

THE GHOSTS OF AGES PAST: GOTHIC DOUBLES AND TRAUMATIC TRANSFORMATION IN GEORGE LIPPARD'S *'BEL OF PRAIRIE EDEN*

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In *Anatomy of American Pop Culture*, Carl Bode notes the gradual vanishing of George Lippard's popular sensational fiction from the national literary imagination "to the extent that the library of Congress itself...does not contain a single copy of some of his works."¹ However, during the three decades of his literary career (1822-1854), Lippard was a household name. A native of Philadelphia, he worked as a journalist, generated a weekly paper entitled *The Quaker City*, and wrote a variety of sensational novels that include urban mysteries like *The Monks of Monk Hall* and *The Killers*, a series of "legends" about the American Revolution, and two novels about the U.S.-Mexico War, *The Legends of Mexico* and *'Bel of Prairie Eden*. He was also a dedicated social reformist and used popular literature as a medium for critiquing capitalism. His tales of American greed and corruption inspired both extreme adulation and severe aspersion from the general public and his contemporary critics. David S. Reynolds notes that Lippard "was invariably dubbed an 'indecent' writer...a 'licentious popinjay,' a 'redhot locofoc' and a 'political pothouse brawler'" because of the sexual and violent content of his stories.² Meanwhile, his social critique of capitalism and class garnered him designations of "genius" and "the leading spokesperson for the common man" by contemporaries Rev. Charles Chauncey Burr and Edgar Allan Poe.³

Despite his notoriety and the social relevance of his body of work, Lippard's contributions to American literature have been neglected and overshadowed by his contemporaries like Poe, Melville, Hawthorne and Whitman, mainly because Lippard wrote in a genre that has been deemed inferior. Sensational literature, which "emphasized thrills, shocks and horror"⁴ and appealed to a mass audience, was criticized in the nineteenth century for its monopoly of the literary market and gave way to what Reynolds terms the "conventional" works of Melville and Hawthorne that "invested [literature] with a new intensity and artistry that rescued" these works from an "increasing crassness and formlessness."⁵ However, to dismiss the sexual and violent aspects of Lippard's work as crass, neglects to consider the social fears and anxieties that such descriptions invoke. After all, his blend of social critique and sensationalism had a specific aim: to write stories "for the advancement of social reform" that were bold enough to "picture the wrongs of the great mass of humanity."⁶ The "wrongs" that materialized in Lippard's stories as scenes of rape, murder, and bloody warfare, thus have social importance because they

¹ Carl Bode, "Strong Meat: The Popular Novel in the 'Forties," in *Anatomy of American Popular Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 162.

² David S. Reynolds, introduction to *George Lippard Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical, 1822-1854* (New York: Peter Lang Publications, 1986), 6.

³ Reynolds, introduction, 4-6.

⁴ Jesse Alemán, and Shelley Streeby, Introduction in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation: an Anthology of Nineteenth-century Popular Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2007), xvii.

⁵ David Reynolds, "The Sensational Press and the Rise of Subversive Literature" in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) 209.

⁶ George Lippard, "A National Literature," in *George Lippard Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical, 1822-1854* (New York: Peter Lang Publications, 1986), 281.

reflect the destructive potential of capitalism that Lippard and his fellow social reformists feared would be the demise of the Union. Lippard's work, therefore, deserves critical examination because the sensational aspects of his stories are prime sites for understanding the intersections between popular political beliefs and popular forms of literature — an intersection that produces national narratives reflecting the social and political temperament of the antebellum period.

