonical" idea of narrative is the point of departure from which Keene starts building his concept of Counternarrative.

What the author proposes with the short stories of this collection, in fact, is a recontextualization of the "narrative" category under a completely different light.

In an effort to emancipate his brand of black literature from the European canons and standards, the author operates what in my analysis I call a "Decolonization of Literature". As a support to this particular aspect of my project, alongside Bruner's ideas on narratives and their construction, I also employ some of Henry Louis Gates Jr's considerations on black literature from his seminal book *The Signifying Monkey*. Through his fiction, Keene finally gives voice to Black and Indigenous figures making them the center of the narrations and shifting their role from that of stereotypical secondary characters to that of protagonists; highlighting in this shift the fundamental dichotomy between Personal history and Official history at the center of many of the stories. The American continent with its history becomes, so, another central character of Keene's work. My analysis examines Keene's "Pan-American" idea of fiction, looking into the relationship between the past and the present of the continent, and taking into consideration the use the author makes of foundational

symbols and texts of the American identity.

Most crucially, though, Keene's short stories are opportunities to talk about key issues such as personal/group identity, self-determination, and personal freedom.

My dissertation focuses on these themes and tries to analyze how they come into contact with Bruner's concept of narrative in the categories of "Life Narrative" and Autobiography.

Following the author's division of the book into three sections, I analyze how these issues follow an imaginary trajectory, shaped by acts of authority, that serves as a structure to the collection as a whole, and gives meaning to the two interrelated categories of Counternarrative, and Encounternarrative that Keene proposes.

PART 1 “COUNTERNARRATIVES”

1.1 "Mannahatta"

Having considered, in the introduction of my thesis, the concept of narrative, its features according to Bruner's text, and its relationship with the other key concepts of personal identity and self-affirmation, I will now proceed to analyze how Keene actually brings these concepts to life in his short stories.

As I have said in the introduction, in fact, the eloquent title of the first section of Keene's book: *Counternarratives* definitely puts upfront many questions about the nature of the narrative and, what, consequently, might be "Counter" to or about it. I have already presented some of the concepts that will help me throughout this analysis in the introduction where I have talked about Jerome Bruner's "10 Features of narratives". The ideas of Particularity or Canonicity and Breach definitely belong, in fact, to the realm of narrative. What might make Keene's stories Counternarratives is, therefore, the aim, the intention Keene has in mind when using these tools.

"Mannahatta" as the opening short story of the book makes no exception and represents a quintessential example of this new Counternarrative category we are just starting to explore.

In talking about the feature of Particularity Bruner says: "Narratives take as their

ostensive reference particular happenings, but this is [...] their vehicle rather than their destination. For stories fall into more general types." (Bruner,1991, 6)

Narratives fall into literary genres; their characters, settings, and events inevitably adhere to some sort of tropes, and it's in the details with which the writer decides to fill this general structure that lays the element that Bruner calls "Suggestiveness".

"Particularity reaches its emblematic status by its embeddedness in a story that is in some sense generic [...] it is by virtue of this embeddedness in the genre that narrative particulars can be "filled in" when they are missing from an account. The Suggestiveness of a story lies, then, in the emblematic nature of its particulars, its relevance to a more inclusive narrative type." (Bruner,1991, 7)

These notions are also strictly linked to another pair that Bruner presents in his 10 features: Canonicity and Breach.

If we consider narrated events as "Canonical scripts", events that happen in a certain way because of the genre they belong to and the tropes they abide by, we can see the importance of these two terms.

For to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated or deviated in a manner to do violence to what Hayden White calls the "legitimacy" of the canonical script.[...] Breaches of the canonical, like the scripts breached, are often highly conventional and are strongly influenced by narrative traditions. [...] and this is perhaps, what makes the innovative storyteller such a Powerful figure in a Culture. He may go beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way, indeed in a way they had never before noticed or even dreamed (Bruner 1991, 11-12).

Hence, what are the breaches and deviations that Keene applies to the canonical script his short story "Mannahatta" should follow; and why do these breaches make of it a Counternarrative rather than a simple, even if innovative, narrative?

If we wanted to track down the canonical script to which "Mannahatta" belongs we wouldn't have a particularly hard time. The short story, in terms of its pure fabula,

simply reports the docking of a lonesome canoe on a swampy and unexplored island. In the most topical of the scenes we're shown the explorer seeing earth for the first time after his navigation, and finally touching it.

The explorer even makes some comments on the luscious nature of the new island and mentions the possibility of indigenous inhabitants populating it.

All of these elements directly remind us of the many reports by famous explorers we've been exposed to as a foundational trope of the narrative about the origins of the American continent. The most eminent examples of this tradition are Columbus' letters to the royal family in Spain, Amerigo Vespucci's reports, or those by Alvar Nùñez Cabeza de Vaca, all texts that someone studying American literature and culture is well aware of, of their contents and form.

Although it is not explicit, in fact, we can imagine that Keene's target reader is someone who's versed in American culture and has, therefore, the means to analyze the text according to an imaginary national mythology of the States, identifying symbolic events and objects in the narratives.

If we consider these examples as the canon Keene is working with, any variation from the standard form or the canonic content of such texts is, therefore, a deliberate choice of the author that contributes to his conception of Counternarrative.

For Keene, writing a Counternarrative means to re-elaborate the classic texts and their tropes, operating changes on the settings, the points of view, the characters, to create new narratives that have always remained unexpressed.

The variation from the narrative canon, assumes, in Keene's project, also a political meaning; it is something that wishes to operate on the text as much as on the culture that produced it.

Starting from the title we can notice how Keene likes to re-elaborate the classical literary genres and play with the perception and knowledge of the reader.

Mannahatta is an Algonquin word meaning "Island full of Hills", the Lenape indigenous tribe living in the northeastern part of the United States between Vermont, Delaware, and New York, used to identify the area we now all know as Manhattan,

one of the five boroughs of New York.

Being introduced to a place we all know for the incredible exposure it has on every possible media, but in a way that doesn't match the knowledge we have about the place definitely creates a striking effect.

The author plays with our expectations and our knowledge, as informed readers of the text, saying the story he's about to narrate is not set in the Manhattan we all know, but in a place that has now been erased, no longer exists, but is paradoxically more original and official than the Manhattan of our perception.

With this title Keene is already suggesting to us that the Manhattan we all know is a product of the European cultural egemony of the same explorers and conquistadors his short story is trying to reelaborate the diaries and reports of.

Keene's setting hasn't got a Spanish name, as many newly discovered islands or patches of lands had in the embryonic stage of the exploration of the American continent (Florida, Hispaniola...), it's got an Indigenous name.

This particular, this breach from the conventional script, despite being so trivial, is reinforcing one of the real and profound aims of Keene's concept of Counternarrative: the decolonization of literature, literary genres, and their white-European heritage.

What about Keene's explorer figure; how does he fit in this counternarrative?

It's definitely interesting to notice, if we follow a narratological approach, how this novel is told by an external narrator that addresses the main protagonist of the story in the third person. Most of the short stories in this first section of the book will follow this structure. When we imagine the standard figure of the explorer/colonizer, the literary forms that come to our mind are diaries or letters, texts in which the voice of the narrator coincides with the voice of the main character.

Despite the fact that we are going to see our protagonist taking an important stance in this narration we are still denied the possibility to hear his story in the first person.

"Mannahatta" as the first story of the collection, serves as a starting point in the trajectory towards the self-affirmation of the personal identity and authority I am analyzing, and this role makes the presence of a first-person narrator impossible.

This is a perfect example of a breach from canonicity that encompasses at the same time the form and the content of the narrative.

We know, about our explorer, that he's got many names according to who's calling him; this opens another really interesting "fil rouge" for the first section of the book. Quite like the island on which he has just set foot, our explorer has been imposed a colonizing film over his name, and thus, his identity. He's got a Spanish name for the Spanish colonizers of Santo Domingo, a Danish names for the Danish crew of the ship where he works, a Portuguese name for his Portuguese father and friends, but most of all he's got an indigenous name coming from the tribe of his mother, a name that he has to keep as a secret. This last affirmation problematizes, to a certain degree, the role of the external narrator telling the story. Even if it would not sound logical, it almost seems as if the external narrator was meta-narratively respecting the will of his protagonist keeping its secret.

M and Mannahatta with their indigenous heritage expressed in their names are counterposed to the European settlers: they are the repository of that version of history that has been colonized and therefore erased; this makes them the protagonists of the counternarrative. The contrast between Indigenous language and cultural heritage and the European power which tries to impose itself over it, is the centre of this short story and many that will follow it in the first section of the book.

M is just the first of many characters that will use the tools of indigenous traditions and language to achieve a form of personal affirmation and freedom.

"With the key of this language that most of the Dutch on the ship assured him they could not fully hear, he had himself unlocked a door" (Keene, 4)

Even if M. doesn't speak for himself in the short story, in fact, as a character he makes some very important actions that put him in a condition of authority, almost we could say, for the first time in his life.

His marking of the territory, though, isn't that of an European explorer who examines the nature and conformation of the newfound land to seize it, proclaim it as his to then exploit it and its inhabitants.

He sees the island as a getaway, he is in the final analysis more of a fugitive than an explorer. His drive for the marking of the territory is motivated only by his desire for self-affirmation; he wants the island to be his island so that he can feel free to be himself, as he never had the possibility to.

"There was always the possibility that one of the first people, whom he expected to appear at any moment [...] would untie the markers, erase the hatchings, thereby erasing this spot specificity, for him, returning it to the anonymity that every step there, as on every ship he had sailed on, every word he had never before spoken, every face he had never seen until he did, once held." (Keene, 5)

The island is seen as a new perspective by our explorer, something that can project him in a better future. Ironically the same view could be applied to the European explorers that used to magnify the qualities of newly discovered pieces of land as if they were true heavens descended on earth. The difference between M. and his more official European counterparts is that he wants to break every possible tie with the original continent he feels he doesn't belong to, and with the condition of slavery he mentally associates with it: "When he returned a week later, his canoe and a skiff laden with ampler sacks, of flint, candles, seeds, a musket, his sword, a small tarp to protect him from the rain, enough hatchets and knives to ensure his work as a trader, and translator, never to return to the *Jonge Tobias*, or any other ship, nor to the narrow alleys of Amsterdam or his native Hispaniola." (Keene, 6).

This is a passage in which the content of Keene's narration bridges the gap with the intentions of the writer himself in an almost meta-narrative fashion; the character is expressing the will to break every contact he's had with the European/colonizer influence to embrace the indigenous side of his heritage, and so is doing Keene with his work, trying to create a pan-American shared narrative for the indigenous people of the continent, a counternarrative that never had the possibility to be heard.

On a final note, I would also like to point out the symbolical impact of the central marking element that M. leaves on the island as a signal: a cross.

Even considered the aim of a "decolonizing narrative", we cannot avoid to notice the

fact that M. is really a mestizo character, one that inevitably brings in him, by the part of his father, a Catholic/Christian element to his identity, making his condition more troubled and complex.

This condition also helps us to speak about black literature, and consequently Keene's own writing. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. says in his seminal text *The Signifying Monkey*: "black texts are "mulattoes" (or "mulatas"), with a two toned heritage. These texts speak in the standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent [...] that Signifies (upon) the various black vernacular traditions, which are still being written down."(Louis Gates Jr, 1988, Introduction)

1.2 "On Brazil, Or Dénouement: The Londonias-Figueiras"

The second short story of Keene's collection is already much more structurally complex than "Mannahatta" that could be considered, in fact, more of an introduction to the whole collection.

Despite this, an analysis of the title, quite like for the first short story I have considered, tell us a lot about the short story itself.

This is the first short story in this section of the book to have a title that heavily resembles that of a historical treaty; Keene will maintain this format for the rest of the short stories in this section, opening his fiction to another fundamental theme of the book; the relation between official history and personal history. All the short stories of this first section of the book are, indeed, narratives that delve into the personal lives of their characters but still framing them in the broader context of real official history with its data.

Bruner's notion of diachronicity helps us understanding this inextricable bond.

A narrative is an account of events happening over time [...] The time involved, moreover, as Paul Ricoeur has noted is "human Time" rather than abstract or "clock" time. It is time whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass. [...] There are many

conventions for expressing the sequenced durativity of narrative even in discourse, like flashbacks, and flash-forwards, temporal synecdoche, and so on (Bruner, 1991, 6).

The conceptions of time of official history and narrative are, therefore, radically different but they inevitably inform each other.

If we think about the time in official history as a general account of the events happening through a span of time and in a chronological order all over the world, then narrative history time is something that filters all of these data provided, enhances some of them, completely omits some of them, puts some that happened before, after, and vice-versa: "We seem to have no other way of describing "lived time" save in the form of a narrative. Which is not to say that there are no other forms that can be imposed on the experience of time, but none of them succeeds in capturing the sense of lived time." (Bruner, 1987, 12) In describing, finally, the relation between these two different conceptions of time Bruner finds himself borrowing two terms from the tradition of Russian Formalism. He talks about *Fabula* as a set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence, while *Syuzhet* is described as the same set of narrated situations and events as they are presented to the reader after the reordering and modifications operated by the writer.

Going back to the title of the short story we can better understand its significance.

The short story title is really three titles merged into a bigger one; we have "On Brazil", then we have "Dénouement" and finally "The Londonias".

This three subtitles are three separate narrative threads that contribute to the same united and coherent narrative despite being texts that belong in different genres, but most of all different temporal and geographical coordinates.

We have already discussed in "Mannahatta" how Keene's narratives tend to be place-specific, embracing the setting of the story as a real protagonist alongside the human beings that live inside it; but "On Brazil" puts this concept even more upfront.

The first one of the three sub-titles almost sounds to the reader as it could be a full-on dissertation about the South-American colossus, and it is in a certain way, both from a

historical and geographical but most of all sociological point of view.

Where "On Brazil", then, seems to offer us the data of official disciplines, "The Londonias" is a family narrative that focuses completely on the personal history of a rich dynasty of Portuguese origins in the business of the sugar cane plantation in the rural northern part of the country from the 17th to the 20th century.

We see, therefore, how personal and official history both come into play into Keene's narrative and are indissolubly linked through the final of the three sub-narratives: "On Dénouement", that focuses on a single event happening in present-day Brazil.

In my opinion, in this short story, there are two levels that the reader should be picking up some clues from to really understand the deep message the author is trying to convey through its narrative. First, the past influences the present, and as a consequence, the present ends up mirroring the past, secondly, Brazil as a country, and more generally America as a continent, as we know them today, were both built on the institution of slavery, and the Slave-Master relationships we can observe inside a family unit are at the base of the same kind of relationships on an institutional/governmental scale.

These two levels work one alongside the other constructing Keene's Counternarrative. The short story opens with what seems to be a newspaper article about the discovery of the beheaded body of the banking heir Sergio Inocencio Maluuf Figueiras by the hands of the chief detective S.A. Brito Viana in a favela in the outskirts of Sao Paulo. This article is notable for two reasons; first and foremost its being a newspaper article, secondly the emphasis on names.

The use of a newspaper excerpt is meaningful in the context of this short story since it is just one of the external source that Keene decides to include in the narration.

The author resorts to geographical maps, family trees, tribunal reports, all external elements that he decides to include inside his fiction world.

This concerns the element of official history permeating in Keene's Counternarrative. It gives strength to the aura of officiality of the story, and together with other elements it is the way in which the European cultural Hegemony is imposed on the narrative.

The external elements are paired with an external narrator that, once again, imposes his neutral point of view all over the situations, preventing us, yet another time to hear the voices of the oppressed and unheard, hiding the counternarrative.

Another key element of this short story is the attention on names, that is, in my opinion one of the biggest "traits d'union" between the three sub-narratives.

Viana and Maluuf Figueiras, the surnames we have just read in the newspaper, Londonias, the surname we're going to meet in a moment are the real reading key through which we should read the short story.

Keene with a highly artificial but effective stylistic trick plays with recursivity transforming the three different narratives into one singular revenge narrative that encompasses five centuries of Brazilian history.

In the central sub-narrative that constitutes the body of the short story, the author draws the family tree of a rich family of Portuguese traders, the Londonias that become even more prominent in a series of cross-marriages with the noble Figueiras family. In reality, though, Keene uses the story of this family unit as a footprint to sketch a symbolical parable about the Brazilian country as a whole.

The Londonia's family story starts with a man escaping from a violent crime he has committed and mating with a mixed-race woman, as if Keene was suggesting that the marks of violence and Mestizo identity were at the core of the Brazilian identity itself. This effect is accentuated, as mentioned above by the use of many paratextual elements, in this case, in particular, the first of the two geographical maps we will see in the short story, representing Colonial Brazil.

Keeping on sketching the Londonias family tree Keene starts playing with names. Talking about Maria Amada he says: "she produced several children, only one of whom--- Francisco, who was known as "Inocencio" for his marked simplicity of expression--- lived to adulthood." (Keene,11)

From this point on the Londonia, later Londonia-Figueiras family will maintain the second name "Inocencio" as a mark of their ancestry, but rather paradoxically this name that inevitably makes us think of innocence will be applied to family members

that are rather the opposite of this virtue; fierce, stubborn, even vicious people.

The first real big event in the story of the Londonia family we are presented with is a rebellion in José's plantation lead by the black slave Cesarao. As an event that will have a big impact in the family story and inevitably in the economy of Keene's short story itself, we see here the concept of human time coming into existence.

This single episode will be so central to the story that its significance will be incredible even four centuries after it's happened, the reader just doesn't know it yet.

Làzaro Inocencio Londonia Figueiras will be the real focus of the family tree narration from now on. His career in the military will bring him to lead a command of soldiers against the Dutch Army threatening to gain land in the northern parts of the Portuguese colony. Làzaro's expedition turns out to be unsuccessful on account of a dynamic we have already seen in "Mannahatta"; the dichotomy between the European and the Indigenous sets of knowledge.

"As they moved inland on foot, Londonia's men realized he was as unfamiliar as they with the difficult, nearly impassably dense forest terrain." (Keene, 13)

Everything Londonia knows about is the life of the plantation and the civilized activities of the biggest city centers; the woods, nature, are again presented as the kingdom of the Indigenous/Black people.

"he could see beyond a fringe of mahogany trees a tiny settlement [...] It was, he realized soon enough a quilombo." (Keene, 15)

The quilombo, as an independent community of fugitive slaves, as there have been many in Brazil during that period, marks a new arrival on the scene of the slave as a figure that takes part in the narrative, something that has been almost marking the time of this short story.

We can start to see a pattern here: the precipitating events in Keene's syuzhet are all moments in which the slave-master relationship becomes evident and reaches an apex. With an incredible and macroscopic temporal ellipsis; Keene projects the reader in the third sub-narrative: "On Dènouement".

We find ourselves in 20th century Brazil where we're shown how the Figueiras family

has managed to maintain its noble status throughout the centuries becoming a rich family in modern-day Brazil.

"In 1966, the model Francesca Josefina Schweisser Figueiras, daughter of army chief General Adolfo Schweisser and the socialite Mariana Augusta "Gugu" Figueiras Figueiras, married Albertino Maluuf [...] Their youngest son, Sergio Albertino, was known as "Inocencio", a family nickname given, for as back as anyone could recall, to at least one of the Figueiras boy in each generation." (Keene, 24)

Sergio Albertino brings in his name the heritage of his ancestry, then, and even in his appearance; Keene describes his "Emerald eyes, skin white as moonstone, a swan's neck" with the same exact words he had used for a minor figure in the Londonia's dynasty in the previous sub-narrative.

But it's with Lázaro that the young Sergio shares his personality traits, like his old ancestor he's stubborn, fierce, he loves risk.

Keene describes him as venturing out in the favelas, the neighborhood of Sao Paolo reserved for poor people and criminals, and it's difficult not to see the mirror image of Lázaro venturing into the forest and discovering the quilombo.

In the rich neighborhood-favela dichotomy, we see mirrored the colonial city-quilombo one, and the next step is inevitably trying to expand this dichotomy to a whole system.

Keene is trying to say that the master-slave relationship is still an existing dynamic in action in Brazilian society, it has just changed its modalities.

The recursivity through which the author has been conveying this message reaches its peak in the beheading of Sergio Albertino in the favela; just the opposite of what had happened centuries before.

This time the poorest and lowest fringes of the society have taken their personal revenge over the ruling class, accomplishing the final and definitive act of decolonization of the short story.

In the last paragraph, which is again titled "On Brazil", Keene brings the consequences of his work to their conclusion adding some details that add a further

layer of complexity to the story.

In bringing back the parallel between the personal history of the Londonias and the official history of Brazil, Keene tells us how even a megacity as Sao Paulo has started his days as a little village "On the periphery of the portuguese state."(Keene, 25)

These notions are reported by professor Dr. Arturo Figueiras Wernitzky (completely made up by Keene's mind, so we are again brought to think that the author has paid close attention to his surname).

Figueiras Wernitzky also talks about the people inhabiting the infamous Sao Paolo's favelas: "*nordestino* migrants, many of them of African ancestry, were members of the Londonia family." (Keene, 26) We must suppose, then, that the young Sergio Albertino has been beheaded by someone that belongs to the mixed-race branch of his same family tree.

Keene showcases in this passage his formidable ability of playing exactly on the subtle verge between official and personal history, using reasonably official data to create the biggest plot twist in his fictional narrative.

Keene's final touch also falls in the category of the small details that make a great difference.

We're told that the favela where Sergio is Beheaded is called N. by the authorities; an N that could stand for *Novissima* (Newest), or *Mais Notório* (Most Notorious), or even *Nada Lugar* (No place), but the residents, instead, call it *QUILOMBO CESARAO*.

This simple particular opens two final threads in the short story.

Symbolically we witness Cesarao's revenge on the Londonia-Figueira family, the beheaded turns into the beheader.

1.3 "An Outtake From The Ideological Origins Of The American Revolution"

In many respects, the third short story of the collection is really similar to the previous one. We get the same aspect of official history and personal history intermingling, the same chronological report about characters' lives, and even the same internal structure divided into shorter chapters.

Although, I would say that the most important parallel we could make about the two texts is precisely Keene's intention in writing them and how his approach is organic to it. The author, in fact, presents us again a personal history that, in some way, he deems to be paradigmatic about the official historical and geographical context in which the events are set. Just like "On Brazil" aimed at raising a discourse about the identity of the South American state and how its past inevitably informs its present, through the family tree of the Londonias-Figueiras family; this third short story sketches out something similar to a moral tale about the conceptions of freedom and identity in the United States through the personal history of the young slave Zion.

This said, also the differences between the two short stories are definitely interesting. For example, Keene here decides to focus on a particular period of time abandoning macroscopic flashbacks and flash-forwards and building his story around the timespan of the main character's life, a timespan that is so crucial even to the history of the United States for its symbolic value.

The second stark difference, instead, is fundamental to the role of the short story inside the collection, in my opinion.

Even if the narrator keeps on being someone external to the story reporting it in the third person, Zion, a black character is the undisputed protagonist of the novel.

Tracing the parable of self-affirmation we are reading these short stories through, this is a step forward from "On Brazil" where the point of view of the African/Indigenous people was completely cut out from the narrative.

Starting, as always, the analysis of the text from its title, we can see how the trend of officiality of the title expressed through the aspect of technicality, also applies to this short story. We have another treaty-like title suggesting that the author is putting his fiction and official disciplines in a reciprocal relation: historical, geographical, sociological data are used to inform the fiction which in turn ends up being an occasion comment on said disciplines.

The different sections in which the short story is, in turn, divided, contribute to this reciprocal relation with their sub-titles that constantly point towards it.

If we face, in fact, the idea of official disciplines informing the text, we are also told by the author himself that this still is a work of fiction, and so it escapes from these dynamics, offering in the very idea of an Outtake an unexpressed point of view.

The first section of the short story is, in fact, titled "Origins" taking a central word from the title of the story.

Whereas in the title of the whole short story the origins are those of the American Revolution, though, the origins of the first section's title are explicitly those of the protagonist; Zion: "In January 1754, Mary, a young Negro servant to Isaac Wantone, wealthy farmer and patriot of the town of Roxbury, Massachusetts, gave birth in her master's stables to a male child." (Keene, 27)

This first scene already presents upfront the two main themes of the short story: the topic of identity and that of freedom.

Keene suggests through many hints scattered in the first page how the newborn's identity isn't as clear-cut as we could imagine. The first of these hints is directly in the childbirth scene where we have two highly contrasting actions: we witness a woman experiencing one of the most painful moments of her life and recurring to her native African language to do so, and her son, the product of her immense effort, being promptly imposed a name coming from Judeo-Christian tradition.

Mary's shriek is described as "In part her native Akan", as to suggest that also the woman too doesn't only have East-African heritage, but rather a more complex identity that has already undergone some process of mixing with other Indigenous or European heritages.

This part of Zion's cultural heritage, though, is hastily denied and covered by the imposition of a name that doesn't belong to the newborn or her mother's tradition, but it's only the product of their master's choice and expression.

Mary herself, has clearly been given this Christian name by someone else, maybe Wantone, maybe a previous owner, however it's certainly symbolic that she has the same name as Virgin Mary and we are about to witness the life of her child.

Wantone's imposition of the name is the first early affirmation of his power and

position of ownership over Zion which is, as a consequence, in the condition of having been born a slave by nature.

Keene also suggests in this first chapter that Wantone himself might be Zion's father, so the child could be even a more direct product of these two heritages mixing.

This suspicion is, however, silenced by Wantone himself that doesn't want to see his reputation and the marriage with his wife being jeopardized.

Of the general silence inside the house about the possible scandal, Keene writes:

"Toward neither plan did he meet with rebellion; so it is said that one's sense of the law, like one's concept of morality, originates in the home." (Keene, 28)

This phrase is fundamental since it introduces in the text the concept of "Relative" which will be important for the understanding of the ending of the short story.

Wantone's perception of the concepts of law and morality is inevitably biased by his condition of power.

In the second chapter of this narrative, "Music", we see which great influence this element has on Zion's life. After his birth, Zion is handed over to the care of the slave Lacy. Lacy sings to put Zion to sleep, giving a start to the child's relation with this means of expression.

"She also sang to him the lively songs she remembered from her childhood along the lower Volta, in the Gold Coast, as well as the Christian hymns when any member of the family, especially her mistress, was in earshot." (Keene, 29). Again we can see how the element of music is used to reinforce the image of Zion's double heritage.

The figure of the slave New Mary, who substitutes Lacy in the task of taking care of Zion is really useful to the economy of the short story since her condition is in contrast to that of Zion himself.

