

Leituras Contemporâneas



THINKING BETWEEN OLD AND NEW MODERNITIES

*Specimen days reloaded*¹

Sonia Torres
UFF

RESUMO

O ensaio propõe uma reflexão sobre como a obra *Dias especiais*, de Michael Cunningham, contribui para a revisão crítica da modernidade, por meio de um conjunto de diálogos entretecidos entre antigas e novas modernidades. O fantasma de Whitman que permeia a narrativa e a (re)apresentação de um repertório de projetos (tanto históricos quanto estéticos) perdidos ou descartados sugerem a busca por formas de melhor compreender os rumos da democracia na modernidade tardia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Dias especiais, modernidades, o pós-11 de setembro

To-day, I should say – defiant of cynics and pessimists, and with a full knowledge of all their exceptions – an appreciative and perceptive study of the current humanity of New York gives the directest proof yet of successful Democracy (...) I find in this visit to New York, and the daily contact and rapport with its myriad people (...) the grandest physical habitat and surroundings of land and water the globe affords (...) – city of superb Democracy, amid superb surroundings.²

Contemporary Literature often (re)presents a repertoire of discarded projects – both aesthetic and historical – which suggests a search for new forms of knowledge that may shed light on (late) modern subjectivities. The challenge, then, when reading contemporary fiction, is that we are often experiencing narratives that present a series of mediations and meditations that “think between the times.”³ Time, of course, implies

¹ This essay is the revised, unpublished, version of my keynote speech titled “Representing Multitudes: Struggling with Old and New Histories,” delivered during the 1st International ABRAPUI Conference (FALE/UFMG, June 2007). I’d like to take the opportunity to thank the conference organizers, in especial ABRAPUI’s President in office at the time Glúcia Renate Gonçalves, for the privileged space in which to share my first thoughts, developed into the present work.

² WHITMAN. *Specimen Days*, p. 824-825.

³ I am borrowing (and somewhat dislocating) Nicolás Casullo’s phrase from *Pensar entre épocas: memoria, sujetos e crítica social*, in which he discusses the historical experiences that mark Latin American intellectuals’ ways of understanding and confronting the past.

history, “that ruthless discipline of context,”⁴ as Arjun Appadurai (citing E.P. Thompson) has referred to it. Within the specificity of literary studies, reading these works implies reflecting on the impact of multiple modernities on contemporaneity, and on the ways by which the lost narratives that contributed to these modernities are reworked by contemporary authors as a productive means of creating a critical space for globalized intellectuals to provide a cosmopolitan critique of our times.

I have chosen to share my exploration of Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days*⁵ in order to discuss the author’s strategy of thinking and writing between the times through a narrative technique that is both trans-historical and trans-genre. Those familiar with Cunningham’s novel, or collection of three novellas, will very likely recall that the author intertwines three historical moments – the 19th century Industrial Age, our 21st century age of information and surveillance, and a post-human age, sometime in the 22nd century – referencing these with three literary genres: the realistic novel or short story, detective fiction, and a futuristic Science Fiction dystopia. The three main characters, Simon, Lucas/Luke and Catherine/Catareen, are carried over from one story to another, in different roles. All the stories take place in New York City, and the disquieting spectre of Walt Whitman serves as a unifying element in the book, which takes its title from the poet’s “convulsively written reminiscences.”⁶

The first narrative, “In the Machine,” revolves around the death of a New York factory worker, Simon, who has been crushed to death by a machine. Lucas, his disfigured young brother, replaces him in the factory, in order to support what is left of their poor family – a father who survives with the help of a breathing machine and a bedridden mother who is deranged by the death of her eldest son. While operating the same machine that killed Simon, Lucas hears his brother’s voice – not only inside the factory machine, but also in his father’s breathing machine and the mother’s music box. Convinced that “the dead returned in machinery,”⁷ Lucas believes his brother’s ghost will eventually inhabit all the machines in New York City, including the factory where Simon’s fiancée, Catherine, works as a seamstress. He then makes it his mission to save Catherine, by attempting to prevent her from going to work. He does, indeed, manage to save her, not from the ghost inhabiting the machines, but when the factory burns down with workers trapped inside.

Lucas is referred to in the text as “a misshapen boy with a walleye and a pumpkin head and a habit of speaking in fits.”⁸ His strangeness resides not only in his deformity, but also in the fact that he intermittently recites verses from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. An interesting first challenge for us here is to link the boy’s physical otherness to Whitman’s time. The 19th century was a time of identity crisis for U.S. Americans: How to construct a national identity based on freedom and independence (the self-made

⁴ APPADURAI. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 17.

⁵ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*.

⁶ WHITMAN. *Specimen Days*, p. 776.

