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Cover image: Gesar statue and performance in Yushu, 2014.
Photo by Timothy Thurston

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Assessing the Sustainability of the Gesar Epic in Northwest China, Thoughts from Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.¹

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Abstract

As heritage—in both its tangible and intangible forms—has grown into an important component of cultural policy around the globe, new scholarship has emerged critically examining how the heritage framework has impacted designated sites and cultural practices. In recent years, “cultural sustainability” has allowed scholars to examine individual traditions as part of a larger cultural and sociopolitical ecology. Using Schippers and Grant’s (2016) five domain theory for the assessment of cultural sustainability, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, this article examines the present vitality and prospects of the Tibetan Gesar epic from the perspective of systems of teaching and learning, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, regulations and infrastructures, and music and music industries. Although the UNESCO-listed Gesar epic appears stable at present, there are some potential concerns about its future vitality.

Key words: Cultural sustainability, Tibet, Yul shul, Yushu, Gesar, epic

As heritage—in both its tangible and intangible forms—has grown into a vital component of cultural policy around the globe, new scholarship has emerged critically examining how the heritage framework has impacted designated sites and cultural practices. Heritage has been seen to create an “Authorized Heritage Discourse” that “establishes and sanctions a top-down relationship between expert, heritage site and “visitor, in which the expert ‘translates this discourse into national policies and laws’” (Smith 2006, 34). The emphasis placed on the expert’s role in managing and replicating these discourses has created a separate class of metacultural professionals (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004) who manage the application for, discourses around, and presentations of heritage. At the same time heritage regimes (Bendix et al 2013) have also come under scrutiny for perceived negative outcomes. These include concentrating resources at metacultural institutions instead of going to traditions and the communities that support them (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004), excluding local communities or stakeholders (Maags 2018), and the ossification and abandonment of traditions (Goody 2004). In response to these concerns, applied anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and linguists alike have sought new theories and metaphors to understand the complexity of intangible traditions that can then structure new participatory approaches to ensure the future vitality of intangible traditions.

In recent years, ecological metaphors of culture, viewing expressive practices as parts of a complex and dynamic system have offered powerful correctives to approaches that treat cultures statically or in isolation. Scholars studying language maintenance and revitalization, for example, have adopted resilience as a metaphor emphasizing adaptation to emerging disturbances to a system (see, for example, Bradley 2010 and Roche 2017), though some folklorists remain skeptical (Noyes 2016). In applied ethnomusicology, meanwhile, “cultural sustainability” has emerged as a powerful theory for understanding individual traditions as part of a larger cultural and sociopolitical ecology. Cultural sustainability recognizes music cultures as existing within a broader ecosystem, requiring “adaptive management” in attempts to maintain the health of the traditional ecosystem more generally (Titon 2009 and Titon 2015). In order to better understand the factors influencing a tradition’s present vitality and future sustainability, Schippers and Grant (2016) forward a five-domain structure for assessing “systems of teaching and learning,” “musicians and communities,” “contexts and constructs,” “regulations and infrastructures,” and “music and music industries.” Cultural sustainability has thus far been applied primarily to musical traditions, but the application to storytelling traditions can offer valuable perspectives to these traditions as well.

On December 2, 2004, the People’s Republic of China became the sixth nation to ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Although both grassroots and governmental interventions into intangible traditions predate the UNESCO convention, the Convention has given new moral and governmental authority to efforts to safeguard China’s heritage, and China has been one of the most active states in accruing recognitions from the international body.² Today China boasts the largest number of traditions on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Noting the development of this sprawling heritage regime, an increasing amount of scholarship has examined the growing heritage industry in China from the disciplinary perspectives of anthropology, tourism, folkloristics, ethnomusicology, and more.³

The Tibetan epic of King Gesar, often championed as the longest epic in the world,⁴ was inscribed onto UNESCO’s representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 with an ambitious nine-year, 50 million RMB, plan for safeguarding the epic. Doing so brought a nation-wide network of Gesarologists, heritage professionals, and tradition bearers into a national “heritage regime” and an international framework of cultural governance. Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, located in the Southwestern part of Qinghai Province, is a major center of the Gesar epic tradition. The prefecture is home to a vibrant ecosystem of traditions that includes religious pilgrimage sites, material traditions (including specific metal-working traditions and carving holy stones), and folksong, speech, and storytelling traditions. The Gesar epic broadly construed to include both the long-form epic and broader Gesar-related knowledge transmitted in opera, proverbs, folksong, micro-narrative, and sites attributed to the epic and its characters is an integral part of this traditional ecosystem in Yul shul (for more, see Thurston 2019). The prefecture is home to several *‘bab sgrung* “dream-inspired bards” as well as a variety of sites linked to episodes or characters in

the epic, including Rta rna Monastery in Nangchen County a site boasting reliquaries of Gesar and his generals as well as many items reported to have belonged to Gesar (Grüschke 2004). A Gesar festival is held in the summers set to coincide with the Yulshul horse race festival, and many monuments and museums are dedicated to Gesar in the prefecture. For all of this effort, however, many performers seem to believe that the epic is under threat. A decade on from the epic's inscription on the UNESCO list, the time seems ripe to assess the effects this program has shaped the present and future of the epic tradition.

Based on fieldwork comprised of 24 semi-structured ethnographic interviews with cultural management professionals and bards completed in Yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ། (Ch. Yushu 玉树) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the summer of 2018, as well as numerous unrecorded conversations and participant observation of Gesar performances and cultural festivals, this article examines the current conditions and the prospects of the Tibetan epic of King Gesar within China's heritage program. Responses are analyzed along Schippers and Grant's (2016) five-domains of cultural sustainability, with each section devoted to one of these domains. The conclusion offers a discussion of the Gesar epic's present and future and how these might help us better understand intangible cultural heritage in Tibet, specifically, and the People's Republic of China more generally.

Systems of Teaching and Learning

This domain assesses balances between informal and formal training, notation-based and aural learning, holistic and analytical approaches, and emphasis on tangible and less tangible aspects of 'musicking'. It explores contemporary developments in learning and teaching... and how non-musical activities, philosophies and approaches intersect with learning and teaching. These issues play a key role from the level of community initiatives to elite institutionalised professional training. (Schippers 2016, 12)

Philosophies of Learning and Teaching

In Yul shul, efforts to safeguard the Gesar epic focus primarily on its prosimetric form performed by *sgrung mkhan* སྒུང་མཁན། "bards," who are emically distinguished by how they learn the epic. The most famous of these are '*bab sgrung* འབབ་སྒུང། who learn the epic through divine inspiration. *Phra sgrung* འཕམ་སྒུང། are inspired as well but perform the epic holding a blank or reflective device in front of them in which they see the epic. There are also non-inspired classes like *don sgrung* རོན་སྒུང།, who perform the epic by reading it and *thos sgrung* ཐོས་སྒུང།, who learn the epic through hearing it. Still others—sometimes illiterate—are suddenly inspired to write entire episodes of the epic. These so-called *gter sgrung* གཏོར་སྒུང། are not found in Yul shul.⁵

For inspired bards, like '*bab sgrung* and *phra sgrung*, there are no formal systems for teaching or learning the epic, as performance requires divine inspiration. One example of this comes in the narratives bards tell about their inspiration. The biography of one officially recognized '*bab sgrung* from Yul shul's Rdza stod County, reads:

When he was 13, on the 15th day of the first of the summer months, one early morning as the cattle were spread out foraging on the side of Dzakyab Champa Taktse mountain, in that holy place the birds and the bees were chirping and buzzing. Resting and listening lazily to a bubbling stream, he fell asleep. In his dream, he saw a white man with conch armor, a white horse with a turquoise mane. A loving smile appeared on his lips, and he said “Boy, I have an empowering jewel for you.” Then he seemed to open his chest with both hands placed light-filled volumes of books in his chest and closed it. He touched him three times with a *vajra* and with a sharp voice, he said, “You, boy connected by karma, I’ve placed this highly auspicious jewel in your hands. May it bring benefit to all beings.” Having said this, he disappeared... From then on, he was able to tell the epic of King Gesar of Ling without difficulty.