In the past two decades, Lippard's work has gradually begun to resurface, and his U.S.-Mexico war novelette, *'Bel of Prairie Eden*, has undergone critical examination by scholars who are interested in how *'Bel* and other U.S.-Mexico War novelettes construct a national narrative of the war that, according to Shelley Streeby, stages the United States' "unity against the imagined disunity of Mexico."⁷ My project also takes a critical look at *'Bel* with regard to the national anxieties about the potential consequences of the war with Mexico that forms the bedrock of the narrative. I argue that Lippard attempts to establish borders of race and nation between Mexico and the United States in *'Bel*, but in the process, these demarcations prove to be unstable and are constantly transgressed thereby exposing national anxieties about racial integration and U.S. expansionism due to the U.S.-Mexico War. As a result, Mexico emerges as an uncanny double of the United States, and the instability of borders in the novelette call into question the so-called unity and superiority of the United States.

GEORGE LIPPARD'S GOTHIC SENSATIONALISM

The term "gothic" is often invoked when critics attempt to classify Lippard's gruesome brand of sensational fiction. Bode argues that Lippard "used the Gothic form only as a foundation,"⁸ while Streeby argues that in *'Legends of Mexico*, Lippard "often uses bloody, gothic language and imagery to illustrate the horrors of war."⁹ In addition, Charles Crow argues that Lippard's urban mysteries are examples of "city gothics" in which the city is characterized as a place of "corruption, crime and disease, the legacy of the Old World that immigrants to America were trying to escape."¹⁰ Yet despite the gothic elements that are present in his works, Lippard is rarely categorized as an American gothic author with the likes of Charles Brockden Brown or Edgar Allan Poe. Reynolds argues that the vulgarity of Lippard's style coupled with his political message categorizes his work as "subversive" rather than gothic literature, which he defines as "a literature of protest with an ardently democratic political dimension... [that] was increasingly informed by a bitter radical-democrat vision of nineteenth century America, which was portrayed as a nightmarish society of class divisions and social inequities."¹¹ Moreover, Reynolds argues that it is the excessive nature of Lippard's sensationalist style that distinguishes him from his gothic contemporaries and diminishes the social critique in many of his gothic scenes; "there is little social import," Reynolds argues, "to Lippard's long description of an old lady's brains splattered on the floor, or dismembered corpses in a dissecting room."¹² However, Streeby's critical examinations of Lippard's work indicates that

7 Shelly Streeby, "George Lippard's 1848: Empire, Amnesia and the U.S.-Mexican War," in *American Sensations: Class, Empire and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 39.

8 Bode, 164.

9 Streeby, "George Lippard's 1848: Empire, Amnesia and the U.S.-Mexican War," 59.

10 Crow, Charles L. "Gothic in a Post American World," in *American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2009), 166.

11 Reynolds, 198.

12 Reynolds, 207.

these excessively gothic moments reveal much about the social critique imbedded in his stories. In her article “Haunted Houses: George Lippard, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Middle Class,” Streeby compares gothic conventions in the works of Hawthorne and Lippard to illustrate that “Lippard’s obsessive focus on flesh, blood, and low and lurid sensations ... helped him to elaborate a critique of liberal capitalism that isn’t available in Hawthorne’s fiction” and she demonstrates this by examining “the uncanny bodies that are domesticated and thereby put to rest in Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* [that] return with a divisive vengeance in Lippard’s sensational literature.”¹³ Moreover, in her chapter “George Lippard’s 1848: Empire, Amnesia and the U.S.-Mexican War,” she argues that Lippard’s *Legends of Mexico* becomes a gothic project when his attempts describe the U.S. Empire as “uniquely progressive and beneficent” ruptures in his gory descriptions of war, thereby exposing the horrors of the U.S. Empire.¹⁴ Thus, Streeby’s work has been significant in revealing the connections between the gothic and his social critique of capitalism in connection with his vision of U.S. Empire.

In addition, her chapter on Lippard in *American Sensations: Class, Empire and the Production of Popular Culture* is also one of a very few works that examines the treatment of the U.S.-Mexican War in *Legends of Mexico* and *’Bel of Prairie Eden*. My project is grounded in Streeby’s notion that the gothic devices in Lippard’s work reveal much about his political views on the U.S.-Mexico War as well as expose the limitations of his vision for social reform in the United States that reifies antebellum notions of racial purity. I would like to build on Streeby’s contributions by examining the gothic doubling in *’Bel of Prairie Eden* and the way in which the binary relationship that Lippard attempts to establish between Mexico and the United States dissolves as the story progresses, thus indicating the threat that incorporating Mexican land and Mexican people pose to the stability of the Union.