⁷ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 45.

⁸ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 4.

individual), while escaping, at the same time, standardization, through mechanical reproduction? Whitman's *en masse*, as we know, had little to do with mass production. "Inside the Machine," in my reading, addresses the contradictions present in the United States' great experiment with democracy by the association we can make between Lucas's physical extra-ordinariness, and his compulsive recitation of the Poet of Democracy's *Leaves of Grass*.

In her study of extra-ordinary bodies in U.S. culture and literature,⁹ Rosemarie Garland Thompson discusses how the ideological leveling of class distinctions set the stage for a new social hierarchy based on ability (expressed, for instance, in the Jeffersonian idea of natural leadership) and produced a distinct aristocracy of the body. The unitedstatesian ideal self at the top of this hierarchy was an autonomous producer, a self-governing and self-made generic individual capable of creating his own perfected self.¹⁰ What interests me, in the context of Cunningham's novel, are the relations that can be established between poverty, disability, and the work force, since Lucas replaces his brother at the factory, despite his "oddness." Thompson writes that "[n]owhere is the disabled figure more troubling to American ideology and history than in relation to the concept of work: the system of production and distribution of economic resources in which the abstract principles of self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress are manifest most completely." "Disabled people," she goes on to say, "are often imagined as unable to be productive, to direct their own lives, participate in the community, or establish meaningful personal relations – regardless of their actual capabilities or achievements."¹¹

Thompson's discussion of freak shows in 19th century USA helps us think about the relation between Lucas's body and the U.S. body politic of the time. According to her, "the immense popularity of the shows between the Jacksonian and Progressive Eras suggests that the onlookers needed to constantly reaffirm the difference between 'them' and 'us' at a time when immigration, emancipation of the slaves, and female suffrage confounded previously reliable physical indices of status and privilege such as maleness and Western European features."¹² "In addition," argues Thompson, "expansionist acts like Indian removal and the Mexican War, as well as slavery, required propagation of a white supremacist ideology that the freak show enacted in its display of cultural others. The white working classes who were competing with immigrants and people of color for scarce resources during this period also benefited from the self-image of able-bodiedness and racial normalcy that the freak show provided its spectators".¹³

⁹ THOMPSON. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*.

¹⁰ THOMPSON, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 64.

¹¹ THOMPSON. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 46.

¹² THOMPSON. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 65.

¹³ THOMPSON. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 66.

The freak's body mocked the boundaries and similarities that a well-ordered democratic society required to avoid anarchy and create national unity. By exoticizing and trivializing bodies that were physically nonconformist, the freak show symbolically contained the potential threat that difference among the polity might erupt as anarchy. (...) As icons of the extraordinary, freaks were anachronisms in a nineteenth-century democracy.¹⁴

Because I'm seeking to establish a parallel with Whitman's "ghost" in the text, one might speculate that Cunningham's text addresses two specific historical contexts – the Civil War and the escalating accidents caused by machinery, since both produced mutilated individuals. It is productive to remind ourselves, at this point, that Cunningham takes the title *Specimen Days* from Whitman's journals, where the poet narrates his traumatic experience as a nurse to the wounded and dying in the U.S. Civil War. Also, Cunningham's depictions of the plight of the working class echoes naturalistic works of fiction like *Life in the Iron Mills* by Rebecca Harding Davis (1860). In this sense, the factory fire narrated in this first story allows for a revisitation of 19th century political theories on the worker and the intellectual, while pointing to the demise of the proletariat as a transformational force. The working class had been, from 1830 to 1980, the messianic subject who would guarantee the transition from Capitalism to Socialism. In a 2006 interview, Jacques Rancière, who has written about the worker and the intellectual in the 19th century, says:

I studied the workers' emancipation in the nineteenth century in order to rethink a certain tradition, namely the Marxist tradition. But now I am sorry to say that there is not much interest in those topics. It is taken for granted that all this is over, no more workers' movement, no more workers' emancipation. (...) Workers are seen as an outmoded part of the population who cannot grapple with modernity.¹⁵

It is worthy of note that the tragic fire in "In the Machine" is based on a real historical event – although Cunningham has dislocated it in time (and he is careful to explain in his Author's Note that he has "taken especial liberty with chronology and [has] juxtaposed events, people, buildings, and monuments that may in fact have been separated in twenty years or more").¹⁶ The fictional incident not only recalls the New York Triangle Fire of 1911; it marks a shift in the text from one narrative of modernity to another, in that the description of the women leaping to their deaths foreshadows the individuals jumping from the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in our century, and links to the following story, "The Children's Crusade," one of the first literary texts to reference the post-9/11. This second story is, therefore, set in the New York of our late modernity, accordingly marking the shift from Whitman's nascent metropolis to Cunningham's global cosmopolis: "The metropolis will bring together a vast dispersion of the ancient worlds in a ghostly, mercantile World that can be culturally groped for, but that slips between our fingers like sand."¹⁷

¹⁴ THOMPSON. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Cf. LIE. Interview with Jacques Rancière.