The narratives of other inspired *sgrung mkhan* are remarkably similar to this (see, for example, FitzHerbert 2010). Other bards learn the epic by listening to it and memorizing it (*thos sgrung*), or they recite it from a written version (*don sgrung*).

The heritage regime in Yul shul places overwhelming emphasis on inspired bards, and cultural heritage experts frequently told me that these could not be taught. Interestingly, however, it is common for multiple inspired *sgrung mkhan* to appear in a single family with ties to Tibetan oral traditions, and to the Gesar epic itself. In Yul shul, there are at least two families that have more than one recognized bard, multiple examples in which inspired bards **hail from the same families, and go on to receive official recognition from the state**. For example, one performer told me that his son had recently started feeling inspired to sing the epic. At the same time, one heritage expert mentioned they knew of an entire family of inspired bards. The performer whose biography is narrated has an older brother who is one of China’s most inspired famous bards.

A sympathetic reading on this phenomenon would be that lineages play a significant role, and families with several *sgrung mkhan* in their lineage are often considered more likely to have *sgrung mkhan* in their future. A more cynical perspective might be that families provided access to the key discourses and narratives necessary for state recognition (see Maags 2018) as well as environmental exposure the ecosystem of genres through which Gesar culture is transmitted (see Thurston 2019). Nevertheless, neither bards nor heritage workers question this taxonomy in their work, and this has significant consequences for state interventions.

Learning and Teaching Practices and Approaches.

In Yul shul, people say that if a Tibetan can talk, they can sing, and if they can walk, then they can dance. In place of formal training, singing and dancing are traditionally learned more environmentally. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and Tibet’s incorporation into that region, Tibetan song and dance traditions have Song and Dance troupes (Ch. *ge wu tuan* 歌舞团). Tibetan dancers can receive formal tuition at universities training institutions with minority dance traditions in-

corporated into a new form of “Chinese Dance” (Wilcox 2019), and students can specialize in certain performance traditions like Tibetan opera (Henrion-Dourcy 2017). These opportunities for formal study do not, however, extend to the epic. Instead, the emic classification of *sgrung mkhan* influences learning and teaching.

Inspired bards, by virtue of their inspiration, cannot be taught, but instead, as described above, find inspiration through supernatural encounters on the grassland and other liminal spaces. As such, many cultural professionals emphasize that there is no way to teach these *sgrung mkhan*. In Yul shul, the heavy emphasis placed on ‘*bab sgrung*’ for heritage recognition means that the teaching of performance is not considered necessary for officially recognized heritage transmitters. At the same time, the number of amateur *don sgrung* “reciting bards,” means that literacy and environment are essential to learning the epic.

Traditionally, one might have learned to read in a monastery, and learned music section from listening to other performers. One septuagenarian reciting bard, for example, spoke of first hearing the epic as a six-year-old novice when, during his first day in the monastery, he heard his teacher singing it during a break from class. He was hooked and was eventually able to parlay his literacy into jobs teaching, researching history, and as a respected *guojia ji yinsong yiren*, or “national level chanting artist.” More recently, “transmission bases” (Ch. *chuancheng jidi* 传承基地) have been created in local schools, including one in Yul shul’s Zaduo County. Interested students can go to these bases as extracurricular activities where they can learn about the epic, and learn to perform sections of the epic under the tutelage of local teachers. As this suggests, literacy, is one gateway to the epic. Some, however, learn to perform the epic based on hearing it. Though I did not meet any officially recognized *thos sgrung* during my fieldwork, I did meet some people who could perform sections of the epic on command simply by hearing their parents, grandparents, or itinerant bards during their childhoods. In this way, there are many pathways for learning the epic.

Other influences on learning and teaching

Culture workers in Yul shul focus heavily on identifying and recognizing inspired *sgrung mkhan* and documenting their repertoire. The overwhelming emphasis on inspiration leads culture workers to focus less on transmission itself and more on ‘mass transmission’ (Ch. *qunzhong chuancheng* 群众传承). Doing so places more emphasis on teaching “fluent audiences” (Foley 2002) than on training the next generation of competent performers. Tasks focused on mass transmission include curating painting exhibitions, displays, preparing public performances during festivals, and inviting bards to perform in local schools.

Implications for sustainability

The heritage management system in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture heavily emphasizes inspired bards. This emphasis on inspiration has important implications for State interventions and the futures of the tradition, as government work tends to focus more on training fluent audiences than on a new generation of performers (more

on this below). The diverse ways that people come to perform the epic, meanwhile, are good for the epic's overall prospects, and some trends suggest people are beginning to look beyond inspired bards, to encourage people to perform the epic as reciters. At the same time, the ambivalent place of Tibetan literacy in the education system will certainly have effects on the epic's future.

Musicians and Communities

This domain examines the role and position of musicians and the basis of the tradition within the community. It looks at the everyday realities in the existence of creative musicians, including the role of technology, media and travel, and issues of remuneration through performances, teaching, tenured employment, freelancing, portfolio careers, community support and non-musical activities. Cross-cultural influences and the role of diasporas are examined as well as the interaction between musicians within the community. (Schippers 2016, 12)

The Musician-Community Relationship

Some researchers have reported that Gesar performers feel that there is little interest in the epic within their local communities (see Guo 2005), but this did not appear to be the case in Yulshul in 2018. Many inspired bards reported the strong belief that audiences appreciated and understood their performances. Bards said that they regularly perform divinations, wedding speeches, and attempt to heal people's various bodily afflictions by breathing on them. In Yul shul, then, inspired bards contribute to the spiritual and physical health of their local communities.

Though not called on for divinations or healing, non-inspired bards, especially the literate *don sgrung*, "reciting bards," also often enjoy high status in the broader Yul shul community. These bards are respected both within their local communities and especially within the broader Gesar studies community, where they rub shoulders with prestigious Gesarologists and publish versions of the epic. This said, their social position in the community is also closely related to their literacy, which has opened other (often high status) avenues of employment as teachers or in the local government.

