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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of World War II in the home front as represented in short-stories published in the U.S. wartime journal *Common Ground*. Published between 1940 and 1949, the magazine combined literature and social and cultural critique in its progressive analysis of matters of race, immigration, citizenship, and civil rights. Although *Common Ground's* intellectual community committed itself to protect unity at the home front, it published complex representations of the theme of homecoming in particular, conveying instances of latent violence at the national level that challenged the sense of 'homeliness.' The analysis attempts a combination of theories of the nation with Gaston Bachelard's considerations on the poetics of space and Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny.

Introduction

Shortly before the United States' entry into World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated that he wanted to provide the U.S. and the world with 'freedom from fear'. Roosevelt's famous 1941 annual message to Congress, "The Four Freedoms", selected four specific freedoms: want, fear, speech and religion. While the latter were 'old' liberties written in the U.S. Constitution, the former two resulted from the specific international context of the moment, and also, at home, from the acute economic crisis that ravaged the nation for over a decade. Want and fear explained the rise of the nazi and fascist regimes in Europe and the present war. But by rallying his citizens to the protection of these freedoms, Roosevelt already had in mind, of course, the U.S. intervention in the war, a decision that was still controversial among the people. And thus, while raising the flag of a fearless life in an unarmed world, Roosevelt also ordered an increase in the output of the national industries of armament.

In terms of national economic policy, the war industries actually accomplished what Roosevelt's Presidency's best promise – the New Deal – had continuously fallen short of attaining: economic stability and an end to the Great Depression. If anything was to blame for this unprecedented period of economic and emotional hardships in national history, it was the Depression. With the war industries working at full speed after 1939, freedom from want was soon to be conquered. But the same could not be said about freedom from fear. The attack on the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, later in 1941, strengthened fear at the home front. The same act of aggression would justify the entry of the U.S. in the war, offering the missing reason for consensus: self-defense. On a broad ideological level, it was furthermore a war with a universal target: a war against oppression in the forms of fascism and imperialism. This were the best vindications to make it a *just war* in the classical sense, hence its permanence in the popular memory as 'the good war' and 'the people's war'.

But this perception was not easy to build up during wartime. Keeping up morale at the home front became as ingenious a process as at the battlefield. In a nation of immigration as the U.S., unity and solidarity were a continuous trial the war tended to aggravate. The variety of ethnicities making up the national whole was feared as a powerful fuse to dissent, betrayal, disloyalty, division – in a word, disunion. The concern was not new, but the war created particular circumstances that might generate different views over the participation of the U.S. in the conflict, for once because original home bonds of loyalty and affect might well compete with the national imaginary of the U.S. and so weaken the necessary sentiment of patriotism and full loyalty to, and engagement in, the war effort.

Perspectives indeed varied widely. How good was this war for people of German and Italian descent, who were soon forced to report to the authorities, labelled as 'enemy aliens' and eventually forbidden naturalization? How much goodness was there in the forced displacement of the Japanese American community, who, in an unprecedented military operation, were incarcerated in remote camps, surrounded by barbed wire, where they remained in isolation for over three years, their homes and property confiscated by the state,

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all with Roosevelt's approval? Not to mention the ongoing discrimination against 'traditional' oppressed groups, from Mexican and Native Americans to African Americans, all of which left home to fight bravely for the nation in the war, only to experience the same forms of segregation in the army, and, upon return, meet the same familiar – or unfamiliar? – home.

Common Ground, the journal I will be looking into, takes up these questions, elaborating on the metaphor of the wars within, social tension as a 'psychological civil war' that undermined the war effort and the promise of stability of the home front. Part of the reason why I believe *Common Ground* gave a particular contribution to wartime discourse is its 'double allegiance', as both part of a government agency, and part of what became a particular critical project developed by the community of intellectuals who contributed to the journal. Published between 1940 and 1949, *Common Ground* was the organ of the Common Council for American Unity, one of the many agencies created to answer the national emergency, and as such it was deeply intertwined with the war effort. It was committed to contributing to national pacification and keeping the national morale safe and sound, as part of a legacy of war agencies that went as far back as World War I, and Woodrow Wilson's need to justify the U.S. involvement in the war.

But the 1940s were significantly different from the 1910s, for the nazis had given propaganda a very bad name. A democratic society as the U.S. boasted to *educate* rather than manipulate its citizens. The occasionally conflicting, yet challenging, articulation between pedagogy and criticism in the pages of *Common Ground* is a result of that tension. The journal was in fact launched with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, but progressive voices soon began to seek a consistent critique of the home front's problems and found ways to work this critique through the praise of the war effort. That *Common Ground* built a solid individual project was proven by the fact that publication halted only as late as 1949.