¹⁶ CUNNINGHAM. Author's Note in *Specimen Days*, n.p.

¹⁷ CASULLO. *The Loss of One's Own*, p. 3.

The main characters in “The Children’s Crusade” are Cat (Catherine) Martin, an African American detective; her boyfriend Simon, who is turned on by what he considers to be Cat’s exciting life, in opposition to his routine as a businessman – he relishes Cat’s nightly reports about her cases, which she embellishes to humor him (“Cat knew the word ‘perpetrator’ would be exciting to Simon,”¹⁸ and a potential suicide bomber from the children’s crusade, a group of drifting nameless boys taken in by an old woman who goes by the name of Walt Whitman, whose (the original Whitman’s) poetry they all recite, while spreading terror in the city by wrapping their arms around random citizens and detonating pipe bombs attached to their bodies. The “case” begins when the crime deterrence office where Cat works puts a call through to her from one of the juvenile suicide bombers.

Cunningham’s post- 9/11 narrative reflects some of the event’s aftermaths, both at the national and personal levels. For example, when Cat glances downtown, in the direction of the incident – “It would still be cordoned off; they’d still be combing the pavement. Even now, it was impossible not to be struck by the emptiness where the towers had stood.”¹⁹ Or when, after the first suicide attack in the children’s crusade, she muses that

[t]he danger that had infected the air for the last few years was stirred up now; people could smell it. Today they’d been reminded, *we’d* been reminded, of something much of the rest of the world had known for a century – that you could easily, at any moment, make your fatal mistake. That we all humped along unharmed because no one had decided to kill us that day. That we could not know, as we hurried about our business, whether we were escaping the conflagration or rushing into it.²⁰

The 9/11 is the interruption of the American Dream. It is also a confrontation with alterity; an opportunity, in Iain Chambers’s words, “to receive in the dramatic interruption, and the dreary predictability of the response that jumps to the defense of ‘progress’, ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘freedom’”, the invitation “to step sideways into another world; that is into an altogether more disturbing and critical space.”²¹ The spectre of war haunts the globe, in these our “special” days, and

represents a dramatic moment in which the limits of one’s powers and possibilities are forcefully registered. This could be a definition of the actual historical epoch. If, until recently, the globe presented itself as a smooth surface traversed by the uncontested flows of “globalization,” we are now forced to recognize that there exist irreducible moments and sites that deviate such flows and refuse to be simply absorbed by them.²²

¹⁸ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 110.

¹⁹ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 104.

²⁰ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 105, emphasis in original.

²¹ CHAMBERS. *The Power of Cartography and the Violence of Maps*, p. 14.

²² CHAMBERS. *The Power of Cartography and the Violence of Maps*, p. 14.

"My book and the war are one," wrote Whitman in his poem "To Thee Old Cause."²³ Like in Whitman, the spectre of war haunts Cunningham's book – "the idea of thee the war revolving,/With all its angry and vehement play of causes" –, except that now it appears in its new form, the "war against terrorism." Heike Härting suggests that global civil war relies on "the perpetual brutalization and surveillance of civil society, often – but not exclusively – in the name of a humanitarian, peacekeeping, or protective cause."²⁴ These considerations bring us to the atmosphere of surveillance in "The Children's Crusade," and to Cat's role as a detective.

Cunningham's choice of the detective genre for "The Children's Crusade" provides a model of post-World War II detective fiction that is marked by an abundant deployment of the conventions of the classic detective story, only to frustrate the reader in terms of closure.²⁵ Detective fiction as a genre has a long history of depicting urban space. In the noir or hard-boiled genre, the (traditionally male) P.I. "sees and deciphers the signifiers of that labyrinth of populated spaces and buildings which forms the modern metropolis."²⁶ Here, however, the city is undecipherable. On her visit to Whitman specialist Rita Dunn's office at NYU, Cat is reminded that one of the buildings on Waverly had been "the sweatshop where the fire was,"²⁷ but is unable to identify the exact one. The space of New York City in the mystery of the children's crusade is not consistent with the paradigm of detective fiction, because it is a city being constantly reinvented – which harkens back to De Certeau's observation, back in the 1980s, that "New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. (...) The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding."²⁸

