

Re-membering National Identity in the American Maximalist Novel

Elisa Pesce [University of Glasgow]

Abstract

In an article for U.S. men's magazine *Esquire*, literary journalist Jonathan Russell Clark recently wondered whether the maximalist novel still matters or if, as a distinctive form of post-WWII U.S. fiction, it has nothing significant left to say. Aligning with Clark's conclusion that 'maximalism is alive and well; it's just under a wider and more eclectic stewardship', this paper foregrounds examples of maximalist women writers to claim that the genre's perceived decline in prestige in the framework of contemporary cultural production is not due to its aesthetic or ethical irrelevance, but results from approaching maximalism as a prescriptive, rather than a descriptive, critical category. Consequently, with the progressive association of size with masculinity in twentieth-century U.S. culture, big, ambitious novels of ideas by white male authors such as Pynchon, DeLillo and Wallace have been celebrated and canonised as maximalist for allegedly speaking of, to and on behalf of the whole nation; simultaneously, and uncoincidentally, the numerous – mostly non-white – women writers who aimed maximalism at hyper-specific, real-world issues have been largely excluded from models of this narrative style. By engaging with criticism by Nick Levey, Paul K. Saint-Amour and Kasia Boddy, as well as with Elaine Showalter's history of women writing in the United States, I argue that, freed from universalising and nationalistic prescriptive connotations, the maximalist novel is a powerful means for carving out space for the marginalised in U.S. literature and society, thus posing a threat to dominant notions of U.S. identity.

Introduction

In western history, the development of distinctive national bodies of literature has traditionally depended on and followed the emergence of those geopolitical units known as nation-states (Buell 2014, p.10). While most European nations bring together people with a shared racial, cultural, and/or linguistic history, the U.S. represents an exception: its territorial vastness and landscape diversity is matched with an equally heterogenous population, united more in theory

than in practice by a set of myth, beliefs, and ideas that mostly reflect the experience of the dominant, white, Anglo-American group (Miller 2009, n.p.; Buell 2014, p.13 and 17). Since its emergence during the Civil War, U.S. literature has thus developed a peculiar category for works of fiction that show a particular concern for and ability to represent the nation's 'essence and character': the Great American Novel.² The first definition of the GAN dates to 1868, when John William DeForest describes it as 'the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence' and the 'task of painting the American soul within the framework of a novel' (28). As a critical category, however, the GAN has predominantly evolved as a product of academic and professional literary criticism, with an equal share of detractors and supporters. Despite being a project fraught with contradictions – first and foremost its predominantly white and male author base – it survived and adapted to the profound socio-cultural changes of the twentieth century and progressively intersected another category associated with ideals of literary greatness: the maximalist novel, a type of prose that celebrates excess in all its forms – aesthetic, stylistic, and of scope.

In this paper, I discuss unacknowledged instances of maximalist fiction in which memories of an unrecorded, erased, manipulated, or traumatic past are presented as crucial to the identity-building, survival, and mental well-being of both U.S. individuals and communities, especially in marginalised or minority groups. By analysing episodes from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* (2010), and Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019), I show that maximalism can offer more than the hegemonic representations of U.S. identity that early critics of the 'big' American novel – such as Edward Mendelson, Frederick R. Karl, and Tom LeClair – identified in the genre. Its drive to detailedness is exceptionally suited and consequently exploited by non-male and/or non-white authors for complementary, alternative, and subversive portraits of (inter)national realities. Remembrance is key to these literary projects, in which the characters' ability to develop an individual and a national sense of identity strictly depends on the extent to which they can access or control knowledge of the past. Memory thus becomes a major tool deployed by the authors to denounce and challenge the systematic erasure and manipulation of U.S.

² The Civil War is conventionally considered the starting point of a distinctively American body of literature because in the Colonial and Early National Period (17th century–1830) the first colonists wrote texts (mostly but not exclusively in English) that were more practical, straightforward, and often derivative of literature in Great Britain, as well as dependent on British literature for literary models and standards.

history and the sense of alienation on which the development of an abstract, universalising idea of U.S. national identity has traditionally relied, to the detriment (predominantly but not exclusively) of citizens with a multi-ethnic or multicultural background.