“’BEL OF PRAIRIE EDEN” AND THE U.S.-MEXICAN WAR

Published in 1848, *’Bel of Prairie Eden* is set during the U.S.-Mexico War and begins on a Texas plantation called Prairie Eden, located just outside of San Antonio. The narrative moves from Prairie Eden to Vera Cruz, Mexico, where most of the plot’s action takes place, before ending in Philadelphia. The narrative also makes temporal shifts as it moves from the past to the present, often in the same chapter. While literary critics tend to disapprove of the often confusing organization of place and time in sensational novels like *’Bel of Prairie Eden*, I will reveal later on that the shift in time and place is an important component of the story’s Gothic structure.

Similar to his urban mysteries, Lippard depicts capitalism as a corrupt enterprise in *’Bel of Prairie Eden*, and in this particular novel, capitalism is tied to U.S. westward expansion through Jacob Grywin, a corrupt banker who flees Philadelphia and erects a plantation in Texas. Grywin’s past crimes serve as the catalyst for the revenge plot that unfolds when his plantation overseer, Ewen McGregor turns him over to a group of Mexican Rancheros headed by Don Antonio Marin. This event sets off a chain of gruesome acts that include Don Antonio Marin’s rape of Jacob Grywin’s daughter Isabel, (’Bel), the captivity of Jacob Grywin’s sons John and Harry in Mexico, the murder of Harry by Don Antonio Marin and John’s revengeful plotting which involves forcing Don Antonio Marin to watch as he rapes Isora, Don Antonio’s

¹³ Shelley Streeby “Haunted Houses: George Lippard, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Middle Class America.” *Criticism* 38, no. 3 (1996), 443.

¹⁴ Streeby, 43.

sister. The story ends in Philadelphia with John, now Juan, grieving over the death of his beloved Isora.

In their introduction to *'Bel of Prairie Eden* in the anthology *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*, Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby argue that while Lippard was in favor of the war's potential to provide land for the white working classes, *'Bel of Prairie Eden* "reveals many of his doubts about the war, especially his fears that slavery, would extend to the new lands taken from Mexico."¹⁵ What also becomes clear is that these fears are projected onto Mexico and construct a narrative of the war that reifies racial prejudices against Mexicans that are rooted in the "Black Legend" of the Spanish Conquest. Streeby defines the Black Legend as "a system of beliefs [that] was supported by anti-catholic sentiments, accounts of the Spanish Inquisition, reports of Spanish atrocities in the New World and ideas about the horrors of racial mixing."¹⁶ Anti-Catholicism is a prominent trope of gothic literature and in American gothic literature, Catholicism appears as an archaic and undemocratic threat to the stability of the Union. Elizabeth Kelly Gray points out that anti-Catholicism in antebellum America is directly tied to an ideology of foreign otherness, in which the problems of industrialization and expansion were characterized as the effects of foreign intrusions rather than inherent to U.S. political and social systems.¹⁷ This becomes apparent through the way in which the U.S. invokes the Black Legend during the war with Mexico in order to justify the war as an enterprise of democracy, thereby distinguishing it from the tyranny of the Spanish Conquest.¹⁸ According to Streeby, Lippard's novel *Legends of Mexico* "draws on the Black Legend when he identifies tyranny, luxury, and avarice with Spain, introduces rapacious Spanish villains and contrasts an evil Spanish conquest with a liberating U.S. presence in Mexico."¹⁹ The narrative of *'Bel of Prairie Eden* is also structured by a similar binary relationship between the U.S. and Mexico and similar to what Streeby argues about *Legends of Mexico*, as this binary relationship dissolves,

