

Manifest Destiny: the American West as a Map of the Unconscious

Marco Petrelli

«I take SPACE to be the central fact of every man born in America. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy» (Olson 1967: 3). That is how the poet Charles Olson described the pivotal element of American mythopoeia: immense and pitiless. His *Call Me Ishmael*, however, wasn't the first work of American criticism to pinpoint the supposed connection between the uniqueness of the geographical element and its settlers' mindscape. I wrote 'settlers' because this paper won't deal with the undoubtedly strong connection that Native Americans had (and still have) with the continent, but rather with the impact that this apparently endless mass of land – «all that raw land that unrolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast», as Jack Kerouac famously wrote in the epilogue of *On the Road* – had on the unprepared minds of the European settlers and their descendants, the future 'discoverers' of the North American continent.

Neither is this a paper about the well-known (should I write: notorious?) connection between geography and ideology that Frederick Jackson Turner put forward in his "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", a thesis that substantially changed the way in which scholars approached the analysis of American society in respect to the space it occupied. Like the authors of *Manifest Destiny* (and Charles Olson), I take the impact of the landscape, and of the frontier in particular, in shaping New Worldlings' imagination for granted. The aim of this paper is to analyze the way in which the doctrine of manifest destiny is re-elaborated and presented in the homonymous comic, and how the comic itself stands as one harsh critique of American

exceptionalism. In doing so, I am going to make reference to some of the seminal studies on the role of space in creating a certain ethos (from the already-mentioned classic work by Turner, to Richard Slotkin's paradigm of a "regeneration through violence"), also deploying some considerations related to the general debate on the importance of space in addressing the narration.

Let's start with some historical-political background. The "manifest destiny" formula was arguably used for the first time by the journalist John L. O'Sullivan in 1845 in an essay titled "Annexation", published in the July-August issue of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. In this piece, O'Sullivan called on the necessity for the US to annex the Republic of Texas, stating that it was America's «manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence» (1845: 5). The blatant chauvinism of US aggressive foreign politics finds in this sentence a perfect wording, but its roots are elsewhere, and that is precisely the timespan covered by *Manifest Destiny*. As a matter of fact, the first time that the "Providence continent" was actually trodden through all its width, hence furnishing the US with an enormous space ready to be filled with tall tales and legends not unsimilar to those we can read in classical chronicles penned by Herodotus or Xenophon, coincides with the widely-known Lewis and Clark Expedition – which is precisely the object of the *Manifest Destiny* series.

Covering the years 1804-1806, the series follows the so-called Corps of Discovery Expedition as they cross the Louisiana Territory, and finally reach the Pacific coast near modern Astoria, Oregon. As I wrote, the expedition marked the first time that a US contingent touched the Western shores, moving through a territory that, at the time, was mostly unknown, a 19th Century 'terra incognita'. Immediately after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, President Thomas Jefferson commissioned the expedition in order to explore and map the newly-acquired land and, most importantly with regard to the Manifest Destiny philosophy, to establish US outposts so to grant an American presence in these territories before other European powers could put their flags on it, claiming possession.

Again, the westward opening was a great thrust for colonization, encouraging another (and greater) wave of frontiersmen to settle in the newly purchased territories and providing grounds for the US's colonization of the North American continent. Apart from the immense geopolitical impact that the westward expansion had, it is necessary to consider how the Louisiana Territory, an enormous space that at the time was as much real as a palimpsest for imagination, gave the American mind a fertile ground on which to construct and install some of its most influential foundational myths. And it is precisely from here that Chris Dingess, Matthew Roberts, Tony Akins and Owen Gieni start to assemble their profound critique of the kind of self-celebrating, jingoist rhetoric still championed by the US.

As history tells us, the Lewis and Clark Expedition started from Camp Dubois, near St. Louis, Missouri, in 1804. The city of St. Louis retrospectively furnishes the series with its most-recurring symbol: the Gateway Arch. The monument (also called "Gateway to the West") was completed in 1965 and dedicated to the American people as a symbol of their courage and determination in conquering the West. David Dillon, an architectural critic, called it a symbol of "boundless American optimism" (Dillon 2001: 12C). The statement couldn't be more incongruous when it comes to *Manifest Destiny*. In fact, the arch, or better, the arches, since the expedition bumps into a number of those artifacts – manufactured in different materials such as grass and manure – become in the series portals to a nightmarish dimension. Whenever the US soldiers find one of these landmarks, they have to face the different dangers of which the 'terra incognita' is full. It is commonly believed, although largely incorrect, that ancient cartographers used to mark unexplored and mysterious territories with the inscription: 'HIC SUNT LEONES' or 'HIC SUNT DRACONES', a perfect exemplification of how uncharted lands were inherently connected with life-threatening dangers, and how imagination almost automatically worked to generate myths out of what was beyond the mind's grasp.



