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From Citizens to Aliens

Plotting Against American Citizenship in P. Roth's *The Plot Against America*

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Abstract

This article analyzes how Philip Roth in *The Plot Against America* (2004) explores the ephemerality of US citizenship by providing examples of legislative ebbs and flows as they adhere (or not) to the constitutive story the nation makes about itself. Throughout the article, I will highlight how the Roths "fall from grace" from Americanness into Jewishness in the government's eyes as they are gradually stripped of their rights as American citizens and progressively turned into aliens in their own home through a series of government initiatives, such as *Just Folks, Homestead '42*, and the *Good Neighbor Project*. I will do so by framing these initiatives within a broader US legislative context, as well as by drawing parallelisms with historical instances that bear striking similarities to the same initiatives. I will also point out how the constitutive story of the nation framed within the novel should interact with the historical and contextual complexities around citizenship and its practices, thus showing how the novel provides commentary not only on the story the nation tells about itself, but also on how such a story can be improved.

It was the most beautiful panorama I'd ever seen, a patriotic paradise, the American Garden of Eden spread before us, and we stood huddled together there, the family expelled.

(Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*)

1. Introduction

Summarizing the conceptualization of citizenship in the US is quite a daunting task: throughout American history, citizenship has passed through numerous phases and configurations intrinsically connected with its narrative mythology – a covenant of faith,[1] a consensual Lockean

[1] As Anglo settlers arrived on the shores of today's Massachusetts in the early 1600s, they declared themselves a civil covenant that would protect the interests of its godly citizens. William Bradford's *Mayflower Compact* (1620) and John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630) are traditionally considered the early documents which attest this verbal fiat. Sacvan Bercovitch's 1975 book *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and his 1978 seminal work *The American Jeremiad* analyze early colonial

social contract,[2] a shelter for the poor and persecuted masses of Europe, a melting pot,[3] and, more recently, a transnational community which has exalted, at least up till Trump's second term, the framework of diversity, equity, and inclusion (what organizations and corporations call DEI). While this short, and in no way exhaustive, list may hint at a gradual expansion of the boundaries of citizenship, Judith N. Shklar explains that "America has not marched single file down a single straight liberal highway as both the lamenters and the celebrators of its political life have claimed, either in despair or in complacency" (Shklar 1996, 13). Indeed, in 1997 Rogers M. Smith further elaborates on Shklar's claim adding that "the overall pattern [of citizenship rights] will be one of fluctuation between more consensual and egalitarian and more ascriptive and inegalitarian arrangements, with the long-term trends being products of contingent politics more than inexorable cultural necessities" (Smith 1997, 9). I would, therefore, argue that citizenship in the US might be better understood as a tidal movement of ebbs and flows which, in time, has included and excluded people from the institutionalized community whose civil rights are protected and liberties guaranteed by the law of the State.

In this article, I want to analyze how Philip Roth in *The Plot Against America* (2004) explores the ephemerality of US citizenship by providing examples of such legislative ebbs and flows as they adhere (or not) to the constitutive story the nation tells about itself. In this novel, Roth portrays an alternate history in which Franklin D. Roosevelt was defeated in the 1940 presidential election by aviator hero Charles Lindbergh. The story follows the fortunes of the Roth family during the Lindbergh presidency, as antisemitism becomes an everyday occurrence in American life and the Jewish American community is singled out as a threat to the country and kicked out of the metaphorical heaven that is the US. Throughout this article, I will highlight how the Roths *fall from grace* from Americanness into Jewishness in the government's

texts which conceptualize these people's self-declaration of intents and their own vision in relation to both European and Christian history.

[2] While several works, such as John Dickinson's 1768 *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* and Thomas Paine's 1776 *Common Sense* laid the philosophical and theoretical groundwork for the American Revolution arguing for the rights of colonial citizens encroached by the British crown, the official signing of the Lockean social contract is the Declaration of Independence (1776). Many scholars have in time highlighted the historical and social relevance of the DOI specifically for the way its postulations are grounded in European Enlightenment philosophy and proclaim a new nation among nations. Edmund S. Morgan's 1956 *The Birth of the Republic 1763-89* and Martin Seymour Lipset's 1963 *The First New Nation* provide apt commentary on the inception of revolutionary idea in the colonies and the way the self-declared new nation moved its first steps both ideologically and practically. David Armitage's *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007) offers instead a global, historical perspective on the document itself.