²³ "To Thee Old Cause. To thee old cause!/Thou peerless, passionate, good cause,/Thou stern, remorseless, sweet idea,/Deathless throughout the ages, races, lands,/After a strange sad war, great war for thee,/(I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be/really fought, for thee,)/These chants for thee, the eternal march of thee./ (A war O soldiers not for itself alone,/Far, far more stood silently waiting behind, now to advance in this book.)/ Thou orb of many orbs!/Thou seething principle!/ thou well-kept, latent germ! thou centre!/Around the idea of thee the war revolving,/With all its angry and vehement play of causes,/(With vast results to come for thrice a thousand years,)/These recitatives for thee, – my Book and the War are one,/Merged in its spirit I and mine, as the contest hinged on thee,/As a wheel on its axis turns, this book unwitting to itself,/Around the idea of thee." WHITMAN. *To Thee Old Cause*, p. 3, my emphasis.

²⁴ HÄRTING. *Global Civil War and Post-Colonial Studies*.

²⁵ As Holquist writes, "the new metaphysical detective story (...) is non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered, and which can therefore be forgotten". (...) Instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb." See HOLQUIST, Michael, *Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction*, p. 155.

²⁶ WILLET. *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 3.

²⁷ CUNNINGHAM, Michael. *Specimen Days*, p. 144.

²⁸ DE CERTEAU. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 91. De Certeau's words, written in 1984, offer an ironic twist, if we think of the explosion of the Twin Towers as being constantly said to have "changed the course of history."

Cunningham's detective story undermines conventional notions of urban space as a rationally ordered environment. Rather, it depicts this space as a series of "scapes," to borrow Appadurai's neologism, based on the idea that traditions of perception and perspective as well as variations in the situation of the observer may affect the process and product of representation.²⁹ The traditional detective figure epitomizes the post-Enlightenment thinking subject who arrives at the solution to a crime by producing a rationally ordered social space, while the more recent "metaphysical sleuth" finds herself confronting the insoluble mysteries of her own interpretation and her own identity.³⁰ At the beginning of her quest, Cat is not aware of this; it is, ultimately, her inability to crack the case by following the clues (which include finding the hidden meaning behind the references to Whitman), even after consulting with a Whitman specialist, that leads her to recognize the need to reconceptualize the spaces inside which she lives, and her own relation to these spaces. As she walks the streets of New York, Cat notices a punk on Fifth Street, who offers his informal analysis of the social space: "so, people, you're fucking surprised that it's all blowing up in your goddamned fucking faces?"³¹

To be sure, Cat is depicted, at first, as a hard-boiled detective (and it is worth noting that, once she shows herself to be vulnerable, her boyfriend Simon demonstrates disinterest, in that she is no longer "playing her part"). Noir frequently expresses the dangers, discontents and anxieties of its specific historical time and place. According to Horesley, a concept of fatality is essential to noir vision, which perceives irrationality not merely as a given state but as the result of the ruling political and social conditions.³² Gradually, we come to realize how out of place Cat seems, with no secure familial or communal ties (similar to Lucas, in the first story, she is still mourning the deaths of her son Luke and her husband Daryl). In the course of attempting to solve the case of the suicide bombings, Cat becomes a questor, rather than a detective, in search for meaning. The detective's reliance on her ability to decode the world reflects her belief in both a tightly formed linguistic economy (*Leaves of Grass* supposedly holding a "meaning" that would unravel the mystery) as well as the possibility of spatial solutions, or a rationally ordered social space – in which, we might add, she herself may still have a place:

The same moon would be rising over countless little towns out there (...) where they had no need of specialists to divine the actual intentions of professed bombers, poisoners, Uzi-owning defenders of racial purity, and machete-wielding grandfathers. (...) And where, of course, there was no place at all for a woman like Cat.³³

When we first meet Cat, we learn that her apartment is not her own home, it is a rented space, a temporary place of dwelling –

²⁹ APPADURAI, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 48.

³⁰ cf. MERIVALE, Patricia, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, p. 2.

³¹ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 105, emphasis in original.

³² cf. HORSELEY. *The Noir Thriller*.

³³ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 104.