More recently, the ICH "brand" (see Maags 2018) has added a new valence to the musician-community relationship. UNESCO recognition of the Gesar epic as Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the creation of county-, prefectural-, provincial-, and national-level lists. This four-tier recognition system and their corresponding lists have added new governmental authority to the Gesar epic and its officially recognized artists and transmitters. Though bards remain close to their communities and play vital roles in the community's spiritual health, the heritage system focuses almost exclusively on secular visions of the epic, thereby overlooking some of the bard's most significant points of connection with the local community.

enough to ensure their financial stability. Nevertheless, the combination of financial support and prestige both within the local community and in the broader academic community speaks to an overall positive relationship between musicians and communities in the present and provides hope for the epic's future. New threats to sustainability may arise; however, if heritage recognition distances *sgrung mkhan* from their communities.

Contexts and Constructs

This domain assesses the cultural context of traditions. It examines the realities of and the attitudes to recontextualisation, cross-cultural influences, authenticity and context, and explicit and implicit approaches to cultural diversity resulting from travel, migration or media, as well as obstacles such as poverty, prejudice, racism, stigma, restrictive religious attitudes, and issues of appropriation. It also looks at the underlying values and attitudes (constructs) steering musical directions. These include musical tastes, aesthetics, cosmologies, socially and individually constructed identities, gender issues, as well as (perceived) prestige, which is often underestimated as a factor in musical survival. (Schippers 2016, 12)

Cultural and Social Contexts

Tibetan Society is undergoing rapid change, and Yul shul is no exception. Yul shul has seen an economic boom underpinned by state infrastructure spending as part of the "Great Open the West" (Ch. *Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发) Campaign (Goodman 2004), the popularity of "caterpillar fungus" prized for its medicinal properties (Grüschke 2011), and mining. New technologies and an increasingly mobile population, meanwhile, have provided unprecedented access to new cultures and ideas. In response, many Tibetans have grown concerned about the state of the Tibetan language (Roche 2019) and culture (Thurston 2019). Part of the response to this has been an explosion of attention to education and literacy across the region (see, for example, Dak Lhagyal 2019). This section discusses the broader cultural context of contemporary Tibet, the contexts of epic performance, local attitudes about new media environments, and feelings about the epic's recontextualization in these new media.

The epic traditionally is told in a variety of contexts, depending on performance type. Informal narratives from the Gesar epic could take place almost anywhere. Kondro Tsering (2012, 19) speaks of listening to his grandmother tell Gesar stories as entertainment. Rdo rje tshe brtan (2013, 29), meanwhile, remembers an elementary school teacher regaling his classmates with tales of the epic. In still other cases, certain parts of the epic might be linked with features in the local landscape and recalled when passing those locations (Thurston 2019a). In addition to informal narratives, itinerant bards and local Gesar opera troupes, meanwhile, have traditionally performed at festivals and horse races. Bards, I was told, travelled from tent to tent, singing parts of the epic for donations. In twenty-first century Yul shul, however, some of these contexts still exist, but they are rapidly changing.

In Yul shul, the government has become the chief “patron” of the Gesar epic, and opportunities for performance are primarily limited to government-sanctioned stages. For example, every summer, the Yul shul Horse race festival runs concurrently with a Gesar Culture festival. Key events during these festivals include performances of Gesar opera, the opening of a Gesar exhibition hall in the middle of Yul shul city, and performances by inspired bards. The government also arranges for *sgrung mkhan* to visit and perform in schools and for visiting officials. The most renowned performers also travel to perform at conferences in major urban centers like Beijing, Xining, and Chengdu.

Unfortunately, the state as patron has also severely constricted opportunities for audiences to hear the epic in traditional contexts. For example, the Gesar Culture Center, managed by the Prefectural Gesar Research Office, is not regularly open, and the public can only attend performances or view the center’s Gesar-related “artifacts” (I was later told that these are copies and that the originals are held in a monastery in Nangchen) on selected days. Despite these levels of control, it appears that performance also does occasionally occur in less formal contexts. Performers in one county of Yul shul have opened a *sgrung khang* ལྷོ་ཁང་།, a teahouse where people can listen to the epic. Due to time constraints, I was unable to visit this site in 2018, but consultants suggested that it was locally operated. This sort of grassroots attempt at promoting culture may be an emerging trend.

The advent of new audiovisual and communications technologies on the Tibetan Plateau has further fueled concerns about the Gesar epic’s ability to survive when audiences have so many other, more modern choices distracting their attention. Tibetan autobiographical texts poignantly illustrate this concern when describing the initial arrival of new technologies on the Tibetan plateau. Though not from Yul shul, one autobiography describes the way television brought new forms of sociability to the Tibetan village:

After a local power plant was built, a number of families bought televisions and stopped telling King Gesar stories for recreation... They seldom talked to each other before television came because they chanted *mani* and did not want to be disturbed. But, after TV came to our village, they discussed the film they had watched the previous night, or the TV series about the Monkey King (Journey to the West). (Kondro Tsering 2012, 95)

The author further recalls one old man saying, “Our King Gesar is absolutely nothing at all in compared [sic] to those Chinese actors. He didn’t know martial arts and didn’t have a gun,” (Kondro Tsering 2012, 96). Beyond television, Tibetan folksong competes with Tibetan, Chinese, and Western popular music industry (Morcom 2008, 270). Smartphones and social media, meanwhile, have made this media available on demand, and concerns persist about the Gesar epic’s ability to compete in an increasingly crowded mediascape.

Nevertheless, recontextualization is more than just a threat to traditions. It is also an opportunity. In 2018, culture workers and *sgrung mkhan* in Yul shul were open to

remediating the Gesar epic as a way to support the epic's continued vitality. In work with local government offices, inspired *sgrung mkhan* assist workers to create new textual versions of the epic documenting their repertoires. In 2018, several governmental units were simultaneously creating competing "complete" editions of the epic. Many also wished to see cartoons and live-action films about the epic. Nevertheless, culture workers uniformly expressed disapproval when asked how they would feel if these new media replaced the prosimetric form entirely. In this way, people see new media as potential "cultural carriers" (Ch. *wenhua zaiti* 文化载体) to support the Gesar epic's sustainability.

More broadly still, while the government supports the epic, changing language competences in Yul shul are also **crucial to the epic's vitality, both in terms of the performers' ability to narrate the epic, and the audience's ability to understand the epic register.** Yul shul suffers from some of the worst education levels in Qinghai Province (Zenz 2014, 52-59), and is notorious for poor Tibetan language education in particular. In recent years, speaking "pure Tibetan" (Thurston 2019b) and Tibetan literacy have emerged as key concerns. The government, meanwhile, has also limited opportunities for Tibetan language both in schools and in holiday classes offered in local monasteries. In 2019, reports on social media suggested that one County in Yul shul even banned all winter literacy classes. Poor literacy leads one to question the utility of creating textual editions, while the time students spend in school—distanced from folk traditions—may future generations' ability to understand the oral versions.