[3] Some of the most famous historical texts that first reference the conceptualization of the colonies and then the US as a shelter and then a melting pot are Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Later, Israel Zangwill's 1908 play *The Melting Pot* widely popularized the expression. For a condensed, yet quite comprehensive history of the US as melting pot, see Peter Kivisto's chapter "The United States as Melting Pot: Myth and Reality" in his 2002 book *Multiculturalism in a Global Society*.

eyes as they are expelled from the constitutive story of the nation, gradually stripped of their rights as American citizens, and progressively turned into aliens in their own home through a series of government initiatives, such as *Just Folks*, *Homestead '42*, and the *Good Neighbor Project*. For better clarity, I have divided my argumentation into three sections: in the first section, I will better define the analytical framework and highlight how homesteading has been used in time as a signifier for the core ethically constitutive story of the nation; in the second section, I will explain how the Roths have been expelled from this story and how their citizenship rights have been consequently encroached upon. I will also highlight how the American promise is then reframed for Jewish Americans in the novel and how they exercise new practices of citizenships to curtail those encroachments; and in the third section, I will show how the novel provides commentary not only on the story the nation made about itself, but also on how such a story can be improved by interacting with historical and contextual complexities around citizenship and identity. Throughout the article, I will also frame the legislative provisions in the novel within a broader US legislative context, as well as draw parallelisms with historical instances that bear striking similarities to those initiatives.

2. (Home)steadying the nation

In the early pages of the novel, the main character and narrator, Philip, defines his family of four as "outgoing, hospitable people" (Roth 2004, 2) who live in the predominantly Jewish Weequahic neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. Herman Roth, his father, is a stubborn, hard-working man who sells premiums for one of the largest insurance companies in the country, Metropolitan Life, and he is also a staunch believer in the values of American democracy. Bess Roth, his mother, is a stalwart helm who savvily steers the family's finances and empathetically provides reconciliation grounds whenever there is a crack in the surface. Sandy, Philip's older brother, is a creative and artistically talented eleven-year-old boy who is often moved in his actions by his desire to please people. Philip, the youngest of the family and the narrator of the story, is an affectionate and impressionable kid whose anxious attitude carries the reader through the events of the novel. Philip considers his life and family typically American, embracing all the rituals that make it so: "I pledged allegiance to the flag of our homeland every morning at school. I sang of its marvels with my classmates at assembly programs. I eagerly observed its national holidays, and without giving a second thought to my affinity for the Fourth of July fireworks or the Thanksgiving turkey or the Decoration Day double-header. Our homeland was America" (Roth 2004, 4). Like most American families, Philip explains, the Roths do keep some ties with their religion and cultural traditions, but their migrant roots – never rejected but already three generations removed at the time when the narrative unfolds – do not characterize them any more than their work and/or class do. (Roth 2004, 2-4).

Having migrant roots clearly does not set the Roths apart from the majority of the US population since its composite nature has always been remarked as a constitutive story of the nation. By 1782, it was already framed in Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, where the United States is celebrated as the place where "individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men," a concept later also famously emblazoned at the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty through Emma Lazarus's words inviting other countries to "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." It is safe to say that the welcoming land beckoning all people to join in a new nation is one of the foundation myths of the US. As they proceed to identify key narratives in US culture throughout the centuries, Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean highlight that "one means by which America has unified itself is through an imagined communal mythology that all could share and that provided a cluster of beliefs through which the nation could be articulated, both to itself and to the world" (Campbell and Kean 1997, 22). Similarly, Donald E. Pease has often remarked that myths are used in the US to incorporate events into national narratives that may or may not prescribe a somewhat unified and coherent interpretation of the national identity (Pease 2009, 5; 2007, 111).

In his book *Stories of Peoplehood* (2003), Roger M. Smith explains that peoples coalesce around ethically constitutive stories which

> present membership in a particular people as somehow intrinsic to who its members really are, because of traits that are imbued with ethical significance. Such stories proclaim that members' culture, religion, language, race, ethnicity, ancestry, history, or other such factors are constitutive of their very identities as persons, in ways that both affirm their worth and delineate their obligations. (Smith 2003, 62)

He elaborates, then, that people-building elites – *i.e.*, social and political groups in charge of creating and/or guiding the nation – usually design such stories to inspire worth in the people's identity and trust in their leaders' ability to guide them purposefully. Thus, an ethically constitutive story that tells of a nation welcoming poor immigrants from Europe with open arms to offer them a brighter, prospering future is designed to inspire the worth of an uprooted, inhomogeneous people who sees the promise of a community made of (and by) others like themselves. The people are, therefore, led to trust that they will be regarded as active members of the community and not be treated as aliens, regardless of their country of origin. American historian John Higham also recognizes this as one of the distinctive features of immigration in the United States when he explains that

> Resting theoretically on principles that belong to everyone by right of a common humanity, the United States presented itself to the world as a universal nation, a home for all peoples.