"She had been born in the region of the Gambia, where all were free, and quickly chafed under the weight of her new status. She ignored orders; she talked back. Moreover she was given to spreading rumors and painting her face and fingers gaily with Roxbury clay and indigo on the Sabbath, while declining to recite the Lord's prayers." (Keene, 29-30)

Along with the memory of freedom New Mary also brings inside her that of her African/Indigenous heritage; she's a stubborn figure who hasn't still had the time to bend under the yoke of slavery

Under the Influence of New Mary, Zion begins to develop a similar restless attitude that he starts expressing exactly through music: "during New Mary's tenure Zion had often shown signs of melancholy or unprovoked anger. Frequently sullen, he would often sequester himself in the buttery [...] singing to himself lyrics improvised out of the air or songs he had learned from Lacy and the other slaves." (Keene, 30)

The Irishman Ford, who oversees over Wantone's territory, later becomes another source of melodies for Zion songs that start absorbing in them all of these different influences. The author opens the text, therefore, to a parallel between Zion's personal history and the history of the United States as a country.

The African heritage, the European protestant one, the Irish one... they all bring their contribution to the identity of the boy, as they all do to that of the country at this initial stage of its history.

From this point on, music becomes a constant in Zion's life; a superpower and damnation at the same time. It is the only form of expression of his identity he knows, but for the same reason it also is what puts him into trouble most of the times.

Its fundamental role in Zion's first attempt of escaping Wantone's property opens the next chapter of his life which is, in fact, marked by many of these attempts.

This first flight attempt is not only narrated by Keene through fictional elements, he resorts back to the use of external documents such as a New England map and an advertisement on the local gazette to convey the feeling of official history stepping in Zion's personal narrative.

"To Pennyman" describes Zion's experience after having been sold by Wantone to a new, possibly stricter owner. Pennyman's approach to the boy is that of dehumanizing him, depriving him of every aspect of his being that might stick out as particular and identity: "He especially bridled at Pennyman's austerities: the provision of a minimum of food, and no spices at all, at meals; a moratorium on singing or

celebrations of any kind, particularly during those hours that he set aside for his ledger books or to read the Gospel." (Keene, 35)

Zion, who has now grown up to be a stubborn man hopelessly yearning for freedom reacts with violence to the harassments.

Keene depicts a protagonist who is willing to commit crimes in the name of his values and principles that can be summed up in the idea of personal freedom.

Keene, then, goes on to narrate Zion's arrival in Boston.

Describing the big city through historical/geographical data (names of historical Boston neighborhoods and streets such as Beacon Hill, Green Street, Mill Pond), Keene puts the focus on the fact that there are "Free blacks" living in this setting, but almost as if he felt constricted even in this context, Zion embarks on a ship "the Hazard, which ventured as far south as the English Caribbean, and on which he experienced the freedoms and vicissitudes of the maritime life." (Keene, 36)

The following section, "Liberty", opens with another parallel between Zion's personal history and the official history of the country, which is described, in fact, as striving for freedom itself: "The 1770: great changes were blowing through the streets of the colonial capital. The Crown's troops had irrevocably stained Boston's cobblestones with the blood of Attucks and others; the promise of freedom sweetened the air like incense." (Keene, 36) The mention of Crispus Attucks, often mentioned as the first martyr of the American revolution, brings us back to the data of official history. Attucks' figure, even if it appears only in this short quote, is also emblematic in the context of the short story, since it poses the same identity and freedom issues we see in Zion:

Historians disagree on whether he was a free man or an escaped slave, but most agree he was of Natick and African descent. Two major sources of eyewitness testimony about the Boston Massacre published in 1770 did not refer to him as "Black" nor as "Negro", it appears that Bostonians viewed him as being of mixed ethnicity. According to the contemporaneous account in the Pennsylvania Gazette, he was a "Mulattoe man" (Kachun/Mitchell,

2017 /Pennsylvania Gazette, March 22, 1770).

The Boston setting in which Zion returns after his experience on the sea is radically different: "For the town appeared to his eyes to have evacuated its entire black population." (Keene, 36)

The capital isn't anymore the Mecca of the free blacks he knew it for and, in fact, he soon gets captured by the crown's authorities, sent to a prison, then he escapes and gets sent to Pennyman, from where he escapes starting a streak of crimes.

Zion's defiant attitude describes a man that now only cares about his freedom, or rather what he deems to be freedom based on his experiences: "his realization of his own personal power had galvanized him, making life insufferable under any circumstances but his own liberation." (Keene, 37) Zion's desire for freedom almost becomes a detrimental obsession; he just wants liberty without really knowing what to make of it, how to use it without harming his position.

In "Spree" Zion is supposed to be put on a slave ship headed to Virginia by his master Hollis. Throughout this section, we see again how singing and running away are two actions Zion links necessarily with the condition of freedom, but here, he even achieves some sort of self-affirmation of his freedom; his only possibility to express some authority is, though, outside of the realm of law.

He is captured for the umpteenth time and his life intercepts again the lines of official history: "The magistrate responded that given the current worsening political situation in the capital, it appeared unlikely that the slave's crimes would receive rapid adjudication." (Keene, 41) The tumultuous political situation in the major cities of the country approaching his independence seems to interfere with Zion's judgment.

"Jurisdiction" opens with Zion being incarcerated again and being able to run away and commit another spree.

What's most interesting, though, is the paratextual element that Keene places at the beginning of the paragraph: a copy of the "Declaration of Independence".

We've seen the author use many documents to reinforce the idea of officiality of history throughout these last two short stories but we could say none of those has been

more official than this. The symbolic value of the Declaration for the future of the nation, though, also puts the reader in front of the issue of freedom.

We witness Zion being imprisoned another time, and on the other hand there's the nation proclaiming its freedom from the colonial bindings of the English crown.

It is as if the two opposite conditions were presented as part of the same process: like if the institutional freedom of the country depended on Zion's work as a slave, and the work of the many other black men and women that share his condition.

"Zion was tried and found guilty of rape by a judge who considered the slave's affinity for civil disobedience and social disruption to be intolerable in the light of the present state of alarm throughout the region." (Keene, 42) Quite symbolically, the "civil disobedience" that can't be tolerated in the slave's attitude is the same the inhabitants of the colonies are using as the main tool of their battle.

This parallel Keene sketches out assumes the form of a paradox when we try to think about what may be the most famous and quoted phrase of the Declaration.

Zion as a slave has been denied those "Certain unalienable rights" he should have been endowed by the Lord as a man, equal to all other men, even his masters.

The stark contrast between his condition and the ideal condition of man proposed in the document makes evident how slavery has been at the base of this whole process of liberation, a "conditio sine qua non".

In the short paragraph "Confession" the reader is exposed to Zion finally taking the floor giving an overview of his life the last day before his death sentence and ending in a confession that assumes the form of a moral saying: "To all fellow brothers and sisters of Afrik and other wise in Bondage in this common Wealth of Massachusetts take heart that ye avoid Drunkenness and Lewdness of the Flesh for the one true liberty lies in holding free----- do keep the Faith." (Keene, 42)

Zion feels the need to speak to all the people in his same condition, suggesting them to avoid the crime path, the refusal of law and authority that he, now, realizes is only a fake and temporary form of liberty for someone in his condition.

Zion's realization is backed up by the words of the political philosopher; David Hume,

whom Keene quotes directly in the second to last paragraph of the short story; "Theory (Outtake)".

Hume, in his passage, expresses in philosophical terms the issue of relative perception, stating that one's idea of freedom is formed on a "false sensation or seeming experience which we have, or may have, of liberty or indifference, in many of our actions." (Keene, 43)

Zion's inability of making the most of his freedom depends on the fact that he has never experienced what most of us consider real liberty, and has mistaken the refusal of that set of laws and conventions that enslaved him for it.

Like the title of the paragraph suggests, the quotation of an eminent intellectual under the "Theory" heading reinforces, yet another time, the element of official disciplines becoming a fundamental part of the narrative fiction. The bracketed subtitles "(Outtake)" brings us back to the title of the whole short novel, reminding us that the fiction section of this short story has been deleted, hidden from the reports of official history, it is something maybe that the people who wrote the official history might be ashamed of, and, therefore, falls into the category of Counternarrative.

"Eclipse", on a final note, ends the whole story commenting on the hypocrisy of perfunctory justice by the part of a nation striving to be a beacon of justice and democracy: "On the morning of April 1, 1775, the authorities did not find the Negro named Zion in his cell. Given the severity of the crimes and the necessity of preserving the ruling order, another Negro, whose particular crimes are not recorded, was hanged in the Worcester Town Square."(Keene, 43)

Keene is here, nevertheless, commenting on modern-day USA too, presenting in this passage a practice that, through other dynamics, is still in place today as a base of what we call systemic racism.

1.4 "A Letter On The Trials Of The Counterreformation In New Lisbon"

The last two short stories of this first section are among the longest and most intricate of the whole book, but at the same time, in my opinion, they also are the two most

gripping and accomplished of the lot.

They are, above all, the two short stories in which I was more able to fully grasp what Keene means when he talks about Counternarratives, being somewhat the epitome of this new narrative category. In particular; if we think about Counternarratives as re-elaborations/reworkings of conventional narratives and their tropes as a means of undermining these same narratives in favor of a fresh perspective on them; I would say that "A Letter On The Trials Of Counterreformation In New Lisbon" is particularly successful in doing so.

Considering what I have just said, it might be useful to analyze a little bit more the idea of literary genre as presented by Bruner in his ten features of narrative.

“We all know that there are recognizable “kinds” of narratives; farce, black comedy, tragedy, the *Bildungsroman* [...] we can speak of genre both as a property of a text and a way of comprehending a narrative.” (Bruner, 1991, 14)

Most of all, though, Bruner focuses on the fact that a literary genre informs both the content and the form of a narrative:

What are genres, viewed Psychologically? Merely institutionalized representations of human plights? There are surely such plights in all human cultures [...] But I think that emphasis on plights and their putative universality may obscure a deeper issue. For plights is only the plot form of a genre, its *fabula*. But genre is also form of telling, its *sjuzet*. Even if genres specialize in conventionalized human plights, they achieve their effects by using language in a particular way (Bruner, 1991, 14).

So literary genres, ultimately, are sets of standardized contents and forms of expression that influence the nature of a text itself creating recognizable patterns that help the reader identify texts as part of the genre, for the sake of easier/faster understanding of them.

Having defined the concept of genre it becomes almost self-evident how the concept of Canonicity, we have already met, is strictly linked to it.

The author embracing the practice of re-elaboration has to be constantly aware of the

laws of the genre since the re-elaboration involves the violation or re-contextualization of these same tropes.

The words of Henry Louis Gates Jr help us understand how these concepts of literary genre and re-elaboration are particularly fundamental when we analyze Black texts:

"Anyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black. Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetitions and revisions are fundamental to black artistic forms." (Louis Gates Jr, 1988, Introduction)

Having explored the concept of literary genre, we can now focus on the direct consequences it has on Keene's work and in particular on this short story.

As the title says, "A Letter On The Trial Of Counterreformation In New Lisbon" is a short story presented completely in the form of a missive.

Just as for the short stories that precede it, Keene maintains the technical title bearing the officiality of history in it. The setting of the story is again Brazil, as to return to the discourse about pan-Americanism he had started with "On Brazil".

The country is referred to as New Lisbon in the title; as it was called in the period in which the story is set. The short story, in fact, unlike the others we have seen up till now, focuses on events that happen during a limited time span that only cover some months. The geographical setting too has some sort of a limited space unity since all the vents take place into what we could call a microcosm, that collides with the macrocosm around it only at the end of the story.

The final clue that we can gather from the title is in the term "Counterreformation" that directs us, again, towards the time in which the story is set but also towards the religious theme running through it.

The first striking feature about the short story, in my opinion, appears again in the form of external elements from the main narrative. Keene, in fact, decides to open the short story with four quotations as if to form a sort of preface for the reader to sew up.

It's interesting to notice the sources from which Keene takes these quotations because they obviously tell us something about the nature of the text.

The first one is by Aby Warburg, German Jew art critic and historian living between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century; then there is Yehuda HaLevi, 10th century Sephardic rabbi, philosopher and poet, the third quote is from Mario de Andrade, 20th century writer and father of the Brazilian Modernism, and the last quote is assigned to Manoel Aries D'azevedo, a fictional character at the center of the story we are about to read.

We see how Keene, in short, doesn't stop mixing the two parallel worlds of official history and narrative fiction, putting his imaginary protagonist on the same level of people who really existed.

In terms of contents, they all seem to deal with the issue of knowledge and reality. Warburg talks about "the recurring irrationality of culture" as opposed to "modernizing rationality" a dichotomy we have already seen in the other stories in some terms, and that will be crucial also in this one.

HaLevi's and de Andrade's quotes could be read in relation, thinking about the opposing concepts of superficial "Flying on the wings of eagles" and deep knowledge "I want the essence".

And finally, D'azevedo's line could also be read through the dynamics of these opposing forces, presenting a "disquiet" deep down hidden under a "placid surface". After having analyzed this peculiar introduction I, now, begin to deal with the real body of the text.

The first information we are given are a date and the name and role/position of an addressee; the short story, as the title suggests, is written in the form of a long letter. This formal choice, in my opinion, has to do both with the discourse on literary genre I did above but also with Keene's more personal aims.

Despite being given the name of the addressee, as readers we are denied the identity of the person who's writing the letter, though we gather from the first pages of the text that the person who writes is also at the center of the events that have brought to this

missive since he seems to know things that we are completely unaware of. There definitely is an aura of mystery surrounding the first pages of this missive, we're told about some events that have "Inverted worlds" and that no one had envisioned, no one but our mysterious narrator that seems to be omniscient, the only one in possession of all the informations, yet this omniscient narrator still prefers not to reveal his name, at least not yet.

The unknown writer, then begins his narration framing the temporal and spatial settings of the events :

It was, you will remember, During the period shortly preceding All Saint's Day, which is to say late October of that year, 1629, that you sent a certain priest, Dom Joaquim D'Azevedo, from Olinda, to assume the position of provost of the foundation at Alagoas [...] The Alagoas monastery had been without a leader since the untimely drowning, under mysterious circumstances of the prior Provost Dom Affonso Travassos, also sent by you [...] in June 1629; and one year before that, the prior leader, Dom Luiz Duran Carneiro, had succumbed, allegedly to the temptations of the Devil himself, and disappeared into the interior [...] This then is where it begins (Keene, 48/49).

The death of two Provosts in a secluded monastery in the Brazilian woods is a premise that definitely belongs to the Gothic novel genre, but the fact that all of this is being told through a letter only reinforces this perception, making us think of all the notorious texts belonging to the genre that heavily rely on the epistular form, the most famous of which might well be one of the most recognizable books ever: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

The scene of D'Azevedo's Arrival at the monastery, as the first major event in the plot, definitely follows the canons of the genre, being rich in descriptions that reinforce the general feel of mystery surrounding the whole narration.

The monastery is presented in the same way as a medieval abandoned castle infested by ghosts could have been presented with mentions to "Monstrous Shadows" and not

a single person in sight. Keene, though, constantly wavers between the conventions of the genre and his vision of counternarrative, interpolating key elements of his imagery with the elements of Gothic, marrying the two words.

He began to wonder if he had been brought to the right building, for there were no addresses in this part of the world nor was there any proof, save to the lantern, that a living soul still occupied or visited this building. Out of the corner of his eye he detected a movement – a human? – an animal? [...] shadows of shadows. Whether it was a person, a wild creature, or a mere phantasm he could not be sure, though it was common knowledge that although the Portuguese had made great strides in civilizing the wilds of this vast terrain, creatures beyond the knowledge of the wisest man in all of Europe, still circulated throughout it (Keene, 52).

In this passage, the occasions of inspiring an idea of mystery upon the reader stem from the basic equation of Europe-Civilized world/America-Uncivilized world. The mention of "this part of the world" makes us understand that D'Azevedo is a European and feels like an Alien in this new land that he has come to intending to evangelize it.

In the following pages, Keene introduces another element that is both typical of the Gothic novel world but also organic to his discourse on knowledge: D'Azevedo's altered states of perception.

He awoke on a cot in a room just larger than a cubicle [...] He had been undressed--- he had not undressed himself, he could not recall having done so [...] He felt heavy in the head, as if he had downed a potion [...] On the desk he saw a small clay bowl, a pitcher of similar material, a second smaller fired pitcher, a tin cup, and a rag. He was sure when he had looked at the table just seconds ago these were not there, and this led him to pinch his hand to ensure he was not still wandering in a dream [...] Following Dom Gaspar, D'Azevedo tried but could not get a sense of the geometry of the house (Keene, 53).

Keene's protagonist seems to be clueless and confused, as if he was in a delirium; he almost resembles in his altered state of conscience the typical protagonist of an Edgar Allan Poe short story, *The Oval Portrait* comes to mind, for example.

What's interesting to notice, though, is that Keene's protagonist seems to be in this state just because he is out of his element, just the fact of being in this part of the world is an occasion of disquiet, almost as if his European brand of knowledge couldn't be of any use in this context.

The introduction of the other two European monks alongside the Indigenous/Black slaves in the narration solidifies this element of contrast between cultural traditions inside the monastery, introducing the ubiquitous Master-Slave dynamic.

When talking about the slaves it is worth noting how, even in this short story, great attention is posed on the issue of naming; all of them have been imposed by the monks Christian names but they are often called by their nicknames that tend to trivialize their characteristics and behaviors.

After this tumultuous start, Keene focuses, then, on how D'Azevedo successfully seems to bring a new balance and composure inside the monastery by the virtue of his Christian faith, as if after the initial shock the man had regained the grasp of reality thanks to his rational/European mind.

This attitude of faith and rectitude is described as to be at the base of the external renewal of the monastery, as much as at the success of the new vicarial church for the kids of European families in the nearby city.

Through some observation on D'Azevedo's studying habits, though, Keene seems to make some meta-comments about the short story itself: "Long hours spent in the study of any text will reveal inner, unseen contours, an abstract architecture [...] what is to know, know deeply? Is knowledge not always a form of power that, taken too far, cannot be taken against itself?" (Keene, 60)

There's self-righteousness in D'Azevedo's knowledge about what is happening around him, and so do we, the readers, think we know what is happening; but maybe there is something more that only Keene as the author and our mysterious narrator can know,

for different reasons. Maybe the European/Colonizer knowledge through which the main character is reading the events is detrimental to itself.

The first plot twist in the story is conventionally introduced through what seems to be almost a formula: "One Wednesday evening".

In a narrative in which the conception of time has been rather fluid and approximated up to this point, the precise indication signifies an important break.

"Once he had concluded the Vespers and tucked in for the night, D'Azevedo awoke to what he thought he perceived as the regular beating of a drumhead, though so low it was almost below the audibility." (Keene, 61)

A new element of mystery disrupts the perceived balance that both the protagonist and the reader thought they had found.

"As he closed the door he could again hear the drumming, faint but now accompanied, he perceived, by a low wail, like an animal caught in the crevice of a deep shaft [...] out of the corner of his eye he spied a shape, a shadow, moving along the rear wall, and he turned to spot something, someone, it's hair fanning over its shoulders." (Keene, 62)

What the Provost has seen seems at first immaterial "Shape/Shadow", then feral "animal", and finally a woman with long hair; in short words, the identity of this entity escapes the clergyman's knowledge.

This event, though, opens a completely new path for the short story, one that is going to shed light on the facts that have preceded D'Azevedo's arrival at the monastery.

The first step of this unveiling passes, again, through an altered state of conscience: Dom Gaspar's drunkenness: "The brother, his lips and mind also loosened by wine, unbuttoned." (Keene, 64) In his account of the evil deeds committed in the monastery, Gaspar talks of Wickedness, Witchcraft, Sorcery, all words that we can easily associate with the vocabulary of the Gothic Novel.

Keene's Counternarrative imagery though, intersects again the genre conventions and we see how the wickedness and sorcery are associated with the ideas of Indigenous Culture.

In one of the most evident scenes in which the two narrative words meet, the author describes one of the rituals that were usually made in the monastery.

Padre Barbosa Pires told me he saw a Negro Woman, and one of the slaves, he could not make out which one it was, ordering padre Travassos around, the elderly priest on his hands and knees in the center of the cloister at twilight not but a week, I believe, before he died, and he wore a doublet, not a robe, not a single stitch, and the Negro was riding him like an ass, and driving him with a crop, and around the white man's neck he held reins tight for in his mouth was a bit, and the white man was not uttering a single sound, only making the sounds of a beast, that much he glimpsed (Keene, 65).

We see in this evocative image the "Inverted words" the narrator had mentioned in the introduction of the letter.

This inversion of the roles between slaves and masters could also be symbolically read in a meta-narrative way. We have, in fact, considered up to this point in the short story the European characters as bearers of a rational knowledge of reality, while the Black/Indigenous characters have always been synonyms with an irrational and arcane version of knowledge; what if the latter version of knowledge and tradition was the way out of this mystery? The short story will soon undergo a change of direction along these lines.

After Gaspar's revelation comes, in my opinion, one of the most fascinating scenes not only of the short story but of the whole book. D'Azevedo's nightmare is described by Keene in such an elaborate sequence of adjectives that makes us understand how to re-elaborate a literary genre an author has to know its lexicon and its dynamics to an incredible degree. It is interesting to notice how the monstrous figure is, yet another time, a mixture of a black man and a beast, something human and non-human at the same time; so much so that even if the Provost identifies him as a "Negro", and so Human-like, he can't but refer to it as "it" and not "Him".

If the nightmare episode wasn't enough, right after it, another element which we could inscribe in the tradition of the gothic novel makes its appearance.

D'Azevedo finds what seems to be a blank piece of paper someone has slipped under the door of his bedroom but in the most classic of turns, when held to a flame the paper piece reveals a message:

"They are coming least you fear watch and listen trust the seer?" (Keene, 69)

The provost's rational perception of reality is shakier than ever at this point; who are they? Who is the seer?

At this point of the novel, Keene decides to take a further path with a new plot twist, subverting the expectations of his readers, and the conventions of the genre after two very conventional scenes.

Official history, in fact, makes, once again, its intrusion into Keene's fictional world. "They", D'Azevedo is promptly informed by Gaspar, might be the Dutch who seems to have seized the Capital city of Olinda.

The position of the Provost seems, therefore, to be split between two threats of really different nature: a supernatural threat in the form of some kind of monstrous entity haunting the monastery, and a physical threat in the form of the Dutch army making its way into the region.

The introduction of the element of official history inside the short story has made me think a lot about how the balance between the two elements of official and personal is slowly shifting as we go on reading. Despite being in the form of an official document, "A letter on the trial of counterreformation" is a story in which the impact of the external world and its element is not that present.

It is largely a story about the monastery, a microcosm that is seemingly unaffected by the events outside of it for most of the narration.

The fact that the narrator of the short story seems to be someone inside the monastery that has lived the events, and not an unknown and neutral third person, reinforces the idea that Keene's focus in this short story is on the fictional world he has created rather than on his relation with the outside, as it was in "An Outtake".

The lack in use of external sources that shape the course of the narrative, finally, brings me to think that we are, in fact, witnessing a shift that will reach his

conclusion, I believe, in the next and last short story of this section.

After having considered the general condition of the monastery, preparing for a possible Dutch attack, D'Azevedo is called by Gaspar who frantically informs him there has been "an incident at the slave quarters"(Keene, 72).

Arrived at the shacks he sees there, Padre Pero, shirtless, supervising over two of the monastery's slaves and a black woman bound by their wrists.

When asked for an explanation the priest resorts to all his disgust for the people, referring to them as "creatures", reinforcing so, the image of an Indigenous identity that is ambiguous, an undetermined mix of the human and the feral.

When D'Azevedo asks about the identity of the woman he had never seen around there, Pero reveals is none other than the slave Joao Baptista with a whip.

"This Joao Baptista or quimbanda as they call it [...] has long been a source of mischief, well before you arrived. It—She---He sent away a number of the slaves, as you can see, as part of its, his mischief, and was planning to dispatch the rest of us to that blackest place well before the Dutch could." (Keene, 74)

Pero refers to Joao Baptista as "It---she---He" as if lacking the knowledge to determine which of the three articles he should have used.

Joao Baptista is at the same time inhuman, then human female, then human male.

What is interesting, though, is the name the slaves, use to refer to him "Quimbanda". Quimbanda is, in fact, an Afro-Brazilian religion which takes inspiration from many different sources such as native Brazilian culture, African Yoruba Religion, Kongolese Spirituality, and European witchcraft, which expresses through this mixture of elements the complex Brazilian cultural identity.

At this point, then, we might start to think that the European priests' suspects about Joao Baptista not being fully human, or only human, to be more exact, could be true. Their suspects, though, come from a pejorative perspective they have of all Black/Indigenous men, while Joao's real power would stem from his personal and unique spirituality.

Joao's figure has just become, in this narrative the repository of Indigenous Brazilian

culture, as opposed to the Catholic/European mindset proposed by the priests and in particular by D'Azevedo as the most powerful of them. It's quite symbolic that Keene makes the two figures meet in a private conversation to give an end to the short story. The face-to-face encounter between the cultural identity clash we have been witnessing up to this point.

"Now that he was looking Joao Baptista in the eyes, he considered that he had never really observed him, never seen him before [...] it was as if he had glimpsed this face somewhere else on an inner mirror, and what he had seen for nearly his entire stay at the house had been merely an outline, a mask, a shadow." (Keene, 76)

D'Azevedo experiences the feeling of seeing for the first time the real identity of the man, instead of the mask of the slave he's been obliged to wear for all this time, an identity that doesn't really belong to him.

This process of acknowledgment culminates in Joao taking the floor for the first time. When informed about the accusations Pero and Barbosa Pires have moved towards him the slave answers: "Before we proceed, I would that you call me Burunbana as that is my name." (Keene, 77)

Joao Baptista himself reveals, then, his identity in the clearest act of self-identification we have seen in the book up until now, abandoning his Christian name and imposing his Indigenous real name, and with it, his identity, over it. With this taking of authority by the part of the black man comes also the refusal of the Christian tradition he's been imposed. Despite his troubled disposition of missionary who doesn't want to treat the slaves as beasts, D'Azevedo is still surprised by Joao's affirmation, he cannot but condemn his lack of respect and tries to impose his authority.

"I am the Provost of this house and you will not speak with me this way. When you speak with me you will use your Christian name--." (Keene, 78) to which Burunbana asks if he has to use the provost's Christian name too or he can use his real name "Manoel Aries ben Saùl".