The first of many ominous 'Gateway Arches' encountered by the expedition

Pushing the boundaries of the classical 'zoological' classification, the authors of *Manifest Destiny* show a fervid fantasy in populating the West with monsters. We find 'minotaurs' (half-bison, half-human), carnivorous prairies, a strange race of talking birds, a huge man-eating toad, and the flora itself that, spreading like a zombifying virus, turns the pioneers into highly-infective, aggressive half-vegetal creatures. About this last incarnation of the horrors of the West, it is interesting to notice how (at least in the first issues of the series) it is the continent itself that seems to possess some kind of will, orchestrating the many attacks on the Lewis and Clark Expedition through a supposed 'collective conscience' whose aim is to stop the men from reaching the Pacific – as it could foresee the ravages and massacres that were to come. As a confirmation, a character writes in his log: «Nature itself may be our most formidable foe» (Issue 19: 1).

Before spending some more words on this characterization of nature as a sentient and malevolent (from the expedition's point of view, of course) being, I would like to re-connect this connotation to its ideological substratum, in order to better clarify *Manifest Destiny's* desecrating critique of "The Epic of America", as James Truslow Adams defined it. As I made clear at the beginning, the American West has been the repository of a large part of the US's national mythology. The connection between geography and ethos, or between space and ideology, was probably pinpointed for the first time by Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). In this famous and debated essay, the historian considered the frontier stage of American expansion – in regard to the worldview and social philosophy it brought along – something to be retained, at least ideally, at all costs. Only by embracing a perennial frontier state of mind the American people could maintain a firm grasp on progress, thus ensuring their endurance through the centuries.

Turner's paradigm is obviously a mindful mix of overt optimism and sheer nationalism, and his analysis hasn't stood the test of time – as a matter of fact it has been discussed, critiqued, revisited, debunked and problematized by a great number of historic approaches that came after

it, most notably by the historians belonging to the “New Western History” current.

The myth of the “Garden of the World”, an explosive version of the pastoral vision that developed on the eastern coast (and especially in Virginia), maintains the latter’s utopian nature and strong religious slant. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, then, that was Thomas Jefferson himself that ordered the Lewis and Clark expedition – his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1785, is a milestone of American ruralism, and a key text to understand American pastoralism in general. A now-classic study on the western frontier, Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, underlines the connection between the original Virginian Edenic ideal and its western counterpart through the mediation of President Jefferson. «The importance of the Lewis and Clarke expedition», writes Nash Smith, «lay on the level of imagination: it was drama, it was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future. It gave tangible substance to what had been merely an idea» (Nash Smith 1950: 18). Working to undermine rather than to epitomize this myth, *Manifest Destiny* gives shape and depth to its authors’ iconoclastic take on the frontier’s ideological legacy and its mythological assets.

Nothing less than a vanguard in charge of ‘seizing’ the continent’s geography in order to claim it, the expedition was also hidden beneath the make-believe mask of a scientific exploration. As it is made clear by President Jefferson himself, (Issue 24: 19) there is a “war” going on, and the expedition’s mission is far from being a peaceful one. «Without blood there is no prosperity [...]» says Captain Helm (a character I am going to discuss later on), and only the side willing to spill innocent blood «shall win the war and rule the land» (*ibid.*: 20). Although mapping and naturalistic classification were not the main concern of the corps, the series heightens this aspect by showing an overenthusiastic Lewis as he names the newly discovered species (a true American Adam descending through hell), meticulously stores plant and flower specimens and generally devotes all his attention to the strange new world he passes through. «Too much focus can be dangerous» (Issue 31: 18) says the always practical Clark to a daydreaming Lewis as the latter is absorbed by the study of the mysterious and ominous arches.

Ironically, this pronouncement is a perfect meta-comment on the series itself: *Manifest Destiny's* sometimes pedantic attention to Louisiana's strange and horrific biosphere¹ is but a hint to go over the surface of things by stripping the myth of its glorifying aura. Lewis's obsessive nomenclatural patina can't really hide what is beneath: a landscape of horror, death and fear upon which American democracy laid the foundation for its myths.