Constructs

The Gesar epic is considered a vital part of Tibetan identity in Yul shul. Sites attributed to Gesar's exploits dot the Yul shul Tibetan landscape (Thurston 2019), and inspired bards are considered to have spiritual powers. Tibetans more generally view Gesar as a culture hero, and references to the epic appear in a variety of oral traditions, including proverbs, riddles, folksong, and informal narrative. The epic has also been the inspiration for and subject of modern cultural production, including literature (Alai 2009, Don grub rgyal 1997), film, and more. In conversation, handsome men are compared to Gesar, and beautiful ladies to Gesar's wife 'Brug mo, and cunning folk likened to Gesar's devious Uncle Khro thung. Folk songs make allusions to the epic and its main characters. There are also real audiences for prosimetric performance as well. UNESCO recognition also adds a more modern and governmental value to the epic and its bards.

Beyond the secular realm, the Gesar epic has developed **crucial valences with Tibetan Buddhism** as well. Texts incorporating Gesar into Buddhist tradition date back to the 17th century (FitzHerbert 2016), while a well-documented vein of religious and intellectual interest in the epic hero can be traced to the 18th century (Makley 2007; FitzHerbert 2015). In the twenty-first century, Yul shul different sects maintain different attitudes toward the epic. The Sa skya and Bka' rgyud sects—the two largest Buddhist sects in the area—support the epic, but the reform-minded Dge lugs pa sect is less supportive of the epic. In conversation, one inspired *sgrung mkhan*, for example, sug-

gested that his son had recently started to feel inspired to perform the story as well. This unwanted inspiration had caused some consternation because his son is a monk in a Dge lugs monastery, where the epic is not viewed positively. The relatively weak presence of the Dge lugs sect in Yul shul locally limits the influence of these negative attitudes toward Gesar culture, but the sect's popularity across Tibet may raise some concern for broader sustainability.

Shortly after UNESCO recognized Gesar epic as Chinese heritage, Gauthard (2011, 185) wrote that “[t]he Tibetans are unanimous, Gesar does not need to be saved by the Chinese authorities.” By 2019, this did not seem to be true in Yul shul. Yul shul's *sgrung mkhan* and cultural workers seem to feel that the Gesar epic and its performances would be in great danger without the State's support. The local government, meanwhile, is also seen to be largely supportive of this work, with several competing province- and county-level projects being completed simultaneously. At the same time, many Gesar professionals in Yul shul seem to believe that their contributions are undervalued. Several expressed concern that funding for Gesar research centers is distributed at the national and provincial level, where many of the scholars are from the ethnolinguistic region of Northeastern Tibet known as Amdo. Lacking a deeper understanding of Yul shul's Gesar traditions, local cultural professionals argue, Amdo's Gesarologists overlook and undervalue the prefecture's unique contributions, thus hampering efforts to safeguard and sustain the epic.

Implications for Sustainability

Schippers and Grant (2016) highlight prestige as one of the most significant factors for cultural sustainability. The prestige afforded to officially recognized *sgrung mkhan* is one of the main reasons for optimism regarding the epic. The combination of the State's recognition and the role in the community's spiritual health offer considerable prestige to inspired *sgrung mkhan*. Many reciting bards in Yul shul, meanwhile, are literate, have government work (which may be unrelated to the epic), and work to preserve Tibetan traditions. This all guarantees many of reciting bards levels of prestige, and, to some degree offsets the lack of official recognition and monetary assistance. The tendency of provincial and national-level metacultural professionals to undervalue Yul shul's contribution, meanwhile, is seen as a threat, but also seems to mobilize the Prefecture's culture workers to redouble their efforts to preserve Tibetan culture.

The changing contexts for and attitudes toward the epic remain a potential problem for the vitality of epic performance in its prosimetric form. As a traditional “verbal art,” language competence is essential to both performers and audiences, and ongoing tensions over education leave the epic in a strange state. There will be little point in performing if the students have not learned the oral traditional register well-enough to understand it. Without improved literacy in Tibetan, meanwhile, one wonders about the value of the textual versions as well. At the same time, there are generally positive attitudes toward the Gesar epic and openness toward any medium that can help to further “develop” the epic and its contents. Many performers expressed a wish to take

the epic itself to a broader audience around the world, and people felt this would be good regardless of the artistic form it would take.

Regulations and infrastructures

This domain primarily relates to the “hardware” of music—places to perform, compose,

practice, and learn, all of which are essential for a practice to survive as well as virtual spaces for creation collaboration, learning, and dissemination. Other aspects included in this domain, are the availability and-or manufacturing of instruments and other tangible resources. It also examines the extent to which regulations are conducive or obstructive to a blossoming heritage, including grants, artists’ rights, copyright laws, sound restrictions, laws limiting artistic expression and averse circumstances such as obstacles that can arise from totalitarian regimes, persecution, civil unrest, war or the displacement of music or people. (Schippers 2016, 13)

The Chinese government places a high value on the Gesar epic for decades, and the epic was mentioned as a key project for social science research in the sixth, seventh, and eighth five-year work plans (1980-1995). In 2009, as part of the application for UNESCO recognition, the Chinese government earmarked 50 million RMB (approximately 7.27 million US dollars) for safeguarding the epic over the next decade. The creation of laws to safeguard the epic and other intangible cultural heritage, the infrastructure to engage in this work, and the funding to support this work is undeniable.

In the decade since the epic’s initial inscription, culture workers have made good on many of the proposed measures, including the creation of cultural spaces for live epic performances (there are multiple such locations in Yul shul alone), and created a digital database of the Gesar epic tradition. The Chinese government funds a network of county-, prefectural, and provincial, and national-level Gesar research offices responsible for working with bards to collect, transcribe, and publish editions of the epic, arrange for public displays relating to the Gesar epic. Some of these offices, including the Prefectural level Gesar research office in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture have a dedicated recording studio just for bards to record their performances of the epic, and plans are in place for upgrading the studio as well. In some cases, the Gesar research offices collaborate with or work in parallel to each other and to culture bureaus responsible for identifying and safeguarding heritage more broadly.

The documentary work done by these offices, however, is rarely accessible to a broader public. In light of this, and the heavy emphasis placed on entextualization, it seems as if most recording work is done primarily to support the creation of written versions of each inspired bard’s repertoire, **and there are often a number of “authoritative”** versions being created at any given time. In July 2018, the Yul shul culture bureau was completing one version with the assistance of bards and retired schoolteachers working long hours to meet their deadline. The National Gesar Research Center had funded this project. At the same time, one “reciting bard’ (and Yul shul native) with

whom I spoke said that he was self-funding his own bilingual, 113 volume version of the epic.

Complementing this massive, ongoing entextualization effort, is a series of well-funded projects to provide for more dynamic approaches to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage more broadly. In 2018, Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous prefecture also announced the designation of the region as a Yul shul prefecture Tibetan Cultural ecological safeguarding experimental region (Ch. Zangzu [Yushu] *wenhua shengtai baohu shiyan qu* 藏族(玉树)文化生态保护区). The experimental region is the third such region in Qinghai Province and the 20 across China. Official news reports say that the project will see them engage in *salvage* (Ch. *qiangjiu xing* 抢救性) safeguarding for more intangible forms, and “productive” (Ch. *sheng chan xing* 生产性) safeguarding. Gesar. Meanwhile, the neighboring Mgo log (Ch. Guoluo 果洛) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has a “Gesar Cultural Ecological Safeguarding” experimental region. Local culture workers in Yul shul were, as yet, unsure about what this would entail or how it would affect current efforts to safeguard the Gesar epic.