In the last, and maybe biggest plot twist of the whole short story, we come to know, in fact, that the one concealing his true identity has always been D'Azevedo who is, in

reality, a Portuguese Jew, escaped from the continent with his family because of the persecutions and passing as a catholic priest to avoid being caught.

In the context of a short story and a whole collection, indeed, in which personal and cultural identity is a key concept, this scene is emblematic of the complexity of the issue of self-identification.

Burunbana's and D'Azevedo's paths are exactly the opposite, therefore, in terms of self-affirmation; while the slave character finally has the opportunity to express his real identity achieving some sort of freedom with this action, the master figure is revealed to be part of an oppressed ethnic group in reality.

With this scene, the ending of the short story totally diverts from the tracks of the Gothic Novel assuming all the aspects of Keene's brand of Counternarrative.

The explanation of how Burunbana knows about D'Azevedo's real identity, re-opens the discourse about Colonizer knowledge vs Indigenous knowledge that has been a running theme throughout the whole short story; a discourse that is strictly linked with what I have called Keene's aim of decolonizing narratives.

"I am a Jinbada, or as one say in your language, Quibanda. I can read the past and the future. I can speak to the living, as now, and to the dead. I can feel weather before it turns and the night before it falls. Every creature that walks this earth converses with me." (Keene, 80) He then goes on to explain that Pero and Barbosa Pires are the root of all the evil that has been happening in the monastery, even the mysterious disappearances of Travassos and Duran Carneiro.

It's quite symbolic that this new hero is able to fulfill this role inside the story only thanks to a superpower that is the direct consequence of his original cultural identity. The Indigenous knowledge solves an intricate bundle of lies and mysteries that the D'Azevedo's rational European mindset has not even approached.

Keene depicts in Burunbana a sort of "Black Savior" figure in contrast with the trope of the "White savior", typical of conventional forms of narrative.

Despite Burunbana's crucial role in the resolution of the crisis inside the microcosm of the monastery, we are told by Keene how the destinies of the heroic slaves and those

of the two remaining priests will be drastically different when stepping out in the real world, that of official history.

We see in this description the re-proposition of a theme I had already analyzed in the previous short story: the idea of "relative" liberty.

D'Azevedo and Leite as Europeans will be granted an institutionalized form of freedom, one that is accepted by governments and even enemy armies; the same form of freedom, though, isn't imaginable for the African slaves that, on the other hand, don't fully recognize the value of it.

As Burunbana says in his last phrase, the freedom they have gained is a personal freedom they don't want any authorities outside of their group to recognize.

Significantly, in fact, we are told that they have decided to live separated from that same society of which they have already refused the institutional form of freedom.

They live together in organized communities where there is no idea either of hierarchy or of a leader figure (the absence of a leader figure is remarked as such an important element that the word is written in Italics). In the outside world, though, the dynamics are still the same, the Dutch have substituted the Portuguese but the result is exactly the same since their colonizer attitude and nature towards the people of the new world goes above their national identities.

In the final paragraph of the letter, we finally discover the identity of our unknown writer/narrator: "As for the Burunbana who is Jinbada and was known as Joao Baptista, that one continues spirit working among the people [...] that one is I *who writes you this letter*."(Keene, 83)

Narratologically we have followed an internal narrator to the story talking in the third person of himself and D'azevedo. We have, therefore, the first instance in the collection of a "Narration of the self" even if disguised in the form of an official document, a letter. The narrator doesn't present himself as the protagonist of the story, the letter has been written to inform someone about D'Azevedo's state and what has brought him to it, though, throughout the story we see Burunbana's figure emerging more and more up the end where he is at the center of the narration as much, if not

more than the Provost. So, even if not completely accomplished, we have a hint of what the process of self-affirmation through the narration of the self could be, another step forward in the trajectory I am analyzing.

Since we have seen how the process of self-affirmation also passes through the tool of names, it's interesting to notice the phrasing "Burunbana who is Jinbada and was known as Joao Baptista".

Burunbana reinforces his original true identity through the use of his real name and role in the community and putting Joao Baptista in the past, a chapter of his life that will never be re-opened.

As a final touch, to inform us that he is still in contact with D'Azevedo, Burunbana closes the letter by writing the date at the bottom of the letter according to the Jewish Calendar "Elul 5390", and signing himself with his official full name "*N'Golo BURUNBANA Zumbi*".

1.5 "Gloss On a History Of Roman Catholics In The Early American Republic, 1790-1825; Or Thr Strange History Of Our Lady Of The Sorrows"

The last piece of this first section of Keene's work is, in my opinion, one of the most complex pieces in the book; and it is so because it contains and summarizes all of the elements we have been able to observe in the previous four stories.

All of the stylistic devices and the canonical contents which contribute to the author's conception of Counternarrative shine, in the longest story of the collection, with their full power. Furthermore, I believe that this short story in particular, as the last one of the first section, also has the role of drawing some conclusions on the two main themes that have guided my analysis: the contrasting but mutually necessary conceptions of personal and official history, and the redemptive self-affirmative arch the characters have been following from story to story.

The text of the short story opens, for example, with what looks exactly like an institutional heading to an academic essay; we see the names of the authors, the publisher, and the year of publication; it is indeed the *History of Roman Catholics in*

the Early American Republic that is referenced in the title.

We are, therefore, completely immersed in what seems to be the context of official history. The mention of the convent, though, will serve as a bridge, an intermediate step just before the twist that Keene is preparing to set up.

"Because the convent and school suddenly vanished without a trace, and within several years the order itself disappeared as well, and as the nearby non-Catholic settlement suffered through a series of calamities before dwindling to near extinction before its reestablishment in 1812, no other definitive records of this foundation remain." (Keene, 86)

Here Keene interrupts the text of the essay introducing a footnote, but not a regular one, rather a footnote that takes over and establishes its prominence over the essay becoming the actual text of the novel. Reaching the apex of its intents Keene puts the counternarrative upfront, eliminating what we would call "Official History", as to suggest that this version of history has been already told too many times and it has, nowadays, lost its relevance.

Keene provides the reader with a swift transition, catapulting him "in medias res" in the new context of the counternarrative.

The first word we are proposed is, not surprisingly, a name, that of the real protagonist of the story, Carmel, a young slave girl who's born, and has always worked in the Valdoré plantation in Saint Domingue under the French master Nicolas de L'Ecart. What's interesting in this first part of the narration is the fact that, despite having abandoned a narrative in which the role of official history was fundamental, Keene has, actually, opened a counternarrative that heavily relies on the same historical data. To explain the condition of the plantation as a setting, Keene, in fact, inevitably has to comment on the many turmoils and insurgencies running through the Caribbean colonies at the beginning of the 19th century, as a direct result of the french revolution in Europe. The narrator interlaces circumstantial historical/geopolitical comments belonging to the realm of officiality, with elements of Carmel's more personal history; like a brief description of her parents' lives.

The portrait of Carmel's father presents us an emblematic slave figure; a man that has been displaced from his place of origin, has been given a name that he and his people don't acknowledge, but, differently from many other slave figures we have seen, has been able to achieve some degree of emancipation through his skills and craftsmanship. Quite significantly; Frédéric's artistic talent will be passed to Carmel, later in the story, as if it was a sort of inheritance.

Also the circumstances of the man's death are something worth analyzing since they open the discourse of race-relations to further problematizations:

In early 1801, while returning from working on a ceiling portrait of colonial nobles at a neighboring plantation, he was seized and pressed into service by one of Valdoré's former residents, a mixed race commander affiliated with the French; to this man it was inconceivable that someone of such aesthetic gifts could ally himself with the black hordes [...] his repeated attempts to escape to Valdoré were unsuccessful. During a counterattack against the rebels at Les Cayes, one of the Cuban dogs imported by the French turned on him, opening his throat with the precision of a masterly brushstroke, in one bite (Keene, 87).

Kabinda as a man, knows only the plantation life, he has no experience, apart from the years of his childhood, of any other way of living, and if he lives alongside the black slaves is just because he recognizes them as his people, not for any ideological or political stance. On the other hand, who confronts him, is someone who has lived at Valdoré but, being of mixed-race succumbs to the doubleness of his identity and decides to ally himself with the French, which, he deems to be more civilized, and he does not see why Kabinda would not do the same. It is strange to imagine a black slave attempting to escape towards a plantation, a place we associate with slavery and the abuse of black slaves, but Keene has purposefully created the figure of a man who has lost his African identity and now completely and willfully belongs to the context of the plantation.

About Carmel's mother, Jeanne, we know that:

In her spare time she was said to practice divination, and later as the system of social control disintegrated, she increasingly served as a translator and courier for several groups of insurgents headquartered near the south coast. She had learned her divination skills from her mother, as she had from hers, and had performed it when necessary and without de L'Ecart's knowledge, as a secondary mode of manor religion and Justice (Keene, 88).

Carmel has these two really different figures composing her family heritage, but is described by Keene as someone who still hasn't realized herself, has her parents have done through their talents and Keene signifies this through her complete lack of expression (or so it appears from the outside).

Carmel is nothing but a slave at the moment, a tool in the hands of her master who, at the same time, values her condition on the base of her work "Considering her no more extensively than one might remember an extra utensil in a large hand-me-down table service."(Keene, 90)

This condition of stability which is accepted as a given fact, though, is, in reality, troubled by the historical events unfolding outside of the plantation (On the contrary to what happened in the previous short story.)

"By the turn of the new century, however, L'ouverture had sunk those once Halcyon days far into the sea's black depths. The plantation began bleeding workers, which soon left its fields fallow and the entire property susceptible to attack." (Keene, 90)

The mention of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture makes the presence of official history in the narration evident and opens the discourse about the two parallel forms of emancipation which are at the center of the story: Carmel personal one that is yet to happen, and that of his people and fellow slaves which is taking place right now outside of the plantation microcosm.

These two different but similar forms of liberation are motivated by the doubts expressed in "The role of duty"; one of the three "detached" installments that will become a sort of constant throughout the whole story.

"Under the circumstances, are there any benefits to dedication, devotion, honor----

responsibility? What, in this context, is the responsible action?" (Keene, 90)

The following pages seem to suggest that this abstract idea of independence could be materialized through personal expression.

We are told in fact that, despite appearing as silent to an external eye, Carmel has her own personal way of expression she has taken from her father.

"Carmel would spend her free moments drawing. [...] Her imagery ranged from the plantation itself to the seascapes and hill ringed plains around Jérémie, to imaginary realms she conjured from book illustrations, dreams, nightmares, and rare late night visitations with her late mother." (Keene, 91)

The account goes on to explain how the girl often includes in her drawing figures of saints from the catholic tradition in which she's been baptized, as well as African Folklore figure her mother used to tell her about. Carmel has shaped her own language around her double identity, the different heritages, skills, and beliefs of her parents, the direct experiences she's made of the world, and her fervent imagination. This complex and layered form of expression, once again, meta-narratively comments on the nature of black art and literature itself; the many influences it's subjected to, and how it re-elaborates them.

Carmel's expression, though, lacks in one of the main components of this act; understandability. This lacking quality in her language, though, might be seen as the real force rather than a weakness; it makes her self-expression, and consequently self-affirmation, possible, while preventing her to be understood by master figures such as de L'Ecart and his personal advisor Malesvaux.

Carmel's drawings could substantially be seen as an element of instability inside the microcosm of the plantation, as the revolts outside in the colony are a threat to the stability of the French Empire, and de L'Ecart position on this subject is that of a man who is a clear expression of the established order: "de L'Ecart found it inconceivable that Napoleon's forces would fall to unlettered gangs and maroons [...] He was determined not to leave the world under conditions substantially reduced from those in which he entered it." (Keene, 93)

In this context of war between the establishment and the revolutionary forces, both internally and externally, the sudden death of the master figure gains a special significance, particularly for the passive but fundamental role Carmel plays in it.

We see, in this passage, the first instance of a new form of drawing for Carmel, one that resembles a raptus and seems to be dictated by total irrationality.

In "What Carmel Draws" we have a description of the girl's work that seems to represent the scenario in which de L'Ecart is going to die a day after the girl will have finished his drawing. This form of drawing seems, therefore, to merge her father's artistic skills and her mother's "divinatory powers".

At Nicolas' death, his brother Olivier de L'Ecart inherits the plantation.

Olivier is described by the author as a character moved by an internal conflict looming over his figure: "He had supported the King's laws and penal codes across the new world colonies through his advocacy [...] He nevertheless was a man of feeling; he had always maintained a strong inner revulsion towards absolutism and the dominance of the aristocratic estate over the others." (Keene, 96)

This personal condition of his is bound to affect even the destiny of the plantation and, then, of Carmel's life: "Upon learning of his brother's death, de L'Ecart planned to dispose of the estates as quickly as possible [...] As his parting act and as a gesture of his magnanimity, a virtue in which he took considerable pride, he also planned to emancipate whatever slaves were still at Valdoré." (Keene, 96-97)

This disposition is described as being an effect of the fact that Olivier has grown up in the colonial context of the plantation, knowing the dynamics of the place. On the other hand, we are shown the master's wife and daughter romanticizing the slave-master relationship, that they don't know directly, and see as something exotic and fashionable. "Grace de L'Ecart was not so eager to dispose of Valdoré [...] she had also dreamt of becoming a plantation mistress, a role for which her upbringing had most thoroughly prepared her. [...] She was also ready to take reins over her own retinue of slaves." (Keene, 97-98) Eugénie de L'Ecart is of the same mind as her mother, so much so that she almost elects Carmel as her personal bondswoman,

establishing a one-to-one Master-Slave relationship.

Upon this formally standardized relationship, the two girls build something that may resemble a form of true affection but rather is more similar to a toxic interdependence: "Within a few weeks Carmel and Eugénie had developed a means of communication consisting of hand and facial gestures that only they could comprehend." (Keene, 101) Deep down inside her, though, Carmel thoughts that can't be reached or grasped are devoted to the idea of flight and liberty: she feels she doesn't belong anymore in the condition of the slave girl, but she's also aware of the threats that are waiting for her outside (the same French or Rebel people that have killed both her parents). Just like her mother and father, Carmel escapes from social categories and has in this condition of total outsider her greatest weakness.

While the de l'Ecarts plan their journey up to the United States in the safeness of their plantation microcosm, the turmoils outside are reaching a highpoint: "Several plantations to the southwest had already been razed, their owners tossed into the Bourdon, while the French forces were again massacring rebels in the north. The goal of the masses was to tear the white out of the tricolor." (Keene, 103)

This final declaration of intents could be, significantly, read, in my opinion, as another meta-narrative comment about Keene's idea of counternarrative: the rebels want to tear the white out of the tricolor just as the author is tearing the white/European point of view out of his literature.

This constant wavering balance between social stability and turmoil is mirrored in Carmel's situation. The girl is divided between her duties as a slave for the withe family and her rapturous drawing episodes; respectively a role she's forced to play and her actual personality she has to hide.

The duplicity of this situation is addressed in the second installment of "The role of duty" where Keene turns back to the tool of external quotations, presenting Deleuze's concept of "Abstract quantity of work" as a key to read the condition of slavery shared by the black people at large.

Having Olivier to leave the house, and being Grace completely estranged from the

situation; the whole plantation is left as a setting for the first confrontation between Carmel and Eugénie. The white girl has, in fact, discovered one of Carmel's secret drawings, and in "Concerning the Image" asks the slave about its meaning.

"Carmel, though, still unsure, considers her earlier experience of the drawing with M. Nicolas, and tries to mime what she lacks the gestures for: they are going to TEAR THE WHITE OUT!" (Keene, 107)

We see, here, Carmel embracing the revolutionary cause, and consequently affirming her desire of independence alongside that of the rebels outside, the personal and the group/ethnic aspects are developing together.

At the same time, alongside Carmel's realization, the revolt outside reaches what could be considered a final outburst: "she glimpsed through the kitchen window the surrounding hills, which were glowing like an amphitheater at a night carnival."

(Keene, 108)

A new installment introduces the reader to Carmel's imaginary/supernatural dialogues with her dead mother. The dialogue concerns the topics of flight/liberty, the conditions under which this could happen, the doubts that accompany them.

Even Carmel still does not know what is going to happen in a few hours.

The two de L'Ecart's women flight with Carmel at their back in the attempt to reach Olivier ends up in a real and proper slaughter. The French master has been killed by the rebels and his wife will follow the same destiny, leaving the two girls alone in their slave-master relationship.

Carmel, is reported by the external narrator, remembers "nothing" of these precipitating events, but she realizes the lines she had been frantically sketching over the walls of the plantation house the day before were the flames she is now seeing.

The girl is only starting to realize the potential of her powers and the impact they might have on her path to freedom and independence.

This highly dramatic scene closes the first part of a short story that is strongly connotated by this rupture.

The rupture happens both at the level of the setting of the story but also on that of the

literary genre re-elaborated by Keene; up till now we have been reading a “Plantation Novel” set in a Caraibic island while the story will soon turn into another gothic novel/mystery novel set in rural Kentucky.

Keene's discourse about the element of Pan-Americanism in his counternarratives is, here, more evident than ever. Through the figures of Carmel, her parents, and the de L'Ecart's, the author creates a thread that runs from the African continent to the United States passing through Central America, almost following the lines of a standardized slave diaspora.

Meta-narratively he creates another thread, one that links Carmel's Slave narrative, a genre that was born and developed in the American continent, with the European tradition of the gothic novel.

The mark of the passage of time between the two short stories is, again, expressed by an official history data: "A year and a half after the establishment of the Haitian state." (Keene, 109) The colonies' socio-political condition of instability seems to follow the two girls as if it was a stain on their lives, even considering their different perspectives. Eugénies uncles in Washington, for example, attribute the girl's attitude to her exposure to the revolution. "Under a different scenario, they might have recognized she was entering the full bloom of an innate rebelliousness not unlike to the one she had just lived through." (Keene, 110) The official historical events are considered for the impact they have on the personal history of fictional characters. "In the late summer of 1806 Eugénie de l'Ecart entered the Academy of the Most Precious Charity of our Lady of the Sorrows, near the village of Hurtstown, Kentucky."(Keene, 110)

The first phrase that really introduces us to the second part of the story sets up the scene both historically and geographically, presenting us with some data that significantly play on the verge between the real and the fictional.

Knowing that the author is constructing his imagery on the two notions of official and personal history I thought it would have been interesting to analyze his choices in terms of setting/naming.

Through a simple and fast web investigation I have found out that: first, there is no Hurttstown in Kentucky; the first result that pops up when searching for it, is the real city of Bardstown, evidently for its assonance in the name. Coincidentally; the city of Bardstown is also the place where the oldest monastery still operating in the whole United States is located.

Founded in 1848 as a Trappist outpost in the new world, the “Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani” is one of the oldest abbeys in North America still accessible today.

(“Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani”, Wikipedia page)

It is not a case, therefore, in my opinion, that Keene reports the fictional city of Hurttstown as being also often called "Gethsemane", creating an intricate web of cross-references that plays with official history, almost parodying the concepts of reality and accuracy.

In the first description of the convent the most notable feature, in my opinion, is the appearance of a trope common to many different genres in American Literature: the image of the Indian burial mound who's been effaced to make space to a new building which represents a white/European institution.

At the same time, though, the Catholic convent, the sisters, and the acolytes in it are viewed with suspicion and doubt by the part of the fully protestant nearby city.

In this change of setting from the Valdoré's plantation to the Hurttstown's convent, it is very funny to notice how Keene still presents these two places as having an element in common: their mission to preserve the established order of the pre-revolution European continent. "The convent's Mother Superior, Sr. Louis Marie [...] was of the mind that the greater threat lay not in the gospels of finance, freemasonry, and Protestantism, which were preponderant in America, but in that other dangerous product of the post-Reformation age, excessive liberty, poisoned by rationality."(Keene, 112)

About the education given in the convent, Keene tells us that the curriculum includes practical arts, introductory mathematics, theology, and French and Latin grammar.

It is also worth noticing that Eugénie and Carmel's condition is not strange in the

context of the convent, many of the students are from noble southern families and have brought with them a personal slave girl.

The "Selected Rules (*printed and bound at the Convent of Our Lady of the Sorrows*)" are just a pale vestige of the external sources Keene has been presenting us till now; they are an official document coming from a fictional institution in a fictional world, something that has only the appearance of official history but, unlike the Declaration Of Independence, has lost the nature of it.

The strict class schedule of the convent seems to have a different and unexpected effect on the two girls, almost serving as a strange tool that reverses the master-slave dynamics. While Eugénie is completely uninterested by the classes and feels trapped in this context of "modesty, charity, and gentility", Carmel seems to fully embrace the opportunity of accessing some kind of knowledge for the first time in her life, seeing it as a liberating and emancipatory element, in fact.

"Carmel's true enthusiasm lay in Eugénie's books, from which she devised her own curriculum." (Keene, 115)

The two parallel lines of emancipation and self-affirmation are merging into Carmel's figure: self-affirmation through knowledge, and emancipation through self-affirmation. Carmel's taciturn and reserved behavior isn't condemned only by Eugénie but also by the other slave girls in the convent that, considering her refusal for any form of dialogue start saying that: "She only spoke when casting spells; she was actually a zombie, she might not be a female at all." (Keene, 116)

Carmel's indefinite nature of human male/female creature, or supernatural entity could be seen as a trait she has inherited by her mother and her doctrines of divination, but in a context of narrative inter-referentiality between the short stories in this section of the book is something really similar to Burunbuna's figure.

At this point of the story, Carmel's only means to express this indefinite identity is still the action of drawing, that, just like when she was at Valdoré she has to carry on secretly on loose scraps of paper.

In "Carmel's Drawings" Keene informs us of how Carmel's imagery is developing

implementing new sources of inspiration from the new context to which she is being exposed: "Her mother [...] Christ among a crowd of rebels giving a sermon on the banks of the Grand'Anse [...] General Napoleon and president Jefferson chatting on Wahington street---." (Keene, 117)

What is interesting to see in how Keene describes Carmel's progress in the act of drawing, is that the author presents the character as someone in the process of learning, someone that understands something new day by day and wishes to apply this new knowledge to the set of ability she already owns.

We can also appreciate how Keene, in the description of Carmel's constant distancing from Eugénie and what she means to her, pairs the idea of artistic growth with the physical dimension of the growth of the body: "Carmel, who for a week had been alternately restless and easily peeved, had wanted to show her that earlier that day she had finally passed into womanhood." (Keene, 119)

Carmel's affirmation passes also through these details, but what is important is that it has stopped being a mere "self-affirmation", she wants some validation now, she wants to be sure Eugénie is aware of what is happening.

If this is Carmel's way of escaping her former condition of slavery, her master is much more concerned with the present condition of imprisonment that she feels living inside the convent; she is described as "slipping away" every night.

Eugénie's night-wanderings become, for Keene, an occasion to introduce the formal elements and themes of the gothic novel in the context of the short story: "the Mother Superior described what Moor, who had served as a sentry that night, had witnessed at the front gate: clouds as huge as Hispaniola had anchored over the hill and town below; then burst forth with rains the likes of which he'd never seen in his entire life [...] Turning back in amazement at the ferocity of the unexpected tempest, he'd noticed a ghostly specter hurrying toward the gate." (Keene, 121-122)

In this condition of general instability inside and outside of the convent the two girl's relationship is reaching a breaking point; they have abandoned all forms of companionship. This is aptly represented by the fact that now they both have personal

secrets, things that if they told each other they would end up in danger for.

Carmel seems to be fully aware of this condition, so much so that she resorts to a new mental dialogue with her deceased mother on the topics of freedom and independence, how to achieve them. In these dialogues, we are only given, as readers, the voice of Carmel's mother posing the questions; almost as if Carmel, as she is been doing with everyone inside the convent, wanted to hide her intentions even from us.

The following eight pages are, in my opinion, among the most fascinating of the short story and the whole book. Our protagonist, in fact, carries out a fundamental shift, something that will change the fortunes of the singular story's plot, but even more, those of the whole book in its structure.

Keene has presented us Carmel, up to this moment, as someone who is applying the new knowledge she acquires only to the artistic expressive form, now, though, the author introduces Carmel's language to the equation, making the girl's path towards self-affirmation more evident than ever in its process.

We can talk about a process since in the diary pages that the author will present us, we will see the physical development through time of the language in someone who is learning a new skill through a "trial and error" scheme.

Not differently from her drawings, Carmel's writing is a mishmash of different elements and sources that the girl has been absorbing from all of her experiences.

Keene imagines some sort of Pidgin-like broken English in which French and Latin make their intrusion. Carmel alternates between languages, shortens words and names, changes their spelling.

The information we're given in the diary are totally circumstantial (Passing of the seasons described through the weather, minor events happening inside the convent...) but what is fascinating is exactly how they are reported, the variations on the theme that the talking character decides to operate.

"so v v cold [...] Frigidissima haec hiems est [...] Finalemnt cold breakg [...]"

PRINTEMPS – SPRING [...] V hot today." (Keene, 124-130)

In "Drawing" we see Carmel using her language to describe her work in a different

way; she doesn't use her composite made-up language, just English words interrupted by dashes, no link between them, images and concepts scattered on the written page as they are in the drawing. The last word "I N F A N T" which Carmel has crossed out at the end, brings us into the final act of the short story: once again her divinatory powers shine through her drawings in the synthesis of her parents' skills.

Despite what I have just analyzed is already stylistically very dense and complex, Keene still has another major change in style to implement in the narrative.

Out of the bloom, after having presented us the story in the form of a third-person narration, then in the form of a diary written in Carmel's broken English, Keene finally resorts to a first-person narrator in this third part of the story, one, though, that talks in perfect English. We might think we are being subjected to Carmel's thoughts, she might be very good at reading the situation but not good enough in transferring these thoughts into the English language.

Anyway, this is the first instance in the book of a first-person narrator that has the possibility to tell his story, his version, through his words.

Quite significantly, Keene has decided to reach this defining moment in a very peculiar way: the novel is structurally, inside the context of the whole book, the culmination of a process that has been outlined throughout the first section, but at the same time the progression from third-person to first-person narrator is also represented internally in the singular short story.

Going back to the plan of contents what has just happened in the convent had been foreshadowed by Carmel in the last drawing we have been described.

A dead fetus has just been found outside the entrance of the building.