The idea of a 'landscape of fear' is particularly apt in describing the series' locale due to some plain references to H. P. Lovecraft scattered through the issues² – also, in the afterword to the first issue, "This book is weird and I blame my mom and dad" (Issue 1: 25), writer Chris Dingess plainly inscribes the series into the framework of "weird fiction", a label that Lovecraft himself used and popularized. What we discover as we follow the expedition's path, is that the arches/portals connect our world with an extraterrestrial dimension in which gods more ancient, more powerful and definitely crueller than our own, are lurking, waiting to wreak havoc on Earth. It doesn't get more Lovecraftian than this, I guess. This fearful geography also evokes the title of a very interesting book by the human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan called, of course, *Landscapes of Fear*. Going through the different ways in which primitive societies have lived their places and times, Yi-Fu Tuan shows how «the farther [a tribe or a generic group of people] move away

¹ As a proof of this 'scientific' outlook, the bound volumes of the series bear titles like *Flora & Fauna*, *Amphibia & Insecta*, *Chiroptera & Carniformaves*.

² The connection between the idea of a 'landscape of fear' and Lovecraft's cosmology is not done at random. In an interview with author John Higgs (link in sitography), Alan Moore talks about his *Providence* and Lovecraft's unconventional cosmological view. The suggestion that Lovecraft's work as a whole is sustained by a landscape of fear is Moore's, or at least, I heard it from him for the first time. I found it to be a brilliant definition and used it ever since. I later found a similar argument in Moore's introduction of Leslie S. Klinger's *The New Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*. The formula is of course also inspired by Yi-Fu Tuan's *Landscapes of Fear*, a book I refer to later on in the essay.

from their settlements the more likely they are to meet nature spirits that are maliciously rather than unintentionally harmful» (1979: 55). Of course, a subdivision of the 19th-century US Army is certainly not a group of Tarongans hunters (the people originally used by Tuan in the statement above); on the contrary: the expedition uses everything allowed by their status of technologically advanced men to bend the environment to their will. In spite of that, if we consider Turner's frontier thesis again (and we must, because *Manifest Destiny* is aware in its addressing it), it is necessary to remember how, according to the historian, progressing through the wilderness meant also retrogressing to a pre-civilized social stage. «American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line» (Turner 1921: 2). This regression gets clearer and clearer as the soldiers push through the wilderness. Ranks, order and the general social balance are shattered, and people slowly turn into ruthless brutes who would stop at nothing when it comes to survive the "fatal environment" (in Richard Slotkin's words). As a result, the West becomes populated with malevolent creatures of all sorts, giving *Manifest Destiny* an 'epic' quality similar to that which can be found in classical odeporic literature such as the *Odyssey* or the *Argonautica*. The convergence of Tuan's description of tribal fear and Turner's social-historical de-evolution gives us the coordinates to understand how the series uses landscape and characters to draw a picture of American colonialism that draws as much from the rhetorically-biased national discourse than from the kind of irrational 'mapping' associated with tribal cultures – or, in this (and Turner's) case, de-evolved 'civilized' men. *Manifest Destiny*, then, accommodates to Turner's classic frontier thesis, demonstrating once again its deliberate drawing on American national mythology.

But, for all its philological accuracy, the series is not a mirror neutrally reflecting the image projected by nationalism. Here is where horror breaks in, and why.

As I wrote, Lovecraft is indeed a major influence on *Manifest Destiny's* cosmology. Apart from one's judgment of the Providence writer's work, it is impossible not to recognize in him an acute observer

of his times, an eclectic intelligence drawn equally to Greek mythology and quantum physics. Nothing like a coherent philosophy of existence was ever penned by Lovecraft, but his cosmic nihilism – the belief that we inhabit a complex and ultimately unfathomable universe totally indifferent to our presumptions of being somewhat ‘special’, the expression of a superior will or of some inherent finalism in the order of things – can be deducted from his letters and, of course, from the dreadful ‘Olympus’ that populates his fiction: a mythology made of extraterrestrial and extradimensional deities that are described as demented or aloof, sometimes not even aware of human existence at all. As Alan Moore writes in the introduction to Leslie S. Klinger *The New Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*:

Lovecraft came of age in an America yet to cohere as a society, much less as an emergent global superpower, and still beset by a wide plethora of terrors and anxieties. [...] In this light, it is possible to perceive Lovecraft as an almost unbearably sensitive barometer of American dread. (Klinger 2014: 10, 11)

Lovecraft’s landscape of fear is then the result of his bleak vision, a cosmic indifferentism, or “cosmicism” as it has been often labeled (*Cfr.* Klinger 2014: 99), through which a society’s fears and disquiet are projected on the space that that society inhabits. If one confronts this worldview (or better, its inner workings) with the traditional Puritan way of perceiving American space, some similarities as well as some important differences are to be noted.

The Puritan vision of the wilderness was strictly tied to the cognate ideas of the garden and the errand. New England Puritans perceived their mission in the New World to be an «errand into a howling wilderness, in the midst of which as God’s regenerate band they would make a pleasure garden for Him» (Simpson 1983: 15). They were moved by a teleological drive that ensured them the right and will to conquer the “unholy wilderness” outside the safe limits of the new garden of Eden sustained by their obedience to the covenant with God. It is not

difficult to understand Lewis and Clark's holier-than-thou attitude towards the new land and its inhabitants if one considers the religious rationale from which the doctrine of manifest destiny has budded. Under this aspect, the perception of uncharted territories differs little from Yi-Fu Tuan's description of primitive societies' spatial grid – the fear of the unknown is in a way fear of what is godless. But the feeling of being invested with a 'sacred' quest guaranteed these men the blind confidence that probably buoyed the Spanish 'conquistadores' in the 16th Century (represented in the series by the trickster ghost Maldonado, an evil and deceptive presence that stands as a spectral synecdoche for all the ravages that Europeans inflicted on the American continent). The belief that the US destiny was to spread and prevail is indeed clear from the very beginning of the Puritan discourse on American space, as it is clear from this sermon by Thomas Prince delivered in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1730, in which the "dark regions of America" are made, through Isaiah 35:8, into a land of plenty: «The waters of the divine influence break out in the wilderness [...] and an high way now is there which is call'd the way of holiness» (cited in Simpson 1983: 5). Although the members of the expedition are often portrayed in the series as hot-blooded patriots and sometimes religious fanatics, the fundamental optimism of the errand into the wilderness is fundamentally lost, and the "enjoyment" associated to it by Samuel Danforth (Simpson 1984: 6) is turned into a pervasive atmosphere of fear, horror, and desperation.

This short digression into the Puritan-pastoral roots of manifest destiny is intended to show how, when it comes to *Manifest Destiny*, it would be in a way perfunctory to interpret the large number of monstrosities encountered by Lewis and Clark and their men only as a re-imagination of the tribal, classical, and Puritanical disquiet towards wilderness – as I said, the series is not a mirror uncritically reflecting a certain set of cultural elements. In other words, one should not think of the horrific imagery being so to speak 'emanated' by the 'genius loci' of the unknown territories, but rather consider how *Manifest Destiny's* space is actually a mindscape projected by an uneasy conscience – the machinery of terror is set in motion by the same drive that moved

Lovecraft's approach to the fantastic. In the wake of the great American gothic heritage, and in accord with what David Punter writes in *The Literature of Terror Volume 2: The Modern Gothic*, the series exhibits «a process of cultural self-analysis, and the images which it throws up become the dream-figures of a troubled social group, troubled now by international *as much as national developments*» (Punter 2013: 205, italics mine). In their depicting an unwelcoming, violent and ruthless geography, the authors of *Manifest Destiny* are creating a complex allegory of US colonization, showing off its intrinsic monstrosity through the comic's fantastic and horrific distortions.