> […] This American self-image was enormously magnetic. It implied that nationality was not exclusive, that citizenship could be widely available, and that class and ethnic boundaries would be soft and permeable. The invitation to newcomers (at first to white males only) to participate in political life on equal terms with other citizens gave outsiders some leverage in using the power of suffrage and the protection of courts. It encouraged white ethnic groups to organize, to make their weight felt, and so to use a system of liberty under law. (Higham 1999, 41)

The "invitation to newcomers" that Higham mentions was not just a metaphorical or rhetorical exercise, but it represents a constitutive story which distinctively echoes throughout the US legislation. In a mission to repopulate the rural land to the West violently taken from Natives, many leaders turned to immigration policies to stimulate population growth and westward settlement (Nelson 2021; Muller 2003). Already in 1790, Congress passed, under Washington, the *Naturalization Act* granting citizenship to any "free White person(s) of good character" who had resided for at least two years in the United States – the first legislative flow granting citizenship to a wider pool of people. This was paired with the *Federal Lands Act* of 1796, which subdivided and distributed, for a fee, rural lands to the west of the original thirteen colonies. Following the consequent population growth and westward expansion of the US, the *Federal Lands Act* no longer sufficed in motivating people to move westward, since many new migrants could hardly afford to buy land plots from the Federal Government. A significant shift in practice came with the *Homestead Act* of 1862, signed into law by President Lincoln: now the land was no longer seen as a source of revenue to fill the treasury but as an incentive to entice rural settlers. With this Act, therefore, any householder over the age of twenty-one could now claim up to 160 acres of land from the Federal Government, free of charge (Nelson 2021, 87-90).

While the scholarship of the late 20th century started looking at it more negatively – as historian Katherin Harris notices in the preface of her book *Long Vistas: Women and Families on Colorado Homesteads* (1993, ix-x) – Richard Edwards notices that homesteading has been widely celebrated in political terms by liberals and conservatives alike who saw in it the expression of great American values, such as equality and private property. He further argues that this vision was also echoed in popular culture through books, such as Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1924-25), and Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series (1930s-1940s), which famously also became a hit TV show in the 70s – proving just how lasting such a perspective was. This was because homesteading was an essential part of a national vision that aimed at "stimulat[ing] canal and railroad growth, […] occupy[ing] remote regions and thereby forestall[ing] threats from foreign powers, […] populat[ing] the West in order to foster private economic development, and […] create[ing] a land-owning, small-farmer middle class that would sustain a democratic society" (Edwards 2017, 2-7). It is precisely because Roth recognizes the historical relevance of such an Act that

he turns it into a provision intended to shame American citizens of Jewish descent and revert their status, both metaphorically and practically, to that of recently arrived migrants striving to survive in a new land and having to rely on the good heart of the State and of their neighbors to teach them the American way, setting them *de facto* on a path to denaturalization.

Presented as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" (Roth 2004, 204), *Homestead '42* is introduced by Roth as one of the main initiatives designed by the *Office of American Absorption*, a special department, created by Lindbergh, whose main purpose was "to implement programs 'encouraging America's religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society'" (Roth 2004, 84). While the family is already experiencing internal and external tensions, Herman receives a relocation letter from the insurance company he works for. This letter words the relocation in patriotic terms, highlighting both the pioneering spirit of the *Homestead '42* initiative – that would have them move to the heartland of Kentucky – and how "parents and children can [thus] enrich their Americanness over the generations" (Roth 2004, 205).

Herman soon discovers that this "opportunity" has been given to seven of his co-workers, also Jews and living in the Roths' neighborhood, who would all be relocated in different rural areas across the country, from Montana to Kansas, to Oklahoma, within distinctively Christian communities. I would argue that the intended design behind this initiative is not to give American Jews the chance to experience Americanness, but to break apart their communities and weaken their solidarity and ballot power, thus applying the principle of gerrymandering through displacement. As Nick Seabrook explains, gerrymandering is a political practice of redrawing districts which "involves a concerted effort to make the votes of certain groups of people matter more than the votes of others" departing from "traditional district-drawing principles of compactness, of contiguity, of following existing political boundaries, and of preserving the integrity of communities" (Seabrook 2022, 11-13). More specifically, the form of displacement enforced on the Jewish community in the novel is similar to the racial vote dilution – also called "cracking" – that several racist states in the US have for decades enacted to limit African American voter participation. Seabrook points out that, by cracking, "a […] racial minority group may be denied an opportunity to elect representatives of their choice by dividing their members among a series of districts where they are outnumbered by the white majority" (Seabrook 2002, 191). Because it impinges directly on voting rights, *Homestead '42* stands, therefore, as the first legislative ebb in the novel that effectively restricts citizenship rights for the Jewish people in the country.

While Herman's stubbornness makes him sooner resign than accept this relocation for himself and the family, Bess also wonders, legitimately, what this initiative says about their status as American citizens: "Well, like it or not, Lindbergh is teaching us what it is to be Jews.