Both the sisters and the students talk about this incredible event in a tone and using semantic fields that transport, again, the narrative on the track of the gothic novel genre. "It was simply impossible that any of the nuns, let alone the girls, had been involved in such abominations. [...] even the sickly greedy Eugénie --- none of them could possibly have been with child [...] tiny corpse [...] its mud-caked face petrified in a shriek [...] the calligraphy of marks and hatches, as if a demonic stylus had been

drawn across its forehead and chest." (Keene, 133-134)

Even when commenting on the slave's cloth in which the body was found wrapped in, one of the sisters refers to the black girls in the convent as "Infernal race".

As he had presented us with the rules of the convent, Keene follows the discovery of the little dead body with an official/fictional document: "Excerpts From a Report By Sr.. Germain Ruth On The Inspection Of The Pupils".

The major point of interest in the report is, in my opinion, the fact that Eugénie, among all the students, seems to be the one with the strongest alibi, the calmest and most composed one too, and even if we have seen Carmel suspecting something about her ,we are told that the slave girl herself has personally testified in favor of her master. It is as if Carmel did not want her to be discovered this way; as if she had something else in mind for her.

The results of the inspection seem to bring new stability, at least in the rocky relationship between the convent and the townspeople.

The direct mention of Malesvaux in this section (he had appeared also in the pages of the diary), makes us understand how much Carmel pays attention to this figure that symbolically serves as a link between her old life at Valdoré and her new life here, while at the same time she doubts that the clergyman has noticed and recognized her. Inside the convent, on the other hand, the condition of stability doesn't mirror that of the outside. The tensions inside the building mainly concern the two characters at the center of the narration. Carmel and Eugenie's relationship is now only based on the reciprocal suspicion they each have of the other person.

This situation brings, again, the author to ponder on Carmel's condition of slavery and on the role the concept of duty plays in it.

In the following installment of "On Duty", Keene expresses his thoughts and doubts through a very diverse set of sources and quotations, starting from Chaucer and Ending with Fanon, two writers/intellectuals that couldn't be further apart the one from the other. Keene separates the quotations through questions on the nature of the concept itself as if he was interviewing the quotes, waiting for them to provide an

answer to his doubts. In the meantime, Carmel's path towards her final emancipation progresses step by step. The author presents us a character who is starting to become aware of the process she is dealing with. Carmel seems to use her knowledge to question her own choice and try to understand her art: "I seldom undertook the more elaborate drawings that had been my regular practice since arriving with Eugénie [...] usually with a bit of bemusement at the queer constellation of imagery and signification that I had developed--- what on earth or in the heavens had I been thinking?" (Keene, 145)

Most importantly, though, we see that now Carmel is becoming aware of her powers, the gifts her parents have provided her with; she is aware of the difference between her usual/rational mode of drawing and the rapturous divinatory episodes she has from time to time. Carmel seems to use her new understanding of knowledge also to think retrospectively about Valdoré; what are the effects that first part of her life have on her new perspective of the world she's developing: "As I often now did when I wanted to pass unnoticed from one part of the convent to another, I imagined myself the shadow I had been at Valdoré, where no white person, save Eugénie, had ever seemed capable of seeing me. [...] I wondered where most of them now were, the ones who had successfully escaped Valsoré's vise, France's visible and invisible chains." (Keene, 146).

It's exactly during one of these night pilgrimages that Carmel happens to stumble upon two mysterious figures apparently confabulating something in the dark.

They are Fr. Malesvaux and Eugénie: "The two struggled, in silence, he holding her wrists tightly and saying without saying *in two weeks, in two weeks* while trying to extricate himself, she responding *you don't understand you don't*, until finally he caressed her face, her hair and hurried out the door." (Keene, 148)

Also in this episode, Carmel's new conception of knowledge steps in through a short comment: "Until I grew tired of the episode, whose overall meaning had grown clear to me." (Keene, 148)

Now that she has had a confirmation of the fact that Eugénie has been plotting

something this whole time, Carmel is determined to expose the girl through her own means; she will no longer protect her.

This becomes clear in the next installment of "A Dialogue".

This time, we are given exclusively Carmel's point of view, her answers to the mother's questions, and the last two bits are explicitly revealing in talking about Carmel's determination: "I am more than ready and willing to take action [...] I think I have finally come to understand your logic." (Keene, 149).

These statements are highly representative of Carmel's new overview of life. she is a character who necessarily has to hope for something better in the future since she's starting to realize that she has been living as a slave up to this moment. This concept is beautifully displayed in the short paragraph concerning Carmel's idea of hell.

Keene had already talked in "An Outtake" about the idea of feeling or concepts being relative to one's personality and experiences (Zion and his personal conception of freedom), and he does in this passage a similar discourse.

While she might be acquainted with the classical Christian vision of hell, this imagery has been taught to her by the same external figures that have been oppressing and using her for all her life. This same condition of being treated as a tool, an inferior human being, is the personal capitalized "Hell" Carmel knows and has been living in. All this considered; the last and final act we are missing from Carmel's narrative is her definitive detachment from Eugénie, and personal declaration of independence.

Keene stages these two final moments in a pyrotechnic series of events that frantically unfold.

"I woke to hear Eugénie creeping past my bed. [...] What was she looking for? [...] She was, I knew, going to meet with Fr. Malelsvaux perhaps to show him my handiwork, though to what purpose I could not foretell. Perhaps she now bore his child, and she was planning to run away, this time with him." (Keene, 151)

At first, Carmel's reaction is one of indifference, as to reinforce her will to detach herself from the master figure of the girl, but eventually she resorts to follow her.

What she discovers, in a plot twist, is that the man Eugénie has been talking to is not

Malesvaux but rather the son of Hurttstown's reverend White. The couple has secretly stolen money from the funds of the city and plans to run away and make a new life with them. Eugénie, though, eventually understands that Carmel has been following her and the two girls finally reach their inevitable definitive confrontation.

Eugénie in the effort to threaten Carmel will heavily rely on the racial element of her identity and her condition of slave. The condition of blackness is, again, fundamentally associated with the semantic field of evil, evoking images of sorcery, or even satanism that remind us of the traces of the gothic novel genres scattered throughout the story. The exact same dynamics were present in "A letter" in the scene where Padre Pero accuses Burunbana of everything happening around the monastery. On the other hand, Carmel's response is incredibly more rational than we could expect in this situation, she finally assumes her role of protagonist and main character, finally escaping that of the submissive slave, and in doing this she even expresses a form of morality in her actions: "I thought about letting the nuns counter the Reverend and the townspeople on their own, but it was not, it seemed to me, the charitable thing to do, and although they had assisted my bondage, that would endure as a cross for their consciences to bear." (Keene, 153)

Despite the rationality of her thoughts, though, the nature of the actions Carmel will carry out to solve the situation belongs to the realm of the magical and the irrational. Just like Burunbana has been accused of being not human, which he, in fact, is but not in a pejorative sense of the term, Carmel has been accused of being a witch and having powers, which she actually has and ultimately decides to use.

The first victim of Carmel's powers will be Fr. Malesvaux; the girl initially thinks of sparing him from his rage because she still sees in him a link to her days in Valdoré, but she then realizes that she doesn't revisit those old days with pleasure, but rather with resentment, and decides to stir the man across the room, finally erasing a painful page from her personal history.

Eugénie and White are the only two left for her to care about, Carmel is stubborn and determined in her aim of confronting personally the white girl without leaving her to

the judgment of the crowd outside.

"I initiated my procedures, pouring a generous libation accompanied by prayers, drawing a circle around me with the wine, filling the washbasin with enough water that I could see my reflection. I sat beside it, formed a filigreed vane with the beads and closed my eyes." (Keene, 155)

Carmel is in the middle of what seems to be a magic ritual, something similar, we could imagine, to the one she uses to communicate with her mother in the afterlife. The full spectrum of Carmel's power is presented in this image: the girl, not only now understands reality thanks to her knowledge, but can even shape it.

The role of knowledge in the ritual is stressed by the fact that Carmel accompanies the magical acts with a prayer in Latin, a language she has been picking up secretly in the convent. As her last resort, Eugénie tries being accommodating with Carmel, proposing her to run away together, but in this effort of faking an affection towards the girl uses patronizing names that reinforce her position of master.

In the final realization of her personal emancipation from the condition of slavery, Carmel answers fighting back the colonizer language with what seems to be an indigenous African language, accomplishing her personal freedom through an act of decolonization.

Quite significantly, after this incredible effort, the first thing Carmel thinks about is trying to get in contact with her mother: "I resumed my position and continued searching in the watery mirror, until I finally found my mother's face." (Keene, 157)

In the last installment of "A Dialogue" we are finally given both sides of the exchange, as if the daughter wanted to testify to the mother that she has finally accomplished what they had been talking about for years: "Are you going to waste yet another opportunity to save yourself? Didn't I already tell you I refused to think of them as wasted opportunities to save myself, but rather as stages in my careful process of preparation?" (Keene, 157)

Carmel herself, therefore, confirms with her own words, that what we have witnessed has been a process in stages leading to her self-affirmation and independence.

Ironically, the last short paragraph of the short story (and therefore of the whole first section of the book) problematizes the concept of "Narration of the self" which has found in Carmel's character, its expression.

The girl, in fact, closes the short story saying: "Perhaps, I find myself recounting to Phedra, Marinette and others, it will be left to the patience of someone more devoted to the genre of literature than I to record the noises that filled that hot moonless night in Kentucky." (Keene, 158)

The narration we have witnessed, is presented as the one Carmel reserves to her friends, something personal that hasn't gone through the filter of a re-elaboration for the purposes of writing fiction.

Paradoxically, though, if we analyze the text through a meta-narrative lens, Keene has just proposed to us exactly what Carmel affirms she cannot do.

This analysis of the text in its ambiguous nature, as a personal report on one hand and a piece of fiction on the other one, closes the first section of the book representing again the key question at the core of the whole work: "What is a narrative?"

PART 2 "ENCOUNTERNARRATIVES"

2.1 "The Aeronauts"

In the first section of the book, I have analyzed Keene's work under the perspective of his proposed concept of Counternarrative.

This second section of the book, which opens with "The Aeronauts", is presented through a title that evidently is in a continuum with that of the first section, and therefore with some of the concepts we have already analyzed, but also appears to add another layer of complexity.

Keene's Counternarratives turn into Encounternarratives, and simply adding a syllable evokes a new world of meanings thanks to the notion of "Encounter".

How should this new notion be analyzed in the short stories belonging to this section, what is its contribution to Keene's fictional/non-fictional world?

I think it could be really interesting to analyze this element of Encounter following

two interpretative lines: the first one totally pertains to the realm of the fictional narrative world, while the latter is concerned with our response as readers to the narratives and the characters we will be exposed to.

Some of the short stories of this section, in fact, have encounters as central turning points in their plots; the events being narrated take a particular turn after the main character meets someone new, or meets again someone from his past.

On the other hand, Keene uses some of the short stories in this section as an occasion to present to the reader real historical figures that he deems representative of the complex idea of black identity he is building through his work, be them hidden figures or famous ones presented under a new light.

Some of the short stories in the section tend to follow the first approach to the concept of encounter, some the latter, and some others even fuse these two approaches bridging the gap between the “character-to-character” and “reader-to-character” types of encounter.

Despite the idea of Encounter being at the center of this section, the author does not forget the running themes of freedom, self-affirmation/authority, and narration of the self that serve as a pillar to his fiction; he rather keeps tracing a trajectory of the processes both involved in and generated by these themes, through his characters.

If the first section of the book, in fact, was mainly centered around characters striving to obtain freedom and rights for themselves or their family/group, this second section showcases us free characters, people that have achieved some form of freedom but are struggling to maintain it and see it constantly jeopardized by external threats from the society, or internal threats in the form of troubled identities.

After you have obtained freedom, what do you make of it? How are you supposed to know how to use a tool you were told for centuries you could not use?

These questions seem to be at the center of the short stories of this section, and they certainly are a key to read the opening one "The Aeronauts".

Keene's will to open a completely new chapter in his book is emphasized by many elements, the most evident of which might be the nature and form of titles.

The author, in fact, abandons his highly technical and specific titles in favor of a more minimalistic approach to them (3 words at most).

It is almost as if the author didn't feel anymore the need to legitimize his counternarratives through the frame of the more official version of history relying on a White/European point of view. Quoting one of the most fascinating characters of the first section of the book (Carmel), Keene seems to have "Torn the White Out" from his narratives. Apart from a remarkable exception, "Rivers", in fact, most of the experimental elements and traits in the short stories of this second section can be found directly on the stylistic textual level; the short stories end up being experimental by their own nature and not comparatively because they are a re-elaborations of European literary staples. Keene's narratives don't need to be Counter anymore, nevertheless, they bring in their new definition the full name of their former nature, as if the Encounter wasn't possible without the Counter, as if it was, in fact, its direct consequence.

Personally, I see the two first short stories of this second section "The Aeronauts" and "Rivers" as Keene's way to make the transition from Counter to Encounter smoother. The two texts are among the simplest of the lot in structure: they don't present the various experimentations the following stories will showcase, and even though they have some elements of the first section stories' they still manage to introduce new themes. "The Aeronauts", for example, is a rather typical and straightforward narration presenting some elements of what we could call a Picaresque imagery.

Picaresque derives from Spanish *picaresco*, which means "of or relating to a pizaro." What is a pizaro? This word, which also derives from Spanish, means "rogue" or "bohemian." "Pizaro" describes a type of character that has long been a popular subject for fictional narrative. Typically, the picaresque novel centers around a wandering individual of low standing who happens into a series of adventures among people of various higher classes, often relying on his wits and a little dishonesty to get by. ("Picaresque" *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

Many elements of this description would fit Theodore, the protagonist of Keene's story; but another really important feature of Picaresque Novel that would also apply to "The Aeronauts", is that this form of traditional narrative is usually told in the first person by the character, resulting in an account of his life's vicissitudes.

Having analyzed the whole first section of the book through the lens of self-narrative and the concept of authority inherent in it, the opening line of "The Aeronauts" represents a significant point in this context.

"*Scream* I holler to Horatio's, Nimrod's, and Rosaline's laughter, then they're asking me to tell it to them again, though I plead how at this age I can't hardly even remember my name." (Keene, 161)

Theodore, or Red as the friends call him, is the narrator of his own personal history, exactly the figure Jerome Bruner analyzes in his 1987 essay "Life as Narrative".

This is the first instance, in the book, where we are exposed to a narrative told in the first person by the protagonist taking part in it and presented to external individuals.

Theodore's voice is in a position of authority, so, this means that the events of his personal history and even those of the official history, serving as a setting, will be filtered, enhanced, omitted according to his will.

As Bruner would put it:

The Mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair: that is to say just as art imitates life in Aristotele's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. "Life" in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as "a narrative is". [...] When somebody tells you his life [...] it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-clear-crystal recital of something univocally given. [...] There is no such thing psychologically as "Life Itself". At very least it is a selective achievement of memory recall (Bruner, 1987, 12).

In this context, both the events of personal history and the data of official history appear to be inevitably filtered by Theodore's voice.

So when we see him say "I start with how it began six months before it all happened , round the middle of May, 1861, when I showed up for a job as a steward at the final Saturday of the spring lecture series at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia." (Keene, 161), we can't but register the fact that even the official elements of this narration will circle around Theodore's life, since who tells the story is also at the center of it.

As readers, for example, the mention of the year 1861 inevitably evokes in us the notion of Civil War, and despite the fact that the war will have a fundamental role in this short story, for now, we are forced to see it just as a moment in our protagonist's personal history. The mention of the Academy of Natural Sciences in the phrase Theodore decides to open his story with demonstrates the key role that the element of "Knowledge" will play in this narration.

We have already seen Keene exploring the idea of knowledge as a means of personal emancipation in the characters of Burunbana and Carmel, but the great difference between those instances and this new representation of the concept is in the more institutionalized nature of the form of knowledge; this is not Burunbana's magical knowledge or Carmel's convent education, this is real science.

Another fundamental element of the narration we can see in this first page is the idea that personal histories are unavoidably influenced by cultural/societal factors, another idea Bruner is personally convinced of.

"The Aeronauts" is Theodore's personal life narrative as much as it is a narrative about the present conditions and future possibilities of his people, being him, as an individual, also part of an oppressed ethnic minority.

We see, in many instances, how this form of societal influence shapes Theodore's thoughts: "Although I was no great cook, hated being in kitchens and hated even more ordering anyone around, catering was going be my profession, cause as my daddy used to say "Anybody can cook bad meal for theyself but rich folks always welcome help to eat well"." (Keene, 161)

On the other hand, we're shown how Theodore inadvertently is already starting to

subtly defy this dynamic. Keene depicts him as being attentive and curious to the scientific discussions taking place at the Academy even if he doesn't possess the knowledge to understand them. Theodore's curious attitude is noticed even by the white bourgeois people around him, but it is treated as a queer trait of his personality that can be used in discussions as if he was some sort of freak doing his performance. Theodore is, therefore, shown as being torn between his secure life as a free black man that doesn't stand out, a future he's been conditioned to accept, and the possibilities that could be opened by his innate formidable memory, that for the moment only exposes him to the fake attentions of the Academy people: "my mother was always warning me about allowing my memory or the past to overmaster me [...] just like she would admonish me not to let my mind fly too far, too fast into such things, lest I couldn't bring it back down to earth." (Keene, 164)

We already see how, in this dubious internal condition, the metaphor of flying/ being in the air, implicit in the title "The Aeronauts", is assuming an important role: this semantic field is ambiguously represented as something Theodore is attracted to, but is also warned to stay away from.

Despite this, the promise of knowledge as a tool that may contribute to man's emancipation is something that fascinates Theodore, also thanks to the exposure he's been granted to the Academy meetings; a context in which he can hear phrases such as: "this Academy and the aims to which it and we are honourably dedicated [...] the pursuit of betterment of mankind through those means we yet have and are still developing."(Keene, 167)

The idea of a "Mankind" that is helped by science almost seems to set aside the racial divide Theodore has been told to be always aware of, even if it's presented only theoretically as a principle.

This phrase is used in an introductory speech to the conference of the eminent scientist Thaddeus Lowe. This scene is quite symbolical of the idea of Encounter I have presented at the center of this section; the reader witnesses a scene in which someone is introduced to an audience, but at the same time the reader himself is being

introduced to someone, especially since Thaddeus Lowe is a real historical figure. "Thaddeus Sobieski Constantine Lowe (August 20, 1832 – January 16, 1913), also known as Professor T.S.C. Lowe, was an American Civil War aeronaut, scientist, and inventor [...] and the father of military aerial reconnaissance in the United States" (Vergano, June 10, 2011).

The introduction of Lowe's figure enables Keene to turn the metaphor of flying/human flight into something more concrete, a real element of Theodore's story. The protagonist, in fact, says: "The very idea of human flight fascinated me." (Keene, 168), a phrase that could be read either in a direct or a symbolical tone.

Lowe's report of an attempted unsuccessful flight brings again the element of official data into the story; the professor, in fact, during a demonstration has been drifted away from his target and has ended up "All the way to South Carolina, *after* Fort Sumter!" (Keene, 168) The location Keene mentions isn't incidental, Fort Sumter has been the setting of the first battle of the American Civil War, but again this doesn't seem to concern the author too much, official history almost appears in the form of a list of collateral events to the main story.

Keene is much more focused on the effects Lowe's talk have had on Theodore's imagination, and describes the many questions the boy would like to pose to the professor: "I would have asked him specifically about what it felt like when he was high up enough to see past the top of mountains, whether he could touch the clouds, was the sun brighter than on the ground. How, I wondered, did it look with all of Ohio behind him and Kentucky out front below?" (Keene, 169)

Theodore's uncontrollable curiosity is balanced, once again, by the social constrictions that appear in the form of inner thoughts. These two sides of his personality seem to be constantly battling against each other: "my mind alternating between the account of the balloon flight and thoughts about souping turtles which I hated to do." (Keene, 170). In the background, Keene shows us Robins, Professor Linde, and other members of the Academy engaging in a discussion about the upcoming Civil War, its first rumblings, the condition of colored people, and how they have been treated by

the different administrations.

What's interesting is that Robins seems to talk about such important issues in the tone of a cheeky chat with some friends; proving how much his knowledge about the themes is, indeed, superficial.

His superficiality is paired with the paternalistic attitude he reserves to Theodore, constantly bringing him into the conversation without worrying about the embarrassment this suscitates in the boy. Theodore, feeling the pressure of the situation unfolding, ends up giving in to Robins' demand,t and reports some technical data off of Dr. Lowe's conference to the amazement of the audience.

Keene, though, applies in this scene a deviation from the standardized scene Theodore had already narrated from another conference: two of the people in the audience, Lowe and most of all Linde, seem to be honestly surprised by Theodore's ability in a positive way. I would definitely say that this last scene represents the fundamental Encounter that puts the events of the story in motion once and for all.

Right after it, though, Keene shows us how the context of the Academy amounts to nothing but the slightest part of Theodore's daily life and societal condition.

The boy abandons the scientific language of the professors and the musings about balloon flight to embrace his coworker's Horatio broken Black/English and the thoughts about his family, the rent to pay, and his lover Rosaline.

On his way to his second job, Theodore makes another crucial encounter, a bad one this time. Keene's idea of Encounter, in fact, isn't inherently positive or negative, it just assumes the form of a precipitating event in the plot.

A couple blocks from the river, near Cope, from behind the corner of a warehouse my first cousin on my daddy's side, Daniel Lyons(Dandy),[...] wherever he happened to be, my mother warned me constantly, so was trouble. Nevertheless I didn't know anybody walking the streets of Philadelphia who could stay so close to danger yet outside the lasso of the law or always have a good time doing so (Keene, 177-178).

Dandy is exactly someone we would define as a "Trouble-maker", someone on the

opposite side of the spectrum in respect to the low profile Theodore's parents have suggested him to follow.

If we think of Theodore's freedom as a black man as something only recently acquired and, therefore, shaky and unstable, Dandy's presence is definitely described as something that could jeopardize it.

Despite trying, in many ways, to decline the cousin's invite to go somewhere to see a certain thing, once again, Theodore ends up being won by his overwhelming curiosity. The same personal trait that may grant him a better future is now putting him into trouble. At the back of a dark abandoned hallway, Dandy leads Theodore inside a room where the boy can barely distinguish two figures: a black boy serving as a guard and a white lady, face down, tied to a bed.

"I knew being in this room with this white woman was forbidden and if they caught us they would hang us, but Dandy was stroking the outside of his pants and saying "She and I is both waiting, Red." (Keene, 181)

Interestingly Keene decides to opt, in this scene, for what, we can only think, was considered one of the most heinous crimes at the time; not only sexual intercourse, but perpetrated by two black men and at the expense of a white woman.

It's not a case, as a result, that the couple of black boys isn't even given the time to finish what they have started before the authorities arrive.

In what is the most Picaresque-like scene of the whole short story Theodore and Dandy find themselves jumping from one roof to another trying to escape the police and an angry mob of citizens following them.

Fortunately, Dandy's luck strikes again and the two are not caught.

Theodore eventually gets fired, though, for not having gone to work that evening, but this event that should be tragic, in reality, turns out to be something that motivates Theodore to pursue his dream of changing life.

"One hot August Sunday I met up with Horatio near Wahington Square. We were just ambling and sharing a cigar and, as if an invisible fuze exploded in my head, I said, "I'm going to work with Mr. Robin's friend."(Keene, 185)

Theodore's realization unfolds almost in the form of a real epiphany, none of the objections Horatio moves towards his project seem to touch him. Keene depicts the boy as having found his true aspiration in life.

Theodore personally goes to Mr. Linde's address where is confronted initially by the groundskeeper Anatole and then by Linde's sister Katherine.

This scene is symbolic in exemplifying the relative nature of Theodore's, and every other free black man's, freedom.

No matter how much Theodore's freedom has been institutionally accepted, if he had been taken with Dandy they would have been lynched, and when he presents himself at the gate of Mr. Linde's house he's met with suspicion and a little bit of disgust.

In these scenes, Keene indirectly comments on the unbridgeable gap between the condition of freedom as proposed by the law and the same condition as it is perceived by the general public of people in the streets.

This scene is followed by another instance of the concept of official history serving the purpose of pure fiction.

We have seen Keene use many realistic external documents to reinforce the idea that his fiction is set in a determined period: maps, newspaper articles... but the most interesting pieces, in my opinion, are the letters Keene decides to craft.

For their nature, I think, letters are the perfect mean to bridge the gap between the official and the personal aspects of the narrative, because they give an official surface appearance to something that might be completely made up. Linde's written answer to Theodore's visit accomplishes exactly this. The document has the double effect of pushing the plot forward and giving a further characterization to Linde, presenting him as someone who really values Theodore's qualities and is not playing pretend, like Mr. Robins. Theodore, on the other hand, seems to be more and more determined to join the Army Balloon Corps as days pass. Keene portrays him immersed in the scriptures to find the final spark of motivation he needs or trying to reassure her mother and relatives about his choice; what's become clear is that the boy definitely wants to contribute to the cause, making something of his life.

If theoretically the boy is ready to take action, the technical aspects of his immediate future are still uncertain; paradoxically Dandy steps again into the story with one of his plans, and illegally manages to sneak Theodore and him in a train to Washington. The arrival in Washington is masterfully described by the author through the first impressions of his main character. Nothing escapes Theodore's glance, and quite ironically even a fundamental symbol of Americanness (The Capitol) is presented through the eyes of the boy (The Personal over the Official).

"I also saw that we were facing South and there, looming right in front of us, atop a hill ringed by buildings, was a gigantic white building with an unfinished dome. Astonished, I asked him, pointing to it, "Do you think that's the President's House or the Capitol?" (Keene, 195)

We know, as readers, that the building Red is pointing to is the Capitol thanks to the mention of the "unfinished dome", but what is peculiar is that, in this case, Keene seems to use the gap between official and personal history as an occasion to create comedy. Even the city itself, with its status symbol of American Capital, is described through the boy's eyes in an unflattering way: "He was not listening to anything I was saying, not about how much emptier and dirtier the capital was than Philadelphia, how there were twice as many soldiers everywhere, how every other person appeared to be like us." (Keene, 195)

This last comment, and in particular its very last word "Us", opens the narration to another really interesting interpretative layer. Theodore, in fact, seems to be very interested in the condition of colored people in the Capital. This element particularly shines through in the descriptions of the black neighborhoods of the city and introduces the theme of personal history as collective history.

Theodore, outside of his Philadelphia comfort zone, feels like a stranger in this new Washington context; his whole personal identity, in this new place, seems to be reduced to the fact that he is a black man, and his living conditions in the city will depend upon it.