Quite explicitly, the series puts at the end of the journey through the West a last 'Gateway Arch' standing right in front of the Pacific Ocean – and more stunning than any of the others, to the point that a character exclaims: «We were rewarded for our exploration a vision of such beauty it cemented any belief in a Christian God that this journey had weakened» (Issue 22: 14). It is not Lewis and Clark who get there at first, but a previous, lost expedition (I am going to refer to them as the Helm-Flewelling expedition from now on) whose numbers are gruesomely cut down by monsters, cannibalism and madness – just like the official Corps of Discovery the series is mainly focused upon – and whose only survivor will indirectly persuade Jefferson to kick off the expedition by bringing back from the West the skull of a 'sasquatch'. It is the Spanish ghost Maldonado who tricks the remaining members of this expedition into reaching the arch, and the mention of a rejuvenated faith in God is indeed more than a hint at the role that religion had in presenting Western colonialism as an ersatz cultural dogma. But the last arch is, like the others, a portal to an abominable dimension, and the horror it discloses is the authors' strongest and clearest dig at American expansion (until now, I need to add, because the series is still ongoing). When the portal-arch opens, the remaining two famished members of the Helm-Flewelling expedition are faced with the appalling vision of an extradimensional god in the form of a monstrous, giant, eagle-like creature surrounded by hellish fire – «This is your destiny. This is Navath» (Issue 22: 15) says Maldonado. The extraterrestrial god (more powerful than God himself, it seems) is soon revealed to be a sadistic



Navath, America's Manifest Destiny

and bloodthirsty entity who forces the two men to fight themselves to death in order to find a true 'survivor'. Of course, the eagle looks and the fact that this malevolent deity is standing at the westernmost point reached by the expedition is not casual at all. Navath substitutes the noble-looking national bird with a fiery monster; or rather, standing as the 'non plus ultra' of the American dream of expansion, strips this symbol down to its naked core of unadulterated violence.

Let's go back to Frederick Jackson Turner. The spatial logic of the frontier as described by the historian posits that the westward movement is to be identified with the advancement of democracy. The fallacy of this logic was already recognized by Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land*, in which he wrote:

In associating democracy with free land he [Turner] had inevitably linked it also with the idea of nature as a source of spiritual values. [...] Since democracy for him was related to the idea of nature and seemed to have no logical relation to civilization, the conclusion implied by his system was that postfrontier American society contained no force tending toward democracy. (Nash Smith 1950: 257-258)

If democracy as Turner defines it needs nature³ to put down roots, one could imagine the frontier as a kind of wave (an analogy used by Turner himself) in which the crest signals the point where the democratic process is more actively in action, being everything that stands behind it progressively more civilized, and so more detached from nature, as far as one moves back from the outer edge. The frontier ridge is the

³ Although Turner believed in the regenerative power of nature, I think that the kind of relationship with the environment that he had in mind was close to what Leo Marx, in relation to the American pastoral, called "middle state" (Cfr. *The Machine in the Garden*), and not a Hobbesian "State of Nature", being the latter more similar to the kind of social and spiritual anarchy usually linked to completely untamed wilderness.

zenith of democratization, transforming the chaotic wilderness into a “striated” (in Deleuzian terms) space ready to be overflowed by US civilization. Following these dynamics, it is possible to imagine the western coast as the ultimate democratic space, an idea already ironically expressed by Joan Didion who, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* wrote: «things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent» (1968: 225).

The overturn staged by *Manifest Destiny* is then total. The height of the American destiny comes to coincide with an entity of unspeakable evil: cruel, ruthless and spiteful. As I wrote before, the extradimensional god forces Helm and Flewelling to fight themselves to death, as he is looking for the strongest survivor. The “dominant individualism” that according to Turner could be bent to work “for good or for evil” (Turner 1921: 37) seems to be directed exclusively towards the latter in the series. It is as if, in reaching the westernmost point, American character is not as much as heightened by the hardships endured, but ultimately stripped down to its real dimension: an implacable, grisly individualism. D. H. Lawrence’s words on the essential American soul being “hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer” are on point here.

If the fact that the acme of manifest destiny appears to be a symbol of cosmic horror shouldn’t be enough to state the series’ argument, shortly after the deadly fight we witness another quite transparent scene. Captain Helm (the chosen survivor) is walking back to Washington to deliver Navath’s message. The man is starving and half-crazed, talking to his former companion’s severed head as he carries it tied to his body like a satchel. In a desperate attempt to stay alive– «I do what I must to survive», he says, and, in a crescendo: «I will rob a bird of flight to survive», «I will destroy beauty to survive» (Issue 23: 8-9) – Helm strangles a bald eagle and devours it alive to the delight of Flewelling’s severed head, who exclaims: «God bless America! Well done, Captain» (*ibid*: 9). The ferocious irony of this scene is self-evident. The symbolic shift between the monstrous, eagle-like Navath and the actual bald eagle is a clear hint at the deformation of the American ethos into a ruthless ideology of dominance. An ideology that, pushed to the extreme, consumes itself.