[…] We only think we're Americans" (Roth 2004, 256). So, while *Homestead '42* is sold as a means to strengthen membership within a nation, it actually engenders a process of othering that breaks apart a particular community and supposedly forces its integration – something that, at least rhetorically, could be juxtaposed to infamous practices of segregation toward Blacks and Natives in the US. However, the historical precedent that has likely inspired Roth for this fictional provision is the 1887 *Dawes Act* – a Federal policy toward Natives that moves away from practices of removal, treaties, and reservation and pushes, instead, toward Americanization. Through this Act, reservations would be broken up and parcels of tribal land allotted to individual Native Americans and their immediate family to both encourage them to take up agriculture – as a typically American value – and break up tribal ties by relocating said families in different territories. This forced absorption through homesteading was developed behind the reasoning that "if a person adopted 'White' clothing and ways, and was responsible for their own farm, they would gradually drop their 'Indian-ness' and be assimilated into White American culture" (National Archives 2024). However, while Natives would not be officially considered citizens until the 1924 *Indian Citizenship Act* and were therefore cut out from the nation's community to begin with, the Jewish Americans in the novel perceive themselves as an integral part of that nation. Unfortunately, that recognition is not mutual. In his answer to Beth, Herman elaborates on this dawning, blaming it on Lindbergh: "Others? He dares to call us *others*? He's the other. The one who looks most American – and he's the one who is least American!" (italics not mine, Roth 2004, 256). So, by sponsoring these initiatives – Herman points out – the Lindbergh administration, and by extension the US, is taking the first step in the purposeful erosion of the Jewish community, thus seemingly going against the constitutive story of the "great American asylum" – how Crèvecoeur defined it in 1792 – welcoming and regenerating all those who come to it by giving them "land, bread, protection, and consequence" (Crèvecoeur 1792).

3. Re-learning the American promise

The exclusion from the earthly paradise that is America and the protections it grants to its community of citizens is metaphorically conceptualized quite early in the novel. Upon their arrival for a family trip in Washington, only a few months after Lindbergh's election, Philip remains stupefied by the magnificence of the Lincoln Memorial, admitting: "It was the most beautiful panorama I'd ever seen, a patriotic paradise, the American Garden of Eden spread before us, and we stood huddled together there, the family expelled" (Roth 2004, 66). Through this commentary, Philip is quite evidently referring to one of the most perused ethically constitutive stories in US history – the belief that its people, like Thomas Paine already conceptualized in *Common Sense* (1776), similarly to the Jewish people in the Mosaic story,

have been "chosen" as a plan of Providence to establish a nation in the New World that would become "the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from EVERY PART of Europe" (upper cases not mine, Paine 1967, 409-413). Sacvan Bercovitch, already in the 1970s, highlights that early colonial settlers brought to the "new world" both "a conviction that they were elect and an expectation of the great things they were to do on earth" meaning that their flight was conceived both "in spiritual and inward terms, as a means of self-improvement," and "as another (and final) act of the drama of human history," the one where their mission was to leave Babylon – *i.e.*, Europe – "not to withdraw from the world, but to reform it" (Bercovitch 1978, 38). Moreover, Smith explains that this constitutive story works so well because "there simply is no stronger basis for making a membership seem both unquestionably intrinsic and morally worthwhile than to have it assigned by God" (Smith 2003, 66). By claiming divine authorship for this design, membership in the community is thus sanctified and very hard to dispute. Also, a religious basis grants a certain degree of leeway since new members may be accepted if they decide to convert, and old members shunned if they are discovered as heretics or dissidents. Having been labeled as such and "expelled" from the metaphorical Garden of Eden that is America, the Roths – and Jewish Americans by extension – are thus no longer recognized members of the ethically constitutive story that makes the nation, as they have been cast out of the exodus story that stands as the US founding myth – a provision twice as bitter when one considers that the exodus story originally belongs to the transnational Jewish community. This metaphorical ex-communication from the American original constitutive tale is then translated legislatively with the *Homestead '42 Act*, a juridical ebb that justifies and actualizes the banishment by treating them as sinners who are punished with the Dantean contrapasso of being expelled from their very own constitutive story.