In its promotion of critical and active debate over society, *Common Ground* became a cultural practice by itself, and also a social and political activity. Its audience corresponded to Nancy Fraser's idea of the 'subaltern counterpublic' because the contributors conceived of the magazine as their own discursive arena (1993: 14), one which articulated and gave voice to the interpretations and interests of ethnic groups normally excluded from open debate, as William Beyer demonstrated, in "Creating 'Common Ground' on the Home Front: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in a 1940s Quarterly Magazine" (1995). The place and dynamics of the diverse ethnicities in society was one of the cornerstones of the magazine, also because many of *Common Ground*'s contributors were second generation immigrants themselves. But the pool of magazine's contributors was wide and included influent intellectuals, from Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank to Pearl S. Buck, Louis Adamic and Langston Hughes, Thomas Mann and Carey McWilliams.

The Home-Nation, the National Family and the Uncanny

The choice for the politics of belonging as the center of the magazine's project explains the importance of the theme of home in *Common Ground*'s texts, an aspect often articulated with the metaphor of the people as the national family. Gaston Bachelard's remarks on the 'house' being "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (1994: 6) help one understand the resonance of the image of the nation as home. For Bachelard, it works like a formula, "a body of images" dominated by positive maternal features; it is like "a large cradle" in which life begins "enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (1994: 7). These images identify and signify ideas of stability, therefore holding a promise of protection for the individual (1994: 17). Hence, home is not pure space but, and especially if aligned with the nation, it emerges as a yet more powerful site of belonging and as such a continuous source of meaning within the national imaginary.

Common Ground aligned with this powerful discourse that further inhabited the 'house'/nation with one "single family, bound together by affective ties akin to those [individuals] shared with their closest relatives" (Westbrook, 1993: 216).

But, as Bachelard also states, the house protects more than the individual. It becomes also a reservoir of memories and imagination (1994: 5), which reminds one necessarily of Sigmund Freud's articulation of the feeling of the uncanny with the unhomely. As Freud remarked, the home is a paradoxical entity in its combination of protection and secrecy: what the home keeps, it also conceals, keeps hidden, from those outside it; the 'heimlich' is simultaneously the 'unheimlich' because it contains it, for what was repressed/kept secret had once been familiar (2003: 132; 134). Thus, memory and the imagination or, as Freud says, the 'secret wisdom' of the home, can *haunt* the place as well (2003: 129). Of course, in the case of Common Ground's texts, the war is the triggering event to deal with the unhomely aspects of the nation. When the war turns the nation upside down, the emergence of the 'home front' immediately gives expression to that inevitable disarray: despite the war, the home is still desired as the familiar shelter and demanded to retain its protective aura; but, because of the war, the permanent menace of insecurity - the unfamiliar - holds a place within the home nation and breeds sentiments Freud describes as the uncanny. On top of that, the nation-state's immediate grasp at extraordinary powers, allegedly to extend its role as protector of the national family and warrantor of its property, add to the unhomely feeling, for then you have the full play of powers that were repressed, as it were, out in the open and scratching people's everyday lives. All this results in representations of home as a conflicting reality that inspires forms of fear close to Freud's notion of the uncanny. Several of the stories and articles resorting to 'home' in their titles end up introducing representations that disrupted the classical meaning of the nation as home and family.

In *Common Ground*'s texts, a bellicose vocabulary takes hold from early on. War as the leading metaphor was introduced by writer Louis Adamic, the first editor, in his inaugural editorial, "This Crisis is an Opportunity", when he asserted that there was "a [...] psychological civil war, which is being waged among groups of various backgrounds within our population" (63). Adamic elaborated further on the image: "We are not free internally of many of the subtle ills, weaknesses, and disorders that afflict other lands recently crushed or still under attack as I write" (62); "It is the dark, quicksandy basis of the psychological civil war [...] the prejudices, intolerance and discrimination that shoot and fly in all directions" (65).¹

It was indeed not long after the publication of Adamic's first editorial that the U.S. witnessed some of the worst urban riots in its history. The so-called Detroit race riots took place in 1943, Detroit being referred to in *Common Ground* as a "bustling war center" (21).² The riot was one of the most fierce in U.S. history, leaving 34 people dead. In the same year, New York City witnessed the Harlem race riots, whereas Los Angeles saw the '*Pachuco* riots', involving the Mexican American community. Not only did these events add significantly to the feeling of collective insecurity in the urban populations, as they also evinced how the order of peace and security defended by the nation-state effectively relied upon a deeper, and latent, structure of violent disorder – to which the nation-state itself was not alien.