Her apartment felt particularly small. It had a way of expanding or contracting, depending on how the day went. Today it struck her as ludicrous, these little rooms in which she, an expensively educated thirty-eight-year-old woman, found herself living. Remember: it's a grand and a half, minimum. Be grateful for your rent-controlled life. Embrace the fact that you live above the poverty line.³⁴

– all she has left that provides her with any security or sense of having a place, after the death of her husband. Detectives have, to be sure, always been loners or outsiders; they do not hold nine to five jobs nor have bourgeois families to go back to at the end of the day. As Holquist observes, the detective “does not really exist when he is not on the case.”³⁵ Like De Certeau's city, that “universe of rented spaces”, the detective is also “haunted by a nowhere.”³⁶ Cat, however, not only rejects her workplace as “so ugly and silent and far from everything,”³⁷ but feels more comfortable spending the night in the luxury of Simon's upscale apartment, where she can indulge in the bourgeois illusion of being isolated from the street: “she was safe, in this bedroom, high above the streets.”³⁸ In exchange, she “gave him street cred; she tickled his edgy bone. She made him more complicated. He gave her, well (...) this.”³⁹ The interpretation of Whitman's verses is not, therefore, the only mystery refractory to the detective's investigation in “The Children's Crusade,” in that it also speculates on the nature of social space – which includes establishing connections between the production of social space and identity formation, both in the private and public spheres.

When the whitmanesque old lady finally puts in an appearance, she declares that she is “part of the plan to tell people that it's all over. No more sucking the life out of the rest of the world so that a small percentage of the population can live comfortably. It's a big project, I grant you. But history is always changed by a small band of very determined people.”⁴⁰

Her words, along with the random suicide bombings, remind us of Hardt and Negri's multitude, the spontaneous aggregation of a plurality of actions that do not need to be articulated among themselves:

a new cycle of struggles, it would be a cycle defined not by the communicative extension of the struggles but rather by their singular emergence, by the intensity that characterizes them one by one. In short, this new phase is defined by the fact that these struggles do not link horizontally, but each one leaps vertically, directly to the virtual center of Empire.⁴¹

Hardt and Negri wrote that what is proper of the multitude is *the will to be against* – “Today (...) the only solution would be to be against everything, in every place.”⁴² They maintain that the main pattern of this new logic of struggle in late capitalism is desertion:

³⁴ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 127.

³⁵ HOLQUIST. *Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction*, p. 142.

³⁶ DE CERTEAU. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 103.

³⁷ DE CERTEAU. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 118.

³⁸ DE CERTEAU. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 134.

³⁹ DE CERTEAU. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 134.

⁴⁰ DE CERTEAU. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 172.

⁴¹ HARDT; NEGRI. *Empire*, p. 58.

⁴² HARDT; NEGRI. *Empire*, p. 212.

Whereas being-against in modernity often meant a direct and/or dialectical opposition of forces, in postmodernity being-against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance. Battles against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of the places of power.⁴³

According to Robin Woods, the role of the classic detective was “not only to capture the criminal, but also to protect society from the criminal’s moral influence.”⁴⁴ The detective’s job, then, was to secure bourgeois space and all that it symbolizes. Here, ironically, the criminals are the Whitman-alluding family – a distortion of the bourgeois family. The role of the detective, in the story’s context, is, ironically, to protect society from a senior citizen and a group of abandoned minors. Along with the woman’s speech, this suggests that a finger is being pointed inwards – to the internal vulnerability of U.S. Empire – through the deployment of society’s supposedly most vulnerable beings, an elderly woman and a band of kids. Like those other “deserters,” the punks on Fifth Street, Walt Whitman’s postmodern double points to a national identity crisis of a country unable to sufficiently grasp the reality of itself and therefore unable to fathom the rest of the world:

Look around. Do you see happiness? Do you see joy? Americans have never been this prosperous, people have never been this safe. They’ve never lived so long, in such health, ever, in the whole of history. (...) And look at us. We’re so obese we need bigger cemetery plots. Our ten-year-olds are doing heroin, or they’re murdering eight-year-olds, or both. (...) Everything we eat has to be sealed because if it wasn’t, somebody would put poison in it (...) A tenth of us are in jail, and we can’t build new ones fast enough. We’re bombing other countries simply because they make us nervous, and most of us not only couldn’t find those countries on the map, we couldn’t tell you which continent they’re on. (...) So tell me. Would you say this is working out? Does this seem to you like a story that wants to continue?⁴⁵

What comes to one’s attention is the dialogic relation between a lost narrative of modernity that has been hidden by a dynamic of what we could call the demise of physical as well as ontological certainty after 9/11 and contemporary concerns revolving around security and surveillance. Linking Hardt and Negri’s idea of desertion to the story under discussion, it is fruitful to remind ourselves that the primary task of the detective – with his ability to map and comprehend the scene or space of the crime, and aided by the *police state* of surveillance – is to reestablish order, to resecure clearly demarcated ideological spaces for each and every individual. Cunningham’s detective story goes against this logic, flinging the detective into a space of physical and ontological uncertainty. Acutely aware of the displacement she experiences in the global city, where the very notion of “home” is thrown into question, Cat also deserts, and begins her “strange new life”,⁴⁶ escaping to nowhere with an “irreparably damaged” boy⁴⁷ from the “Whitman family,” who may someday decide to murder her – defying the detective’s logic that accords

⁴³ HARDT; NEGRI. *Empire*, p. 212, emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ WOODS. *His Appearance is Against Him: The Emergence of the Detective*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 171.