U.S. Empire becomes, as we shall see, an uncanny double of the Spanish empire in this text. For if the United States displaces and replaces the remnants of the Spanish empire in Mexico, it also inherits the curses heaped on Spain: as the violence depicted in this novel escalates, it becomes difficult to separate Spanish tyranny from U.S.-American freedom.²⁰

Thus, it is the instability of borders in *'Bel of Prairie Eden* that call into question not only the extent to which U.S. expansionism is indeed an enterprise of democracy, but also the very nature of democracy in antebellum America. For it is the dissolution of moral, political, and racial boundaries between the U.S. and Mexico that exposes the horrors of capitalism and slavery; and that both upholds and ruptures the stability of the Union. Freud's notion of the *uncanny* becomes helpful in understanding the complex relationship between the U.S. and Mexico depicted in *'Bel of Prairie Eden*. The *uncanny* or "that class

¹⁵ Jesse Alemán, and Shelley Streeby, "'Bel of Prairie Eden,'" in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation: an Anthology of Nineteenth-century Popular Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2007), 107.

¹⁶ Streeby, 58.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Kelly Gray, "The World by Gaslight: Urban-gothic Literature and Moral Reform in New York City 1845-1860," *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 2 (June 2009), 137-161.

¹⁸ Streeby, 58.

¹⁹ Streeby, 58.

²⁰ Streeby, 58.

of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar”²¹ is a distinctive gothic trope in which something or someone is terrifying precisely because it is strangely familiar; that is, it represents or embodies some aspect we recognize as part of ourselves but that we desire to repress. In gothic literature, the *uncanny* is represented through doubles: places, characters, events or objects that become terrifying to a character or to a reader because it is a reflection of something repressed yet integral to the self and thus as Justin D. Edwards argues, “forces one to face the fiction of a stable self.”²² In *Bel of Prairie Eden*, it is the instability of the border that allows for the *uncanny* relationship between the United States and Mexico to emerge and troubles the United States’ notion of a racially superior, pure and democratic union.

“IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF CORTES:” UNCANNY DOUBLES AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

The massive Gothic estate of Jacob Grywin, called Prairie Eden, is situated on the borderlands of Texas and is described as “something between savage grandeur and refined civilization”²³ it is therefore positioned between two competing legacies of empire: the Spanish conquest and the project of U.S. expansionism enacted through the war with Mexico. The promise of U.S. expansion as a result of the war is evoked through the magnitude of the mansion in its “two story height” and “spacious rooms,” as well as the flourishing land of “emerald corn...rich grass...and quivering beds of wild flowers”²⁴ Two chapters later, the story moves the narrative to Mexico and begins with a description of a hacienda called Rancho Salado that stands in stark contrast to the prosperity of Prairie Eden, invoking the ruinous aftermath of the “savage” Spanish Conquest. Rancho Salado is composed of only “one story...with a stunted and withered tree before its low and narrow door” and is positioned in a “monotonous waste of sand, as far as the eye could see.”²⁵ Yet while Prairie Eden and Rancho Salado serve to establish an opposition between Mexico and the U.S. and the Spanish Conquest and U.S.-Mexican War, in which the Spanish Conquest is positioned as the savage other to the U.S.-Mexican War’s civilizing project, both of these structures house horrific scenes of rape and execution. Thereby troubling this binary relationship and calling into question the “civilized” and democratic nature of the United States’ national ethos. At Rancho Salado, John Grywin witnesses the execution of his little brother Harry, an event that marks his traumatic transformation into Juan. Meanwhile, at Prairie Eden, John’s father Jacob is hanged and his sister Isabel raped by Don Antonio Marin, aided by Jacob’s former clerk and plantation overseer Ewen McGregor, who seeks revenge against Grywin for his past corruptions as a bank director in Philadelphia. A causal link is established between the prosperity of Prairie Eden and Grywin’s corrupt past in McGregor’s accusations against Grywin for “seeking refuge for his guilty wealth in the prairie of Texas.”²⁶ Thus, the project of U.S. expansionism that the war sought to secure is presented in the text as a corrupting agent, for it is

²¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *Collected Papers Volume IV* (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), 369-370.