Helm will return to Jefferson and tell him about the western 'terra damnata', prompting the president to organize the Lewis and Clark expedition, but the man's mind will never recover from the horrors he witnessed, leaving him forever in the mouth of madness (another clear Lovecraftian motif). It should now be clear that in *Manifest Destiny* violence is never a necessary evil through which the higher values of American democracy are asserted – there is nothing regenerative in what the soldier did or suffered, and the same goes with the members of the Corps of Discovery, whose regression to a more primitive state is not coincident with a return to a more innocent social state, but rather a descent into barbarism and insanity. Both Slotkin's and Turner's paradigms are denied here, since violence isn't by any means justified by an ennobling myth, and the regression from Europe-influenced ways of life, a step that Turner deemed necessary for the birth of the true American character, isn't followed by the affirmation of newborn 'Übermenschen'. By missing this step, the characters in *Manifest Destiny* are permanently stuck in a subhuman condition of bestiality and nihilism. Lewis and Clark's catabasis isn't paired with a resurgence back to the stars. As I said the series is still ongoing, but at the moment it is practically impossible to distinguish the members of the expedition from the brainless monsters that surround them – with the possible exception of few men, they have alienated any sympathy that the reader could have felt for them.

Throughout the story, the space in which the characters move is always a mirror of their psychological and moral journey, acting at least in one occasion (the 'fog' episode in issues 26-31) as an actual projection of their fears and remorse for their past misdeeds. It won't be an exaggeration to think of the West as it is depicted in the series as another 'character', actively participating in the story and contributing to its unraveling. The space evoked by the authors shows both fantastic and realistic elements carefully blended together. The Corps' itinerary is carefully reproduced on the map, as are some real landmarks that the expedition passes on its way west, like the hamlet of La Charrette and Fort Mandan (built in 1804 by Lewis and Clark's men and located in modern-day North Dakota). This quality makes the Louisiana Territory

in *Manifest Destiny* a 'real and imagined' place, built as much on historical research as on sheer fantasy, thus actively and continuously interacting with the characters.

The definition is not mine of course, but it is taken from Edward Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Spaces* (where the adjectives "real" and "imagined" are actually hyphenated into a single, integral quality), a very important study in sociospatiality that could be used to further investigate *Manifest Destiny's* geographical dynamics. Some fundamental distinctions need to be made, though. It is not my intention here to go deep into Soja's theories, nor to systematically apply the thirdspace construct to the series' real and fictional space. My mention of Soja is but a moment of transition to theoretically frame *Manifest Destiny's* West in more accurate terms. The geographer's intent was not only to apply a different system of thought to the study of space through the suggestion of a "cumulative trialectics" between spatiality, historicity and sociality (already established by Henry Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space*), but also to inject spatial studies with radically progressive ethics. Thirdspace, mediated also by postcolonial thinkers such as Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said, is «radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge» (Soja 1996: 61), and so, also an undoubtedly optimistic encouragement to an endless re-negotiation of cultural and identity values. Through thirdspace we are fostered to reconsider the relations between a cultural monolith and everything that moves on its peripheral boundaries, simultaneously taking into account the centripetal and the centrifugal in the creation of a fluid super-system whose pivotal element is inclusiveness. Although *Manifest Destiny* demonstrates to be painfully aware of the need to reconsider spatial knowledge to reach a higher level of cultural conscience, it is impossible to consider it as an artistic rendition of Soja's thought. Quite the opposite, in fact: through the Lewis and Clark expedition, one is faced with a synecdoche of the ruthless advance of the whole American war machine. As an example, let's consider the Corps' encounter with a strange race of talking birds: the Fezron. After teaming up with this weird tribe to fight a common enemy (the predatory, head-hunting

Vameter), the soldiers wait for them to be sound asleep before slaughtering every single Fezron in cold blood, fearing that they could be of some danger to the future American settlers. This scene, a particularly repulsive one in a comic full of gore, is a quite straightforward allegory of how Native Americans were systematically exterminated and removed from their land in order to make space for the expanding nation. Unmistakable iconographic references leave no doubt about the political intent of this narrative arch, so much that a reader (who shall here remain anonymous) complained with the authors about what he felt to be an unnecessary politicization of the series. He probably didn't read between the lines before, as this had not been the first time that *Manifest Destiny* more or less directly addressed what has been silenced by the nationalistic rhetoric associated with the West.