⁴⁶ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 193.

⁴⁷ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 195.

to every subject, including herself, a secure place: “In place of the assured consolation of returning home, [she finds herself] on the threshold of perpetual departure, embarking on a journey in which a preceding knowledge and understanding is destined to be re-configured and re-routed”;⁴⁸ “And now suddenly she understood. She had fallen for it. *We need to make it known that nobody is safe. Not a rich man. Not a poor man.*”⁴⁹

In accordance with Horsey’s observation that “the historical dimension of noir fatality is strong,”⁵⁰ the failure of Cunningham’s noir investigator has to be seen in the light of a specific social context – which is usually invested with ambivalence, randomness, and threat, leading to the destabilization of the identity of the detective:

Treacherous confusion of [her] role and the movement of the protagonist from one role to another constitute key structural elements in noir narrative. The victim might, for example, become the aggressor; the hunter might turn into the hunted or vice versa; the investigator might double as either the victim or the perpetrator. (...) The denial of any stable position leads to a collapse of binary dichotomies. (...) everyone is guilty (...) and there can be no clear distinction between guilt and innocence.⁵¹

In the post-9/11 era, the discourse of violence (terror/ism) seems to have subsumed all other discourses, placing the question of security at the forefront, at the center of the map of global society’s preoccupations. The (con)fusion of all ideologies and traditional belief systems contributes to an atmosphere of ontological insecurity and fear of losing the fundamental principles of any society, to the extent that old forms of security are being substituted by a new, post-human power. This is the power at play in the third and last tale of *Specimen Days*, when both biological and artificially created beings live in a permanent state of fear. Except that here the threat is no longer from outside, and refugees include aliens from planet Nadia. “Why exactly,” asks Marcus, a clone, before he is exterminated by government drones, “do you think we *shouldn’t* be nervous all the time?,”⁵² echoing the elderly lady and the Fifth Street punk in “The Children’s Crusade.” Taking up the master trope of a bleak dystopian future articulated in numerous SF works, “Like Beauty” is set in a future of environmental collapse, after meltdown, in a world dominated by corporations named Magicorp, Infinidot etc., where the global currency is the yen. The U.S. is portrayed as a balkanized wasteland, where survivors squat in deactivated malls and fast-food franchises.

As I have look’d over the proof-sheets of the preceding pages, I have once or twice fear’d that my diary would prove, at best, but a batch of convulsively written reminiscences. Well, be it so. They are but parts of the actual distraction, heat, smoke and excitement of those times. The war itself, with the temper of society preceding it, can indeed be best described by that very word **convulsiveness**.⁵³

⁴⁸ Cf. CHAMBERS. *The Power of Cartography and the Violence of Maps*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 196.

⁵⁰ HORSELY. *The Noir Thriller*, p. 11.

⁵¹ HORSELY. *The Noir Thriller*, p. 10.

⁵² CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 211, emphasis in original.

⁵³ WHITMAN. *Specimen Days*, p. 776, emphasis in original.

New York City reappears – this time as a theme park for wealthy visitors from Eurasia. Simon also reappears: if in the first episode he was inside the machine, now he is a machine – a “simulo,” or cyborg who, when the story opens, works for Dangerous Encounters Ltd., simulating muggings in Central Park, for those who could afford the nostalgia. Depending on the “level” of the costumer these encounters may include sexual harassment, suggestive, also, of a Foucauldian complicity between sex and power, in that these “professional delinquents” provide a marginal group (echoing the 19th century “freaks” as well as the “Whitman family” of the two previous episodes) against which the rich tourists can define themselves. Another aspect of nostalgia that demands attention in this last episode is the way it points to discourses, practices, and objects that have become a repertoire of fragments and ruins of modernity – not only in the simulated muggings, and the abandoned malls, once icons of modernity at large, but also in the bits and pieces of U.S. consumer culture, like the necklace worn by Luke, a disfigured teenager who teams up with Simon and Catareen, a refugee from planet Nadia, towards the end of the narration. Luke is wearing a necklace made with a flattened Aphrodite tuna can, an orange plastic peace symbol, a bottle of MAC nail polish, and a yellow-fanged cat skull.⁵⁴ And here we can see evidences of the ecological paradigm contradicting the expectations of the culture of consumption.⁵⁵

Simon goes underground, to escape the authorities who want to obliterate all simulos, because of their unpredicted complexity: they are becoming increasingly more human, which interferes with their function. He is seeking Emory Lowell, his maker, in Denver (now a vast shantytown), and is joined in his quest by Catareen, a lizard-like female from an alien species who reached Earth on “Promise Ships” (the inter-referentiality with the pilgrims who arrived at Mount Plymouth on the Mayflower will not escape the reader), and is exploited as migrant labor; and Luke, a member of an evangelical group called New Covenant.