²² Justin D. Edwards, Introduction to *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2003) xxv.

²³ George Lippard, “Bel of Prairie Eden,” in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*, edited by Jesse Alemàn and Shelley Streeby (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 121.

²⁴ Lippard, 120.

²⁵ Lippard, 131.

²⁶ Lippard, 125.

ultimately Jacob Grywin's past that prompts the Grywins' move to Texas as well as that which instigates the revenge plot. Jacob Grywin is therefore implicated not only in the rape of his daughter at Prairie Eden, but also in the murder of Harry and the traumatic transformation of John at Rancho Salado. Rancho Salado thus functions as an uncanny double to Prairie Eden because it exposes the horrific consequences of Jacob Grywin's past.

Throughout the novelette, the past haunts the present — further indicating the return of the repressed — as revengeful acts are motivated by past experiences. In Chapter One, John is quick to silence Harry at the mere mention of Philadelphia, signifying the repression of their father's corrupt deeds, which are precisely the reason why Ewen McGregor turns him over to Don Antonio Marin. Isabel is raped by Don Antonio Marin because of her past rejection of him in Philadelphia. Finally, John enacts revenge on Ewen McGregor and Don Antonio Marin for the violence they enacted on his family and he is never able to escape the wrongs that he commits as the story ends with his demise in Philadelphia. The return of the repressed through revenge establishes *uncanny* relations between characters. Ewen McGregor functions as a double for Jacob Grywin as both are exposed as traitors: McGregor as a traitor to the Grywins and his country and Jacob Grywin as a "traitor to the trust of some thousand widows and orphans" in Philadelphia.²⁷ Don Antonio Marin and John (as Juan) also serve as each other's doubles as their acts of revenge are exactly the same; both commit rape against each other's sister. Through these pairs of doubles, the horrors of revenge make it difficult to distinguish between which of these characters are agents of corruption and which are victims.

Shifts in time also signify the return of a repressed past and work to establish an uncanny double between the U.S.-Mexico War and the Spanish Conquest. Chapter Two begins with a description of a lone Indian who stands in the center of a patch of land that Prairie Eden would be erected on a decade later. The lone Indian mourns the death and disappearance of his people before heading "toward the west" never to return.²⁸ The narrative then shifts abruptly in time to the "strange sight" of the Grywins' plantation. The lone Indian represents a repressed aspect of United States history in which entire nations of Native Americans were uprooted and pushed off their land in order to make way for the settlement and institution of wealthy plantations like Prairie Eden. Lippard was very vocal about his criticisms of the banking system in the United States which he viewed as "that legalized form of robbery which enables the Speculator, the Broker, and the Capitalist to get rich upon the labor and misery of the masses"²⁹ and the juxtaposition of the lone Indian and the establishment of Prairie Eden indicates his fear that the land acquired as a result of the U.S.-Mexico War would be monopolized by the wealthy rather than distributed evenly amongst all classes. Later on in the novel, Lippard uses a similar technique of a shift in time that invokes the Spanish Conquest. In Chapter Seven entitled "A Hundred Years Ago," Lippard constructs a description of the Spanish Conquest that is infused with the mythology of the Black Legend. Hernán Cortez appears as a greedy tyrant who vows to conquer "the land of Montezuma, swarming with its millions of people, and glorious with its unmeasured stores of gold."³⁰ Lippard describes Cortez's desire

²⁷ Lippard, 125.

²⁸ Lippard, 119.

²⁹ George Lippard, "The Banking System," in *George Lippard Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical 1822-1854*, edited by David S. Reynolds (New York: Peter Lang Publications, 1986), 169.