I begin by presenting the main features of the maximalist novel and explaining how its relationship with both dominant and oppositional ideas of U.S. identity is forged in the peculiar, all-pervasive presence of warfare in the U.S. I then illustrate the way Silko, Yamashita, and Ellmann exploit maximalist narrative techniques to challenge traditional western systems of knowledge production and distribution and raise concerns about who decides what is worth remembering when the definition of American is at stake. Full of conflicts and revolutions, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* takes historical and cultural memory as a fundamental prerequisite for the survival of the Indigenous people of the Americas, for whom the five-hundred-year war against the coloniser has never ended. Yamashita's *I Hotel* foregrounds the role of retrieving immigrants' lost voices and traditions alongside the creation of a Pan-Asian American identity, catalysed by the civil rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s and the Vietnam War. In Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport*, the protagonist's memory is in thrall to her endless grief for her mother's death, which leaves her powerless against the psychodynamics of total war that has become the natural state of things in the U.S.

Maximalism, War, And Identity

The adjective maximalist enters the language of literary criticism through a 1986 essay by John Barth which mainly discusses its opposite trend, that is, minimalism. In this piece, Barth defines both tendencies as particularly relevant to the U.S. postmodern literary scene because linked to old, distinctly American features and concerns (1986, p.1). Consequently, while the minimalist short story values economy and austerity in unit, form, scale, style, and/or material, the maximalist doorstopper novel harks back to the vastness (both geographical and of the spirit of initiative) that fuelled the myths of U.S. exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Therefore, this writing style unapologetically deploys totality and excess on all levels, as a means of showing its profound engagement in the way the individual's everyday experience connects with and draws meaning from the broader development of national affairs. In the 2010s, Barth's taxonomy evolves into the name of a distinctive type of novel, when scholars such as Stefano Ercolino and Nick Levey propose maximalist as the most suitable term for articulating the cultural value of the late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century 'big' U.S. novel. While Ercolino focuses mainly on the aesthetics of the genre, characterised by extensive use of the

encyclopaedic mode, linguistic digression, redundancy, multiple interconnected plotlines, myriads of characters, and a complex overall structure that often results in a lengthy and overwhelming reading experience (2012, p. 242), Levey suggests a more philosophical approach to this type of narrative and describes it as a ‘mindset and approach to novelistic poetics that finds the lure of detailedness irresistible, despite its often troublesome nature’ (2017, p. 6). Indeed, excess of details in the arts has historically had a bad reputation, as a sign of imperfection, decadence, and amorality unsurprisingly associated, especially since Neoclassicism, with femininity. Despite this, maximalism is largely considered a typically masculine (and white) writing style, mostly because of the solid association between encyclopaedic detail (a defining and common feature in the maximalist novel) and literary mastery established by postmodern critics such as Edward Mendelson and Franco Moretti. The maximalist novel thus represents a literary niche in which detail is not only praised but even considered a marker of ultimate greatness – at an individual and national level, one of the reasons why the category came to overlap with that of the GAN. As Naomi Schor observes, however, this revaluation of detail did not lead to an erasure of its gendered connotations but resulted in a mere defeminization of detail that ‘leav[es] the masculine and its prerogatives intact’ (1987, p. 97). It comes as no surprise, then, that the increasing number of maximalist novels by women writers published since 1990 have only recently been acknowledged as such since the type of details and the worldview that they offer poses a challenge to previous definitions of the genre.

Postmodern theories of the ‘big’ U.S. novel, which later influenced the maximalist framework as well, draw a tight, long-lasting connection between the frequent use of fictional encyclopaedism in this type of narrative and GAN-like representations of a unitary national identity, predominantly by declining the former as a modern version of the epic. While scholars such as Antonio Barrenechea and Paul K. Saint-Amour have recently suggested alternative, less-western-centric interpretations of encyclopaedism that debunk the limitations of considering over-detailedness as a marker of epic-like totalising narratives, to my purposes here I wish to stress the inherent relation of epic with war, one that has rooted western nation-states in ancient organic national units that emerged from the ashes of unifying conflicts.³ As a