The meeting with Lowell parodies the American Pastoral – now distorted, since the landscape is one of ecological disaster. Lowell lives in what could be termed “the country” with his Nadian wife Othea and a group of scientists and “visionaries,” in a house that has one tree and one horse in the back yard, where people eat fresh eggs and bacon for breakfast instead of dehydrated food. The whole atmosphere harkens back to lost modernities:

a glass-fronted cabinet that held a collection of brightly colored odds and ends. (...) a Chia Pet shaped like a lamb, PEZ dispensers, a pink plastic squeeze bottle of Mr. Bubble, a rubber statuette of Bullwinkle the Moose in a striped bathing suit from the 1800s (...) The kitchen was like a kitchen from fifty years ago. It had an atomic stove and a refrigeration module and a sink with a faucet and handles.⁵⁶

But here, once again, Cunningham presents us with a distortion of the middle-class family: Lowell’s family is composed of humans and Nadians, and one *mestizo* infant

⁵⁴ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 250.

⁵⁵ I refer the reader to NADEAU. *The Environmental Endgame*.

⁵⁶ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 277.

(Lowell and Othea's baby, half human and half Nadian). Besides this, Lowell is represented as an African American Whitman, with his "cascade of smoke-colored beard spilled over his chest" and wearing a "battered, broad-brimmed hat pulled down to his shaggy grey brows"⁵⁷ – adding to a defamiliarization that dialogues with the old lady in "The Children's Crusade." If there was a strangeness in the poet's double being a "mother" of homeless children (as if "Whitman, a childless man dedicated to the love of comrades, as the 'father' of children of any sort, white, brown, or other"⁵⁸ weren't "queer" enough!), there is definite irony in having Whitman ("white man") appear as a black man. The text seems to address the problematic of Whitman's legacy for an ethnically diverse nation.⁵⁹

The passage is also suggestive of a utopian solution for this family of deserters, who intend to migrate to another planet – that has the significantly Whitmanesque name of Paumanok – in a spacecraft they have bought "from the Jehovahs," who "sold the whole fleet after things fell apart with HBO."⁶⁰ Paumanok is the Native American name for Long Island, New York, Whitman's place of birth. It is the title of one of the biographical sections of Whitman's *Specimen Days*, as well as the central reference in his poem and literary manifesto "Starting from Paumanok,"⁶¹ in which he intends to, literally, start from Paumanok, and journey forth geographically as well as metaphysically, in order to "strike up for a New World." The poem lists elements of modernity – crowds, factories, steamboats, locomotives, printing presses, miners digging mines, "eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports"⁶² –; but is also suggestive of a response to the challenge of modernity, to a rapidly changing world, and conveys a sense of movement and urgency: "haste, haste on."⁶³

Both ironically and symptomatically – and fittingly, for the case at hand of Cunningham's use of the SF genre – Whitman's poem was first titled "Premonition". It is interesting to note how the three main characters retrace the Westering movement, traveling from New York to Denver (the story ends with Simon on horseback, headed for California – and what his fate will be we do not know). Yet, the narrative also deterritorializes Whitman's "Starting from Paumanok," in that to the group of nuts, marginals, and outcasts who are heading for another planet, to "haste on" is to desert, and the New World is outside our world. These considerations are relevant to the futuristic context of Cunningham's last tale. Futuristic dystopias are traditionally read as cautionary tales, a "premonition," warning us against a bleak future. Yet, the imagined futures of such works frequently address new and defamiliarizing perspectives on our own present. Fredric Jameson argues that a true sense of history involves representation neither of

⁵⁷ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 274.

⁵⁸ I am quoting, with a twist, from PRICE. *To Walt Whitman, America*.

⁵⁹ On the other hand, it is important to note that many Harlem Renaissance writers negotiated their positions as writers both black and "American" through their reading of Whitman. For a discussion of Whitman's legacy for an ethnically diverse nation, see PRICE. *To Walt Whitman, America*.

⁶⁰ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 278.

⁶¹ WHITMAN, *Starting from Paumanok*, p. 66-86.

⁶² WHITMAN, *Starting from Paumanok*, p. 67.

