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## **Empire Rules: Cultures of U.S. Imperialism in Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.**

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Empire Rules: Cultures of U.S. Imperialism in Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

This dissertation concerns contemporary multi-ethnic literature of the U.S. (MELUS) and empire. Namely, contemporary MELUS invites a reckoning with U.S. Empire, an amalgamation of settler colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, which works through ahistorical and transhistorical cultural narratives. In turn, contemporary multi-ethnic writers uncover our obscured colonial and imperial histories and legacies that racialize, criminalize, and otherize people of color in the U.S. within our present moment. This dissertation, then, analyzes recent novels and poetry collections by African American, Native American, Latinx, and African diasporic writers to unmask the efforts of empire-building with the material effects on colonized, marginalized peoples. Reckoning with U.S. Empire within the literary space of contemporary MELUS, I argue, illustrates how the symbolic and material rules of U.S. Empire were established and how these rules concurrently erase their authors and beneficiaries, thereby naturalizing or normalizing our social, political, and economic hierarchies. Observing our contemporary moment portrayed in the fiction and poetry of MELUS has shown that nothing in our society—race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender—is an accident or created by chance. These are the rules of U.S. Empire employed since the constitutional foundation of the U.S., and now contemporary African American, Native, Latinx, and West African women writers are unveiling these rules, their construction, and at times their undoing.

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## Introduction

Contemporary literature and culture of the United States, namely multi-ethnic literature of the U.S. (MELUS), invites a reckoning with U.S. Empire—an amalgamation of settler colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism—from the beginnings of our so-called democratic republic into the twenty-first century. The engagement with U.S. imperial and colonial histories in many works of U.S. multi-ethnic literature reunites the often-erased efforts of empire-building with its material effects on colonized, marginalized peoples, often manifesting and propagating through cultural narratives. For example, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), the practice of convict leasing links an impoverished, mixed-race family in present-day Mississippi with the plundered black bodies of slavery in the U.S. South. In *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2014), the murder of a Mexican immigrant with a visa by an Anglo American in Delaware connects nineteenth century, race-based immigration laws and shifting borders with globalization's need for cheap labor.

Reckoning with U.S. Empire within the literary space of contemporary MELUS, I argue, illustrates how the symbolic and material rules of U.S. Empire were established, while concurrently erasing its authors and its beneficiaries. These rules, as I show, are ahistorical and transhistorical, privileging whiteness, Eurocentrism, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. These rules allow U.S. Empire to function as a stable, naturalized power that determines social and political hierarchies, while erasing or obscuring the blood-soaked imperial and colonial histories that led to that contemporary moment. The reckoning with U.S. Empire that takes place within MELUS, however, also demonstrates how multi-ethnic writers are bending these rules through anti-colonial and decolonial interventions including critiques of race, citizenship, history, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and capital.

In his discussion on the foundations of “American literature,” Michael Hames-García cites José Martí, the nineteenth-century Cuban political leader and essayist, and Jose Saldívar, a scholar of late postcontemporary culture, to argue that “American literature” offers opportunities to “map literary history across geopolitical borders in order to highlight critical perspectives on white, US hegemony and domination,” including opening up U.S. literary and cultural studies “to analyses of imperialism and to international and border studies” (20-21). In other words, defining “American literature” includes reading literature from immigrants and marginalized peoples who exist in a postcolonial condition in relation to U.S. Empire. Simply, Hames-García argues “I want to take Martí’s vision as a reflection to present back to ‘us’ our national culture. If we, as scholars of the United States, want to be able to recognize conflict and to analyze its causes, then it would behoove us to eschew self-congratulatory approaches to US culture, history, and identity in our research and pedagogy” (23). In effect, the literatures of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx, and of the African diaspora reflects our national culture in the U.S. That is, Hames-García suggests scholars of U.S. literature can better reflect U.S. culture, history, and politics by curating what we teach and how we teach it, namely including and prioritizing MELUS while also investigating MELUS’s relationships to U.S. Empire.

In this project, I prioritize and investigate the relationships between U.S. Empire and contemporary African American, Native American, Latinx, and African diasporic literature. Prioritizing these multi-ethnic literatures reveals the endemic, constitutional racism built into the DNA of our democratic republic; it unmask powerful cultural narratives that shift the burden of social ills onto marginalized peoples while maintaining the structures of power that create the very material effects that dominate the lived experiences of marginalized peoples; and it foregrounds the colonial and imperial histories of U.S. Empire that help create racial and cultural

formations that limit full membership into U.S. society for marginalized peoples. For instance, contemporary African American literature not only views and accepts anti-black racism as integral to the founding of our nation, but also reveals how this racism has evolved across four centuries playing out in the everyday existences of African Americans across the U.S. For contemporary Native American literature, the exclusionary relationship between Indigenous peoples contrasts with the history of African American ancestors who were unequally included in the U.S Constitution. Since these exclusionary beginnings, U.S. Empire has tried to annihilate Native Americans, both physically and epistemically. Contemporary Native writers document the erasures of genocide and massacre and point to the present-day realities of Natives as defying the five-hundred-year-long campaign of genocide stemming from the first exclusions of Natives within U.S. society. Contemporary Latinx writers, similarly, detail colonial and imperial histories but point to racial and cultural formations that now exist as borders—boundaries that create illegality, ineligibility, and illegibility. Lastly, this project reads contemporary African diasporic literature within U.S. Empire because the novels of West African women writers demonstrate the borders and barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship that limit belonging or acceptance, rather than the celebratory narratives of the American dream and American exceptionalism. Contemporary African diasporic literature, then, belies the progress and the promise of a post-race society that continually shows the U.S. as a site of violence and social struggle—a U.S. that refuses to accept the legacies of slavery, genocide, and dispossession.

To start, I define U.S. Empire and its rules. I disentangle the strictly imperial dimension of Empire from the cultural thread enmeshed within U.S. Empire that works as much through military interventions as it does through cultural narratives. This two-fold nature functions as the rules of U.S. Empire that create our contemporary moment, and to arrive at our current times

means to excavate the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism since the beginnings of our nation. And so, what follows is a brief history of U.S Empire that charts interventions, relocations, human flows, and occupations while also naming the agents of power who effect these events and structures. This section ends by analyzing the pervasive ideology of exceptionalism that undergirds U.S. Empire. Next, I explore the literary space of MELUS in relation to U.S. Empire and show how multi-ethnic writers confront the legacies of colonialism and imperialism by offering decolonial and anti-colonial approaches as ways to defy the rules of U.S. Empire. Finally, I describe the following four chapters that concern the literature of African American, Native American, Latinx, and African diasporic writers.

*Defining U.S. Empire and Its Rules*

To express the fundamental, or constitutional, rules of U.S. Empire, I defer to key concepts in *Empire* (2000) by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Referring to a twenty-first century context, Hardt and Negri claim that the powers of Empire lie in a new form of sovereignty and globalization; they claim that Empire is a political subject governing the world through regulation of global exchanges, including global markets and global production (xi-xii). In this way, Hardt's and Negri's concept of Empire is more concerned with globalization and national and supranational entities, e.g., International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, The World Trade Organization, and even the European Union, rather than histories or cultures of imperialism. Furthermore, in contrast to imperialism, which depends on an imperial center, Empire, in Negri's and Hardt's view, is decentered and deterritorializing; in other words, it relies less and less on fixed borders or boundaries to effect its power (xii). Indeed, as Hardt and Negri likewise claim, no nation can be 'the Empire' of the globe or be the world leader in the way of

former European empires. The British Empire and French Empire that set up colonies all across the globe will never repeat themselves.

In keeping with this definition of Empire, this project focuses on U.S. Empire's decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of symbolic and material rules and the obscured ahistorical nature of that apparatus. For, as Hardt and Negri also contend, Empire "presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity. From the perspective of Empire, this is the way things will always be and the way they were always meant to be" (xiv). U.S. Empire, for example, was instrumental in the naturalization of slavery during the 1860s in the U.S. South and made it seem as if slavery always existed and will always exist. In the 1960s, U.S. empire also played a role in the naturalization of segregation (even in the face of *Brown v. Board of Education*) and made it seem as if Anglos and African Americans would always be separate. U.S. Empire creates an eternal contemporary moment without reference to prior history. Relatedly, and in addition to its ersatz fixity, the concept of U.S. Empire speaks through peace, democracy, freedom, and liberty, even though the practice of U.S. Empire is characterized by wars over land disputes and the theft of land through genocidal campaigns (Hardt and Negri xv). Continental expansion, for example, broadened the frontiers for Anglo Americans to prosper on open ranges but only by displacing and massacring tens of thousands of Native Americans.

Since the rules of U.S. Empire work best without history and without progenitors, uncovering these rules means to unmask the beneficiaries and to place events within context. In the following brief history of U.S. Empire, the constitutional components of U.S. Empire are related and placed within a timeline from the beginning of our nation-state to our contemporary moment. Imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism—constitutional components of U.S. Empire—

have been indivisible and interdependent since the beginnings of our democratic republic. According to Edward Said, imperialism refers to the practice and theory of a metropolitan center dominating a colony abroad, whereas colonialism, often a project of imperialism, means to settle colonies on distant territory (qtd. in Ashcroft). In the case of the U.S., these practices and theories are not mutually exclusive, rather they occur simultaneously and always within the framework of capitalism. Obfuscations surrounding the theories and practices of colonial and imperial tendencies often erase the contribution of capitalism. Traced back to the American revolution and the philosophies of early American leaders, these three structures contributed to continental expansion to the Pacific and then expansion in the Americas, especially into Caribbean and Central American nations, protectorates, and commonwealths. When the original thirteen colonies declared independence in 1776, the new American leaders who governed the new fledgling nation were still thinking like “members of a commercial and industrial empire;” that is, this new nation created an army and a navy to support commercial and industrial growth across North America and to protect markets abroad (McColley). In fact, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, wanted to create an empire of liberty while others, including John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, sought to “lead and teach the whole Western Hemisphere” (McColley). A paradoxically integral component of this Jeffersonian empire of liberty was the institution of slavery. In her recent introductory essay to *The 1619 Project*, Nikole Hannah-Jones argues that black Americans have been perfecting our democracy since the first African slaves arrived in Jamestown in 1619, ensuring that in fact all men and women are created equal. Notably, Hannah-Jones contends that a key consideration for emancipation from the British Empire was the institution of slavery that in 1776 was already

vital to the new nation's society, economy, and culture. Now constitutional in early American leaders' thinking, capitalism functioned concurrently with colonial and imperial ideologies.

Reflecting the empire-driven mindset of the nation's leadership, "new Americans" also adopted the theories of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. Indeed, U.S. Empire was representative of the new national identity encapsulated by frontiersmen, backwoodsmen, and pioneers (McColley). The Lewis and Clark expedition following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase mythologized this new identity while early American literature galvanized the American imaginary to explore the wilderness and 'civilize' the frontier. *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-41) by James Fenimore Cooper romanticized the adventures of frontiersman, Natty Bumppo, and Bret Harte's *The Luck of Roaring Camp, and Other Sketches* (1870), explored the 'local colour' of California mining camps well after the initial influx of forty-niners following John Sutter's discovery of gold near the Sacramento River in 1848. These pioneers and frontiersmen stemmed from the immigration of propertyless whites during colonial America. In fact, around seventy percent of all white immigration, including free and propertyless whites, were indentured servants who eventually bought their freedom and became the generations of pioneers, frontiersmen, and imperialists (Gonzalez 23). Still, the American ideology of conquering 'nature'—without regard to the peoples already occupying those lands—pervades American-ness.

In a similar way, American school children, especially Texan students, are taught to revere Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Barret Travis, quintessential American pioneers, who died as 'martyrs' at the Alamo. Notwithstanding these American heroes' Mexican citizenship, open rebellion to their country, and open defense of slavery, these 'martyrs' constitute brave *American-ness*. In turn, these and future American pioneers continued

unauthorized continental expansion throughout the eighteenth century, beginning in 1783 with the addition of new territories including present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and Mississippi, among others. Continental expansion, then, propelled by racist, imperialist ideologies of “America for the Americans” and “Manifest Destiny,” destroyed numerous Native American tribes and relocated surviving tribes to reservations in Oklahoma. Additionally, expansion continued through relentless filibustering, where Anglo settlers incessantly invaded parts of the Spanish borderlands and later the Mexican borderlands. In this way, the U.S. acquired Florida, Texas, California, and the U.S. Southwest after the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, and the Gadsden Purchase of 1854. After acquiring the east-to-west expanse of North America, the U.S. continually needed labor to profit from these expansions. A large component of labor in the U.S. empire consisted of African slaves who continued to provide labor in the new Southern territories and states; in addition, Spanish, Mexican, and East Asian labor developed the fields, connected the railroads, and built towns.

Furthermore, specific histories of the U.S. demonstrate clear instances of empire-building where colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism are enmeshed. Manifestations of empire-building are evident in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 or in the filibustering by Anglo settlers into Mexican lands across the South and Southwest resulting in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. A directive from Thomas Jefferson sent James Monroe and Robert Livingston to purchase this large plot from the French Empire. Monroe and Livingston agreed to pay \$15 million for the land, and this purchase legitimized Anglo expansion west of the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains while also inheriting a port in New Orleans, a major hub for the slave trade.

In 1846, President Polk sent General Zachary Taylor to dispute the border between the newly acquired state of Texas and Mexico. A decade before, Texas seceded from Mexico to

become the Republic of Texas; however, Mexico did not formally recognize the secession. When the Mexican army attacked Taylor, Polk declared war, and after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico lost over half of its territory, including present-day California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. As with the Louisiana Purchase, the question of permitting or prohibiting the colonial institution of slavery on newly acquired lands persisted.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, instances of empire-building occupied or intervened in Central America and on the Caribbean islands when U.S. Empire engaged in hemispheric expansion. This form of U.S. Empire was called different ideologies in different eras, such as the Monroe Doctrine, dollar diplomacy, and the Good Neighbor Policy. U.S. Empire persistently threatened direct, territorial expansion or intervention, or even gunboat diplomacy. During this time, U.S. Empire often sought a new investment, an opening of markets, or protection of its assets within Latin America. In this way, U.S. Empire created enormous profits from U.S.-based multinational corporations, including United Fruit and the Panama Canal Company. In addition, U.S. Empire retained its military influence and occasionally occupied Caribbean islands, including Haiti, the Dominican Republic (multiple times), Grenada, and others.

Incidentally, U.S. Empire in the Caribbean and in Central America, through either dollar or gunboat diplomacy, effected two large consequences: first, it created U.S. (white) capital and, second, it started denser and sustained immigration to the U.S. In fact, in 2000, Juan Gonzalez argues that “US economic and political domination over Latin America has always been—and continues to be—the underlying reason for the massive Latino presence here. Quite simply, our vast Latino population is the unintended harvest of the US empire” (xvii). In the early 1990s, Cherrie Moraga voiced a similar sentiment: “Ironically, the US’s gradual consumption of Latin

America and the Caribbean is bringing the people of the Americas together...Every place the United States has been involved militarily has brought its offspring, its orphans, its homeless, and its casualties to this country: Vietnam, Guatemala, Cambodia, the Philippines” (qtd. in Madsen 119). Immigration to the U.S. not only consists of Latinos/as but also populations from any nation that U.S. Empire has occupied, colonized, financed, tested nuclear weapons, or invested in, including Haiti, the Marshall Islands, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Vietnam, and Korea.

In a twenty-first century context, a 2003 U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, and the U.S. still retains a presence in both countries. Popular culture post 9/11 deemed these wars in Iraq and Afghanistan not as imperial but as part of the ‘War on Terror.’ Consistent with U.S. involvement in wars since WWII, these invasions were not considered imperial enterprises, but a fight for freedom and democracy. Notably, critics of the Iraq War cited the voluminous Iraqi oil fields as the reason for waging war against a country that did not have clear ties to 9/11. In this way, these critics, like previous critics of Western and hemispheric expansion, identified the enduring interdependency of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. Since the al Qaeda attacks on 9/11, debates around immigration, especially unauthorized immigration, have been linked more and more to criminality, especially in the form of terrorism, despite often having legal claims for asylum. These links largely benefit conservative, nationalist politicians in national and local elections who promise to secure the border, fight terrorism, and maintain law and order. And so, recent migrants from Central America have been treated as an ‘invasion of criminals.’ All immigrants, not matter the humanitarian context, have become eternal criminals or threats to America itself. In this way, from the beginnings of our republic’s founding, these three interdependent structures of U.S. Empire, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, created its rules while erasing its authors and beneficiaries.

Underlying the rules of U.S. Empire as a hermeneutic tool to read American history and culture is the ubiquitous, permissive ideology of American exceptionalism. Although exceptionalism was first propagated by leaders of the Puritan migration in the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Colonies and later espoused by the Framers after the American Revolution, John L. O'Sullivan's slogan of "manifest destiny" truly envisioned exceptionalism as part of American culture and subsequently enraptured the American imaginary. O'Sullivan coined this slogan in an appeal for the annexation of Texas as a slave state. Expansionists in the 1840s insisted that settler colonialism, or 'to overspread the continent,' was a way to spread democracy and liberalism to Native Americans and Mexicans in the borderlands. Essentially, these Democratic expansionists viewed democracy and colonization as "complementary, not contradictory" (Hietala xiv). In the same way that U.S. Empire speaks of peace through war, American exceptionalism speaks of freedom and liberty through colonization and coercion.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and after the U.S. attained continental expansion, Frederick Jackson Turner codified American exceptionalism in his "Frontier Thesis." Broadcasting his thesis at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Turner commemorated the landing of Europeans in the so-called New World by exuberantly celebrating the closing of the frontier, or the "colonization of the Great West," in which the American character and national identity was defined (9). For example, Turner elicits Daniel Boone, "the great backwoodsman, who combined the occupations of hunter, trader, cattle-raiser, farmer and surveyor" as an exemplar of the American character (Turner 17). In this way, Boone exemplified American pragmatism, individualism, and liberalism. However, Boone's and Turner's liberalism and exceptionalism excluded Native Americans, African slaves, and Mexicans. Just as Thomas Jefferson feared the domestic insurrections from the 'merciless Indian Savages' on the frontier of

the original thirteen colonies and thereby excluded Native Americans from founding documents, Turner also did not include Natives Americans under the purview of American exceptionalism, or rather Turner deemed the continent to be empty and open for settlement. He made a passing allusion to Jackson's forced removal of Eastern tribes towards the west banks of the Mississippi River and to the numerous massacres, including the Wounded Knee Massacre that happened only three years before his public talk; commenting on various territorial encounters between Anglo settlers and Native Americans, he wrote, "Each [frontier] was won by a series of Indian wars" (Turner 13). A key part of exceptionalism is telling half of the story, diminishing the importance of certain elements, or erasing it entirely. Thinking that westward movement, which also included expanding slavery and colonization, was tantamount to progress, civilization, and divine destiny belies the American ideals of liberalism, and the myth of exceptionalism exposes the illiberal, often duplicitous, nature of American exceptionalism.

In a contemporary sense, American exceptionalism declares that the United States is not only the richest, most powerful country but also the rightful moral and political leader of the world. Just as European royalty once were called the "defender of the faith" or "the most Christian king," U.S. presidents now adopt the exceptionalist title of "leader of the Free World" (Hodgson 26). This title accepts itself as true, despite ample evidence to the contrary, including undemocratic voting processes, mass incarceration, and massive income and wealth inequality, especially by race. In a historical sense and in the way that American exceptionalism functions in U.S. Empire, it "permeates every period of American history" and although the "arguments themselves change over time, the basic assumptions and terms of reference do not change" (Madsen 1). As a foundation of U.S. Empire, American exceptionalism relies on mutable arguments to serve the same policies and institutions that benefit those already in power:

patriarchal white supremacy. Hietala argues that manifest destiny is simply “one of many euphemisms that allowed several generations of Americans to maintain an unwarranted complacency in regard to their nation’s past,” and, now, the exceptionalist ideology of manifest destiny has taken shape outside U.S. borders where U.S. foreign policy attempts to police the world (271). The Puritans used exceptionalism to justify social domination through religion; the 1840s expansionists used it to ‘overspread’ an ‘empty’ continent to the detriment of Native Americans and Mexicans; and contemporary exceptionalist ideologies now include a post-racial society and the American dream. Finally, Hietala concludes that “impressions about the past affect consciousness in the present and help define the possibilities for the future, the way in which historical events are interpreted significantly influences the ongoing process of defining national identity, national character, and national purpose” (272). Cultural interpretations of American history, especially through the lens of American exceptionalism, determine how systemic racism, white supremacy, or the American dream are propagated or challenged.

*Exploring and Defying the Rules of U.S. Empire in MELUS*

This project adds to the scholarship of cultures of U.S. imperialism and contends most readily with U.S. Empire and American cultural studies through readings of contemporary MELUS. Early contributions to cultures of U.S. imperialism started the dialogue between postcolonial theory and American literature. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin present a thorough study of postcolonial literatures from formerly colonized peoples of the British empire, including American literature, which is a form of postcolonial writing. Ashcroft et al. argue that literature is central to the project of empire-building: “study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate and the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other, both at the

level of simply utility (as propaganda for instance) and at the unconscious level, where it leads to the naturalizing of constructed value (e.g. civilization, humanity, etc.)” (3). In early American literature, for example, the frontiersmen and pioneers naturalized ‘civilization’ while defining Native Americans and Mexicans as ‘foreign enemies.’ Literature and culture, in this way, are inextricable in U.S. Empire. And so, when multi-ethnic writers contextualize their contemporary moment through imperial and colonial histories, these writers are writing *back to* U.S. Empire—back to the colonial and imperial projects that helped define how they are racialized, how they are ghettoized, and how they are otherized. On one hand, MELUS acknowledges U.S. Empire whereas other American writers view it as a backdrop on which their dramas play out—the drama in MELUS *is* the backdrop. On the other hand, MELUS resists aspects of U.S. Empire that contribute to oppression and marginalization. In this way, MELUS functions as a site of reckoning where (formerly) colonized peoples resist erasure by writing their own stories, including their relationship to imperial, colonial, and capitalist histories of the U.S.

Further work has explored the obscured role of U.S. imperialism in our history and the interdependent relationship between U.S. imperialism and American culture. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993) points to the imperial amnesia that often permeates cultural understandings of U.S. history, politics, and literature. More precisely, this edited collection challenges the paradigm of American exceptionalism and reunites U.S. empire-building to internal categories of gender, race, and ethnicity. Therefore, to explore empire-building and American culture, I take up the methodology of postcolonial theory. My use of postcolonial theory expands several areas of critique, including historicism, postcoloniality, and decolonization. Ashcroft et al. note that postcolonialism illuminates “diverse contemporary and historical cultural phenomena, since the impact of colonialism has been so widespread and so

endemic in shaping the twentieth century and its effects” (201). In this way, postcolonial theory explores the impact of colonialism through its constitution of cultural moments and identity in the U.S. In contrast to the initial, surface-level look by Ashcroft et al. on former settler colonies, including Canada, New Zealand, and the U.S., this project solely involves American studies, especially U.S. ethnic studies, within a postcolonial critique. This project, thus, explores twenty-first century cultural phenomena in MELUS from its historical roots to problematize the rules of U.S. Empire. Specifically, these rules are questioned or unsettled through epistemic decolonialization, namely decolonial imaginaries or poetics, or through anti-colonial approaches that falls short of the decolonial option. In this way, postcolonial critiques of U.S. ethnic studies through literature offer ways out of colonialism whereby multi-ethnic writers explore ways to resist persistent postcoloniality. Postcolonialism, or postcoloniality, then, concerns itself with the relationship between Empire and identity in addition to the problem of historicism. Furthermore, in another version of postcoloniality, Ashcroft et al. claim that the term ‘postcolonial,’ “covers all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). This engagement of colonialism and imperialism with culture creates a space where MELUS can reckon or reconcile Empire with culture in American studies.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon defines decolonization as a program to disorder the world as we know it, but he recognizes that decolonization can only create a significant change when accompanied by its “historical form and content” (36). After the Second World War and especially during the 1960s and 70s, political decolonization formally severed empires from their colonies in Africa and Asia, including Egypt, South Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines in 1946 from the U.S. Since these political revolutions, decolonization has taken a

more metaphorical influence where this can refer to writing in English pidgin or even publishing more multi-ethnic writers, especially writers of color.

However, in “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang warn that “When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (3). Tuck and Yang unsettle casual uses of decolonization. Significantly, decolonization as metaphor equivocates the responsibility of structural injustices. Tuck and Yang also differentiate internal, external, and settler colonialism since these particular structures determine effective decolonization. Whereas decolonization as metaphor encourages identification (checking in on Facebook at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline), decolonization needs ‘historical form and content’ to show the precise relationship with U.S. Empire. For example, settler colonialism, which operates as both internal and external colonial modes, requires a decolonization that speaks to genocide, erasure, schooling, policing, and the land. Tuck and Yang explain that “land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationship to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (5). Indigenous peoples experience profound loss when settlers steal land and claim it as their new home. And so, according to Tuck and Yang, decolonization for Indigenous peoples requires the repatriation of all stolen land. Each colonized, marginalized people under U.S. Empire requires a specific decolonization that demands inclusion of imperial and colonial histories related to their particular histories of oppression. Decolonization for African Americans looks different than decolonization for Native Americans; decolonization for Latinx immigrants looks different than decolonization for West African

immigrants. Each of the following chapters reckon with the mechanisms of U.S. Empire in relation to these different groups and their potential decolonization.

In Chapter 1 “*Postcolonial Black Motherhood: Dismantling Controlling Images*,” I analyze postcolonial Black motherhood in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. These novels tell the stories of generations of Black mothers. *Salvage the Bones* follows fifteen-year-old Esch as she navigates poverty, sexual abuse, and violence while becoming an expecting mother as Hurricane Katrina makes landfall in southern Mississippi. Esch’s life as a budding mother is coupled with the mythology of Medea, the nursing and prize fighting of an all-white pit bull named China, and an anthropomorphized Hurricane Katrina. Ward creates this confluence of mothers to explore Black motherhood in the U.S. South where U.S. Empire routinely separated mothers from their children, treated mothers as sows, and ignored high rates of maternal death. As the allusion to Medea suggests and to an extent Hurricane Katrina, Esch’s pregnancy invokes the unsettling dichotomy of death and black bodies.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward further investigates the intersections between Black motherhood and death. In fact, Ward’s Black mothers are overwhelmed with the responsibility of protecting their loved ones’ bodies from U.S. Empire. In this way, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a postcolonial response to slavery, convict leasing, and white supremacy. Ward, thus, points to the machinations of U.S. Empire during slavery and Reconstruction to show the effects of slavery’s legacy on the present in the form of the carceral state. This chapter, then, looks at the ways in which the novel confronts controlling images of Black women that portray all Black mothers as bad mothers who fail their children by masking the material effects, such as inferior housing, workplace discrimination, and *de facto* segregation, that actually dominate the lived experiences

of African Americans. Leonie's characterization in the novel challenges these controlling images and the stereotype of the 'superstrong Black mother.' All in all, these controlling images in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, through its allusions to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and *Salvage the Bones*, through its reference to Medea, decolonizes Black motherhood by placing the histories of colonialism and empire into close proximity to the contemporary moment of Leonie and Esch.

Chapter 2, "Exclusive Americans, Excluded Native Americans," recounts the relationship between Native peoples and U.S. Empire, namely how Native Americans were wholly unincorporated in the founding of our new nation and then displaced, killed, and erased to such an extent that U.S. mainstream culture often does not know present-day Natives still exist or that they exist somewhere *out there*. Inextricably enmeshed in settler colonialism, contemporary Native writers voice both their concerns as descendants of indigenous peoples in a settler state, while also exposing the insidious mechanics of U.S. Empire as a settler state. Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas* (2017) and Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018) resist not only erasure from U.S. culture but also explore anti-colonial and decolonial imaginaries within a settler state.

*Whereas* challenges the borders of indigenous sovereignty and culture within the border landscape of U.S. Empire and literature, especially its vital medium of language. Split into two major sections, "Part I: These Beings the Concerns" and "Part II: Whereas," *Whereas* as a collection of poetry names the concerns of contemporary Natives as erasure, sexism, and epistemic and structural violence. Long Soldier excavates the language of U.S. Empire to both attempt a home or belonging and to confront the semantics and grammar that maintain and naturalize the settler state. Throughout the collection, Long Soldier arranges the typeface and white space as borders and border crossings that point to the 'historical form and content,' of decolonization as envisioned by Frantz Fanon. More recently, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang

have argued that decolonization in our settler state requires the repatriation of all stolen land and the abolition of land as property (3). Long Soldier's poetry strives for decolonial poetics in her disambiguation of language and arrangements on the page. In this way, Long Soldier explores the political and linguistic violations of U.S. Empire upon the Great Sioux Nation peoples.