Moreover, choosing Kentucky for this relocation is not fortuitous. Just the previous summer, Philip's older brother, Sandy, had been shipped to a summer camp in a tobacco farm near Danville, KY, within another initiative of the *OAA*, *Just Folks*, this time "a volunteer work program introducing city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life" (Roth 2004, 84). Sandy's insecure personality and his secret admiration for President Lindbergh make him the perfect candidate for this program. He embraces the whole experience and is happy to recount it upon his return at the first family dinner, proving that the absorption program resulted in the desired effect: Sandy has taken up Kentucky's regional accent, has started eating bacon and pork sausages, has learned how to weed corn and tobacco, holds the owner of the farm, Mr. Mawhinney, in the highest esteem, and has become best friend with his son, Orin Mawhinney. Mr. Mawhinney's family history, embedded in the history of Kentucky itself, makes it the golden standard of Americanness and its ethically constitutive story: the land he owns has been in his family since the days of Daniel Boone, he is able to make a living right out of the earth, and,

most importantly, he is a "Christian, a long-standing member of the great overpowering majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness […], who settled the frontier, tilled the farms, built the cities, [and] governed the states" (Roth 2004, 93).

The same mentioning of Daniel Boone, who Roth manages to include almost every time one of the characters talks about Kentucky, is also not fortuitous. Boone is one of the first "heroes" of the American frontier as he ventured through what later came to be known as the Wilderness Road to establish in Kentucky one of the first colonial settlements west of the Appalachians on land taken from Natives with violence and disadvantageous treaties. Kentucky, therefore, stands as a synecdoche for a peculiar brand of Americanness, quite far from the lofty ideals of liberal democracy, inclusiveness, and neighborly care in which the Roth family firmly believes, and connected, instead, with the ethically constitutive story of the frontier, its nostalgia, and the exploitation and violence that came with it. In 1973, Richard Slotkin identifies Daniel Boone as "the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero of the early republic" that helps develop American identity, someone who is "the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his act of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars" (Slotkin 2002, 21-22). Slotkin also seems to refer to Kentucky as "the spirit of wilderness" itself. Indeed this view has a long-established tradition: Thomas D. Clark, the esteemed frontier historian from Kentucky, opens his book *Agrarian Kentucky* (1977) with a romanticized account of Daniel Boone and his companions exploring the land and taking in the view for the first time: "Crossing the narrow saddle gap which separated the hills of the Roundstone country from the Bluegrass savannah land, this advance party of the Transylvania Company was ready to set foot in the fertile promised land" (Clark 1977, 1). This idealization of Kentucky as an idyllic and bountiful land of hope has, as a matter of fact, been recorded quite early on in many contexts: by land scouts like George Rogers Clark and Felix Walker, Boone's companion; by early settlers such as David Meade; by military men such as Gen Levi Todd; and even by politicians such as Henry Clay, who, in an 1849 letter, stated "I am in one respect better off than Moses. He died in sight of, without reaching, the promised land. I occupy as good a farm as any that he would have found, if he had reached it; and it has been acquired, not by hereditary descent, but by my own labor" (Smith 1999, 77-79; Clark 1977, 2-5, 23).

It is safe to assume, then, that Roth chose Kentucky deliberately because it has often been depicted as the American promised land *par excellence*. Sandy, and the whole Roth family afterward, are, therefore, first kicked out of the metaphorical Garden of Eden that is America and then shipped to its most concrete proxy so that, as aliens who are no longer part of the ethically constitutive story of the nation, they can learn firsthand what, according to the lore, the American promise should have already granted them as citizens: a bountiful land of

opportunity. In his 2009 book *The New American Exceptionalism*, Donald E. Pease elaborates on myths and ideological narratives that constitute and justify American politics and culture. In the introduction, he highlights how state fantasies supply scenarios that function as a prerequisite to US citizens' interiorizing of the state's rules and norms. The state fantasy is not a direct form of government but a tale that creates the backstory necessary to justify a new order:

> A state fantasy should not be construed as a specific, restricted instrument of governance. It sustains the continued symbolic efficacy of the entire order it legislates. A state fantasy becomes symbolically effective when it produces a relation with the order it legislates that makes it seem an enactment of the will of the individual national subject rather than an imposition of the state. (Pease 2009, 6)

In this case, the US constitutive story – or state fantasy – of a diverse people finding its promised land is altered so that the Jewish community is no longer part of it, thus justifying the subsequent legislation that encroaches on the rights of Jewish American citizens. The new state fantasy then not only justifies these provisions, but it normalizes them to the eyes of the rest of the population by making them the natural expression of a new order: as former citizens who have been expelled from the land in the new constitutive story, it is only natural that they are shipped to directly experience what the American life is all about. At this point in the novel, the state fantasy has already been successfully rewritten, and only the Jewish population seems outraged by it.