³⁰ Lippard, 150.

for conquest as a “madness” that resonates “in the deep flush which reddens his cheek, in the unnatural glare of his eye.”³¹ This chapter precedes “The Landing At Vera Cruz” in which American soldiers arrive at the same place Cortez announces his conquest of Mexico, three hundred years later. Thus, in the juxtaposition of these two chapters, we see Lippard making a parallel between the U.S.-Mexico War and the Spanish Conquest. Moreover, in “The Landing at Vera Cruz,” Lippard once again invokes U.S. expansion with descriptions of a “western sky” where “Orizoba glares like the ghost of past ages.”³² Taken together these chapters parallel Chapter Two, in that the past is invoked to shed light on future events. The greed that Lippard attributes to the Spanish Conquest becomes the *uncanny* double for the capitalist greed that uproots the lone Indian in Chapter Two and drives the battle scene at Vera Cruz in which General Winfield Scott leads his army “in the footsteps of Cortes.”³³

JOHN/JUAN'S REVENGE: THE MORAL THREAT OF RACIAL INTEGRATION

While the haunting of the past serves to reveal the national fear of incorporating Mexican land, revengeful acts of rape and the grim transformation of John Grywin into Juan reveals the fear that incorporating Mexican people as a result of the U.S.-Mexico War would lead to both moral and physical deterioration. Edwards argues that American gothic literature is marked by fears of racial impurity as he explains that “in antebellum America, where one proof of African American blood separated slave from master...proof of pure bloodlines was an anxious necessity” and thus discourse surrounding racial integration expressed “an anxiety about the imagined moral and physical decay of the nation.”³⁴ In terms of the U.S.-Mexico War, acquiring Mexican land also meant incorporating upper-class, landed Mexican families, who were direct descendants of Spanish settlers. As Streeby points out, anxieties over Spanish and Indian mixing informed the mythology of the Black Legend that circulated in narratives about the U.S.-Mexico War. Acts of rape and John’s transformation into Juan exposes the threat that racially mixed Mexicans pose to the notion of racial purity that antebellum Americans believed marked them as a superior nation.

The two instances of rape that occur in the novelette signify simultaneous transgressions of national and racial borders. The bodies of Isabel and Isora are racialized through Lippard’s constant references to their whiteness. Lippard calls attention to Isabel’s “white teeth,” her “arm and hand of alabaster,” “white breasts” and “white shoulders” as well as Isora’s “white arm” and “the alabaster whiteness of her shoulders, her feet, her arms and her bosom.”³⁵ The descriptions of Isabel and Isora’s white bodies are also infused with contrasting images of blackness. In the rape scene between Don Antonio Marin and Isabel, Lippard writes that her “black hair wound about her white round throat” while Don Antonio looks on with “his black eyes dilating until they assumed a tiger like glare.”³⁶ In addition, Isora appears in her bedroom “half-naked” with her “form pressed quiveringly against the dark mahogany panels” of her door in an effort

³¹ Lippard, 150.

³² Lippard, 142.

³³ Lippard, 145

³⁴ Edwards, xxv.

³⁵ Lippard, 123-24, 137.

³⁶ Lippard, 128.

to keep her suspicious brother out of her bedroom.³⁷ The sexual and violent undertones of such racially charged descriptions evoke fears of miscegenation in which blackness poses a physical threat to the racial purity of whiteness.