³ In *America Unbound – Encyclopedic Literature and Hemispheric Studies* (2016), Barrenechea approaches the encyclopaedic novel from a hemispheric perspective, that is as a phenomenon ‘guided by a shared sense that American parts live in complex relation to a hemispheric whole’ (p. xi). In *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (2015), Saint-Amour looks at modernist interwar encyclopaedic novels in Europe

narrative genre galvanised by war and a hotbed for accounts of national becoming, epic categorically excludes women from its authors. Moreover, as suggested by the fact that (as an adjective) epic also evokes monumentality (and therefore all sorts of bigness or greatness), the exclusion of women's novels from models of maximalism finds explanation also in the progressive association of size with masculinity and male intellectual superiority identified by Kasia Boddy throughout U.S. literature and culminating after World War II (2019, p. 320-22). In what follows, I analyse the way Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, Yamashita's *I Hotel*, and Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* subversively use maximalist techniques to foster remembrance and allow for the development of a sense of individual and national identity in marginalised U.S. subjects. In so doing, I also expose the way conflicts and warfare have historically provided and continue to provide an exceptionally persistent catalyst to such process, which these three novels describe from the perspective of the margin rather than from that of the dominant social group.

***Almanac of the Dead* – Retrieving The Erased Histories Of Indigenous Americas**

Set in a near dystopian-like future, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* features more than sixty characters and multiple interconnected plotlines, all eventually converging in Tucson, Arizona. Most of the characters prepare themselves for some kind of impending, unspecified change, caused by the progressively evident demise of a neoliberalist capitalist system irreparably tainted by violence and corruption. While the descendants of the European colonisers (called 'the Destroyers') dismiss the increasing upheavals in the Indigenous communities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border as the demonstration of their belatedness and resistance to Western standards of modernity, the latter see their subversive actions as a continuation of the American Indian Wars that they have been fighting for more than four hundred years. Moreover, they interpret the increasingly anxious response of the U.S. authorities and elites to social unrest as a sign that the times are ripe for the long-awaited revolution that will fulfil an ancient prophecy foretelling the disappearance of European culture from the Americas.

For the revolution to succeed, however, the masses need to be prepared and brought on board, something that requires the novel's revolutionaries to retrieve the knowledge of the Indigenous histories and cultures that centuries of colonialism and domestic imperialism have manipulated and/or erased. To counter the weaponization of ignorance of the past on which

to redefine the genre as counter-narrative, that is, as a type of novel that provides alternative portraits of reality to those offered by totalizing hegemonic discourses (p. 9).

Europeans have heavily relied, Silko's Indigenous character uses a range of texts and strategies to challenge and redress the official archives of American history. The most prominent among them is the novel's titular almanac, a series of notebooks passed down for generations that stands for the real-world Meso-American codices that survived the destruction of the Indigenous libraries by the Spaniards. According to Adam Sol, they represent an encyclopaedia of sorts for the ancestors of the current native inhabitants of the American Southwest (Sol and Silko 1999, p. 25). In fact, one of the purposes of the almanac, a form common to several premodern civilisations around the world, was to provide representations of favourable and unfavourable days with advice on what should be done on each of them. Since several ancient and/or Indigenous cosmologies had not a linear but a cyclical conception of time, the fact that the days were supposed to eventually return means that almanacs were instruments of prediction. Accordingly, in Silko's novel, the sisters Lecha and Zeta and the twins Tacho and El Feo can interpret the titular manuscript to identify in the present the signs of the forthcoming days of the revolution. The intrinsic prophetic function of the almanac form is the main instrument used by Silko to subvert the early definitions of fictional encyclopaedism. According to Saint-Amour, postmodern critics ascribed to novels that extensively used this narrative mode an ability to announce and represent the emergence of new phenomena, but implicitly limited it to the individuation of Eurocentric, universalising paradigms of national development. Contrary to that, Saint-Amour argues that encyclopaedism is as frequent in mainstream narratives of western-style modernization as it is in accounts of alternative realities from outside the nation-state metropolis or at the margins of the empire (in the post-colony or among the underdeveloped populations within the first world) (2015, p. 213). I maintain that *Almanac of the Dead* deploys encyclopaedism in a similarly unconventional and subversive context, that is, from the perspective of Indigenous America. The following two examples illustrate how encyclopaedic information is used in the novel to link remembrance and the acceptance of one's ethnic and cultural background to the development of a comfortable sense of identity and even to survival.