However, the irony of such a legislation is quite bitter when one takes into account that the historical model for Roth's *Just Folks* program are, as Austin Busch points out, "off-reservation boarding schools, such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania." Busch explains that these institutions were an essential part of a broader late nineteenth-century movement aimed at reforming US policy toward Native Americans by deemphasizing conquest, displacement, and extermination, and privileging Native Americans' "absorption into the common life of our own people" (Adams in Busch 2020, 163). At these boarding schools, students were prohibited from speaking their indigenous languages and were taught instead to "dress, eat, pray, and think about America like whites did" (Busch 2020, 164), thus having them adapt to the hegemonic brand of Americanness and its ethically constitutive story of an abundant, inclusive asylum which fails to account for the violence and destruction it wreaked. While this might be read as a legislative flow that expands the boundaries of citizenship by including Native Americans in its fold, it is actually an ebb that tries to erase other – equally valid – ethically constitutive stories and identities in fear that they might, at some point, go against the grain of the currently hegemonic one. As a matter of fact, it is very telling that the summer camp Sandy is shipped to is also a complete reverse of American Jewish summer camps that

started becoming popular at the beginning of the 20th century as a vehicle for the creation and promotion of a transnational Jewish identity. According to Sarah Bunin Benor, Jonathan Krasner and Sharon Avni, these camps offered ethnically focused programs designed to instruct the youth on Jewish holidays, rituals, and everyday culture, as well as teach them Yiddish and Hebrew through folk songs, dances, and other group activities (Benor et al. 2020, 40-43). In *The Plot Against America*, Roth is, therefore, taking a long-standing practice in the US, originally designed to create and preserve the American Jewish culture, and morphing it into an also long-standing practice that was instead aimed at erasing whatever remained of Native cultures, deemed inferior to the predominant, hegemonic WASP brand of Americanness. In those schools, Native children would be aggressively assimilated to the American ways in the name of an ethically constitutive story and an ideal of citizenship that is sadly blind to the wealth of cultural difference, willfully forgetful of the mayhem it wreaked with its greed, and cunningly scared of how other constitutive stories may subvert the established order of things. Similarly, *Just Folks* aims at erasing the cultural identity and traditions of the Jewish American youth in the novel, in order to mold them into the image of the hegemonic brand and create a rift with the older generation.

Just Folks is not the only instance, in Roth's novel, of a similar narrative strategy. The *Homestead '42 Act* that would force the Roth family to relocate altogether in Kentucky also bears striking similarities to the Nazi process of "Germanization" of Eastern Europe – also called Lebensraum, "living space" – where undesirables were deported, concentrated, or eliminated to make room for the eastward expansion of Germany, while a certain number of people were forcefully "Germanized" by being culturally and racially integrated into the traditions of the German volk (Busch 2020, 161). What might result as startling, however, is that the Lebensraum ideology is not only inspired by the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion at the expense of the Native population but also reconfigures the experience of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. In his 2017 book *Hitler's American Model*, James Whitman explains that, during the 1935 Nazi meeting to plan what would then become the Nurnberg Laws, there were lengthy discussions on the United States, especially when it came to race law and citizenship policy that would infer the racial inferiority of Natives and Blacks. Also, many Nazi texts "made a point of invoking the example of Jim Crow segregation, and there were leading Nazi lawyers who made serious proposals that something similar ought to be introduced into Germany" (Whitman 2017, 11).

Roth's repurposing of the US segregation laws and policies against Jewish Americans has been long noted by scholars, most famously by Walter Benn Michaels in his 2006 article "Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism." Michaels comments that "Jewish success in America today is less an effect of triumph over racism than it is an effect of the triumph of

racism" (Michaels 2006, 290), thereby highlighting in his article how the novel feeds on well-established, more or less violent, practices of othering toward Black people in the US, from wealth distribution and ballot power to lynchings. Other critics, instead, such as Christopher Douglas and Andrew Gross, read Roth's historical rewriting as a way to encapsulate profound shifts in American history. Gross, for example, concedes that, while Roth "plagiarizes the black experience of segregation to represent an exaggerated version of anti-Semitism" (Gross 2010, 421), his ultimate goal is to explore the role of memory in the personal, as well as in politics and culture in general. Moreover, I would add and argue that Roth's novel provides a commentary on the ephemerality of citizenship by taking inspiration not only from segregation laws and institutionalized racism, but also from practices of resistance that controversially define citizenship well beyond civil rights, protections, and concessions granted by the State. In his 2019 book *Practices of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*, Derrick R. Spires argues that, throughout the centuries, Black activists articulated a theory of citizenship based on a set of common practices "grounded in the active engagement in the process of creating and maintaining collectivity, whether defined as state, community, or other affiliative structure" (Spires 2019, 7). According to Spires, these practices take place not only in print or various media, but also in streets, neighborhoods, and other physical spaces. While not recognized as citizens, these activists sought new ways of understanding citizenship itself outside rights discourse using "underground economies, vigilance committees, mutual aid societies, institutionalized shadow politics, and myriad informal and ad hoc cultural practices that often supplemented or replaced official citizenship frameworks" (Spires 2019, 17). Spires uses, for example, *Black State Conventions* created to address constitutional franchise restrictions or poems and articles in publications such as *Anglo-African Magazine* or *Frederick Douglass' Paper* as tokens of an unsanctioned form of citizenship which builds – and cares for – a community still not recognized within both the ethically constitutive story of the nation and its deriving laws.

