<CT>John Kitzmiller, Euro-American Difference, and the Cinema of the West

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Abstract

Using the international career of the now largely forgotten African American star John Kitzmiller (1913–1965) as a test case, this article analyzes the discourse of Euro-American difference and uncovers continuities that this discourse obscures. Michigan-born Kitzmiller served in Italy during WWII as a military engineer before director Luigi Zampa cast him to play a black American soldier in the WWII drama Vivere in pace / To Live in Peace (1947). Convinced that European cinema offered him opportunities unavailable to black actors in Hollywood, Kitzmiller stayed in Italy and acted in several more films. I suggest that an examination of Kitzmiller’s life and film presence sheds light on the cultural history of the North Atlantic borderland, on the relation between European cinema and Hollywood cinema, and on the role racial hierarchies play in both.

America and Western Europe have long perceived each other as different. Born out of a revolutionary war with England, during the nineteenth century the United States differed from Europe in its commitment to industrialization, slavery, and republicanism. Through the second half of the past century, however, this difference waned as the two sides of the North Atlantic embraced the same Fordist, capitalist economy fueled by high levels of production and consumption, the same political system based on representative democracy, and the same military alliance targeted at containing the Soviet Union. The Economist described this path to convergence in 2003 and concluded that “between 1945
and about 1990, America and [Western] Europe seemed to be growing more like one another in almost every way that matters.”

In the face of this convergence, however, the discourse of Euro-American difference, the “not like us” attitude historian Richard Pells has described, did not abate. At the end of WWII, integrated military alliances and economic coordination (oiled by the American financing of the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan) had thrust the two sides of the North Atlantic closer to each other than they had ever been before. The more Americans and Western Europeans grew similar, however, the more they described themselves as different. Upon arriving in the United States for a four-month visit, Simone de Beauvoir rejoiced to see finally “the land of the gold-rush, the pioneers and cowboys” only to be soon irked by the “smell of money” she detected everywhere.

American opulence was not the only difference that Europeans stressed. Together with money, the strongest demarcation between Europe and the United States had to do with race. Jean-Paul Sartre described lynching and racism in his 1946 play La Putain respectueuse / The Respectful Whore and considered both “a specifically American phenomenon.” When it came to racism, European superiority was found in the unlikeliest of places: according to the majority of German intellectuals, in the two decades following the end of World War II, in each of the two German republics race had been mostly erased from public discourse as a category of social classification. Racism had ceased to exist. “In just over a decade since Hitler’s defeat,” German historian Heide Fehrenbach writes, “a chastened nation appeared to have surpassed its tutor.”

But how different were, finally, the two sides of the North Atlantic? Or, to use W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous concept, how exceptional had Europe and its cinema been in
resisting the global articulation of the “color line”?

Using the international career of the largely forgotten African American star John Kitzmiller (1913–1965) as a meaningful test case, I analyze the discourse of Euro-American difference and uncover continuities that this discourse obscures. By and large, in fact, the European film industry and culture did not reject the main racist tenets of Hollywood cinema and built on the contingencies of European history and traditions to create a film commodity that was compatible with the racial hierarchies of the West.

That I am focusing on cinema and the career of a film actor to dissect the discourse of Euro-American difference is also relevant. Cinema and its historiography were central to this Euro-American differentiation. Films were produced for the masses and the alleged absence of racism in mass-marketed, European-produced, cinema supposedly proved that Europe had immunized itself against the virus of popular racism. When asked to add a chapter on Italian film to the 1956 Italian translation of Peter Noble’s 1948 book *The Negro in Film*, Italian film historian Lorenzo Quaglietti argued that the main difference between American and Italian cinema resided in the way both cinemas represented black characters. Papering over centuries of racism and racial oppression that was embedded in Italian history, culture, and the very architecture of Italian cities (figs. 1 and 2), Quaglietti argued that in Italian films black characters were like all the others: they did not "express the terms of a racial problem" that did not exist in Italy, nor did they "originat[e] conflicts where their skin color is their defining characteristic."

Quaglietti was wrong. The study of Kitzmiller’s career helps sketch the contours of the cinema of the West and reveals that both sides of the North Atlantic participated in
the production of a filmic culture that tended to degrade blackness. As we shall see, notwithstanding his skills as an actor and his accurate reading of the functioning of the international film industry, the cultural economy of the North Atlantic limited the progress of Kiztmiller’s career and the roles available to him.

When cinema came knocking on his door, Kitzmiller had never considered a career in the moving pictures. A thirty-one-year-old veteran from Battle Creek, Michigan, Kitzmiller was an ambitious young man from a solid middle-class background. His father, John B. Kitzmiller, was an employee of the Kellogg factory. In high school, he had not hesitated to add under his graduation picture the phrase “The greater the obstacle, the more joy in overcoming it,” but acting had not been part of his plans in high school or at Western Michigan University, where he earned a chemical engineering degree. Enlisting soon after Pearl Harbor, the young man had made captain serving in the engineering corps of the all-African American 92nd Infantry (Buffalo) Division. Along with other African American troops, Kitzmiller had been redeployed to the town of Tombolo, next to the Tuscan harbor of Livorno, a stretch of pinewood and bush that was used both as a repository of material for the 5th Army and as the main encampments for the segregated black units. It was here that he was approached by director Luigi Zampa. Zampa was walking through the camp when he saw Kitzmiller and heard his booming laughter. According to Kitzmiller, “The director said, ‘that’s the laugh I need!’ and I got the part.” The role Zampa offered him was in *Vivere in pace / To Live in Peace* (1947), which was then being cast. Kitzmiller initially demurred. The young man was no actor, did not know Zampa, and was not familiar with Italian cinema. It took some convincing, but he finally accepted the offer.
It helped that Kitzmiller was not particularly eager to go home to Michigan. Unmarried, he had lost both parents during the war and his sister Sue was moving to Detroit. The grim forecasts about the return of the Depression might have given him pause. “At that time thousands of discharged GIs were looking for jobs, so I figured I’d let them get settled down first,” the actor told his hometown paper in 1960.14

As importantly, Italy may have seemed welcoming to the young captain. In the early 1960s, reflecting on his European experience in the immediate postwar period, writer William Gardner Smith, an African American veteran, described what he called the initial “détente” of the African American soldiers in Europe: “an incredible relaxation of tensions. The black American heav[es] a sigh of relief as he arriv[es] in Europe . . . and thus immediately shed[s] the racial claustrophobia engendered by the black ghettos of America.”15 Like the black soldiers in Gardner Smith’s 1948 novel The Last of the Warriors, Kitzmiller may have been reticent about going back to Jim Crow America.16 In 1950 Kitzmiller told The Daily Compass that for a black man the thought of becoming an actor in Hollywood was just as bizarre as “representing Mississippi in the United States Senate." Italy, however, seemed different: "There is a sense of security and complete freedom in knowing that I am welcome in any café or hotel."17 To Ebony, which noted that he was "still without fame in America," but called him "the Negro actor who enjoys the most steady and consistent career," Kitzmiller said that his plan was to become an "international actor."18

It is plausible that when Zampa offered him a job Kitzmiller may have been experiencing the same sense of détente as the soldiers in Gardner Smith’s novel. The lives of the GIs of the 92nd Buffalo Soldier Division radically improved after the
hostilities ceased. Encamped on the Tyrrhenian Coast immediately south of where the Arno river flows into the Mediterranean after crossing the old university town of Pisa, these troops were close enough to Livorno and Pisa to enjoy the advantages of urban settings and a well-supplied port through which most American goods entered the peninsula. In convincing Kitzmiller to remain in Italy and try an acting career, the truce offered by Tombolo’s human and natural landscape was probably as important as the director’s job offer.

Kitzmiller was not likely to be aware of this at the time, but Zampa’s offer also reflected the cultural upheaval in Italian film culture that we now associate with neorealism. Usually dated to the release of Roberto Rossellini’s Roma città aperta / Rome, Open City in 1945, the onset of neorealism had pushed the Italian film industry to open up to characters previously shunned by Italian cinema. Neorealist filmmakers purported to privilege stories of ordinary Italians, shoot in exteriors, use natural light, and cast non-professional, as well as trained, actors. Neorealists were touting film as the “altoparlante,” the loudspeaker, which would connect them once again with the real Italy from which the cacophony of Fascist escapism and militarism had separated them. Italian directors did not hesitate to train their lenses on African American soldiers. Like the Italian veteran and the urban and rural poor, the black GI’s were a direct signifier of these perilous times and the clearest sign of the defeat of Fascism and its delirium omnipotentiae. As neorealism’s founding father, Rossellini made a big impression working with this topical issue in Paisà / Paisan (1946), where he paired an African American soldier, Joe (Dots Johnson), with a street urchin, Pascà (Alfonso Bovino), in the Neapolitan episode of the film. By 1948, also thanks to Kitzmiller’s work, director
Stefano Vanzina (who used the professional name Steno) would ironically jot down a list of the "typical characters of neorealist films" and place the “Negro soldier” in a catalog that included “the farmer working for the peasants co-op,” the anti-Fascist “priest on a bicycle,” the “Italian army veteran,” “the truck driver,” and “the Sicilian fisherman.”

Kitzmiller’s first film for Italian cinema, *Vivere in pace*, from a script by Zampa, Suso Cecchi D’Amico, Aldo Fabrizi, and Pietro Tellini, was hailed by many as another film marking the intellectual and esthetic renaissance of Italian cinema after the Fascist repression. In New York City, where it was released in November 1947, the film replaced *Città aperta* at the World Theater where Rossellini’s film had run for ninety-one weeks.

In contrast to the openness of the urban and civic horizons of *Città aperta*, *Vivere in pace*’s focus is consciously “small.” The opening lines of the film tell that the village is small (“paesino”), it has a “chiesetta” (small church). Like these places, the people had been of too little importance to attract the attention of the warring factions. *Vivere in pace* turns the grandiose civic themes of Rossellini’s *Città aperta* into a “burlesque farce.”

Fabrizi, who had just starred as the martyred Catholic priest in *Città aperta*, is Zio Tigna, an unassuming man trying to keep his family safe; Kitzmiller is Joe, a black GI, who is saved and hidden by a family of Italian farmers together with a white companion, Ronald (Gar Moore). The story ends in tragedy when the withdrawing German troops shoot Tigna in retaliation for the help the village provided the American GIs.

*Vivere in pace* was a critical and popular success: it garnered the Italian film industry's awards for best original script and best supporting actress for Ave Ninchi. In December 1947 *Vivere in pace* won the New York Film Critics' Award for best foreign film. “The revivified Italian film industry which has sent us such powerful films as
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*Sciuscìa* [Shoeshine, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1946] and *Città aperta* has now sent another one along that takes a place of distinction among the fine motion pictures of our times,” Bosley Crowther wrote in the *New York Times*. "Crowther noted that the unknown American stars, Gar Moore and John Kitzmiller, were “remarkably forthright” in embodying, respectively, an “American journalist and the Negro.”

Like Crowther, the film seems satisfied that being a Negro is the only necessary professional qualification for Joe. The narrative economy of *Vivere in pace* enacted a separation of roles between white and black Americans: together with Mirella Monti, Moore takes care of the romance, and Kitzmiller is left alone to shoulder the farce. He crows like a rooster on top of the chicken coop, drinks copiously, plays the trumpet, and even reveals his presence to the Germans, precipitating the killing of Zio Tigna in the tear-jerking finale of the film.

There is no evidence that Italian critics sensed the racial coding of the film: *Bianco e Nero*, the flagship film magazine issued by the Centro Nazionale di Cinematografia, for example, praised Kitzmiller's performance as possessing "an animalesque innocence." Underlying both the transatlantic similarities as well as the rather scant attention devoted by the American Cultural Front to race and racism, some of the white American progressive film critics shared this view. Along with Bosley Crowther, James Agee remarked that the presentation of Kitzmiller was "the only pure presentation of a man of his race that I have seen in a movie."

To be sure, some American critics were not convinced of the progressive qualities of *Vivere in pace*, especially where the representation of a black American soldier was concerned. A few wrote of their annoyance at the film’s portrayal of Joe’s penchant for
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Drunkenness. *The Daily News* asserted that “the handling of the Negro is the sort of thing that you would never see in an American picture. By making him indirectly and quite innocently responsible for the ultimate death of the man who has sheltered him, a producer here would be accused of discrimination against the race.”

*Vivere in pace* worked, in fact, as a compendium of some of the racist stereotypes at large in Italian culture. Upon seeing Joe, the two young children innocently ask their father "how are Negroes able to know whether or not they have dirty feet?" Uncle Tigna comments that Joe is not really black, but "just a little tanned." Joe’s actions are determined by simple desires: when inebriated, he dances and plays the trumpet. Yet racial stereotypes assume local nuances. The film uses Kitzmiller to evoke and simultaneously exorcise Italian colonialism. Through the character of Kitzmiller and his relation with the grandfather, "Grampa," (Ernesto Amirante), a veteran of the Libyan campaign of 1911, the film erases the crimes of Italian colonialism, and trivializes it as an essentially benign process performed by "Italiani brava gente" who meant no harm to the natives. Repeatedly, the jovial, benevolent Grampa asks Joe whether he is an "ascaro" (a member of the colonial troops that served the Italian colonial governments in Libya and later Ethiopia and Somalia, the “Africa Orientale Italiana,” Italian Eastern Africa, or AOI). The former soldier of the colonial army refers to both the conquest of Ethiopia and that of Libya and asks Joe if he has met the “Negus” (Ethiopian king) and whether he was present at the events of Sciara Sciat in 1911 during the Libyan-Italian-Turkish war for Libya.