*Whereas*, therefore, questions the power and powerlessness of language within settler colonialism that euphemizes violence against Natives and simplifies present-day concerns for contemporary Natives into ahistorical, imagined representations.

Second, *There There* tells the stories of contemporary Urban Natives in Oakland who consider who is a Native and how to be a Native, especially an Urban Native. Orange's nontraditional novel switches back and forth between Native voices and includes a nonfiction prologue and an interlude. Not only does the novel trace the genealogies of the connected narrators but also points to the genealogies of U.S. Empire and Urban Natives. Orange's references to blood and bullets gives voice to Urban Native's perspectives in the struggle of stories that define present-day Natives who wrestle with the legacies of settler colonialism. *There There*, thus, documents the uprootedness of Native peoples who have been nearly annihilated, but also proves the vitality of Urban Natives in Oakland and in other urban spaces who are living an anti-colonial present and imagining an anti-colonial future, or present-day Natives who live as both Natives and urban Americans.

In Chapter 3 "(Un)Settled Latinx Borders," I investigate the construction, or process, of borders for contemporary Latinx people, especially Mexicans and Central Americans. One of these borders is the language surrounding Latinx people: what should we call ourselves? Discussing the usage of *Latinx* invites a reckoning with colonialism and imperialism while also pointing to the construction of the U.S. Latino/a in American literature and in U.S. mainstream

culture. In effect, this chapter interrogates the racial and cultural formations of Latinx peoples, in particular Mexicans and Central Americans. Building on the scholarship on racial formations by Michael Omi and Howard Winant and on racial scripts by Natalia Molina, I explicate the relationship between social structures and cultural representations of Latinx people in U.S. Empire that erases or obscures the racialization and criminalization of these communities. Racialization marks Latinx people as ‘other’ or foreign while criminalization marks them as deportable or justifiably dispossessed. I, then, foreground the borders and legacies of empire to elucidate the concealed constructions surrounding Latinx people in the contemporary moments of Cristina Henríquez’s *The Book of Unknown Americans* and Maya Chinchilla’s *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* (2014).

To start, *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Henríquez, who is of Panamanian descent, follows a group of new arrivals and a mobilized border in the context of globalization that trails recent Mexican immigrants throughout the U.S. Specifically, globalization has accelerated the scope of global capitalism and has solidified increasing interdependency across nation-states through political, economic, and social links. However, instead of connecting people within globalization, U.S. Empire has created racial and cultural formations that racialize and criminalize Latinx immigrants, especially Mexicans and in particular during economic downturns. And then, all Latinx communities, both citizens and immigrants, are read as a homogenous group of ‘criminal aliens’ by U.S. mainstream culture. Therefore, I argue, *Unknown Americans* illustrates how the murder of Arturo Rivera by an Anglo American stems from imperial amnesia and exclusionary immigration policies that made Arturo a ‘criminal alien.’

Next, *The Cha Cha Files*, a debut poetry collection, reminds readers of the long-forgotten interventions and outcomes of decades-long wars on the isthmus and offers a way out of these

imperial legacies for Central Americans through the neologism of Central American Americans that at once questions the inherited epistemologies of empire and resists facile reductions of Central Americans in U.S. mainstream culture that often flattens these differences into Mexicanness. A founding member of an artist collective titled EpiCentroAmerica, Chinchilla has been writing about Central Americanness in the U.S. since the early 2000s. Her poetics offers political and cultural imaginaries for Central American Americans that play with racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in the formations of Central Americans in the diaspora. Effectively, this discussion expresses the creative interventions of Central American Americans in the Latinx diaspora.

In this fourth and final chapter, “West African Women Writers and American Exceptionalism,” I discuss the relationship between aspiring Americans, especially West African immigrants, and American exceptionalism. In particular, race and class have been constitutional determinants in American liberalism, the bedrock of exceptionalism, since 1619 when ‘20 and odd negroes’ were first purchased by English colonists at Jamestown. *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) by Imbolo Mbue challenges the illiberalism in American exceptionalism and rebukes the viability of the American dream for poor, nonwhite immigrants, respectively. In all, both West African women writers expose the equivocation of liberalism and opportunity comprising American exceptionalism.

Ifemelu’s movements between Lagos, Nigeria, and the U.S. Northeast in *Americanah* provides the critical space for exposing exceptionalism in terms of race, class, and gender. In particular, Ifemelu comments on contemporary racism and its embeddedness in the liberalism of American exceptionalism. Ifemelu correctly identifies this contemporary racism as color-blind racism, or racism without racists, according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. This new racism is vital to

maintaining white supremacy since it aids white privilege without naming its beneficiaries, thereby naturalizing or normalizing white supremacy. *Americanah*, therefore, questions the construction of blackness as a West African women immigrant within U.S. Empire and names its power through race, class, and gender that upholds the illiberalism of American exceptionalism.

While *Americanah* primarily confronts the racial and material realities of ‘black’ women, Ifemelu and other characters in the novel also tackle the exclusionary immigration apparatus that has maintained white supremacy since 1790. Mbue’s novel, *Behold the Dreamers* narrates another immigrant story and wrestles with the brutality of the American immigration system, as well. *Dreamers* parses the American dream through the story of Jende and Neni Jonga, immigrants from Cameroon. Upon the historical backdrop of the mutable American dream, from the religious colonial writings of the Puritans to the modern ideal of larger and larger degrees of economic success, *Dreamers* breakdowns the exclusivity of the American dream built upon racial income and wealth inequality, especially in the housing market, a cornerstone of achieving the American dream.

Finally, reckoning and re-interpreting the histories and legacies of colonialism and empire within the site of MELUS brings forward the machinations and effects of U.S. Empire on colonized, marginalized peoples. This project specifies how contemporary American literature reflects and constitutes the past and present of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx immigrants, and West African immigrants. Significantly, this project also shows how multi-ethnic writers offer decolonial imaginaries by clarifying how U.S. Empire has worked upon their particular racial and cultural formations. However, in fact, the opposite can also be true: MELUS can re-inscribe the hierarchies of exceptionalism. These chapters, in the end, reveal that histories and legacies of U.S. Empire are closer to our contemporary moment than we think.

## Chapter 1 – Postcolonial Black Motherhood: Dismantling Controlling Images

Jesmyn Ward's contemporary novels *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* share a direct connection with Toni Morrison's early novels that archive Black women's lived experiences and re-imagine American literary imagination. Like Morrison, Ward centers Black mother's voices and stories in order to excavate erased histories and critique U.S. social hierarchies that discriminate against Black mothers based on race and gender in the form of controlling images. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins outlines inter-related, socially constructed controlling images, including the mammy, the jezebel, the welfare mother, and the matriarch, that have unfairly defined Black women, especially Black mothers, as unworthy of political, social, and economic justice. Made prominent in the American imaginary by Hattie McDaniel playing "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the mammy image is a loyal, obedient domestic servant for white children that undergirds the continued economic exploitation of Black women and naturalizes their over-representation in domestic service jobs. The jezebel, or whore, stereotype portrays Black women as sexually aggressive while the welfare mother, linked to the jezebel, is a stereotype of Black women having too many children that they cannot support and must then collect welfare. Finally, the matriarch is an aggressive, emasculating Black woman who neglects her children as a working mother.

Combating the controlling aspects of images and stereotypes of Black women, including the jezebel, matriarch, and welfare mother, Ward re-writes mainstream history and motherhood to include Black Americans. In "Living Memory," Toni Morrison says, "We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future...The past is absent or it's romanticized" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 75). Furthermore, in order to foreground the past and remove white Americans' moves toward innocence, she writes, "I know I can't change the future

but I can change the past. Insight and knowledge change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite. Our past was appropriated” (qtd. in Madsen 151). *Gone with the Wind* romanticizes the antebellum South and erases the labor of Black bodies that created the wealth, clothes, and food for the O’Hara family on Tara plantation. In Morrison’s novels, she re-writes the past to include the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye*, the Peace family in *Sula* (1973), the Dead family in *Song of Solomon* (1977), and the Garner family in *Beloved* (1987). Her ‘insight and knowledge’ represent narrating the lives of these Black Americans from the lived experience as a Black mother—namely slavery, terrorism, Jim Crow, redlining, mass incarceration, and police shootings. Morrison changes the past in this way, and Ward joins Morrison’s archival work to resist control and oppression.

Black feminists from different disciplines have evaluated the social and cultural impact of not re-appropriating their pasts. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison critiques the construction of Black Americans within American literature written by European-descended writers who portray American history, culture, and society devoid of Blackness and naturalize whiteness. In contrast to her ‘knowledge,’ Morrison questions the validity of assumptions propagated by white literary historians and critics that are passed on as conventional or required ‘knowledge’ (*Playing in the Dark* 4-5). That is, the knowledge handed down from white scholarship disregards the impact of Africans and then African Americans on literature and culture. From a sociological perspective, Collins critiques the construction of the white, middle class, nuclear family within the American imaginary as normal or default. Collins, also, deplors that state-sanctioned, heterosexual marriage is represented as legitimate in American society, i.e., “in general, everything the imagined traditional family ideal is thought to be, African-American families are not” (53). Starting from

the position of a slave mother, contemporary Black mothers have to fight for recognition of their families as legitimate and worthwhile. Citing a disastrous intersection of politics, social norms, and culture, Hortense Spillers laments the conclusions of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," (1965) that fault Black mothers for a social "pathology" of living as unwed, single mothers whose children fail school, get arrested, and commit crimes (455-6). Although Moynihan's intentions to persuade Nixon officials that civil rights legislation alone would not create equality for Black Americans were accurate, his discourse and lack of specific recommendations only worsened the possibility for real reform by pathologizing Black mothers as illegitimate models of motherhood. Lacking self-definition and not re-imagining the past is detrimental to postcolonial Black motherhood. Esch, then, can dismantle the controlling image of jezebel and welfare mother. She no longer views her sexuality as negative and no longer sees her unborn child as a burden. While *Sing* dismantles the matriarch image by exposing its mechanizations, Leonie, herself, internalizes the social control of the matriarch and abdicates the motherwork of Jojo and Kayla.

These controlling images that have evolved since the slave era have erased the structural oppressions experienced by Black mothers—namely, race, gender, and class—so that U.S. Empire can fault Black motherhood for violence, neglect, criminality, abuse, and social decay. That is, Black mothers are portrayed as bad mothers who fail their children and threaten society itself. Although all Black mothers experience the dual oppression of race and sex, not all Black mothers view motherhood the same: postcolonial Black motherhood is not a single story. Nevertheless, Black motherhood is always compared to white motherhood, not granting Black mothers agency or subjectivity. Similar to the social construction of controlling images, motherhood is a cultural construction, thereby there is no essential or universal experience of

motherhood (O'Reilly 29). Furthermore, motherhood for some is oppressive and exploitive, while others view motherhood as self-actualizing or attaining status within the community (Collins 191). Black mothers defining their experience creates the possibilities of empowerment through critique, activism, and advocacy.

Like Sojourner Truth's 1851 decree, "Ain't I a Woman?" Black feminists have theorized escapes from these controlling images. In "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," Audre Lorde argues that "For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment. The development of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities is a vital component in the war for Black liberation" (45-46). In a postcolonial condition, Black motherhood has been defined by U.S. Empire through controlling images that oppress Black women and deny their histories and current realities; resisting these controlling images through self-definition is a vital lifeline for the survival of Black mothers and their children.

To resist these controlling images, Black feminists have used creative, discursive, and intersectional strategies in social and cultural productions, including creating kinship networks of othermothers—women or men who share mothering responsibilities—, to raise and protect their children. An early Black feminist, Maria Stewart urged women in 1831 to claim their rights because "you can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not" (qtd. in Collins. 4). Stewart and other early Black feminists sought equal rights based on this distinct dual oppression, especially as this duality relates to motherhood. Evolving since the slave era, all of these controlling images, which are interdependent and socially constructed, have been used as a tool of oppression by U.S. Empire, but Black women writers have resisted these images'

social control by centering Black mothers and creating numerous possibilities for self-definition. For example, slave mothers were characterized as jezebels “to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women” (Collins 89). Slave mothers, including Sally Hemmings, were raped and subsequently birthed mixed-race children based on this controlling image who were in turn enslaved. In other words, Jefferson enslaved his own children. In response to Audre Lorde’s axiomatic necessity for self-definition, Ward takes up the obligation of defining postcolonial Black motherhood in the twenty-first century to combat the power of these controlling images.

The depictions of postcolonial Black motherhood in Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I argue, dismantle these controlling images for Black mothers. Although the protagonists of both novels can be read as encompassing one or more of these stereotypes, Esch (*Salvage the Bones*) is defined as a jezebel and a potential welfare mother and Leonie (*Sing, Unburied, Sing*) is defined as a jezebel, welfare mother, matriarch, and mammy, they also push against these stereotypes by narrating their own stories and self-defining their own intersectional identities. In so doing, Ward’s novels also work to self-define and contextualize the histories of colonialism and empire within the U.S. South—namely, the colonial project of slavery, the imperial project of expansionism, and the postcolonial project of mass incarceration and lynching. These novels, then, re-imagine the past since the slave era to the present and re-focus Black mothers into a more coherent, inclusive American national identity and culture to resist social control of images and stereotypes in U.S. Empire.

*A Confluence of Mothers in Salvage the Bones*

*Salvage* follows the perspective of Esch, short for Eschelle, as she narrates twelve days of summer before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina makes landfall in fictional Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. Either through nascency, absence, effect, or correlation, *Salvage*, importantly, centers on Black mothers and anthropomorphized mother figures, including China, an all-white pit bull; Hurricane Katrina, a 2005 category-five storm that devastated coastal areas of Louisiana and Mississippi; and Medea, a mythological sorceress who murdered her children after her husband committed adultery. Esch is the only daughter in a family of five living in a secluded, low-laying clearing surrounded by wilderness, named the Pit, which was created when Papa Joseph, Esch's grandfather, let white men excavate a hillside for red clay until rain eventually pooled into a small pond. Papa Joseph stopped selling dirt when he feared the earth would collapse and turn his corn fields into a swamp. Foreshadowing the precariousness of their lives and the potential for flooding to overwhelm their entire existence, the Pit represents an ever-present danger of catastrophe.

*Salvage* also mirrors this potential catastrophe within the lived experiences of the Baptiste family. Daddy who is still reeling from Mama's death works odd jobs and drinks daily. Skeetah, whose real name is Jason, makes infrequent money at dog fights with China who births five puppies at the beginning of the novel, which he intends to sell. Randall is trying to get scouted for basketball camp, but his knees swell to grapefruits after every game. Junior, the youngest at seven, survives off wild chicken eggs, Vienna sausages, potted meats, and instant ramen. Esch who often serves the meals for the entire family also serves as the sexual partner for numerous older boys who visit the Pit. Esch contends "the only thing that's ever been easy for me to do, like swimming through water, was sex when I started having it. I was twelve" (*Salvage*

22). Esch views sex as a natural part of her lived experience, and the greater understanding of sex and sexuality that Esch develops over the course of the novel leads to her rejection of the jezebel and welfare mother images—she becomes empowered through her sexuality and her nascent motherhood.

One of these older boys is Manny, a light-skinned boy who is friends with Skeetah and Randall. Esch who is reading Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* falls in love with Manny as Medea falls in love with Jason. Alice Walker captures the tenor of Esch and Manny's relationship: "When we have asked for love, we have been given children" (14). Manny gives Esch a child and withholds his love. Paralleling the Jason and Medea myth with the relationship between Esch and Manny, *Salvage* collapses the contemporary U.S. South and ancient Greek mythology to define the contours of Black motherhood and its construction (Clark 346). Astutely paralleling and collapsing seemingly disparate constructions, *Salvage*, then, brings the colonial project of slave motherhood into the cultural and geographic landscape of the contemporary U.S. South with the stereotype of the jezebel and the welfare mother. By creating a confluence of mothers in the figures of Esch, Mama, China, Medea, and Katrina, *Salvage the Bones*, I argue, resists the controlling images of postcolonial Black motherhood that stem from the slave mother as jezebel then welfare mother and views motherhood as empowerment. *Salvage* dismantles the controlling images of the jezebel and welfare mother through Esch's own budding motherhood and understanding of her sexuality that opens up the possibilities of what Black motherhood can look like to resist social control, especially through the figures of China, Katrina, Medea, and Mama.

Through the narrator-mother Esch, *Salvage* interrogates sex and sexuality as it relates to the stereotype of the jezebel and welfare mother. Building on the work of interrogating stereotypes by earlier Black feminists like Audre Lorde, Trudier Harris, and Alice Walker,

Collins explains the particular oppressions forced upon Black women and mothers. The jezebel image, as mentioned above, was used as a discursive tool to sexually assault slave mothers without repercussion, often resulting in pregnancy. After the slave era, the jezebel still marked Black women as sexually aggressive, but now the control of this image allowed mainstream society to shun and demean teen mothers, portraying single, teen mothers as a direct threat to the social fabric. Additionally, working mothers who sought a better life for their daughters would feel betrayed by a pregnant teen daughter (Collins 83).

Esch internalizes this controlling image when she witnesses Mama birthing Junior in the same bed where she gave birth to Esch, Skeetah, and Randall. Mama who dies after Junior's birth is shaking her head in pain, and Esch narrates an unspoken warning from Mama: "Maybe that meant *no*. Or *Don't worry—I'm coming back*. Or *I'm sorry*. Or *Don't do it*. *Don't become the woman in this bed*, Esch, she could have been saying. But I have" (*Salvage* 222). Esch sees herself as a failure and views her pregnancy as a betrayal of her mother's trust. Related to the jezebel stereotype, the controlling image of the welfare mother also has an oppressive function to maintain Black mothers in a subordinated status in mainstream society. In essence, the welfare mother reverses the slave mother and jezebel stereotype who during the slave era were celebrated as breeders since more children meant more property. Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861), asserts "women are considered of no value, *unless* they continually increase their owner's stock" (qtd. in Spillers 475). In contrast, welfare mothers and their children are seen as burdens on taxpayers.

After the slave era, the welfare mother, often paired with the jezebel image, also supposedly threatens the economic viability of society although she lawfully uses social welfare benefits (Collins 86). Esch internalizes the welfare mother image at first; she views her future

child as a burden on her, her family, and her community. Contemplating ways to terminate her pregnancy, Esch recounts the rumors she has heard at school—drinking bleach, punching her stomach, taking too many birth control pills. These options are what the girls at school say “when you can’t afford an abortion, when you can’t have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you” (*Salvage* 102). That is, Esch internalizes anti-blackness implicit in U.S. Empire that deems “black children inferior, unworthy, and unlovable,” thereby making maternal love of black children a form of resistance and collective survival (O’Reilly 11). Realizing her options “narrow to none” and internalizing the dual oppressions of Black motherhood, Esch in the beginning hides her secret from her family and from Manny.

Narrating a background of poverty, neglect, and violence in rural Mississippi, Esch links the embodiment of the cultural and geographic landscape to the histories of racial and sexual violence in the U.S. South. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing* (2000), Patricia Yaeger theorizes new categories of interpretation for women’s Southern literature that links the grotesque with an everyday gender and racial politics, especially as they relate to geography and sexuality. Yaeger explains, “the foundation or basis for this world is made out of repudiated, throwaway bodies that mire the earth: a landscape built over and upon the melancholic detritus, the disposable bodies denied by white culture” (8, 15). Part of her readings characterize the landscape of the U.S. South as a site of throwaway Black bodies. Among the detritus of Esch’s front yard stand rusted cars, refrigerators, and farm equipment, and near the Pit, Esch and her siblings burn their trash. Esch’s landscape features, then, are markers of generational poverty stemming from exclusion from mainstream, formal economies exclusive to white culture. On another level, Yaeger points to the macabre palimpsest of Black bodies that undergird the U.S. economy and society. Furthermore, Farah Jasmine Griffin, writing in “*Who*

*Set you Flowin'?*” cites that the dredging of the Mississippi River for the murdered bodies of civil rights workers yielded numerous unidentified Black bodies who went missing without incident or investigation (20). These throwaway bodies are the results of racial violence and injustice within the white supremacist criminal justice system in Mississippi in the 1960s. Alluding to the throwaway bodies in the U.S. South, *Salvage* views the embodiment of Esch’s pregnancy as a site for potential neglect and violence.

Although *Salvage* does not raise dead Black bodies to the forefront, Esch’s narration subtly invokes these histories of racism and violence. Describing the ubiquity of hurricanes in the summer on their “twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach,” Esch says that these hurricanes “knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses” (*Salvage* 4). The wealthy owners of these mansions and the culture of the U.S. South, then, erase the colonial project of slavery, as if it never happened. Esch, also, invokes present-day, de facto segregation where “St. Catherine schools changed our bus route so that we were picked up at 6:30 A.M., and for the next hour we rode up and out of the black Bois that we knew and into the white Bois that we didn’t that spread out and upcountry (*Salvage* 70). Implemented nearly two decades after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, school busing attempted to integrate all-white school districts. However, school districts often refused and cited individual choice as the reason why they, and thereby neighborhoods, remained majority white or non-white.

In addition to these histories, the geographic landscape of the Baptiste’s family worldview mimics the throwaway parameters of their lives as defined in U.S. Empire. For instance, the Pit, the Baptiste family home for generations, is deep in the wilderness of rural Mississippi while the nearest white family lives on top of a hill with acres of grazable land for cows. In this way, the Baptistes are far from any semblance of integration in mainstream society,

and indeed formal institutions are not concerned with their lives or well-being. Before the hurricane's landfall, the government sends out evacuation notices by phone, and Esch remembers the message in general: "*Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned*" (*Salvage* 217). This automated message with an "iron throat" provides no institutional reprieve for those who stay by choice or by necessity.

In *Migrating Fictions*, Abigail Manzella argues that the politics of mobility during mass migrations are strongly associated with race and class. Describing the plight of many Katrina victims Manzella says, "Without access to mass transportation, the money to acquire any transportation, or housing outside the city, many were in effect deserted there" (194). Notably, the very same buses that transported Esch out of the Black Bois into the white Bois, could have transported vulnerable families out of the hurricane's path (Manzella 198). Based on the cultural and geographic landscape narrated in *Salvage*, neither formal institutions nor white mainstream culture would acknowledge or even mourn the deaths of Black families like the Baptistes. If they were to die during Katrina, they would simply count, or not, as more disposable bodies. A victim of the politics of mobility and descendant of throwaway bodies, Esch, by the novel's end, rejects these parameters and the labels of jezebel and welfare mother by valuing her life and her unborn child.

Despite the landscape of catastrophe and death, *Salvage* points to the collective survival of Esch and her child, a stand-in for Black futurity, through sexuality and motherhood as empowerment. In "'Boll Weevil in the Cotton / Devil in the White Man': Reasons for Leaving the South," Griffin cites lynching and other forms of terrorism as major factors for the Great Migration into northern metropolises, and part of this characterization is the pathos of the blues

that “encompasses the psychological state of someone who is exploited, abused, dominated, and dispossessed” (19). Linking the ethos of the fugitive slave narrative to lynching, Griffin references several works, including *Cane* (1923) by Jean Toomer and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) by James Weldon Johnson, to illustrate the strong impetus to escape the terror of the blues, as slaves once fled bondage. Although when confronted with the blues that haunt the U.S. South, some Black writers seek to survive rather than flee. Borrowing from Clyde Woods’ *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, Erica Edwards contends that Esch and the Baptiste family represent an ideology of collective survival, which Woods terms the *blues epistemology*, defined as “an ethic of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation” (qtd. in Edwards 156). That is, despite the throwaway conditions of Black livelihoods in *Salvage*, the Baptiste family, especially Esch, resists emerging disasters and intends to survive. In fact, the Baptiste family that has lived through Hurricanes Camille, Elaine, and now Katrina show how “disaster is a way of life for them—responding to it, grappling with it, emerging out of it” (Marotte 178). Encapsulating the *blues epistemology*, Esch who learns she is pregnant on “The Second Day: Hidden Eggs,” continues her role as the socially controlled mother figure until she embraces her own motherhood.

Esch’ relationship with Manny illustrates the controlling power of these images and, at the same time, Esch’s self-definition. Integral to this relationship and its consequences of an unwanted pregnancy is Esch’s understanding of sex and sexuality. On the surface, Esch has consensual sex with the older boys who hang out in the Pit. However, Esch’s understanding of sex is more complex than Manny’s assertion that everyone knows she’s a slut (*Salvage* 204). Manny defines Esch as a jezebel and uses this controlling image to insult Esch and refute responsibility. Esch, rather, analogizes sex to swimming since she learned how to swim when

Daddy threw her into the pond in the Pit at the age of six. Esch had “taken to it fast,” but the forceful instruction mimics the exploitative sex that Esch engages in with Manny and the other boys. She first has sex with Marquise who was only a year older than her at thirteen in Daddy’s dump truck. Esch recalls, “then he started touching me, and if felt good, and then it didn’t, but then it did again. And it was easier to let him inside than push him away, easier than hearing him ask me, *Why not?* It was easier to keep quiet and take it than to give him an answer” (*Salvage* 23). Although Esch finds pleasure in sex, none of her encounters are without force or an underlying threat of violence. In effect, Esch equates her natural swimming ability to sex: Esch sees these sexual experiences as normal.

Another aspect of Esch’s relationship to sex is linked to her interpretation of Greek mythology that aligns sex with power: “I’d let boys have it because for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved” (*Salvage* 16). Esch finds the representation of women in Greek mythology—“trickster nymphs, the ruthless goddesses, the world-uprooting mothers”—as both empowering and frightful. Both of these desires relate Esch’s strong attraction to Manny who chose her “again and again” even though he has a girlfriend, Shaliyah. Although Manny and the other boys take advantage of Esch, Edwards argues that sex represents “safety and sustenance” for her (159). That is, Esch is practicing a survival strategy that keeps her alive in a landscape of coercion and violence. Mary Ruth Marotte, paralleling the narrative of Harriet Jacobs and Esch, views agency in Jacobs’ actions within the unequal relationship between masters and slaves. In fact, Jacobs contends that “It seems less degrading to give one’s self than to submit to compulsion. There is something to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you” (qtd. in Fultz 32). While admitting the “sophistry” in interpreting this coercive situation between a master and a slave, Jacobs finds power in sex as Esch does.

As the storm approaches and her stomach protrudes further and further, Esch modifies her self-definition of sex and sexuality as an emerging mother when Manny rejects her attempts at an emotional connection: specifically, Esch's identification with the complex mother figures of China, Medea, and Katrina expands her self-definition of sex and motherhood. As Hurricane Katrina approaches the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico, she becomes gendered and has "a name now. Like the worst, she's a woman" (124). Esch describes the violence of Katrina as "the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered...the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive" (*Salvage* 255). In this way, Katrina's portrayal mirrors the murderous, vengeful myths of Medea--motherhood is capable of violence. When Manny is first introduced in the novel, Esch compares their relationship to the budding relationship between Jason and Medea, and Esch wonders "if Medea felt this way before she walked out to meet Jason for the first time, like a hard wind come through her and set her to shaking" (7). The morning after she discovers she is pregnant, Esch, who is reading *Mythology*, says, "Here is someone that I recognize. When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by my throat. I can see her...She has magic, could bend the natural to the unnatural. But even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her" (*Salvage* 38). Esch identifies that the potential of falling in love exerts extraordinary power over the body, which is the prominent avenue of knowledge for Esch.

Edith Hamilton's version documents the bright beginning to the eventual marriage of Jason and Medea. In *Mythology*, Jason is tasked to find the Golden Fleece, and Medea, a sorceress, uses her powers of prophecy and magic to help him through various trials. In Euripides' version of *Medea*, their marriage dissolves after Jason leaves Medea for the princess of Corinth, and an enraged Medea murders her daughter and two sons, escaping on a chariot

harnessed to dragons. Medea's love for Jason transforms into rage as Esch's love for Manny does. Esch's attempts at an emotional connection with Manny are rebuffed again and again until she "shrieks" in rage. Once, in the pond in the Pit underwater, Manny forces Esch to grope him, but when she reaches out to touch his chest, Manny says, "Naw, Esch... You know it ain't like that" (*Salvage* 56). Later during Randall's basketball game, Manny steals into the girls' bathroom to have sex with Esch, and when Esch tries again to connect with Manny, repeating in her mind "He will look at me," she is thrown across the stall by Manny who yells, "Fuck!" when he feels the "the swell that is not swell, the fat that is not fat, the budding baby" (*Salvage* 146). In a final rebuff, Manny says, "I ain't got nothing here... Nothing." (*Salvage* 203). At the culmination of his refutations, Esch identifies as both China and Medea as she attacks Manny. Esch is on Manny "like China" during a dog fight, and when Medea/Esch shrieked in her rage, "Jason heard" (*Salvage* 203, 205). Acting as Medea and China, Esch literally pushes against the jezebel image.