Across these efforts, workers reported inconsistent archival methods, and even the leaders of different work units were sometimes unsure about how to locate specific episodes from specific performers. The experts who work in these offices, meanwhile, often have little to no training in recording, cultural documentation, folkloristic, archival methods, or related disciplines. Instead, many are former schoolteachers. Such is the state of Tibetan language education in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous prefecture that those with the best Tibetan language skills become teachers, and move into culture later in life. When they make this move, however, they receive little to no training and are generally unaware of concerns of archives, accessibility, metadata collection, and the like.

Implications for Sustainability

National and local governments have placed considerable emphasis on safeguarding the Gesar epic, and the tradition of prosimetric performance. There are strong infrastructures and regulatory frameworks to support the tradition. The material requirements for performance, meanwhile, are few. Within the heritage regime, there is also considerable scope for individual officials to create and implement programs that they think may benefit a tradition. In Rdza stod (Ch. Zaduo) county, for example, one young leader, whose father recites the epic from a text, told that in his county, they have a “Gesar transmission base” in a local primary school, where students can learn. He is also planning to hold a competition for non-inspired performers of the epic with cash prizes for the best performers. These sorts of initiatives seem to seek not just the creation of fluent audiences, but also to encourage a broader range of participation in the Gesar epic. These sorts of programs are only just beginning, but a new stage of engagement with the Gesar epic—a stage based on a broader definition of the epic and its transmission—may be underway. Through encouraging broader participation of the epic meanwhile, and acknowledging the contributions of non-inspired performers, there would seem to be more scope for community members to actively engage with the epic, which may yet have positive outcomes for the epic.

Music and music industries

This domain addresses large-scale dissemination and commercial aspects of music.

Most musicians and musical styles depend in one way or another on the music industry for their survival. Over the past 100 years the distribution of music has increasingly involved recordings, radio, television, and internet... At the same time, many acoustic and live forms have changed under the influence of internal and external factors leading to a wealth of new performance formats. This domain examines the ever-changing modes of distributing, publicising and supporting music, including the role of audiences... Patrons, sponsors, funding bodies, and governments who 'buy' or 'buy into' artistic product. (Schippers 2016, 13).

With Tibetan language broadcast stations, a large popular music industry, and a budding film industry, Tibet has a thriving (though always precarious) Tibetophone media ecosystem. The Gesar epic, however, does not feature prominently in this ecosystem. China's state-run media—including all television and radio broadcast—maintains a fairly consistent, low-level engagement with the Gesar epic. *Sgrung mkhan* occasionally appear on local culture programs, and national news regularly publicizes major achievements in safeguarding the epic, from the publication of new textual traditions to new performance styles. Nonetheless, performances themselves are less frequently featured on traditional mass media. Recordings made by government offices tend not to get broader distribution to the public unless transcribed and published as books. There are even some barriers to publication, particularly for private individuals. In China, getting published requires funding, as most publishing houses require authors to pay for all the costs of publication from obtaining an ISBN number to the cost of printing the book itself. While government offices sometimes assume these publication costs, many others are self-funded. In both cases, printing runs tend to be limited, and it can be difficult to obtain a copy unless you already know the people involved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these textual versions are rarely read.

Yul shul also has a number of shops that specialize in selling recordings of chanted religious scriptures, and Gesar epic recitation. Customers enter the shops and purchase either speakers or SD cards full of mp3s of their choice. Shopkeepers told me that they do make steady sales of epic recordings. From my observations, customers often knew to request specific bards and specific episodes of the epic. Interestingly, recordings seemed limited to *don sgrung* "reciting bards" rather than the *'bab sgrung* officially recognized by the state. The featured bards in these recordings were not making any financial benefit from the sale of their recordings. Nevertheless, the continued sales of these recordings suggest the ongoing appreciation for the epic and its performance in the present.

The Gesar epic, meanwhile, appears (often indirectly) in a variety of other media. For example, the popular 2016 hip-hop song *Alalamo* used a highly recognizable feature of epic performance to comment on the direction of Tibetan society more broadly.

Some documentaries circulate featuring epic performers, including “A Gesar Bard’s Tale” (Coleman & Lharigtso 2014), which was available on Netflix between 2015 and 2017. One can also find locally produced lower budget videos of Gesar opera (performed on location as opposed to on stage) on YouTube, and there are even rumors of a feature film about the Gesar epic under production, while several local groups have also produced films about the Gesar epic. These efforts are often received positively by Tibetan audiences and speak to how the epic reaches audiences through a variety of media.

Implications for Sustainability

The ability to experience the Gesar epic across a variety of media has perhaps helped to further support audience engagement with the epic. The Chinese media’s engagement with the epic and with government achievements in safeguarding efforts has conferred prestige on the epic and its performers. Thus, although performers may derive little financial benefit from the media, and although the epic’s presence in the media is largely oblique, the opportunities to garner prestige may help to further guarantee the sustainability of the epic. At the same time, the epic’s presence in media is mostly oblique, and the prestige garnered, then, may be ephemeral or unevenly distributed.

Issues and Initiatives for Sustainability

Overall Vitality

At present, the Gesar epic benefits from a strongly supported and well-funded cultural heritage regime, prestige within the local community, and considerable support from within the Tibetan community and a number of passionate workers both inside the government and outside it who seek to ensure continued knowledge and performance of the epic. The epic exists across a variety of new-media and performance contexts, and reaches audiences in many formats. These factors combine to ensure that, among Tibet’s oral traditions, the epic boasts impressive vitality in the present even if it—like much of Tibetan culture—often seems precarious in an increasingly crowded mediascape.

Key Issues for Sustainability

The key issues for sustainability in the present, in the eyes of performers and culture workers, are the remuneration of *sgrung mkhan*, and the concern about training fluent audiences able to enjoy the epic. Efforts to improve the training of fluent audiences are ongoing. From this researcher’s perspective, however, many other issues may impact on the sustainability of the epic in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. These include the tendency to focus on inspired bards at the expense of other bards, the complex politics of heritage recognition and its tendency to remove *sgrung mkhan* from their local communities, and how Yul shul’s implementation of bilingual education policies may mitigate against true sustainability.

Past Initiatives

For many years in the post-Mao period, the primary interventions in Gesar culture were focused on recording the repertoires of different inspired bards, and creating textual versions of these (for example, Bsam grub 2001 and Grags pa 1998). Dozens of volumes have since been published, documenting the unique capabilities and verbal artistic repertoire of these bards. A tremendous amount of scholarly effort, meanwhile, has gone into identifying the historical origins and analyzing the verbal art of the genre. More recently, UNESCO recognition has encouraged new efforts to safeguard the epic through the establishment of “transmission bases” where students can learn to perform the epic, through public performance at “Gesar festivals.” In 2018, meanwhile, Chinese government websites (see, for example, Xu 2018) trumpeted the creation of a Gesar Culture Transmitters Database” (Ch. *Gesaer wenhua chuancheng ren shu ju ku* 格萨尔文化传承人数据库), though as of writing, I could find no public-facing link to the database itself.