These historical references were neither randomly chosen nor unknown to most of the Italian spectators. As for the events of Sciara Sciat, a neighborhood at the outskirts of
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the Libyan city of Tripoli, they were the most famous, or notorious, of the Libyan 1911 campaign. After an initial defeat (October 23, 1911) at the hands of Turkish and Libyan soldiers, Italian troops executed about 1,800 of the 30,000 inhabitants of Tripoli, an event historians now see as genocide. The Ethiopian conquest had been one of the lone “successes” of Benito Mussolini’s imperial projects and the Duce hailed the war as the “most gigantic spectacle in the history of mankind.” The campaign had certainly been grandiosely murderous with Italian troops consistently employing chemical weapons against troops and civilians in violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol.

The cultural work *Vivere in pace* does is, thus, relevant. In the aftermath of World War II, Ethiopians and Libyans—and next to them many Serbian and Greek victims of Italian occupation—were vocally demanding Italy’s condemnation of decades of genocidal colonialist wars. The performances of Kitzmiller and Amirante have to be understood in this context. The joviality of the grandfather's character and his persistence in identifying Joe as a former colonial servant of the Italian empire serves to subsume the history of Italian colonialism – including the genocide following the battle of Sciara Sciat—under the mythology of the "italiani brava gente" (Grampa is certainly "brava gente" even though he is both a racist and an imperialist).

Kitzmiller’s positive reviews helped him win more engagements. But if Kitzmiller was dissatisfied with the role he played in *Vivere in pace*, his second released film was bound to be an even bigger disappointment. *Tombolo, paradiso nero / Tombolo, Black Paradise* (dir. Giorgio Ferroni, 1947) played on the fears engendered in the Atlantic community by the news that African American GIs were dating local women in the areas close to American bases in Italy and Germany.
The presence of soldiers and the lure of the American goods had caused makeshift settlements to spring up in the woods between Pisa and Livorno. The area soon acquired a bad reputation. "The area between Livorno and Pisa" wrote the cinematographer Aldo Tonti in 1964, "had become a nest of debased people. You would have thought that you were in Congo." The Italian press had already investigated the story, and so had the American papers. In May 1947 the Washington Post published a story about Tombolo, the "Tahiti of Italy . . . where scores of American deserters, many of them Negroes, live . . . with Italian girls." For John Schillace, the author of The Tragic Forest: Tales of the Forest of Tombolo, the pinewoods were a “mysterious forest” peopled by GIs and deserters, girlfriends and prostitutes, whites and Negroes. One of the GIs, named Lincoln, was a notorious African American giant who, supposedly driven to insanity by the death of his two little sons, had killed his Italian companion and was known to roam the woods dressed only in a blanket (“running through the forest naked with that bloody blanket, which many fanciful retelling of the story had changed into leopard skin”).

The Atlantic community of the second postwar was also made up of intertwining tales, stories echoing each other across the ocean. White American and white Italian chroniclers evoked and built on each other’s work in depicting the Tombolo forest. Schillace’s sordid tale of Lincoln had its roots in the Corriere della Sera, where one of the scriptwriters for Tombolo, the former officer of the Italian colonial troops in Africa and future dean of Italian pundits Indro Montanelli, also wrote about Lincoln in 1947. He was “the Negro who goes about shouting in the woods . . . a giant, more than two meters tall, with huge shoulders and with blood-shot eyes with a leopard skin thrown on his naked chest.”
In this climate, the reaction of the locals to interracial fraternization could easily become visceral, violent. In February 1947, the majority of the people living in the housing project INCIS on Viale Mameli in Livorno demanded the eviction of the "segnorine," as the Italian women who dated African Americans were called, and the purification of their apartments "with D.D.T" (fig. 3). On the night of August 3, 1947, young men from Livorno attacked several black GIs and the "segnorine" accompanying them. While the soldiers were able to take shelter in the military barracks, twenty-three women were publicly undressed, and forcefully hoisted on a merry-go-round in the middle of the central square of Livorno.

Against this backdrop, the film by former Fascist Giorgio Ferroni, Tombolo seems almost tame. Kitzmiller plays Jack, a corrupted sergeant in the U.S. Army who covets Anna (Adriana Benetti), the pawn of a small time black marketeer, Alfredo (Dante Maggio). Her father is the righteous Andrea (Aldo Fabrizi), a former Italian carabiniere (military police) in the AOI, who works as custodian of a warehouse. Duped by the gangsters, Andrea lets them rob the storehouse and then is himself charged with the robbery. To convince Alfredo to pay his bail, Anna agrees “to go with the Negro” who, in return for two hours with her, will allow Alfredo to plunder his military depot. Notified of the pact, Renzo (Luigi Tosi), Anna’s lover, rescues his girl from Jack by getting the soldier drunk. As the police and the MPs are alerted to the heist, Andrea dies at the hands of the corrupt Alfredo whom he pursues into a minefield. His sacrifice will buy his, and Anna’s, redemption.

Kitzmiller gives a compelling performance as the corrupt soldier. His lust for Anna is as evident as her repulsion towards him. Even as Anna considers going with Jack
in order to save her dad from the gallows, she is horrified that her father may later find out that “I have gone with a Negro, that I have always gone with them.” Interestingly, the script by Montanelli, Glauco Pellegrini and Rodolfo Sonego transfers onto Jack the same stereotypes as *Vivere in pace*, but turns the comedy into tragedy. Like John, Jack speaks in pidgin Italian, which was meant to elicit a comic response from the audience. Like John, Jack drinks too much and can’t hold it. Like John, Jack is contrasted with a former member of the Italian African colonial force, Andrea, who is as good as the black man is brutish. Their relationship implicitly invokes the reversal of historical roles that lies at the center of the white Atlantic anxieties: blacks have power over whites, savage Ethiopians are ready to plunder civilized Italy.

This time even Crowther’s *New York Times* could not help noting the "patently biased attitude toward the American Negro soldier in uniform." Italian film critics, however, were not appalled: the film was well directed and well interpreted by Aldo Fabrizi and could be called “the triumph of duty” for its idealistic portrayal of the former colonial soldier. *Tombolo* was an "in-depth character study, and a passionate interpretation of souls,” the Italian magazine *Film* commented. The film effortlessly fits in with the neorealist genre of Italian cinema, chimed in *L’operatore*.

The next role interpreted by Kitzmiller, in Alberto Lattuada's *Senza pietà / Without Pity* (1948), was intended to both correct and cash in on Italian anxieties regarding miscegenation. Lattuada and his scriptwriters Tullio Pinelli and Federico Fellini (who did uncredited work on *Tombolo*), built on a preexisting screen persona and conventions, only to try and reverse them. Once again, the story takes place in the Tombolo pinewoods. Like the previous movie, *Senza pietà* centers on Kitzmiller’s
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obsession with white women. The “segnorina,” Angela, is Carla del Poggio, then Lattuada’s wife. Kitzmiller speaks the same mangled Italian as before. Even his name harks back to his past roles: after John and Jack, his character is now called Jerry. Like the preceding film, *Senza pietà* is a tragedy. Angela dies at the hands of Pierluigi (Pier Claudé), the sexually ambiguous Italian gangster who runs the black market in Livorno. Heartbroken, Angela’s lifeless body next to him, Jerry drives his truck off a cliff in Marina di Pisa.

*Tombolo* and *Senza pietà* are, however, remarkably different. Lattuada, Fellini, and Pinelli give the character of Jerry substance and density previously unknown. It is not just in the number of lines Kitzmiller gets to deliver. This time around it is Jerry who wants to save Angela from the life of a “segnorina.” Because of his well-meaning interference, he becomes the target of Pierluigi. To save Angela, Jerry agrees to help Pierluigi rob a military depot. Angela is also a different character from Anna. She genuinely likes Jerry. The film, though, leaves purposefully unclear the nature and depth of her affection for him. Marcella (Giulietta Masina), another “segnorina,” comments that Angela does not love Jerry, but rather that she is fond of him. That their relationship is nonsexual is confirmed not solely by the images (Jerry never touches her) and by Angela’s words (“he is not my fiancé!” she protests) but also by the very words of Jerry, who tells Angela that “I know. You not love Jerry. I love you. You know this. I am like brother. I not leave you no more. You will see: Jerry strong companion” (io conosco che tu non ami Jerry. Ti voglio bene. Tu conosci questo. Sono come fratello. Non ti lascio piu’. You will see Jerry è forte compagno). European and American critics noted the
character’s “dog-like devotion to things and loved ones” and “animal-like candor,” “a kindly spirit destroyed by circumstances beyond his control.”

Italian critics also stressed that the racism the film referred to was really located outside of Italy, and in particular in the United States. The film did not speak to present-day Italy but rather to contemporary American racism, wrote Christian Democrat Gian Luigi Rondi in the newspaper *Il Tempo*. The Italian racism the film referenced had existed but was now in the past. The events Lattuada describes appear “positively removed into the memories of the past. . . . His characters today appear remote: they are not big enough to be part of history and they are too remote to be chronicle.”

The Cold War was heating up the European debate about the United States in which the narrative of Euro-American difference displaced the color line onto America, as one of the preeminent markers of regional, intra-Western, difference: Americans were racist, Europeans were not. Ten years after the enactment of the 1938 racial laws, film critic Massimo Mida praised Edward Dmytryk’s *Crossfire* (1946) for its attack on anti-Semitism and noted that it dealt with racism, "a sickness which affects America" but had not touched Italy. American cinema was racist, European cinema did not “see color.” In an essay he wrote for the communist magazine *Cinema Nuovo*, Rudi Berger argued that the "racial problem" was gone from Italian cinema because it was only part of the "artificial parenthesis imposed (on Italy) by the Fascist alliance with Nazism." Looking at “the films of Italian realism,” including *Senza pietà*, *Vivere in pace*, and *Tombolo*, Berger suggested fantastically that blacks were presented “without prejudice—just like the whites.”
Ultimately, *Senza pietà* confirms, rather than reverses, the racial markings characterizing the cultural practices of the Atlantic community. Lattuada himself called *Senza pietà* “a really American film for the way it was shot, its rhythm, its editing, and other formal solutions.” Positive and complex African American characters had already appeared in Hollywood postwar productions and *Our World* noted that the U.S. distributors of Lattuada’s films were building on the path opened by the successful runs of *Pinky* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1949) and *Home of the Brave* (dir. Mark Robson, 1949). The files of the Production Code Administration relative to the American distribution of *Senza pietà* reveal that the film, while narrowly distributed, was admitted without significant changes to New York State and Massachusetts, the major U.S. markets for subtitled foreign films.

What I am suggesting here is that *Senza pietà* posits itself in dialectical and synthetic relation with Hollywood cinema, one that is as much about rejection as it is about incorporation. This transatlantic linkage, which contradicted the contemporary discourse of Euro-American difference, did not escape a young, Martinique-born, psychiatrist then working in France. In his *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon cogently wrote that “the black man has to be portrayed in a certain way, and the same stereotype can be found from the black man in *Senza pietà*—me work hard, me never lie, me never steal—to the servant in *Duel in the Sun.*”

In fact, Lattuada and his scriptwriters devised a strategy that was to become typical of Hollywood cinema across the North Atlantic pond: the black male character was given one of the positive, central, roles in the picture, but this was achieved at the cost of his desexualization. Jerry’s relation to Angela is childish and strongly marked as
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asesexual, his neutered sexuality being enhanced by the childish vocabulary he employs in his unsophisticated division of the world between the good and the evil ("buoni" and "cattivi"). When at the beginning of the film he is lying wounded at Angela’s feet, she calms him down by talking to him like a pet and telling him “be good, be good” (stai buono, su, stai buono). It is obvious that between him and Angela, he is the junior partner—a fact that was quite relevant, and reassuring, for postwar Italian society.58

After *Senza pietà* John Kitzmiller’s career sputtered on in an all too familiar direction: Italians asked him to represent nature untouched by the sophistication and complexities of modernity. His role in Sergio Corbucci’s *La Peccatrice dell’isola / The Island Sinner* (1952) exemplifies this. In the film, Kitzmiller is Moses, a fisherman at the center of a complex story of misplaced passions. Dead at the beginning of the film, Moses is suspected of having killed Carla (Silvana Pampanini), the beautiful but wicked wife of the local entrepreneur, Ingarsia (Folco Lulli) and then of having killed himself. In the end, another man, Francesco (Mario Vitale), is found to be guilty of the murder of Carla. Moses died trying to protect his friend, Rosario (Gianni Musy), from the allure of the devious Carla.