To follow on Adamic's metaphor, at the root of this war was fear, and fear ran through relations within the national family itself. Fear, too, inspired the action of the nation-state but in other forms: fear of the fragmentation of the nation, of loyalties drifting away, of treason to the national cause. And, in *Common Ground*, fear was associated with a manifest dissatisfaction with the repressive measures imposed within, by the nation-state, on account of protecting the national family. Implied in Louis Adamic's words are the institutionalized

¹ "This Crisis is an Opportunity", 1.1 (Autumn 1940): 62-73.

² "Prelude to Disaster: Detroit", by Louis Martin (4.1 – Autumn 1943).

forms of violence, within that vast monopoly which the nation-state assigns itself (Giddens, 1985: 184) and by means of which the state also administrates fear – considering that citizenship is the official stamp of belonging. Adamic is certainly aiming at a range of disciplining processes meant to secure 'internal pacification', to follow Anthony Giddens's critique (1985: 193). Some of those mechanisms were already in place, others came into being in the course of the magazine's duration.³ None of them, however, took into account that other complex structure the nation-state had inherited after the demise of the church, the 'love for the nation', which combined civic virtues with individual subjectivity and the affects and might ultimately challenge the national symbolic (Berlant, 1991).⁴

Fictional representations of the home-nation in Common Ground

I shall follow on to examine fictional texts and how the critique of "the psychological civil war" is accomplished in representations of the home-nation in a couple of short stories dealing with unsettling forms of homecoming. *Common Ground* articulated texts of cultural and social critique with both literary and non-literary, namely autobiographical pieces, but I will focus on the latter. The protagonists in these stories are veterans or soldiers on leave, and discriminated communities, seeking to integrate or reintegrate after the experience of the war. All are requested to face home again after dislocation but none finds the expected welcoming home, the desired safe haven from the war.

One of the most accomplished amongst those representations is, to my mind, "Homecoming", by Frank Yerby, in which the experience of the battlefield fundamentally

³ In effect, the recent 'Alien Registration Act' of 1940 required all non-citizen adult residents to register with the Government and this was followed by the Presidential Order of Dec 8th, 1941, directed at foreign born immigrants coming from 'enemy nations' and halting naturalization procedures.

⁴ Critic Lauren Berlant argues that citizenship in these conditions always implies a double form of "self-abstraction" (on the psychic level) and "self-amputation" (a metaphor referring to the effects of the interdiction of particular forms of physical behavior). Hence, the immigrant as the stranger or foreigner evinces that the *emotional* authority of the nation does not belong to the State alone; it depends on the individuals' will as well. In face of the straight-jacket that national identity can be, the individual may retain individual forms of subjectivity that act like what Berlant also calls a counter-memory that defies the national symbolic.

displaces the Black veteran's idea of home, as he comes back to the Jim Crow South.⁵ In his return to his hometown, Willie is welcomed by a lynch-mob. Although this is no more than a repetition of a once familiar situation, one might expect a different reaction, for Willie brings along from the warfront a very peculiar lesson in dignity. The pain inflicted by the war wounds and the artificial leg won in the war, along with his military decorations, made him realize that he was a man before being a Negro, or a 'boy', and he would not have that disputed anymore, as he explains to his old master, Colonel Bob: "Don't know how to run. Don't know how to beg. Just knows how to fight". Changes in the segregated South did not follow Willie's, though, so the war lesson that helped him repress his fear can not be applied back home. After just a couple of hours that include a visit to the town's enduring memory of Southern aspirations in the Civil War, the Confederate Monument, Willie leaves – better still, he is forced to run away (in as far as his artificial leg allows him...) He pathetically limps along the small town's main avenue towards the train station, eager to flee to the North. He looks as if still marching, but, of course, there is nothing of the dignity attached to defending the family-nation in the indignity of having to defend himself from his own family, in his own home; in other words, he does not manage to repress fear any further. The obvious infamy in the return of fear, this kind of agony and terror felt at home, suggests the uncanny, "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar [homely]" (Freud 2003: 124). One way or another, Willie finds out that he can not escape: an army truck and an ambulance, sent by Colonel Bob, save him from the lynch-mob, at the very last moment, but the end of the story is ambiguous. His weeping and resistance to the officers leads one to think he would have wished to *fight* the crowd instead. But what glory would there be in being lynched...? "This man is a combat fatigue case-not responsible for his actions", the officers declare, making clear that his ultimate destination

⁵ 6.3 (Spring 1946): 41-47.

may well not be the train station and his freedom, but another repetition of a familiar/unfamiliar story.