Just as *Salvage* collapses the U.S. South with ancient Greece, Esch's narration blurs the boundaries between China, Mama, and Esch. This lack of borders between characters expands the power and possibilities of motherhood as seen in the depictions of China during her labor, dog fights, and during the hurricane. In "The First Day: Birth in a Bare-Bulb Place," *Salvage* mirrors the labor of China who births five puppies with the birth of Junior and the eventual death of Mama due to hemorrhaging. In another parallel scene, "The Sixth Day: A Steady Hand," China mauls one of her puppies at the same time that Daddy's fingers are accidentally sliced off by chicken wire. Witnessing these violent scenes, Esch compares bloody-mouthed China with "bright-eyed" Medea and wants to ask her: "*Is this what motherhood is?*" (*Salvage* 130). During her dog fight with Kilo, the father of her puppies, she "makes them know" and defeats Kilo

while her breasts are still engorged with milk. At the end of the novel, China dives into the flood waters after Esch loses the bucket holding her puppies when Esch is tossed into the storm surge.

Explaining the relationship between Esch, Mama, and China, Christopher Lloyd argues that in addition to the throwaway parameters of life in the U.S. South, the characters in *Salvage* experience creaturely lives where the constant threats of U.S. Empire against Black bodies is relational to the precariousness of animal life (249). While recognizing the “knotty world of human/animal interpretation” and while not equating Esch with China, Lloyd contends that viewing the Baptiste family as living creaturely lives coheres with the landscape of throwaway bodies in the U.S. South because marking populations as sub-human, namely like beasts/animals/dogs, allows institutions and individuals to kill other humans or at the very least deny their humanity (249). As a response to her throwaway, creaturely life, Esch becomes China- and Medea-like: a survivor for herself and her unborn child. After surviving the waters of Katrina, Esch points to the power of motherhood she has seen in China and says, “she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister...She will know that I am a mother” (*Salvage* 255, 258). These seemingly paradoxical representations of motherhood in Katrina, Medea, China, and Esch point to the multiplicity of motherhood. Refuting the throwaway, creaturely lives experienced by Esch and her family, *Salvage* finds empowerment in motherhood, and Esch deconstructs the control of the jezebel and welfare mother stereotype by self-defining her sexuality outside and against coercion and violence.

*Salvage* portrays complex characterizations of motherhood and mothering in the figures of Esch, China, Medea, and Katrina as ruthless, loving, murderous, and protective. These seeming contradictions cohere within the depictions of motherhood in *Salvage* due to the throwaway, creaturely parameters of life in the U.S. South. Within the confluence of mother

figures and the deluge of mothering actions, *Salvage* dismantles the controlling social aspect of the jezebel and the welfare mother images by allowing Black mothers to self-define and self-actualize through sex and sexuality. Ward's subsequent novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, further, investigates what it means to raise, protect, and love children as a Black mother or as an othermother in Bois Sauvage within the racist, sexist U.S. South.

*Black Mothers and Children in the Carceral State of Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Whereas *Salvage* documents the motherwork of Esch that allows her and her child to survive constructed and natural catastrophes, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* foregrounds the collective motherwork, both its successes and failures, of the African American Stone family in Bois Sauvage against the carceral state. Leonie Stone is a mother to Jojo and Kayla, thirteen years old and a toddler, respectively. Leonie has been a single mother for the past three years since her white boyfriend, Michael, was sentenced to three years in Parchman penitentiary, and she often works long hours at a country bar in the majority white neighborhood called the Kill. After work, Leonie consumes drugs, including meth, cocaine, and oxycontin, with her white co-worker, Misty, whose Black boyfriend is incarcerated in Parchman, too.

Notably, every time she uses drugs Leonie sees the phantasmagoric figure of Given Stone, her late brother who was killed fifteen years ago in a 'hunting accident' in the hills of the Kill. When Leonie is working or high, Pop, Leonie's father whose name is River Stone, cares for Jojo and Kayla, and within this network of care, Jojo often provides the majority of caretaking responsibilities for Kayla. Jojo feeds her, bathes her, and sleeps alongside her. Before he started caring for Jojo and Kayla, Pop, who was also sentenced to Parchman around sixty years before, which in the 1940s was part of the post-Reconstruction convict leasing system, cared for Richie, the youngest inmate in Parchman at twelve years old whose crime was stealing salted meat to

feed his nine siblings. With Jojo listening, Pop often starts the stories of his time in Parchman with stories about Richie, but never finishes his stories until the ending of the novel, revealing Richie's death.

Both Pop and Richie worked “in the fields, planting and weeding and harvesting crops” (*Sing, Unburied, Sing* 22). Although Parchman did not have any fences, the endless fields and the white “trusty” shooters along with the white dog runners discouraged escapes. Erica Rowell explains that the Mississippi governor built this prison in 1901 to “train black men to treat whites deferentially and provide business with cheap labor” (qtd. in Choi 440). Rowell and other commenters on the convict leasing system explain that this prison and others criminalized “freed slaves and convict[ed] them of nonsensical offenses so that freed men, women, and children could be ‘leased’ to businesses and effectively forced back into slave labor” (Stevenson 299). For instance, Pop and his brother Stag were arrested after a brawl at a bar with white men on shore leave, and Stag was convicted of assault while Pop was convicted of harboring a fugitive.

While *Salvage* rarely engaged with physical interactions between white and Black characters, this novel's characters vividly represent the racial politics in the U.S. South. The novel also considers Black motherhood and mothering as integral to protection of Black women and their children within this ruthless, racist state. Therefore, I argue that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* exposes the matriarch image placed upon Leonie, masking the effects of structural racism, and at the same time questions the viability of protecting Black children by Black mothers and othermothers, like Pop and Jojo, within the carceral state of the U.S. South.

*Sing* follows the journey north to Parchman by Leonie, Misty, Jojo, and Kayla to retrieve Michael who was recently released, and the narration switches back and forth between Jojo and Leonie until Richie, “a dark skinny boy with a patchy afro and a long neck,” stands in front of

Jojo and starts talking to him (*Sing* 130). As a haunting and haunted figure, Richie is seeking closure, and he wants to know how he died. He wants Jojo to make Pop finish his stories about Parchman. Since his death, Richie has haunted Parchman after dropping from his flight alongside a “bird, but not a bird. No feathers. All black scales,” but the memory of Parchman pulls him back to the black earth. (*Sing* 135-6). Richie recognizes Jojo as related to River because he “protects as River protects,” and Richie wants to let Jojo know that “*Boy, you can’t*” (*Sing* 133). The interpolation of Richie’s ghostly figure and narration among that of Jojo and Leonie highlights a key conundrum: How can Black mothers and children live when surrounded with so much death? For Black mothers and othermothers, the carceral state presents constant, everyday danger to Black children and loved ones who are presumed criminals.

The novel begins on Jojo’s birthday, and Jojo wants to help Pop slaughter a goat. Jojo timidly opens the novel: “I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it’s something I could look at straight” (*Sing* 1). However, when Jojo first hears a phantasmagoric Richie talking to him in the car, Jojo says, “I can’t look at him straight” (*Sing* 169). Richie represents death, specifically death at the hands of the formal and informal institutions of the carceral state. Throughout the novel, characters engage in a mothering relationship with those they think they can protect: Pop cares for Richie, Jojo cares for Kayla, and Leonie cares for both Jojo and Kayla. Collins explains that the extended kinship networks established during the slave era persist, and that the work of othermothers is to take on the responsibility of protecting the children of others (55). In addition, Collins contends that violence, which can seem random or unprovoked, is a special concern for Black mothers and othermothers (214). Moreover, the motherwork and othermothering of these characters is constantly threatened by the precariousness of Black lives in the carceral U.S. South. In the following two sections, I explore the positioning of Leonie as a

matriarch and the novel's accumulating evidence of structural racism that exposes this controlling image. Next, I follow the links between the colonial project of slavery to the postcolonial project of mass incarceration and lynching.

First, *Sing* confronts the controlling image of the matriarch by viewing Leonie's parenting within a broader context rather than just zooming in on her drug use, her physical abuse of Jojo, and especially her loss of the title of mother since neither Jojo nor Kayla call her Mama. Collins explains that the control of the matriarch image lies in blaming Black mothers for her family's poverty, failures in school, encounters with the law, and lack of good values (84). However, this cultural interpretation of Black mothers denies their realities: "inferior housing, underfunded schools, employment discrimination, and consumer racism all but disappear from Black women's lives" (Collins 84). Thus, blaming Black mothers for what white mainstream society sees as failing their children shifts attention to an individual while structural problems maintain Black mothers in poverty, in drug abuse, in domestic abuse, in minimum-wage jobs, and in sub-par housing. For instance, Leonie lives in a house in disrepair with Pop and Mama, who is dying of cancer; she snorts crushed pills; and she works at a country bar in the Kill where customers yell at her, "*One more, you sweet Black bitch*" (*Sing* 94). She has intense physical fights with Michael until he decides to leave her and the children to cook meth which leads to his sentence in Parchman. Leonie, then, is a victim of domestic abuse, addiction, loss of a family member, and systemic racism.

During the ride to Parchman, Kayla starts vomiting profusely, and neither Jojo nor Leonie can help her. Leonie tries to treat her with natural medicine using roots and berries like her mother, whose name is Philoméne, but Leonie cannot remember the recipe exactly. Kayla vomits again and again, and when Leonie gives her an herbal concoction, Jojo forces Kayla to

throw up. Doubting Leonie's medicinal and mothering instincts, Jojo says, "I don't want Leonie giving her that I know that's what she think she need to do, but she ain't Mam. She ain't Pop. She ain't never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life" (*Sing* 107). Jojo, then, blames Leonie for all the structural problems that surround her and her efforts to protect her children.

Jojo faults Leonie because she is not a "superstrong Black mother," a controlling image related to the matriarch that demands Black mothers to perform everything for everyone all the time, especially remaining resilient in the face of trauma and oppression (Collins 188). Meant as a compliment by Black men and boys, the 'superstrong Black mother' only hurts Black women's advocacy for social, economic, and political justice. Before she flees with Michael and after she sees her mother off as she enters 'the other side of the door,' Leonie confesses, "I cannot bear the world...*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe*" (*Sing* 274). The controlling power of the matriarch and the superstrong Black mother proves a catastrophe for Leonie, and she flees what she thinks is the root of her ruin: motherhood.

Second, *Sing* carefully chronicles the surviving links between the colonial project of slavery, the imperial project of expansionism, and the postcolonial project of mass incarceration by underscoring the legacies of these racist, sexist institutions through the memories of previous, older or deceased, generations such as Pop and Mam. This colonial and imperial inheritance marks Black mothers and othermothers and their beloveds as vulnerable objects under the evolving threats from the carceral state, such as racialized incarceration and extrajudicial murder, and these threats are exacerbated by positioning Black mothers within the matriarch image. During his sentence at Parchman, Pop connects the convict leasing system to the racist ideology that first kidnapped his great-great-grandmother where the 'white ghosts' took her in the middle

of the day and made her “into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far away, in another world. I knew what that was, to be made a animal” (*Sing* 69). As mentioned above, once a population decides to place another population on the same level as animals according to a difference—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality—these ideologies can justify jailing, beating, and killing. Not only did Pop, Richie, and other Black inmates have to work on the nearly fifteen acres of fields under the harsh Mississippi sun, they were terrorized by the Parchman trusty shooters and the dogs, which again are connected to the legacy of slavery. Pop explains to Jojo that the sergeant and the trusty shooters were a continuation of the overseers and masters on plantations that dotted antebellum Mississippi. Like the panopticon architecture of the plantation, Parchman did not need fences or barriers to maintain an aura of terror and fear.

In addition to the trusty shooters and the sergeant, Parchman maintained a pack of hounds. Kinnie Wagner, a white inmate who had previously escaped from a prison in Tennessee, was the master of the dogs before he escaped from Parchman, and since he trained the hounds, they would not track their master. Pop, then, became the master of the dogs, but he was weary of the situation since “there had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries—slaves running from slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them” (*Sing* 138). Only after another white inmate returned to Parchman after committing another violent crime did Pop lose his position as master of the dogs. The warden put Hogjaw, who was “big and pale as a three-hundred-pound pig,” over the dogs, and he rationalized his decision: “It ain’t natural for a colored man to master dogs. A colored man doesn’t know how to master, because it ain’t in him to master...The only thing a nigger knows how to do is slave” (*Sing* 139). The warden overtly connects slavery to the convict leasing system.

Only three generations removed from the institution of slavery, the carceral state, in both formal and informal institutions, tries to control the work, movement, fertility, and population of Black bodies like Pop's. That is, at any time white terrorism can move from threat to action. A looming specter of terrorism in post-Reconstruction Mississippi and across the U.S. South was lynching, a public spectacle and celebration by white spectators as justice for frivolous 'crimes,' including not crossing the street as a Black man when walking past a white woman. In Parchman, the 'Sunshine Woman,' a prostitute who wore yellow dresses, related a lynching of a couple from outside of Natchez to Pop and Richie as she "sat with her arms across her chest and one hand covering her mouth, watching the trusty shooters" (*Sing* 187). She says that a white woman complained to her husband that a Black couple both molested and disrespected her. Then a mob of one hundred with torches and lanterns mutilated, burned, and hanged the couple. The Sunshine Woman describes the scene: "the mob beat them so bad they eyes disappeared in they swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the tree was smoking" (*Sing* 188).

This specific terrorism expressed both a social control and an ideological control on the Black couple, especially the man who is seen as hyper-sexual. The carnival aspect of the lynching marks this extra-judicial act as celebratory and as a warning while the mutilation of his genitals represents a castration and an attempt to control fertility, thereby a future with less Black men and women. This lynching happened based on a rumor and represents the power of white terrorism in formal and informal institutions. Bryan Stevenson, whose *Just Mercy* links capital punishment inflicted on Black inmates to the tradition of lynching, quotes an older Black man

who says, “The police, the Klan, anybody who was white could terrorize you. We had to worry about bombings and lynchings, racial violence of all kinds” (299). Outside the criminal justice system Black bodies were vulnerable to the move from looming specter of violence to lynchings or bombings, and within the carceral system, Black bodies, now deemed criminals by the state, could be murdered for any incident: the throwaway Black bodies of the U.S. South became even more unprotected.

Under the specter of white terrorism within the racist criminal justice system, Pop as an othermother tries to protect Richie. Indeed, as an ‘unburied’ figure, Richie wants to confide in Jojo that “[...] his pop tried to save me again and again, but he couldn’t” (*Sing* 140). Only fifteen himself during his first year at Parchman, Pop cared for Richie by picking up some of Richie’s farm work, and he even tried to transfer Richie to caring for the hounds so that Richie would not have to work the land. When Richie broke his hoe in the fields, he was punished by lashings from ‘Black Annie,’ a whip that made his back “full of blood, them seven gashes laid open like filleted fish” (*Sing* 120). The sergeant gave him one day to recover, but his wounds oozed pus and bled through his shirt; Richie became ill and told Pop that he was going home.

This is where Pop always left off in his stories about Parchman to Jojo, but when Richie came back with Jojo from the present-day Parchman, Pop finishes the story. One Sunday when “good time girls” visited Parchman and some inmates played baseball, Blue, a Black inmate with mental health issues, who never got a visit from the prostitutes dragged one of these women to the outhouses, beat, and raped her. Richie came upon this scene, and Blue told Richie that he could be beaten or go with him. They fled, and five hours later when she was discovered at the outhouses the warden warned, “*A White woman next!*” (*Sing* 252). During their flight, Blue came upon “a little White girl with red hair” fetching water, and he attacked her, too. Richie helped the

little girl escape, but she ran to her father and “told her daddy some crazy nigger attacked her” (*Sing* 252). Pop who worked under Hogjaw with the dogs is sent after Blue and Richie, but a white mob was forming. The mob found Blue first, and Pop says, “Wasn’t five minutes passed before I saw the bonfire they lit, and I knew what was happening. I knew before I even heard Blue start screaming” (*Sing* 254). Blue was suffering the same fate as the lynched couple from Natchez, and Pop believed that they were going to do the same to Richie. Pop alone came upon Richie who had separated from Blue. Richie asks for help from Pop to take him home, and Pop says, “*Yes, Richie. I’m a take you home*” (*Sing* 255). Like the escaped slave, Margaret Garner, who committed infanticide as a means of ‘saving’ her child from slavery, Pop took a knife and punched it into Richie’s neck, “A child. Tears and snot all over his face. Shocked and scared, until he was still” (*Sing* 255). Pop, then, commanded the dogs to tear apart Richie’s body, and the warden was so pleased with Pop’s work with the dogs that they released him early from Parchman.

Pop chose to ‘protect’ Richie from lynching and incarceration by also committing ‘infanticide’ as an othermother, an unspeakable act. *Sing* parallels this ‘infanticide’ with that committed by Garner, to investigate the nature of motherhood within the carceral state of U.S. Empire: Garner ‘saved’ her child from slavery while Pop ‘saved’ Richie from lynching. Motherwork and othermothering, then, is problematized within a racist culture and system that can murder Black children with impunity. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Sethe, an earlier literary representation of Garner, says, “Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer” (155). Neither Richie nor Pop lived carefree lives in or out of Parchman, and Pop’s love for Richie as an othermother rationalized Pop’s ‘rescue’ of Richie from an imminent lynching.

Starting during post-Reconstruction, convict leasing maintained social control of Black men, women, and children into the 1930s<sup>1</sup> through perceived criminality while lynching terrorized Black Americans well into the 1960s,<sup>2</sup> however, no matter the means of control, the carceral state tries to maintain social, judicial, and ideological control to the detriment of Black Americans. In *Sing*, however, Richie is not the only phantasmagoric reminder of past violence committed on Black bodies. There is also Given, who appears to Leonie when she is high, and who was killed in a ‘hunting accident.’ Before caring for Jojo and after ‘protecting’ Richie, Pop mothered Given, and he tried to protect him. When Given went hunting with his white football teammates in the Kill, he bet Michael’s cousin that he could bring down a buck with a bow and arrow before the cousin could with a rifle. When Given won, Michael’s cousin shot and killed Given. The white teammates, then, ran to Big Joseph, who used to be the sheriff for years; Big Joseph is, now, grandfather to both Jojo and Kayla and father-in-law to Leonie. The teammates asked Big Joseph what to do, and, first, Big Joseph slapped Michael’s cousin twice and berated him, “*You fucking idiot... This ain’t the old days*” (*Sing* 49-50). Big Joseph, who was part of the carceral state, references the terrorism of lynching, bombings, and shootings and bemoans that white people cannot kill Black Americans without repercussion as they once could. Second, Big Joseph concocted a defense of ‘hunting accident’ in court, and Michael’s cousin agreed to a plea deal of three years at Parchman rather than serving the more severe, just sentence of first-degree murder. In fact, Pop sixty years earlier complains that Black inmates were often convicted for

<sup>1</sup> The Equal Justice Initiative enumerates the “offenses” that thousands of Black men, women, and children committed, including loitering, vagrancy, and lacking proof of employment, under the “Black Codes” that states in the U.S. South ratified after the Thirteenth Amendment since it explicitly did not apply to convicted criminals.

<sup>2</sup> The NAACP’s “History of Lynchings” confirms that between 1882-1968 over four thousand lynchings occurred in the U.S., and between these same years, Mississippi was the site of the most with 581 lynchings.

frivolous crimes, like stealing food or fighting, while white inmates were imprisoned for murder or worse.

In the present moment of the novel, both Michael and Jojo experience encounters with the carceral state; however, while the criminal justice system has a more recent history with controlling the drug trade, especially meth, the history between the carceral state and poor, Black Americans represents a longer, more unjust, and more unequal relationship. For this reason, Jojo's experiences are different. Sentenced to five years for cooking and distributing meth, Michael served "three years, two months. And ten days" (*Sing* 38-9). Now named the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Parchman was still a work farm during Michael's three years there, and he returns with a 'green thumb' wanting to make a garden. Even though Michael does not ostensibly return as a man who has witnessed unbelievable violence, in his last letter to Leonie, he writes "*This ain't no place for no man. Black or White. Don't make no difference. This a place for the dead*" (*Sing* 96). Michael, in fact, witnessed hangings, beatings, stabbings, and other forms of violence, and he comments on the inhumaneness of incarceration.

However, his judgement of prison lacks the historical perspective of how the criminal justice system views Black bodies as throwaway, and in the present moment of the novel, as in the contemporary moment outside the novel, a recent new iteration of lynching that has only began breaking into the American imaginary through viral videos is police shootings of unarmed Black men and children. That is, before Black men and boys could even be convicted, they are executed by a state actor. Seeking probable cause in many frivolous iterations as the Black Codes once did, police have detained innumerable Black men and children, and when police make a judgement that they are in danger, this arm of the criminal justice system becomes executioner as the extra-judicial lynchings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries once did.

As Michael is driving towards Bois and the Gulf, they are pulled over by a state trooper. Before they come to a stop, Leonie has taken a bag of meth from Michael's pockets, swallowed it, and switched to the driver's seat since Michael did not have a valid license. When Leonie says they are coming back from Parchman, she says, "I know it's a mistake soon as I say it. I should have said something else, anything else...The handcuffs are on me before the *n* is silent" (*Sing* 162). The officer presumes criminality. After handcuffing Michael, the officer goes for thirteen-year-old Jojo rather than Misty, a white woman. Kayla, the toddler, is hanging onto Jojo as she often does, but the officer hands her to Misty and cuffs Jojo. Pop had sent Jojo on the trip to Parchman with a gris-gris bag in his pocket, which contained a rock. Pop and Mama believe in the power of West African rituals and in the creole traditions of slaves that kept them alive for generations. Jojo reaches for the gris-gris bag seeking safety in the spirit of the rock, and the officer thinks he is reaching for a weapon and draws his gun, pointing at Jojo's face. Leonie who is paralyzed by anger and the full impact of a bag of meth bearing down on her body, says, "It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer...Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can't" (*Sing* 163). The officer knocks Jojo onto his knees and continues pointing the gun at his head. Jojo is saved from the officer's attention when Kayla escapes Misty's grasp and runs to cover her brother as a shield. The officer only leaves the family alone when Kayla accidentally throws up on his uniform.

Sixty years ago in Parchman, Pop remembered Kinnie Wagner telling him, "But do you know your place? Shifted his rifle so the muzzle was facing me. A great black Cyclops eye" (*Sing* 76). Keeping Black Americans in their subordinated 'place' was always a function of the formal institutions of the carceral state, and actors within these institutions perpetuated the threats of violence and death to maintain the racial status quo. The rifle pointed at Pop's face by

the trusty shooter mirrors the pistol pointed at Jojo's head by the officer. Both are institutional actors upholding white supremacy by threatening Black Americans. These parallel scenes express the constant threat of the carceral state to execute with impunity while assuming criminality attached to Black men and children.<sup>3</sup> These instances of encounters with the carceral state—Parchman, lynchings, police shootings—are a piece of the initial colonial project of slavery that has evolved through centuries to maintain control over Black bodies.

Whereas this evolution can be viewed linearly, *Sing* argues for the simultaneity of time as seen in the perspective of Richie:

I didn't understand time, either, when I was young. How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once? (186)

Parchman was a carceral tool of U.S. Empire to re-enslave freed Black men and children, and now as Mississippi State Penitentiary this carceral institution re-enslaves Black bodies that are still presumed criminal or foregoes the judicial process altogether and murders unarmed Black men, women, and children in police shootings. In this way, the murder of Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, and Philando Castile, among others, connects to slavery and Parchman. *Sing* illustrates that the police officers who killed these unarmed Black men and child are the same as the white trusty shooters around the edges of the cotton fields in Parchman, Mississippi. Recent police shootings, lashings by Black Annie, or lynchings by white mobs are happening at once. More specifically, *Sing* shows the threads of the previous iterations of the carceral state working

<sup>3</sup> In 2014, a Cleveland police officer shot and killed Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old boy, who was playing with a replica gun at a park. The officer shot Tamir within two seconds of arriving at the scene. At the time, the officer radioed, "Shots fired, male down. Black male, maybe 20, black revolver, black handgun by him" (Dewan and Oppel, Jr.).

through the fabric of our current criminal ‘justice’ system. No matter the actor or institution, the carceral tool within U.S. Empire always seeks to maintain the racial status quo.

Finally, in *Sing* as Jojo walks in the forest hoping to see the spirit of Mam, he runs into Richie bemoaning his situation under a tree when Jojo sees the branches above Richie full of ghosts, “two or three, all the way up to the top...There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies” (*Sing* 282). Without words, they communicate with Jojo that they died violent deaths and are seeking to ‘go home.’ Joining Jojo in the woods in the arms of Pop, Kayla asks to be put down and begins “to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that I can understand...and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relieve, something like remembrance, something like ease” (*Sing* 284). *Sing* connects this solace to the archival experience of a Black mother. That is, Kayla sings as if “she remembers the sound of the water in Leonie’s womb, the sound of all water, and now she sings it” (*Sing* 285). Kayla’s song connects the sound of the waves under the ship that brought the kidnapped African mother across the Atlantic, and her song relates to the fertility of Black mothers in the twenty-first century. In this way, Ward collapses time as she collapsed ancient Greece and the U.S. South in *Salvage*. Ward links the position of Leonie to the starting point of Baby Suggs’ lived experience as a slave mother in *Beloved*. Similar to Morrison’s archival work in her novels, Ward confronts the haunting legacies of slavery, displacement, and dispossession. Commenting on Morrison’s extrapolation of a West African philosophy, Gurleen Grewal relates that “the dead are not finished with the living because the past (the dead), present (the living), and the future (the unknown) are co-existent...Such a world view posits a fluidity and continuity between the past and the present” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 75). As Morrison before her, Ward mines the lived experiences of Black mothers to express the contemporary moment for Black

motherhood within U.S. Empire that vilifies and pathologizes them. However, Morrison and Ward, among other Black women writers, re-appropriate their pasts and self-define their presents to fight for a more equal future.

### *Conclusion*

Jesmyn Ward's recent novels confront the legacies of slavery and dismantle the controlling images of Black mothers who must live and care for loved ones within U.S. Empire. *Salvage* points to the throwaway, creaturely lives that U.S. Empire has constructed for Black Americans, and Esch, even then, survives these oppressions for herself and for her unborn child. She finds power in the figure of mother, a self-definition that undoes the social control of jezebel and welfare mother. Within *Sing*, Leonie and othermothers protect their children and loved ones under the constant threat of violence or death. The carceral tool in U.S. Empire has evolved from the convict leasing system, lynchings, and Black Codes to the Crime Bill, police shootings, and mass incarceration. Both novels seek to uncover the structural oppressions faced by Black mothers and to express the vitality of self-definition for Black women within U.S. Empire that has pathologized and minoritized Black women since 1619.

## Chapter 2 – Exclusive Americans, Excluded Native Americans

In this chapter, I parse Native Americans' postcolonial, literary responses to settler colonialism and their subsequent erasure from 'American' identity and culture through works that engage with historicism and hybridity. Whereas African slaves were unequally incorporated into 'American' society based on the U.S. Constitution, Native Americans were inimical to the framers' vision and excluded. Natives were named only in relation to taxation and commerce. This exclusionary view of Native Americans is also echoed by Thomas Jefferson who wrote about domestic insurrections from the 'merciless Indian Savages' on the frontier of the original thirteen colonies. The imperial expansion across the continent in the nineteenth century was made possible by constitutional exclusion. That is, the continent is empty and open to a Jeffersonian 'empire of liberty.' Ultimately, interrelated to this political, social exclusion was the material, political, and cultural extinction of Native Americans, or at least that was the goal of settler colonialism.