Kitzmiller’s Moses is a modern translation of Shakespeare’s Caliban. This elemental islander is the offspring of nature: “the sea had thrown him here from who knows where” says Ingarsia. As usual, Kitzmiller’s character cannot bring himself to speak in correct Italian, drinks copiously, and can’t hold his liquor. This time he plays the mouth organ and spouts sentences marked by a distinct biblical flavor: “he always had a Bible with him and by reading it and rereading it he had learned it by heart” Ingarsia tells
the police inspector De Santis (Vittorio Duse) who investigates the murder. Like Jerry, he is marked by his blind devotion to a white person, Rosario, and dies to protect him.

Nature rather than nurture seems to mark the roles in which Kitzmiller was cast. In *Luci del varietà / Variety Lights* (1950), the second film he made with Lattuada (which was also the directorial debut of Federico Fellini, who codirected it), Kitzmiller was once again a happy-go-lucky Negro trumpeter whom Checco (Peppino de Filippo)—a vaudeville impresario on his last legs—meets one night in Rome. Basically playing himself (in the film his name is John and he tells Checco that he was a "chemical engineer"), Kitzmiller wanders the streets of Rome and plays his trumpet. As opposed to the desperate Checco, John does not worry about his future. He relies on his musical talent, walks the city streets, and laughs his booming laughter.

*Luci del varietà* uses the story of Checco and his misfortunes to chronicle the changes taking place in Italy that are displacing traditions of local vaudeville troupes and revolutionizing the national mores. Like other Fellini films—the obvious example being *La Dolce vita* (1960)—modernity was both a source of spectacle and something that remained deeply worrisome.59 The character of Kitzmiller offers blackness as a comforting example of what cannot and will never change. It is thus similar to what James Snead calls the “metaphysical stasis” typical of Hollywood’s representation of blackness insofar “the black is seen as eternal, unchanging, unchangeable.”60 Kitzmiller’s trumpeter works also as a topos of Western culture, a throwback to the use of blackness and “non-Western” sources in much of the European modernist art as a symbol of “a spiritual wholeness that had been obscured in an increasingly civilized and mechanized environment by layers of material development.”61
German Expressionist paintings and sculpture, Kitzmiller stands "in opposition to all aspects of bourgeois normalcy." He is utopian simplification, in the midst of the traumas of modernization. In the middle of the convulsed Italian 1950s that promoted change and pushed rural, provincial vaudevillians like Checco into bankruptcy, Kitzmiller's character represents the eternal out-of-time-ness of blackness seen through European artists' eyes.

At the very beginning of his career, the actor granted Italian filmmakers and Italian society a degree of fairness that may not have been warranted by reality. And yet at other times, the actor sounded less optimistic about this presumed Italian "exceptionalism." In the late 1940s in an interview he gave to journalist Aldo Santini, Kitzmiller appeared much less sanguine than he was in his 1951 conversation with Ebony. Talking to Santini, Kitzmiller treated the United States harshly and asserted that many of the black soldiers in the 5th Army were not sure that the "victorious end of the war [was] going to bring the end of racial discrimination, and they'd rather desert than be pariahs in New York, Saint Louis, or Memphis." As for the peninsula, he realized that "sooner or later there won't be any more roles for Negroes in the Italian cinema."

Kitzmiller kept finding new roles in films but the stereotype of blackness shaped them. Just like any other commodity in the North Atlantic world, film actors tended to fit pre-ordained niches, which were race- and gender-coded, and followed performers across national borders. The roles Kitzmiller was offered in the Western film industry tended to be similar. He was cast as a military policeman in the Italian film by Giacomo Gentilomo Ti ritroverò / Lieutenant Craig: Missing (1949) ("wasted in the brief role," the New York Times commented). He played the role of an African-American GI in Mario Sequi’s
Monastero Santa Chiara (1949) and Renato Polselli's Il Grande addio / The Great Goodbye (1954). In the latter, a heavy hitting melodrama, Kitzmiller was “John,” an American pilot who had sired a son in Italy during the war. John comes back to Naples to seek his son (played by Angelo Maggio, the real-life son of an African American soldier and an Italian woman) after he has given up his military career and become a man of the cloth. Upon seeing the well-adjusted kid and considering his bleak future in America, John decides to leave him in Italy.

In and out of Italy, he was also often cast as a servant. He was the butler, John, in the German production The Cave of the Living Dead (dir. Akos Ratony, 1965). He was cast as David, the African native of The Naked Earth (1958), made in Hollywood by Vincent Sherman, and as Kato, the African slave of Marco Venier, in Due selvaggi a corte (dir. Ferdinando Baldi, 1958). Kitzmiller’s characters often specialized in Bible thumping. He was the religious old slave in the Franco-Italo-German-Yugoslavian production of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (dir. Géza von Radványi, 1965), in which he also got to sing blues and Gospel standards. After spouting biblical passages as Moses in La Peccatrice dell’isola, he played another “Moses,” this time the devout house-servant in the estate of Captain Blood, in the Errol Flynn Jr. vehicle, The Son of Captain Blood (1963), by the Argentinean Tullio DeMichelis.

In the mid-1950s Kitzmiller sought better roles in the Yugoslavian film industry, and in 1957 won the award at Cannes for best male performance for his work in Dolina Miru / Sergeant Jim, aka Valley of Peace (1956), by France Stiglic. Here, though more poignantly than in other films, Kitzmiller again played an African American soldier, Jim, an aviator stranded behind enemy lines in Europe. Set in a gorgeous Slovenian summer
in a pristine alpine landscape, Dolina Miru connects Kitzmiller once again to animals, nature, and children—in this case, two orphans: a German girl, Lotti, and a Slovenian boy, Marko. The actor speaks pidgin German to Lotti (Wohlfeiler Ewelyne), but Marko (Štiglic Tugo), who does not speak German, instinctively understands him. When the three come upon a white horse in a meadow, it follows them for no apparent reason other than Jim’s magnetism to children and animals alike.

The prize Kitzmiller won at Cannes did little to gain widespread distribution for Dolina Miru and moderately increased the actor’s international standing. With the exception of the United States, where it was released in 1961 as Sergeant Jim, the marketing for the film often featured the children Lotti and Marko, rather than Jim, as the protagonists. In 1957, the American and European press hardly noticed him. The New York Times simply mentioned that he had won the prize. The young critics of Cahiers du cinéma did not even mention him or the film in their collective reportage from the festival. One has the impression that the Cannes jury wanted to stake European difference vis-à-vis Hollywood, which, with the exception of Hattie McDaniel’s prize for her role as Mammy in Gone with the Wind (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939), had not yet awarded anything to any of its black stars. In Dolina Miru, Kitzmiller has fewer lines and less complexity than in Senza pietà and his performance is more stilted than in most of his films. The actor, however, gets to declare that America is far from just. “Is America at war?” Lotti asks Jim. “Not yet,” he answers, perhaps referring to the then intensifying civil rights struggle, his perennially smiling face suddenly pensive.

Kitzmiller kept traveling, but the roles tended to be similar, or worse. In Vite perdute / Lost Souls (1958), by Adelchi Bianchi, Kitzmiller played his only criminal
character: Luca, an escaped convict obsessed with white women. The script cast him as a psychotic character, Luca, who rapes Giulia (Sandra Milo) on-screen, and is killed by one of his own gang. *Vite perdute* had a notable cast (Milo, Virna Lisa, Glauco Mauri) and a distinguished director of photography, Aldo Tonti. The communist *L’Unità* called Luca a “revolting” (rivoltante) character impersonated by “il povero Kitzmiller.” The violence and the sex secured it a distribution deal in the United States in 1961, when it was shown on the exploitation circuit.

The Cannes prize likely helped Kitzmiller win better compensation and roles in films with higher budgets. In 1962, he had a part in the James Bond installment *Dr. No.* His role as “Quarrel,” 007’s Jamaican sidekick who believes in dragons and gets his sea directions “from my nose, ears, instincts” rather than Mercator maps, however, was not much of an improvement. His title role as Uncle Tom in the Franco-Italo-German-Yugoslavian version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was a compendium of all the stereotypes of the preceding films. In the movie, Tom shows his musical talents by singing the blues, gives evidence of a deep mnemonic knowledge of the Bible, and relates extremely well to the emotions of a white child, the young Eva Saint-Claire (Michaela May). It is possible, as William M. Slout suggested in 1973, that the film attempted “to relate old and contemporary American racial problems” but if so, it failed on both sides of the chronology. The film told a tale of righteous slaves and monstrous slave traders (Simon Legree, an effective Herbert Lom), but did not forget to show saintly slave-owners as well, such as Saint-Claire (played by O. W. Fischer, who had been a film star in Nazi Germany). Its value probably consisted in offering a few days of employment to a crew of African American and Afro-Caribbean performers (singer Olive Moorefield,
Catana Cayetano, George Goodman) in Europe, but their timid on-screen actions were in stark contrast to what black people were doing outside the theaters, in Africa, Europe, or the United States. When Legree kills Saint-Claire and a mob apprehends and lynches an innocent youngster, Tom looks mournfully at the hanging corpse and asks God to forgive the mob “for they do not know what they are doing.” This quaint adaptation of the nineteenth-century classic does have a thoughtful and poignant performance by Kitzmiller. Heavier and grayer, John makes Tom into a tired, broken man who lives in a world that has hurt him too many times. Kitzmiller plays Tom with dignity and understanding, endowing the character with sparks of real passion.

The film failed on both shores of the Atlantic. Cabin was too timid in its anger, too stodgy in its adhering to the genre of the historical drama, and too cynically unfaithful to the novel in its sexually explicit depiction of Legree’s liaison with his slave Cassy (Moorefield). More important, the film was hopelessly dated in an Atlantic borderland where blackness was being redefined by the likes of James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “Uncle Tom” was figuratively and literally becoming an insult. The film did not find a U.S. distributor until 1969.

Kitzmiller’s decision to make himself employable all over Europe and the United States and become, as he himself told at the beginning of his career, “an international actor,” was, however, sensible. In the two decades following WWII, the number of coproductions that involved two or more national cinemas increased. Going from one European film industry to another was increasingly simple. More important, celebrities were becoming full-fledged commodities that were more and more often traded across national borders. Their origin and area of consumption were not tied to a single nation.
state. “Cinema,” Curzio Malaparte wrote in 1966, “is the nation of the nation-less.”

Ultimately, leaving Rome and working abroad did win Kitzmiller a major film award and kept him employed.

In other, subtler, ways, Kitzmiller tried to make the most of what the Euro-American film industry and culture could offer him. There is a history of resistance buried just under the surface of Kitzmiller’s public performances and career trajectory. At times, Kitzmiller seemed to be poking fun at audiences’ stereotyped views. At the Venice Film Festival in 1948, where Senza pietà premiered, he declared that he had come “to the Lido to get tanned.” He also tried to win roles on stage as opportunities to explore characters different than those offered him by the cinema of the West. The obituary of L’Unità reminded its readers that Kitzmiller had played a leading role in an Italian staging of Jean-Paul Sartre’s La Putain respectueuse, a trenchant 1947 play based on the 1930s Scottsboro Case.

Other times, Kitzmiller lets his anger shine through his performance. For an actor whose talent was routinely ascribed to “nature,” Kitzmiller was quite skilled at making the most of what was available to him and often gave nuanced, multilayered performances against the grain of his scripts. In Vivere in pace, in the scene with “Grampa,” he visibly scoffs at the old man’s amiable musings about Italian colonial forays. He does play the trumpet for the racist old-timer, but he wields the instrument sullenly, with an almost palpable undertone of anger. When cast as an African native in Vincent Sherman's Naked Earth (1958), Kitzmiller made a point of speaking with a formal British accent. "John Kitzmiller is quite formal as a native," noted the New York Times.
The rise to independence of former colonies allowed Kitzmiller to play an African dignitary, but his role was still captive to the paranoia of the former colonialists. In the episodic film *Totòtruffa ’62* (1961), directed by Camillo Mastrocinque, he played the ambassador of the “fictional” African state of Katonga. When he leaves Rome on a mission, his place is taken by Italian comedian extraordinaire Totò, who dons heavy blackface to impersonate the African ambassador and cheat some businessmen who want to do deals with the new, mineral-rich nation. Rather than mimicking Kitzmiller’s actual body, Totò’s makeup outrageously embodies all the Atlantic stereotypes of blackness made shriller by the anticolonial struggle. In the striking conclusion of the Kitzmiller episode, the ambassador of the African “banana republic” and his Italian impersonator, Totò, meet in the lobby of the hotel.

Director Mastrocinque sets the scene well. Totò is exiting the hotel, still made up in outrageous blackface, complete with huge lips and enormous nose ring. Each accompanied by a sidekick, Kitzmiller and Totò come from opposite directions. When he walks by the comedian, Kitzmiller glares at the Italian as his eyes meet Totò’s, who immediately lowers his head in an obsequious bow. As Totò visibly quakes, expecting discovery and retribution, Kitzmiller passes him, goes a few steps, turns around, and stares at the buffoon, who slowly bows again. It is a rare moment when history meets its racist, ahistorical, mythologization. The distorted image in the racist mirror of the cinema of the West is briefly confronted by its original (figs. 4, 5, and 6).