In effect, before locating the Balloon Corps quarters in the city, Theodore spends

some days as an unidentified black man roaming through the streets of the Capital, coming across many possible dangers, in a narrative that is less personal than collective. His condition of constant alert doesn't depend on his "I" (his personal identity), but rather on his "Us" (His ethnic identity).

"I took care to avoid attracting the notice of the soldiers, on guard nearly everywhere I wandered, same as I did the police, whose attention I crossed the street to evade. I spoke at length with no one except our people unless I had to, and none of them paid me any special mind." (Keene, 196)

Thanks to the help of the young messenger Nimrod, who will become a trusted friend, Theodore eventually finds the Balloon Corps quarters and Linde.

The two, establish a relationship that doesn't perpetuate the Master-Slave dynamics we've analyzed throughout the first section of the book; they co-work, they rely on the esteem they both have of each other. and, most of all, Linde serves as a protection and a warranty to Theodore's condition of personal freedom.

These working conditions are different from anything else we have seen up to this point; they exit the semantic field of slavery and almost reverse its dynamics.

If Zion, Burunbana, or Carmel had to emancipate themselves by running away from their masters, both physically and symbolically, to achieve some sort of freedom and self-determination; Theodore, here, is doing exactly the opposite: he is obtaining his freedom from the chains of societal restrictions and trying to make something different of his life exactly by working alongside, and not for a white master.

This idyllic condition, though, exists only inside the Theodore-Linde relation, outside of it the boy is still seen as an insidious and mischievous black man, even, for example, by the people working at the Balloon Corps.

The Balloon Corps' actions are initially described in their preparatory stages but soon comes also for the Aeronauts the moment in which the war starts becoming real and tangible: "One Saturday towards the end of September, General McLellan ordered Professor Lowe to ascend in the *Eagle* above Fort Corcoran and report on the rebel positions south of us, near Falls Church, in preparation, everybody was saying, for a

battle." (Keene, 205) For Theodore, the ongoing war simply becomes a new thing to be worried about, another element that could put his condition of free man at risk.

"That night, before Mr. Edward sent me on my way, he asked me to stroll with him out toward the river. "Sir, is it safe," I asked, and he said "Theodore, why are you always so yellow with fear? [...] Yet even after being down here for nearly a month, I didn't ever feel secure." (Keene, 210)

The two major inclinations of Theodore's personality (Curiosity and Caution) seem to be constantly battling each other and alternating between them at the forefront of the boy's behavior, being the first one the expression of his truer self, and the latter, the consequence of the education he's been given by his parents.

The contrast between these two sides of his personality strongly emerges after a particular event: Theodore receives a letter from his dearest relatives.

Again, another letter plays a key role in the development of the plot, it makes the boy reconsider most of his priorities. His response to it even gets as far as making him doubt the importance of his newly achieved independence and freedom; are these values worth risking his life on the field for?

I sat there for some time thinking about the letter, about Mama and Jonathan, about my siblings and in-laws [...] about my city and my home and how even though I hated scaling fish or shucking oysters, even if I liked it less than all of this, a lot less than all this, wringing a chicken's neck was nowhere near as terrifying as huddling at the rear of a fort or riding on a wagon while gunfire raged nearby, and for a second I began musing about the possibility of returning back north (Keene, 212).

Theodore's nature grows more and more uneasy since the appearance of the letter, we understand it from the many mentions of it Keene makes in the following pages:

"Every chance I could I reread the letter from Jonathan struggling not to drift in a daydream [...] To stop thinking about Philadelphia and the letter and my family, I engaged in my count-ups and downs." (Keene, 215)

Keene seems, again, to resort to the image of the mind "In the air" and its semantic

field throughout these pages, and therefore, in a final twist, decides to turn the running metaphor of flight into an actual flight in the balloon for Theodore.

The metaphorical Aeronaut becomes, so, a real one in the last pages.

"I wasn't supposed to go anywhere near the basket [...] Of course I had wanted many times to climb in the balloon basket, had even thought of hiding in there [...] but on the other hand, I knew my doing so was forbidden [...] when I bent to inspect the telegraph wire I tripped and fell against the edge of the basket." (Keene, 216)

The cables are not secured to the ground, Theodore doesn't even have the time to realize when's he's already starting to get up in the air.

This experience too is filtered through his eyes, his thoughts: "it's not at all like I had imagined, how my weight is dwindling to nothing, how gravity is flipping upside down, time stalling to a standstill, how my stomach is twisting itself into tiny knots catapulting themselves into my throat [...] I'm thinking to myself this really is flying, I'm Flying." (Keene, 217)

The moment should be glorious since it represents the satisfaction of Theodore's curiosity, his insatiable craving for knowledge, despite this, Keene focuses the whole description on feelings of fear and instability.

Physically and mentally, Theodore seems to be realizing that the idea of pure freedom without any boundaries might scare him more than appeal to him.

The lack of reference points he experiences while physically flying in the air, scares him when he sees it mirrored metaphorically in his daily life: can he really live without his family? Can he really live outside of Philadelphia, or even outside of his neighborhood; outside of the microcosm he has accustomed himself to?

"I sit in the center of the basket as it grows colder, knowing now that I am tethered to nothing at all, the basket and me now in a free float, a drift, a soar." (Keene, 218)

In the last paragraph, the parallelism between the physical flight and the flight as a metaphor of freedom becomes even more evident, and Keene insists in portraying the double nature of this concept, both liberating and scary at the same time.

"I feel something, not quite fear and not quite elation, I can't put a name to it [...] pat

my winter coat and feel not only the weight of my papers and my pocketwatch but my heart." (Keene, 218)

The short story symbolically closes with a real cry for help that in its desperation encompasses a whole world of people and faces belonging to the boy's personal history as much as to the context surrounding him; starting from his Mama to Abraham Lincoln.

Theodore who has dreamt of flying for all of his life is desperately calling for help now that he is in the air. Theodore who has dreamt of freedom and independence for all of his life does not really know what to make of them now that he has them at hand. How will the flight end? Will it ever end?

Keene leaves us with an open ending which makes us inevitably ponder on Theodore's and his people's possible futures.

2.2 "Rivers"

Even more than "The Aeronauts", "Rivers" is a short story that serves as a link between the concept of Counter and that of Encounter encapsulating the nature of both in its form and contents.

"Rivers" definitely is a Counternarrative since it heavily relies on the idea of re-elaboration of a pre-existing text, but "Rivers" also is an Encounternarrative since its plot revolves around the main character meeting, after many years, someone who's had an important role in his past life.

If we analyze the short story as we have analyzed those in the first section of the book, the "Counter" nature of the short story becomes even more evident when we think about the title Keene is bringing his vision upon:

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

The idea of "Trivialization/Banalization" of concepts that are so fundamental to the mythology of the country is brought to the extreme in this short story that touches upon one of the most famous and symbolic novels of the whole American Literature. The first line of Keene's short story is already pretty much self-explanatory and quite

revealing about its aim to take such a notorious piece of fiction and turning it into something completely different.

"What I'd like to hear about, the reporter starts in, is the time you and that little boy... and I silence him again with a turn of my head, thinking to myself that this is supposed to be an interview about the war and my service in it." (Keene, 219)

If we think about it, we have already seen something similar to this in the collection: the first page of "Gloss" was a historical report about the conditions of Catholic faith in North America but it's turned into Carmel's life narrative by a footnote.

The major difference here is that the narrator in "Rivers" is a first-person one, and therefore also the main character of the story that is being told.

This radically changes the perspective since the passage from the canonical narrative to its Counter is not operated by someone external in the form of a stylistic tone change, but it is a deliberate choice on the part of the protagonist taking action.

Even more interesting is the fact that in the former canonical narrative our protagonist would not have been the main character, but a sidekick, someone that exists in the realm of fiction only when in company with another more important character.

If in the first section, Keene as the author, pursued the aim of decolonization of the narrative, now he's leaving this task directly to the character themselves.

The protagonist, in fact, goes on to make a list of the many events that have shaped his personal life outside of what has happened with "The boy".

Of the account of events that the protagonist makes, two things are worth noticing: first, it is a mental account, the narrator thinks about what he would like to say to the reporter without actually saying those things, and secondly, his narration of his involvement in the war is much more collective than personal.

The battles, the travels are narrated in the form of a "we", but most importantly, the narrator decides to put the focus on the fact that this war in which he has been involved has been made for "*our* freedom". The "Black" group identity of is of key importance to our protagonist, he describes himself as an individual as much as he describes himself as a part of the African-American ethnicity, displaying a form of

race-consciousness.

The narrator would rather tell this version of the story instead of the more official one, although, the fact that the reporter simply mentions the boy's name reminds him of those past events: "I ain't about to devote a minute to those sense-defying events of forty years before. Yet the mere mention of that boy's name, one I seldom think about, not even in my dreams or nightmares, retrieves the sole two times since those years that I saw his face." (Keene, 219) We really get the idea of a life narrative in Bruner's sense of the concept; the protagonist is portrayed in the cognitive effort of recalling events of the past to shape them into something coherent to the narrative he's trying to build about himself: "That first time the name and face had become molded to the measures of a man, still young and with a decade before him but rendered gaunt and taut by struggles unknown to me and perhaps to that writer, also from Hannibal, who had made him, both of us, briefly famous." (Keene, 219)

This phrase allows Keene to turn this short story into an Encounternarrative, introducing two persons from the protagonist's past in the narrative.

The main character seems to be acknowledging the fact that telling a story about himself doesn't mean refusing everything that has happened before the moment in which he felt free and independent, since those moments have also contributed to the person he is now.

At the same time, it gives Keene the possibility, yet again, to add a layer of irony to another symbol of American identity; Mark Twain, one of the most eminent authors in all of American Literature's history is reduced to "that writer from Hannibal".

The protagonist's point of view creates, on the narrative plan, an indiscernible mix between the personal and the official plan of history, resulting in phrases such as: "ten years after that voyage down the Mississippi [...] ten years before the conflagration that would cleave the country in two." (Keene, 219)

The parallelism "Ten years before – Ten years after" perfectly conveys the idea of human time we've already been exploring: the narrator is trying to find some reference points in time through which he can tell his story.

To this, already complex, scenario, we have to add our role as knowledgeable readers of the story: up to this point, I've been working on a text that only implicitly makes references to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Keene hasn't given us any name for its characters and seems to be waiting the right moment for doing so.

The moment of the encounter, therefore, assumes the role of a validation both for the characters and us, the readers, it is a moment of encounter as much as it is one of recognition: "The other face, the Sawyer boy's, froze as it glimpsed mine [...] "Ain't you Jim Watson, you, that keeps on walking without stepping to the side when you see two gentlemen approaching, like you ain't heard one of 'em call out your name?" [...] There they were, Huckleberry now in his early 20s, and Sawyer, same in years." (Keene, 220) Specularly to what Jim had been doing with the reporter in the previous page, Tom and Huck start informing him about their life after the events narrated in Twain's book. As much as he doesn't care anymore about those past events of their lives spent together, Jim seems not to care about the future of the boys either.

In an affirmation of his independence, and therefore of detachment from their existence, he comments: "He Kept talking for a good while longer but I confess that though my eyes never left his mouth I rapidly quit listening." (Keene, 220)

On the other hand, the two boys still treat him with superiority, diminishing his person and subtly suggesting that their position of power obliges Jim to listen to their tale: "'Hearing about it and us ain't no bother to Jim," Tom said [...] "He ain't got no business that's more important than what we're doing, does he?" Tom said. "Can't be likely, can it?" (Keene, 221).

These last phrases are definitely perceived by Jim as a provocation, a provocation to which, quite surprisingly, he decides to react on paper but not directly.

For the following pages, in fact, Keene creates a dynamics according to which Jim is given the opportunity to tell his version of the story but only to the readers, not to the two boys that would dismiss it and laugh about it.

In this context the phrases "I thought to tell the boy [...] I thought to recount [...] I thought to narrate [...] instead I said" become something similar to a refrain

constantly emphasizing the discrepancy about what Jim would like to tell and what he actually tells. This peculiar situation heavily draws on Keene's concept of Encounternarrative and the division of plans inherent in it. In the fictional world Jim isn't telling his story, Huck and Tom aren't given the honor to listen to it; meta-narratively, though, we the readers, are given this possibility since Keene gives us access to the inner thoughts of the character.

The "character-to-character" and "reader-to-character" encounters inside the short story are fundamentally different, and they give birth to two distinct narratives. The narrative Jim proposes to the boys is purposefully filtered to sound like an inoffensive and bland report on his life conditions, the story we are told instead is a liberating account of events that circles around Jim's path towards freedom and his achievements as a free man.

The story Jim narrates mentally to us assumes some of the features of a canonical Slave narrative as there are many in American Literature.

As a recognizable literary genre, in fact, also Slave Narratives heavily rely on established tropes. It is worth noticing, though, how, being this the first instance of a predominantly "Black" literary genre, Keene does not feel the need to re-contextualize these tropes; the centrality of Black/Oppressed/Slave voices as a key feature of the genre enables the Author to use them in their original form.

As described by James Olney, some the key features of the a Slave Narrative are the following: The first-person form of the narration, the description of the "Parentage" of the narrator, the detailed description of the practices operated by cruel masters, the description of the strong and fierce attitude of African slave trying to defy these dynamics, the description of the slaves' attempts to escape and their tumultuous journey towards freedom, the taking of a new last name...(Olney, 1984, 6) It is fascinating to notice how, despite being Counter in respects to European literary standards, Zion's or Carmel's life narratives turn out to be particularly typical if we try to read them in light of these notions coming from an identitary "Black" genre. What those narratives lacked, however, was the key element of the first person narrator, while what Jim's

narrative lacks is the whole contextual back history he is not interested in telling, the content of which is partially explored in Twain's work.

In other words, Keene's Slave Narratives either lack elements in their form or their content which would be considered fundamental to their labeling as part of the genre. The two short stories in the first chapter of the book could not have had a narrator in the first person reporting his own life history because Keene was interested in portraying the protagonists as being still in the position of victims of the Slavery/Colonization system; this was conveyed stylistically through the presence of an external "patronizing" narrator.

"Rivers", on the other hand, is a story about a man who has managed to escape his condition of slavery, and with it, the dynamics belonging to it.

Jim has his own voice, he has authority over what he wants and doesn't want to tell. His condition of authority meta-narratively depends on the position his short story has inside the collection

Of all the many things that Jim talks about in his narrative, the most interesting element ends up being the question of his new name as a free man, which also gives the title to the short story.

This element was present in Olney's list of Slave Narrative features and it is, in my opinion, the most evident link to that literary tradition we get in the short story.

as soon as we could I made sure Sadie and the little ones each got their Certificates of Freedom from the state of Illinois, Cook County, as I got mine, making sure mine read James Alton Rivers, since I kept the name I had always been known by but I added the town where I first breathed in real liberty, and since we had finally reached the other side of the big snaking muddy river which had been the dividing line our whole lives up until then (Keene, 224).

As I have already talked about the importance naming has in Keene's fiction thanks to its implications in the process of self-identification and affirmation, it's easy to notice why Jim is so concerned about his new name.

In it, we can read his whole story, the evolution from his birth under the condition of slavery to that of freedom that's been achieved through many hardships.

It is a name that ties together Jim's past and his future, but, most importantly, it is the name Jim has chosen for himself, no one has forced it on him, it is his new self-affirmed and self-imposed identity.

The fact that he decides to make the "River" a part of it signifies the importance of this element in the narration. The river as a metaphorical and physical border at the same time symbolizes a turning point in Jim's life, behind that border there is slavery, across from it there is freedom, before crossing it there is life in slavery, after crossing it, life as a free man.

It's worth noticing that also in Twain's book the river was a major metaphor but since that narration was told from Huck's point of view, the context made it totally different. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the Mississippi with his flow becomes a place of liberty for Huck, a place where he can distance himself from the norms of society. On the other hand, for Jim, who would like to be recognized by the same society as a free man, the river is seen as the final obstacle, something to go through to achieve this condition of Citizenship.

Self-affirmation and liberty, though, are described by Keene as constant exercises; disciplines that Jim has to practice every day.

Freedom is not something you achieve one day and it's yours for your entire life, at least not for people in Jim's condition.

I had to learn to say Mr. James Alton Rivers instead of just Jim as white folks always called me, or Jim Watson [...] I keep that certificate at all times and in all places against my chest in a leather pouch I bought for myself and it reads JAMES ALTON RIVERS, FREE PERSON OF COLOR, a resident or citizen of the State of Illinois, at all times in all places, and entitled to be respected accordingly, in Person and Property, at all times in all places, signed with the Seal of said Court, at Chicago, on the 23rd of November in the year of the Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-two (Keene, 225).

This last bit, again, is an occasion to talk about the idea of freedom as something institutionalized as opposed to something accepted by the people.

The man knows that, even if he's been officially granted his freedom by the United States Federal Government, this doesn't make him free to the eyes of most white people that publicly have to accept his condition as been recognized by the law, but privately keep seeing him as someone inferior.

This is, in fact, the exact reaction Huck and Tom have to Jim's narration.

In their response we have another instance of subtle irony on American symbols generated by our condition of knowledgeable readers of the text. We are shown a character of one of the most famous books of American Literature commenting on another of American Literature's most notable pillars: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The encounter between Jim and the two boys ends in a dialogue that reinforces the idea that, even if he might consider himself as a free man, Jim should not expect the two boys, and therefore most of white Americans, to do the same.

Interestingly, as Jim had done at the beginning of the short story, also Huck and Tom seem to speak for "their people", being White Southern Landowners, as if expressing their version of the same race-consciousness we have noticed in the protagonist.

Keene is portraying in his characters the two factions of the Civil War which is bound to start in ten years and will have a fundamental role in the second half of the story. After having retroactively mentioned the Civil War on many occasions, in fact, Jim finally introduces it as a chapter of his life narrative. On their own, historically, the events of the war would already have their inherent value but, obviously, being the story narrated by Jim the events tend to fall again in that blurry space between official data and personal experience.

To talk, for example, about the ambiguous position of the state of Missouri concerning the factions involved in the war Jim says

Then the war began so perhaps both of them (Sawyer and Huck) had moved away to some other place [...] or perhaps they had already headed off to fight

on the Confederate side. There was a pressing question about which side Missouri would go [...] Right around the middle of summer 1863 the army announced that we could sign up, at the Schofield Barracks, and though I was over 40 now, 46 to be exact, I felt it was my duty to contribute directly to the struggle [...] They took me and we, the First Missouri Colored Troops, men, mostly young but some old [...] I would tell to the reporter about all of this. (Keene, 230-231).

The filter through which Jim puts the events of his life and official history is made evident in the passages where the man makes overt reference to the figure of the reporter, he is imagining himself telling the story to a specific person, carefully choosing what to say.

The real main event that completely changes the personal perspective under which Jim narrates his experience in the war, though, is the second and final encounter he has with Huckleberry.

"we were creeping on our hands and knees like turtles across green expanse at the base of Palmito Hill when a fusillade, followed by a brigade of Confederates, engaged us. [...] creeping forward like a panther I saw it, the face I could have identified if blind in both eyes, him, in profile." (Keene, 235)

What is Jim supposed to do? Follow his division and engage in a battle that will have a role in shaping official history, or follow his instinct and engage in a personal duel that would have incredible meaning for him and him only?

We have seen how the whole point of the short story has been that of reporting Jim's version of the events, following an imaginary scale which would definitely be tilted towards the personal aspect of the narrative; and therefore the final scene cannot but be the culmination of this tendency.

"I glanced behind to see if Anderson was nearby, but he and most of the rest were proceeding to the north of me [...] I looked up and he still had not seen me [...] I steadied the barrel, my finger on the trigger, which is where our gazes finally met; I am going to tell the reporter." (Keene, 235)

This second encounter, thus, becomes an actual showdown; Jim against Huck and no one else around. What is peculiar, though, is that Jim, having reached this apex, decides to narrate this moment in a tone that is completely opposite to the idea of private vengeance that we would deem as fitting and logical in this context: they resort, for a last time, to a dynamic of the collective “Us vs Them”.

Keene in this final paragraph stylistically creates a complex alternation between the individual and the collective point of view: the faces of the two protagonists engaging in a duel become the hundreds faces of their alike, as if the collective battle was a reiteration on a bigger scale of what is happening privately between Jim and Huck. All of Jim's people are engaging in their personal duel since every black soldier has been someone else's slave; there are hundreds of Jim with their respective Huck on that field that day.

Huck's death, ultimately, can also be read on the meta-narrative plan once we consider the structure of the whole book and its division into sections.

"Rivers" is, in fact, the last instance of a real Counternarrative, a text that relies on the referentiality it bears towards other "White" texts or literary genres at large.

The assassination of a symbol such as Huckleberry Finn, and his exemplary narrative with him, is the culminating moment in the process of decolonization of literature operated by Keene's Counternarratives.

2.3 "Persons and Places"

As I have just said, the passage from the previous short story to this new one marks an important shift in the structure of the book; Keene abandons the practice of genre re-elaboration in favor of a more stylistic/graphic form of experimentalism that he is going to use as a constant up to the end of the section. This change in the form of Keene's experimentalism could be justified by a more profound change at the level of the issues he's trying to face.

If, up to this moment, the author has been focusing on characters that had problems expressing themselves because they were prevented from doing so by the part of

explicit and overt external forces, in the fictional world in which we are about to enter, most of these external forces have been interiorized by the characters that find some difficulties in expressing themselves mainly because of their internal conflicts. The textual experiments Keene carries out assume their meaning when we try to see them as attempts at portraying these different forms of internal conflicts.

The concepts of racism and discrimination are explored on a subtler and more psychological level, and we will observe the same dynamics mostly affecting their mental stability and personal identity rather than their whole life.

In this transition, some of the Counter elements will inevitably mellow out, and conversely, those belonging to the Encounter category will emerge even more.

These two trends evidently converge in a short story such as "Persons and Places" where the idea of Encounter itself becomes the source for textual experimentation.

In the space of just three pages, the short story narrates the events of a single day, the most central of which is the encounter between two individuals, from the different points of view of the individuals themselves.

The two texts are presented in two detached but parallel columns, and the reader is given the task to read the two of them and make a coherent single narrative out of them. On other occasions, Keene had presented us with multiple narratives that contributed creating a single coherent one, but here, this effort ends up being the real meaning of the story: the encounter between the two points of view and the two individuals they each belong to. This is obviously on the plan of fiction, that I have often referred to as the "Character-to-character encounter", while the short story can definitely be read also according to the "Reader-to-character encounter", being, the two protagonists two eminent thinkers and fundamental figures in American philosophy, as we will soon discover.

The "Parallel columns" format, though, makes so that these two different encounters almost happen at the same time; we are presented with each of the two characters through the impressions of the other one.

Personally, I believe that the idea of impression is at the center of the short story; it's

in the title of one of the two subnarratives, and if we start analyzing the story from this column we have a direct reference to this idea that almost sounds as a meta-narrative comment.

"After lecturing on thought and the color-sense, during which I pressed the students to investigate how the context of one's perception shapes mental impressions, I took lunch with one of Royces' students." (Keene 237)

There is some irony in the image of a professor giving a lecture about "How the context of one's perception shapes mental impressions" in a short story that revolves exactly around the same idea.

The same voice, in fact, just after this first phrase, immediately gives us a clear example of first impression: "A robust, poetically-minded young Platonist from New Hampshire [...] Later as I strolled along Mount Auburn street [...] I noticed him again." (Keene 237-238) Through his point of view, a character is mentally commenting on the other and indirectly presenting him to us; on the parallel text the exact same thing is happening: "I was concentrating on my questions for the coming meeting of the Philosophical Club, where Santayana, that new graduate student and my likely tutor, is set to speak [...] Indeed as I was passing down Mount Auburn street, I spotted his black-clad figure floating by [...] Our gazes met, glancingly." (Keene 238). Our second character too is formulating his mental impressions about the other man but, differently from the first column of text, we as the readers get a name and not just an approximate description.

This brings us to think that evidently, this "Santayana" is much more notable and famous than the other character, at least at the moment in which the short story is set. Two phrases more than any other seem to be serving as a link between the two columns, their point of view, and the people expressing them: "I noticed him again – Our gazes met". In these two short phrases, we have the specific description of the real moment of encounter. After this moment also the second character is presented directly with his name, and in delaying this discovery, Keene again seems to play with our nature of knowledgeable readers: "This *Du Bois*, who, I am told [...] fashions

himself a philosopher, though gifted with scientific and other facilities." (Keene 238)
We are revealed, finally, that the young Negro is no other than W.E.B. Dubois, only a student at the time, meeting for the first time with the influential Spanish philosopher George Santayana, one of his mentors.

In narrating the two perspectives Keene embraces the triviality and banal nature of what has happened, two persons crossing their paths, but this narration, when rooted in the historical present, assumes a whole other meaning for the reader who's got the task of putting a simple story into a broader context.

What seemed a casual encounter between two random persons suddenly assumes the nature of a debate between two eminent thinkers and intellectuals.

There is a subtle irony in presenting to the reader the figure of someone as Dubois, a ground-breaking and influential figure in the field of Black culture and identity, while still a young scholar with all his revolutionary thoughts and works still ahead of him. Throughout all of this, though, Keene doesn't stop thinking about the broader theme of freedom in its forms of juridical freedom and actual freedom.

Both Santayana and Dubois are depicted, in fact, as free men, but, opposite to the condition of Theodore in "The Aeronauts", they have finally achieved the position of intellectuals, that is, individuals who can actually live and get by thanks to their knowledge, a knowledge they have acquired and they're entitled with.

Despite this, they both are presented as segregated characters too. Santayana knows that as a Spaniard he is never going to be perceived as someone fully integrated into the American society, no matter how successful of a professor he may be, but at the same time, he is problematizing his condition by thinking that he will always be more accepted, as a white man, than the brilliant young student he has met.

He is even worried of having had a role in the segregation of the young Dubois, having projected a threatened attitude upon meeting him in the streets.

All of these concerns can be tracked down in the text, but what is interesting is that, at this point, to understand them in their full spectrum we really should start reading the two columns as if they were a single narrative.