Current and Planned Initiatives

While all of the above-mentioned past initiatives continue into the present, several new initiatives are also planned at local levels. Textual efforts continue. In 2018, the Yul shul government also established a Tibetan Culture Ecological Preservation Experimental Region covering the entire prefecture. This area aims to engage in productive preservation for handcraft and tangible traditions, while also supporting “salvage preservation” for intangible traditions. Planned initiatives change based on the proclivities of leaders in different offices and work units. The young assistant bureau chief of the Zado County culture bureau was preparing competition to give prizes to non-inspired bards in hopes of encouraging fans to take up active performance of the epic. In 2018, I also heard reports of new *sgrung khang* “story houses” in other counties of Yul shul. Due to restrictions of time, I was unable to visit one of these locations and assess their funding and operations, but consultants suggested that these locations allowed for public performance of the epic independent of the state. In comparison with Zado, Gesar professionals working in prefectural level offices were more concerned with *qunzhong chuancheng* (“mass transmission”). They were creating new textual editions, preparing the Gesar festival, and also laying the groundwork for an upcoming plan being an exhibition of expensive *thangka* paintings that would help people learn about the epic’s main characters.

Conclusion

Using Schippers and Grant’s five-domain assessment of cultural sustainability, this article has made an ecological examination of the Tibetan Gesar epic’s sustainability. The overall picture is complicated, and there are many reasons for optimism and concern in equal measure. At present, the Gesar epic seems to be stable. There is no shortage of passionate Tibetans who seek to continue performing and documenting the epic, and the government continues to devote tremendous amounts of resources to the safeguarding activities. Safeguarding activities include documentation and performance,

and there seem to be audiences interested in the epic. Concerns about the epic's future, however, remain, although centered on fuzzier evidence. For example, official Gesar work seems to focus overwhelmingly on mass transmission—including the creation of textual versions and public displays. Much of the work being done to safeguard the epic seems focused on creating “fluent audiences” (Foley 2002, 104), and on the content of the epic rather than the performance tradition itself. At the same time, the famously poor state of Tibetan education in Yul shul, and the amount of time students spend learning away from homes, leaves one to wonder how the next generation will become fluent audiences without better grounding in the range of Tibetan oral traditions within the broader Tibetan folk ecology. In Yul shul, in particular, meanwhile, bards and heritage professionals alike still feel like more funding is needed and better understanding from provincial and national offices dominated by scholars from other Tibetan areas. In sum, some positive trends give hope for the future, while structural issues remain that lead to concerns about the epic's long-term sustainability.

Notes

- 1 Research for this paper was funded by the University of Leeds, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies Strategic Research Development Fund and a small grant from the Association of Asian Studies China and Inner Asia Council. Early drafts of this paper were shared at conferences in China and at a University of Leeds East Asian Studies Research Seminar in December 2018. I am grateful for comments and questions at these events, which have shaped the present essay. Remaining mistakes are entirely my own.
- 2 See UNESCO 2003 for the Convention itself. For how UNESCO's heritage frameworks have shaped communities around the globe, see Foster and Gilman 2015.
- 3 For a selection of relevant English language scholarship, see, Oakes (2012), You (2015), Silverman and Blumenfield (2012), and Maags and Svensson (2018), McLaren 2010, and Rees 2016. For contributions specifically examining Tibetan culture, see Gauthard 2011, Laukkanen 2016, Saxer 2013, and Shepherd 2006.
- 4 Some, including Fitzherbert (2010), question this claim.
- 5 See Zhambei Gyaltsho 2001 for more on this emic typology of bards.

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Responses

Not Assessing the Potential of the New Glocal Tools of the UNESCO Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage Paradigm in Yul Shul, in Applied Ethnomusicology or Gesarology

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Timothy Thurston has done a fine job of appropriating the structure promoted in an Oxford University Press volume on applied ethnomusicology as a sensitizing framework to present and analyze the recent developments in transmitting a repertoire of epic constructions in Tibetan, and now also Mandarin languages. His article would have fit in (a sequel, on storytelling, of) that volume, edited in 2016 by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant, with the inspiring title “Sustainable futures for music culture: an ecological perspective.” The different case studies all follow the “Five-Domain Framework” developed by Schippers and Grant: 1) systems of learning music, 2) musicians and communities, 3) contexts and constructs, 4) infrastructure and regulations and 5) music industry and media. This is complemented by a systematic discussion of the “implications for sustainability” and a section on “issues and initiatives for sustainability.” The Schippers and Grant volume was applauded and welcomed but also subjected to sharp criticism by Aaron Allen (2017, 383): “Nevertheless, I do hope that the project’s framing theory will be

revised and surpassed soon (...) I am disappointed at the lack of adequate engagement with the meanings and vast areas of inquiry around the two keywords ‘sustainability’ and ‘ecology’.” The book was the result of a research project in Australia between 2009-2014, hence missing the whole movement that emerged thanks to the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, launched in 2015, and the effects of injecting the SDGs in the implementation of UNESCO’s heritage conventions, recommendations and programmes.

It does not help that Thurston opted to work with gross caricatures of “the heritage framework” or of “metacultural professionals.” He does this in order to take distance and to promote (the abovementioned) alternatives for studying dealing with “intangible traditions” (a pleonasm). He explores stories about a few effects attributed to the inscription of an item on the so-called Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Reflexive twenty-first century applied ethnomusicology and the 2003 UNESCO Convention Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage Paradigm could be a match made in Heaven. But just like in a relationship, unless it is a story of transcendent inspired transmission or purely the work of Cupid, it involves hard work to mutually understand each other and, but above all, to keep up these efforts as everyone changes.

If the words “world heritage” (list) pop up in relation to (ethno)music(ology), then you immediately know that you are confronted with a very superficial (non) understanding of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Luckily this is not the case in Thurston’s contribution. In a recent dis-

cussion of studies of top scholars on Vietnamese musical items on the Representative and Urgent Safeguarding Lists, I voiced my surprise that these taboo words were used and I asked the question if this echoed (wishful) misunderstandings of government officials or stakeholders (Jacobs 2018). In any case, ethnomusicologists should be aware of the “appropriate language” battles and what is at stake (see “heritage frameworks,” in plural). It is also important to understand which special—marginal!—positions UNESCO programmes on endangered languages (see Catherine Grant) and the programme on “living human treasures,” or what Catherine Maag called “ICH transmitter system,” actually have in the global 2003 UNESCO Convention paradigm. Are there no other safeguarding trajectories possible? It will allow to make a richer exploration of which alternatives under that paradigmatic UNESCO umbrella could be proposed to CGIs and other stakeholders in this part of China.