And yet something was taking its toll on the actor. Contemporaries remember that by the middle of the 1950s Kitzmiller had changed his mind about Italy and the local possibilities for black actors. Director Luigi Zampa remembers the actor as extremely
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sad, almost suicidal. In an interview with the Battle Creek Examiner in 1960, Kitzmiller tried to recast his professional disappointment within a classic Cold War narrative. Recounting his thirteen-year career in Italian film, Kitzmiller argued that Italian Communists were ultimately to blame. Radical filmmakers had at first loved him (“They used to swarm around me”) but now “they hate me” because he had refused to play along with the communist politics of his erstwhile admirers. Contradicting his own previous statements for the benefit of the paper, Kitzmiller stated that he “never saw any race problem” in the United States and that to the Communists “I kept insisting I wasn’t staying here because of racial discrimination in the United States. Then they stopped writing and closed up their books.”

Eventually, his drinking got the best of him. According to Variety (March 3, 1965), Kitzmiller died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1965 in Rome. He was only fifty-one years old. At the time of his death, Kitzmiller was as forgotten in Italy as he had been overlooked in the United States. While at the American premiere of Luci del varietà in 1965, the Village Voice critic Andrew Sarris wrote that some colleague had asked him "facetiously" whatever happened to John Kitzmiller. Sarris did not know much. He had read that the actor was dead, he told the fellow critic.

What can we learn from Kitzmiller’s story? First of all, my critique of Euro-American difference should not be mistaken for a call for sameness. When Italian intellectuals constructed their version of 1950s cultural difference in relation to Hollywood’s racism, they were building on concrete and divergent aspects of Italian and American cinemas and societies. The coding of blackness in Hollywood cinema led to the formation of an impermeable barrier that reflected a social order based on the separation
of black and white people that shared the same land. Thus, as Michael Paul Rogin has suggested, classical American cinema is a cinema concerned with borders and sensitive to a paranoia about trespassing them—a cinema that, in fact, identified the mulatto as the deadliest of social viruses.\textsuperscript{83}

In the Italian case, race and its omission did not directly concern slavery or a nationally based apartheid regime, nor did they mirror an elaborate legal system regulating almost every aspect of society and meant to enforce the separation between races. Blackness in Italian cinema referred to what pioneering Italian historian Angelo del Boca has called "the (conscious or unconscious) deletion of colonial crimes and the missing debate on Italian imperialist expansion."\textsuperscript{84} It was meant to abet and protect the silencing and forgetting of the recent Italian past as well as reconfirm the centrality of the cultural role that the coding of blacks as inferior has had in Italian culture for centuries.\textsuperscript{85} In the Italian circumstance the necessity to consolidate hierarchies may have been more urgent than the enforcing of borders between neighbors.

A comparative analysis of the role played by racial markings in European and American cinemas is still missing: yet some of Kitzmiller’s roles, for example in \textit{Tombolo} or in \textit{Senza pietà}, allow for a degree of familiarity between black men and white women while strengthening a racial hierarchy that marks blacks as childlike and brutish.\textsuperscript{86} I would suggest that Italian cinema is less obsessed with the mulatto and more intrigued by the typology of the “sambo”—a figure of racial ranking and stereotyping that supports and naturalizes Italy’s attempts at hegemony in the southern Mediterranean. Thus, rather than the Aryanist version of racism, which was prevalent in the United States and Nazi Germany and focused on pseudo-biology, racial separation, and racial purity,
Kitzmiller’s career ran up against the hidden but still potent legacy of “Mediterraneist racism” (razzismo mediterraneista) recently analyzed by Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi Lombardi-Diop. The Mediterraneist racism was mainstream in Italy until the end of World War Two and concerned itself with cultural, rather than biological, definitions of racial lineages (the Fascist “stirpe”) and with creating a racial justification for Italian domination over Africa and the southern Mediterranean Sea.\(^87\)

Kitzmiller’s career did suffer from racism and this flew in the face of the “not like us” narrative developed by Europe. My analysis of his work ends up questioning the mythology of a non-racist Europe and its underlying exceptionalist pretense. Italy and Europe did not escape the “color line,” and Kitzmiller’s story corroborates W. E. B. Du Bois’s cautioning against those who saw the color line as a specifically American problem. “The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem. ‘The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line’” Du Bois repeated in 1906, adding, “The question [of the color line] enters into European imperial politics and floods our continents from Alaska to Patagonia.” \(^88\)

Regional variances in the way racial hierarchies were articulated and enforced in the North Atlantic borderland mattered, and Kitzmiller’s career does not suggest an absence of difference between the two sides of the Atlantic. Shaped by local contingencies, images ricocheted across the ocean acquiring various meanings, fueling diverse agendas, and finally participating in creating the détente to which Gardner Smith refers. When *Senza pietà* was released in Italy in 1948, paparazzi took pictures of Kitzmiller at the Venice Film Festival lunching with his costar, Carla del Poggio. These offscreen images depicted Kitzmiller and Del Poggio as more intimate than they were at
any time in the actual film. Such contact would have hardly been possible in most of Italy—certainly not in Livorno—without Del Poggio being seen as a prostitute.\textsuperscript{89} This said, it is important to remark that legislation against interracial socialization was nonexistent in postwar Western Europe, with the important and telling exception of the colonial territories.\textsuperscript{90} Notably, the photos of Kitzmiller eating with Del Poggio made their way into \textit{Ebony} (fig. 7).\textsuperscript{91}

These differences did not disturb, however, the cohesiveness of the dominant culture in the North Atlantic. On the contrary, in both the United States and Western Europe, racial hierarchies existed and were compatible with one another. Notwithstanding Kitzmiller’s shrewd career strategy, his professional trajectory across many nations and in so many national film cultures and industries finally stalled before the coherence of the cinema of the West. If we see through the dark glass of late-forties and early-fifties exceptionalist proclamations, we can discern how racial markings linked both sides of the North Atlantic. While they limited Kitzmiller’s career, they did not really disrupt Hollywood/Cinecittà transactions that actually intensified with the coproductions of the 1950s and the 1960s.\textsuperscript{92} Italians’ most strenuous opposition to Hollywood cinema derived from politics and trade, not race. It was a debate about the divisions of roles, and profits within Western film culture and the film industry, rather than a discussion about the role of race and racism in the making of Euro-American wealth. The West, indeed, was one.

Notes

<insert endnotes>
The author dedicates this essay to his daughter, Sahar, and thanks Ingalsca Schrosbdorff, Jonathan Auerbach, John S. Baick, Tom Bender, Ira Berlin, Mario del Pero, Ruth Feldstein, Jim Gilbert, Jon Shelton, and Judy Smith for reading this essay and providing valuable feedback.


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10 *Battle Creek Examiner*, June 3 1960, 2. *Ebony*, November 1951, 75. Lux publicity package for *Senza pietà* Clipping File, Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Science (hereafter AMPAS).

11 *Battle Creek Examiner*, June 3 1960, 2.

12 See also *Ebony*, November 1951, 71–73, and *Scene Magazine* (Battle Creek), February 1985, 72.


14 *Battle Creek Examiner*, June 3, 1960, 1 and 2.


18 *Ebony*, November 1951, 71–73.


20 For two recent and thorough syntheses of neorealism, see Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007), and Stefania Parigi, *Neorealismo* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014).


27 *Bianco e Nero* 2, no. 10 (1948): 73


32 On the use of chemical weapons by the Fascist troops against the Ethiopian population see the pioneering work by Angelo del Boca and in particular his *L’Africa nella coscienza degll Italiani* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 120–21, and his *Italiani, brava gente?* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), 196–97. On the use of the war by the regime see


41 Santini, *Tombolo*, 68.

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44 *Corriere della Sera*, October 26, 1947, 2.

45 *Film*, October 18, 1947, 3.


49 Issued on July 14, 1938, and signed by ten prominent Italian scientists, the “Manifesto sulla purezza della razza” stated that Italians were a “pure race” (razza pura), separate and superior to the Jews, the Africans, and the “Orientals.” The manifesto was the basis for the Racial Laws of November 1938 that promoted the separation of the races in the peninsula and the open discrimination against Italian Jews. See “Manifesto sulla purezza della razza,” [http://www.internetsv.info/Manifesto.html](http://www.internetsv.info/Manifesto.html), accessed September 22, 2014. On the racial laws see Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 148–57.


York: Routledge, 1994), and in particular the essay “Spectatorship and Capture in *King Kong*: The Guilty Look,” 1–27.


54 *Our World*, May 1950, 37.

55 See *Without Pity / Senza pietà* Production Code Administration File, AMPAS.


58 Sexual and racial anxieties encroached with the film production itself: a brawl broke out when Angela (Carla Del Poggio) was mistaken for a "segnorina" and harassed by a local young man, and Kitzmiller was often arrested by the MPs who mistook him as a deserter. Faldini and Fofi, *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, 129.


60 Snead, 3.


64 *New York Times*, May 19, 1951, 9.

65 See for example the Japanese poster for the film in author’s collection.


70 Stout, 150.


72 Curzio Malaparte, *Diario di uno straniero a Parigi* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1966), 12.


74 Ibid., February 25, 1965, 11.


76 See *Battle Creek Examiner*, January 3, 1960, 2.

This is an obvious pun on the State of Katanga that broke away from the Republic of Congo-Léopoldville from 1960 to 1963.


*Battle Creek Examiner*, January 3, 1960, 1 and 2.

Kitzmiller’s sister, Sue, called his death “mysterious.” See *Battle Creek Examiner*, March 1, 1965.


Alessandro Banti has analyzed the racial overtones of Italian nation building moment in his *La Nazione del Risorgimento: Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell’Italia Unità* (Turin: Einaudi 2000).

This was noted in “Without Pity Italian Film Stars John Kitzmiller in Negro-White Love Story” *Our World*, May 1950, 37. See also the review of *Senza pietà* in *Bianco e nero*, where Giulio Cesare Castello calls Kitzmiller’s work in the film “an elementary sincerity, an animalesque candor.” [AU: Is quotation phrasing correct? Please confirm.] YES IT IS. I JUST ADDED A COMMA. *Bianco e nero*, 9, no. 19 (December 1948): 72–73


89 DP Aldo Tonti remembered the “tornado of fistfights” (turbine di cazzotti) accompanying the interracial crew of the film wherever they went. Tonti, *Odore di cinema*, 119.


The Multiple Meanings of “the West” and the Indispensability of the United States

Jeffrey Herf

The following historical contrast illustrates an obvious but perhaps under-appreciated truth about the multiple meanings of the Western tradition. As a by now extensive scholarly literature documents, the Nazi Party and Nazi regime drew heavily on the anti-Semitic dimensions of Christian theology.¹ To be sure, Hitler and his associates selectively read and radicalized Christian teachings, but they were not innovators in blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus or imputing to them various sorts of evils.² No one outdid Martin Luther, certainly one of the key figures of the Western tradition’s case for individual freedom, in crude and vicious hatred of the Jews.³ Hitler told one Catholic Bishop who raised concerns about the regime’s anti-Jewish policy that he was merely doing what the Catholic


³. Christopher Proust, Demonizing the Jews: Martin Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2012).
Church had advocated for centuries. The famous term “Final Solution” indicated that for Hitler, the Holocaust would be the last of many previous efforts to deal with “the Jewish question.” Today, no serious historian of Nazism and the Holocaust would argue that it had nothing to do with the history of Christianity. The Holocaust was thus in the continuities of the Western tradition. It was not the inevitable product of the Western tradition, but only the naïve or apologetic would write about “the West” without writing as well about the Jew-hatred that was one of its continuities.