Dubois through his impressions says "Why does he glower so? Is it fear, for certainly he has seen a Negro before, or can it be acknowledgment of how deeply we are linked? Or does he, like nearly all the rest of them, *not really see me* at all?" (Keene 238). To which Santayana mentally answers "Several times we have glimpsed each other, and I have, I shall not disassemble, hurried on [...] This *Jeune philosophe*, like the other Negro students, the handful of unassimilable Easterners, Chinese, Mexican boys, must by necessity subsist on an Island even more remote than that on which I sojourned during my college days." (Keene 238-239)

Paradoxically we have Dubois noticing the affinity of their condition as "unassimilable" people among the many reasons for which the professor might be interested in him (He even speaks about their "Common Humanity" at a certain point), and Santayana reconsidering his condition of "Isolation" in comparison to that of the few minority students he observes in the campus.

The encounter between the two seems to be delayed once again, but mentally they both picture in their mind the image of their first private meeting and conversation. Still, the two seem to keep indirectly teasing each other with two unanswered questions: "What does he think of me? What do I think of him?"

It's interesting to notice how, in the action of capturing the flowing thoughts of these two great thinkers who are starting to know each other, Keene ends their separate narrative columns in two very different ways.

If Santayana is described as being immersed in his thoughts about a possible future meeting with the brilliant boy, Dubois' mind is captured by something else.

"I could only glimpse the evening headlines --- A human bullet runs the 100 yards dash in under 10 seconds, the Abyssinian war continues; another lynching, making swift mental notes on all issues pertaining to my people." (Keene 239)

Dubois, just like Theodore and Jim in the previous two short stories, is depicted as a character that despite having a strong personal identity, feels all the deep implications of his ethnic heritage; he unintentionally switches from his personal concerns to "All issues pertaining to my people".

As knowledgeable readers of the text, this level of race-consciousness by the part of a young student that will go on to found the "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" doesn't surprise us.

Paradoxically we have more information to read the character's future than the character himself at this initial stage of his adult life.

2.4 "Acrobatique"

"Acrobatique", just like "Persons and Places" is a short text, but in it, Keene still manages to elaborate on many of the concepts and themes he has already presented us, and introduce a new one: the concept of Performance, that will be fundamental to read this and the following stories.

At the center of this short story as the sole first-person narrator, there is, once again, a real historical figure: Miss La La.

Unlike the young W.E.B. Dubois, this name will not mean much even to most of the informed readers of the book. Keene is opening his narratives to more obscure and specific characters as to say that even these figures we may have forgotten about or never known of can be symbolical of the black identity and the struggles associated with it. In this context, the "Reader-to-Character" aspect of the Encounter appears to be prioritized: the reader is asked to have a higher degree of involvement in the shaping of the narrative itself by making some research on this new figure he's being introduced to: "Miss La La (Born April 21, 1858) was an expert aerialist who served as a muse to Edgar Degas and was depicted in his 1879 painting *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*." (Rosenberg, The New York Times, February 21, 2013)

As he had done in "Rivers", Keene returns back to play with a famous source, even if pictoric in this case, to reappropriate it.

If in the previous novella Jim refused to put Huckleberry Finn at the center of the narration, here, in the case of Miss La La, we have no trace of someone questioning the narrator/protagonist's authority. Her condition of total authority over the narration of the story is signified by one of the most evident and radical graphic experiments

Keene carries out; the opening and closing lines of the text are displayed vertically on the page. This graphic element presents us with La La's personal perspective in action, and puts us up in the air with her, making the same acrobatics by her side. Despite her total control over the narration, though, it is made clear from the very beginning that the same concept of authority is, indeed, problematic when we consider La La's position as an acrobat, and it is so in particular if we consider her life as inextricably bound to the idea of performance.

The first vertical phrase, in fact, presents us La La flying up in the air while all around her many voices in different languages ask her to go "*Higher, Plus haut!, hoher*". Performing in the Circus is La La's work, it is part of her identity and as an artistic job, it offers her the possibility to express herself, on the other hand, the same idea of performance exposes her to the orders of an audience.

Keene will soon compare this dynamic to a new form of slavery.

La La's version of the story fits, therefore, in the paradigm of the problematization of freedom we have been analyzing in this section of the book.

As a Black woman and an artist, someone who produces an action, La La's position is ambiguous and ambivalent: she herself does find that action cathartic and liberating, but at the same time by doing that action in a Circus, for money, she is inevitably selling her performance as a spectacularization of her identity, her blackness.

"until I fix a face fixing me, lips agape, eyes firm as beads of beryl, amazement streaming out of them that I am hovering above, the mouthpiece in my teeth and no harness or net to rescue me [...] *Bravissima, Madame La La, une miracle, magnifique [...] la mulatresse-canon, la Venus noire, elle là la notre, a marvel of nature.*"

(Keene, 242) The epithets of *mulatresse*, *Venus noire*, or even *marvel of nature* definitely suggest an element of sexualized exoticism having a role in the acrobat's performance. Especially in describing one of La La's most famous acts, which requires her to wear a mouth gag that ties her to a metal chain hanging from the tent, Keene heavily underlines the similarities in the conditions of Circus Workers and Slaves. That mouth gag contraction cannot but bring to my mind some of the tools, as

the many slave collars, that were commonly used in American plantations to prevent slaves from running away

The iron bit also referred to as a gag, was used by slave masters and overseers as a form of punishment on slaves in the Southern United States [...] A website dedicated to documenting the history of slavery in the US quotes from slave trader turned abolitionist Thomas Branagan, who describes the iron bit through a "front and profile view of an African's head, with the mouth-piece and necklace, the hooks round which are placed to prevent an escapee when pursued in the woods, and to hinder them from laying down the head to procure rest. ("Slave Iron Bit", Wikipedia page)

This double condition of being at the same time free, but nonetheless afflicted by the chains of "Mental Slavery" is an element that Keene sees as being constant in the figures of Black artists that he is going to portray.

We are presented with characters that all have in common the condition of being artists, therefore individuals who work expressing themselves, but their personal narrations are sparse, episodic, at times frantic, the embodiments of unstable identities who are struggling to find a balance between their "self" and what surrounds it.

La La's identity is, furthermore, described by Keene as being particularly "Nomadic", we are told that the girl was born in Prussia and at times feels Prussian but, by touring all over Europe with the Circus, she has acquired some sort of a cosmopolite attitude. Unlike some of the self-affirmed identities we have already analyzed in this second section of the book, La La's one seems to be based only on the fundamental principles of freedom and self-determination, it is not bound to any idea of ethnic group.

Some of the acrobat's affirmations reinforce the idea that what she values the most is her independence and her independence only:

how I am to exceed every limit placed on me unless I place it there, because that is what I think of when I think of *freedom*, that I have gathered around me people who understand how to translate fear into impossibility, who have no wings but fly beyond the most fantastical vision of the clouds, who face

death daily back out into the waiting room and I am one of them (Keene, 243-245).

La La, as an acrobat, is someone who has mastered the art of flying and has turned it into a discipline that has its risks, but over which she has some form of control.

As she says, she is the one imposing limits on herself.

While she might be completely aware of her position and feel in charge of it, La La can not have any control over the perception other people have of her, and this becomes of particular relevance when we consider that her work is literally performing in front of an audience.

If we consider this context, the moment of Encounter becomes particularly meaningful for the protagonist because it is an occasion where her idea of her self comes into contact with the idea other people have of it: "As I was heading back into our dressing room another man drew forward, bent down, gray threading his beard, his large, lidded eyes hard at me like lead shot, he introduced himself as *M. Edgar Degas*, a painter, he said." (Keene, 245)

In the economy of the short story, a real historical figure most of the readers probably already know as one of the most famous impressionist painters ever, is relegated to the secondary role of a mere observer.

We could say that Degas, in this text, assumes the same function the figure of the reporter had in "Rivers", that of an eye from the outside witnessing our main character making his performance. This inevitably problematizes the idea of self awareness.

Jim and La La, in the same way, are internally sure of their freedom because for them it simply depends on their life principles, but their conditions of individuals that have to move inside a society expose them to the gaze of other people that may have doubts about these firm beliefs. In this constant struggle between personal perception of the self and other people's perception of it, we can find the most critical element of La La's identity. So, even if we have seen that the acrobat isn't particularly concerned by her ethnic heritage personally, she still has to suffer through people referring to her as "African Princess". She might not perceive her "blackness" as something so important

to her identity, but the inevitable truth is that other people do, and they form expectations based on it.

Keene portrays La La in the effort of trying to go over this barrier and perform for her own sake rather than for the pleasure of others: "I rose, amid that collection of expectation and excitement [...] the one whose name I could not remember, then I do, as I elude him and all of them, gliding higher, toward the freedom of the dome, high as the summit of Mont Blanc." (Keene, 246-247)

One inescapable element, though, seems to bring her "back on earth" to her condition of performer: "the mouthpiece tightly in my bite", that same mouthpiece that I have previously associated with the semantic field of slavery.

This realization seems to arouse in La La's mind the idea of race consciousness she has been avoiding up to this moment, and in the final vertical line of the story she refers to the painter, watching him from high up there in his studio, as "Degas, le blanc." (Keene, 247) They are both artists, both excellent in their respective fields, but ironically, reversing their actual physical position, he is the one in power, metaphorically "Looking down" on her.

The patronizing white artist almost seems to be described by Keene through a synecdoche which takes his name and puts it on the same plan with his social status: "the name, severe and aristocratic." (Keene, 247)

2.5 "Cold"

In "Cold", Keene keeps proposing some of the themes he has introduced in "Acrobatique" and will continue characterizing the following short stories up to the end of this section of the book.

The previous story has, in fact, marked the debut of the Troubled Artist figure, and its concern with the idea of performance or audience response, and the three short stories following it can be described as different takes on these two general tropes.

Therefore, I am going to analyze the specific features of these stories, trying to understand how the author tackles these themes in different forms, and how he links

them to the idea of Encounter that serves as a pillar to this chapter.

First of all, I would like to notice how Keene generally depicts artists as individuals that are naturally inclined to have a multiple nature to their personality.

This condition depends on the double nature inherent in the production of art: the artist may make something for himself but, no matter what, this product inevitably has to face the judgment of an audience to be considered art.

This duplicity seems to generate in Keene's artist figures some forms of mental dissociation that range from the less severe doubts about their identity and role that we have seen in "Acrobatique" and we will see in "Blues", to certified mental disorders as split personalities, or paranoia, as in the short story I am about to analyze or the one closing the chapter "Anthropophagy".

Ultimately the representation of this duplicity also becomes the occasion for textual experiments. In fact, I am also going to underline how some of the bold stylistic choices Keene will make in the following stories, can be interpreted as formal representations of this internal struggle of the characters.

The major stylistic feature that characterizes "Cold" and represents the "duplicity" in the context of the narration is the choice of the "You Narrative" form.

The most straightforward definition of this narrative situation is the following:

"fiction that employs a pronoun of address in reference to a fictional protagonist."

(Fludernik, 1993, 1)

This basic statement, though, is too generic and doesn't take into account the many variables that, according to Fludernik, problematize this definition.

At the center of this problematization stands the fundamental "Address Function" without which a discourse about Second Person Fiction wouldn't even be possible.

Previous research has either focused on the use of the second person pronoun in reference to a fictional protagonist, or on the address function in Second person texts, but ignoring the central issue of the combination of these two aspects [...] Kacandes bases her analysis of second person fiction on the intensity of the address function which she situates in a scale between pure

address (In which the addressee is potentially able to reply) and a mere rhetorical or apostrophic function (In which the speech act of address is an exclusively rhetorical device and the addressee cannot be envisaged on the same communicative level with the addressor) (Fludernik, 1993, 2).

Fludernik's definition of "Second Person Narrative" depends, therefore, on the concept of address function that, in its turn, necessarily depends on the language function (As the linguist Roman Jakobson would call it) implicit in the communicative act of addressing to someone.

The addressee function of the pronoun is crucial in structuring the make-up of second person fiction because it combines a "Conative" (Jakobson, 1958) level of address and a level of story reference. If there is address, there must be an addressor, an "I" (Implicit or explicit), and hence a narrator, and this narrator can be a mere enunciator, or also a protagonist sharing the *you's* fictional existence on the story level.(Fludernik, 1993, 3).

Having postulated all of the concepts that come into play when speaking of Second Person fiction in general, Fludernik then goes on to explain how the combination of all of these elements in different proportions, or degrees of importance to the structure of a text, creates different modalities of expression inside the second-person category, and, consequently, different Literary models. It is among these scripts that we have to search for the modality Keene decides to employ in "Cold".

Scanning through the pages of Fludernik's text I have found something that seems to be the exact description of what we are dealing with in Keene's text.

While talking of non-fiction models that use the second person pronoun but not the addressee function implicit in it, as they refer to non-fictional protagonists, Fludernik introduces the notion of "Generalized you" or "self-reflexive you".

The most common departing point for second person fiction is the linguistic device of generalizing *you*: *When you have a cold you really feel lousy.*

Generalizing you is a particularly important starting point for developing narrative you, because it is crucially homocommunicative, associating an

addressee with actions performed by that addressee [...] The model of generalizing *you* for reflectional second person fiction is reinforced by one final fictional (and indeed experimental) model, that of *self-address you*. When people in their private thoughts argue with themselves, assuming a dialogue between their egos and super-egos, or (re)enact an exchange between them and a (possible) interlocutor, they may find themselves addressing their own self employing a second person pronoun. Instances of this use can be observed in the internal monologue fiction (Fludernik, 1993, 21-23).

Keene's short story seems to perfectly fit in this last self-address you modality. The text, in fact, is presented as a ten-page long interior monologue coming from a character who, experiencing the mental dissociation I was talking about in the introduction to this short story, perceives his self as alien and external. The narrator reporting on the anxious state of the character and the character himself coincide, giving shape to a warped Life-narrative where the protagonist talks about his condition from an outside position that only he can fully understand.

The personal experience, epitome of the "I" is conveyed through the "You" form. Before I start the actual analysis of the text I would like to focus on the other stylistic experiment Keene employs in the text.

As we have seen him do on many occasions throughout the first section of the book, Keene inserts a paratextual element on the page: the lyrics to a song are presented as if they were an "Aside" to the central text of the short story.

We will soon discover that the song and its lyrics were directly written by the central character of the story and are displayed on the page firstly because they have a fundamental role in shaping the narrative, but also because Keene is particularly interested in exposing his readers to them.

With this text the author inaugurates a third and last layer to his concept of Encounter; the "Reader-to-text" Encounter, that will be present in all of the following short stories of the section. Similarly to what he makes in the "Reader-to-character"

Encounter, Keene wishes to present us the literary works of the real-life characters he has turned into his fictional protagonists.

This use of the paratextual element, though, is fundamentally different from the use of it that he made in the first section. When in short stories like "On Brazil" or "An Outatke" Keene introduced an external textual element, that element was the mark of official history making its appearance in the novel, and was often used as an occasion to make the Counter element of the narrative more evident through the practices of irony and re-elaboration.

In the short stories of this second section of the book there is no re-elaboration of the texts, they are presented as official elements that reinforce the fictional narrative; there is no contrast between the two aspects, rather a collaborative effort.

Furthermore, we should notice how in no case, with this new modality, the external texts become a source for irony; Keene's aim seems to be more that of genuinely paying homage to them. Henry Louis Gates jr's words on intertextuality can help us understand these two different modalities of working with other texts in fiction.

Reed's use of parody would seem to be fittingly described as motivated Signifyin(g), in which the text signifies upon other Black texts, in the manner of the vernacular ritual of "close reading". Walker's use of pastiche, on the other hand, corresponds to unmotivated Signifyin(g), by which I mean to suggest not the absence of a profound intention but the absence of a negative critique. The relation between parody and pastiche is that between motivated and unmotivated Signifyin(g). Whereas Reed seems to be about the clearing of a space narration, Walker seems to be intent on underscoring the relation of her text to Hurston's, in a Joyous proclamation of antecedent and descendant text. The most salient analogue for this unmotivated mode of revision in the broader black cultural tradition might be that between black jazz musicians who perform each other's standards on a joint album, not to critique these but to engage in a refiguration as an act of homage. (Louis Gates Jr, 1988, Introduction).

Having presented these two stylistic features that connote the short story, I now proceed to analyze the direct effect they have on Keene's narration.

The theme of alienation and mental dissociation is upfront right from the very first sentence of the story: "It's fastest, someone once warned you, when you let go. Here in the sweltering dining room, you recognize no one, not a soul [...] When you've come with her before or alone you've usually spotted at least one familiar face."

(Keene, 249) The condition of mental discomfort is directly mirrored on the physical/body plan of the narrator/protagonist by the high temperature that seems to enhance his difficulties at interpreting the reality around him.

The mysterious figure is presented in a state of confusion while trying to grasp the workings of a place he knew in the past, but for which he has now lost all his reference points. This confusion about the microcosm of the hotel might coincide with a more general confusion the character is experiencing towards the world at large.

Revisiting the past he remembers how, years before, the same discomfort he is experiencing now derived from completely different sources: namely racism and segregation: "There was that time in the hotel on Kauterskill when you were asked to vacate your room and move to the other wing because the Carolinian took grave offense that you shared the same linen and dishes, that you might brush against his wife in the hallway or stairwell, as if you could not walk straight or even angled line away from her, as if you had no will." (Keene, 249)

It is interesting to notice how Keene structures the first page of the story around these two different negative experiences, encouraging comparison between the two situations. In the present, the discomfort seems to stem from an unstable mental condition on the personal plan of the character, while in the past the same sensation is described as something the character, still rational at the time, couldn't control, as it simply was a variable totally depending on societal issues.

In the description the person of whom mental sanity we doubt is "The Carolinian" rather than our protagonist. The man is unreasonably scared of the protagonist on the basis of stereotypes and prejudices, such as that of the wild black people that can't

contain their libido. The protagonist seems to be particularly offended by this precise assumption because it is putting into question his rationality, and that of all his people. The author, then, introduces us the element of music in the narration.

We discover that our protagonist is a composer: "then the full song belled in your head and you spent the whole afternoon scoring it [...] The New Yorkers, city dwellers or upstaters, native or immigrant, do not so much as blink when they see you [...] Only one or two of them has ever known whom they were looking at, or, for that matter, uttered more than a simple slur." (Keene, 250)

The mention of the slur is a first nod to the inextricable bond, we will soon discover, our protagonist's music has with the ideas of racism and blackness.

To describe his composure in response to the slur, Keene writes: "The surface appears tranquil, beware the undertow".

This lyrical definition of the attitude of the protagonist is particularly interesting for a reason that pertains to Keene's style.

The phrase is worth noticing since it is a direct quotation of a character we have met in the first section of the book: Joaquim De Azevedo. Keene casually repurposes the phrase in this new context, creating a web of cross-referentiality with his own text. The narration, then returns to the present, but the author doesn't give us direct clues about this time shift.

Keene seems to be using both the content and the form of his narrative to make us immerse in the protagonist's word; a word in which the condition of pain and hallucination has blurred the lines between the past and the present.

"For the last month or two, or five, has it been year --- why can you not remember? --- these new melodies cannot flush from your head [...] Songs have always come, one by one or in pairs, dozens, you set them down to paper, to poetry." (Keene, 250)

For the first time, we have, here, the most classic image of the troubled artist.

His own art seems to have a fundamental role in the crisis the protagonist is living through; in the past, songs flowed from him almost naturally, while now the music is described as a form of damnation more than a gift, something that torments him.

His mind, in particular, seems to be crowded with any possible noise in a chaotic cacophony he struggles to compose into a melody.

The protagonist himself is ready to acknowledge that this interminable wave of sounds and noises is at the root of his profound disquiet, but he does not seem to want anyone helping him with it, even if he knows that he needs help: "Fact is that you should not have told the attendants at the Manhattan State Hospital dor the Insane you were free of the interminable internal bellowing [...] that the tempest of those songs had died down." (Keene, 251)

Through these flashbacks that give us some insights into how the dissociative disorder came to be, we are also subjected to the "Reader-to-character" Encounter and finally get to know who the mysterious protagonist really is.

How the neighbors banged on the walls, the front door, gathered on the stoops as they came and carried you downstairs, saying "Mr. Cole, you alright?"--- "Poor thing, you know he wrote the "The Girl With the Dreamy Eyes?" [...] In your twenties it had all flowed so easily, you'd sealed the deal, the singing, the wisecracks, the dancing, all those godforsaken songs, that cooning and crooning minstrelsy cooping a mountain of green in return, concreting a vision of you, of all of you in their heads, your own, the nigger who could do no wrong with the Creole Show (Keene, 252).

I personally think that this passage is fundamental because not only it makes us understand the identity of the real-life figure hidden behind the You mask, but it also clarifies the real source of the man's disquiet once and for all, indissolubly tying his art with the issue of the performance of Blackness.

Mr. Cole, the writer of "The girl with the dreamy eyes", is the African-American composer Bob Cole.

Just like miss La La in the previous story, he is a minor historical figure in comparison to an intellectual of the caliber of Dubois, but nevertheless, he has had a fundamental role in the affirmation of black figures in the world of entertainment.

“Robert Allen Cole Jr. (July 1, 1968 – August 2, 1911) was an American composer,

actor, playwright, and stage producer and director. [...] Cole was the pre-eminent leader in the world of black musical theater both as a composer and as a performer. [...] Cole committed suicide by drowning himself in a creek in the Catskills in 1911, after a nervous breakdown and period of clinical depression that worsened in 1910” (“Bob Cole”, Wikipedia Page).

The final line of the introductory paragraph of Cole's Wikipedia page confirms to the reader the setting of the short story he's reading, suggesting that Keene is basically building a fictional report of Cole's last days through the eyes of the mentally ill individual who is about to commit suicide.

The data of official history doesn't make its incursion into the story; it is just taken and fictionally re-elaborated. In the same way, we are also given the opportunity to notice the stark contrast between the official data and Cole's vision of them when talking of his success. If the official information tell us that Cole is a leading figure paving the way for generations of black actors and singers to come, in fact, Cole's version of the facts is more focused on what he had to do to achieve this status.

The mention of "Cooning" and "Minstrelsy" in his account makes us understand that the compromise Cole has been forced to agree to in exchange for money and fame, is the condition of playing a stereotyped version of his personal and ethnic identity on stage, an accomodating parody of blackness that panders to a mostly white audience. In this case, the dynamic we had already presented in "Acrobatique" is exacerbated. La La in that short story didn't feel in control of the sexualizing nature implicit in the fetishization of her blackness and if the audience derived pleasure and enjoyment from it she was harmless in front of this situation. Cole, on the other hand, feels an extreme sense of guilt because he is aware he has been actively perpetuating a negative stereotype that in the immediate has gained him money and fame, but in the longer term has contributed to his personal oppression and that of his people. His concerns, in fact, are described as personal as much as ethnic "concreting a vision of you, of all of you in their heads, your own, the nigger who could do no wrong with the Creole Show." (Keene, 252)

This is then, fundamentally, the real source of his mental dissociation: the coexistence in his self of his real identity and the mask of the Coon/Negro. In this context, the lyrics of Cole's old song being a constant and inevitable presence on the page assume their real meaning. As readers, we are forced to see them all the time, they are there and cannot be avoided. This controversial part of his past haunts him in the present in the form of the above-mentioned cacophony.

I think it could also be interesting to read the nature of these hallucinated melodies under an unexpected light: Ironically, from a meta-narrative standpoint, this constant stream of different sources could also be speaking of Keene's approach with writing. The Remarks one of Cole's colleagues makes to the composer "Cole you have four or five different polyrhythms running concurrently, no man can play this." (Keene, 252), sounds a lot like something we could also say to the author.

Throughout the two sections of the book, Keene has been interpolating his narrations with historical data, literary genres and traditions, maps and photos, pictorial and textual references, and even symbols of the American national Identity, adding layers upon layers of possible meanings to his fiction.

Throughout the following pages in his sparse and fragmented style, Keene continues developing this idea of the cacophony being at the center of Coles' unstable mental state connotating it, each time it make its appearance, with some new symptoms: "Sometimes the songs make you so dizzy you forget where you are [...] Then soon as you stir you're back at this internal concert, on stage again inside your head." (Keene, 253). In this very last phrase, we could even postulate the possibility of Cole's having multiple split personalities. These hallucinations, though, progressively, assume a more and more definite form, and from the noises of the bustling street of New York turn into bits and pieces of his old works. The same pieces that we all see on the margin of the written page haunt him like ghosts from his past.

without these notes peeling into bedlam nobody knows, why did you ever write them, who did you write them for, yourself *and* them, more them than you you did not want to, do now dare to admit, these songs still reeling and

unreeling, unreal, daily, hourly, by the minute, in you, your head, and you can't, simply cannot, can no longer bear it. [...] perhaps years before he saw you staring back from a handbill, contentedly, unlike now, and he too secretly blames you, they all do, for how you all are viewed (Keene, 254).

Far from being an exclusively individual experience, Cole's dissociation has a lot to do with the perception of external people, and in particular with the idea of "Group". This paragraph explains it excellently. In it, Cole's singular "You" gets paired with two distinct "Them" that represent the two opposites ethnic groups involved in the very idea of Cole's performing.

The first Them refers to the audience, which was mostly white at the time.

Cole affirms he's performing for them, he is not writing melodies and lyrics as a form of self-expression; to be granted a role in the world of entertainment he has had to produce a form of art in which he doesn't believe for the enjoyment of other people. What about his people? We have already seen Cole displaying his ethnic identity actively identifying as a black man, but his work has inevitably and permanently put him in a difficult position in regards to the black community, the second Them.

Cole knows that he has had a role in shaping the same stereotype from which he himself has suffered many times throughout his life and also knows that most black men would agree with him in saying so.

At this point, Cole's dissociative episodes are reaching their apex: the man describes how he is able to actively discern between his two personalities: his real self and his stage self "You flinch seeing your own face staring back, your mug never so cool or placid anymore except in photographs or engravings [...] making you glad there are no mirror's nearby, that you never saw yourself on stage, made up and masked, always masked." (Keene, 255)

Even if more marginally than in other stories of this second section, Keene then introduces the "character-to-character" element of the Encounter.

Cole, in fact, gets out of his hotel room and in the garden outside bumps into two friends he has met during the last few summers spent in that same hotel.