It is not a reassuring sign if the only primary source reference to UNESCO instruments is the original Convention text itself, dated 2003, and not the whole, periodically updated set of *Basic Texts*, hence https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003_Convention_Basic_Texts-2018_version-EN.pdf. In 2020, it is no longer sufficient to only mobilize, discuss and interpret the 2003 text. Not only should recent publications like the Commentary, edited by Janet Blake and Lucas Lixinski, be used to understand the evolving interpretations, or to be sensitized about the reasons why for instance the emphasis on “the community” in the Five Domain Framework should raise caution (Jacobs 2020). The focus should also be on the most recent

version of the Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Overall Results Framework for the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: recent tools for glocal ethics (Jacobs 2016 & 2017). Preferably in combination with resources like <https://ich.unesco.org/en/safeguard-00012> and, today, above all <https://ich.unesco.org/en/overall-results-framework-00984>. Not using, or even mentioning, the successive versions of the operational directives, leads to missing the operational directives 170 to 197 assembled since 2016 in the chapter VI on sustainable development at the national level. Exploring the potential of operational directives 170 and 171, 172-176, 179 (for instance when discussing the roles of the *'bab sgrung*, or “inspired bards”), 180, 185-186 (for all bards) or 187 is a way forward for research that claims to foster (cultural) sustainability and ecology and that actually can be “applied.” This can become very important in the 2020s: thanks to the theory of change/overall results framework, periodic reporting and the expected impact on future cultural policy developments at all levels. It is there that ambitious contributions to applied scholarship, like those of Grant, Schippers and, indeed, Thurston might really flourish.

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The Punisher: A Cultural Image of the ‘Moral Wound’

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Abstract

The concept of “moral wound” has in recent years re-entered the scientific debate centered on war experiences of soldiers and veterans from predominantly Western societies, previously dominated by the category of PTSD. The discourse of “moral wounds” is rooted in the Indo-European cultural heritage, indicating that the traumatic potential of war experiences may be considered universal. This paper analyses the creation and potential social impact of the cultural image of “moral wound” in the contemporary U.S. popular culture through the content analysis of depictions of the character of the Punisher in the comic book medium and the eponymous Netflix TV series.

Keywords: *thémis*, moral wound, ethics of war, popular culture, Marvel Comics, Homer, vigilantism, war trauma, regeneration through violence

Introduction

The focus in the analysis of the emergence of war-related personality disorders among veterans has been recently shifting toward the notion of a “moral wound” (Sherman 2015, Meagher 2014, Wood 2016). “Moral wound,” or “moral injury” is a concept embedded within the broader medical discourse encompassing other combat trauma-related disorders like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or TBI (traumatic brain injury). The notion of “moral injury” was introduced to the social sciences in mid-90s by Shay (Shay 1994, 2002) and, by the end of 2000s, revisited by Litz (Litz et al. 2009). The idea, however, is far from new: it lies at the foundations of European culture, having gained prominence as early as XI-VII BCE, in the Homeric epics and art. Through the cultural artifacts of ancient Greece, the ideas of violent heroism and its price, both physical and metaphysical, have permeated various cultures. They are clearly noticeable in modern art and pop-culture, but also vital in understanding the social sensibilities of contemporary societies, particularly American society. This article examines one notable emergence of the concept of a “moral wound” in present-day popular culture within the broad context of classical Homeric heritage and ethics of war: the Netflix TV series *Marvel’s The Punisher*. Part I of this work addresses the emergence of the notion of “moral wound,” analyzing two prominent cases of betrayal of “what’s right” in the myths of Achilles and Odysseus. Part II focuses on the social concepts of divine and human law, and their application in the idea of vigilantism. The subsequent section investigates the origins of the Punisher and other vigilantes within the broad context of American history. Finally, the Punisher’s reinforced image

as a morally wounded soldier and veteran in the Netflix TV series, analyzed from an anthropological perspective as a socio-cultural product of War on Terror and the ambivalent relations between the American society and its army, form respectively part IV and the conclusion of the article.

‘Moral wound’

The concept of a “moral wound” was introduced to modern anthropology by Moses Finley. His analysis of the world of Homer (1954, rev. 2002) emphasized the meaning of *thémis* as an ethical category *de facto* ruling the lives of ancient Greeks. *Thémis* means “what’s right”: it is a concept encompassing “custom, tradition, folk-ways, mores, whatever we may call it, the enormous power of ‘it is (or is not) done’” (Finley 2002, 82). Like the contemporary notion of “it is/it isn’t done” *thémis* in ancient Greece embodied what is nowadays defined as “moral order, convention, normative expectations, ethics, and commonly understood social values” (Shay 1994, 5). *Thémis* can be thus described as an axio-normative aspect of the phenomenological *Lebenswelt* (Schütz 1945, 1967).¹ Situated on the crossroads between two spheres: the sacred and the profane, this concept also served as the foundation of an impassable axio-normative barrier between the human and the other-than-human: either god-like or beast-like. Delineating the borders of humanity, it served as an all-encompassing ethical system, defining, among other things, the key values of an ancient society: honor, duty, loyalty, guest-right and gift-exchange. Moreover, it was also regarded as a measure of the Absolute, sanctified by long tradition and by its inherently sacral nature. For *Thémis* was first and foremost a Greek goddess, a Titaness born in time before Olympic gods, a personification of divine order, law, and custom. As the daughter of Uranos (Sky) and Gaia (Earth), and sister to entities such as Cronus (Time), Hyperion (Light) or Mnemosyne (Memory), *Thémis* personified the primary sense-infused order imposed on the chaotic world (Hesiod 1914, 135). *Thémis* then, both as a category denoting “what’s right” and thus demarcating the unassailable border of human community in a world inhabited also by gods and monsters, as well as a universally revered goddess of order and law, belongs to the sphere broadly associated with modern ethics and morality, but infused with a strong religious component: a presence of a higher sanction. The evidence from the socio-cultural artifacts of ancient Greeks indicates a persistent, deeply rooted belief that every instance of breaking the divine law, betraying “what’s right,” brings about tragic consequences for the perpetrators, their victims and their community as a whole. This belief forms an ethical foundation of such cultural phenomena as the myths of the Labdacids and the house of Atreus, as well as related archetypes, but most importantly—the premise of Homeric *Iliad*, an epic devoted to the depiction not so much of the Trojan War as of Achilles’ wrath.²

Achilles as an epitome of a morally wounded soldier

Achilles was the greatest hero among the Achaeans besieging Troy under the leadership of Agamemnon. Agamemnon, as the military leader of the host, had the right of the mightiest to divide the spoils of war as he saw fit. But by demanding the prize of

Achilles in recompense for his own loss he had violated *thémis*, the unwritten structure of sanctified mores and conventions binding the Achaeans tighter than any other social obligation. By taking Briseis, Agamemnon had broken the trust between his soldiers and himself as their leader. By putting his own interest above the well-being of those under his command, he nullified the basis for their mutual loyalty – his to his men and his men to himself. This betrayal of *thémis* affected Achilles the most, as its main victim but also as a personage of an elevated, heroic status among the Achaeans. As Finley writes, “Achilles’ ‘honour’ was openly shamed, and once ‘honour’ is destroyed the moral existence of the loser collapses” (Finley 2002, 117). However, the betrayal of “what’s right” by the Achaean leader also undermined the foundations of the whole Achaean community: for if such a thing could have happened to Achilles, one of the most powerful, heroic and honorable of them all, it could happen to anyone. The fundamental rules of social life, *thémis*, had been betrayed, and that violation led to other infringements on the axio-normative structure of the community, this time perpetrated by Achilles himself. Peleus’ son had been excluded from the community of *thémis* by Agamemnon’s deed, but he also excluded himself, intentionally alienating himself from his erstwhile companions. The greatest Achaean hero stopped fighting the Trojan War; and more: he had sent his mother to plead with Zeus against his own comrades. Throughout the bloody fighting he had stayed in his tent, passively observing the defeats and deaths of his brothers in arms, unmoved by their tragedy—because he had no longer perceived himself as a member of their community.