Angelita La Escapía is an Indigenous Maya woman who infiltrates the Marxist group of the white Cuban Bartolomeo to intercept and divert fundings and weapons for the Indigenous rebel cell that hides in the mountains around Mexico City. When Bartolomeo is about to discover and strike back at the organised resistance of Angelita's people, she takes him hostage and puts him on trial for 'crimes against the people's history' (Silko 1992, p. 525). This act is a symbolic one through which vengeance is exacted against the innumerable offences of the white colonisers. While, until the very end, Bartolomeo is incredulous that he – a white man –

is being tried and declared guilty by people whom he calls ‘[j]ungle monkeys and savages [with] no history’ (Silko 1992, p. 525), just before sentencing him to death, Angelita recites a list of ‘only a few of the *big* uprisings and revolutions’ that Native Americans have fought since the arrival of the Europeans (Silko 1992, p. 527, original emphasis). The list, which takes up three pages, represents information that official U.S. accounts omit or report from the perspective of European history makers. As Herbert Hirsch reminds us, the construction of memory is not only influenced by paradigms of time purposefully used for suppressive writing of history but is also ‘manipulated to serve political power, [hence] the ability to manipulate memory is, in itself, a measure of that power’ (1995, p. 22). Angelita’s recuperation and distribution of forgotten Indigenous histories, therefore, aims at giving agency back to her people. With this information, they begin to imagine and build a new future, one that conforms to the Indigenous cultural beliefs and the temporalities preserved in the ancient almanac.

Angelita’s activities also include gathering information on the illicit business of Menardo, a self-made insurance salesman who, despite his Native ancestry, manages to buy his way up the social ladder in the Chiapas region. His story follows an opposite trajectory to that of most of the novel’s Indigenous characters: while those who reconnect with and embrace their past find new instruments to fight oppression and survive, Menardo represses and denies his ethnic origins, thus becoming the cause of his own demise and death. Barrenechea defines Menardo’s story as an instance of ‘Latin American identity at war with itself’ that exemplifies the Spanish peninsular caste system’s preoccupation with *limpieza de sangre* after the Counter-Reformation (2016, p. 123). Bullied throughout his childhood for his Native appearance, Menardo cuts all bridges with his relatives, including his beloved grandfather, whose tales he nevertheless remembers. Because of his entrepreneurial abilities, he manages to marry into a formerly wealthy family with claims of direct descentance from the Spanish colonisers. Deep down, however, he knows that the members of the local high society barely tolerate him. As a consequence, the increasing success of his company and the beginning of his extramarital relationship with the younger and beautiful Alegria are accompanied by unbearable pressure that causes his mental health to plummet. The man is tormented by dreams that, as a Native Mexican, he knows are premonitory. Unable to interpret them, he relies on the help of his driver, Tacho (a spy for his brother El Feo and Angelita). The fact that the latter lies to him about the meaning of his dreams is totally irrelevant: Menardo’s rejection of his ethnic origins is so profound that he dismisses all signs of Tacho’s treachery and his own residual memories of his grandfather’s stories. Driven crazy by fear, he is eventually – and ironically – killed precisely by Tacho. Menardo’s story thus is emblematic of the consequences of repudiating

one's roots: had he chosen to embrace his ancestry, he could have accessed the prophecies and teachings of his people's intertextual encyclopaedic almanac and saved himself. Instead, he falls victim to the white man's greed for money and power.

***I Hotel* – Celebrating the Polyphony of Asian America**

I Hotel mixes historical facts and fiction to chronicle the emergence and evolution of the Yellow Power movement between 1968 and 1977, a decade that also saw the Asian American communities in San Francisco rallying to save the titular International Hotel from demolition. The characters, who represent students, labourers, artists as well as militant revolutionaries, all gravitate around the hotel, a symbol of the struggle of people of Asian birth and descent for the preservation of a strong sense of identity. As Rychetta Watkins observes, while Yellow Americans share the same basic problems as other people of colour in the U.S., they simultaneously must fight for dismantling specific stereotypes, such as the 'model minority' myth. Additionally, early activists found it hard 'to define a unified identity and articulate a collective purpose and objectives sufficient to propel a political movement [because they] had to negotiate the distinct histories of Asians in America (2012, p. 38) – an extremely heterogenous community that formed over a long span of time and under the most diverse conditions. In what follows, I discuss two moments in Yamashita's novel that foreground the role of scholars, artists, and writers in retrieving memories of an Asian past, fostering remembrance and crafting a new identity. The first one allows me to discuss the role of the anthology in building the literary body of Asian America, a process that equates intellectuals with activists and warriors in the heated climate of the civil rights movements and the Vietnam War. The second one explores multimodal writing as a means for addressing questions around alienation and disconnection from past histories and traditions, in which memory is presented as both problematic and vital for Americans of Asian origins.