"Homecoming" is clearly an allusion to the troubled times of 1941-42, when several black soldiers were killed, mainly in the South. But I believe it is also a synecdoche of the experience of those Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Filipino Americans and African Americans who returned from the battlefield, sometimes with military badges, to meet no more than the familiar everyday spaces in which the action of the state in defence of the nation deferred the promise of equality, keeping them distant from the privileges of belonging they had fought for with their own lives. In other words, it stays for all those who were required to face again the unhomely nation of their past, of their memory. As in "Homecoming", the war had allowed the fear of racism to be repressed, but the mob incident triggers the uncanny when it forces Willie to meet racism in the eye again.

In Yerby's short-story, the form of state protection represented by the army truck and the ambulance also called to mind the pattern of 'protective custody' applied to Japanese Americans at the home front during wartime. *Common Ground* was indeed one of the few *forae* which dared to question and debate publicly the internment program of this community.⁶ As noted by a Japanese American contributor to the journal, if Jim Crow ruled race relations in the South, *Jap Crow* would soon receive the official stamp and so rule nationwide, by means of the wartime removal program.⁷ Forced removal to the internment camps was the best evidence of official hostility towards Japanese immigrants and their descendants, and the apex of an old anti-Oriental tradition upheld by federal legislation.⁸

⁶ Common Ground devoted a large section of its Spring 1942 issue to the matter, in texts subscribed by Japanese American contributors.

⁷ "Farewell to Little Tokyo", by Larry Tajiri, 4.2 (Winter 1943): 90-95.

⁸ Basically this legislation did not allow Asian ethnicities to attain citizenship; e.g. Chinese, Korean, Filipinos, a remnant of the 1870 legislation.

Pearl Harbor attack, the program went well beyond immediate identification and soon incarcerated the Japanese American community, without any trial whatsoever. The event that triggered the operation, the Pearl Harbor attack, is described in Common Ground, in the words of Mary Oyama, a Japanese American writer, in the image of "a hard paralyzing stone inside".⁹ It had triggered so much fear, confusion, shame and anger in the Japanese American community itself that many committed suicide. Those who did not yield to shame, accepted detention and the cancellation of their lives for several years, herded like animals in old stores and barracks lost in the deserts or in the plains.

When the war finished, the War Relocation Authority re-homed the Japanese Americans and I follow the representation in another of Common Ground's texts: "A Nisei Report from Home", also by Mary Oyama, as a reflection both on what she calls, ironically or euphemistically, the "Strange-Interlude" and "the exile in our own country" (26), and a reflection also on the experience of relocation itself.¹⁰ Although the program never comes under open attack, there surfaces, as in other texts, a profound awareness of its racist nature. And although the text ends in a very conciliatory tone: "There are hurts – yes, but they are past, and this homecoming is another beginning" (28), the description of the narrator's son's problematic reintegration at school figures as a repetition of the unfamiliar past: the child states the obvious, that he is called *Richard*, an *American* name, as he very patiently informs his colleagues, following his parents' advice. But for the other schoolchildren the ethnic difference stamped on his eyes creates a contradiction that bears him irremediably different from them. The same idea resonates in another piece published during the relocation period, "Nisei, Nisei", a poem by Japanese American M. H. Constable.¹¹ Here the ethnic traces of the Japanese American materialize in an "enemy mask," but one that can not be pulled off, for it

⁹ "After Pearl Harbor", 2.3 (Spring 1942): 12. ¹⁰ 6.2 (Winter 1946): 26-28.

¹¹ The pseudonym of Mary Takahashi, 6.3 (Spring 1946): 47-48.

is "[n]ailed on [the] flesh". The image suggests an imposed doubleness that again recalls Freud's theory on the uncanny; how can the nation be the home in the sense of the familiar to the Japanese American citizen if s/he is forced to simultaneously perform its other/double – the enemy?