In *The Plot Against America*, as the Jewish community perceives its rights encroached upon, it coalesces around the charismatic figure of radio news commentator Walter Winchell, who starts a loud presidential campaign against Lindbergh and triggers a series of antisemitic riots in every city he tours. In the rising tension that leads to Winchell's assassination in Kentucky, the Jewish Americans in the novel organize themselves by creating a para-statal apparatus that would grant them some form of protection and would respond to the violence with violence. Hence, Roth imagines the *Committees of Concerned Jewish Citizens*, local groups of prominent Jewish Americans "determined to ensure their communities' safety by enlisting the authorities to draw up contingency plans to prepare for the worst possibility" (Roth 2004, 268). As these committees spread all around the US, they are shadowed by a "hastily assembled volunteer

corps" (Roth 2004, 271) called the *Provisional Jewish Police*. Roth uses no kind words to describe the type of people who enlist as vigilantes for the *Jewish Police*, and when violence erupts and some of them are killed, their death is not even mourned by the Jewish community itself. However, this corps intends to provide protection, were the local police to side with the antisemitic rioters, showing how these people no longer believe to be a part of the community that forms the nation and are thus fearful of not being granted default protection by the law. Roth, therefore, envisions practices of citizenship, like those identified by Spiros, that uncouple citizenship from state institutions, especially in light of the legislative ebbs that gradually set aside and stripped said community of its rights and recognition.

4. A cake and a gun

I would argue that Roth's attempt at creating a narrative that shifts the focus of discrimination in the US from one minority to the other – from Black and Natives to Jews – is ultimately not the victimization of a specific social and ethnic group for the mere sake of it or the response to a specific moment in US history, but the breaking down of a universal process of othering, made of both legislative provisions and punctual changes in the constitutive story that justify them. Roth achieves this by blurring and extending the boundaries of history and memory, and interplaying them multi-directionally. In his 2009 book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg explains that the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale after World War II allowed for a re-articulation of other histories of violence, thus revealing and unfolding new narratives in the collective memory. Rothberg argues against a competitive memory, which would see in the recognition of someone's identity and history the exclusion of another from public discourse. Rather, he elaborates, memory works best when it is not hierarchical but multidirectional since "the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant" (Rothberg 2009, 3-9). Similarly, I would say, Roth approaches US history multi-directionally by taking chunks from various narratives of violence in the nation's past and stitching them together to create a new history, repurposed to warn readers of its universality. The process of othering for the Jewish Americans in the novel is so subtle, simple, and hidden in lawfulness that it can be, has been, and might still be applied to pretty much any person or group in any nation. According to Roth, this othering is carried out in the US mainly through fear of dissent perceived as stemming from a minority or class. From the early pages of the novel, Lindbergh's problem with the Jews is that they represent the "greatest danger to this country" (Roth 2004, 14) and, by the end of the novel, the main public discourse is that the kidnapping of President Lindbergh has been perpetrated "by a conspiracy of Jewish interests" (Roth 2004, 309). But even though the

Lindbergh administration presents Jews to the public eye as a menace to the values and ideals of the US, the Roth family never seems to lose hope in the checks and balances of American democracy and in a *deus ex machina* intervention by Roosevelt, who would set the story straight and end the internal turmoil that is rocking the country. Instead, the Acts depicted in the novel, to curb the alleged Jewish influence on the country and weaken their power as a community, seem to transfigure the many factual US Acts that, ever since the *Alien Friends Act* of 1798, "reveal an underlying, perpetual fear of internal and external subversion in the United States, as well as the perception of foreigners as the source of subversion, responsible for instigating dissent and importing radical ideologies" (Kraut 2020, 3). These Acts, ranging from ideological exclusion from the ethically constitutive story of the nation to denaturalization and deportation, to extreme vetting and travel bans, have in turn targeted different groups of perceived dissidents and/or threats – anarchists, communists, and more recently Muslim Americans, Mexican immigrants, and international students. The appeal to nationalism in times of crises as counter ideology to a potential external or internal threat, like the one that Roth highlights in *The Plot Against America*, betrays an insecurity and frustration whose reasons are difficult to articulate but which, according to Umberto Eco in "Ur-Fascism" (1995), function as entry point for fascism. Moved by a lack of internal cohesion, the search for identity is pursued through processes of othering and scapegoating that round people up against a common enemy, usually a minority or an immigrant community, because the easiest and clearest privilege of social identity is being born in the same country, as Eco states in 1995, but also circling back to the ultimate ethically constitutive story according to Smith.