Paul and Jack are second-generation Chinese and members of the Poetry Boys Club at San Francisco State College (the centre of the 1986 student protests). While editing a literary anthology, they find a discarded copy of John Okada's 'first real serious novel in Asian America [which went] out of print with a couple of lousy reviews' and nobody recognises as a classic (Yamashita 2010, p. 96). They also come in possession of a letter in which Okada mentions that a second novel is in the making. The boys, therefore, arrange a meeting with the author's widow to ask for permission to reprint her husband's first novel and search for the second unfinished manuscript among his papers. Jack enthusiastically explains the importance of the

retrieval of Okada's forgotten work for their literary ambitions: 'It means we got a history! We're yellow writers who come from a tradition of yellow writing!' (Yamashita 2010, p. 96). The episode is based on real facts and on a text that gave a terrific contribution to the development of an Asian American literary canon.⁴ As Watkins remarks,

Okada's *No-No Boy*, originally published in 1957, anticipates the demands for self-determination and issues of representation and racial consciousness that characterized the Power moment. Republished in 1976, Okada's story of Ichiro's struggle to forge a Japanese American identity against the backdrop of World War II and the unjust internment and imprisonment of Japanese American citizens resonated with young Asian Americans struggling to secure their place in America even as the war in Vietnam raged on. (2012, p. 115)

Different generations, different wars, but like most other ethnic groups in the U.S. Japanese and Chinese Americans forged their identity surrounded by wars and conflicts, both global and local. As another character exclaims at a student rally at UC Berkley, in the 1970s, Asian American students 'saw three choices: go to school, go to prison, go to war' (Yamashita 2010, p. 127). These choices, however, were seldom mutually exclusive and often represented overlapping stages of a single life experience for the novel's characters. Hence, when the aforementioned Paul loses his dad to a heart attack, the whole episode is narrated as a parallel between death in Chinatown and death in Vietnam, both described as irrelevant because they involve invisible American citizens (Yamashita 2010, p. 4). Literature is a powerful, inherently political act with a long history of contributing to fixing this invisibility issue. At the time in which *I Hotel* is set, journals and anthologies were its primary weapons.

As Watkins argues, in the late 1960s and 1970s, some early activists drifted from military combat to militant resistance, exercised predominantly by infiltrating academia. The result was the appearance of the first Asian American Studies programmes in U.S. universities (along with their Ethnic Studies and African American Studies counterparts) and the flourishing of periodicals such as *Gidra* (2012, p. 82). Intellectuals also committed to redressing the flattening of differences entailed by the creation of a Pan-Asian American identity, which was essential for political reasons. Several literary anthologies, therefore, attempted to represent the variety of perspectives in Asian America by disentangling its individual components (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, etc.), while simultaneously trying to insert a new authoritative "Asian"

⁴ The novel was really found in a used book store by Jeff Chan in 1970 and reissued under the Combined Asian-American Resources Project (CARP) label in 1976 (Schleitwiler 2018, np.).

category in the U.S. canon. One such text is *AIIEEEEE!* (1974), curated by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong.⁵ The introduction presents the editors' intent to give voice to a long-silenced group:

Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his *AIIEEEEE!* It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice. (1974, p. viii, original emphasis)

The task, however, was challenging because of the difficulty to recognise and give equal weighting to a number of Asian languages and identities, all alive and in a constant intersection.