⁶³ WHITMAN, *Starting from Paumanok*, p. 82.

the past nor of the future, but a “perception of the present as history, that is, of the present as it participates in the flow of history from past to future.”⁶⁴ In late capitalism, Jameson argues, futurological stories are actually “an outright representation of the present.”⁶⁵

Jameson’s words bring to mind another collection of novellas, Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*. The narrator of the concluding story in Auster’s trilogy, “The Locked Room,” tells us that all “three stories are finally the same story,”⁶⁶ the difference being that each “represents a different stage” in the narrator’s awareness of what the story is ultimately about.⁶⁷ In a similar manner, reading Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* relies heavily on the dialogic relation between past and present: one story informs the other, adding to our awareness of what Cunningham’s metaphysical foray into the heart of New York’s old and new modernities is ultimately about. Whitman’s foray across the globe “in the name of these States”⁶⁸ in “Starting from Paumanok” is hardly what the present States, in the name of their citizens, have in mind. As we know, “September 11, 2001, marks the displacement effected by an event.”⁶⁹ As Paul Passavant and Jodi Dean have written, “the Bush administration [treated] 9/11 as foundational to a new order of meaning, identity, and permanent war” (...), “[equating] the defense of freedom with the defense of global capitalism.”⁷⁰ And as Heike Härting has noted,

the notion of the “civil” in “global civil war” is (...) frequently synonymous with the dismantling of civil rights and an internationally condoned assignment to “civilize” so-called rogue or failed nation states. In this sense, we may call the US-led “war against terror” a “global civil war” without, however, reducing the latter concept to a post-9-11 phenomenon. For, polemically speaking, despite its involvement of a wide range of global actors, the “war on terror” remains a national project of the United States. It mobilizes patriotic sentiments of US-American national destiny on a global scale and depends on the simultaneous denial and reinvention of the United States’ imperial past.⁷¹

This imperial past is – paradoxically – organized around a narrative of democracy. As Chambers has written, “liberalism has fully colonized democracy, reducing the latter to a smiling public mask/masque, and its language to an increasingly cynical ventriloquism.”⁷² Whitman sought to include, encompass, celebrate, and give voice to a variegated multitude – what, in a way, Cunningham (another white man) has sought to do, by populating his book with an abundant array of cultural and racial Others. Whitman’s presence is closely linked to the idea of U.S. democracy. Yet, as Michael Hardt wrote in a recent article for *American Quarterly*, it is difficult to pronounce the word democracy today:

⁶⁴ JAMESON. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 284.

⁶⁵ JAMESON. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 286.

⁶⁶ AUSTER. *The New York Trilogy*, p. 346.

⁶⁷ AUSTER. *The New York Trilogy*, p. 346.

⁶⁸ WHITMAN. *Starting from Paumanok*, p. 69.

⁶⁹ PASSAVANT; DEAN. *Representation and the Event*, p. 315.

⁷⁰ PASSAVANT; DEAN. *Representation and the Event*, p. 315.

⁷¹ HÄRTING. *Global Civil War and Post-Colonial Studies*.

⁷² CHAMBERS. *The Power of Cartography and the Violence of Maps*, p. 17.

It feels uncomfortable in the mouth. It tastes like ashes, as if the beautiful dreams it once contained have been burnt out by political reaction and cynicism. The most visible political projects today that fly the banner of democracy, in fact, really promote something closer to its opposite – war, authoritarian government, and social inequality.⁷³

One of the challenges of Literature is to help us recognize ways by which all paradigm shifts, like the one we are experiencing in this first decade of the new century, force us to reflect on the human condition. As literary critics, a challenge of ineludable relevance we are faced with is that we generally work with different theoretical tools from those of social or political scientists, whose work is based on the reality principle. Yet, as readers and participants in everyday life, we are confronted with the fact that war and exclusion, as well as the imagining of a space for democracy, can be found in political practices as well as represented in fiction.

In “Like Beauty,” the closest meaning for “beautiful” in Catareen’s native Nadian is “better than useful.” “The bulk of her people’s vocabulary pertained to weather conditions, threats of various kinds, and that which could be eaten, traded, or burned for fuel.”⁷⁴ The last specimen of modernity offered by Cunningham, then, provides an uncomfortable awareness that democracy should (can?) be better than just a useful word.



ABSTRACT

In this essay I propose to reflect on ways by which Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* contributes to a revision of modernity, through a set of intertwined dialogues between old and new modernities. Whitman’s ghost pervades the narrative and a repertoire of lost or discarded projects (both historic and aesthetic) are (re)presented – suggesting a search for ways of better understanding the course of Democracy in our late modernity.

KEYWORDS

Specimen Days, modernities, the post-9/11

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⁷³ HARDT. Jefferson and Democracy, p. 41.

⁷⁴ CUNNINGHAM. *Specimen Days*, p. 200.

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