Yet as another aspect of World War II indicates, the plural “continuities,” rather than the singular “continuity,” regarding “the West” is appropriate. In August 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter off the coast of Canada. At the conclusion of the meeting, Churchill proposed that the political and military leaders of the United States and Great Britain present on the deck of the H.M.S. Prince of Wales unite in singing what he thought would be an appropriate song that captured the Charter’s affirmation of the right of self-determination and the right to freedom from fear and from want. Churchill thought it also expressed the spirit of the Anglo-American alliance that had emerged even before the formal American entry into the war in Europe. The song was “Onward Christian Soldiers.” As this all-male, all-white, all-Christian group sang the famous refrain “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before,” it became obvious, if not then, then certainly in hindsight, that Christianity meant something entirely different for FDR and Churchill than it did for the Nazis. It meant that the Jews too were God’s children. It meant that for these Christian believers, Nazism was an absolute evil. Roosevelt and Churchill mobilized the Christian tradition to wage war against Hitler, who believed he was simply executing its message about the Jews, which previous Westerners had been too cowardly to implement. To be sure, the British and the American governments did not make the fight against the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime a major theme of Allied political warfare. Indeed, anti-Semitism in the United States increased during World War II and did not begin to decline until after the revelations of the Holocaust. Yet, for all of the Allies’ shortcomings regarding these issues, the fact remains that political leaders imbued with varieties of Christian traditions won a war against Nazi Germany.4

4. On the role of religion in American foreign relations in general, see Andrew Preston, The Sword of the Spirit, The Shield of the Faith: Religion in American Foreign Wars
During and after World War II, there were those who argued that Nazi Germany represented a rejection of Western culture, a culture they identified with the liberal tradition in Europe and Britain. Yet the Second World War was not only one between the Western tradition and its arch enemies. It was also a war within the Western tradition, a war about which continuities of that tradition would emerge triumphant. The Nazis and the fascists, and the millions who followed them, could plausibly make that case that hatred of the Jews was an important and core part of the Western, and also Christian, tradition. They could find predecessors in the West who disdained individual freedom, celebrated the state and collectivism over individual liberty, invented theories of racial superiority that justified black slavery, and viewed dictatorship as vastly preferable to liberal democracy. Hayek and others made the compelling case that in the modern, that is, liberal, West, those ideas were not the mainstream of what was distinctive about the West. Yet it was no accident that the Nazis claimed that they were defending Western civilization against the threats of “Jewish bolshevism” in Moscow and the supposedly Jewish-dominated imperialists in London and New York. Nor was it an accident that they attracted many collaborators and that liberal democracy found many antagonists in the 1930s. The recent decades of historical scholarship on the history of racism, anti-Semitism, and illiberalism in the Western tradition have demonstrated that the Nazis and the fascists were not nearly as innovative as they often claimed to be. The fact that mass movements supported Nazism and fascism indicated that they had struck a chord with pre-existing traditions.

Yet in Britain, the United States, and the other members of the Allied powers, “the Western tradition” meant above all defense of individual freedom, the rule of law, religious tolerance, rejection of racism and


anti-Semitism, freedom of speech and assembly, as well as the connection between the market economy, political freedom, and economic growth. FDR and Churchill could easily point to a host of political, religious, and intellectual figures whose work composed what by the mid-twentieth century was the core of a liberal reading of the Western tradition. It was this “West,” that of John Locke and James Madison, Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, the economic liberals from Smith to Keynes and Hayek, of the Revolutions of 1688 in England, 1789 in France, the American Revolution and Lincoln’s effort to complete it in the American Civil War, that one associates with the Anglo-American leaders singing of marching off to war.7 To be sure, the United States went to war in 1941 with a segregated armed forces, with Jim Crow intact in the South and anti-Semitism still very much a part of American life. The internment of Japanese-Americans during the war underscored the manner in which the war in the Pacific reinforced rather than undermined racist views. Yet, after the attack on Pearl Harbor that understandably inflamed popular anger at Japan, Roosevelt still opted for a “Europe first” strategy that made the defeat of Nazi Germany the American priority. While the Japanese attack made American entry inevitable, the priority on defeating Hitler was result of the political and moral judgments made by FDR and Churchill. The leader of the still intact British Empire and the President of a United States that had yet to make good on the promise of equal citizenship to its African-American citizens nevertheless led their countries in a war against an official racist state. Hitler’s evil had shown as clearly as it could be done what the consequences could be of the dark currents of hatred that lurked within the Western tradition. It was FDR and Churchill’s accomplishment to have mobilized the other continuities of the West in winning the war.

World War II and the Holocaust remain the single most important events in the modern history of the West. It is understandable that in its aftermath, the intellectual temptation in our universities was enormous to remind young generations of the values and traditions for which the Allies fought. It is understandable that celebration and some complacency seeped into the way the Western tradition was taught. Yet even in the decades of the supposedly complacent celebration of the West, liberal education in American universities produced several generations of students who

7. For the influential wartime restatement of this meaning of the Western tradition, see Friedrich Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1944).
were anything but complacent conformists. Indeed, how could reading Machiavelli, Luther, Calvin, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith, the Jacobins, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Tocqueville, and Marx, as well as Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, but also the anti-totalitarian theorists and writers such as Arendt, Camus, Orwell, Karl Popper, and Isaiah Berlin fail to foster an understanding both of the liberal dimensions of the Western tradition and the enemies of liberalism?

We historians of Germany, who reflect on six different governments in the same country within one century, have had to think a lot about how the same national and cultural framework can contain within it so many contrasting possibilities for freedom or tyranny, totalitarianism or liberal democracy, genocide or the rule of law and tolerance. Thomas Nipperdey, one of the greatest historians of modern Germany, captured my point in classic essays on the multiple continuities of German history.8 He argued that Germany offered a pre-history to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, and also, as historians have recently pointed out, to the decision-making and implementation of the Holocaust in 1941.9 Yet this same country had other continuities that were the pre-history of the founding of a liberal democracy in 1949 in West Germany and then of peaceful unification and the end of dictatorship in 1989. As the contrast between the way the Nazis and FDR and Churchill understood Christianity indicated, what Nipperdey said about German history is true of the history of the West. It too is a history of multiple continuities. Part of our moral obligation as scholars has rightly found expression in the many books published in recent decades about the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism. Yet we scholars also have a moral obligation to teach and do research in the humane and decent continuities of the Western tradition and to remind our students of the better angels of the Western tradition. I have the impression that too many students graduate from our finest universities not knowing how it was that the Allies won World War II, how the Western alliance won the Cold War or even why it was important to do so, or where the ideas of freedom and equality that inspired the American Civil Rights movement came from. In recent years, they also learn too little about the contribution of the Western

liberal tradition to Zionism and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Israel.

Instead, in part due to the impact of German social theory from Max Weber to Martin Heidegger and the Frankfurt School, too many of our students are taught that “modernity” was and is an evil that produced the great catastrophes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The habit of referring to something called modernity became a form of intellectual laziness that made it possible to sound profound without knowing much about the particular histories of foreign countries. It is ironic that this talk of modernity was associated with a “critical” theory, for its impact in Germany was to displace the embarrassing proper nouns of German history with comforting abstractions that could apply anywhere in the world. A definitional trick, launched by Max Weber, reverberated through modern intellectual life. Having redefined modernity as technical rationality and bureaucracy, and thus excluding notions of individual liberty, equality of citizenship, or political pluralism, the various German social theorists could indict this modernity for assorted crimes and catastrophes.\footnote{I made this point first in Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich (New York: Cambridge UP, 1984), and more recently in “Displacement, Abstraction and Historical Specificity: Comments on the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory,” in Leonard V. Kaplan and Rudy Koshar, eds., The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theory and Law (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 409–20.}

Hannah Arendt’s misunderstanding of who Adolf Eichmann was, her inability to recognize the dissembler in Jerusalem for the ideological fanatic that he was, found famous expression in the mistaken notion of the banality of evil.\footnote{On Eichmann’s ideological fanaticism, see Bettina Stangneth, Eichmann vor Jerusalem: Das unbeheiligte Leben eines Massenmörders (Hamburg: Arche Verlag, 2011).} Some of the German refugee intellectuals, most famously Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment, obscured the reality that it was the defeat of the humane and liberal traditions by the Nazi regime, not “modernity” or the Enlightenment, that led to the Holocaust and the race war on the Eastern Front. The theorists of the ills of modernity obscured modernity’s multiple continuities, including those evident in the Atlantic Alliance, first in World War II and then again the Cold War. The sheer fact that some nations of the West defeated the Axis powers did not make a dent in these theorists’ flight from historical specificity.\footnote{In the postwar decades, Horkheimer in particular displayed an appreciation for the Western liberal tradition. See Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 13,
generations of political and intellectual figures for whom “Westernization” meant a rejection of the Nazi era and an opening to “the West,” understood as the broad spectrum of liberal traditions embodied in the Atlantic Alliance that emerged in World War II and persisted during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{13}

As I write, a disaster has unfolded in Iraq. The West is not winning the unfortunately named “war on terror.” The tide of war is not receding. Islamist terrorists are running forward, not backward. Al-Qaeda is not finished but has mutated into other forms of anti-Western organizations. The Obama administration’s confident expressions of realism and prudence threaten to become a chaotic rout. From its first days in office, it has refused to speak frankly about both the virtues of free societies as well as the threat that radical Islamism poses to them. Islamism draws inspiration from non-Western ideological, religious, and cultural traditions, and yet, as informed observers have pointed out for some time, it shares the totalitarian impulse that almost destroyed the West in the middle of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{14} The president and his officials have refused to acknowledge the connection between Islamist ideology and international terrorism or the connection between the ideology of the Iranian regime, its anti-Semitism, and its quest for nuclear weapons. When the Iranian audiences chant “Death to America” and “Death to Israel,” they are not offering bargaining chips at a negotiation. When the authors of the Hamas Covenant of 1988 cited the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and versus from the Koran to justify the destruction of the state of Israel and repeated Nazism’s anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, they were not engaging in meaningless political rhetoric. The leaders of Iran and of Hamas were and are speaking from the heart.\textsuperscript{15}

The United States remains indispensable if the liberal traditions of “the West” are going to be preserved and strengthened. Had it not been


\textsuperscript{14} On this, see Paul Berman, \textit{Terror and Liberalism} (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

for the United States, Nazi Germany might very well have won World War II—or Europe would have been conquered by the Red Army. The United States was equally indispensable for defeating the Soviet Union and its allies. Without the military and economic power of the United States, the stability of the global economy and the existence of liberal democratic governments around the world would not be possible. Had the United States not remained engaged in Western Europe and Japan, West Germany and Japan would have had to appease the Communists in Europe and Asia and the relative postwar political and economic stability of the past seven decades would not have taken place. No other country has our advantages of geography, political institutions, the size and vitality of its economy, the increasing independence of energy resources, and, yes, the military power to defend the liberal traditions of the West. No other country can lead others successfully to confront and defeat the ideological and military threats posed by the varieties of radical Islamism.

What was true of World War II and the Cold War remains true of the challenge to the West posed by varieties of Islamism. The United States must lead what we can still call the free world, or else the liberal international order will not be effectively defended. The defense of the better traditions of “the West,” those of individual liberty, equality of citizenship, the rule of law, political and intellectual freedom, of pluralism and compromise as a tradition depends now, as much as it did during World War II and the Cold War, on the willingness of the United States to lead. The great traditions of Western political thinking from left to right and in between have cast a harsh gaze on wishful thinking. The central American illusion of the past five years has been that the tide of war would recede because we want it to do so. As the catastrophe in Syria and now Iraq has made clear, this understandable hope has now been shown to be the illusion it was from the outset. As has been the case so often in the past when the West defended itself, made advances in human freedom, and improved the economic life of millions of people, it did so by abandoning past illusions and looking at uncomfortable truths straight in the eye. American scholars and intellectuals have rightly devoted enormous energy in recent decades to sharply criticizing the West’s dark traditions, namely, the hatred of liberal democracy, the ideologies that justified racial slavery and discrimination, and the anti-Jewish passions that were centuries in the making. Yet this same tradition of criticism and the growth of knowledge
should be applied as well to the illusions of recent years. Who knows if this moment of sobriety will lead to a new realism or to yet more years of wishful thinking? Memory of crime and catastrophe is part of our moral obligation as scholars, intellectuals, and citizens, but the memory of the better parts of our traditions is an equally important moral obligation. We can fulfill the latter obligation while remaining mindful of the Western tradition’s multiple continuities.
Only seventeen years after World War II ended, John F. Kennedy made the trip to West Germany. Speaking there in the summer of 1962, Kennedy was obviously an American president on a state visit. Yet he was something else as well. He went so far as to declare himself a Berliner, in West Berlin, immediately likening his declaration to one from classical antiquity—*civis romanus sum*—and implying a concordance of spirit between the Roman Empire and the recently fashioned NATO alliance. These august associations heartened his German audience. By placing West Germany in a grand historical continuum, stretching back millennia, Kennedy freed at least half of Germany from the prison of German nationalism. The Nazi past need not dictate the German future, since Germany’s place in Europe and its place in Western culture could be fit to another past and another future. American audiences did not object to Kennedy’s political language, to its Latin and German words, or to the notion that Kennedy, a World War II hero in the Pacific, was a plausible Berliner. Most of Kennedy’s compatriots thrilled to the cadence of their young president’s voice and speech. West Berlin could not have been a fully alien city to these Americans. Good politics on both sides of the Atlantic, Kennedy’s speech marked the apex of success for the West as an American project, an American passion, and an American-led political entity.¹

Kennedy presented no new argument about the U.S.-European relationship in Berlin. Harry Truman had already overseen the broadening of an Anglo-American alliance to include much of Charlemagne’s Europe.