Mexican Americans were another ethnic group traditionally facing legal segregation and exclusion and thus at pains with making the U.S. a home. Beatrice Griffith's "In the Flow of Time" fictionalized the 1943 riots, giving the young *pachuco*, Mingo, the authority of the protagonist.¹² Resentment, vengeance, pride, dignity, and honor command the affects in this short-story, which looks into the imperial history of the U.S. West to explain the emergence of the *pachuco* subculture – or why home did not feel like home in the Southwest.¹³ Caught between their parents' and mainstream culture, the *pachucos* created their own world: it had its own rules, a style and a secret dialect and was associated with street violence, but also with entertainment: dancing, partying, music, dating – none of which was much in tune with the official constraints and sacrificial spirit of wartime. Allegedly resenting this indifference to the war effort, during several nights U.S. marines attacked any pachucos they could find, beating them up and stripping them out of their symbol of pride: the loud, extravagant clothes, all this under yells and cheers from the crowds that gathered around. The police stood in watching and waiting for the grand finale: rounding off the pachucos' humiliation with a night in jail. The events became known as the 'zoot-suit riots', even though the zoot-suiters were actually the victims.

Griffith's short-story actually brings in the 'foreign war' and turns fascism into a native politics in its representation of the riots. When asked by his other *pachuco* friend if he would enlist and fight for the U.S. in the war, Mingo wonders why he should, if the discrimination he feels in Los Angeles is the same that he hears about in places like Germany. We recognise

¹² 9.1 (Autumn 1948): 13-20.

¹³ The identity '*pachuco*' was a step in the ladder of Chicanos, first, and Mexican-Americans, later.

the uncanny in Mingo's words, as he blurs the line between fantasy and reality in inverting the war scenery: "This isn't Los Angeles. This is a street in Germany" (17), he tells his friend. But the uncanny bears yet another form in this short-story: the eruption of the repressed imperial history of the region, in Mingo's 'other war': "This land", he tells his friend, "used to belong to the Mexicans. Maybe it will again. Maybe we'll get it back. I'll fight for it" (19). This is the only war he can conceive of, the only war he sees as protective of his home, a home lost to the U.S.A. It is a war set on U.S. soil, one that would at last deliver Mexicans and their descendants in the U.S. the dignity they were robbed of.

Finally, "Warrior Returning", by Juanita Platero and Siyowin Miller, is a good example to round-off this analysis.¹⁴ Decidero is the Native-American soldier on leave to meet his newborn child. With desertion at the back of his mind, the pun on the character's name reinforces the dilemma, leading the whole plot: will he *decide* to overstay his leave and stay home, abiding to his doubts about his contribution to the war, or will he decide to return to the military base and fulfill his national duty towards the nation? His close family and the community long for his return *home*, many failing to understand his absence, because their sense of the nation-family is not the same as that taught to Decidero at the army. Decidero ultimately stands a trial, as it were, before the tribal council, an event that might create the opportunity for him to come to terms with his decision to desert. After all, in questioning him about what it is like to be away, the ancient wise men touch the wound – or bring in the uncanny: why fight for your nation *away* from that nation? Like in Beatrice Griffith's short-story, the 'house', or the nation, is inhabited by too many (secret) memories that the need to fight in the war bring out into the open.

¹⁴ 5.2 (Winter 1944): 41-52.

Yet, Decidero's doubts gradually begin to wane as he takes up the word and becomes the center of the council, his acceptance of his responsibility in defending the wider national family increasing accordingly. In a funny inversion, the once skeptical elders start listening to him attentively and in unreserved admiration, making him feel proud of that other connection that only he himself holds. The baby who is born meanwhile is unlikely to become a warrior herself – it's a girl – but her name, decided on the spot by the elderly, "She-Comes-With-War", is the seal on her father's loyalty to the national family and the war effort. War is ultimately accepted, as well as the notion of a wider family, blessed with the new beginning symbolized in the newborn. But the essential question has been asked, *why fight a war outside home*?

Conclusion

I believe that *Common Ground*'s decision to silence the battlefield (and its silence when the bombs fell down on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is especially unsettling), certainly aims at protecting the people from the destructive power of the war and representations of the loss of beloved ones that might endanger unity. But the invisibility of the warfront allowed for making the home front visible as a *front itself*, in its many un-homely and innate warring aspects. However, the arrival of another war, the Cold one, identified a new external, and internal, enemy and redirected fear towards this target. In this new war stage, *Common Ground* and its vital critique of the home front were made redundant. During that period, only the Civil Rights movement, I believe, carried on many of *Common Ground*'s concerns and aspirations.

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