*Whereas* (2017) by Layli Long Soldier, a member of the Oglala Lakota tribe under the Great Sioux Nation, historicizes and problematizes the racial and ethnic erasure of Native Americans through anti-colonial and decolonial poetry. Long Soldier's poetry collection deploys an anti-colonial and decolonial imaginary to re-interpret the seeming order, or "peace," established by U.S. imperialism across Indigenous land, a notion rooted in the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. The Frontier Thesis argued that westward expansion on "free and open land" had forged American identity and history based on individualism, liberty, and 'civilization.' In this way, Turner contributed to an American creation myth that functions on the fulcrum of Native American annihilation, both epistemic and material. During the nineteenth century, the continental expansion by white settlers to the U.S. West coast was seen as a triumph

for 'America.' The national discourse of this illegal, imperial expansion was propagated by racist slogans, including "America for the Americans" and "Manifest Destiny" (Gonzalez 28). The relationship of continental expansion with native peoples represented an apocalyptic cataclysm: pandemic disease, massacres, forced removal, and political, cultural, and historical erasure.

As an anti-colonial and decolonial project, *Whereas* privileges the narratives and voices of the colonized to contextualize imperial acts of violence and to specify the decolonization of settler colonialism. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon defines decolonization as a program to disorder the world as we know it, but he recognizes that decolonization can only create a significant change when accompanied by its "historical form and content" (36). Creating a program to disorder settler colonialism necessarily needs 'historical form and content,' which Long Soldier provides in her examination of borders and crossings. In her discussion of borders and crossings in literature, Claudia Sadowski-Smith argues that literature can "draw on the power of imagination to depict alternative visions of past, current, and future developments, particularly underexplored connections among various individuals and communities that inhabit the border landscape" (2-3). The border landscapes analyzed by Sadowski-Smith contrasts the Canadian-U.S. border and the U.S.-Mexico border that are both seen as gateways to potential threats, either terrorists or undocumented migrants. In these border landscapes, the inhabitants and border crossers in these areas are represented according to the aims of empire. In her discussion of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, for example, Sadowski-Smith cites increased military might and increased neoliberal policies, or free trade, as the response by empire to these perceived threats. In the context of Long Soldier's poetry, the border landscape of Natives includes both rural and urban landscapes, reservations and cities. Natives as border crossers, then, move across and into these areas as well as across representations associated with these

border landscapes. Long Soldier's poetics explores the language and structure of Native border landscapes and the ways U.S. Empire maintains them.

Settler colonialism, which operates as both internal and external colonial modes, requires a decolonization that speaks to genocide, erasure, schooling, policing, and land. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explain that "land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationship to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence" (5). When settlers commodify the land after stealing it as their new home, Indigenous peoples indelibly suffer.

*Whereas*, then, takes up the tropes of the body, the land, and language as borders to demonstrate how expanding U.S. sovereignty necessitates a dwindling of sovereignty for native peoples, especially due to constant crossings and violations of these borders. In this discussion, I focus on several poems that elicit the often-forgotten violent history between U.S. imperialism—in the form of white settlers, the U.S. government, and the U.S. army—and native peoples across present-day U.S. states. These poems also explore the political and linguistic violations of U.S. imperialism upon the Great Sioux Nation peoples. From the incessant broken treaties to the use of conditional language in an official apology to Natives, U.S. Empire has violated Indigenous sovereignty, denied responsibility for present-day outcomes, and reified Native exclusion in 'American' society.

Complementing the anti-colonial poetics of *Whereas, There There* (2018) by Tommy Orange confronts representations of Natives within the border landscape of urbanity. In this hybrid novel, intergenerational narrators tell their stories as Urban Natives in Oakland, California. In my discussion of *There There*, I trace the genealogies of U.S. Empire and Urban

Natives through the intergenerational voices of each narrator, especially the younger generation. In 1956, The Indian Relocation Act passed in response to Congress's new policy of terminating support for Indigenous tribes and ending the protected status of remaining Indigenous lands. The Bureau of Indian Affairs administered this 1956 Act and encouraged voluntary urban relocation. Thus, metropolitan cities, including Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Oakland, saw an unprecedented influx of Native American residents. An unconventional novel that includes a nonfiction prologue and interlude with an unidentified speaker, *There There* is told through the voices of numerous Urban Natives, including a substance abuse counselor with an alcohol addiction, a teenage boy re-discovering his Native roots, a drug dealer who wants to rob the Big Oakland Powwow, and others. The narrations begin in the late 1970s and end in the contemporary present of the Big Oakland Powwow at the coliseum.

Orange begins the novel with a discussion of a quotidian image: an Indian Head, which played on TVs across America when programming ended. Although the Indian Head test pattern is no longer ubiquitous, Native imagery and symbols infuse U.S. culture. Everyday products, such as cigarettes, motorcycles, and baseball hats, reference Native American tribes or items—or, often, an ahistorical, inaccurate imaginary representation. In particular, Native tribes and imagery dominate American sports from professional leagues to little leagues. The Kansas City Chiefs, for instance, beat a large drum while fans, some in headdresses, chant “Oh, Oh, Oh” and perform a ‘tomahawk chop.’ These imagined representations of Nativeness erase the centuries of genocide, massacres, kidnappings, brainwashing, and ghettoization. This history of settler colonialism is not present in these performances of Nativeness, and so Orange, along with Long Soldier, foregrounds settler colonialism and its legacy onto our present-day moment. For example, Orange points to the history of presenting a disembodied Indian head, which started

under the constitutional rules of U.S. Empire: Metacomet's head was displayed at Fort Plymouth after King Philip's War while other Indian heads were flown on spikes like a flag.<sup>4</sup> These genocidal beginnings stretch into the present for Urban Natives. For instance, the move to cities for Natives was, as Orange writes, "the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign. But the city made us new, and we made it ours" (8). Whereas U.S. Empire still attempts to display more 'Indian Heads,' Urban Natives are being taken in by U.S. cities and re-making their present against the assimilation of a settler futurity. Orange makes this final connection through the trope of bullets: both the imperial bullets that exterminated a supposedly empty continent and the frequent bullets of contemporary mass shootings. Specifically, Orange explains:

the bullets moved on after moving through us, became the promise of what was to come, the speed and the killing, the hard, fast lines of borders and buildings. They took everything and ground it down to dust as fine as gunpowder, they fired their guns into the air in victory and the strays flew out into the nothingness of histories written wrong and meant to be forgotten. Stray bullets and consequences are landing on our unsuspecting bodies even now. (10)

The celebration of the genocide of Native Americans that was critical to the constitutional rules of U.S. Empire continues to affect the contemporary lives of Natives, including Urban Natives.

Both Long Soldier and Orange confront the current effects of settler colonialism in their poetry and fiction, respectively. Tuck and Yang explain that settler colonialism is different from internal or external colonialism since settlers arrive with the intention of making a new home on claimed land, thereby establishing sovereignty over land, air, water, and earth (5). Furthermore,

<sup>4</sup> Also known as King Philip, Metacomet was the second son of Massasoit, a Wampanoag sachem, who began King Philip's War (1675-1676) when settlers executed three of his warriors. Leading up to this armed conflict, Metacomet exchanged land for ammunition, guns, and liquor, until he realized these exchanges dwindled indigenous sovereignty. Towards the end of the war, Metacomet fled to Mount Hope where he was betrayed and later beheaded and his body quartered. His head was displayed on a spike for twenty-five years at Fort Plymouth.

Patrick Wolfe argues that since settler colonialism re-asserts its sovereignty over stolen land each day of occupation, it is not an event—not just the 1830 Indian Removal Act or the 1956 Indian Relocation Act—but a structure. This structure of settler colonialism by necessity demands a clean slate, or the eradication of indigenous peoples. When Natives within the ‘domestic’ borders of the U.S. cannot be made extinct, they are disappeared through physical relocation and psychic moves, i.e., prisons, boarding schools, reservations, conscription, and assimilation. For example, forcibly relocating tribes east of the Mississippi River west into ‘Indian Territory,’ and allotting stolen land to formerly indentured white settlers disappeared or killed tens of thousands of Natives. In fact, the Dawes Act of 1887 effectively bequeathed over 90 million acres of land to white settlers after nearly 100,000 Natives were removed or killed.

Repatriating stolen land, or Native livelihoods, counteracts this settler violence. However, as Tuck and Yang argue, this decolonization often becomes a metaphor or confused with *anti-colonial* approaches to addressing settler colonialism; they explain:

when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grated onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks.” (Tuck and Yang 3)

Decolonization as a metaphor translates to educators saying that we should “decolonize our schools” or our “bookshelves.” Another form of metaphorized decolonization is the appropriation of Native imagery on consumer products that, in theory, represents visibility and celebration, when in fact these appropriations do not achieve anything beyond revenue for corporations. While decolonization represents an ‘elsewhere’ where all stolen land is repatriated and all property is abolished, anti-colonialization, or an anti-colonial approach, can only celebrate empowered postcolonial subjects who then themselves benefit from stolen land and its

resources. However, anti-colonial approaches can develop critical moves against settler innocence, especially in creating a consciousness of oppression and possible liberation or social justice. Long Soldier's poetry imagines both an anti-colonial approach and decolonial 'elsewhere' while Orange's novel pulls back from decolonization to offer an anti-colonial belonging.

Existing within settler colonialism, Long Soldier and Orange, also, wrestle with the legacies of colonialism and representations of the 'vanishing Indian.' Jana Sequoya Magdaleno describes this struggle as a contest of stories. She explains that "the problem, of course, is that the material conditions of being Indian have changed over time, while the images of Indianness have not" (282). In other words, Magdaleno asks her readers: Who is an Indian? And how does one 'Indian?' Defining the identity of Indianness contains the paradox of fulfilling the blood quantum requirements of specific tribes while also enrolling with the U.S. government to be a member of a federally recognized tribe. One places the power of definition in Native hands, while the other is imposed upon surviving ancestors by the settler state. Moreover, the question of ancestry versus tribal membership also complicates Native identity. A settler who 'discovers' a long-lost ancestor with 'Indian blood' can claim ancestry; however, a DNA test cannot 'make' you Native. In fact, this move towards innocence is sometimes called the Indian-grandmother complex where settlers can enjoy the benefits of whiteness while occupying stolen land by claiming that they are actually also Native, not settlers. Magdaleno, furthermore, provides an answer of 'how to Indian;' she explains that it must "depend in part on whether one is Indian in the city or the country; whether in the ways of tradition or of modernization; whether drawing more on old or on new cultural influences" (285). In navigating these spectrums of living within

settler colonialism as a Native, both Long Soldier and Orange attempt to answer, ‘who is an Indian’ and ‘how to Indian’ in both anti-colonial and decolonial ways.

*Anti-colonial and Decolonial Poetics in Whereas*

U.S. Empire apologists have always justified countless acts of violence with euphemism or simply with erasure. Force removal became ‘relocation;’ Brainwashing became ‘re-education.’ *Whereas*’ poetry and poetics interrogates the euphemistic language of U.S. Empire that speaks as “peace” but acts through genocide. As a whole, Long Soldier’s poetry collection addresses Senate Joint Resolution 14, or the U.S. Apology “to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer any apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States.” Originally sponsored by then Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas in 2009, the final version of the Apology became subsumed into the 2010 Defense Appropriations Act, H. R. 3326. Long Soldier’s poetry collection takes its name from the grammar of conditional sentences starting each paragraph in the resolution. The second paragraph of the resolution, for instance, reads: “Whereas the ancestors of today’s Native Peoples inhabited the land of the present-day United States since time immemorial and for thousands of years before the arrival of people of European descent;” (1). *Whereas*, then, questions the power and powerlessness of language within settler colonialism that misrepresents the complexity of Natives today and simplifies American history through erasure and euphemism. The power of language creates realities, i.e., theorizing decolonization can have material effects; however, language, as in this resolution, reminds Natives that the grammar of U.S. Empire renders Indigenous knowledges and ways of being powerless.

Language, semantics, grammar, and the white space on the page preoccupies the speaker in “Part I: These Being the Concerns,” which in turn sets up the concerns of “Part II: Whereas”

where the speaker adopts the usage of language and organization of the Apology to speak towards an anti-colonial and decolonial future. In “Wahpánica,” a poem included in Part I, the speaker translates the poem’s title as “*to be destitute to have nothing of one’s own*” (Long Soldier 43). A standard English translation of this title is simply “poor,” which is, indeed, a poor substitute for the precise meaning. For the speaker, *wahpánica* translates to feeling sick to your stomach when deciding how to spend “the last \$3 comma on milk or gas or half for both with two children in the backseat watching” (Long Soldier 44). The speaker spells out punctuation to slow the line; a comma gives the speaker time to breathe, almost a caesura. At the end of the poem, the speaker still seeking to give language to the poem’s title, says, “But this is a spill-over translation for how I cannot speak / my mind comma the meta-phrasal ache of being *language poor*” (44). The speaker aches as a consequence of the fact that English translations cannot express her thoughts or feelings, only approximations or worse platitudes for words that do not have synonyms. So, the speaker takes extreme care with diction, syntax, grammar, and spacing. In the opening poem, “He Sápa,” the speaker meditates on the conjugation of *drag*. In the past tense, it changes to *dragged* or *drug* as in “they *drug* him down / the long road, the pale rock and brown. Down dust, a knocking path. And *to drag* has a begin / point (though two are considered): begins when man is bound; begins also with one first tug” (Long Soldier 7). The precise grammatical usage of *drag* portrays a grisly scene where a Native man’s body turns red, to pink, to white, a “glisten of star / to bone” (Long Soldier 7). These are the concerns of the speaker: how to adequately and accurately describe unspeakable, often forgotten physical and epistemic violence against Natives.

The last poem of Part I, “38,” tells the expunged history of the Dakota 38, “which refers to thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham

Lincoln” (Long Soldier 49). These hangings represent the largest “legal” mass execution perpetuated by the U.S. government. Furthermore, as above, the speaker takes great care in the structure of her poetics. For instance, the speaker conjugates *hang* as *hanged* when referring to the capital punishment of hanging. In other words, the Dakota 38 were hanged by the U.S. Cavalry. In the same week of the hangings, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Three years into the Civil War, this proclamation argued that all former slaves were now free. Although the Proclamation ostensibly did not free all ‘persons held as slaves,’ the political imaginary of this document changed the tenor of the Civil War to a war for freedom. The speaker continues: “There was a movie titled *Lincoln* about the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. / The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was included in the film *Lincoln*; the hanging of the Dakota 38 was not” (49). In much the same way that *Lincoln* does not dwell on Lincoln’s racism, the movie erases the problematic parts of his biography that ‘takes away’ from the idealized and often mythologized figure of the “Great Emancipator.” In other words, U.S. Empire actively erases its means to an end of imperial expansion and dominance.

The speaker, next, explains the context of the subsequent hangings, which was a result of the Sioux Uprising of 1862. In short, during expansion, treaties between the Dakota peoples and the government were agreed upon where Dakota land was ‘purchased.’ However, this initial treaty only ceded land in exchange for goods and safety until numerous subsequent treaties were drafted and enforced to the detriment of the Dakota peoples who were left with minimal land and not enough to feed themselves, causing starvation. The speaker writes, “One should read ‘The Dakota people starved’ as a straightforward and plainly stated fact” (Long Soldier 51). In this manner, the speaker relies on English syntax, diction, and grammar to state as clearly as possible the events and facts surrounding the uprising. The opening lines of “38” read, “Here, the

sentence will be respected. / I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate” (Long Soldier 49). Speaking in a seemingly detached tone and style, the speaker writes with the intention to tell clear-cut truths through precise language, i.e., the Dakota people starved.

Without food, money, or credit, the Dakota revolted by killing settlers and traders, and the U.S. Cavalry subsequently quelled the revolt imprisoning thousands and hanging thirty-eight. After the revolt, the remaining Dakota lost their land and were forcibly moved, or exiled, onto reservations in South Dakota and Nebraska. Importantly, “38” also recounts the infamous refusal of Andrew Myrick, a white trader, to deal credit to the Dakota by saying, “If they are hungry, let them eat grass” (Long Soldier 53). During the Sioux Uprising, Myrick was one of the first killed, and the Dakota people stuffed his mouth with grass. The speaker of “38” then says, “I’m inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem” (Long Soldier 53). This violent episode of revenge and irony through poetry is instructive since the poetry collection begins with the epigraph, “Now / make room / in the mouth / for grassesgrassesgrasses” (Long Soldier 5). In this way, the speaker of the collection is playing with the language of violence and retribution to tell readers that this poetry collection re-centers erased histories of racialized violence and forces its readers to swallow the ‘grasses’ of plainly spoken retribution, if only in poems.

In part two of this collection, Long Soldier tropes on the conditional language of ‘whereas’ statements found in the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans, signed by President Obama in 2009. Long Soldier preambles her series of poems, entitled “Whereas Statements,” by saying that as a dual citizen of the U.S. and the Oglala Lakota Nation “I must work, I must eat, I must art, I must mother, I must friend, I must listen, I must observe, constantly I must live” (57). Throughout the collection, the speaker both questions the stability of

language and what is ultimately conveyed by language—its associations, its elisions, and its erasures. Throughout this series, the speaker also questions the use of ‘whereas’ in the Apology. The speaker argues that rights cannot be legally claimed “if placed within a Whereas Statement. Meaning whatever comes after the word ‘Whereas’ and before the semicolon in a Congressional document falls short of legal grounds, is never cause to sue the Government, the Government’s courts say” (Long Soldier 70). That is, the conditions presented in these ‘whereas statements’ opening the congressional resolution are legally null. Notwithstanding the forced removals, treaty violations, or massacres detailed in the resolution, contemporary Native Americans cannot seek reparations for these histories since they are placed in a conditional syntax.

Lastly, in this series of ‘whereas statements,’ the speaker explores the linguistic and political violations impressed upon Indigenous epistemology and sovereignty, beginning with the equivocation of genocide. The speaker explains, “Whereas I tire. Of my effort to match the effort of the statement: ‘Whereas Native Peoples and non-Native settlers engaged in numerous armed conflicts in which unfortunately, both took innocent lives, including those of women and children’” (Long Soldier 74). The effort to linguistically deny genocide by changing the term to “armed conflict” is a massive logical, colonial leap. In this way, the congressional resolution blames both sides. Obviously, this conditional statement fails to contextualize power on each side and treats tribes, including women and children, the same as the U.S. Cavalry, an implement of war.

In the final poem before the ironic “Disclaimer,” which denies the government legal grounds to sue Long Soldier, the speaker foregrounds the struggle over sovereignty through white space and borders. In the poem, “Resolutions (7),” the speaker visually explores and depicts the crossings and violations of Native peoples’ political, linguistic, and geographic

borders by U.S. imperialism that minimizes the sovereignty of the Great Sioux Nation. Again, in this poem, the speaker focuses on ceaseless abrogated treaties that resulted in the stealing of land and the forcible relocation of Native peoples to reservations. The poem begins, “(7) I commend the inventive crafting of a national resolution so mindful of—,” and each successive line expands to the left margin, “boundaries / their boundaries / in their boundaries / located in their boundaries...efforts with recognized Indian tribes located in their boundaries” until the next line crosses over into the borders of a long rectangle that is placed on the right-side of the page next to the column of expanding lines; furthermore, as the expanding lines on the left-hand side of the page grows longer and longer, taking up more and more space, the lines that are crossing over into the rectangle appear smaller and smaller in font (Long Soldier 97).

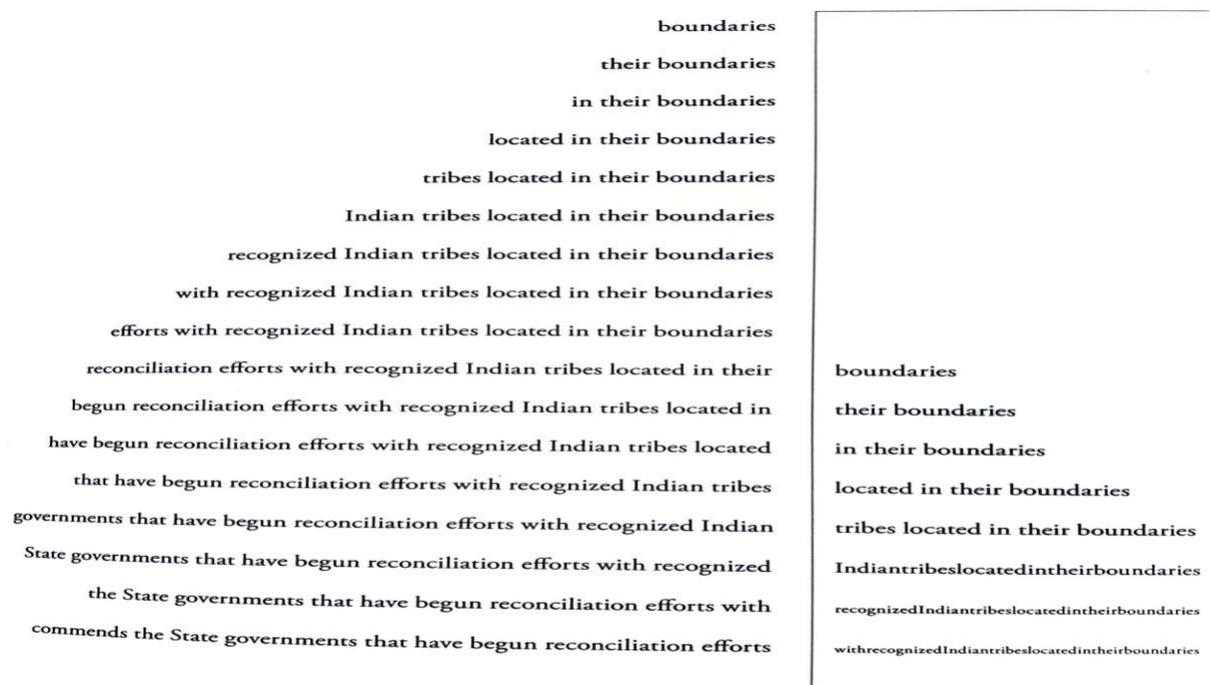


Fig. 1. “Resolutions (7)” (97)

In Figure 1 above, the border crossings into the right-aligned rectangle, which functions as a reservation with hard borders, mimics the movements of U.S. Empire into the white space of the page, represented as legalistic language. The first line of the poem, ironically, belies the faithfulness of ‘national resolutions’ since previous experiences for dozens of tribes resulted in broken promises, violence, and forced relocation. In a way, “Resolutions (7)” harkens back to the plight of the Sioux in “38” where cessation of land through broken treaties resulted in suffering and forced removal. In addition, this poem strikes at the naturalization of U.S. Empire in its imperial movements across the continent and at the balance of uplifting U.S. Empire for its attempts at reconciliation while disregarding these historical and present-day sovereignty violations. Reservations, then, become normalized, even ‘traditional;’ living as a dual citizen in a dependent, hence *not independent*, nation within the U.S. becomes quotidian. In a sense, this poem visually recreates that experience for Indigenous peoples as the process of U.S. imperialism took hold and continues to maintain the status quo of ghettoization, both physical and mental. The final line of the poem graphically illustrates the end result: flattering language for (blameless) U.S. involvement and miniscule recognition of cramped Native sovereignty on what is left of stolen land.

#### *Urban Nativeness in There There*

In her review of *Whereas*, Natalie Diaz, a contemporary Mojave American and Latina poet, points to Long Soldier’s emphasis on how language can carry personal and national narratives. The national narrative about Native Americans in Long Soldier’s poetry is that they exist out *there* or do not exist at all. Orange’s *There There* subverts our national narrative about Natives by carrying the conversation of personal narratives into the popular imagination from the mouths and stories of Urban Natives who talk about themselves, their identities, their histories,

and their futures. In the “Prologue,” a speaker, who is not a character narrator in the novel, explains that the city made Natives anew, but the intention of the Indian Relocation Act had been to assimilate, or to disappear, the ‘Native problem (Orange 9).’ As shown in the previous chapter, the ‘Negro problem’ evolved as methods for keeping Black Americans outside of the protections of citizenship evolved. For instance, after the abolition of slavery, post-Reconstruction policies ushered in the Jim Crow era that concretized racial segregation, convict leasing, and disenfranchisement for newly freed Black Americans, a system akin to a second slavery. Similarly, when confronting the ‘Native problem,’ Anglo Americans in the government, especially expansionist Democrats of the nineteenth century, realized that Natives were not going to become extinct. And so, they deployed various policies to erase Indigenous knowledges and ways of being, including boarding schools and later relocation into urban spaces. However, Urban Natives, like Dene Oxendene, the second narrator in the novel after Tony Loneman, recognize that urban spaces represent land where there is no there there. Dene’s character and motives mimic the archival motives of the novel since he applies for and receives a grant from the Oakland Indian Center to film a documentary that records the stories of Urban Natives in the Bay Area, both Natives born there and those who moved there. Invoking Gertrude Stein’s quotation from *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Dene relates that Stein was bemoaning how much development in Oakland had radically changed the Oakland she knew as a child. At once, Dene recognizes that the phrase describes Native people in the U.S. and all over the Americas. He says that “it’s been developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory. There is no there there” (Orange 39). This settler homesteading, both in rural and urban spaces, has replaced Indigenous relationships to the land, making land, air, water, and earth a commodity to profit from. At the same time, Dene also recognizes that this

phrase relates to him as an Urban Native since he was born and raised in Oakland; he's *from* Oakland. He is both Native and from a major city in the U.S.—both Native and American simultaneously. *There There*, then, proves that Native people have been uprooted and subject to near annihilation, yet also argues that Urban Natives in Oakland and in other urban spaces are creating an anti-colonial *there there*, a present-day Native population that is both Native and American—in Oakland, there is a *there there*.

Each chapter represents the story and voice of a different character that slowly reveals the imbricated relationships between them. Tony Loneman begins and ends the novel's narrative. Tony, who suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome, or the Drome, lives with his grandmother, Maxine. He went to live with her after his mother was jailed. He hangs out with low-level weed dealers and uses his profits to help with rent and bills. Maxine tells Tony that he comes from Cheyenne people and that he is a medicine man. She also used to take him to powwows where he used to dance with full regalia. By the end of the opening chapter, Tony reveals that he, along with a couple others, will rob the upcoming Big Oakland Powwow, which is organized by the Indian Center. Powwows across the U.S., or the powwow circuit, anchor Native communities in a place by bringing together local and distant tribes for dances and rituals specific to their tribes while also providing incomes for many artists, dancers, performers, and even emcees. Often, powwows offer cash prizes for competing dancers and performers. All the characters of *There There* are gravitating to the powwow in search of either authenticity, money, pride, or belonging.

In terms of authenticity, the question of who is Native and how to be Native preoccupies many characters' thoughts as it does the speaker of the "Prologue" and "Interlude" who expands the definition of Native identity to include more than just enrollment in a federally recognized tribe. Defining authenticity for Urban Natives by Urban Natives defies U.S. Empire's

racialization of Natives that diminishes their genuineness over generations and ties Nativeness to reservations. In the “Interlude,” the speaker describes a version of an urban experience: “Urban Indians feel at home walking in the shadow of a downtown building. We came to know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain range... We know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers” (Orange 11). Urban Indians who used to be called ‘sidewalk Indians’ are searching for an identity in the cities that matches where they came from, concrete plains and high rises. Detractors of Native identity in urban spaces deem Urban Natives as “inauthentic, cultureless, refugees, apples” (Orange 10). According to Tuck and Yang, this settler move to innocence marks Urban Natives as assimilated and thus disappeared, thereby completing the colonial goal of refuting Native claims to land and rights. To combat this settler futurity, according to J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, indigenous peoples, including Urban Natives, self-identify. That is, regardless of enrollment or specific blood quantum requirements, Natives in what is now the U.S. can self-identify as Indigenous. Additionally, the speaker in *There There* details the heterogeneity of indigeneity:

We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians, North American Indians, Natives, NDNs and Ind’ins, Status Indians and Non-Status Indians, First Nations Indians and Indians so Indian we either think about the fact of it every single day or we never think about it at all. We are Urban Indians and Indigenous Indians, Rez Indians and Indians from Mexico and Central and South America. We are Alaskan Native Indians, Native Hawaiians, and European expatriate Indians, Indians from eight different tribes with quarter-blood quantum requirements and so not federally recognized Indian kinds of Indians. We are enrolled members of tribes and disenrolled members, ineligible members and tribal council members. We are full-blood, half-breed, quadroon, eighths, sixteenths, thirty-seconds. Undoable math. Insignificant remainders. (Orange 136).