In a chapter significantly entitled '1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel', Yamashita joins the debate on the efficacy of the anthology by deploying a diverse range of modes and genres to reflect on the composite identity of the new generations of Asian Americans. In '2: Theater of the Double Ax' (a subchapter structured like a play), Pa has a Chinese delicatessen and five sets of American-born Siamese twins. While talking with a customer he says: 'These kids all sneaking around with split personalities' and 'Every paper son split into two memories' (Yamashita 2010, p. 231). The playwright/narrator analogously laments:

Come to America and your children all come out hyphenated. Half this-half that. Nothing whole. Everything half-assed. [...] One half trying to be the other half and vice versa' (Yamashita 2010, p. 231).

The latter point is further articulated in the comic-strip form in '6: Chiquita Banana', where Chiquita's Siamese daughters (both named after popular figures in U.S. culture) have low self-esteem and each suffers the consequences of her sibling's abuse by their mother's lover, Don Juan Samuel (which is dressed like Uncle Sam). Along with Chiquita (who is named after a famous multinational corporation), the twins are symbols of the ongoing exploitation of the U.S. neo-imperialist, multinational capitalistic system. As Ruth Yvonne Hsu argues, the twins 'are constituted in the transnational discursive Imaginary of Asia and the Americas' and the fact they are eventually saved and split with a sword by Mulan Rouge (Chiquita's sister from China) points out the necessity of 'understanding colonialism in Asia in order to more fully grasp the history of the indigenous and Asian America in the US' (2022, p. 296). However, by

⁵ The title of the anthology reproduces a sound (aiieeeee!) stereotypically associated with the yellow man as something when wounded, sad, angry, swearing or otherwise screaming.

ending with one of the girls wondering ‘Now what?’ (Yamashita 2010, p. 264), the comic strip raises questions about whether the twins’ separation leads to a real liberation and suggests that an autonomous sense of identity is a much more complex condition to attain.

Accordingly, the rest of the chapter – as a whole, a fascinating reinterpretation of the doppelgänger motif – further elaborates on the importance of remembering Asian cultures and traditions and merging them with Anglo-American ones to strengthen conflictual, hyphenated identities. The subchapter ‘8: Dance’ does that in the most visually striking fashion. It illustrates a choreography in which the story of a legendary Chinese outlaw (a recurrent figure in the novel) is performed on a mix of Peking Opera and avant-garde sax-based jazz. Over six pages, two double narrative streams progressively intertwine and merge, representing the (comm)union between the body of music(ian) and the body of danc(er). In the process, the outlaw’s legend intersects the life story of two Asian Americans from very different family backgrounds, which consequently become outlaws themselves. As the narrator explains, the experiment seeks to answer the following questions:

What is Asian American dance? [...] Does the body have a memory? What’s the memory of the Asian American body? [The choreographer] says she choreographs as if blind. Choreographs as if deaf. Choreographs in silence. (Yamashita 2010, p. 279)

I argue that Asian Americans might feel they are carrying on in their life blind, deaf, and silenced, but their bodies remember. By following the choreographer’s suggestion to ‘listen to the bodies’ movements’ (Yamashita 2010, p. 279) offered by all types of artists, they can get back into contact with the stories and beliefs enshrined in their DNA (whose structure is evoked by the layout of the narrative streams on the page). Like the arts, activism fosters communication among generations of immigrants that too rarely share their life experiences. As another character in the novel admits during a pilgrimage to Tule Lake (the site of a Japanese American WWII internment camp), there are ‘Lots of stories. We [older generations have] been silent all these years. You kids are right to make us talk about this again. Shouldn’t forget as if it never happened’ (Yamashita 2010, p. 186).

***Ducks, Newburyport* – The Memories That Tell Us (Apart)**

The narrator/protagonist of Ellmann’s *Ducks, Newburyport* seems to embody a radically opposite condition, in which she constantly struggles to keep her memories at bay and focalise on the present in the attempt to reconnect with herself. The novel deploys the interior