Supreme Allied Commander Eisenhower was compelled to run for president when he met with fellow Republican Robert Taft and found him unsure about NATO. It was Truman and Eisenhower who conceptualized and cemented the Western alliance, though it was Kennedy who most eloquently memorialized it in words. In 1962, Kennedy had easy access to the symbolism of Western culture, and his audiences, elite as well as popular, were obviously receptive to such symbolism. To Americans he offered the novel pleasure of leadership and the familiar pleasure of projecting liberty through American activism and example. To Europeans Kennedy offered a degree of deference, an esteem not merely tactical, despite the obtrusive realities of American occupation. The Rome and Berlin of Kennedy’s speech were very European places. Kennedy did not choose to rhapsodize, in Berlin, about Lexington, Yorktown, Philadelphia, or Gettysburg. Declaring a cultural allegiance to Rome and Berlin, Kennedy was honoring a European pattern to civilization and an indigenous European hold on political liberty. Amid the Cold War peril, America was fortunate to exist within this venerable tradition. Such was Kennedy’s point of view.2

Kennedy’s Berlin speech falls with almost geometric precision between two historical eras. One was the alignment of the United States with the cause of the West, which was pioneered during World War I, and the other was the unraveling of this alignment, which began after JFK’s assassination in November 1963, intensifying in the later phases of the Vietnam War. “The West” was never a populist rallying cry in America. Apart from its local connotation—the American West—the word has no meaningful application to domestic American politics. An obsession of elites, its natural application is to the practice of foreign policy. The West has mattered in official Washington and in academia, which created a cadre of Americans committed to the West, beginning in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, the West lost its footing in academia, such that very few Americans are now educated in the culture or history of the West as such. Nor are they educated to see the United States as a Western country. In the relationship between America and the West, academia has anticipated the two most significant trends: the construction of a Euro-American West, from 1914 to 1963, and the deconstruction of a Euro-American West from 1963 to the present. The history of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy corresponds directly, if

belatedly, to this narrative of rise, decline, and fall. Since 1989, the United States has tried to implement a non-Western foreign policy.

I.

The instability in America’s connection to the West reflects instabilities in America’s connection to Europe as well as cultural ambiguities embedded in early American history. The American Revolution asserted an American political identity, a republican break from the heritage of European empire, a new order of the ages that would flow from the eradication of an established church and a divinely sanctioned monarch. Simultaneously, the American Revolution conveyed the Founders’ reverence for European political norms, whether absorbed from the study of antiquity or from the legal and parliamentary traditions of Great Britain. The many Europeans who came to fight against Britain—the Marquis de Lafayette foremost among them—guaranteed an enduring tie between the American republic and the project of liberal reform in Europe. This Euro-American story runs from 1776 to 1789 to 1848 to 1945 to 1989, where it arrives at a kind of terminal point. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote with nuanced appreciation of the American ambiguities, of a country unlike France or Britain, when he came on his study tour in the 1830s. However distant, however different, America was intelligible to Europeans and, more than that, it was meaningful to Europeans. Democracy in America today, democracy in Europe one day: where America had gone, Europe might yet go. The distance and proximity between Europe and America constituted a problem worthy of Tocqueville’s intellect.

Nineteenth-century American culture perpetuated the relevant Euro-American instabilities. This century witnessed the birth of an American high culture called for by the Transcendentalists, and most lyrically by Emerson in his essay “The American Scholar” (1837). Walt Whitman enshrined a national ethos in indelibly American poetry. After the Civil War, Mark Twain finished the job, merging the finest possible writing with the speech of everyday Americans. In A Connecticut Yankee in King

Arthur’s Court (1889), he shrewdly satirized the contrast between American and European types. By the end of the nineteenth century, the balance of wealth was tipping from Europe over to America, with a rising self-confidence in American culture, a sense that America was completing a long cycle of tutelage and gradually coming into its own. Yet the nineteenth-century academic world in America was oddly dismissive of American culture. In this century, American history and literature were esoteric subjects at American universities. What counted were the literature, history, and languages of Europe. Latin and Greek were self-evidently the learned languages, and until well into the twentieth century America itself was largely off the map of learned Americans.4

Prior to the First World War, Europe and the United States did not unite around the image of a transatlantic West. Three circumstances militated against such a unity and such an image. One was the unapologetically Anglo-Protestant identity of the American elite. An ancestral affiliation with Britain or with the English-speaking peoples burnished the assumption that Protestantism is a necessary foundation for self-government.5 The Catholic and the Jewish elements in European civilization could thus appear alien to turn-of-the-century American elites. Another circumstance that separated America from modern Europe was the emphasis on classical learning, which elevated the distant past in America’s appreciation of Europe. Much of modern Europe—Italy, Spain, the eastern territories of the Russian empire, the western territories of the Habsburg Empire and German Kaiserreich, the northern territories of the Ottoman Empire—was far away and hard to make familiar. Finally, America had its own national culture and history, regardless of what was taught in the universities. A country that spanned a continent was not overly dependent on others. The Monroe Doctrine designated the United States a hemispheric power, an American power in the broadest sense of the word, and this was a designation roughly proportional to the main lines of nineteenth-century American culture. The ambitions were as formidable as they were regional. When the United States colonized the Philippines, it struck Mark


Twain, for one, as a deviation from American republicanism, an ugly and foolish appropriation of Europe’s global imperialism. Twain presumed a set of salient distinctions between American virtue and the Western will to power.

The First World War gave birth to the ideal of a Euro-American West. Woodrow Wilson was the beau ideal of the Anglo-Protestant statesman, eager to challenge the German Kaiser and to see the United States allied with Great Britain. The war into which Wilson brought his country was a war within the West, a problem to which the Euro-American West was in no sense a solution. Only in the discussions of the postwar order might something like this enter into view, and Wilson did much to guide these discussions. By sending American troops to France, Wilson established the United States as a European power, joining America’s political destiny to that of continental Europe. Wilson aspired to a democratic order internationally, a global vision, though it was Europe that most interested him. Wilson equated values with security and security with values: making the world safe for democracy would eliminate future security threats. Therefore, a democratic West, however hypothetical, would be greatly beneficial to the United States, and the postwar order might redeem the terrible costs incurred by war. While Wilson was president, Columbia University was introducing courses on Western civilization to compensate for the abolition of Greek and Latin requirements, to educate modern American citizens, and to acquaint future soldiers with the principles for which they would be fighting. In Wilsonianism, and in this new curricular undertaking, the seeds were planted for a durable Euro-American West. They would take decades to bear fruit.

After World War I, the West captivated America’s academics, intellectuals, and diplomats, though for each constituency it had a separate meaning.

The academics’ West was historical. It was a legacy that had been amassed over time and one that the university was ideally suited to perpetuating. This West was equally a textual and a narrative legacy, familiarity with the classic texts a synonym for education. The great books were distinguished by their greatness—the magisterial poetry of Homer, the philosophical acuity of Aristotle’s *Ethics* or Plato’s *Republic*—but

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they also described a particular culture. Americans were born to be the communicants of Western culture. One taught the great books to American students so that, having been assimilated into the culture that was theirs, they could contribute to its legacy. The time line of the great books amounted to a chronological narrative. The triad of antiquity, Middle Ages, and modernity was one part of this narrative, and another part was more political or geopolitical: the rise of the West. This was the West that had coalesced around 1500, exploration inculcating empire, as the edge in economic power and technological know-how moved, in the eighteenth century, from Asia to Europe. The rise of the West was a historical process with normative implications, which might alternately be characterized as progress or civilization or liberty. The academic task of the 1920s and 1930s, then, was to write modern America into a well-established history. A discovery of the West, America was a Columbian nation destined to partner with Europe in the West’s vertiginous rise—just the right motif for Columbia University and for a country whose capital city lies in the District of Columbia.

As if in dialogue with the academic West, Washington’s interwar public architecture and monuments traced a coherent narrative of the West. Neoclassicism is a mainstay of American public architecture, especially in the new Rome dreamed up by its antiquity-besotted founders. The Capitol building left no doubt as to the civilizational origins of the American polity. The Beaux-Arts style gave Washington Union Station, modeled on Rome’s Baths of Caracalla, and New York a similarly inspired Grand Central Station; both were finished in 1907. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s architect of choice, John Russell Pope, completed the National Archives in 1935, a temple to the republic’s sacred documents. Cass Gilbert’s Supreme Court building, also finished in 1935, is no less neoclassical, no less a temple to the better angels of American politics. Pope’s Jefferson Memorial rose


8. Columbia’s Butler Library, designed by James Gamble Rogers and completed in 1934, has four rows of names on its exterior; the names were chosen by Columbia president, Nicholas Murray Butler. Three rows are European: Homer to Virgil; Horace to Dante; and Cervantes to Goethe. The fourth and longest is America, running from George Washington to Mark Twain. See “What Names Are Chiseled on the Façade of Butler Library?” at the Columbia University Libraries website, http://library.columbia.edu/help/faq/lio/facade.html.
up on the tidal basin in 1937, a domed tribute to Jefferson the philosopher-president. Pope’s National Gallery of Art elegantly filled its spot on the National Mall in 1940. Its holdings are a startling commentary on American nationhood: about a third of the National Gallery’s displayed art is American, and the rest is European. There were other architectural styles available in the 1930s. Pope’s designs were chosen to represent the spirit of American republicanism and to remind Americans not of a shared Christian heritage and not of some uniquely national heritage. His buildings anticipated a citizenry elevated and civilized by classical learning and example. Twentieth-century American collegiate architecture often conveyed a similar message.⁹

The intellectuals’ West was neither neoclassical nor traditional. It was a zone of crisis. Conservative and radical intellectuals could agree on one premise: that the First World War had devastated the West. To many conservatives the modern machine age was at fault. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution had yielded a secular wasteland. Manipulating the overall despair, the Bolsheviks staged a revolution that confirmed a general sickness of spirit. The conservatives’ West was Christendom, an entity they felt was failing in 1917—or, as Oswald Spengler put it, “going down,” the victim of its own decadence. Spengler published the first volume of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (in Germany) in 1918 and the second in 1923. It appeared in English translation as *The Decline of the West*, released in two volumes, and to much Anglo-American excitement, between 1926 and 1928. Conservative pessimism could lead, as it did with Eliot and his friend Ezra Pound, in the direction of fascism. Other conservatives sought the renewal of the West in the thought of Edmund Burke, Thomas Aquinas, and Jacques Maritain, in a usable traditionalism.¹⁰ On the Left, the advent of fascism radicalized intellectuals who had observed socialism’s submission to nationalism in World War I. Thereafter, sympathies divided among communism, socialism, and social democracy. Only Stalin’s Soviet Union could save the West from Hitler and from the depredations of capitalism, argued the Stalinists. Only Trotsky was properly a man of Western civilization, the Trotskyists countered, associating

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Stalin with Asia and thus with barbarism. In the 1930s, a transatlantic socialist culture extended from George Orwell in London to Bertolt Brecht in American exile to the Partisan Review circle in New York. Only the Left, an international political movement and political spirit, could save the West by distancing it from the horrors of capitalism. The West was a ubiquitous term in the 1920s and 1930s, but it was a term on which few could agree.

Yet another West was that of the diplomats, whose careers often took them to the heart of Europe. This West was a zone of crisis too, paradigmatically so in the interwar years. Italy and Spain lurched from upheaval to upheaval after World War I. Spain would descend into protracted civil war. Mussolini’s Italy gave fascism its debut in 1922, a distinctively Western form of government. Germany, heart of the Abendland and home to the era’s deepest intellectual culture, succumbed to fascism in 1933. After 1933, Austria and Spain felt the pressure of German influence, which skewed continental Europe’s balance of power toward fascism. Suffering through the Great Depression, Britain, France, and the United States watched Hitler negotiate himself into a position of terrifying strength, and, having prepared himself well, Hitler tricked Stalin into signing a non-aggression pact in August 1939. With this the war began. To the extent that American foreign policy entailed the projection of American values in Europe, Hitler’s ascendency spelled out a spectacular failure. The First World War had pitted the Western world against itself, with no end to conflict in sight. American diplomats might be Europhiles, they might care deeply about the fate of democracy in Europe, and they might worry about the West, but there was little they could do to prevent the coming war. They knew that domestic political opinion militated against premature American involvement. By 1941, the United States was an ally of the Soviet Union, a non-Western power, and it was at war with Germany, an archetypally Western country. World War II thoroughly unsettled

the political geography, such that a Western alliance was either a distant memory or a distant hope.

Still, each war from 1941 to 1945 brought the United States closer to Western Europe. Two world wars had turned the West into a massive killing field—or, as Mark Mazower has termed the twentieth-century European landmass, a dark continent.\textsuperscript{12} The violence was without historical precedent: mechanized killing on the battlefield, aerial bombardment of civilians, civil-war conditions with armies, militias, and partisan movements competing for hearts and minds. At the center of Germany’s war was a campaign of surreal racial fury, in which all of Europe was eventually implicated. In Europe’s West, German occupation generated an avalanche of collaboration. In the eastern Europe, the Germans committed crimes beyond measure and crimes that compelled local participation, from the initial shooting sprees to the orchestrated executions of 1941 to the death camps that would come to symbolize the Final Solution. From 1941 to 1945, Europe was united in the murder of Jews, and the moral catastrophe of it all undermined the European foundation of European civilization, as it has continued to do ever since. A reluctant savior of Europe’s Jews, the United States held onto its democracy, a fact of durable significance to wartime Europe. America was related to Europe, an overseas cousin, and American democracy was a Western alternative to the tyranny that had seduced so many Europeans in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{13} Soviet communism was the other alternative to fascism, though Moscow was in Europe’s East—at the edge of Asia. Lenin or Trotsky might have succeeded in making Moscow the center of Western civilization, but Stalin was poorly suited to the job. Much as he had promoted socialism in one country in the 1920s, Stalin settled for domination of Europe’s East, which he pursued at the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam Conferences, setting the stage for the contest over Europe’s postwar soul. Almost by default the East was to be Soviet and the West American. Friend and foe formed into new equations. As American troops scattered across Europe, and as the borders were redrawn, there emerged a transatlantic West.