But what happens when being born in the same country is not enough? In the US, where anyone born on its soil is automatically a citizen, how can internal or external threats be identified? And how is it possible to blame a part of the population and, at the same time, take pride in being a country of immigrants? In the last chapters of the novel, Roth seems to critically suggest that, in order to survive the vetting and not being labeled as a threat by the government and society at large, it all boils down to not only adapting – at least apparently – to whichever brand of Americanness is the most powerful and successful, but also grasping a bigger picture that does not reject complexities. Following the enactment of another *OAA*'s initiative, the *Good Neighbor Project*, a Gentile family moves next to the Roths, taking the place of the Wishnows, relocated to Kentucky within the *Homestead '42* program. The Cucuzzas are a second-generation Italian American family of four: a mother, a father, a son, and a grandmother. During the riots ensuing the killing of Winchell, Joey Cucuzza and his son show up at the Roths' doorsteps carrying a cake and a gun as gifts. In this simple gesture, they sublimize two quite distinctive features of Americanness, holding them together as a two-faced coin which synthesizes a more honest, complex ethically constitutive story: on the one side, there is

neighborly care – bequeathed by Winthrop's covenant and later upheld as a value of kindness unto others that is not necessarily religious – and, on the other side, there is the violence with which land has been seized from Natives, and enslaved people have been ruthlessly exploited throughout US history. I would argue that Cucuzza operates what, in psychological terms, can be defined as "identity integration," a concept originally championed by Erik Erikson in the 1960s. Moin Syed and Kate C. McLean explain that, in Eriksonian perspective, the definition of a healthy identity is developed through a sense of integration of multiple identities across context and time, so that they postulate a consistent narrative where they fit together and are not in contrast with one another (Syed and McLean 2015, 110-111). Joey, a night watchman, explains to a reluctant Herman that he should take the gun to keep the family safe, should anyone come for them. Herman seems to find this suggestion preposterous, and he answers as a proud, liberal American that: "All my life I have paid my rent on time, I have paid my taxes on time, and I have paid my bills on time. […] I have never tried to cheat the United States government. I believe in this country. I love this country" (Roth 2004, 284). While the "good neighbor" insists that the best option for them is taking the gun, Herman keeps his faith in an almost naïve idealization of American democracy by telling Cucuzza: "You know what I love? Election day" (Roth 2004, 285).

Herman and Joey are respectively third- and second-generation immigrants, but they both consider themselves American. However, their vision of Americanness seems quite different: while Herman glorifies Roosevelt's New Deal for the way it helped common people and he cannot believe that his co-nationals would vote for Lindbergh, Cucuzza embraces a more nuanced version of reality by integrating aspects of Americanness that are seemingly in contrast with one another. He understands the individualistic undercurrent of violence and the need to protect oneself from it but, at the same time, he admits – in a simple, broken English – that fascism in Europe makes him sick, and that "we need [FDR] bad" before it spreads irreversibly on US soil (Roth 2004, 286). Herman is enraged and utterly unable to make sense of his country because for him it only exists in a transfixed state, as the ultimate bulwark of democracy in a world that is becoming undemocratic by the minute. By doing so, however, he refuses to see the historical complexities that encase and define the US. Smith explains that, in order to build a more coherent ethically constitutive story, we need to take into account historical perspectives and, I would add, integrate them into a consistent, contextual narrative. This can be achieved, firstly, by removing divine authorship from the equation and seeing the American people as acting agents in human history, thus holding them responsible for defining their own civic aims and identity and, secondly, by understanding that communities like the US are "historical political creations that have been produced both by force and, usually, a great range of ideological traditions, and all the traditions that retain support, democratic and undemocratic, secular

liberal, militantly religious, and narrowly ethnic, must be recognized as authentic elements of that national identity" (Smith 2003, 188-190). Cucuzza's point of view is far from being really comprehensive, but it stands as a reminder that, through the critical acknowledgment of seemingly confusing and opposing identities and their diachronic evolution, it is possible to build and accept a more complex and accountable ethically constitutive story. In turn, a more nuanced ethically constitutive story helps diagnose processes of othering – like the targeting of international students and universities that is unfortunately happening in the US as this article is being reviewed – that can thus be avoided. When the agency rests in the hand of the people (and does not hide behind a divine design) and the historical progressions and regressions – the legislative ebbs and flows – are acknowledged, accepted and integrated as part of the expected development of the nation and its identity, then it is possible to steer the course toward a direction that is even more democratic than the original vision could ever fathom. Roth's novel, therefore, tells the reader that this multi-faceted version of a nation's constitutive story is indeed within reach but truly graspable only when its historical and contextual complexity is fully taken in – however dystopian it may be.

Bionote

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