The disambiguation of indigeneity shows the expanded possibilities of Nativeness outside blood quantum requirements and enrollment. Also, the identities spelled out above can often overlap. For example, Dene Oxendene is both an enrolled member of one the 566 federally recognized

tribes, but he identifies as a ‘half-breed’ and an Urban Indian. Blood, as wound and a connection, dominates the expressions of Native identity. Blood quantum was first considered as a criterion for citizenship in what is now the U.S. in the Virginia Colony in 1705 (Orange 137). During this time, people who had at least one Native parent did not have the same rights as those who considered themselves white. At first, this blood quantum resembles the one-drop rule; however, understandings of race for Black Americans and Native Americans diverges based on the colonial project of slavery and continental expansion. Kim Tallbear contends that the one-drop rule dominates understandings of racial categories based on the white-black binary, but navigating Native identity based on blood is antithetical to the one-drop rule. Since U.S. Empire needed the labor of African slaves to labor on newly claimed land, the one-drop rule justified the *inherited* status of slaves to blackness. In this way, blackness as a racial category is expansive meaning all people who have ‘black blood’ are considered slaves. In contrast, the justification for the newly claimed land came from portraying the land as empty and from narrativizing the *subtractive* nature of Nativeness (Tuck and Yang 12). Each generation of Natives who mixed blood lines would become less and less Native, thereby serving the goal of settler colonialism to diminish Native claims to land. Importantly, even though this racialization of Nativeness diminished in each generation, no generation would be ‘exactly white.’ As racializations for people of color have shown then and since, no matter how phenotypically ‘white’ or how much light-skinned people ‘pass,’ people of color will never arrive at the category of ‘white.’ On the other hand, those who consider themselves white can ‘become’ Native. In 1924, the Racial Integrity Act outlined a loophole, known as the Pocahontas Exception, that allowed thousands of white Americans to claim Native ancestry, including Nancy Reagan (Tuck and Yang 13). Playing Indian for white people is not the same as enrolling or self-identifying in a significant

way with Nativeness: it is a costume they can take off and on. Although U.S. Empire has tried to diminish Nativeness to nothingness in its colonial racialization, *There There* illustrates how present-day Natives are indeed still existing in all spaces of what is now the U.S.

While the novel outlines the multitude of ways to determine who is Native, the novel also expresses the complexities of what being Native means, especially, in its present-day connections with urban and virtual spaces and in particular through the characters of Orvil Red Feather, Tony Loneman, and Edwin Black. Since Urban Natives are heterogenous and practice differing versions of Nativeness, the novel showcases the many ways Nativeness is expressed in various characters. For instance, Orvil has two brothers, Loother and Lony, who are the three sons of Jaime Red Feather, the daughter of Jacquie Red Feather who gave Jaime up for adoption as a teenager after conceiving during the occupation of Alcatraz island in 1969. Succeeding chapters narrated by Orvil and Jacquie tell the story of how Jaime developed a drug addiction while pregnant with her sons. All three children started their lives suffering from heroin withdrawal. Later, Jaime would commit suicide by shooting herself between the eyes. Jacquie, the grandmother of the three boys, could not cope with the loss and became an alcoholic. In the present-day timeline of the novel, Jamie has been dead thirteen years and Jacquie has had varying successes with sobriety. In turn, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, Jacquie's half-sister, who once occupied Alcatraz island, now works as a mail carrier in Oakland and takes care of the three boys. They call her grandma, but in reality she is actually their great aunt. The complexity of the lives involved illustrate the heavy histories inherited by present-day Urban Natives. The "Prologue" speaker says, "But what we are is what our ancestors did. How they survived" (Orange 10). Within this family alone, their ancestors survived removal, genocide, starvation, ghettoization, poverty, migrations, drug and alcohol addiction, and suicide. However, what it

means to be Native is not limited to this heritage of blood and bullets. How to be Native, especially in the novel's contemporary moment and in urban spaces, means creating a future for yourself. Opal explains to Orvil that "Don't ever let anyone tell you what being Indian means. Too many of us died to get just a little bit of us here, right now, right in this kitchen" (Orange 119). Given the colonial project of diminishing Native people, blood, traditions, and languages, Orvil's mere presence in Oakland is remarkable. Nevertheless, Opal also once opposed participating in 'anything Indian' with the three boys. Orvil learned from Opal that being a Native "was something they could decide for themselves when they were old enough. Like drinking or driving or smoking or voting. Indianing" (Orange 118). Orvil then decided that he was going to 'Indian,' which he learned virtually from documentaries, YouTube videos, and reading Wikipedia. Orvil would put on hand-me-down regalia and practice in his room; he also decided that he would win the prize money at the Big Oakland Powwow. Like Orvil, Tony Loneman also strives for his identity through a return to traditional dancing but also through adopting contemporary realities, such as hip hop. Tony listens to his favorite rapper MF Doom, who wears a metal mask, on his iPod as he rides public transit or his bike all over Oakland. Tony sees MF Doom's mask as his own since people who stare at him only see the Drome. However, he overcomes this perception when he dances. As he is practicing with his full regalia in front of the blank screen of a TV, he says, "I looked at my face. The Drome. I didn't see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer" (Orange 26). Tony, then, expresses his version of Nativeness most completely as a dancer. Orvil and Tony both find authenticity in Native traditions such as powwow dancing but also through their contemporary realities of urban and virtual spaces.

An organizer of the upcoming Big Oakland Powwow, Edwin Black also connects with his Nativeness through the internet and online research. Edwin's chapters relate how Edwin has

succumbed to an internet addiction where he logged two years in real time in *Second Life*, a virtual world that lets users imagine how they look, what they do, and where they live. Notably in *Second Life*, Edwin made himself thinner and thinner as he became more and more overweight, and in the game, he created a fantasy where he was raised by his dad on a reservation. When he was not playing *Second Life*, Edwin was researching manifestations of his physical ailments, such as constipation and bezoars, or he was trying to find his father on Facebook. His mother Karen once had a one-night stand with a man named Harvey who lived in Phoenix, but Harvey did not know Edwin existed until he was contacted on Facebook through Karen's account, which was actually Edwin searching out his father on the internet. Edwin's life on the internet and his search for his Native father is a search for his own identity. Although he self-identifies as Native with "tons of Native friends" on his Facebook feed, Edwin admits, "I don't know how to be [Native]. Every possible way I think that it might look for me to say I'm Native seems wrong" (Orange 72). Edwin's search for authenticity is marred by his life on the internet where he thinks that all he has to do is Google search "How to be Native," and he can summon his pedigree along with useful facts or practices that he could then implement. However, personal identity formation is not the same as creating an avatar on *Second Life*. Furthermore, Edwin's master's thesis on blood quantum policies on modern Native identity was written "All without knowing my tribe. Always defending myself. Like I'm not Native enough" (Orange 72). Edwin preoccupies himself with rigid categories of identity that somehow confirm Nateness. However, after he finds his father through Facebook and discovers that his father is emceeding the Big Oakland Powwow, Edwin applies for an internship at the Indian Center where he becomes one of the main organizers for the powwow. In this way, Edwin simply decides to

self-identify as Native and be an Urban Native in Oakland regardless of blood quantum requirements, enrollment, or behavioral criteria on ‘how to be Indian.’

Finally, by building tension between a bullet-ridden past and the interrelations between the characters, *There There* arrives at a fated climax during the Big Oakland Powwow where several young Natives, including Tony Loneman, try to rob the prize money only to turn on themselves and unsuspecting victims dancing on the grass at the coliseum. In this way, the novel is a meditation on time and narrative. The interrelated narrators relate their present-day lives as Urban Natives, and the speaker of the nonfiction sections connects these lives to the 1830 Indian Removal Act, the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, the Dawes Act of 1887, the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, and to the 1956 Indian Relocation Act, among other acts of U.S. Empire. Orange introduces the real bullets of settler colonists in the “Prologue” and updates these bullets to those coming out of 3-D printed, white guns that can pass through security at the powwow. At the same time, the metaphorical bullets of settler colonialism—assimilation, ghettoization, and erasure—land on the unsuspecting bodies of present-day Natives in the outcomes of poverty, addiction, and *de facto* segregation.

In the “Interlude,” the novel connects the everydayness of mass shootings in the U.S. with the bullets of settler colonialism. The speaker explains that “the shots will come from everywhere, inside, outside, past, future, now;” furthermore, the speaker adds, “Something about it will make sense. The bullets have been coming from miles. Years. ... The tragedy of it all will be unspeakable, the fact we’ve been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers” (Orange 140-1). The mass shooting at the coliseum during the Big Oakland Powwow stems from the past but also represents a fateful outcome of Native futures where the legacy of settler colonialism collides

with Native traditions, such as powwows, and technological advances, including the internet, drones, and 3-D printed guns.

Orange, then, creates an unavoidable climax that starts in the “Prologue,” continues in the building chapters, foreshadows the future shooting in the “Interlude,” and arrives at a tense moment of both silence and frenzied panic at the powwow. The bullets that will affect every character in the novel were shot during the Thanksgivings of a ‘successful massacre’ during the seventeenth century and moved across time to Sand Creek in 1864 and to Wounded Knee in 1890. The mass shooting would end the lives of Orvil Red Feather, Bill Davis, Thomas Frank, Calvin Johnson, Octavio Gomez, Charles, Carlos, and Tony Loneman who is wearing full regalia. The attempted robbery turned into a shootout between conspirators: Octavio, Charles, Carlos, and Tony, with bullets also landing on numerous unsuspecting victims. Jacquie Red Feather who came to see her grandson, Orvil, thought it was “some kind of performance-art piece. All these people in regalia on the ground like it’s a massacre” (Orange 279). This fatal version of life imitating art connects the unstoppable movement of the first bullets fired at Natives in what would become the U.S. during the seventeenth century to the ‘present-tense’ Urban Natives in Oakland.

### *Conclusion*

Both poetry collection and novel confront present-day realities of settler colonialism and both explore the structures of language and time that carry personal and national narratives about Natives. In addition, both Long Soldier and Orange offer anti-colonial approaches to understanding present-day Nativeness. However, only “(2) Resolutions” of *Whereas* intimates a decolonial future where land is repatriated and property abolished. Likewise, the essentialness of land as *home* differs in its articulations from Long Soldier to Orange. In *Whereas*, Long Soldier

feels the uprootedness of the original removal west of the Mississippi that she metaphorizes as tooth pain. In the final “whereas statements” poem, the speaker writes to a fourteen-year-old girl who called for a formal apology and reparations from the U.S. after learning about the ‘shocking’ conditions on reservations; the speaker relates to the teenager that an apology has already been given on behalf of all Americans, and the speaker also wants to tell her about a dental visit after budget sequestration where due to lack of funding the speaker’s tooth had to be pulled instead of simply filled. The speaker says, “Dear Girl, I honor your response and action, I do. Yet the root of reparation is repair. My tooth will not grow back. The root, gone” (Long Soldier 84). The U.S. government cannot undo its forced removal of Indian tribes and its atrocities. The uprootedness of the tooth mimics the cultural identity of Nativeness that has lost its connection to land, a cosmic, ontological, and epistemic connection. In this way, *Whereas* suggests that the decolonial option of repatriating land and abolishing property is what decolonization demands since the ‘root’ for reparations is gone.

In contrast, Orange’s novel focusing on Urban Natives does not center land as identity and only offers anti-colonial approaches to social justice—the ability for present-day Natives to be both Native and American. In the “Prologue,” the speaker claims that “Urban Indians were the generation born in the city. We’ve been moving for a long time, but the land moves with you like memory...Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere” (Orange 11). Instead of the ‘elsewhere’ of decoloniality as expressed by Tuck and Yang, the speaker claims that Native identity can form anywhere. Or, the land is within Native identity regardless of physical geography or location. In terms of raising consciousness, *There There* does provide a route to explore Urban Native identity that is anti-colonial, but the novel stops short of the decolonial option.

### Chapter 3 - (Un)Settled Latinx Borders

The term, *Latinx*, crosses the borders of national boundaries, ethnicity, race, citizenship, gender, sexuality, and migrations. Since the early 2000s, *Latinx* has been used to describe Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, Central American Americans, Central American immigrants, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Spanish-speakers, low wage workers, field workers, lawyers, teachers, brown-skinned people, and dark brown-skinned people. In terms of gender, *Latinx* neutralizes the gendered endings of *-o/-a* in Spanish. *Latinx*, then, gestures towards a larger, more inclusive identity marker that makes room for gender nonconforming, genderqueer, and non-binary people. However, *Latinx* resists accounting for the infinite matrix of identities and histories as a way to homogenize these participating communities into one category, or a panethnicity, as *Latinidad* has done in the recent past. Instead, *Latinx* presents a working term that articulates political imaginaries for participating communities while also accounting for and reckoning with the legacies of colonialism, racism, and misogyny inherited from the Spanish and U.S. Empire. Importantly, *Latinx* is not a category imposed from above. The Office of Management and Budget in 1977, for example, created a panethnic category, “Hispanic,” defining it as any “person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (qtd. in Marrow 41-2). Thirty years later, Marta Caminero-Santangelo contested the panethnic labels of “Hispanic” and “Latino” and theorized around the discourse of *Latinidad*. In her 2007 monograph, *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity*, Caminero-Santangelo points to the fragility of the racial category of “Hispanic” since it disregards the presence of indigenous, European, and African people in “Latin America” (14). She also disavows that all Latinos or Hispanics are connected through a common language, citing Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s argument: “Latino is a statistical

fiction, a figment of the imagination of ethnic ideologues, ad executives and salsa singers...Latino is an empty concept. Latino doesn't have a culture, a language, a place of origin" (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 9-10). Despite these contradictions and exclusions, Caminero-Santangelo accepts "Latino" not because it connects various groups under one label but because it names the construction in popular culture of these groups in a way that speaks to the discursive power of "Latino" within U.S. Empire.

In contrast, Claudia Milian's *Latinizing America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (2013) rebukes aspects of *Latinidad* as expressed by Caminero-Santangelo and offers the term *Latinities*. Milian argues for a "coeval path and lexicon for how cultural signifiers for the U.S. Latino and Latina have been accessed by an unexpected circle of Latin participants: U.S. African Americans and 'problematic' subgroups like Central Americans" (1). Specifically, Milian charts the cultural connections and crossing color lines of blackness, brownness, and dark brownness (16). Whereas Caminero-Santangelo focuses on unsettling the static nature of *Latinidad*, Milian theorizes Latinness in "ways that exceed generic brown Latinoness and Latinaness" (3-4). Milian, then, expands Latinness outside the brownness of *Latinidad*, thereby including cultural and social linkages between other brown, black, and dark brown people within the U.S. Importantly, both Milian and Caminero-Santangelo use the analytic of culture to investigate Latino/a-ness. Caminero-Santangelo's conclusion promotes the more nuanced understanding of Latino/a-ness in U.S. Empire where various groups can *become* and *unbecome* "Latino" over time and space, i.e., various groups are constructed by popular culture and governmentality as Latinos depending on racial and cultural formations.

More recently, Alán Pelaez Lopez argues in "The X in Latinx is a Wound, Not a Trend" that Latinx is not for everyone and that we should not normalize Latinx. Similar to the specificity

of borderlands as expressed by Anzaldúa and despite its rampant applications across experiences, Latinx is also a specific configuration of identities that address settler colonialism, anti-blackness, and gendered violence, especially against LGBTQIA+ Latin Americans. Anzaldúa's borderlands is rooted in queer Chicana feminisms that reappropriate pre-colonial goddesses and culture. Latinx, according to Lopez, sets up each end of the "x" as the four wounds of settlement, anti-blackness, feminicides, and inarticulation. The first two wounds relate to the Spanish empire and the reifying of the racial hierarchy that figure in the colonial and imperial legacies, namely indigenous dispossession and slavery. The third wound, femicides and gendered violence, dispossess the LGBTQIA+ community of social membership within U.S. Latinx diaspora and within the isthmus. Mexican journalist, Andrea Gonzalez, says that there are at least twelve feminicides a day in Latin America (qtd. in Lopez). The final wound is inarticulation, relating the difficulty of speaking about the dispossessed experiences of queer bodies in the U.S. diaspora and within the isthmus. Lopez, then, argues that the "X" in Latinx is "one of the interventions that queer, trans, feminist, Black and Indigenous Latinx subcultures have developed to begin addressing the four wounds of Latinidad and force us to see ourselves in all of our complexity, history, and to hopefully, imagine a future." Ultimately, Latinx, as opposed to Latinidad, Latinities, or Latino/a, better articulates the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people.

Reflecting on the colonial and imperial histories of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Central Americans, and Central American Americans, I, nevertheless, argue that *Latinx* best informs the possibilities of experiences for people who have a relationship to the Spanish and subsequently U.S. empire, culturally, socially, or politically. Although Caminero-Santangelo decides on "Latino" and Milian argues for "Latinities," neither, I contest, challenges colonialism, imperialism, anti-blackness, and gendered violence as Latinx does. Increasingly, the term *Latinx*

records the dynamic relational matrixes between ‘white,’ brown, black, and dark brown groups given past encounters with U.S. Empire.

This chapter, then, interrogates the racial and cultural formations of Latinx people of Mexican and Central American descent that couples the process of borders and the projects of colonialism and empire. Building on Natalia Molina’s *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (2014), who in turn expands on the theory of racial projects as expressed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant<sup>5</sup>, this chapter elucidates the relationship between the social structures and cultural representations among the constructions of these Latinx communities named above. Importantly, Molina also argues for the interpretation that racial projects are linked across time and space for various racialized groups. Specifically, Molina focuses on the *immigration regime* constructed around Mexican migration in terms of race and citizenship between 1924 to 1965 that posits Mexicans’ race and citizenship eligibility were treated as relational to the racialized groups familiar to US popular culture and governmentality, namely Native Americans and African Americans (1, 6). Instead of taking a comparative approach to compare and contrast various racialized groups, she endorses a relational approach that shows how a “mutually constitutive process” creates various racial projects (Molina 3).

<sup>5</sup> Omi and Winant explain that race is fundamentally a socio-historical concept that creates meaning by specific social relations and historical context. In this way, Omi and Winant contend that racial categories vary over time and space. Notably, Omi and Winant argue that racial formations have a profound effect on politics, e.g., labelling someone as ‘black’ between 1619 and 1865 delineated that person as part of the ‘slave race,’ with no legal rights—a political position concretized in *Dred Scott v Sanford* (1857). And so, Omi and Winant argue that *racial formation* refers to the “process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings” (5).

Furthermore, U.S. Empire erases and obscures the social structures that racialize and marginalize Latinx communities. Among these social structures include colorblind policing policies, immigration law and enforcement, and media representation, among others. I intend to foreground these obscured social structures, namely borders and legacies of empire, to position the contemporary moment of Cristina Henríquez's *Unknown Americans* and the Maya Chinchilla's *The Cha Cha Files*. For instance, this 2014 novel and poetry collection, respectively, shows how U.S. Empire uses previous racial projects to racialize and otherize new arrivals—and even long-standing inhabitants of present-day U.S. lands—encountering various elements of borders and empire, such as border patrol, ICE, citizenship eligibility, and limited social and cultural membership. Additionally, *Unknown Americans* reinforces American exceptionalism that conceals the histories of anti-Mexican legislation and immigration policies; also, this novel justifies white resentment against Latinx immigrants, especially Mexicans, by couching the murder of Arturo in economic concerns. On the other hand, *The Cha Cha Files* plays with the language of borders and empire in a Central American context to bring interventions, genocides, and diasporas to the front. Chinchilla's poetry reminds its U.S. readers of their imperial forgetfulness and imagines a belonging within the Central American diaspora.

In our contemporary moment, the borders of empire represent not only crossings, physical or otherwise, but also constructions or processes. Whereas Anzaldúa viewed the Mexico-U.S. border as an 'open wound,' shifts in imperial power have produced a mobile border that follows migrants around (Brady). The deterritorialized power of U.S. security interests has 'thickened the border' that extends out of the Southwest into the nation-state, according to Gilberto Rosas. Writing post-9/11, Rosas contends that the intensifying policing practices of the Border Patrol and emergence of vigilante groups, including the Minutemen and the Arizona

Guard, in the U.S. borderlands suggest that Latinx immigrants of Mexican and Central American descent are targeted under a state of exception. Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben, Rosas explains that democratic states declare states of exception, or states of emergency, that allow formal and informal security apparatuses to operate outside the constraints of regular law, including inflicting violence upon citizens (337). Furthermore, Janet Bauer and Vijay Prashad, echoing the ‘thickening’ of the border, argue that increased anxieties in the U.S. borderlands creates heightened concerns within the nation-state, leading to violent targeting of Latinx communities who are only and always constructed as ‘immigrants.’ Since 2001 and more recently since the 2016 election, immigration policy has operated on the basis of a state of emergency, which creates unquestioned normalcy in practices of governmentality. So, borders are both national boundaries and “the ways in which difference is deployed across societies and cultures to mark distinctions of power” (Schmidt and Singh vii). Not only are these borders mobile, but also constructed on the inequality of imperial and colonial legacies that inform the processes of migrations. For example, the creation of migration across the U.S.-Mexico border stems from the annexation of Texas, the U.S.-Mexico War, and the subsequent Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In the same way, the borders of the square next to “Hispanic white” on the U.S. census derive from nearly two centuries of ethnic and racial formations in relation to other people of color. These legacies, in turn, shape the racial and cultural projects Latinx communities, especially those of Mexican and Central American descent. Specifically, these racial and cultural projects refer to the concealed social structures that create the cultural representations of Latinx people. Therefore, I argue that Latinx communities portrayed in *The Book of Unknown Americans* and *The Cha Cha Files* read as a homogenized group of foreigners or aliens within a state of exception that criminalizes and flattens their border crossings—race,

ethnicity, citizenship, national origin—within U.S. Empire. In particular, *Unknown Americans* illustrates how all Latinx people are seen as Mexican and therefore deserving subjects of anti-Mexican rancor; *The Cha Cha Files*, on the other hand, speaks to the static representations of Central Americans based on violence, war, and poverty. Paradoxically, Henríquez both resists and perpetuates this homogenization by narrativizing marginalized voices while Chinchilla offers the neologism of Central American American that challenges frozen, cold-war narratives. Furthermore, the understanding of Latinx communities as ‘criminal aliens’ stems from imperial amnesia and race-based immigration and enforcement practices that are based on previous relationships with other marginalized groups.

*‘Mexican-Making’ in the Thickened U.S. Borderlands*

Henríquez writes a realist novel that gives voice to the different perspectives of the Latinx experience in our contemporary moment, and the novel’s realism functions as both a description of everyday life but also as a defamiliarization that questions the ordinariness of anti-Mexican rancor and the homogenization of all Latinx people. Henríquez wrote the novel to give immigrants a chance to tell their stories, immigrants like her own father who migrated to the U.S. from Panama in 1971 to study chemical engineering at the University of Delaware.<sup>6</sup> Henríquez’s novel tells several different versions of immigrant experiences, especially immigrants who only intend to work for a time and return to their home country, yet stay instead and have families and careers in the U.S. In this way, the novel approximates her father’s journey in the everyday lives of characters like Rafael Toro, a Panamanian American father who fled after the invasion in the 1980s; Benny Quinto, a Nicaraguan American who migrated to escape poverty; and Gustavo

<sup>6</sup> Details of her father’s immigrant experience come from a video interview from Knopf Double Day’s Youtube Channel, entitled “Cristina Henríquez on the Unknown Americans Project.”

Milhojas, a Guatemalan American who left first Guatemala then Mexico to arrive in the U.S. in 2000 where he works to send remittances to his family. On the other hand, *Unknown Americans* also defamiliarizes quotidian national rancor against immigrants and Mexicans, in particular. Caroline Levine, in “The Strange Familiar,” argues that descriptive realism “asks us to perceive anew what we thought we already knew but did not perceive well enough” (589). Citing the Russian formalist, Victor Shklovsky, Levine makes the case that realist description can jolt readers out of a routine that conditions everyday perceptions of Americanness and non-Americanness. In other words, Levine says that realism “asks us how we might estrange our routine of ignoring routine” (591). In this case, Henríquez realist novel asks its readers to acknowledge the routine of anti-immigrant sentiment and its cousin white supremacy.

As a whole, *Unknown Americans* examines the realities facing Latinx communities in Delaware, in particular the situation of three new arrivals from Mexico, a mother, father, and daughter. Alma Rivera, the mother of Maribel, narrates the majority of the novel along with Mayor Toro, a young Panamanian American, who develops a close relationship with Maribel. Before migrating to Delaware on an employer-sponsored visa to work in a mushroom factory, Arturo Rivera, the father, owned a construction business in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, where one day Maribel suffered a fall from a ladder leaving her cognitively impaired. Alma who had been steadying the ladder was startled and jostled the ladder, and now she believes she caused Maribel’s accident. In part, Maribel’s need for special education prompted Arturo’s application for a visa. Once in Delaware, Arturo works at a mushroom factory over the state line in Pennsylvania; Maribel enrolls in Evers, a school providing special education services; and Alma learns where to shop, how to cook American foods, and how to enroll in ESL classes from the other Latinx women in their apartment complex. In short, the Riveras adjust to their new lives in

Delaware, but when the 2008 Recession takes hold, Arturo loses his job at the factory and has thirty days to find a new job for his visa. When Maribel fails to show up at her bus stop one day, Arturo who still has not found work goes out to look for her. In his search, he confronts Garrett Miller who has bullied and assaulted Maribel earlier in the novel; however, Garret's father intervenes and shoots Arturo with a shotgun. These two catastrophic events, which are treated as accidents in Alma's narration, chronologically bookend the novel. I, however, argue that Arturo's murder by an Anglo American is not accidental, rather a culmination of reading Latinx people as 'criminal aliens' stemming from imperial amnesia and exclusionary immigration policies.

*Unknown Americans*, then, foregrounds imperial and colonial histories that situate the everyday hostile realities facing Latinx communities throughout the U.S. For instance, Micho Alvarez, a Mexican American photographer, narrates that people treat him as a criminal or gangbanger due to dominant representations in the media. He explains that when Anglo Americans consume popular media they learn that "we're all drug dealers, we're tossing bodies in vats of acid, we want to destroy America, we still think Texas belongs to us,...we don't pay any taxes, we're lazy, we're stupid, we're all wetbacks who crossed the border illegally" (Henríquez 236). These popular notions that ignore imperial and colonial histories constellate all brown- and dark brown-skinned people in the U.S. into a homogenous band of criminals. In *Harvest of Empire* (2011), Juan González explains that new arrivals, especially, never culturally move from the status of immigrant to citizen but remain in a "linguistic/racial caste status" that creates ethnoracial categories to police and surveille these immigrants (xviii). In fact, as Micho Alvarez details, immigrants and citizens alike of Mexican or any Latin American descent are conflated into one category: a criminal threat to white Americans.

Part of the imperial amnesia within contemporary mainstream U.S. culture as evidenced in the stories of Henríquez's characters denies the interdependent crossings of the color line within the context of the Rio Grande Valley, a context that like the border has expanded out from Texas and out of the U.S. Southwest. In the early nineteenth century, Anglo Americans encroached further and further into Mexican borderlands until open rebellion broke out for an independent Texas. Notably, in 1836, the revered figures of Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Barret Travis, considered iconic American pioneers, died as 'martyrs' at the Alamo in San Antonio. However, in context, these Mexican citizens openly rebelled against their country for the right to own slaves and to bear arms. Ten years later, expansionist Democrats under the leadership of President James K. Polk declared war on Mexico stating that "after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil" (qtd. in Hietala 264). Polk, nonetheless, already pledged to annex Texas into the United States a year earlier and agreed to admit it as a slave state. Polk and other expansionists viewed Texas as an outlet for an unwanted black population since both Democrats and Republicans were unwilling to incorporate Black Americans into their societies in both the U.S. North and South. In an apparent contrast, after the Mexican American War's conclusion under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, the inhabitants of more than half of Mexico's former land, including Texas, California, and Utah, were incorporated into the U.S. and promised citizenship along with protection of their property. This sudden shift in political positioning meant that "everything changed for Mexicans in the United States after the war. Overnight they went from living in Mexico to living in the United States and from being Mexican citizens to being U.S. citizens. Many lost their own land. In addition, their culture, language, and religion were now seen as inferior to those of white Americans" (Molina 25).

Notably, when the border itself crossed these formerly Mexican citizens, they became implicated in the racial projects of blackness and whiteness within U.S. Empire. That is, initially, these newly minted U.S. citizens were categorized as white according to the rigid white/black binary, but almost immediately this claim to whiteness was challenged. The watershed moment of 1850, according to Gautham Rao, including the Fugitive Slave Act, which compelled all U.S. citizens to return fugitive slaves to the South, firmly named the U.S. as a space of slavery (Drysedale 74). Importantly, by establishing the U.S. and some of its newly acquired territories as spaces in the service of slavery, the black-white binary became even more entrenched in governmentality, often excluding Latinx citizens and immigrants.