monologue's potential for exploring the life of the mind on an unprecedented scale, following the thoughts of a white, middle-aged, middle-class, Ohioan woman for almost one thousand pages. While Ellmann's wordiness and interest in the everyday fall among the canonical features of the maximalist novel, *Ducks, Newburyport's* domestic setting and exclusively feminine focalisation undermine expectations of an epic narrative concerned with big, abstract, universal issues. Nevertheless, the novel engages with an array of topics conventionally considered highbrow, from colonial history to contemporary politics, from global warming to gender violence, and provides a state-of-the-nation-like account of present-day U.S. By doing this through the mind of an unnamed woman, it challenges stereotypical views of the male perspective as the only one capable of bridging the distance between the individual and the universal, illustrating how the former is imbricated with and affected by a complex network of (inter)national socioeconomic forces. In this final subsection, I investigate the causes of Ellmann's narrator's sense of alienation and fragile identity. Firstly, I explain that contrary to the woman's belief, memory is not the bane but the staple of her own existence and identity. Secondly, I argue that the narrator's unresolved relationship with her traumatic past severely limits her ability to cope with the pervasive violence that characterises life in the Trump era, thus further tarnishing her ability to feel part of U.S. society.

As *Ducks, Newburyport* unfolds, its narrator/protagonist reveals a personality crippled by emotional instability and numbness. The woman thinks that this is due to her inability to overcome two traumatic past events: her beloved mother died prematurely after a decade-long illness, leaving her broken and unable to grow into her own person. Additionally, the narrator recently survived a nasty form of cancer, following which she quit teaching and started a home pie-baking business to supplement her husband's income. Therefore, for the last two years, she has been drowning in house chores, childcare responsibility toward her four children, and anxiety about the financial difficulties that increasingly affect the U.S. middle class. To convey a lack of control over both her past and the contemporary world, the woman's interior monologue alternates with moments when a stream of consciousness is used to stress her insecurity and powerlessness. I maintain that the perspective offered by French philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of *durée*, or consciousness as duration, on Ellmann's narrative technique helps identify a contradictory, double relationship of the narrator with her past. Bergson describes the mechanisms of the mind through the image of a snowball, rather than that of a flowing stream, because of its implicit element of accumulation. Hence, for Bergson, the present condition of the self is always the result of an ongoing swelling of the mind produced by the accretion of memories over time (2002, p. 171). This process constitutes a

fundamental condition for the exercise of free will, in that, as Anne Fernihough explains, ‘through memory, [...] our actions transcend predictable mechanical responses to the extent that we bring our accumulated experiences to bear on a given situation’ (2007, p. 69). I argue that *Ducks, Newburyport* displays the jamming of this essential mechanism. The narrator is obsessed with her inability to cope with her past and blames trauma for her idleness. Consequently, on the one hand, she is doing her best to block out her memories and live ‘in the now’ – ‘nothing compares to the pain of losing Mommy [...] this is why I don’t like remembering things (Ellmann 2019, p. 164, original emphasis). On the other hand, however, the continuous repetition of the connective phrase ‘the fact that’ reveals that she is scavenging her past for a solution to her problems. She is relentlessly and uncontrollably drawn to reconsider even her most painful memories in her search for a ‘centre of being’. I maintain that the protagonist cannot hold such a centre because she cannot fully accept that it is her past that made her what she is, and that her present is the result of the inevitable accumulation of fragments of her past. Unable to either observe reality from this perspective or resist the lure of memory, the woman keeps spiralling close to some sort of revelation or resolution, only to be bounced back to square one.

The narrator’s conflictual relationship with remembrance does not only affect her personal sense of identity but also her ability to visualise a positive future for herself and her children. In fact, her insecurity at an individual level translates into an enhanced exposure to the psychodynamics of collective dread and anxiety that according to Saint-Amour has characterised life in the U.S. since the interwar period and become the naturalised state of things, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2015, p. 8, 16-17). This phenomenon, Saint-Amour explains, goes by the name of total war, ‘modern warfare’s putative expansion beyond the battlefield to encompass a nation’s very political, economic, and cultural domain’ (2015, p. 7). In addition to extending constant preparation for an imminent, apocalyptic conflict to all aspects of civilian life, total war forecloses futurity by hindering the work of the imagination at an individual and collective level. Consequently, it prevents people from counteracting hegemonic narratives that present destruction and strife as normal, inevitable conditions. Ellmann’s narrator is utterly at the mercy of total war dynamics in the Trump era, as demonstrated by her anxious, helpless reaction to inputs from her surroundings. These are represented by the stream-of-consciousness moments in the narrative, which also mimic the data bombing to which we are all subject in the contemporary world. Like most characters in – and readers of – maximalist novels, *Ducks’* narrator struggles to extract meaningful information from this wall of white noise and is generally anaesthetised by it. Her resulting