Everything in *Manifest Destiny* goes in the direction of dystopia and apocalypse. Soja's paradigm may furnish the grounds upon which the series' spatial and cultural awareness are grounded, but the authors consciously decided to turn everything in the worst possible scenario. This kind of operation is closer to another theoretical dimension, that of James R. Giles' "fourthspace". The critic coined this term in relation to the novels of Cormac McCarthy, another ambiguous rhapsodist of the American west, whose *Blood Meridian*, an epic and unbearably violent book, was undoubtedly an influence on *Manifest Destiny's* atmosphere. In an essay published in the volume of Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Views* dedicated to Cormac McCarthy, Giles takes Soja's thirdspace premises and overturns its outcome into what he labels "fourthspace", an imagined landscape «existing in a condition somewhat similar to, but ultimately extremely unlike, Edward W. Soja's thirdspace» (Giles 2009: 109). «Fourthspace», he writes, «merges the material, the metaphoric or linguistic, and the psychological or subconscious, and only the darkest forms of freedom, the most horrific possibilities, result from the merger» (*ibid.*). The authors' deep-seated skepticism towards the overblown national rhetoric infiltrates the imperialist discourse like a virus and turn it against itself, creating a horror-ridden historiographic metafiction whose function is to debunk the frontier mythology forever nestled into the American mind.

Manifest Destiny situates itself in the grain of the artistic expressions of disbelief towards this naïve (but not at all innocent) metanarrative, and it chooses to do so eminently through the way in which space is described, depicted and lived by the characters. If H. P. Lovecraft established an antecedent in terms of the cosmic-pessimistic worldview exhibited by the series, the construction of the narrative space owes much to the same dynamics that Ruth D. Weston associated to the gothic space in relation to Eudora Welty's novels. The connection between a disenchanting reaction to Turner's original thesis and Welty's use of the gothic space as a consistent technique in her oeuvre was first highlighted by Lisa K. Miller in an essay titled *The Dark Side of Our Frontier Heritage*, in which the critic analyzed the use of the frontier thesis in Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom*. One of the leading figures in modern American gothic fiction, Welty graduated from the University of Wisconsin, where Frederick Jackson Turner's influence and legacy as a former tenured professor were still strong during the time that the writer spent there. Weston takes this brilliant hint to connect the borderland environments often used by Welty with the ambience associated with traditional gothic settings like prisons, dungeons and cathedrals. In her analysis, she equals gothic space to a narrative technique actively participating in the creation of plot, and defines it as:

A general awareness of a psychological or parapsychological realm that impinges upon the everyday world of actuality. The gothic space is a complex and unpredictable setting that heightens the exposed nature of the human being who is trapped there. [It] engender[s] anxiety, dread, and the sense that escape is not possible. (Weston 1994: 19)⁴

⁴ It is worth noticing how Weston's definition echoes Lovecraft's own description of weird fiction's aura: "A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces [...] a malign and particular suspension or defeat of th[e] fixed laws of Nature" (Lovecraft 1973: 15).

And that is exactly how *Manifest Destiny* works in creating a space that is also a mindspace explicitly directed towards a critique of the ideas contained and connected to the philosophy that gives the series its title. This definition reinforces once again my belief that western space is used in the comic as a projection of the troubled unconscious of a guilty nation, filtered and worded by that nation's most sensitive (or straightforwardly dissident) members. The map of the Louisiana Territory reproduced by *Manifest Destiny* is but a polemic, political pamphlet intended to demystify the rhetoric of a country built by brave men that had God on their side and, as the fanatic preacher Pryor jokingly declares (Issue 31: 4), loaded guns in their hands – which seems to me an almost literal quotation of a famous American poet⁵ who once bitingly declared that one doesn't count the dead and doesn't ask questions when God is on your side.

⁵ I am of course referencing Bob Dylan's *With God on Our Side*.

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The author

Marco Petrelli

Marco Petrelli received his PhD from “Sapienza”, University of Rome in 2017 with a dissertation, titled “A Southern Mode of the Imagination: Space and Myth in Cormac McCarthy’s Novels”. He is currently adjunct professor of Anglo-American Literatures and Languages at the University of Catania. His research interests include, but are not limited to, the literature and culture of the US South, contemporary American literature, postmodernism, geocriticism, and graphic narratives. He published articles on Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner.

Email: marco.sal.petrelli@gmail.com

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