In spite of the promised political and social membership of Mexicans, expansionists and law enforcement after 1848 promoted the incorporation of the land and not the people of present-day Texas and California. Politicians either thought these new citizens of Mexican descent would become extinct or would be entirely segregated from Anglo Americans (Hietala 155-6). To promote these two outcomes, policing and enforcement, including the celebrated Texas Rangers, perpetuated state-sponsored terrorism against Mexican Americans, especially after the turn of the twentieth century. Ostensibly protecting Anglo-American ranchlands, Texas Rangers often abused their authority against so-called 'Mexican bandits' or 'bandit sympathizers.' In fact, Texas Rangers and other vigilantes were reifying the new racial hierarchy. During the 1910 Mexican Revolution, thousands of ethnic Mexicans escaped the violence and settled in U.S. border towns. During the Mexican Revolution, Texas Rangers inflicted a "reign of terror" against all ethnic Mexicans who they suspected of revolutionary activities. That is, Texas Rangers summarily executed Mexicans regardless of citizenship, evidence of guilt, or social status. In particular, in 1915, Governor James Edward Ferguson expanded Texas Ranger ranks

and even increased salaries in an effort to systematically execute anyone affiliated with revolutionary activities after learning of the Plan de San Diego that called for an overthrow of the U.S. rule in south Texas and the murder of all Anglo men sixteen years or older (Martínez 667). A year later, President Wilson sent nearly one hundred thousand National Guard troops to police the U.S.-Mexico border from Yuma, Arizona, to Brownville, Texas, effectively militarizing and solidifying the boundary as permanent. Coupling Americans of Mexican descent with banditry undermined resistance against Anglo American's theft of property and usurpation of political power, giving U.S. agents of immigration enforcement impunity to abuse their power.

Similarly, the discourse of banditry justified the murders of ethnic Mexicans and the usurpation of property during the invasion and occupation of California. Local newspapers in the 1850s engaged in profiling by conflating 'Mexicanness' with banditry where any ethnic Mexican was a member of the "Joaquín scare" (Drysdale 66). That is, in addition to the famous 'bandits' of Texas, the legend of Joaquín Murieta, memorialized in John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854), expressed justified resistance to Anglo occupation. Originally protesting a tax targeting 'foreign' miners, Murieta, who was most likely five different Joaquíns, began thefts and assaults since he like many ethnic Mexicans could not find work in the mines just two years after gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. Captain Harry Love, a veteran of the U.S.-Mexican war, hunted down Joaquín, or at least a Joaquín, and preserved his decapitated head in alcohol, later touring the state and charging to view the "dreaded assassin" (Drysdale 63). This performative enforcement extended the terror for ethnic Mexicans from the Rio Grande Valley to the California coast. Importantly, just as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act reified the US as a space of slavery, the discourse of banditry transformed "the borderland into a space of counterinsurgency" (Drysdale 75). Both formal and informal agents of U.S. Empire

were, then, reaffirmed in their occupation of stolen land and the genocide of ethnic Mexicans and indigenous peoples in the Southwest. From the border towns of South Texas to the golden hills of California, Mexicans became synonymous with banditry, and with the systematization of immigration policy starting in the 1920s, Mexican Americans would also become ‘aliens’ in their own lands.

In addition to foregrounding imperial and colonial histories, *Unknown Americans*, also underscores the criminalization of Latinx communities, especially people of Mexican descent, through the systemic enforcement of *de facto*-race-based immigration policies. For instance, Arturo’s dismissal from the mushroom factory started a thirty-day countdown until his status changed from ‘legal’ to ‘illegal.’ When Arturo fruitlessly applied for jobs during the Great Recession, employers laughed in his face and told him to, “crawl back across the river, amigo” (Henríquez 182). These exclusionary policies, especially during economic downturns, were predicated on the racial and cultural formations, or what Molina terms race-making of Mexicans in U.S. Empire. At the time of the first census in 1790, citizens were defined as “All free white persons who have, or shall migrate into the United States...and shall have resided in the US for one whole year” (Coates 128). Since 1790, racial and cultural formations have conspired to exclude Latinx immigrants and citizens from full social and political citizenship. In fact, generations of ethnic Mexicans after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo remained as far from the promised protections of citizenship *then* as they did in 1790. During the early twentieth century, Mexicans in the Southwest and California were largely sojourner laborers who returned to Mexico so that they did not settle down, unionize, naturalize, or vote (Molina 20-1). However, by the 1930s, despite being legally classified as white since 1848, U.S. Empire in the woes of the Great Depression began scapegoating a growing Mexican population and treating them as a

threat. Significantly, the 1930 U.S. Census created a separate racial category, “Mexican,” to disavow ethnic Mexicans’ claims to whiteness and its accompanying racial and citizenship privileges. Re-mixing the race of Mexicans in the U.S. borderlands moved Latinx communities, both citizens and immigrants, even further away from the 1790 stipulation of whiteness.

Although the 1790 policy explicitly included immigrants, the aspiration for citizenship remains racialized today, and twentieth-century policies systematized these racial enforcement practices throughout that century. For example, during the same year that Border Patrol was founded, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act excluded many immigrant groups according to national origin quotas while completely prohibiting immigration from Asia. Mexican immigrants were initially exempt from these exclusionary measures due to labor shortages and lack of enforcement at the border, but a renewal of this act four years later included Mexicans in its exclusion. Similar to the intention of the 1790 policy, this early twentieth-century policy was supposed to “preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity,” according to the Department of State’s Office of the Historian.<sup>7</sup> In plain language, this immigration act ensured the dominance of Anglo Americans in terms of population and politics. During the Great Depression, exclusionary governmentality targeted ethnic Mexicans under Hoover’s slogan of “American jobs for real Americans,” and Hoover’s administration, thus, deported more than a million Mexicans, sixty percent of whom were U.S. citizens. In contrast, in the build-up to WWII, Roosevelt created the Bracero Program, the largest guest worker program in U.S. history, involving more than four million Mexican workers over two decades. However, after the servicemen returned to a recession, the Eisenhower administration implemented a military-style campaign of mass

<sup>7</sup> This nativist language still exists on the official Office of the Historian webpage, “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act).”

deportations known as “Operation Wetback” that spearheaded the deportation of around a million Mexicans in all of 1954, once again including U.S. citizens.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, before the figure of the ‘illegal immigrant’ became a popular mainstay in right-wing immigration discussions, in the 1950s the term, “wetback,” replaced the nineteenth-century accusation of ‘bandit’ or ‘bandit sympathizer’ while still constructing an ethnoracial figure that was a social burden and a criminal (Molina 113). Specifically, *wetback* criminalized, even more, unauthorized crossings of the U.S.-Mexico border; even though unauthorized entry is only a civil offense, the construction and propagation of terms like *wetback* and *illegal immigrant* have associated these crossings with deep moral failings and with grave criminality. These two large-scale deportation schemes became a ‘solution’ to the growing permanent population of Mexicans and other Latinxs. This solution of deportation to disappear unwanted Latinx communities stems from the intersection between capitalism and immigration. For instance, leaders of agribusiness in the Southwest during the 1920s enumerated that the advantage of employing Mexicans, instead of Puerto Ricans or Filipinos who have citizenship, is that they can be easily deported, even on paydays.

Currently, reporting by government watchdogs has cited numerous cases of ICE arresting and detaining U.S. citizens for months and even years, extending the legacies of race-based immigration policies and enforcement into our contemporary moment. Since 2012, over one thousand U.S. citizens were released from ICE custody after proving their citizenship claims. In the novel, Micho Alvarez feels sometimes that he has to scream, “You don’t know me, man. I’m

<sup>8</sup> According to Molina, Operation Wetback, which was launched on June 17, 1954, had a stated goal of deporting one million undocumented Mexicans. However, by the end of the summer funding had run out, and the military-style campaign only deported around 30,000 people from California and Arizona (114). The touted one million apprehensions, critics contest, included all arrests from the fiscal year 1954.

a citizen here! But I shouldn't have to tell anyone that. I want to be given the benefit of the doubt" (Henríquez 236-7). Although mass deportations, namely five million, occurred under the Obama administration, the climate of fear instilled in Trump's immigration policies ignores Micho's cry for recognition as a U.S. citizen. Micho's perceived Mexicanness excludes him from an automatic entitlement to citizenship because whiteness has been stipulated as a requirement since 1790. Since then, eligibility for citizenship has hardened in its commitment to whiteness. Two Supreme Court cases, 1922 *Ozawa v. United States* and 1923 *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, narrativize how citizenship and whiteness has become inextricable to the detriment of Micho and other Latinx citizens. In both of these cases, the question of naturalization depended on the court's understanding of 'white' because if Thind or Ozawa were neither white nor black, they would be denied citizenship. Ultimately, the courts decided that both plaintiffs were not white (nor black), thus denied citizenship. Chief Justice George Sutherland argued that the "words 'white person' were meant to indicate only a person of what is *popularly* known as the Caucasian race" (qtd. in Molina 50). In this way, the cultural representation of whiteness influenced the structures of immigration law that disenfranchised Latinx populations denying them not only social and cultural membership but also political membership within the U.S. A decade after designating ethnic Mexicans as racially "Mexican," organizers, especially the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), reversed the court's previous decisions successfully. Although this fight to claim whiteness helped many ethnic Mexicans and other Latin American citizens, LULAC and other organizers tacitly endorsed the anti-blackness codified in U.S. Empire, negatively affecting indigenous peoples and Latinx of African descent.

Latinx characters, even white-passing characters in *Unknown Americans* and even those with 'proper' authorization, are homogenized as 'criminal aliens.' In the novel, Garrett Miller,

the young bully of Maribel, explains to Mayor Toro, a Panamanian American that “my dad says all you people are from Mexico” (Henríquez 69). Garrett’s father, who later shoots Arturo, has himself lost his job during the 2008 Recession and clearly views all Latinx bodies as ‘criminal aliens.’ In a mixture of push and pull effects harkening back to the Bracero Program and to NAFTA in 1994, Arturo Rivera receives an employer-sponsored visa as an agricultural worker: that is, globalized, neoliberal ecosystems, which require cheap, exploitable labor, displace workers in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean and then dispose of them when they are no longer profitable. In essence, NAFTA, which greatly benefited U.S. corporations, promoted free trade but refused to accept Latinx people.

Learning about Arturo’s dismissal, Alma Rivera dismays, “This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen. We had followed the rules. We had said to ourselves, we won’t be like everyone else, those people who packed up and went north without waiting first for proper authorization” (Henríquez 181). Yet, Arturo’s firing and subsequent loss of a visa coheres with race-based practices spanning centuries that cannot accept Latinx bodies, only their labor. In fact, the mushroom corporation only sponsored Arturo’s visa to alleviate some pressure from the government to at least appear to follow immigration law. In effect, NAFTA and exclusionary immigration practices, including the escalation of Border Patrol practices, create the pervasive figure of the ‘illegal immigrant’ so much so that all Mexican Americans and other Latinx citizens are presumed foreign and alien (Manzella 161). The various Latinx communities in *Unknown Americans*, including Panamanians, Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans among others, are read as ‘criminal aliens,’ a process that can be traced back to executions in South Texas and impoverished Mexican farmers in the late 1990s stealing across the Rio Grande.

Although *Unknown Americans* invokes imperial and colonial legacies along with exclusionary immigration policies, Henríquez also characterizes moments of anti-Mexican violence, epistemic or material, through the prism of American exceptionalism and the American dream. Furthermore, this prism of exceptionality covers over differences so that assimilation, or the ‘melting pot,’ reads as natural or favorable for newcomers and citizens. For example, explaining the novel’s title, Micho Alvarez says, “We’re the unknown Americans, the ones no one even wants to know, because they’ve been told they’re supposed to be scared of us and because maybe if they did take the time to get to know us, they might realize that we’re not that bad, maybe even that we’re a lot like them” (Henríquez 237). Here, Micho addresses a general audience of White Americans that automatically deem Mexico and Mexicans as bad, evil, or dangerous. He argues for a dialogue with Americans to prove Mexican humanity. Of course, this ‘common sense’ tactic places the burden of explaining oppression to the oppressors who are committed to maintaining the status quo. Also, in his appeal Micho perceives a panethnicity across Latinx communities that ignores the nuanced encounters and dynamics within the U.S. and among various Latinx groups. The specific phrase of “unknown Americans” mimics other hegemonic phrases linked to American cultural identity such as “a nation of immigrants” or a “melting pot,” which naturalize the colonialism and imperialism experienced by different Latinx communities. This phrase, “unknown Americans,” flattens the border crossings of voices like Rafael, Benny, and Micho. That is, the reason that Rafael left Panama is different than why Micho decided to work in the U.S. instead of Mexico. Then, once in the U.S. the lived experiences within the Latinx communities of Micho and Gustavo differ based on their ethnicities and traditions. Gustavo who is half Mexican and half Guatemalan says that “The Mexicans look down on us. They believe Guatemalans are stupid... They were offended to think

that any Mexican man would have stooped so low as to be with a Guatemalan woman to create me” (Henríquez 88). This dynamic between Latinx communities exemplifies the incongruous nature of a panethnic Latino/a/x identity. Finally, in the *Unknown Americans*’s last chapter, Arturo Rivera speaks posthumously to say that “One day when we go back to México and people ask me what it was like here, I will tell them those things. I will tell them all the ways I loved this country” (Henríquez 286). Speaking through Arturo, Henríquez moves towards reconciliation with her white readership, couched in American exceptionalism, that treats anti-Mexican, thus anti-Latinx, violence as a simple misunderstanding. From this perspective, all Arturo had to do was explain that he was searching for his daughter; however, Arturo’s final words deny the centuries-long criminalization of Mexican-ness and the systematic exclusion of Latinx communities from the protections of citizenship.

*Intervention of Central American Americans<sup>9</sup>*

Although the novel promotes a panethnic solidarity in the phrase “unknown Americans,” Henríquez’s structure—alternating and interrupting narrators who are Panamanian, Nicaraguan, Venezuelan, Paraguayan, and Dominican, among others—de-centralizes the prominent representation of the so-called ‘established’ Latinx groups: Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans. In particular, representations of Mexican Americans/Mexicans dominate cultural reproductions and mainstream visibility, especially TV, music, and film in the U.S. During a gathering in the apartment complex that turned into a party when the heat went out, Mayor Toro’s mother, a Panamanian, is asked to make Mexican-style hot cocoa with

<sup>9</sup> Since my analysis of Chinchilla concerns both history and culture, I discuss her poetry collection around the discourse of Central American American that better encapsulates diverse border crossings than the simple appellation of U.S. Central Americans, i.e., not limiting Chinchilla and other Central Americans to the physical crossing of a nation-state.

cinnamon sticks and contests that “It always has to be the Mexican way. México, México. As if the rest of us don’t exist” (Henríquez 140). Mexican over-representation in popular culture renders other immigrants and citizens from Latin American, especially Central Americans, invisible, according to Arturo Arias. U.S. Empire participates in a flattening of differences and an erasure in Latinx communities. Central Americans, in particular, are subsumed into Mexican-ness.

Writing about pedagogy and representation in the white spaces of writing centers, Romeo García criticizes the limits of the white/black binary in writing centers and challenges that “the flattening of difference, the representation of sameness within difference that so saturates writing center talk about race, is untenable and damaging to people like me who come from the LRGV [Lower Rio Grande Valley] or from other Mexican American communities” (47). Although García’s argument unsettles the black/white binary that has historically mired Latinx communities’ visibility, his argument, nevertheless, obscures the representation of Central Americans and others. While Mexicans are flattened into the difference of nonwhite constituents in writing centers and other academic spaces, whereby Mexicans are treated the same as Black Americans in these spaces, other Latinx communities are, then, flattened into Mexican-ness. In turn, García’s very complaint against invisibility creates another erasure. Furthermore, Molina’s framework of a relational approach through racial scripts can be extended from a Mexican-specific trajectory to determine Central American’s fate within U.S. society. As Molina contends, since racialized groups are linked across time and space, the racial and cultural formations constructed for Mexican-ness since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo transfer to the new ‘other’ (16).

In contrast, José Falconi and José Mazzotti in *The Other Latinos* argue that these new ‘other Latinos’ expand the scope of Latinoness and create new possibilities in representation for new arrivals or citizens of Latin American descent (6). In terms of race and ethnicity, Central Americans, for instance, are diverse, and within this diversity Central Americans express differences in gender and sexuality. From this position, I argue, *The Cha Cha Files* shows how Central Americans and Central American Americans express political and cultural imaginaries outside the shadow of Mexican-ness. Namely, Chinchilla’s poetry plays with the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of Latinx identities that reckon with the racial and cultural formations of Central Americans within U.S. Empire. Thereby, Central American Americans are both coerced and *creative* participants in Latinx communities.

*The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* is Chinchilla’s debut poetry collection, published in 2014. This poetry collection both reckons with the past traumas of many Central Americans during the civil wars across the isthmus and also constructs, through creative interventions, new understandings of Central American Americans. Arias explains that the neologism of Central American American, “an anadiplosis that sounds more like a redundancy,” names a radical projection of who and what Central Americans are in the U.S. (“Central American Americans” 103). For example, Chinchilla unsettles the geographical and political boundaries of Central Americans, especially Central American Americans who live as U.S. Latino/as in diaspora. Part of Chinchilla’s questioning settles on the unclear boundaries of who are Central American Americans based on the ‘documented’ erasures and silences for those who were formed by or products of the civil wars. Additionally, an interweaving intervention of *jotería* studies within Central American American-ness challenges the gendered violence and rigid gender roles within Latino/a cultural formations. As Chinchilla’s poetry describes the positioning of Central

American Americans, especially Guatemalans, in the U.S. Latino/a diaspora under the racial scripts of Mexican-ness, her poetry also creates political and queer imaginaries for diasporic cultural formations.

Similar to the invisibility of Central Americans and their flattening into Mexican-ness by U.S. mainstream culture, imperial amnesia in the collective memory of U.S. Empire regarding Central Americans is even more obscured than that for Mexican Americans. Just as *Unknown Americans* invoked the colonialism and imperialism within the U.S. borderlands, *The Cha Cha Files* summons forgotten legacies of U.S. imperialism throughout the isthmus, along with Spanish colonialism, that led to the racial and cultural formations of Central Americans within U.S. governmentality and mainstream culture. In the opening poem, “Solidarity Baby,” the speaker relates her political foundations as a “solidarity baby,” riding in a backpack while her parents marched and playing with toys as refugees on board the “Central American Underground Railroad” went through her living room. Speaking from bits and pieces of memory, the speaker says:

I used to get names of dictators and leaders of the people mixed up:  
 Somoza o Sandino? Ríos Montt or Otto René Castillo?  
 Banana Republicans, Cold Warriors Contras quién?  
 Was Reagan a good guy or a bad guy?  
 Let me see if I can get this right:

*A-B-CIA-GIC-FMSLN-URNG-UFW-XYZ.* (4)

The speaker’s confusion about the names of dictators and the names of revolutionaries suggests that silences and obfuscations outside of the isthmus in the diaspora still dominate the collective memory of these traumas. César Augusto Sandino, which became the namesake for the Sandinistas, struggled against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, the first Somoza of a forty-six-year-long stranglehold on power in Nicaragua, and the Sandinistas fought and defeated the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979 only to struggle against the Contras aided by

the Reagan administration during the 1980s. That is, the Republican administration under Reagan who considered Nicaragua as a permanent banana republic along with all of Central America intervened against, or ‘contra,’ the Sandinistas, a Marxist regime. The confusion as related by the speaker is a question of perspective from the Central American American who has adopted U.S. resentment of communism but also has heard the horrors of the right-wing, U.S.-aided governments on the isthmus. In this case, Reagan is both a ‘good guy’ and a ‘bad guy,’ depending on perspective and historical trauma. Also, the speaker knowingly re-arranges the alphabet to resurrect connections with these traumatic pasts. Of course, the CIA during the Cold War intervened with dramatic effect in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, and El Salvador among other Latin American countries. The arrangements of “FMSLN” and “URNG” refer to the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), the official name of the Sandinistas, and to the *Unidad Revolucionario Nacional Guatemalteco* (URNG), the leftist, guerrilla opposition to authoritarian Guatemalan governments. These references and recollections point to the colonial and imperial encounters with U.S. Empire in the isthmus.

Whereas the border itself crossed ethnic Mexicans in the borderlands during the nineteenth century, the deterritorialized border of U.S. Empire in the second half of the twentieth century prominently crossed into the isthmus during the Cold War, yet the underpinnings of treating the isthmus as a collective were set as the Spanish Empire was losing influence and territory in the Western hemisphere. By 1823 when the Monroe Doctrine, which prohibited Europeans—namely the Spanish—from reasserting power over former colonies, was enacted, the Spanish Empire had already lost Mexico, Florida, Central America, and several territories in South America. As their sphere of influence dwindled, U.S. Empire asserted its dominion throughout Latin American by way of war, including the Spanish-American War of 1898, and by

proclamations, including the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary, which *ex post facto* declared intervention into Latin America as justified. This broad perspective of U.S. Empire in labelling all lands south of its physical southern border as “Latin America” contributed to the Cold War perspective of U.S. intervention, namely, these foreign policies constructed all of “Latin America” as a single entity (Caminero-Santangelo 18).

During the Cold War, especially after the 1947 Truman Doctrine that explicitly countered Soviet expansion, U.S. Empire, in turn, viewed the isthmus as a pivotal site of contestation where democracy battled communism. For example, when Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán of Guatemala was elected in 1951 under the popular mandate of land reform to wrest idle lands from the United Fruit Company (UFCO) and redistribute it to peasants, the Eisenhower administration intervened under the guidance of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles. “Operation Success,” which incidentally coincided with “Operation Wetback,” was launched in June 1954 where a coup ousted Arbenz and installed a pro-UFCO government that dissolved unions and granted a million acres of land to UFCO. For the next four decades, Guatemalans, especially indigenous peasants, would endure kidnappings, death squads, and terror under revolving dictators until a peace treaty was signed in 1996. More than 200,000 Guatemalans, especially indigenous peasants, were killed in the four-decades-long civil war, and nearly ninety percent of all deaths, disappearances, and other violent acts were attributed to the Guatemalan government (Rodríguez 33). In effect, Guatemalans suffered the longest and bloodiest civil war in Central America undergirded by U.S. foreign policy.

A lasting effect of the Guatemalan civil war was a mass exodus during the 1980s and 1990s into Mexico and into the U.S; however, exclusionary immigration and inhumane enforcement practices conspired to limit social and political membership in the U.S. for Central

Americans and Central American Americans. President Carter attempted to address the mass exodus through the 1980 Refugee Act, which allowed asylum seekers to find refuge in the U.S. due to fear of persecution based on “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (qtd. in González 138). However, Reagan rescinded the act and instead increased his opposition to communism in Central America; additionally, the Reagan administration denied and detained asylum seekers from Guatemala among others in the early 1980s. Between 1983 and 1990, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) granted less than three percent of political asylum applications from a majority of Central Americans while accepting nearly twenty-five percent from Nicaraguans, which was under Sandinista control (González 131).<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the Reagan administration in 1986 enacted the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) that further militarized the U.S.-Mexico border and granted temporary legal status to undocumented immigrants who arrived before 1982. However, of the 2.7 million applications filed by late 1988, more than seventy percent were Mexicans while Central Americans accounted for only nine percent (Rodríguez 87). *Prima facie*, this immigration act that was supposed to curb ‘illegal immigration’ failed while actively discriminating against Central American newcomers who were not present *en masse* in the U.S. before 1982. Importantly, IRCA also proposed penalties for employers knowingly hiring undocumented workers, but enforcement of this provision was sporadic and incomplete. Employers flagrantly violated the language of the provision since they simply had to hire workers as contractors, as

<sup>10</sup> INS formed in 1933; it later converged within the new 2003 Department of Homeland Security under the name U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

done in the agriculture and construction industries, and claim that they verified paperwork as genuine.

Although the exclusionary governmentality denying Central Americans political membership within the U.S. diaspora was allayed for some by Temporary Protected Status (TPS), especially to Salvadorans who were fleeing the civil war, inhumane enforcement practices conspired to construct Central Americans as deportable economic menaces who were ‘stealing American jobs.’ In May 2008, the U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement agency (ICE), another branch of the Department of Homeland Security, launched the then largest immigration raid in Postville, Iowa, at an Agriprocessors Inc. slaughterhouse and meat packing plant. Under the George W. Bush administration, ICE raids were a common tactic to publicly showcase immigration enforcement. In the Postville raid, ICE arrested nearly four hundred people, the vast majority of which were indigenous Maya Guatemalans (“Centroamericanidades” 14). That is, rather than acknowledging the failures in imperial interventions and exclusionary immigration practices, U.S. governmentality and popular culture scapegoats undocumented Central Americans for economic woes and social unrest. Therefore, U.S. Empire refuses to recognize the dynamic encounters with colonialism and imperialism along with the racial scripts of Mexican-ness that homogenize Central Americans and Central American Americans into the single category of ‘criminal alien’ that is undeserving of asylum or social and political membership.

In creating a space within Latinx communities, Central American Americans, like Chinchilla, have interrogated the epistemic ‘location’ of Central America, thereby expanding what constitutes Central American American-ness. In the poem, “Central American-American,” the speaker unsettles static, cold war cultural constructions for more recent Central American

Americans within the U.S. Latino/a diaspora. As the speaker relates, even configuring this neologism on the page is unstable:

Centralamerican American  
 does that come with a hyphen?  
 a space?  
 Central America  
 America  
 América  
 Las Américas...

Are there flowers on a volcano?  
 am I a CENTRAL  
 American?  
 Where is the center of America? (Chinchilla 21-22)

Alluding to Pérez Firmat's *Living on the Hyphen* (1994), the speaker implicitly disavows the 'othering' discursive power of the hyphen where members, such as "Cuban-Americans," are forced to live between cultures. Requiring a hyphen denies these Americans full membership within that society because their membership is qualified, usually in terms of national origin. For Central Americans, the discursive power of limiting an epistemic and geographical space for Central American Americans stems from the Spanish colonial history and its postcolonial legacy within contemporary U.S. mainstream culture.

Maritza Cárdenas confers that "Central America is seen as a historical construct comprised by countries and cultures that share a collective history" (115). Although they share a similar colonial history where the present-day countries on the isthmus were a part of the Federal Republic of Central America formed in 1823, these countries have since encountered different dynamics across the centuries, especially in their relationship to the U.S. Privileging the Spanish colonial history demarcates Central Americans as conflated across race and ethnicity into a mestizaje, ignoring both ancient and present-day indigenous communities. Additionally, in the twentieth century, the speaker, in the following poem, "What it's Like to be a Central American

Unicorn for Those Who Aren't," says, "First of all I am a mythical creature that is only mentioned / if at all / in relation to war, trauma, maras, revolutions, earthquakes, canals and volcanos" (Chinchilla 25). When the Central American diaspora is recognized within U.S. mainstream culture at all, the tendency is to constellate all members of the diaspora as victims of the civil wars, natural disasters, gangs, and trauma. The speaker pushes back against this designation by questioning the assumptions of U.S. Empire: namely, where is the center of America? What is the difference between America and América?

Dislocating the geographical boundaries of the colonial inheritance of North, Central, and South America disavows the othering discourse applied to Central Americans in the diaspora. Neither Central nor North America existed before the invasion of the Spanish conquistadors and the killing of indigenous peoples and knowledges. Neither did the Maya, Quiché, nor Garifuna<sup>11</sup> subscribe to the racial hierarchy of whiteness or locate themselves as subordinate under other nation-states prior to colonial contact. Chinchilla and other Central American Americans, then, question the inherited colonial epistemologies of geography and culture. Claudia Milian who writes about Central Americans as part of her category of "disorienting Latinities," explains, "Central American-American is so strange—and estranged—that its insistent claims of American-Americanness seem unbelievable (142). Milian highlights the point of contention: "America" in U.S. mainstream culture only refers to all things of the United States of America. Thus, the epistemic stranglehold on 'America' to only refer to the U.S. *ipso facto* determines all

<sup>11</sup> The Maya, an ancient civilization, has archeological sites across Mesoamerica including on the Yucatán Peninsula in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador. A part of the larger Maya peoples, the Quiché, or K'iche', lived in pre-Columbian times and still live in the highlands of Guatemala. Both of these ancient peoples were greatly affected by the Spanish empire starting in the sixteenth century. The Garifuna predominately live in modern-day Belize, but they were originally descended from Black Caribs and indigenous peoples in the Caribbean who were deported from Saint Vincent to then British Honduras.

arguments to the contrary as ridiculous. In other words, claims to American-ness in the U.S. by Central Americans are epistemologically refuted. Instead, Central Americans in the diaspora are simply perceived as “illegals,” “Communists,” and lesser than Mexicans or Mexican Americans (“Central American Americans” 109). As evidenced by the exclusionary immigration and inhumane enforcement practices, U.S. Empire and mainstream culture still clings to this perception while creatives like Chinchilla actively resist it.