Edwards explains that fears of miscegenation were rooted in the scientific and medical beliefs that different races were fundamentally “different species” and that racial integration would “cause the United States to degenerate not only culturally but also physically.”³⁸ This emerges in gothic texts, Edwards continues to argue, as “discourses of death, impurity, and genetic contamination.”³⁹ Lippard makes use of such discourses to construct the rapes of Isabel and Isora as moral and physical attacks made by racialized foreign men and thus these scenes of rape signify not only racial but national transgressions. The Irish immigrant and traitor Red Ewen “pollutes the cheeks of the slumbering Isabel” when he invades “the sanctity of [her] bed chamber” while the racially ambiguous Juan declares before he rapes Isora that “tonight Isora sinks into the embrace of pollution.”⁴⁰ Don Antonio and Juan are both able to infect the bodies of Isabel and Isora by drugging and raping them with deleterious consequences. Lippard describes Isabel as both “a dead woman” and “a ghost” while the rape of Isora by Juan and their subsequent marriage leads to her literal death.⁴¹ Thus, the corporeal violence that Don Antonio Marin and Juan enact upon Isabel and Isora signify fears of miscegenation brought on by foreign invasion, in which the psychological and physical demise of Isabel and Isora come to symbolize the moral and physical decay of antebellum America.

The repetition of the rape act also bears significance especially considering that both acts of rape are revengeful acts that attempt to right a traumatic event from the past. As stated earlier, Don Antonio rapes Isabel because she spurned his advances in Philadelphia and it is precisely the rape of Isabel that motivates Juan to rape Don Antonio’s own sister. Emmanuelle Lévinas’ notion of repetition as an effect of trauma is useful in understanding how the repetition of such corporeal violence in this narrative signifies anxieties about miscegenation in the U.S. In his essay “The Original Traumatism: Lévinas and Psychoanalysis,” Simon Critchley explains that when trauma occurs, “the ego responds to the cathexis of stimulus caused by the trauma with an equivalent anti-cathexis by a defensive strategy that seeks to transform the free or mobile energy of the trauma into bound quiescent energy.”⁴² According to Lévinas, this energy manifests in the repetition of the traumatic act that must be re-enacted in order for “the ego [to be] restored.”⁴³ The repetition of rape — an act of bodily invasion — can be understood in Levinian terms, to signify the repetition of foreign invasion in which the rape of Isabel by Don Antonio symbolizes the Spanish Conquest and Juan’s rape of Isora symbolizes the perpetuation, or repeated act of miscegenation resulting from the incorporation of Mexican people into the union. Therefore, it is precisely the *repetition* of the rape act in the narrative that dissolves the binary relationship between the U.S.

³⁷ Lippard, 137.

³⁸ Edwards, 7.

³⁹ Edwards, 7.

⁴⁰ Lippard, 123, 156.

⁴¹ Lippard, 128.

⁴² Simon Critchley, “The Original Traumatism: Lévinas and Psychoanalysis,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Continental Philosophy*, edited by Richard Kearny and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1998), 237.

⁴³ Critchley, 238.

and Mexico and it is the rupturing of this binary that expose the anxieties of miscegenation and foreign invasion that the U.S. feared would be the outcome of the war with Mexico.

Moreover, as an ambiguously raced character, John/Juan dissolves racial demarcations between Mexicans and citizens of the United States and in the process reveals antebellum anxieties about the potential of racial integration to “result in the death of the white race.”⁴⁴ It is therefore significant that John’s transformation into Juan happens in Mexico, as if to suggest that as a foreign entity, Mexico is the corrupting force that produces his dark metamorphosis from a “noble” soldier into a “satanic” avenger of the crimes committed against his family. John’s transformation begins at Rancho Salado where he witnesses the execution of his brother Harry by Don Antonio Marin. Lippard describes the trauma that John experiences by drawing a comparison between John and Don Antonio Marin. While John stands “frozen into a dead stupor, his hands clasped” with a “vacant gaze,” Don Antonio Marin appears “gazing coolly on the bloody heap of dying and dead” with an expression of “infinite relish” on his face.⁴⁵ Thus, Don Antonio is depicted as a sinister agent of death while John appears as the traumatized victim. However, as the narrative progresses, John, now Juan, haunts Don Antonio Marin, who becomes the victim of his revenge. Lippard describes the trauma that Don Antonio Marin experiences while watching Juan rape his sister with the similar language of death that marked John’s transformation at Rancho Salado; While John was described as “frozen,” Don Antonio stands “motionless” with “his face changed and fallen.”⁴⁶ As Juan, John of Prairie Eden now embodies the Spanish Conquest’s legacy of racial mixing and moral corruption perpetuated by the Black Legend. Thus, the reversal between Don Antonio Marin and Juan coupled with the repeated imagery of death, emphasizes the anxiety that racial integration as a result of the U.S.-Mexico War would overturn the racial hierarchy and lead to the physical and moral decay of the United States.