\textsuperscript{12} Mark Mazower, \textit{Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century} (New York: Knopf, 1998).

\textsuperscript{13} Isaiah Berlin’s biographical sketch of Franklin D. Roosevelt perfectly captures this sentiment. Of the British, Berlin writes that “they felt in their bones that Roosevelt was their lifelong friend, that he hated the Nazis as deeply as they did, that he wanted democracy and civilization, in the sense in which they believed in it, to prevail.” See Isaiah Berlin, \textit{Personal Impressions}, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Viking Press, 1980), p. 29.
Many contingencies contributed to the golden age of the Euro-American West. One was a European collapse more precipitous than anything Spengler had imagined. Another was the consolidation of the Soviet East, which stretched from Tallinn to East Berlin and down to Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, and Sophia—the erstwhile Russian Empire plus choice pieces of East Prussia and the former Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. The Soviet Union was not simply strong in the 1940s; it was expansionary, and it had intellectual and political allies across Western Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In another contingency, the topography of the Cold War replicated an ancient distinction in European political theory. The Greeks had associated themselves (the West) with liberty and the East with Asiatic or Oriental despotism. Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1792) gave an Enlightenment gloss to this ancient division, which was alive and well in the early twentieth century. Stalin had been born in the Caucuses, and oriental despotism was an available label for Stalin’s empire of the East. (His Russian critics sometimes referred to him as Genghis Khan with a telephone.) The latter-day purveyors of Hellenic liberties could only be the Americans, standing guard over the sacred traditions of the West. The interwar universities and the architecture of official Washington honored the conceit that modern America had classical roots. This conceit took on a new meaning with the Cold War, which codified what the first two world wars had confused, demarcating the physical and philosophical borders of the West.

The first three Cold War presidents had each acquired a pronounced Western orientation before the Cold War. Truman fought in the First World War, and since adolescence he had had an intense appreciation of Greco-Roman antiquity and classical authors. World War I left him politically aligned with France and Britain as well as with the foreign-policy thinking of Woodrow Wilson. As a Senator, Truman did battle against isolationism. He was a leader among the Democratic Party’s internationalists, gloomily tracking Hitler’s advances across Europe and agreeing with President Roosevelt that America would have to enter the war. These attitudes, in turn, made Truman an appealing vice-presidential candidate for Roosevelt in 1944. When Roosevelt died in the spring of 1945, the postwar West was Truman’s to visualize. Truman chose not to exclude Germany from the West, as he might have done, and he offered the Marshall Plan to all of Europe, binding the economy of Western Europe to that of the United States. By 1948, the U.S. military, protector of Europe’s recently drawn
western border, was airlifting goods into West Berlin. In 1950 Truman’s State Department and Pentagon finalized the NATO alliance, of which the Federal Republic of Germany (only consolidated as a country in 1949) was an unquestioned member. Shore up the Western allies, do not appease the Soviets—that seemed to be Truman’s approach to prosecuting the incipient Cold War. Riding with Truman on the presidential yacht in January 1952, Winston Churchill told the American president that “you more than any other man have saved Western civilization.”

The career of Eisenhower, a fellow Midwesterner, ran parallel to Truman’s. During the war, it was the internationalist Eisenhower who preserved the Western military alliance. No American of his generation would amass more formidable transatlantic credentials than Eisenhower. After the war, Eisenhower remained active in European affairs, and in the United States he was Europe’s advocate. Eisenhower saw a strategic and civilizational partner in Europe—strategic because civilizational. His Cold War thinking was determined, as was Truman’s, by the First and Second World Wars. Nor was Eisenhower especially optimistic: speaking to a friend in October 1950 about the NATO alliance, he said, “I rather look upon this effort as about the last remaining chance for the survival of Western civilization.”

Eisenhower’s foreign policy proceeded organically from Truman’s. The shared U.S.-European defense of Western Europe and the meshing of NATO with Western civilization harmonized with conventional wisdom in the United States and in Europe. There was a solid cultural foundation for this West, however recently constructed. Meanwhile, Khrushchev weakened Soviet communism’s appeal in Western Europe with his 1956 speech to the Twentieth Party Congress. The exposure of Stalin’s crimes deprived the Soviet Union of ideological and moral prestige, damaging long-term Soviet interests in Eastern Europe and rendering the Warsaw Pact an alliance of coercion rather than of values. Eastern Europe and the Baltic Republics would become the Soviet Union’s Achilles’ heel. As its prospects in Europe darkened, Soviet foreign policy foregrounded the developing world. Truman and Eisenhower, by contrast, had enduringly united Western Europe with the United States by 1960.

John F. Kennedy took up their labors as his own, differing from his Cold War predecessors only in emphasis. He was America’s first Catholic president, the weakening of the Anglo-Protestant grip on America’s elite a precondition for his rise to power. One appeal of the West, in the first half of the twentieth century, was its relative inclusiveness. Jews and Catholics had an obvious stake in the West. If defined as Christendom, the West had to be Catholic as well as Protestant, a helpful state of affairs to the children of immigrants from Italy and Ireland. If defined as the Enlightenment, the West was open to Jews. Since the French Revolution, many European Jews had sought political and cultural citizenship in the West, and in America they would do the same. Jews might also point to the West as a Judeo-Christian construct and to the Old Testament as a foundational text of Western culture. Of Irish-Catholic descent, Kennedy first stepped into the American elite by attending Harvard College, after which his path to the White House was unobstructed. As president, Kennedy reinterpreted America’s Cold War agenda. It was as Western as Truman and Eisenhower had said it was, but it was no geriatric initiative. Truman was born in 1884 and Eisenhower in 1890. Kennedy, born in 1917, infused the West with youthful self-confidence. His West had the energy and the vigor to prevail over the Soviet East. He and his advisors regarded the West as a cognate for modernity. The West had long ago modernized itself, while the non-Western world could follow suit by adopting American formulas of democracy and capitalism and by forsaking the temptation of a communism, which was both unfree and a technique of backwardness. A mood of crisis, unavoidable in 1945 and earlier, had given way to a mood of opportunity. Behind Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy was a confraternity of diplomats, academics, and intellectuals eager to advance American leadership of the West. They provided crucial service to the Cold War White House. Among the diplomats George Kennan was preeminent, and his arguments


17. Erich Auerbach was an influential German-Jewish intellectual who linked the Old Testament to Western literature and who lived and taught in the United States for the latter part of his career. See Malachi Hacohen, “Typology and the Holocaust: Erich Auerbach and Judeo-Christian Europe” Religions 3 (July 2012): 600–45.

about America and the West were elaborate and influential. Kennan, who had worked in the American Embassy in Moscow before the war, frequently categorized Stalin’s Soviet Union as an oriental despotism. Kennan admired the Western liberties that the United States believed it was defending, but he was gravely worried about Western decadence, as he was about the callowness of American culture. Tones of Spengler and T. S. Eliot are audible in Kennan’s writing. Containment, in his view, was a spiritual challenge to the West, necessary to accept if the Soviets were to be held off and necessary if an Americanized West was to avoid the pitfalls of mindless consumerism—the pitfalls, in a sense, of American culture. The implied model of Western culture was Kennan’s own intellect: austere, melancholic, steeped in the great European books, and as alert to civilization per se as to national security or the national interest.  

Dean Acheson, another of the Cold War’s master diplomats, was so genteel and Europhilic that he became a target for Joe McCarthy, the populist Midwestern Senator at war with the State Department’s striped-pants boys. The mildly ironic title of Acheson’s memoir, *Present at the Creation* (1969), rooted America’s creation of a Western alliance in the Book of Genesis. To be a Washington insider, like Acheson, was to believe in this divinely sanctioned state of affairs. A policy intellectual, Paul Nitze was an expert on military matters and an avid Spengler reader, keen to perfect NATO’s security architecture and to forestall the decline of the West. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. government relied heavily on figures like Nitze, on technical experts and pragmatic thinkers who were emotionally committed to the West.  

As diplomats and politicians created a new Euro-American West, American academia was busily updating the teaching of Western civilization. The defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, a defeat in which so many students and professors had participated, could only excite American


academia. The thriving postwar American universities were closer to the centers of power than the prewar universities had ever been. In academia, the rise of the West meant the rise of Western Europe and the United States, or simply the rise of the United States to superpower status. The military, political, and academic narratives of American ascendancy converged in the biography of Eisenhower, who was president of Columbia University before becoming president of the United States in 1952. In the 1930s and 1940s, American universities had given safe haven to a cohort of scholars fleeing Hitler’s Europe: Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Erich Auerbach, Herbert Marcuse, Erwin Panofsky, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin, among others. This brilliant German-Jewish group imported a central European understanding of the West into American intellectual life, accentuating the interplay among Greco-Roman antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, and modern Germany. An accident of history abetted the further Europeanization of American higher education, a Europeanization that was more broadly European—less confined to Protestant Europe—than before. Finally, the Second World War and the Cold War integrated the universities into the national security state. The government did not control the universities, but through informal networks and through targeted funding it did much to structure them. There was a revolving door between Washington, DC, and Cambridge, Massachusetts—and other such places. Students were recruited into the CIA on university campuses. Departments of physics at Berkeley and elsewhere were major Cold War institutions. Though the mixing of academia and government was not necessarily conducted in the name of the West, it had as its background the Cold War Western alliance.21

Intellectuals rallied around the West in the 1950s—or, rather, they rallied around multiple and incompatible Wests. One was the West of the Enlightenment, of human rights, secularism, rationality, and political pluralism. The West that Hitler had repudiated was the West that Britain and the United States had salvaged, and which they might soon have to salvage again, with the help of Western Europe. No more of a liberal than Hitler, Stalin could be easily demonized as an anti-Western, illiberal despot.22


22. On Stalin’s use of anti-Western propaganda within the Soviet Union, see Hans Kohn, “The Triumphs of the East-Slavs after World War II,” in Pan-Slavism: Its History
John F. Kennedy’s liberal anti-communism mirrored that of the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., author of the *Vital Center* (1949), which upheld the Enlightenment program implicit to Cold War combat. Through the Committee on Cultural Freedom (CCF), an international anti-communist organization, Americans and Europeans came together out of solicitude for the liberal West. Another of the intellectuals’ West was radical. Radicals had been touched by the Soviet melodramas of the 1930s, and in the age of McCarthyism they were on the defensive. Some continued arguing for socialism or for social democracy, but not for Soviet communism. *Dissent* magazine was a vehicle for such postwar radicalism, and Irving Howe, its editor, an unabashed lover of Western literature. (He was teased later in life for his adoration of ballet.) Radicals might also be beguiled by the avant-garde West, by the anti-bourgeois animus palpable in the great European and American cities—the literature of the Beats between New York and San Francisco, the canvases of New York’s action painters, London’s angry young men, and the Parisian philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The conservatives’ West was something else entirely. It was just then forming, or reforming, around *National Review* (founded in 1955) and the figure of William F. Buckley, Jr. The language of Western liberty championed by the libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek was congenial to Buckley, who folded it into a reverence for Judeo-Christian tradition and an urgent sense of anti-communist purpose. Postwar intellectuals of all stripes were immersed in stirring discussions of the West, though not necessarily in tandem with one another. The liberals and conservatives justified the Cold War West as no politician or diplomat could. They brought the West to life in print and were themselves exemplars of a transatlantic civilization. A few radicals, like Howe, remained happily in the orbit of a Western culture in the 1950s, but their suspicion of the national security state, their fascination with the avant-garde, and their discontents with the status quo were an omen of things to come.


Severe problems trailed America’s affiliation with the West. The first, by virtue of its association with Europe, was the West’s connotation of whiteness. At times this was an unintended association, and at times it was intended, especially in the American South, where the defense of segregation might blend into the defense of Western civilization and the defense of Western civilization into the defense of segregation. Antebellum defenders of slavery proudly cited Aristotle’s approval of slavery and the Old Testament story of Noah’s son Ham as proof that the South was furthering Western civilization. Ham was banished after looking upon his father’s nakedness; suffering the curse of Ham, he was the alleged progenitor of African slaves. By the 1950s, W. E. B. DuBois had meticulously analyzed the conflation of whiteness with Western civilization. Perfectly positioned to do so, he was an African-American scholar and intellectual who had studied in Berlin and who had earned his Ph.D. in history from Harvard. DuBois construed the dilemma of the West as the dilemma of empire. The British Empire had elaborated a hierarchy of skin color and status, hierarchies perpetuated in the American colonies and later in the American republic; the French Empire, despite its universalism, had not treated its non-white subjects as equals; and social Darwinism, a pseudoscience of race embraced in Europe as well as America, gave new life to the racial injustices of European imperialism. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s sponsored an early reckoning with America and the West: the triangle of Europe, Africa, and America framed its search for an African-American identity. Marcus Garvey hoped for a return to Africa. Zora Neal Hurston cherished the uncorrupted places of black culture and worried, in the 1950s, that desegregation would deprive blacks of their past and their culture. Richard Wright and James Baldwin traveled to Paris to find the best milieu in which to be writers. Both would settle in France. Baldwin used the essay form to calculate the distance he felt from Western civilization, as he did in “Stranger in the Village” (1953), an essay on Baldwin’s stay in a Swiss village. DuBois’s critiques of Western imperialism, the
Harlem Renaissance, and Baldwin’s essays shed light on areas of American culture that the universities’ Western civilization curricula were unable to address.