inability to respond to danger climaxes in the novel's final pages, where the woman and her family survive being held at gunpoint by a neighbour thanks to the courage and prompt intervention of her fifteen-year-old daughter, Stacy. Through the woman's stream of consciousness, however, Ellmann also denounces critical aspects of U.S. history and culture, such as the Indian genocide, gun culture, stereotypes against women and mothers, and the normalisation of isolation, violence, and insecurity. Though unable to counter it, the narrator shows awareness of and contempt for these negative components of Americanness. It ensues that her national identity is as compromised as her personal one: she is an atypical mother who cannot and will not spend her days organising her children's social life, is against open carry laws and refuses to have weapons in the house, keeps Native Americans in high esteem for their respectful and caring relationship with nature, and tirelessly 'thinks up' against the climate of amorality in Trump's U.S. Despite its negative consequences, her fraught relationship with the past and the act of remembering is also what makes her capable of seeing the flaws in hegemonic accounts of the nation and offering an alternative experience of it from the perspective of an unconventional American.

Conclusion

By using fictional encyclopaedism, exploring the communion of literature with other art forms, and concerning themselves with the rapport between individuals and the nation, their past and their everyday, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, Yamashita's *I Hotel*, and Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* expand canonical notions of fictional maximalism to include the perspective of the marginalised. Through their characters' struggles for personal and national identity, the novels challenge the western-centred trajectory of epic-like foundational narratives to remember – in the double sense of re-collecting and re-organising – the body of U.S. literature and society. Silko, Yamashita and Ellmann engage with the GAN-like 'big novel' to defy the historical association between size and masculinity and subvert enduring stereotypes around the gender and ethnicity of the 'great American writer'. Their works of fiction deploy memories of the Native Americans' erased past, the rediscovery of a polyphony of voices in Asian American communities, and the traumatic past of an alienated middle-class mother respectively in order to challenge mainstream ideas of what it means to be an American and paint a broader, more colourful picture of an extremely heterogenous nation-state.

Bibliography

- Barrenechea, Antonio. 2016. *America Unbound – Encyclopedic Literature and Hemispheric Studies*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press.
- Barth, John. 1986 (28 December). A Few Words About Minimalism. *The New York Times*. p.1.
- Bergson, Henri. 2002. The Endurance of Life. In Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (ed.), *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 171-86. New York: Continuum.
- Boddy, Kasia. 2019. Making it Long: Men, Women, and the Great American Novel Now. *Textual Practice* 33(2). 318-337.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2014. *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Chan, Jeffrey Paul et al.. (ed.). 1974. *IIIIIIIIII!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press.
- DeForest, John William. 1868 (9 January). The Great American Novel. *The Nation*. p.28.
- Ellmann, Lucy. 2019. *Ducks, Newburyport*. Norwich: Galley Beggar Press.
- Ercolino, Stefano. 2012. The Maximalist Novel. *Comparative Literature* 64(3). 241-256.
- Fernihough, Anne. 2007. Consciousness as a Stream. In Morag Shiach (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, 65-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, Herbert. 1995. *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Hsu, Ruth Yvonne. 2022. Karen Tei Yamashita and Magical Realism: Re-Membering Community, Undoing Borders. *Literature* 2. 288–299.
- Levey, Nick. 2017. *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature: The Uses of Detail*. New York: Routledge.
- Miller, Laura. 2009 (24 February). Why can't a woman write the Great American Novel? *Salon*. n.p.
- Saint-Amour, K. Paul. 2015. *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schleitwiler, Vince. 2018 (18 November). The Bright Future and Long Shadow of John Okada's "No-No Boy". *Asian American Writers' Workshop*.
- Schor, Naomi. 1987. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*. London: Methuen.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. [1991] 1992. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sol, Adam and Leslie Marmon Silko. 1999. The Story as It's Told: Prodigious Revisions in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Almanac of the Dead". *American Indian Quarterly* 23(3/4). 24-48.

Watkins, Richetta. 2012. *Black Power, Yellow Power, and the Making of Revolutionary Identities*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Yamashita, Karen Tei. 2010. *I Hotel*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.