"Luther and Hanna, they travel down from Buffalo where he has a general practice and also runs the local colored paper and she teaches school."(Keene, 255)

In these two figures of husband and wife involved in the black community and living what seems to be a happy life, Keene almost seems to assert that an alternative to Cole's despair is possible; they somewhat represent a little glimpse of hope for all black people. The most interesting figure, though, must be that of a friend accompanying them. Cole is extremely fascinated by this woman from the very first moment he sees her, and his first impression of her even turns into an opportunity to comment on the state of Black representation in entertainment: "The other woman, pretty enough to be a movie star if colored woman starred in movies, looks familiar but you cannot place her." (Keene, 255)

The trio invites him to join them in a picnic down a nearby creek they have planned and Cole agrees even if he takes some time to understand, being in the middle of another of his severe crises. The tension in this scene is palpable; Cole moves absently in the space as he had no conscience of it, immersed in the cacophony in his head. Anna and Luther appear to be aware of the semi-catatonic state of their friend, and, just as us in the role of informed readers that know how Cole is going to die, they suspect he will try to drown himself in the creek, and follow the man trying to prevent him from doing it.

From this point up to the end of the short story, Keene embraces his frantic and fragmented style in reporting Cole's thoughts that have turned into a real delirium of whirling images and abstract concepts reaching lyrical peaks of evocative power: "You mean to say something about the weather, but no words emerge, nothing about the food, the staff, your mother, Luther's suit, Anna's dress [...] Only a sound that sounds like the inside of a sound, a not-whistle, a not-warble, a code, a cloud of could and cannot." (Keene, 256)

Keene alternates between Cole's paranoid state and the conversations carried out by Luther, Anna, and Gwendolyn. These two narrative lines, though, converge on the theme of race and Cole is yet another time subjugated by his sense of guilt.

The three friends, in fact, are talking about real historical events of the present shaping the future of Black identity, while Cole cannot avoid thinking that what he has done in the past has marched in the opposite direction, causing harm to an entire group of people he himself identifies in.

Keene again reflects on the threatening nature of the past in the form of memory, a theme that he will further explore in the final story of this second section.

Cole seems to live, at this point, only in function of hurting memories of his past, he is unable to do anything different from remembering his old songs: "you know these songs by heart, how many times did you perform them by heart, stand before the wall of stares and pull everything from your heart, by heart, recorded them by heart, you could put on a show right now by heart, as you did last night by heart, here on this greensward by heart, anywhere you wanted by heart." (Keene, 258)

The frantic and rhythmic repetition of the particle "By heart" hammers on this concept of memory being a constant menace for Cole, but it also is a graphical representation of Cole's heartbeat getting faster and faster now that he is really pondering suicide. His estrangement from the concepts of present and past that have inevitably merged in his mind is symbolized by his titanic effort to remember.

Finally, we get the only "Rational" phrase we hear Cole pronounce in the whole story, symbolically it is also the only phrase in the direct discourse form, and in the first person: "I'm going to go for a swim." (Keene, 258) We are instantly informed, though, of the fact that this is not a glimpse of lucidity in Cole's voice, but rather his final act, the fulfillment of his will to end his life. When Luther and Anna try to call him back, in fact, Cole pretends not to hear them and advances towards the water.

"You're pantomiming [...] this time without the kohl or charcoal corking and the floppy hat." (Keene, 258-259) he says about himself.

As he has been doing for all his life Cole plays a role, hides his real self, and plunges into the water as if he was simply a man craving for a bath.

He specifies, though, that this time he has taken off of himself all of the stage attributes of the Coon, so even if he is pretending not to hear his friends (Playing), he

is, indeed, going towards his death with intention, affirming his true self.

This divestment of the mask becomes a running metaphor in the last page of the story where all its attributes are identified as elements of the past Cole is abandoning to accept the end of his life: "never again to croon a coon song [...] no cane or jig now [...] you ducking beneath the surface, the hot hate floating, away, swimming away." (Keene, 259) This mental process, described once again symbolically through De Azevedo's words, leads to the surfacing of what Cole himself defines as "the true you": Cole finally having the possibility to express his damaged and hurt "Self", which, at least, is real.

In narrating the final moments of his life, Cole directly describes death as a liberating experience bringing a pain that is much more bearable than the memories of songs running through his head.

He describes his abandonment to the bliss of death with the image of his mind turning into "the blackness". While we know that this blackness is much more probably an image to describe the oblivion towards which Cole is moving, we cannot avoid noticing the double meaning inherent in the word in the context of a short story that has been dealing with African-American identity and its performance.

In the final line of the story that perfectly coincides with the final moment of Cole's life we are also given an explanation of the enigmatic title of the text: "if you get there before I do tell all'a my friends I'm coming until the music breaks into a screaming silence that if you could describe it in a word would be no word or note or sound at all but fleetingly, freeingly *cold*..." (Keene, 259)

Cole accomplishes the final and definitive rejection of his past closing his life on a *tactile* rather than *auditory* feeling, and condemning the songs that persecute him, and the hurtful memories they bring along, to be forgotten.

1.5 "Blues"

Having opened in the last short story a focus on the theme of "intertextuality", I think it would be interesting to read also this story under that light; furtherly examining the

third version of Encounter I have proposed: the "Reader- to-text" Encounter.

"Blues" is, in fact, a text that works on other texts both "internally" and "externally". Internally it does so showcasing a dynamic that is really similar to that of a short story we have read in this same section of the book "Persons and Places", while externally, just like in "Cold", the literary work of one of the two protagonists of the story has a fundamental role in the narration.

I think that the comparison between these short stories is particularly compelling, especially if we focus on the elements according to which the stories diverge.

While as far as the events happening, the texts can be perceived as very similar, the stylistic elements of each narration makes them almost two perfect opposite.

Both "Persons and Places" and "Blues" narrate an encounter, in both of them the encounter is between two intellectuals that really existed and therefore belong to the realm of official history, in both of them there is an ideal hierarchy between the two characters, in both of them we are exposed to the perceptions of the characters gaining access to an intimate version of official history otherwise inaccessible.

Upon this script Keene operates two fundamental variations between the contents of the two short stories. First, the two characters actually meet in "Blues", they don't simply exchange glances from the sides of the street while imagining their first meeting, but most importantly, despite the implicit hierarchy between them as established writer and young poet, the two characters (Unlike DuBois and Santayana), are fully aware of their shared condition of "outcasts", they don't have to call this notion into question.

As I was saying above, though, the starkest differences between the two texts are formal/stylistic rather than on the plan of content. The first important formal difference is in the voice of the narrator: while in the first story we had two first-person narrators reporting their points of view, here the points of view are those of the two characters but the narrator is an external third-person one.

Keene seems to be exploring the theme of personal identity in this second section of the book by offering us a large spectrum of the many possible interactions between

character and narrator. We have seen instances of people talking about themselves in the first person, people talking about themselves in the second person, and here we have two people talking about themselves and each other at the same time but through the voice of a third-person narrator.

The most striking and important formal difference between the two texts, though, is in the type of stylistic experiment the author decides to explore in them; this is the element that ideally makes the two texts opposites.

"Persons and Places" developed on the page on two separate columns, each one expressing the point of view of one of the two protagonists of the story, and the reader had the task to "fill in" the coherent narrative by combining the two parallel lines.

In "Blues", instead, not only the two points of view of the protagonist are seamlessly mixed in an indistinguishable continuum, but the narration is also interspersed by constant ellipses that break the flow of thoughts and turn the identification of the two different voices into a real challenge. In the first short story the reader is prevented from directly witnessing the actual Encounter between two characters that are constantly divided and never really meet, being fictionally and meta-narratively on two parallel columns; in the second one, instead, the Encounter is such a totalizing experience that we are not given the possibility to witness the two separate voices, we have to work on the text to do it.

In other words, the experiments carried out by Keene in the two texts have the exact opposite result if we consider the interpretative effort of the reader facing them.

Now, starting with the analysis of the text, "Blues" starts with a party scene during which one of the two protagonists seems to be the main attraction. The first pages of the short stories are spent focusing on the complex identity of this enigmatic figure.

He *wanted to say something*... but the English words at first eluded him... when they met earlier that year... [...] the noted poet had been staying briefly in Mexico... even before then a few of them had shared his poems like talismans... reading them as if their lives depended upon it [...] the older poets had already dismissed this so called literature, condemned it.... much

like their peers in Harlem... all this pansy dust from the gutter passing for good writing (Keene, 261).

The opening line of the text focuses on the issue of lack or difficulty of communication; we are in Mexico but one of our characters, the one through the eyes (but not the voice) of which we see this first phrase, is trying to talk to the other character in English.

We are informed of the ideal hierarchy between the two characters too, we can suppose that the one focalizing the scene is an admirer of this "Noted Poet".

The trope of performance, or more generally the artistic work presented to an audience, appears in the form of a comment on the reactions different types of critics and intellectuals have had to the work of the Noted Poet.

All of these information are conveyed in a neutral third person giving us an idea of the mental gymnastics we are being required to discern the different points of view.

The identity of the celebrated/belittled poet is furtherly problematized by the fact that he surprises all of the bystanders speaking in fluent Spanish, opening the question of his multiple heritage: "maybe he was a *veracruzano*... who had grown up among gringos... a Mexican as the new star of American Negro Literature... someone whispered this in laughter [...] Carlos corrected that he was from Missouri, wherever that was... his father, he told them, had managed an electric plant... run a ranch in Toluca... he had spent part of his adolescent years here." (Keene, 261)

At first, he is identified as a Mexican that has spent all his life among Americans (referred to as Gringos) but the reality is exactly the opposite: he is a "Gringo" who has spent some years of his life in Mexico.

For a brief moment, the poet seems to escape any ethnic label to the eyes of the people around him, he's in a sort of ethnic "grey space".

The correction, that makes him fit into the category of Black American, almost assumes a reassuring thone; he perfectly adheres to the ideal image of a "Negro" and therefore he can logically be "The new star of American Negro Literature".

Indirectly presenting us fragments of the biography of the poet, Keene, just as he has

been doing with all the real characters in this second section of the book, is yet again playing with our condition of informed readers.

Someone versed in Black Literature might already have identified the poet thanks to the clues Keene has been scattering throughout this first page, but if it wasn't enough the author comments, using one more time our knowledge as a source of irony: "his English name was not so easy to pronounce... LongStone is how they all kept saying it..." (Keene, 262). Having completed the puzzle of clues we are finally introduced to the first protagonist of the story: the African- American author Langston Hughes. Having established the identity of this first character, Keene goes on to present the second one in function of him, as to reinforce the idea of Hughes being the important one between the two: "the American disappeared into the darkness... then suddenly LongStone is at Xavier's side, smiling...saying I will be staying in the city for a little while longer... Xavier mentioning his fellowship to study drama at Yale... if you get to New York send word, we'll meet up in Harlem... he gives him several contacts in order to reach him." (Keene, 262).

This scene of Encounter is peculiar if we try to analyze it under a narratological light. The paragraph above is characterized by Xavier's focalization of the events: the narrator seems to follow his gaze which at the same time follows Langston.

The fact that the poet is referred to as "The American" seems to reinforce the idea that the scene is being told through Xavier's point of view, nevertheless, during the dialogue we are presented Hughes' voice in the first person, while Xavier's contributions are still in the neutral third person. Xavier's figure is totally dependent on that of the more established poet. Having considered this, I thought it logical to try to understand who Xavier might have been in function of Hughes.

After some researches, the most probable candidate is Xavier Villaurrutia, Mexican Modernist poet and author of "NORTH CAROLINA BLUES To Langstone Hughes" In my opinion, this is the instance in which Keene's idea of Encounternarrative most blatantly encompasses all of its possible meanings.

The most evident level is that of the "Character-to-character" Encounter: Langston

Hughes and Xavier Villaurrutia meeting for the first time.

The first degree of research makes space for the “Reader-to-character” Encounter: we try to gather information from Keene's text, and searching for a correlation between the clues we end up discovering the profiles of two poets that we might have known or not known priorly. The last category, I have just proposed in the previous short story, is that of the “Reader-to-text” Encounter: through the research, the reader discovers "NORTH CAROLINA BLUES", a further point of contact between the two characters, and a text the importance of which in Keene's fictional narration is already evident from the title of the short story.

Going back to the narration after this digression, we had left Hughes leaving Villaurrutia his Harlem address during the party in Mexico.

The focalization, but not the voice, goes then back to Xavier that starts telling us about his experience in America, always through the lenses of the neutral third-person narrator, resulting in phrases such as: "He sent a telegram from New Heaven... to the address on St. Nicholas Avenue, where Langston was staying." (Keene, 263), that despite being grammatically correct sound forced and unnatural.

Among the many comments the narrator makes, one of the banalest has caught my attention because of the contextual irony unexpressed but inherent in it: "he slipped down for the holiday the Americans celebrate to honor the Genoese Columbus." (Keene, 263) If we keep in mind the Pan-American/Indigenous context in which Keene has inscribed a lot of his short stories, the image of a Mexican man arriving in New York during the celebrations for "Columbus Day" suscitates some dark humor. Moving through the streets of the city as a Mexican man, and therefore someone that, he thinks, is perceived as a stranger by the people around him, Xaviers discovers to his surprise that in certain parts of the town he might be more accepted than someone like Langstone, an American.

"you should not stay up in Harlem, a friend had written... they rioted in March, another warned, attacking every white person... another said it was fine, spend a night at the Theresa... No problems for Mexicans but Negroes are forbidden there..."

(Keene, 263) Harlem in these accounts appears as a place reserved only for the Blacks, a neighborhood that has been actively segregated by African-Americans themselves, as if it was their colony and safe place.

Xavier could paradoxically even pass for a white man there, and be beaten up.

Outside of it, he's not perceived as much as a menace as Langstone, despite being the immigrant of the two. Segregation has to do with color more than with nationality.

Apart from the question of ethnicity, also sexuality has a role in the definition of the outcasts nature of the two characters. Xavier's position is directly expressed through other comments in the third person: "his eyes lingering on the men but he said nothing... no one to help relieve his loneliness... he knew there were places nearby."

(Keene, 264) I personally think that "loneliness" is a keyword in the interpretation of this short story: we are being told about two characters that outside the moment of their encounter feel like total misfits and don't really have a community in which they can identify. Xavier already feels like a stranger as a Mexican in America, Langstone doesn't feel safe as a Black man in America even if he is perceived as American outside of the country, and both of them feel their homosexuality as an additional weight on these conditions. The ellipses Keene uses are the perfect tool to convey this sense of isolation of the two characters.

After this two-page long focalization through Xavier's perspective the point of view shifts back to that of Hughes. In these first paragraphs focalized on him, Hughes perfectly fits the image of the troubled artist trying to juggle between his artistic vision and the compromise proposed by greedy producers for the enjoyment of the audience. This dynamic, which I have already observed in "Cold", is making him feel despondent and initially makes him see Xavier's telegram as a nuisance rather than happy news: "the premiere of the play is just over a week away... everything that could go wrong already has... because of the rich ofay producer-director... whose changes have warped his vision... into something monstrous... a mess on stage."

(Keene, 264)

Eventually, the feeling of melancholy suscitated by all of his artistic worries ends up

overwhelming the poet and he finds himself wishing for company, any form of it, mirroring the image of Xavier roaming through the streets of New York longing for a man: "if only he had a Beauty now to listen to him... lean on, lie beside as he barely slept... black, Mexican, it wouldn't matter..." (Keene, 265)

These two inclinations converge in the poet's final decision of going outside and considering meeting the young Mexican poet: "he had only just altd a nightmare... the cast on stage performing and the theater empty... Jones refusing altogether to pay him... critics writing reviews condemning the language and structure... he could use the air and light of central avenue now..." (Keene, 265).

In a sort of narrative tennis table match the focalization passes back and forth between Langston and Xavier. Now the young Mexican poet describes his day as a tourist in New York, the notable places he visits: the Chrysler Building, the Empire State, and the many neighborhoods. I personally think that the most notable elements in this account are the particulars thanks to which Xavier's personality shines through.

For example, we are told in a comment how the young student is particularly fascinated by some parts of the city by virtue of some of his favorite writers having crossed them in the past decades: "he walked to the foot of Brooklyn Bridge, imagining Crane's steps, Whitman's ferry crossing..." (Keene, 265)

Of two things only he seems to be particularly remorseful towards the end of the day: not having had time to visit Harlem, and not having met up with Langstone, a place and an individual towards which he feels an incredible fascination.

The next morning, Xavier finally recieves the long-awaited telegram: "Querido Xavier, deseas cenar connigo esta noche?..." (Keene, 266)

The two finally meet in Xavier's hotel lobby. It is very interesting to notice how this second encounter between the two characters starts with this double language swap: Langston talking in Xavier's language and vice-versa in a totally natural way, as to suggest that they both are under the influence of this double tradition, but also as an homage to the other person. When tackling the issue of where having dinner Xavier hopes to benefit from the situation as much as he can, suggesting to reach Harlem.

Xavier seems to be genuinely excited of exploring the neighborhood he's been told so many things about; myths and rumors, under Langston's protective wing.

During the train trip Langston asks Xavier about the many things he's seen since his arrival in America, and particularly in New York.

The comments the two poets make during this friendly chat offer new points of reflection: "Xavier describes the experience of Gershwin's musical... he is one of the finest composers, Langston says... not a colored man but he has something of us in his soul... in no time they reach Harlem... where the buildings shrink and the faces brown..." (Keene, 267) The comment on Gershwin is incredibly interesting since it brings us somewhat back to the context of the previous short story; a whole new world of popular music in the form of early jazz and its derivatives, in opposition to the traditional musical forms proposed by White/European composers, was arising in places such as Harlem. Langston can say that Gershwin "has something of us in his soul" because it is common knowledge that Black people in Black neighborhoods are producing some of the most innovative and exciting music at the time, music is a Black people's thing.

People in the restaurant greet Langston, we get the idea that the author is perceived as a sort of spokesperson for the community, but Keene that appears to be much more interested in the intimacy between the two poets.

Putting into motion again the dynamic of "Reader-to-text" Encounter the two start talking about "Mulatto", the piece that Langston is trying to stage in Broadway.

Just from the title of the text we understand that the poem and the piece explore issues that are deeply personal to Langston and his identity, so it's easy to imagine the frustration of the man when he says "if you only knew what they were doing to it..." (Keene, 268) The vandalization of such an identity-defining work corresponds to the vandalization of the identity itself expressed in it. Langston as an artist, someone that by definition should work expressing his inner self, is being exposed to the commodification of his person with this piece.

The discussion moves from topic to topic; until finally, in one of the most blatant

examples of intertextuality of the short story, the two embark on an infinite list of North American, South American, and European poets and writers that they deem to be worthy of admiration, ranging from Neruda to McKay to Eliot and Gide.

This endless stream of names leads to more general reflections on what should be the aim of literature. The two ponder on how poetry, and every other form of art with it, should definitely try to convey a political message to the masses, but who produces art should also be aware of the implications and the risks attached to this revolutionary aim. Langston in particular expresses his views on poetry as being the synthesis of the two forces I have been analyzing throughout this whole second section of the book: Individuality and Group Identity.

The propelling force of a revolution that can operate big changes on a social level would stem, from the very personal struggles of the people composing the society. After all of this talking about so many different themes, the two characters seem to have gotten really close and Keene describes their intimacy as being more explicit: "the male couple, now openly holding hands at their table, offer familial approval [...] they walk down to 125th street to hail a taxi... shoulder to shoulder, fingers grazing..." (Keene, 269)

In the next scene the two poets are finally together in Xavier's room and this safe space leads them to talk about the most intimate things they share: their sexuality and their art; two themes that seem to be interrelated for them.

"he sits down at the desk... please don't read those poems, they aren't ready [...] That one is titled "Nocturnal Estancias"... Nocturnal ranches and stanzas, how intriguing... I think my whole next book will be a volume of nocturnes... I myself have written so many poems about the night...That is where I truly live..." (Keene, 270)

Xavier and Langston identify as night people, and for how romantic this may sound, it also suggests that they feel safer during a moment of the day where there are fewer people around. It almost looks like they have interiorized the need to hide from other peoples' judgments and turned it into a feature of their identity.

The passage is also worth noticing since it heavily focuses on Xavier's poetry.

We get the idea of Keene's fiction being about other texts, but in Gates' proposed meaning of "Pastiche": no irony in the use of the source, just a case of real homage. After this exchange Langston decides it is time to go, leaving Xavier with the promise of being his guide for his next time in New York. This isn't the end, though; Langston comes in again to retrieve his scarf, but ends up staying for the night, sleeping and having a sexual intercourse with Xavier. This final scene is approached by Keene through two tendencies that would seem to be contrasting logically, but the author manages to marry them successfully. On one hand the intercourse is narrated very naturally even reaching some peaks of tenderness in the character's actions and words, on the other, Keene's fragmented style is pushed to its extremes: the ellipses separate very short phrases, or single words: "he wants to say something... nothing to be said... let hunger and instinct guide them... in this confusion... of bodies..." (Keene, 271) The definition of "confusion" is particularly fitting in this context: Keene alternates movements, body parts, single short words both in English and Spanish in an indefinite whirlwind of sensations. The two kindred spirits of the poets, whose points of view we have seen interlacing constantly between themselves throughout the whole narration, are now mirrored in their body parts physically touching and crossing. On a final note, the short story reintroduces for the last time the theme of intertextuality giving it a symbolical and central role in the text "Blues" in the final analysis is a short story about a text, in this case Villaurutia's poem "North Carolina Blues". More generally it is a story about how art is the product of one's internal struggles, as Langston was saying in Harlem, but also of the few fundamental encounters one makes during his formative years, I may add.

2.6 "Anthropophagy"

Keene decides to close this section of the book with one of the most enigmatic short stories of the collection.

Being the third and last section peculiar, as it is a stand-alone short story, we could almost see "Anthropophagy" as a text that closes a conceptual circle opened by the

first story of the whole collection: "Mannahatta".

The two texts share some features: first of all their brevity, but most importantly they both follow the main character making some actions in the third person, through the eyes of an external narrator. We can easily see how the explorer of the first short story and the poet of the last one are two really different figures, though, and their narrative treatment is the same but for very different reasons.

Where the explorer was not given the possibility to narrate his story in the first person because he was a black/indigenous character made voiceless by the conventions of the literary genre and the historical context; the poet is someone who has spent all his life expressing himself and his identity through his work, but is now made voiceless by a form of mental dissociation caused by his fears.

For this last installment of the second section, in fact, Keene keeps up with the figure of the troubled artist he has been analyzing in the last few short stories.

The whole narration revolves around an author suffering from what we perceive to be paranoia, and facing the inevitable truth of his finiteness in front of an infinite time.

Following the dynamic of "reader-to character" Encounter, Keene introduces us to the protagonist of the short story by using a quotation directly taken from him.

The Modernist Brazilian author Mario De Andrade is, therefore, presented at the same time as a real historical figure and the main character of Keene's narration.

As a phrase: "*The poet sleeps without the need to dream*" seems to speak about the particular relationship between the role of the poet (or the artist in general) and the reality that surrounds him. Keene describes, as a matter of fact, De Andrade as if he was in a constant state of daydreaming throughout the day, making actions while being absent from the world and the people around him.

Keene's poet appears as someone subjugated by the concept of time itself.

"Every day the quickening passage of the years manifest itself around him, in him." (Keene, 273). In this opening line, the passage of time seems to have the power of depersonalizing the individual, bringing the man to the impersonal stage of a "him".

Going back to the title we could think this is the form of anthropophagy Keene

alludes to: the conception of time and its infiniteness ends up deteriorating and phagocytizing what is human in us.

Considering one of the main dichotomies through which we have been reading the whole book, we could see in this image a total victory of history in its more official form over the "Personal": the individual disappears in the immensity of history.

"The endless clangor and perfume of the streets outside the windows, once a comfort, now a menace, requiring a miracle to survive another Carnaval." (Keene, 273)

The "once... and now" dynamic in the phrase seems to confirm this vision of a man who is suffering from the inevitable condition of the passage of time; he has changed perspective over his life with the time, things that excited him before, now terrify him. It's worth noticing how this shift in perspective is represented by Keene in the event of the "Carnaval". Choosing such an identity-defining element of the Brazilian culture opens the short story to the idea of Pan-Americanism the author had been exploring in the first section of the book more than in this second one.

De Andrade is a particularly interesting figure if we talk of Brazilian cultural identity: as an author, he has been interested throughout his whole life with the folklore of the indigenous people of the country and has even written about it in his most famous work, the novel *Macunaíma*.

This leads Keene to use many elements of Brazilian culture in the text to reinforce the idea of national heritage that surrounds this character, like the comparison between the irregular heartbeat of the poet and the sound of a musical instrument that is strictly associated with the slave trade between Africa and Brazil: "The heart's berimbau quivering in irregular time, a rhythm only the reaper can and will discern if allowed." (Keene, 273). The element of music too plays an important role in the characterization of the protagonist, being De Andrade also a musicologist.

Keene employs this notion to indirectly comment on the "double heritage" of the man, for whom the coexistence of his interest for the Brazilian culture, and the influence of European models seems to be one of the few sources of relief from his distress:

"Except in those moments when the hours fall away, disappear, he lying on his side, in

dreams or awake and a record cycles on the player, Debussy, Villa-Lobos, Pixinguinha, or a disc grooved from the recordings of catimbò from his journeys across the northeast, its sonorities drumming out a bridge between the present and the past." (Keene, 273)

It is symbolic how the music is also able to make the condition of the passing time something less horrifying to the eyes of the poet.

Just like La La and Cole, De Andrade has some problems with the idea of an audience being exposed to his work. As a writer, he doesn't actively perform in public, but the result of his work, and expression of his self, inevitably ends up in the hands of other people, and this seems to be another source of great discomfort for the character.

Keene portrays De Andrade as someone who is both frightened and annoyed at the idea of people claiming to appreciate his work without even understanding it.

It looks as if he wanted to protect his work from these "mis-interpreters", but just like La La he's in charge of what he makes only at the moment when he's making it, once his work is available for other people to read, he cannot control their perception of it.

"the beautiful and not so beautiful sycophants who say they have read his *Macunaima* and studies and poetry and the ones who have managed to mis-memorize a few lines."

(Keene, 274) Quite symbolically De Andrade's lines that Keene quotes in the text as being mis-memorized focus again on the question of knowledge and our

interpretation of the reality: "Heroic anxiety of my feelings to awaken the secret of being and things. The mention in the following quote of a flower that remains

"unformed" and "Inaccessible" reiterates this tension between the human effort of trying to understand the reality and reality itself escaping this interpretative effort.

These two quotations seem to act on the text meta-narratively enhancing and emphasizing the fragmented nature of the style, turning it into a genuine Modernist stream of consciousness, making its interpretation more and more difficult.

The narrator embarks into a frantic list of people and places, and the city appears filtered through the eyes of the poet as a cerebral chaotic maze, perfectly conveying the idea of "Menacing Clangor" the author had already used in the first page.