Another problem of American leadership was rooted in foreign policy. Classically understood, the rise of the West was the rise of European empires, starting with the age of exploration. DuBois had no trouble entering American history into this trajectory. The British Empire injected the promise of liberty into its ideology of empire, a contradiction inherited, as it were, by the United States in the American century. Whether imbued with liberty or not, the mantle of the West might well be the mantle of empire. America’s Cold War strategies arose from the collapse of the European empires and the ensuing dilemmas of decolonization. The worst Cold War crises recurred in places previously subject to imperial rule. In these places, American partnerships bore little resemblance to the NATO alliance. The Soviet Union, with interests across Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia, had the old Leninist animosity to European empire at its disposal as well as a recipe for developing agrarian into industrial economies. Soviet propaganda merrily exposed American racism less for a European or an American audience than for the Soviet audiences in the developing world. In the early Cold War, American foreign policy vacillated between an anti-imperialism that could feel instinctively American and an image of Cold War America as the Trumanesque or Churchillian savior of Western civilization. To save the West was potentially to jeopardize America’s anti-imperialist credentials. After the Suez crisis of 1956, the United States was sovereign within the West, but it was not willing to be an isolationist republic, and it was not willing to declare itself an empire. This conundrum led the United States into the agony of the Vietnam War.

The United States did not lose the Cold War in Vietnam. North Vietnamese victory did not prevent the United States from supporting dissident movements in Eastern Europe or from bargaining with Mikhail Gorbachev.

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from a position of strength. Yet Vietnam wrought an extraordinary transformation in American political culture. It changed the self-conception of many who were conditioned to see the United States as the forthright and virtuous leader of the West. The war followed from containment as Eisenhower and Kennedy interpreted Kennan’s famous doctrine. Watching the French defeat in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Eisenhower concluded that the United States had anti-communist responsibilities in Vietnam. Kennedy agreed, positing Vietnam, much like Cuba and West Berlin, as a test of Western resolve. Khrushchev’s and Mao’s will to move the Bolshevik revolution forward had to be resisted in Vietnam. The resolve of the West, the spirit that Kennedy had intoned in his duly famous inaugural address, was the Cold War’s pivot point, and weakness in Vietnam would embolden communists everywhere. This assumption held with Kennedy: it was credible to an American public that was hardly anti-war at the time of JFK’s assassination. With Lyndon Johnson, this same assumption faltered, breaking into the two rival assessments that fueled the anti-war movement. The liberal assessment recalled Mark Twain’s critique of American imperialism, that America had slid into a *mission civilisatrice*, the mission of French Empire, the mission of Western empire. When it should have been promoting democracy, the U.S. was betraying its better self in Vietnam. The radical assessment designated the United States a Western empire. America’s true nature had been shown on the battlefields of Vietnam. America was the West, and the West was America—a tragic and possibly irreversible state of affairs.27

The anti-war movement reflected a profound change in the social order. To label the United States a Western empire was to imply an undercurrent of racism, the original sin of the European empires. To do so in the 1960s was to touch on the decade’s most combustible question, the proper relationship between white and black. The Civil Rights Movement had raised this question in the 1950s, criticizing the white power structure on moral grounds. DuBois and Baldwin provided similar challenges in prose, and by the late 1960s their voices were increasingly consequential. Martin Luther King declared the Vietnam War a war of the white West against a non-white East, an unjust war that rested on injustices at home in America: namely, the disproportionate number of black men in the U.S. military. The Vietnam War was not a mere foreign-policy mistake; it was proof

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27. A key text for the radical assessment was Noam Chomsky’s *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).
of a flawed society. More radical figures entertained more radical ideas. Malcolm X’s conversion to Islam was a repudiation of Western culture. The Black Panther Party militantly opposed American power, America the colonizer, to the American empire, lending its support to anti-colonial or independence movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, blocking the Cold War thrust of American foreign policy. A more mainstream initiative was the publication of Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976), a historical novel with a dramatic narrative of identity formation. It was not a narrative of black slaves being integrated into Western culture but of slaves and former slaves finding their way in a hostile world that was the West’s creation. The cultural significance of this novel, and not just for its African-American readers, cannot be exaggerated. By undermining the cultural legitimacy of the existing American elite—of “the best and the brightest,” as David Halberstam derisively called them in the title of his 1972 book—the Vietnam War introduced new cultural forms. These forms portrayed the white West in a critical light, while attributing heroism to the minority groups that had either been victimized by the West or excluded from the domain of white privilege, from Native Americans to African Americans to Irish Americans to Italian Americans.28

In academia, demographic and intellectual shifts intersected in the 1970s. In 1965, the United States altered its immigration policy, removing the bias toward Europe, while children of turn-of-the-century immigrants poured into the universities in the 1960s. The American university was less and less the preserve of white Protestant elites. The link between heredity and elite education weakened, just as higher education became dramatically more accessible. The curricular West that had opened doors in the 1920s and 1930s, that had allowed Jews and Catholics to share the same heritage with Protestants, was experienced as an impediment in the 1970s and as an obstacle to be overcome. In 1979, Edward Said published *Orientalism*, a book that would remake the humanities in America. It was so widely read, so influential, that its impact can accurately be described

as political. Said was a Palestinian Arab, a Protestant educated in British schools in Cairo. He studied at Princeton and later at Harvard, where he did a Ph.D. in comparative literature. A professor at Columbia, beachhead of the Western civilization revolution, Said used his education in Western literature to write *Orientalism*. His polemical study indicted France and Britain for colonizing the Middle East, for the arrogance of their belief in their own power, and for their blindness to the agency and integrity of those they ruled. Oriental despotism was a fiction that the West had invented to mask its will to power. Said’s final chapter incorporated the United States into this sordid narrative. *Orientalism* was not a book about Vietnam, but it was the Vietnam War, among other things, that lent the book its remarkably popularity in America. Said’s theses explained America’s corruption, from the Middle East to Asia to Latin America. A meditation on America’s corrupt leadership of the West, *Orientalism* had a lasting impact on Middle East-related disciplines. The West’s fall from prestige was an unlikely outcome in 1960, a possibility in 1979, and a *fait accompli* by the 1990s.29

The agony of Vietnam rippled through the Left and the Right. The academic Left celebrated Edward Said as its intellectual and political hero, the marginalized thinker who had pierced the veil of Western hegemony and exposed the racialized egotism at the core of Western civilization. The Democratic Party was vastly more moderate. It mostly accepted the interpretation of Vietnam as a betrayal of America’s better instincts. “Come home America,” as George McGovern so succinctly put it in 1972. Strikingly, though, the Democratic Party post-Vietnam was a different party from the one Kennedy had led until 1963. Kennedy’s West had disappeared from view. His zeal for confrontation, a catalyst for the Vietnam War, was put to the side or it was put away. Together with Nixon’s Republican Party, Democrats explored the advantages of *détente*, of relaxing the tension between Moscow and Washington and of softening the moral condemnation that had divided East from West and West from East.30 To such relaxation Carter attached an appeal to human rights, reformulating what had previously been regarded as the heritage of Western liberty. The global purview of human rights required a global perspective—a loyalty to


human rights as such, on whichever side of the iron curtain the humans happened to be, even if it had Christian vestiges within it. The first evangelical president, Carter preferred the charity of human rights to the us/them, East/West, liberty/despotism polarities of George Kennan’s X article and Long Telegram. For a cadre of intellectuals once enamored of Truman and Kennedy, the Democratic Party of McGovern and Carter was disturbing. Many of them had come of age in the socialist and Trotskyite circles of 1930s New York. They were versed in the culture of the West, erudition picked up either at college or on their own. They had survived the Vietnam War by clustering around the hawkish Democratic Senator “Scoop” Jackson until they felt too troubled by their party to remain Democrats. New to conservatism, they were dubbed the neoconservatives. The man running for president in 1980 was a neoconservative too, a New Dealer in the 1930s, a Hollywood liberal until he became a Republican, a Cold Warrior par excellence, a Governor of California, and, once elected, the last American president who would speak at length and glowingly about the West.31

Reagan’s image of the West came from Whittaker Chambers, a Columbia student in the early 1920s and an alumnus of its Western civ curriculum. Chambers, who left Columbia a communist, became a spy for the Soviet Union in the 1930s and then a celebrity anti-communist. A Christian conservative, Chambers worked for Time magazine in the 1940s and wrote a surprisingly popular history of Western culture for Time’s sister magazine, Life. The modern West grew from Renaissance commercial enterprise, Chambers contended, and then from the Protestant Reformation. Since the eighteenth century, its truest vehicle was the United States, which embodied two essential Western convictions: faith in the Judeo-Christian God and faith in liberty. Chambers chronicled the West’s tortuous twentieth-century destiny in Witness, his best-selling 1952 autobiography, sections of which Reagan committed to memory. Reagan emphasized a Western spirit in his speeches and even, one could say, in his foreign policy. If the Soviet Union was an “evil empire,” the West was right—indeed, was obligated—to challenge its atheist antagonist. This should be NATO’s spirit. National Review conservatives and neoconservatives alike applauded Reagan for his post-Vietnam optimism about

the West, eschewing the suggestion that the West was reason for a guilty conscience. Reagan did not win the Cold War, but he did steer the United States and Europe toward greater self-confidence, pushing Gorbachev to open the Pandora’s box of reform in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. Yet Reagan was a controversial president, and America after Vietnam a polarized country. Only conservatives still wanted to wave the flag of the West: Reagan in the spirit of Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy; Thatcher in the spirit of Churchill; Helmut Kohl in the spirit of Konrad Adenauer. By the 1990s, the West was an elite conservative persuasion and one not always easy to balance with the G.O.P.’s patriotic populism. The plight of the West would be worsened, ironically, by the West’s triumph in 1989. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the clarifying East of the Cold War collapsed along with it. The geopolitical map, relatively stable since 1945, was once again fluid and unpredictable.

Well before 1989, the West had lost its bipartisan élan. By the end of the twentieth century, there was no longer a dense network of institutions to encourage a love of the West. Kennedy spoke to audiences that had been educated in the West in universities or in high schools, like the public schools of Eisenhower’s and Truman’s childhoods, where Greek and Latin were conscientiously taught. Academia of the 1980s relied on a new cultural map. The universities had nationalized the humanities under the rubric of multiculturalism, which was most often the study of minority groups within America. American higher education was much more nationally oriented in 2000 than in 1900. At the same time, universities threw themselves into the study of globalization. The rise of the West was still of interest in the humanities, but almost exclusively as a species of imperialism. Outside the humanities, globalization was regarded as an economic mechanism. The cultural and religious texture of terms like “the West” was peripheral to the macroeconomic analysis of globalization, and a quantitative or practical education in globalization was what students sought en route to careers in high finance. The resting place of the West—as an ideal and as an American ideal—was in conservative magazines and foundations: The New Criterion, National Review, Commentary, the Wall Street Journal editorial page, the Intercollegiate Studies

Institute, the curricula of religious universities, etc. Elsewhere on the Right, Western Europe lost its cultural pull in the 1990s. George W. Bush, whose frustrations with Western Europe were legion after September 11, was interested in universal, not Western, liberties. John McCain selected the red-blooded populist Sarah Palin as his running mate in 2008, and in the 2012 campaign Mitt Romney’s allusions to Europe were restricted to the cautionary examples of Greece and Spain. American academics, diplomats, and intellectuals now pay their respects to the region, the nation, or the global scene, but rarely to anything as cloyingly old-fashioned as “the West.” Reflexes from the past still elicit references to the West, but they are fitful and lacking in context. Even with the revival of geopolitical and cultural East-West tensions over Ukraine, in the spring of 2014, the Obama administration has carefully avoided mention of “the West.” It has spoken against Russia in the name of the “international community,” precisely the term that, for most American elites, has filled the imaginative and rhetorical space formerly occupied by the West.

33. A good example of the transformation from a Western to a post-Western sensibility among American elites is the Aspen Institute. It was founded in 1950 under the intellectual guidance of Mortimer Adler, who, together with Whittaker Chambers, was among the first students to be educated in Columbia’s Great Books program. Adler brought the Columbia program to the University of Chicago, to the general reading public, and then to the Aspen Institute. By 2014, the Aspen Institute had long abandoned Adler’s equation of enduring values with Western values. Today it situates the question of American leadership in the context of a globalizing world and the pursuit of global values. See “A Brief History of the Aspen Institute,” at the Aspen Institute website, http://www.aspeninstitute.org/about/history.