Chinchilla and other members of the Central American diaspora participate in creating their own vision of Central American Americanness within the U.S. diaspora. EpiCentroAmerica, for instance, which includes Chinchilla, is a literary and artistic collective founded in 2000 in Los Angeles, a global city that boasts a large, diverse Latinx population. Notably, Chinchilla co-founded this collective whose work informed the eventual publication of her debut collection. The discursive power of naming the collective ‘EpiCentroAmerica’ actively decolonizes the nationalist terms or hemispheric terms that Latinx groups often adopt, for example, Chicano/a studies departments in academia, LULAC, or MEChA, or “Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan.” Chinchilla invokes the collective’s name in the lines, “I’m just looking for my place / am I a CENTRAL American? / Sí pues, soy del epicentro” (4). The first line includes a reference to her positioning as a queer and political member of the U.S. Central American diaspora while the second and third lines refer to the insistent questioning of inherited colonial knowledge: If the speaker is Central American, then she is from the epicenter, the very definition of American. In this way, the speaker points to the cultural discrepancy that vilifies Central Americans and Central American Americans as ‘criminal aliens’ while also naming them as the center of Americanness.

Finally, Chinchilla interrogates where queer Central American Americans fit in the diaspora, namely an integral and vital inclusion for hers and other Central American Americans' diasporic future. "Femme on Purpose" relates the small narrative of a guest speaker in the poem speaker's 'introduction to trans 101' college class where a trans woman who works as a sex worker explains that she encounters everyday slurs, like "*puta, perra, ...tranny, fucking freak, jota, maricón,*" that belittle and terrorize her (Chinchilla 70). After the class, the speaker tells her story to the trans woman; she says, "I am patient with my own stories / what is under the dressing I present / That my queer is on purpose, that my femme is on purpose / that it was earned with discovery doubt self love / like she did" (Chinchilla 73). The speaker also names this discovery and resiliency as a wound: "the wound is my trophy" (Chinchilla 74). Under the dressing, as in presentation, costuming, and medical gauze, the speaker argues that her femme exteriority is a conscious decision; she has learned from other femmes who express both fierceness and solidarity.

### *Conclusion*

Reckoning with constructed borders of the expanding U.S. borderlands, *Unknown Americans* and *The Cha Cha Files* achieve differing degrees of clarity in foregrounding the social structures that form cultural and racial perceptions of Latinx communities. On the one hand, *Unknown Americans* intended to disempower hegemonic representations of migrants and other Latinx people; however, the framework to inscribe humanity onto these marginalized voices traffics in U.S. exceptionalism. This forced framework denies the centuries-long structures of deportability and dispossession for Latinx peoples, especially Mexicans, that started after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, reified along the U.S.-Mexico border in the LRGV, and expanded out of the U.S. South and Southwest into the rest of the country. In *The Bourgeois*,

Franco Moretti, in direct contrast to Levine's defamiliarization argument, contends that realist fiction can "inscribe the present so deeply in the past that alternatives become simply unimaginable" (qtd. in Levine 589). Henríquez's novel defamiliarizes the routine of anti-Mexican rancor, yet her realist fiction also makes the present so indelible that imagining why this rancor in the first place vanishes from consideration. Notably, a key part of reifying the present occurs through exceptionalist language that begs white Americans for a reconciliation: white Americans can continue pretending that the U.S. is the best, freest country in the world while Latinx people can live without white supremacist terrorism from ICE, USCIS, and DHS. The Latinx voices in *Unknown Americans* are begging white Americans to accept their humanity.

Lastly, *The Cha Cha Files* creates a visibility for Central American Americans that is not frozen in cold war tropes while also expanding Latinx to be inclusive of gender, sexuality, racial, and ethnic differences. Chinchilla's poetics plays with the language of imperialism and identity to theorize around the discourse of Central American American. In "Too Much to Be," the speaker is dancing when a man asks her where she is from. She explains she is from Oakland, but her male dancing partner does not believe her. He also confuses her for a "gringa" who speaks Spanish well then denies her self-identification as a Guatemalan because she's "*too pretty to be Guatemalteca*" (Chinchilla 41). The speaker questions herself: "Is that supposed to be some sort of one drop rule colonial compliment" (Chinchilla 41). Troping on the black/white binary and its subsequent one-drop rule that 'confirms' blackness through 'one drop of blood,' the speaker questions the man's inherited white supremacy from European colonization that deems lighter skin more beautiful than darker skin. That is, the female speaker cannot be Guatemalan since she is light-skinned. In addition to Chinchilla's troping with imperial language, she plays with the sounds and markers of identity, especially queer and ethnic identity. In "Chapina

Dictionary,” the speaker tells her readers about her love of “ch” or “che” as in Chinchilla; these “ch” consonant combinations can be replaced with an “X” for specific reasons. Namely, the speaker contends that “A Chapina with an X is a Guate girl adopting the X, for what is lost, ...and X for reclaiming, for the loss of the Ch, X for crossroads, X as in ch, sometimes X as in sh...A Chapina with an X on her chest like super hero mayan intuitive espiritista getting a handle on her powers” (Chinchilla 45). The X in Chapinx, similar to gender-neutral Latinx, gives power to marginalized identity markers. That is, the speaker lists all the identity markers, especially those beginning in “ch”, that have historically marginalized women like her and instead views them as positives. The indigenous, queer medicine woman in this poem not only expresses the possibilities of X but also celebrates the X.

#### Chapter 4 - West African Women Writers and American Exceptionalism

As discussed in the introduction, liberalism and opportunity are cultural cornerstones of American exceptionalism. Namely, exceptionalism says that the U.S. is the freest country with equal opportunity for all—a pervasive national identity and culture that has substantial roots in the racist and imperial continental expansion of the 1840s and the farthest roots in establishments of the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Colonies. For black slaves, Native Americans, and Mexicans, exceptionalism translated to colonization and coercion. The enculturation of American exceptionalism stems from a national adoption of O’Sullivan’s slogan of “Manifest Destiny” and Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” two expansionist ideologies that justified theft of native land and genocide. Thereby, American exceptionalism reads as an ahistorical and transhistorical interpretation of American history, or a euphemism for war, massacre, and colonization. This literary analysis of two contemporary West African women writers defines the changing contours of liberalism and opportunity since the 1619 arrival of the first slaves in Jamestown while also illustrating how these mutable arguments have produced an illiberal, inopportune society for aspiring Americans.

Focusing on one tenet of exceptionalism, race and class have long been constitutional determinants in American liberalism, which helped fuel expansionist ideologies for immigrants from a socially stratified Europe. Even the father of modern liberalism, John Stuart Mill who greatly influenced the Framers and who wrote *On Liberty* justified colonialism and slavery in antiquity and in his contemporary moment (Bonilla-Silva 69-70). In this way, he and other ‘moral’ philosophers, including Kant and Voltaire, wrote anti-blackness into their treatises. Even further, liberalism also includes a class component that is often overlooked since political and social liberalism, or equal opportunity for all, stems from economic liberalism, or free-market

policies. Leslie Carr argues that classic liberalism, including color-blind racial ideology, mimics the individual choice of the free capitalist marketplace (qtd. in Gallagher 7). For example, during the civil rights movement, especially after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, critics of anti-segregationist policies clamored that racial changes should be a gradual process in ‘people’s hearts,’ and they also criticized these governmental policies as overbearing since “you cannot legislate morality” (Bonilla-Silva 74-5). Jim Crow supporters rejected governmental intervention into social matters based on their economic views that government should not over-regulate, or ‘pick winners and losers.’

These fundamental components of exceptionalism—liberalism and opportunity, especially as they relate to race and class—comprise the focus of my discussions of *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* in this chapter. As the protagonist in *Americanah*, Ifemelu is a dark-skinned Nigerian migrant who anonymously blogs about ‘America’s tribalisms,’ including race, class, and region, from an outsider’s perspective. As seen in Ifemelu’s blog posts and within her social and romantic interactions, post-civil rights racism or color-blind racism, illustrates the anti-black ideology of American exceptionalism. In *Behold the Dreamers*, American exceptionalism further complicates the fading American Dream, and this discussion on socioeconomic opportunity within exceptionalism illustrates its racial and class exclusivity. Together, Adichie and Mbue expose the equivocation of American exceptionalism.

#### *Americanah and (Exceptional) American Race*

Similar to the outside perspective of Alexis de Tocqueville that illuminated the specifics of American politics and society in his 1835 *Democracy in America*, Ifemelu’s point of view on American ‘race’ investigates the power of race in contemporary U.S. society and politics. Shane McCoy, borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins, views Ifemelu as an ‘outsider within’ who can

offer pointed interpretations of American society and culture (281). Ifemelu closely aligns with Adichie's own upbringing: a dark-skinned immigrant woman from Nigeria with a British accent who 'becomes black' when she arrives in the U.S. From these lived experiences, Adichie writes insights into Ifemelu's narrative on how Americans, especially whites, think about race and racism. Importantly, the novel illustrates how contemporary racism is heavily embedded in the liberalism of American exceptionalism.

*Americanah* accompanies Ifemelu as she moves from Lagos, Nigeria to the U.S. Northeast, including Philadelphia, New York City, Baltimore, New Haven, and Princeton. Starting in the present, Ifemelu who is a student at Princeton has to travel to Trenton, New Jersey, to find a salon to braid her hair in part due to de facto housing segregation. On her way there, Ifemelu reveals that she writes a lifestyle blog, which is an anonymous blog called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. The title is a play on Juneteenth, a festival celebrating the abolition of slavery in Texas in 1865, i.e., emancipating the last African slaves in the U.S. Namely, she rightly reminds her blog readers that the acceptance of 'black' as a collective term is a fairly recent phenomena given credence by Stokely Carmichael in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and that U.S. Empire referred to African slaves and their descendants well into the 1950s as 'negroes.' For perspective, one of the Southern slave codes was named the Negro Act of 1739. Also, by calling herself a "Non-American Black," Ifemelu begs the question of how she came to speak English and immigrate to the U.S. Whereas her ancestors were not forcibly removed from West Africa and shipped to the U.S., she still underscores her relationship in her self-identification with imperialism, namely the British Empire. Ifemelu's anonymous

blog entries represent the most insightful moments of deconstructing contemporary U.S. race and racism.

In contrast to the overt racial slurs and terrorism tolerated before the civil-rights era, contemporary racism in the U.S. uses subtle, coded language that reflects an ideology of white supremacy and anti-blackness. This type of non-racist ideology has been labeled color-blind racism by multiple sociologists as early as 1976 with more comprehensive studies gaining traction in 1997.<sup>12</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who wrote *Racism without Racists* (2014), argues that “color-blind racism has rearticulated elements of traditional liberalism (work ethic, rewards by merit, equal opportunity, individualism, etc.) for racially illiberal goals” where white Americans consistently point to individual shortcomings of black Americans to explain their position in American society (18). In other words, whites tell nonwhites, especially American Blacks, that they should forget the past, work harder, and stop blaming others. The tremendous amount of inequality, however, in education, income, wealth, freedom (or lack of incarceration), housing, and politics suggests that liberalism is not the solution but a part of the problem. In this way, contemporary color-blind racism rejects that race is a relevant factor in lived experiences of nonwhite Americans. Clarifying the ubiquity of colorblind racial ideology, Charles Gallagher argues that colorblindness is “the dominant lens through which whites understand contemporary race relations,” and this lens allows white Americans to believe the tropes of classic liberalism where Americans have expunged their racist attitudes and created equal opportunities for all Americans regardless of race (3-4). The double-edged passage of the Civil Rights Acts codified full citizenship for black Americans, but their passage also allowed white Americans to believe

<sup>12</sup> Leslie Carr’s *Color-blind Racism*, J.R. Kluegel’s and Lawrence Bobo’s first writings on laissez-faire racism, and Amy Ansell’s *New Right, New Racism* all were published in 1997.

that racism was behind them since discrimination was now illegal. Colorblindness does not actually ignore race but rather acknowledges race while ignoring power differentials. In addition, color-blind racism, which is as effective as overt racism, “aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards” (Bonilla-Silva 15). This type of racism, then, erases the authors and its beneficiaries by portraying the racial status quo as natural, or at least a natural conclusion based on the ideology of American exceptionalism. Bonilla-Silva terms this curious phenomenon ‘racism without racists.’ In *Americanah*, Ifemelu acutely chronicles her lived experience in this contemporary moment of color-blind racism to expose how liberalism, a key component of American exceptionalism, upholds illiberal white supremacy while actively justifying anti-blackness.

In these blog entries and in her conversations with both American Blacks and Non-American Blacks, Ifemelu a) spells out key tenets of American tribalism, especially race, b) examines race and class, and c) questions whiteness. Ifemelu’s unique perception of American race and racism stems from her upbringing in Nigeria where class is the primary preoccupation, especially in Lagos, a booming metropolis on the coast in southwest Nigeria, where Ifemelu grew up. Ifemelu explains, “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 359). In Nigeria, ethnicity and class mark differences between people. In America, race determines differences. When Ifemelu blogs about Barack Obama, she discredits claims that Obama can choose his race: biracial, multiracial, or black. She argues, “race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because racism. And racism is absurd because it’s about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It’s about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair...In America, you don’t get to decide what race you

are. It is decided for you” (Adichie 419). For example, racial hegemony in the U.S. viewed Obama as black, despite being the biracial son of a white anthropologist from Kansas and a black Kenyan economist. Obama suffered racism throughout his campaign, into his presidency, and even now as a former president. However, contemporary racism towards blacks in the U.S. in the post-Civil Rights era is subtler than Jim Crow-era racism. Ifemelu identifies this new racism in the following:

In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. ...Here’s the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not...Or maybe it’s time to just scrap the word ‘racist.’ Find something new. Like Racial Disorder Syndrome. And we could have different categories for sufferers of this syndrome: mild, medium, and acute. (Adichie 390)

Although she parodies the concept of degrees of racism, Ifemelu actually names this new type of racism: racist ideologies persist but in another language. Ifemelu’s observation strikingly echoes Bonilla-Silva’s “curious enigma of ‘racism without racists’” (15). Therefore, white Americans (seemingly) no longer say ‘negro,’ ‘nigger,’ or ‘colored people;’ rather they can express the same ideology when they say “blacks only get into good schools due to affirmative action,” “some of my best friends are black, but...,” or “I’m not racist, but...” In other words, white Americans claim not to see color while ascribing to abstract liberalism where everyone has an equal opportunity to get into school, find a job, or become President.<sup>13</sup> Whites reject affirmative action because it contradicts a key tenet of liberalism: equal opportunity, and they view affirmative action as inherently unfair, even as ‘reverse racism.’

Moreover, this discursive style of color-blind racism, according to Bonilla-Silva, expresses anti-blackness through the exceptional lens of liberalism in either overt or subtle ways.

<sup>13</sup> American Blacks still lag behind white Americans in numerous parameters of education: high school graduation rates, advanced class enrollment, standardized test scores, college acceptance (Bonilla-Silva 39-40).

For example, one comment to Ifemelu's blog reads, "*Oh fuck off...Black people get everything easy. You can't get anything in this country unless you're black. Black women are even allowed to weigh more*" (Adichie 379). In this more overt example, the blog commenter thinks that American Blacks have become dependent on government handouts ('welfare state') or are given 'special treatment' through affirmative action, which in the lens of liberalism contradicts the American values of hard work, merit, and equal opportunity. In fact, most whites who oppose affirmative action in higher education or in the workplace complain of reverse discrimination. Also, whites feign concern for American Blacks' views on merits, and they explain that American Blacks would feel inferior if they were only hired or accepted due to affirmative action (Bonilla-Silva 97). These discursive mechanisms ultimately, regardless of the verbal hedging, maintain the racial status quo of consistently elevating whiteness while disparaging blackness.

Additionally, these racist ideologies, consequently, bolster another truth about race in the U.S.: whiteness is at the top of the American racial hierarchy due to its privileges and benefits. Ifemelu explains, "So whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course (please, commenters, don't state the obvious) but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness" (Adichie 253-254). White privilege, as expressed by Peggy McIntosh, is akin to a knapsack of affordances, which could mean representation in popular culture, renting or buying a house in your desired neighborhood, shopping without suspicion of theft, reading books about characters who look and think like you, and even appearing wealthy regardless of your actual financial fortunes. In fact, Ifemelu blogs that "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class," and in this post, she explains that black Americans are consistently assumed to be poor, often lumped into the category of "Blacks and Poor Whites" (Adichie 205). Ifemelu blogs about this intersection of race and class after answering the door at

Kimberly's house, her employer, for a carpet cleaner who at first glance does not immediately read Ifemelu as the owner of such a stately house because she is black. In his mind, he thinks that she cannot possibly live here, let alone own this house. When Ifemelu mentions her boss's name, the carpet cleaner's "face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (Adichie 204-5). That is, in U.S. empire, whites are supposed to be rich, and blacks are supposed to be poor.

Part of exceptionalism is telling half the story and diminishing the importance of certain narratives, and, in this way, whiteness is naturalized in liberalism, thereby hiding its benefits. Gallagher explains that establishing colorblindness as the dominant viewpoint on race renders white privilege invisible (4). When Ifemelu starts dating Curt who self-identifies as "a rich white guy from Potomac," she better comprehends white privilege (Adichie 237). Ifemelu works as domestic help for a wealthy, white woman, Kimberly, in the Philadelphia suburbs where she eventually meets and falls in love with Curt. In a discursive instance of white privilege, Kimberly always uses coded language to reference and to tacitly condemn black people. Kimberly uses "beautiful" in the peculiar way of supposedly complementing a "quite ordinary-looking, but always black [woman]" (Adichie 180). In such examples of color-blind racism, white supremacists pretend not to see race (skin color), but when they do acknowledge a racial difference, they use aesthetic codes to say that 'black women are beautiful [even though they are not white]' (Adichie 181).

Beauty standards within white supremacy predominantly reflect skinny, white women, a privilege that always benefits white women and actively oppresses Black women, especially dark-skinned woman with natural hair. From the beginning of *Americanah*, Ifemelu frets about her appearance, especially her hair, and how her appearance is read in a colorblind society. When

she interviews for a position in public relations, she is told to remove her braids and straighten her hair to look more ‘professional,’ hence more white. These instances of white privilege show that (white) liberalism is not, in fact, non-racist.<sup>14</sup> Among white Americans, Bonilla-Silva points to young, working-class women as true racial progressives (144). White liberalism, although it seemingly supports racial equality in principle, often objects to racially progressive goals in practice. White privilege, then, in combination with color-blind racism uses aspects of liberalism to maintain an illiberal society for nonwhite Americans.

As a migrant who is read as black, Ifemelu concurrently has to navigate the U.S. immigration system and informal economy within American colorblindness. Formally, Ifemelu, at first, is an international student with a F-1 visa, which is a nonimmigrant visa that prohibits employment. However, Ifemelu needs income, and so she poses as Ngozi Okonkwo to work as a domestic with Kimberly. When Curt helps her get the position at a public relations firm, he assures her that the firm will sponsor her green card, and within a few years, she becomes a citizen. At this point, Ifemelu becomes a particular member of the ‘new’ African diaspora, specifically an Afropolitan. Taiye Selasi coined Afropolitanism in 2009 to describe writers like Adichie, African writers who split their time between their home country and their host country (Hallemeier 232). Afropolitans comprise a new global subjectivity that can be mobile in order to be culturally fluid, but to be mobile requires proper documentation and disposable income.

Critiquing who has access to Afropolitanism, Dustin Crowley questions the structures of privilege that undergird Afropolitanism (126). Once she acquires citizenship and starts writing

<sup>14</sup> Bonilla-Silva makes the distinction between non-racists, another lens of colorblindness, and anti-racists who understand “the institutional nature of racial matters and accepting that all actors in a racialized society are affected *materially* (receive benefits or disadvantages) and *ideologically* by the racial structure” (24).

her blog full-time with her savings from her public relations position, which Curt encourages, Ifemelu also acquires the ‘structures of privilege’ that bolster Afropolitanism. Markedly, then, Ifemelu begins to yearn for a return to Lagos as an ‘Americanah,’ a sarcastic term for a Nigerian who returns culturally and linguistically changed by American society. Although a large part of her longing to return is to be with Obinze, another significant part of Ifemelu’s longing is the desire to be a part of the “promising future of late Nigerian capitalism” (Hallemeier 232).<sup>15</sup> Obinze plays a crucial part in Ifemelu’s life because he was “Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself” (Adichie 7). In addition to several of her childhood friends who were educated abroad to return and start businesses, Obinze himself achieves incredible financial success on his return to Nigeria, despite returning after deportation from the U.K. Obinze’s fortunes changed remarkably after his deportation where “one week he was broke and squatting in his cousin’s flat and the next he had millions of naira in his bank account” (Adichie 565). Now, both Ifemelu and Obinze fit the new ethos of Afropolitanism: young, wealthy Africans with multiple homes in multiple cultures.

In contrast to Ifemelu’s migration on a student visa and her eventual voluntary return to Nigeria, Obinze migrates to the U.K. where he overstays his visitor visa and subsequently tries to arrange a marriage with a U.K. citizen. Obinze moved to the U.K. when he was unable to secure an American visa to be with Ifemelu. Obinze and Ifemelu met while they were in secondary school in Nigeria; they went to university together; and then they maintained a long-distance relationship until Ifemelu fell into depression. When Ifemelu fails to write, call, or communicate

<sup>15</sup> As noted by Katherine Hallemeier, *Americanah* does not directly engage with the impending 2008 financial crisis, and Ifemelu as a blog writer and freelance speaker lacks the concerns of the global economy. Hallemeier contends that African literature, or any multi-ethnic literature, does not necessarily need to contend with such realities since *Americanah* is also a love story (236).

in any way with Obinze, he moves on and then migrates to the U.K. As often happens with documentation marriages, Obinze falls prey to a scam, and the British woman takes his money and reports him to immigration authorities who deport him back to Nigeria.

Before he leaves, Obinze assails the ahistorical traditions within Western nations, such as the U.S. and the U.K., to discriminate against migrants and immigrants when colonization by these nations produced push and pull factors that created these very human flows. Obinze observes that citizens of the U.K. “lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. Yet he understood. It had to be comforting, this denial of history” (Adichie 320). When nonwhite immigrants are displaced by globalization, poverty, and violence, the global North refuses to accept responsibility and removes ‘unauthorized’ nonwhite bodies from within their borders. Ahistorical interpretations for contemporary moments of mass migration comfort the powerful (white, wealthy), helping them wave away the concerns of nonwhites while at the same time benefiting from informal economies and perpetuating stricter immigration laws.

Obinze’s migration to the U.K. and Ifemelu’s migration to the U.S. contrast each other in another important way: European countries are seen as exclusive, whereas America is seen as inclusive as espoused by the American dream. Mark, one of Obinze’s friends in the U.K., asserts that “countries in Europe were based on exclusion and not, as in America, on inclusion” (Adichie 339). This seemingly stark contrast, indeed, coheres to aspects of American history, but it only tells half the story. Europe is socially stratified whereas the U.S. is believed not to be. However, as the following discussion about the migrants in *Behold the Dreamers* illustrates, the American dream does not include anyone who just works harder than everyone else. Rather, the American

dream is racially, culturally, and economically exclusive; nevertheless, the exceptionalist ideology of the American dream remains a powerful draw for millions from Africa and many more from around the world.

*Parsing the American Dream in Behold the Dreamers*

Another integral aspect of American exceptionalism is opportunity, or the American dream. The American dream has incessantly morphed across history from the religious colonial writings of the Puritans and the liberal ideals of the Signers and Framers into the modern ideal of opportunity to achieve constantly larger and larger degrees of economic success. Often the American dream has inherently excluded nonwhites and other minority groups that reflects the cultural movements of empire since the 1620s, or since the Puritan migration, and additionally the ideal of opportunity across time has been given ahistorical and transhistorical interpretations that serve a convenient political or social aim. Since the 1970s, these aims have been to pass pro-business policies, pass tax cuts for high earners, and to limit government involvement in all social arenas as a way to promote ‘individual freedom.’

To illustrate the exclusivity of the American dream, consider the sermon by John Winthrop delivered on the *Arbella* where he claimed “‘we shall be as a City upon a Hill’” (qtd. in Madsen 18). This maxim has been used by numerous politicians, including John F. Kennedy, Mitt Romney, and even Barack Obama, but this phrase is most closely connected to the idealized vision of Ronald Reagan who referenced Winthrop’s words in his 1989 “Farewell Address to the Nation.” In this address, Reagan says that “I’ve thought a bit of the ‘shining city upon a hill.’ The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man” (6). Reagan extrapolates an ahistorical and transhistorical interpretation of Winthrop’s sermon where this

borrowed biblical language now means that the U.S. is a permanent beacon of hope and liberty for the world to emulate. However, Winthrop did not conceive 'America' as his home because he was a non-separatist, or an Englishman who sought to establish a model church in the Massachusetts Bay Colony to reproduce back in England. Winthrop and the Puritans viewed their migration as a spiritual and political destiny in the 'New World' in order to reform the church in the rest of Europe, or a redeemer nation (Madsen 1-2). Reagan, also, confuses Winthrop's Puritans with William Bradford's Plymouth Colony Pilgrims, who were separatists establishing a new church. Reagan identifies Winthrop as an 'early freedom man,' but Winthrop did not extend freedom of religion to Anne Hutchinson and other Antinomians who accepted an individual's intuition to attain God's grace. Also, Winthrop banished Roger Williams who decried the theft of Native American land. Reagan's interpretation of Winthrop's sermon, then, bears very little connection to the actual imagination of the Puritan leader.

Furthermore, Reagan continues describing the 'city upon a hill' in the following: "a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here" (6). Here, Reagan appeals to the free market discourse and deregulation that theoretically innovates and creates vast amounts of wealth for all Americans. During Reagan's administration in the New Economy, a twentieth-century version of laissez-faire economics, proponents of deregulation, tax cuts, and free trade promised that these measures of freedom would 'lift all boats' while the invisible hand of the market would evenly spread wealth (Smith xxii). Our present-day gulf in income and wealth inequality betrays these promises of equal opportunity in American exceptionalism. Additionally, Reagan describes immigration in exceptionalist terms where immigrants only need to have "will and heart" to make it in America. In this

exceptionalist interpretation, Reagan intuits the tacit connection between immigration of low-skilled labor with unregulated free markets. Part of American exceptionalism and its opportunity stems from exceptionalist interpretations of capitalism. Hodgson argues that “in recent decades, capitalism has taken its place on the podium as an aspect of American exceptionalism almost equal with democracy” (99). In this sense, opportunity, or the American dream, can only be achieved in the free (neoliberal) society of American capitalism.

However, despite Reagan’s and others’ contention that the U.S. is the freest, richest country in the world, there exists astronomical income and wealth inequality, especially in terms of race. For example, in 2001, American Blacks had a median net worth of \$19,024 in comparison to the \$120,989 of whites (Bonilla-Silva 58). On a broader scale, the gap becomes even more unfathomable: in 2007, during the impending housing crisis, the one percent of highest earners in the U.S. made \$1.35 trillion, which is more than the entire economies of France, Italy, or Canada (Smith 101). *Behold the Dreamers*, I argue, brings together the cultural movements of empire with the background of the 2008 financial crisis, its aftermath, and Obama’s election to reveal the limits of opportunity in American exceptionalism, or the American dream.

*Behold the Dreamers* narrates the drama of two families who negotiate the 2008 financial crisis. One family, the Edwards, is a wealthy, white family living in downtown Manhattan while the main protagonists, the Jongas, are poor, black immigrants from Cameroon with ephemeral immigration statuses. Clark Edwards works as a Lehman Brothers executive, and Jende Jonga, an asylum applicant, works as Edwards’ chauffeur with an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) while his wife, Neni, is studying to be a pharmacist on a student visa. The perspectives of both Jende and Neni, in contrast to the Edwards, expose American

exceptionalism, especially the American dream, as racialized, gendered, and socially stratified. Born into a stratified society in Limbe, Cameroon, Jende buys into the 'American dream' where anyone, like Barack Obama, can become an important man--without the (genetic) pedigree of famous presidents before him. In fact, Jende says to Clark Edwards, "I believe that anything is possible for anyone who is American. Truly do, sir. And in fact, sir, I hope that one day my son will grow up to be a great man like you" (Mbue 46). Jende's surefire enthusiasm for America's possibilities for his family and the Edwards family quickly devolve into despair once Lehman Brothers declares bankruptcy in 2008 on the verge of the historic election of Obama.