In the final scene of this dream-like stroll around the city, the narration reaches the apex of the process of mental dissociation we have been witnessing in the character. The author imagines himself as being split into three enigmatic and mysterious figures he refers to as "Our Pierrot, our Miss Sao Paulo, our brown-skinned, bucktoothed hero" declaiming an excerpt from one of his most famous poems: "The Hallucinated City".

This last instance of intertextuality between Keene's text and the work of a real artist becoming the character of Keene's narration, perfectly fits in the "Homage" dynamics we have been observing in the last three short stories.

Furthermore, the choice of this particular poem clearly comments on the text of the short story itself, making the "Hallucinated" nature of what we are reading evident. The last line of the short stories presents us the author pondering on a possible reaction toward this condition of paranoia and existential dread: "while thinking to himself, then as now, we must never let the lies and the tears devour us, we must devour and savor the years." (Keene, 275)

The reaction is, therefore, represented in a form of Anti-Anthropophagy: devouring and savoring the years means trying to go over the painful nature of history "tears", and the unilateral and biased version of it we've been taught to accept "lies", to interrogate it and use it as a tool to better understand the present.

PART 3 "COUNTERNARRATIVE"

3.1 "The Lions"

The third and closing chapter of the collection is, in my opinion, also the least immediate of the three in terms of interpretation.

Its enigmatic nature is evident right from its very beginning. In terms of structure, in fact, "Counternarrative" already is an oddity since it is presented as a separate section of the book, but still contains just a single short story.

The adherence of the two categories of chapter and short story stands as an identity-defining feature of this last part of the book, but takes on a particular meaning when

analyzed in the light of the other two sections. I think that the graphical representation of the titles could serve as a clue in this case, since, in line with his interest in graphical experimentation we have analyzed in many passages of the book, Keene plays with colors when he displays these fundamental elements on the page.

The first chapter, in fact, rather than being simply titled "COUNTERNARRATIVES", is significantly titled "COUNTERNARRATIVES": the two different shades of color in the title create a symbolical divide between the two concepts underlining the compound nature of a name that has many layers of meaning hidden in it.

The ideas of Narrative and Counter on their own are fundamental to the understanding of Keene's fiction, but the real power of it lies in the synthesis between the two of them. The same thing goes for the title of the second section of the book which, seen as a whole is "ENCOUNTERNARRATIVES", but in its parts is broken down as "ENCOUNTERNARRATIVES". Here, the division creates another layer of complexity since the compound name is composed of two nouns one of which is in its singular form and the other in the plural. This difference, the author suggests, seems to be a key without which we can't really read the text since he actively pursues it by isolating the "NARRATIVE" and attaching the "S" that would belong to it to the Encounter. Considering the fact that I have spent most of the second chapter analyzing the many forms the concept of Encounter assumes in Keene's fiction, though, we can definitely understand the reason for the choice of this plural.

The title of this final section closes this cross-comparison presenting a whole different take on this issue that embraces the form as much as the content of Keene's writing. "COUNTERNARRATIVE" is displayed on the page as a singular word without any element representing a separation between two parts.

Differently from its plural counterpart which gives the title to the first section of the book, the word is not presented as a compound of two different concepts, but rather a single idea that has reached some form of internal coherence.

As a chapter that has the role to close the book, and the mental narrative arc I have analyzed the book through, "COUNTERNARRATIVE" is presented as a uniform text

that includes and focuses most of the themes we have come across through the many different narrations. This narrative completeness, in my opinion, is also the explanation to the odd nature of the text, the “singularity” element of which can be read as an example of comprehensiveness.

Another reason for which, I believe, the singular nature of the text is relevant, pertains to the content of the short story, rather than to its placement in the collection.

"The Lions" stages a dialogue between two characters both of whom share a past in the revolutionary movement that, decades before, liberated their African nation from the yoke of first world countries trying to impose their influence over the land.

Years after this shared militancy the younger of the two, a disciple at the time, has become the despotic dictator who rules over the country, the master, in turn, is a political dissident spending his days in prison.

In building this narration, though, Keene seems interested in creating a plausible narrative, rather than a real one. Unlike he has been doing in the last short stories of the second section, the author doesn't give the reader particular clues that may lead him to understand who may these two figures in dialogue be.

Keene's last short story is a Counternarrative (Singular) because it is something of a "historical canonical script". Banally, when we affirm that "History repeats itself", we are acknowledging that even official history follows its standard dynamics.

So, in an effort to analyze how the practice of colonialism has shaped the recent history of the whole African continent, Keene creates a short story in which the temporal and spatial coordinates are deliberately undefined since they are nothing more than variables that can always be applied to an immutable general scheme.

I now begin with the actual analysis of the text starting from the quotes that follow respectively the title of the short story and that of the whole section: "If a lion could talk, we would not understand him" by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and "If there is a genre in which it matters to be sublime, it is evil above all" by Denis Diderot.

Through the image of the Lion, often referred to as "The king of the Savannah" (an epithet that will appear later in the text), Wittgenstein introduces one of the

fundamental themes of the short story: power.

The Lion, an animal which is usually strictly associated with the ideas of power and savagery (The “evil” in Diderot's quote), is put in the context of human society where he does not belong, and loses, consequently, not only his power but even the crucial possibility of simply being understood.

On an imaginary trajectory, the very idea of power being at the center of the narration is a logical step after Keene's problematization of the idea of freedom in the last chapter. If in the first section of the book the author was dealing with characters striving to obtain freedom, and in the second section he was questioning this notion describing characters trying to understand what to make of the freedom they have obtained; the protagonist of this last section is someone who has fought for his freedom (and that of his country) in the past, but now is described as someone who deprives people of their freedom thanks to his position of control.

These three different focuses represent three ascending stages of the same concept of authority in relation to Keene's characters, giving birth to a conceptual path that links the slave characters of the first section of the book to the figure of a black man at the head of a country in this last short story.

The reader might be tempted to identify with the image of the leader (a polar opposite to that of the slave) the fulfillment of the emancipation and decolonization processes presented since the very beginning of the book, however, Keene seems to put this optimistic vision into question by subjecting the idea of power to the same doubts he had subjected that of freedom to.

The short story opens with a dialogue scene, though, similarly to the "A dialogue" installment in "Gloss", we are exposed only to one of the two voices taking part in it. “Good evening. ... Or should I say, Good morning. ... Of course it could be whatever we want it to be. I want-- ... Decree. Good morning, good evening, good night.” (Keene, 279)

It is interesting how, in this first passage, the theme of power is represented indirectly through another theme we have already seen Keene exploring in the book; the

indefinite nature of time.

The first-person narrator, in an act of supreme authority, describes himself as someone who can control time, and make of it whatever he wants.

The exceptionality of this powerful figure that doesn't get overwhelmed by time, but even controls it, is almost enhanced by the position of the short story in the book, right after "Anthropophagy".

The idea of the past (in the form of hurtful memories) haunting human beings in the present, plays a fundamental role in the first pages of this short story, and Keene describes two possible positions in relation to this phenomenon: that of the "I" who is in control of time, and that of his interlocutor, a "You" which is a victim, instead.

"There are some things you can never forget, no matter how hard you try. They root, linger, you'd once have said, You can't forget them I'd say." (Keene, 280).

Against this fatalistic vision, the narrator proposes the paradoxical solution of undoing time itself.

You take time out of the equation, you can't time out, forget. [...] You know I've always had an affinity for non-punctuality, all that messing with time, untimeliness, as you used to describe it. Some things can't be rushed and yet others can't be postponed. How do you un-time? Slip through its grasp? I learned from you. Mmm...I learned that is best to keep time itself out of sync.

Take its beat, remake it your own. Be Untimely (Keene, 280).

The most fascinating aspect of the whole passage must be the reversal of the existing dynamics between the finitude of the human and the infinitude of time: we are used to the image of time slipping through our grasp, not the opposite. "Un-timing", "Being Untimely" are unimaginable concepts that seem to belong only to the vocabulary of the narrator. They are a step further even from the Anti-Anthropophagy proposed in the last short story since they don't posit a life lived in the present, but an impossible life lived out of the concept of time itself. The purest form of power, therefore, is described as personal control over reality itself, the possibility to "cheat fate" and avoid its most infamous and natural consequence: death. "All of those car crashes,

overdoses, bodies found at the bottoms of drained swimming pools, riverbeds, [...] such a remarkable arsenal this particular fate possessed, wouldn't you admit? What I learned from you: how to glide out of fate's schedule. Un-time oneself." (Keene, 281)

Despite the effort of "Being Untimely", though, not even the narrator can totally avoid to remember, be aware of the past that he has largely shared with the interlocutor. Through the memories of the narrator we are granted access to the Guerrilla past of the two characters, and we discover the Mentor-disciple relationship between them. The narrator and his mentor, twenty-five years before, have shared a fundamental role in the liberation of their country, though, what we are told about is not the more official side of this history, but their intimate inner thoughts during those days. Eventually, a more official version of history makes its appearance in the text in the form of a "Speech" reported by the head of the guerrilla on the radio, but ironically our two protagonists are so deeply involved with the revolutionary movement that they know the speech by heart, they don't need to listen to it; their personal history is shaping the future of their country.

The reported text of the speech, which the narrator makes us understand had been written at the time by the interlocutor, is a declaration of intents that applies Keene's narrative reflections on the practice of decolonization to their natural political context. In it, the spokesman for the liberation of the country proposes a new form of power that emancipates itself from the control of the European and American colonizing institutions.

I appeal to you vanguard of our nation's liberation, I appeal to you at this grave hour [...] these demonical settler-colonialists. These aliens in our midst [...] posing as missionaries bringing us the anti-salvation of their diabolical savior, their radioactive ideologies of capitalism and liberalism and individualism transmitted over TV sets and in records and books, through fashion and fads that wither our indigenous culture and traditions like drought, in their pernicious pop culture which like a cancer devours the flesh and souls of our youth [...] This filth, this rot, this shit, in our water and air

[...] we have identified them and we must stamp them out (Keene, 282-283). The alien enemies are identified in the text of the discourse with the name of culturally European, Anglo-Saxon, and "White" cities, as to signify that these are the centers and repository of control that the guerrilla is ready to undermine with its new form of African/traditional power.

Going back to the idea of history repeating itself through canonical scripts, I think it is interesting to notice how this speech is just an updated version of the "TEAR THE WHITE OUT" motto used by the Haitian revolutionaries in "Gloss".

Interestingly, the narrator, speaking about the speech, tells us that the interlocutor has written it but he doesn't personally deliver it despite the fact that it is the product of his soul, and therefore his very personal identity.

Even if the whole nation seems to be agreeing with the message, the figure, which will be soon called "The prophet", decides to remain in the background, having the formal control of the revolution but refusing to become an institutional figure.

The description of this attitude that doesn't belong to the narrator (who twenty-five years later is the leader of the nation) opens a paragraph where Keene explores the differences between the two interlocutors, noticing how at the time they were two opposite individuals, but with the force of a common aim.

"Sound. Your sense was sound, always sound, the most infinitesimal crackle or rustle, and you'd cock your head just so, as if the sound was right beside you, or behind you, or in front of you [...] Mine was smell. Immaturity and ripeness, scents of all kind [...]us two boys from opposite ends of the country, you from the city and I from the bush, sitting and waiting, biding and plotting." (Keene, 285-285)

However, it is fascinating to notice how some of the differences between the two of them have made their way into the narrator politics shaping his idea of power in the present: "I have no gift for poetry, like you, never did, but I sponsor a contest for our youngsters, ten categories, including rap and traditional epic. Some even recite that famous speech, or the revised variation I approved. They're very good. It's even televised and broadcasted via satellite all over the continent, though the part about the

Quislings I had to alter. Not so poetic that cut."(Keene, 285)

This short paragraph in very few lines clearly shows how the protagonist, not so bound by his moral principles unlike the interlocutor, has had to accommodate the doctrine of revolution to some major compromises in order to obtain the power. He has actively changed the speech into something that does not condemn anymore the media of European derivation, such as the television, that he now uses as a tool for his propaganda. He does not even mention the so-called "Quislings" traitors of the nation who, at the time, took sides with the colonizers, he has fashioned his power to the context of the globalized world, abandoning the focus on African tradition. Trying to trace back his life path from the moment where he was a simple disciple to the present in which he rules the entire nation, the narrator returns to the memories of the guerrilla days.

Keene, in the narration, alternates the anecdotes of the past and the actions in the present making us understand how he sees these two moments in a continuum; what has happened twenty-five years before has inevitably shaped the way in which the narrator plays his role of leader and torturer.

For what concerns the evil nature of the narrator's action, Keene, almost following Diderot's opening quote, is sublime, subtle, and theatrical in making us understand what the man does to intimidate his enemies "I had to address the problem of... toes or fingers. You had to, no counting. And sight, that light and dark. But I wanted you to talk to me, talk now, so I didn't order... everything."(Keene, 286)

The narrator, then, describes how the confrontation and the mental fight between him and the interlocutor have been two fundamental moments for his seizure of power; affirming how he has gained knowledge of what he could really do by outpacing his master. The mental fight between the two characters assumes a tangible form in their chess matches in which the "protegé" gets increasingly better to the point of systematically beating his master arousing in him an immense frustration.

The image of the chess games is worth mentioning also because it suggests to the narrator an important consideration on the nature of power, showing us how he too

problematizes the notion: "It fascinated me that the king was so powerless, waiting to be taken. He should have been able to control his fate and the throne. Powerless, and taken. Terrified of knights---and pawns. A bishop, how ridiculous. The queen is the one who never gave a damn. I was the queen, then." (Keene, 287-288).

Keeping on with the description of formative moments of the past that shaped his vision of power, the narrator speaks of a university class both he and the interlocutor attended while in exile: "philosophy of military strategy , or political philosophy, or philosophy of politics itself, something enthralling useless. Yes. Plato, Macchiavelli, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Schmitt--- All those damned Europeans, all that claptrap. Emperor Fredrick the great, teddy Roosevelt, Franco, Mussolini [...] To what end? Our ancestors had more wisdom in their little toes." (Keene, 288)

In this passage, reproposing the clash between the knowledge imposed by the colonizers and the traditional knowledge of indigenous people, it is interesting to notice how the leader appears to be still following the rhetoric of the traditional cultural values of Africa when we have already seen he has betrayed most of the points in the original speech talking about it.

Retracing the path that has led him to his position of power, the leader keeps stressing the importance of his emancipation from the interlocutor, which now he starts calling The prophet: "Then you were behind me. Fully. Behind, until I passed you. Surpassed you. Past me [...] I would say to myself, he foresees everything, moves men around like figurines [...] He has the insight of a seer and the might of a deity. That's why I called you, we all called you The Prophet."(Keene, 288-289)

Symbolically the only figure that has managed to defy the set of practical knowledge through which The Prophet was able to interpret reality and the people moving through it, is the narrator himself.

The leader is now the repository of this knowledge, these formidable manipulative tools that he uses as the foundations of his power. The leader's strategies to keep the nation under control, In Keene's description, almost belong to the realm of "Soft Power". They are described as a complex system of cultural and ideological influences

by the part of media from all over the world to enhance the clashes between the different sections of the population and illude the society of the fundamental regulatory role of the despotic ruler. This practice of exposition to a form of globalized "braindead" entertainment represents the leader's total rejection of the values proposed in the original revolutionary speech.

He has passed, in just twenty years, from writing a thesis on an African thinker such as Frantz Fanon and his theories on the justification of violence for the sake of revolution, to broadcast on the tv Patriotic Dramas as the ultimate form of commodification of the African heritage: "I give them a steady diet of garbage, music videos from Rio, US reality shows, K-Pop, Mexican Telenovelas, Bollywood gangster tales, Nollywood film about witches, fads, diet shows, hair shows, dubbed and scrubbed. Patriotic dramas, documentaries on the colonial wars. You can never go wrong denouncing the British and French." (Keene, 290-291)

Eventually The Prophet steps in and we are given a second voice that contributes to the conversation. Just like he had done in "Blues", though, Keene decides not to signal the switch from one voice to the other too evidently, so this task is yet again left to the interpretative effort of the reader.

The first contribution of The Prophet to the dialogue serves as the umpteenth reminder of the hypocrisy of a leader that, having his political and ideological origins in the liberation war and the values of that speech, has ended up betraying all of his past, now that he is in power. It is interesting to notice how this big transformation has affected even the most evident traits of his personality, like his outfit, for example: "Though you love handmade suits from Italy and the UK in private, and your Nehru collars, African Printed cloths and kufis in public [...] You have on a black beret, fabricated and blocked in the Basque region of Spain, not the Chinese Kind."(Keene, 291) While on the surface he still wants to appear as a symbol of African pride all over the world, we are told that in private he has no problem indulging in luxury and wearing clothes coming from the same country that once were their colonizers. Provocatively the Prophet addresses him saying "I knew you had it in you.(Keene,

291) The man, however, turns the provocation into a sort of bleak compliment, an occasion to reassert his position of control and ironically talk about his mercy:

if I wanted to destroy every single vestige of every single soul that spoke the same language as you and rape their ghosts, rape your ancestors who were my ancestors, if I want to rape the vestigial mother and fathers of us all, if I wanted to rape the last embers of your existence and memory and then what wasn't even left after that, I would have done so. I can write the story of reality however I see fit. At any time. (Keene, 292).

These lines are incredibly meaningful if we try to read them under the light of the Self-Narrative category we have applied throughout the book.

The character seems to have sublimated the pretense of shaping just his personal history, his arrogance has brought him to think he can shape reality itself in his position of total authority.

The same discourse, surprisingly, takes an incredible turn, also adopting some nostalgic tones that end up giving a meaning to the title of the short story: "if I wanted it as it was when we devoured each other that night, like lions, though we were both still cubs, when I shared everything of myself with you and you with me." (Keene, 292). Passages like this are stylistically fascinating since Keene doesn't give us any particular direction or clue and so we are left wondering which of the two men have said this phrase; it does not fit the leader but it should not surprise us now that we are fully aware of his theatricality.

However, we can discern the words of the prophet that keeps triggering him: "You were looking ahead to the bead of my throat [...] you were thinking of terrors that would send the most extreme dystopian writers into paroxysms." (Keene, 293)

The evil the leader has caused is so "sublime" that has surpassed imagination: art is just a mere imitation of the extremes human actions can reach in this field.

At this point, the prophet seems to be fully aware of the fact that his once disciple is there to kill him but, before engaging in this final act, the leader has a last monologue to perform before him: "It's an audience, really, not a conversation. You're not

listening. I do take pleasure, however in one thing." (Keene, 294-295)

It is worth noticing how the leader himself has affirmed that he is performing a monologue at the moment, the prophet is not the intended interlocutor, rather a part of an audience for which he is performing. Meta-narratively, we, as readers, may also be part of his audience. In what does the leader take pleasure then?

wealth isn't it--- Once I thought, following your lead, O Prophet of wealth, that I would take the greatest pleasure in riches. [...] I thought I would feel pleasure bathing in money, sleeping in money, clothing myself in money, eating vomiting crapping fucking money. [...]No. And it isn't power--- Power, that aphrodisiac as someone once said, I don't take pleasure in it either. Prophet of Power, that you were.

[...] money buys power, power buys money, always the two shall meet and screw and someone ends up as the surplus in the equation [...] Fearlessness. I take pleasure in that, tremendous pleasure. Unimaginable pleasure (Keene 295-297).

He, then, goes on to present many examples of this great virtue, images of men, women, and entire groups of people that have changed the story of the world thanks to their fearlessness: Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, Indira Gandhi, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Stating that he is no longer afraid, the leader is positioning himself among these great personalities that have shaped the course of history in favor of oppressed groups. He also traces a mental line of his ancestry, a family tree that links his personal history to the history of colonization and slave trade shared by the whole African continent. Keene's fiction becomes global rather than Pan-American in this passage: the author acknowledges that to speak of the condition and the identity of blacks in the American continent, he inevitably has to track his steps back to the original continent the ancestors of Black Americans came from. It is interesting to notice how, after many short stories set in the past in the American continent he decides to tackle this theme in a short story set in the present and in Africa, as if he was symbolically saying that

the interdependence between the two dimensions of the past and the present inevitably creates an unbreakable link between the two continents.

On the other side of the dialogue, though, the leader is met with a man that has reconciled with the idea of his death and also regards himself as fearless in front of his destiny. These sections of dialogue are almost alienating for the reader.

With his continuity and his lack of any marks of the switch between the two "I", Keene seems to actively search for the confusion between the two characters, the blurring of the line that divides them as if he wanted to suggest there is something of the lion in the Prophet and vice-versa. The only element that serves as a mark of the change of voice is the alternation between the senses going back and forth from "I hear" to "I smell". For what concerns the content, instead, it is worth focusing on the idea of the prophet not having "his people" anymore.

The people of the nation are, at this point, completely accustomed to the new form of power created by the leader; there are no more revolutionary movements, and the same thoughts that contributed to the liberation of the country would, nowadays, be met with reproach.

With cruel irony, the leader even goes so far as to say that he was his last real "ally". The two narrators keep teasing themselves as they have always done since their youth until the lion seems to take a definitive step towards his last decision.

From this moment on, interestingly, the focalization of the final execution shifts almost completely to the point of view of the Prophet.

The description of the torturer is completely in the hands of the victim who is about to die, and moves between his considerations about the present and his regrets about the past: "I hear you unbuttoning your shirt with your intact hand, which you have learned to use as if it were the dominant one, the other, a prothesis, dangles at your side, above the prosthetic foot, proving I should have cut off both sides when I could." (Keene, 300) The image of the prosthetic hand which the prophet has cut from the lion years before becomes a real focus of the description as an element that ties the moment we are witnessing with one lost in their memories. The same hand, though,

also turns into an occasion for the prophet to reflect on ethnic/group history rather than their personal narrations: "the same hands that generations ago [...] would never have been found in a schoolhouse, or a college classroom, or a luxury hotel, or a castle in the middle of here or anywhere else, except cleaning such rooms." (Keene, 301). Keene represents a character that even in the precise moment of his execution still finds the composure to think about some achievements for which he has fought. The leader too has had a role in that fight but, intoxicated from his sense of omnipotence, seems to have forgotten about it.

The other thought nagging the prophet's mind is the remorse for not having done to the lion what he is doing to him now when he had the opportunity to, despite having understood the full extent of the unexpressed evil already present in his disciple.

"I hear you thinking I slaughtered countless people but I could not manage to liquidate this earth of you, stamp out you, filthy degenerate lion Quisling." (Keene, 303)

After having examined the past and the present, the prophet's last thoughts are devoted to the future, not his future, though, but that of the lion.

Following the general tone of the narration according to which "History repeats itself", the prophet is ready to accept his death because he is sure of the fact that the lion will soon undergo the same destiny, he just has to wait for his disciple to step up: "why should anyone fear a lion with only two paws instead of four, [...] a lion so unafraid of anything it is incapable of understanding the sheer terror of life and death, a lion who will itself be devoured by another waiting nearby." (Keene, 303)

The lion's fearlessness has essentially turned into foolishness and unawareness.

The prophet seems to suggest that the truth is that the lion's fearlessness is just another mask, deep down he is aware of the same things the prophet has just said, he simply does not accept them yet.

The prophet's voice ceases in the middle of a phrase; we can only imagine the lion has finally killed him. What matters, though, is the fact that we do not really need the end of that phrase to know how the story will end.

Keene's narrative finishes here but the repetitive nature of history, the ineluctability of

time, and the "canonical" nature implicit in real events, show the reader the way towards the only possible conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Having reached the end of my dissertation, I would like to present my conclusions taking inspiration from two quotes I had to leave out from the body of my thesis since I deem them to be particularly representative of the spirit of Keene's work.

The first quote, used as a preface to the first section of the book comes from the African-American writer James Baldwin: *"Perhaps, then, after all, we have no idea of what history is: or are in flight from the demon we have summoned"*.

The second quote, coming from the Puerto Rican essayist and novelist Edgardo Rodríguez Julià, is used by Keene as a preface to the second section of his collection: *"I believe that if we have any notion at all of what has generally been called human nature, it is because History, like a mirror, holds up for our contemplation an image of ourselves"*.

Despite being highly contrasting, these two definitions of the same broad concept of History inevitably share a base assumption: a human point of view.

The demons Baldwin talks about in his "haunting" vision of history aren't self-evident, they need to be summoned by someone, and even when history is playing an active role, as in Julià's quote, it does so when it is interrogated by someone pondering on the nature of humanity.

Both in its negative and its positive form, History becomes relevant when it is subjected to the process of analysis on the part of an individual or a group of people. Bringing this approach to the plan of the dichotomy between Personal and Official history I have been analyzing throughout Keene's entire collection, we notice how the line between these two concepts becomes particularly blurry.

Every supposedly Official historical event is Personal since an individual or a group of people unavoidably is at the center of it, and the same event will furtherly be analyzed in the future by someone else who will unavoidably provide his personal

point of view on it. We could do for History the same discourse Keene has been doing about Art in many of his short stories: it does not exist in the absence of a human hand shaping it and other human eyes witnessing and interpreting it.

How do the practices of Life-narrative, self-affirmation, and emancipation, explored by Keene in his *Conunternarratives*, fit in this discourse?

If we go back to the idea of a Narrative as something used by human beings to interpret and shape reality, we can understand how the relationship between every narrator of the self and History is pretty much fundamental.

Keene's characters are described as in the process of trying to take their role in the action of shaping History. In the context of this process Personal History represent the first stage, that of producing their narrative. Burunbana, Carmel, Theodore, Jim are all experimenting with the concept of self-narrative: they do not know how to do it since they were never granted this opportunity, by trial and error they are creating their first first-person account of their life. If we imagine a comparison between the Life-Narrative and the work of art, though, this first step corresponds only with the action of producing the piece, La La's and Cole's stories have demonstrated us that this is just the beginning of a long process of acceptance.

What happens when these Personal versions of History are presented to other characters, or readers? They are rejected, they are problematized, they are perceived as fragmentary and obscure by an audience that isn't willing or ready to accept them. In short; these Personal versions of history are not granted their status of officiality, they are confined to the realm of "*Counternarratives*".

The "Counter" category, as much as it is described as something emancipatory, still is, in my opinion, a form of delegitimization of the oppressed people's point of view in history and fiction: a point of view that is not worth by itself but only as "Counter" to a more official one.

Personally, I believe that Keene's aim of "Decolonizing" literature substantially consists in making sure the Personal Counternarratives of the present are granted a place among the Official Narratives of the future.

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