John’s racial split into John/Juan can be understood in Levinian terms as the result of the traumatic murder of his brother and rape of his sister. Critchley points out that according to Lévinas “the deafening shock or the violence of trauma, the subject becomes an internally divided or split self...a gaping wound that will not heal.”⁴⁷ As this racially split character, John/Juan can be understood to embody the trauma of miscegenation that the U.S. feared and his inability to successfully “pass” in Philadelphia, signifies not only his abject status in society but also the way in which John/Juan defies the strict racial categories in antebellum America by signifying “that which cannot be said.”⁴⁸ Thus, in a scene at Walnut-Street Theatre, Juan and Isora’s presence causes much anxiety for theatre-goers who speculate as to their origins. Lippard describes Juan as having “a complexion, a pallid sallow olive [that] indicated traces of strong physical or mental struggle,” and that his features “enchained every eye by a kind of irresistible fascination.”⁴⁹ Following this description, the theater-goers attempt to identify what side of the Mexican-U.S. border he might be from as well as to identify the trauma that haunts his appearance. In addition, Lippard describes the crowd at the theatre which is composed of people across the spectrum of class

⁴⁴ Edwards, 7.

⁴⁵ Lippard, 136.

⁴⁶ Lippard, 175.

⁴⁷ Critchley, 48.

⁴⁸ Critchley, 131.

⁴⁹ Lippard, 187.

and race as a “strongly contrasted mass” that is “rocked to and fro” by the theft of Juan’s pocket book, further emphasizing the imagined moral instability as a result of racial integration that Juan and Isora represent.⁵⁰

The novel ends with the complete moral demise of Juan who loses Isora to an inexplicable death that she attributes to “their blessed union.”⁵¹ Lippard describes her death as a “rapid and imperceptible decay” but, rather than implicating Juan in her death, Lippard traces it to her brother Don Antonio Marin who is described as “the Destroyer of Prairie Eden, its beautiful maiden, white-haired old man, and blue eyed boy.”⁵² Thus, through the implication of Don Antonio Marin in the “decay” of his now Mexican-American sister and the destruction of the Grywins, Mexico is once again imagined as the threat to the moral and physical stability of the United States. However, invoking Don Antonio Marin in the final scene of the novel is itself a return of the repressed that draws attention to the limitations of Lippard’s social critique in *Bel of Prairie Eden*; the haunting presence of Don Antonio Marin at the end of the novel exposes the racism underlining Lippard’s vision of a socially reformed United States.

As a narrative of the U.S.-Mexico War in which the gothic aspects speak to the national fears of incorporating Mexican land and Mexican people, *Bel of Prairie Eden* offers a new modality of the American gothic in which the fears of national instability stem directly from a war with Mexico that troubles antebellum American notions of race and nation. While Lippard projects these fears onto Mexico, the *uncanny* doubles and return of the repressed, work to expose the racism and imperialistic motives that drive the project of U.S. expansionism and question the democratic ethos of the U.S.-Mexico War. Moreover, the national anxieties about relations between Mexico and the U.S. as well as Mexican-American identity that are present in *Bel of Prairie Eden* continue to haunt the cultural and political borders of the U.S. and Mexico and thus, reconsidering Lippard’s work, provides an opportunity to understand and critique the way in which such anxieties and fears were implicated in popular national narratives about the U.S.-Mexican War and their reemergence in contemporary discourses of immigration and border control.

⁵⁰ Lippard, 189.

⁵¹ Lippard, 199.

⁵² Lippard, 200.

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