Jende truly believes, at least initially, in the American dream, and he is responding to the cultures of U.S. imperialism that strived for a so-called New World, colonized the West, created immense wealth for a few in the Gilded Age, and became a superpower after WWII. To briefly recount the progression of the American dream, American exceptionalism tied itself to property and economic security for the descendants of the original colonists on the Eastern seaboard. These early Americans acquired land, thereby wealth, outside the social stratification of Europe. Then, in the nineteenth century, exceptionalism becomes synonymous with expansionism into the American West. Starting with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and culminating in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo along with the 1854 Gadsden Purchase, massive tracts of land became available for white settlement once Native Americans and Mexicans in the borderlands were removed, segregated, or killed. In 1862, Andrew Johnson proposed granting Americans (white men) a 'quarter section' for free and additional acres at \$1.25 per acres (Hodgson 39). This proposal under the Homestead Act of 1845 rescinded any claim by Native Americans and granted it to white settlers. After the revolutions of 1848 in continental Europe and the potato famine in Ireland, mass migration to the U.S. provided a refuge for millions of Europeans who

settled onto these cleared lands. In this way, the U.S. truly represented an opportunity for land ownership and economic security without the social stratification of Europe. After WWII, the American dream consisted of the same basic tenets of exceptionalist opportunity, but the unique position of the U.S., after Europe and Japan were devastated, created a growing middle class that demanded cars, homes, and other symbols of material wealth. The GI Bill educated millions of veterans, while the housing market built surplus homes to house them and create investment opportunities. This middle-class boom, called the “Great Compression” where incomes between the highest and lowest earners were closer than ever before or since, fulfilled the promises of the American dream, at least for white Americans (Smith 42). The timeframe between 1945 and the 1970s represents the pervasive cultural interpretation of the American dream complete with the house, the car, and overall economic security. However, the milk and honey of the American dream started souring in the 1970s when Lewis Powell, a future Supreme Court Justice, published a memo that provided the blueprint for corporations and their CEOs to wrest political and economic power from the middle-class. Since then, pro-business legislation and anti-union sentiment has created an unsustainable economy of inequality that benefits those at the top and mocks the strivings of working Americans and recent migrants. Jende, then, strives for the same opportunity fifty years too late: in 2007 economic inequality across various metrics, especially income and wealth, was at historic highs while housing segregation illustrated the growing stark contrast in wealth and race, especially in New York City.

As an immigrant in New York City, Jende experiences first-hand the inconsistencies of exceptionalist opportunity and, by the end of the novel, concedes defeat and asks for voluntary departure back to Cameroon when his asylum application is rejected. However, in the beginning, Jende describes the U.S. in exceptionalist terms: “he was certain he wouldn’t see Cameroon

again until he had claimed his share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America” (Mbue 19). Adopting the same exceptionalist mantra as the Framers, Jende draws on biblical language and liberalism to name the touchstones of American opportunity. Neni, also, thoroughly believes in the American dream; for example, the narrator says, “Every picture she’d seen of Cameroonians in American was a portrait of bliss: children laughing in the snow; couples smiling at the mall; families posing in front of a nice house with a nice car nearby. America, to her, was synonymous with happiness” (312). Neni’s perspective speaks to the post-WWII markers of material wealth that dominated the American and world imaginary, especially in the immigrant imaginary. That is, immigrants, like Jende and Neni, the world over come to America for a better life. However, both Neni and Jende do not account for contemporary racialized immigration practices, especially for asylum seekers, or for economic inequality in their exceptionalist calculations.

As seen in the differing employment of Jende and Neni, racialized and gendered immigration practices in the contemporary U.S. show the equivocation of exceptionalist opportunity where some jobs require strict documentation and others do not. After Jende’s visitor visa expires, he applies for asylum with an admittedly dubious case; however, during the processing of his asylum application, Jende is granted an EAD that is only valid until his application is approved or denied. Rather than explaining the intricacies of the immigration system during his job interview with Clark, Jende says, “Immigration is slow, sir; very funny how they work...I am very legal, sir.” (Mbue 7). Jende oversimplifies his situation and feels that he needs to qualify his ‘legality’ because he correctly assesses that Clark deems this nonnegotiable. In contrast to Jende’s employment, Neni works for Clark’s wife, Cindy, as a domestic worker and caretaker for Mighty, the youngest son of Clark and Cindy. As noted

above, Neni only has a student visa and no employment authorization, although she often also works for a nursing agency. The lack of attention to ‘legality’ in Neni’s employment marks her work as racialized and gendered, whereas Jende’s employment under Clark must require documents and a non-disclosure agreement. Despite the travails to acquire work as an immigrant with missing or temporary authorization, employment becomes nearly untenable for low-income, low-skilled workers during a recession, and in 2008 one of the most severe recessions took hold of the U.S. and the world economy.

The 2008 financial crisis as a consequence of U.S. Empire, namely neoliberal economic policies and tenets of American exceptionalism, illustrates how staggering wealth inequality that favors already wealthy, white families has the power to decimate the hopes and dreams of vulnerable immigrants. For example, the constant temptation of taking housing for granted appears again and again. Arkamo, one of Jende’s friends who lives in Phoenix in a gated community with a large SUV, encourages Jende to join him in Arizona where he can “connect him with a loan officer who could get him a zero-down-payment mortgage on a sweet mini-mansion” (Mbue 82). Although a big house has become synonymous with exceptionalist opportunity in U.S. Empire, investing in home ownership is both unpredictable and dangerous for aspiring homeowners with minimal equity and assets; then, introducing zero-down-payment mortgages on far-too-expensive housing creates even more danger for these vulnerable applicants. Before the housing crisis, future homeowners would put 20 percent down in equity on their mortgages to have a smaller leverage ratio, i.e., they would have to borrow less money with lower interest rates. However, in the run up to the housing bubble, mortgages with 5 percent down or less became the norm (Blinder 47). And so, when these highly leveraged homes lost their value after the bubble burst, the homeowners went ‘underwater,’ i.e., the home was worth

less than their mortgages, thereby decimating hopes of home ownership for vulnerable immigrants.

These types of mortgages were often offered to vulnerable applicants, who were ‘subprime’ borrowers, or below the ‘prime’ category of mortgage borrowers. In 2001, subprime mortgages were less than ten percent of all new lending, but by 2005, subprime lending constituted twenty percent of all new mortgages, which was worth \$1.25 trillion (Blinder 58). Just like Arkamo, Jende would certainly be a subprime borrower whose mortgage would certainly have gone underwater and then be foreclosed. To make matters worse, many homeowners refinanced their mortgages, often with larger mortgages at lower interest rates, to pocket the difference when house prices were still rising. In addition to the housing bubble, the bond of mortgage-backed securities bubble burst shortly after, and then the most catastrophic event happened on September 15, 2008: Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy. Lehman’s bankruptcy signaled the demise of the macroeconomic credit-lending institution where unemployment skyrocketed, and GDP dropped due to lack of credit for businesses.

*Dreamers*, then, condemns Wall Street investment bankers for their role in propagating exceptionalist opportunity. After the collapse of Lehman, Jende defends Clark and others while comparing the ancient Egyptians with contemporary Americans: “The only difference between Egyptians then and the Americans now, Jende reasoned, was that the Egyptians had been cursed by their own wickedness. They had called an abomination upon their land by worshipping idols and enslaving their fellow humans, all so they could live in splendor. They had chosen riches over righteousness, rapaciousness over justice. The Americans had done no such thing” (Mbue 185). A pessimistic reading of Jende’s evaluation can insert comparable ‘abominations’ in contemporary Americans. Instead of worshipping idols, Americans have worshipped capitalism,

and instead of enslaving their fellow humans, Americans have stuck them with subprime loans. Certainly, the American public would deem those implicated in the financial crisis as choosing riches over righteousness.

Although Jende does not see the immediate connection between Wall Street, including Clark, and exceptionalist opportunity or the American dream, Clark does deem Lehman as rapacious. Like the economist Dean Baker who warned of the impending housing bubble in 2002, Clark plays a Cassandra figure warning about short-sighted gains and long-term, long-lasting consequences. Clark warns about how “really dirty shit is becoming the norm. All over the Street” (Mbue 146). As an unregulated financial institution, Lehman is part of the *shadow banking system*, and so Clark is bemoaning numerous dubious financial tools, such as credit default swaps, innumerable variations on derivatives, collateralized debt obligations, and even NINJA (no income, no jobs, and no assets) loans, that created hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue for Lehman in the run up to the financial crisis. (Blinder 59).<sup>16</sup>

While the Edwards easily absorbed the short-term losses occasioned by the crisis for people like them, the Jongas and millions of citizens and immigrants alike lost their incomes,

<sup>16</sup> When other companies were being absorbed into more balanced financial institutions, such as when Bear Stearns was bought by JP Morgan Chase, Lehman was allowed to fold by decision-makers in the Federal Reserve and Department of Treasury. According to Blinder and other economic commenters, the fall of Lehman Brothers was *the* watershed event that caused not only the financial crisis but also an acute decline in U.S. macroeconomic performance (171). After Lehman’s demise, unemployment and GDP took a sharp drop while credit-granting institutions withheld much-needed cash flows and private or public companies pulled in their investments or folded themselves. This sharp decline in macroeconomics is a result of the interconnectedness of finance and the *real* economy, such as jobs, factories, malls, dealerships, etc. Financial institutions are an integral part of the U.S. modern economy, and our economy is heavily dependent on these credit-granting mechanisms to circulate capital. Once these institutions folded or were absorbed, businesses and individuals lost immensely. In other words, every American lost eight percent of income, or ten percent of Americans lost *eighty* percent of their income (Blinder 14; emphasis added).

jobs, and livelihoods. Moreover, the losses of nonwhites far outweighed the losses of white Americans. Even though the racial poverty gap and wealth gap was substantial, it only increased after the recession, largely due to the housing market crash (Bonilla-Silva 202-3). As noted above, subprime lenders often targeted nonwhite borrowers to sell large, heavily leveraged mortgages that were often designed to default; the wealthy increased their wealth on the misery of the struggling poor. Without a job and a denied asylum application, Jende rejected the American dream and decided to voluntarily return to Cameroon.

Succumbing to stress and depression, Jende decides to leave the U.S., and his departure signals a rebuke of the American dream and an exposure of exceptionalist opportunity that has drawn so many aspiring Americans to the U.S. Although Jende and Neni seek a better life for their son and themselves, the ever increasingly less humane immigration laws of the U.S. severely restrict the dreams of asylum seekers and other immigrants. Part of Neni's refusal to leave is shaped by her lack of agency in her father's house where she waited for years as a "jobless, unwed mother...waiting for Jende to rescue her" (Mbue 12). In the U.S., Neni pursues pharmacy as a profession where "for the very first time in her life, she had a dream besides marriage and motherhood" (Mbue 14). Neni's pursuit of the American dream is also a pursuit of agency and autonomy; however, like the oppressive weight of economic inequality, patriarchy shuts Neni's ambitions.

In a very heated exchanged between the Jongas, Jende argues that "America is not all that; this country is full of lies and people who like to hear lies. If you want to know the truth I'll tell you the truth: This country no longer has room for people like us. Anyone who has no sense can believe the lies and stay here forever, hoping that things will get better for them one day and they will be happy" (Mbue 332-3). Here, Jende acknowledges that the inhumane immigration

practices, the wealth and income gap, and now a financial crisis is far too much to overcome, and he exposes the lie of exceptionalist opportunity. Now, around ten years after the financial crisis, asylum seekers still migrate to the U.S. border seeking refuge, but even if they are allowed to enter, Jende's narrative warns that the American dream as it once existed is an exceptionalist fantasy.

### *Conclusion*

These two novels illustrate that the key tenets of liberalism and opportunity in American exceptionalism are maintaining an illiberal democracy that benefits wealthy, well-connected, white Americans and a racially restrictive, zero-sum game for nonwhite migrants and immigrants. Similar to the use of the phrase *manifest destiny* as argued by Hietala, American exceptionalism and its key tenets is one of many euphemisms that has allowed a complacent (white) population to retain wealth and power over nonwhites and (im)migrants. An exemplary moment in both novels that exhibits the mechanisms of American exceptionalism is the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Although both protagonists heartily celebrate the election of a black American to the presidency, the implications of Obama's election produce distinct conclusions. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu is enraptured with Obama's success, especially after she reads the 2004 memoir, *Dreams from My Father*. She constantly checks on his progress, in part to make sure he is still simply alive, and she celebrates his victories on the way to the general election.

However, a distinct moment happens in March 2008 when Obama gives a speech on race after his pastor's, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, comments dominate the media cycles. In this speech, he concedes that his own grandmother once confessed to fearing the presence of a black man sharing the same sidewalk as her, but Obama contends that he cannot undo his connection to her or to Rev. Wright because "They are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country

that I love” (Obama). Both Ifemelu and her friend, Grace, saw this speech on race as a pragmatic choice to, in fact, not open up a conversation about race, but close it. Universally, commenters commended Obama on the speech, and the media cycle moved on. Obama would not have to directly address race again until the 2009 arrest of Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin. In these instances, political commenters and the general public were less enthusiastic about Obama’s comments. Explaining this shift, Ta-Nehisi Coates notes that before Obama spoke the lines, “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon,” Zimmerman was treated as a villain, and then when Obama commented “the case of Trayvon Martin passed out of its national-mourning phase and lapsed into something darker and more familiar—racialized political fodder” (121). Right-wing talk show hosts and conservative commenters started discrediting Trayvon’s character and sounding alarms of reverse racism. Politically, Obama conceded and curtailed his opinions, especially when he directly talked about race shaping the lived experiences of black Americans.

Furthermore, a more pessimistic extension of this argument says that Obama’s speech and eventual election not only closed the conversation about race, it hardened the resolve of color-blind racism. That is, opponents of affirmative action and *actual* integration in schools or housing can now say that the U.S. cannot be racist if they elected a black American President. Contextualizing Obama’s presidency in post-civil rights racism, Bonilla-Silva argues that Obama’s success derives from a “strategic move toward racelessness and [where he] adopted a post-racial persona and political stance” (208). Obama, unlike Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, does not confront racism, and he does not advocate for race-based politics. Thus, for white voters he makes them comfortable while disregarding the ample evidence of continuing racial inequality in almost all economic, political, and social metrics.

However, Coates, while recognizing that Obama's campaign actively did not "acknowledge the weight of race," argues that Obama's multi-ethnic, trans-national background, in which he was encouraged to study black culture and effectively shielded from the racial practices of the mainland, afforded him the ability to offer trust to white voters—trust that earlier black politicians who experienced Jim Crow and de facto segregation could not offer (125). Despite Coates' nuanced view, Bonilla-Silva predicts that a repercussion of Obama's presidency will be an increase in overt racism, such as the rise of the Tea Party, and a hardened resolve of whites to disparage American Blacks and further oppose affirmative action and immigration (212). Unfortunately, Bonilla-Silva rightly predicted that overt racism would only increase as seen in the contemporary MAGA movement led by a Birther conspiracy theorist and now 45<sup>th</sup> President, Donald Trump. Therefore, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu's discussion and observation of Obama at the time of his election portends an entrenchment of color-blind racism and a move towards innocence for whites.

In *Behold the Dreamers*, Jende and Neni cried in their living room when Obama was announced the president. For Jende especially, Obama confirmed his initial belief in the American dream since "the son of an African now ruled the world" (Mbue 190). Jende believes that the American president is indeed the 'leader of the free world.' He also believes that as an American with African ancestry who migrated to the U.S., Obama represents the true potential of anyone who seeks it, even if that person has to overcome the entire specter of racism. When he is talking to Clark about his own migration, Jende says, "America has something for everyone, sir. Look at Obama, sir. Who is his mother? Who is his father? They are not big people in the government. They are not governors or senators. In fact, sir, I hear they are dead. And look at Obama today. The man is a black man with no father or mother, trying to be president over a

country!” (Mbue 40). Since Jende only knows the classist and corrupt government in Cameroon, he sees Obama as the rule, not the exception. However, poverty, race, and immigration status are not fully calculated in Jende’s estimations of American exceptionalism because exceptionalist opportunity always leaves out half the story. *Behold the Dreamers*, in particular, highlights the struggles of aspiring Americans in the immigration system because citizenship or even authorization remains a constant struggle for nonwhite Americans, even Obama who had to endure the travails of birtherism. Nonetheless, Jende believed in the American dream until he did not.

## Conclusion

U.S. Empire, which works through ahistorical and transhistorical cultural narratives, conceals the colonial and imperial histories that racialize, criminalize, and otherize people of color in the U.S. These obfuscations evolve across time and space according to the specific relationship with U.S. Empire, always achieving the goals of anti-black racism, white supremacy, and compulsory heterosexuality. For instance, single black mothers and othermothers and their children suffer from inferior housing, underfunded schools, and racial profiling not from moral or cultural failings. Armed conflicts and broken treaties between settlers and Natives are part of a five-hundred-year genocidal campaign that present-day Natives in cities and on reservations are still resisting. Latinx people are not foreign criminals stealing ‘American’ jobs and bringing disease but victims of scapegoating during political turmoil and during economic downturns and upheavals. Black West African immigrants are not bad immigrants or undesirable but face structural anti-black racism and sexism along with an exclusionary immigration system that actively maintains white supremacy.

Reading Jesmyn Ward’s recent novels dismantles the power of controlling images that blame Black mothers and othermothers for society’s ills. That is, these potent controlling images completely erase the structural oppressions experienced by Black mothers. Part of Black women’s liberation is through a consciousness of self-definition as expressed through Esch and Leonie. Yet another vital part of liberation lies in material effects of Black women’s oppressions: economic and social. Hill Collins accurately draws a long thread from the slavery era to the present through images that have oppressed Black women. And so, to redress the legacy of slavery for black women is to give equitable access to resources, or reparations. In “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that a key to redressing the original sin of slavery is to

acknowledge that our nation was founded on the institution of slavery, or a slavocracy rather than a democratic republic. From there, reparations mean recognizing how slavery evolved across four hundred years to kill, disenfranchise, disempower, ghettoize, impoverish, and to dispossess the recently freed to Black Americans today. However, both Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones, progenitor of *The 1619 Project*, recognize that reparations threatens the idea of exceptional America itself, its “heritage, history, and standing in the world” (Coates 201). Hannah-Jones and Coates both argue that reparations are unacceptable to white Americans because they refuse to fully comprehend the integrality of slavery and its legacies from the beginning to the present.

A specific legacy related in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, is the contemporary phenomena of mass incarceration, which is an outcome of the carceral state within U.S. Empire. A key concern for Black mothers and othermothers, like Leonie and River, is keeping their children and loved ones safe from the carceral state. Starting in the 1970s, penal welfarism presented a ‘solution’ for an employment problem: jobs for whites and warehousing for blacks (Coates 258). Ever since, mass incarceration has plagued poor, Black communities and functioned as social control for white supremacy. And so, Coates argues that “to war seriously against the disparity in unfreedom [or mass incarceration] requires a war against a disparity in resources. And to war against a disparity in resources is to confront a history in which both the plunder and the mass incarceration of blacks are accepted commonplaces” (279). A structure of racism is the repetition or naturalization of racist policies and outcomes, e.g., Black Americans must be criminals because most criminals are Black Americans. Reparations, then, through race-based programs, like affirmative action, and a real reckoning with an un-sanitized history and racist culture would redress the centuries of lack of access to resources.

For unwanted populations, U.S. Empire has always manufactured rationales for dispossession or disappearing programs to maintain the racial status quo. Black Americans inherited the centuries-long construction of blackness that ungirded the systems of racial oppression across time, including sharecropping, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, convict leasing, and now mass incarceration. However, the beginnings of Black American's positioning in U.S. Empire contrast with the positioning of Indigenous tribes who still exist in a settler nation-state. Native Americans were pushed from their lands starting in the 1830s to make way for settling Anglo Americans who then used the labor of enslaved Africans to profit from stolen land. The contemporary Native voices of Long Soldier and Orange both archive the broken treaties and violence inflicted on Native peoples across the U.S. and imagine an anti-colonial future where 'present-tense Indians' live as both Natives and U.S. citizens. Long Soldier's poetry and Orange's novel vividly depict the historical and present-day machinations of U.S. Empire that erases Natives in the West and Southwest in order to claim the land and establish property. Indigenous lands were stolen through abrogated treaties or out-right theft, and the peoples on those lands were displaced or killed. In the "Interlude" of *There There*, Orange points to the imperial ignorance implicit in U.S. Empire:

If you were fortunate enough to be born into a family whose ancestors directly benefited from genocide and/or slavery, maybe you think the more you don't know, the more innocent you can stay, which is a good incentive to not find out, to not look too deep, to walk carefully around the sleeping tiger. Look no further than your last name. Follow it back and you might find your line paved with gold, or beset with traps. (138-9)

The privilege of remaining ignorant of history and of benefiting from genocide and slavery upholds U.S. Empire. Thus, a decolonial approach to excavating these histories of violence and genocide remains in the power of language, especially legal language. Since the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the relationship between the U.S. and Natives has relapsed from the stated ideal:

“The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians, their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent.” Then in the 1830s, the legal language of *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) rendered Indigenous claims to land null since tribes became domestic, or dependent, nations within the U.S. and regulated only by the federal government, not by states. In this way, consent from Natives was legally not needed. Long Soldier, then, interrogates the structures of language that euphemizes genocide through documents that nullify legal recourse. Mimicking the conditional syntax of the Apology to Native Americans speaks through the power of legal language. Notably, in the final subsection of *Whereas*, “(3) Disclaimer,” Long Soldier writes, “Nothing in this book— / (1) authorizes or supports any claim against Layli Long Soldier by the United States; or / (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against Layli Long Soldier by the United States, / here in the [white space] grassesgrassesgrasses” (101). Empire drafts the language of erasure and Native writers give voice to living within a negation, thereby upending the ‘historical form and content’ of U.S. Empire.

Where the ancestors of African Americans were kidnapped and forced into labor within what would become the U.S. and while Natives were removed and relocated from their lands to further the colonial project of slavery, people on the borderlands of the U.S. after continental expansion were both unequally included through needed labor and at the same time vilified as foreign threats deserving of dispossession and disappearance. Reading *Unknown Americans* and *The Cha Cha Files*, then, figures our contemporary present through the centuries-long constructions of race and culture for Latinx people in U.S Empire. Crossing the borders, or processes, of empire has criminalized and otherized Latinx people resulting in anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant, and anti-asylum rancor in U.S. mainstream culture. In the final chapter of *How*

*Race is Made in America*, Molina remarks that contemporary anti-Latinx immigration measures, unlike the 1924 Immigration Act, are couched in race-neutral terminology that ‘strengthen the border’ or protect ‘American workers.’ Recently, under the Trump administration, various government officials have concretized the U.S. mainstream estimation of all Latinx communities as criminal aliens who are underserving of asylum or reunification with family members.

Arkansas junior Senator, Tom Cotton, sponsored the SECURE Act of 2017 that attempted to end supposed ‘chain migration,’ or family reunification as named in the legal code. The challenge of “public charge,” which dates back to the 1882 Immigration Act and the expanded 1891 Immigration Act, against Latinx migrants denies their incorporation into the U.S. based on the phrase, “persons likely to become a public charge” (Molina 92). Although the public charge accusation was grounded in healthcare during the nineteenth century, present-day iterations focus on accusing immigrants of being too poor. In June 2019, Ken Cuccinelli serving as the newly created principal deputy director of USCIS, essentially acting director, updated the Emma Lazarus poem to reflect this new policy, saying the U.S. would welcome “those who can stand on their own two feet” (Fortin).<sup>17</sup> Based on American exceptionalism and the American dream, Cuccinelli confirms that the Trump administration believes in the lie of meritocracy where race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, among other factors do not affect individual lived experiences—in other words, only white, wealthy, and well-connected immigrants need apply. In this way, the move towards innocence of a racial reconciliation fantasy at the end of *Unknown Americans* coheres with Cuccinelli’s estimation of immigrants because, after Arturo’s death, Alma and Maribel returned to Mexico rejected by the U.S. immigration system and by U.S. Empire that

<sup>17</sup> In November 2019, Chad Wolf was sworn in as acting Secretary of DHS and naming Cuccinelli as his deputy, the second highest senior position in DHS.

views Latinx community members as (poor) criminal threats who steal American jobs. Based on the race-making of Latinx communities across the centuries, race-based immigration practices and inhumane enforcement policies have created a new ‘reign of terror’ that traffics in the race-neutral language, deterrence, and nationalism.

Finally, *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* reveal how color-blind racism and American exceptionalism propagate the myth of meritocracy in U.S. Empire. Both novels demonstrate the power of ahistorical and transhistorical interpretations of American exceptionalism as a constitutional rule of U.S. Empire. Both novels, also, question the veracity of exceptionalism’s key tenets: liberalism and opportunity. Caroline Levine, who examines the structure of racism and the infrastructure of electricity in *Americanah*, claims that structures and infrastructures need analysis since they are often overlooked when they are working smoothly, and examining them when they are working well can show who benefits and who creates misperceptions that keep them working to the detriment of those who lose (600-3). Adichie deconstructs color-blind racism through Ifemelu’s blogs and social interactions to uncover the invisibility of white privilege and an ingrained anti-blackness within all levels of U.S. society. Through this examination of ‘racism without racists,’ Adichie, also, exposes the illiberal structure of meritocracy by enumerating the advantages of white privilege that are not afforded to Americans and immigrants who are people of color.

*Behold the Dreamers*, furthermore, renders exceptionalist opportunity a fantasy in its depiction of racialized immigration and economic inequality. In 1790, Congress declared that “All free white persons who have, or shall migrate into the United States...and shall have resided in the United States for one whole year, shall be entitled to all the rights of citizenship (Coates 128). The first immigration law, then, excluded women, Native Americans, and African slaves.

Through exclusion acts, quota systems, and other anti-immigrant measures, U.S. Empire has always provided pathways for white immigrants to participate in the American dream while precluding nonwhite immigrants and constantly establishing barriers to entry. As Jende's predicament shows, nonwhite migrants who seek asylum under U.S. Empire are no longer provided safety but only met with incredulity and deportation. Then, in addition to this racialized system of immigration, unprecedented economic inequality presents an existential threat to democracy where the super-rich and corporations assume all economic and political power. Thus, white privilege within color-blind racism maintains the illusion of meritocracy and equal opportunity, while the American dream as part of American exceptionalism further separates the poor and the rich, immigrants and citizens.

This project, to end, has defined U.S. Empire and its rules within the literary space of contemporary MELUS. Although the previous chapters have come to conclusions concerning the structures of racism, anti-immigrant vitriol, and historical and cultural erasure, questions about the futures of marginalized peoples who are oppressed by U.S. Empire remain. In *The End of the Myth* (2019), Greg Grandin questions the trajectory of the American myth of limitless possibility enraptured in manifest destiny into a closed border wall. 'Progress' in westward expansion was lauded by Framers and Signers in the eighteenth century and executed by expansionist Democrats in the nineteenth century. Of course, the progression of settler colonialism became a genocidal campaign against Natives and Mexicans in the borderlands to serve the expansion of slavery. Now, Grandin argues that the closing of the U.S. with the symbol of a wall upends the myth of the West where Americans could embody freedom. However, most importantly, Grandin's argument illustrates how manifest destiny and U.S. imperialism covered over how

U.S. Empire spoke through peace and progress while committing massacres, relocations, and disappearances. Thus, when the frontier has ended and Americans are forced to face each other, either U.S. Empire and its ahistorical, transhistorical simplifications of progress and culture will overrule the material outcomes of our colonial and imperial pasts or MELUS can illuminate ways to decolonize or create anti-colonial approaches to social, political, and economic inequalities. Will U.S. mainstream culture ever fully accept that our nation-state was founded as a slavocracy? Can we repatriate all stolen land and abolish property to decolonize our settler nation-state? Relatedly, can we acknowledge that ‘we are a nation of immigrants’ is another euphemism for settler colonialism? Will we ever stop demonizing immigrants during economic turmoil? Can we finally accept that meritocracy is a fantasy of the American dream? Similarly, will we rebuke American exceptionalism that impedes actual progress since we cannot improve if we already think we are the best and freest country? Observing our contemporary moment portrayed in the fiction, poetry, and nonfiction of MELUS has shown that nothing in our society—race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender—is an accident or created by chance. These are the rules of U.S. Empire employed since the constitutional foundation of the U.S., and now contemporary African American, Native, Latinx, and West African women writers are unveiling these rules, their construction, and at times their undoing.

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