The betrayal of *thémis* engenders *mênis*—“an indignant wrath” (Shay 1994, 21), “a cosmic sanction, [...] a social force whose activation brings drastic consequences on the whole community” (Muellner 2004, 8). *Mênis* is more than just an individual’s anger at some perceived injustice; it is a rightful wrath, a devastating emotion that puts its bearer beyond the boundaries of *thémis*, beyond the limits of one’s community. *Mênis* is a wrath of gods—and of Achilles, when his *Lebenswelt*, and with it his assumptions of justice and fairness, were irrevocably broken. In this instant Achilles positioned himself beyond the community of men—and his status as the Other was illustrated by his final violation of *thémis*: the desecration of the body of Hector, Troy’s greatest hero. This deed pushed the Achaean champion beyond the limits of humanity, into the realm of gods and beasts. His madness, his *mênis*, turned him into an *inhuman*, devoid of human feelings or any respect to socially accepted values (Strauss Clay 1983, 66). As Apollo remarks to other Olympic gods,

So, then, you would all be on the side of mad Achilles, who knows neither right nor ruth? He is like some savage lion that in the pride of his great strength and daring springs upon men’s flocks and gorges on them. Even so has Achilles flung aside all pity, and all that conscience which at once so greatly banes yet greatly boons him that will heed it. (Homer, *Iliad* 24.31–35)

The only way Achilles could have come back from the state of *inhumanity* was by returning to the community of men and gods. Reentering the realm of *thémis* is, however, only the final step in a long process of rebuilding one’s identity as whole—and

human. It involves both acknowledging the general existence of the sphere of human emotions, ethics, social ties and obligations in any community, as well as accepting its individual, singular existence in oneself. In *Iliad* this process is illustrated by the sequence of Achilles' meetings with his mother Thetis and Hector's father, Priam. During the meeting with Thetis Achilles accepted a direct order from Zeus to return the body of Hector to the Trojans, but what truly allowed him to reenter the realm of *thémis* in both its ethical, axio-normative aspect and as the sphere of intersubjective, communal life, was his shared mourning with the king of Troy. Only in the meeting with Priam did Achilles acknowledge not merely his grief and longing, but also his guilt, his own betrayal of *thémis*—and solely through the process of communal grieving and reparation could the Achaean hero have regained his former place and status within the community (Finley 2002, 118).

Odysseus as an epitome of a morally wounded veteran

Homer's *Iliad* illustrates a particular kind of betrayal of *thémis* and its consequences, which occurs within the "primary group" (Shils & Janowitz 1948): the community of shared, identity-defining experience of like-minded individuals. Such a brotherhood, akin to the notion of *Umwelt* grounded within the social phenomenological framework, constitutes the most intimate part of *Lebenswelt* (Schütz 1967), consisting of intense, face-to-face relations between "consociates" (Ritzer & Stepnisky 2018). However, there is also a second type of betrayal of "what's right," pertaining to the wider community of the primary socialization, and concerning the social and cultural structures considered by an individual as the ultimate, unquestionable reality: *Lebenswelt*.

Odyssey in its depiction of a decade-long homecoming of a war veteran showcases the second form of violation of "what's right." Whereas Achilles had been wronged by his military leader, and the *thémis* betrayed was the *thémis* of a war-band, a brotherhood of warriors, Odysseus faced a different kind of betrayal at the end of his journey: a destruction of *thémis* in the community he perceived as "normal" and "real", as opposed to the singular, temporary situation of war. It had been the society he had belonged to – and was coming back to—that broke the unwritten, sanctified moral code of conduct. Odysseus was a lawful ruler of the island Ithaca. His twenty years-long absence created a power vacuum on Ithaca in which ensued a bitter struggle between noble houses, epitomized in the famous rivalry for the hand of Odysseus' wife. Penelope's suitors violated *thémis* on multiple occasions: from a blatant disregard for the lawful claim to power of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, through an attempt on his life, implicitly confirming their awareness of his status, to the most prolonged breach of *thémis*, which took the form of a war of attrition on Odysseus' *oikos* (household). The suitors severely abused their guest rights by forcefully overstaying their welcome, raping several of Penelope's servant women, and threatening to bankrupt the whole household. The ultimate betrayal, however, came in the form of breaking the sacred guest-law: the suitors' cruel treatment of Odysseus when he reappeared in his house in the disguise of a beggar.

Odysseus survived twenty long years of traumatic experiences and a multitude of encounters with dangerous, strange, monstrous and god-like beings. He finally broke down in his own house, upon witnessing the violation of *thémis* of his foundational reality. The cosmic injustice of the situation, in which the dreamed-of, safe haven of home became just another battlefield, further aggravated by the very real threat to Odysseus' own life and the lives of his loved ones, undoubtedly reawakened his traumatic memories from Troy. Thus, unsurprisingly, Odysseus dealt with the final threat to his *oikos* not in his capacity as a peaceful ruler of a prosperous island, but as a soldier in a ruthless, bloody war. And although Odysseus exploded with calculated, terrible violence, mercilessly butchering the sons of noble families gathered in his house, his deed was ultimately considered heroic, openly sanctioned and aided by Athena, and regarded as lawful by the community—exactly because he reasserted the moral right which has been broken. His actions were deemed rightful not only by gods, represented in *Odyssey* by the goddess of wisdom and war strategy, but also by the Ithacan society. Such judgment, both divine and profane, is best explained through the concept of *thémis*: because Penelope's suitors had betrayed *thémis*, their death became a rightful retribution, an act of cosmic justice.

Human and divine law

The human edicts usually followed very closely the “divinely sanctioned order whose observance is of the essence of justice” (Vlastos 1996, 98). *Thémis* was sacred law, sanctioned by the gods, and thus by necessity observed and enforced by human societies. That social control, amorphous at first, yet in time having evolved into the complex system of formal legal rules, social norms and informal sanctions characteristic of classical Athens (Lanni 2009), was acutely felt by all who disobeyed the law. The exile from one's community and the sundering of all communal bonds constituted, along with the death penalty, the ultimate punishment meted out by the community to an individual—as evidenced by the famous Socrates' case (Ober 2006). But the social sanction, in all its harshness and inevitability, was presented only as a profane translation of the sacred edicts of gods. The classical Greek texts are very clear: on the occasions when human actions went against *thémis* they invariably brought on all involved the wrath of gods, ill fate and misery. Those humans who failed in their duty toward *thémis* (and *Thémis*) were persecuted by Dike, the goddess of justice and one of the Horae, the three daughters of *Thémis* and Zeus (Aeschylus 1926), as well as by the Erinyes, primordial goddesses of vengeance and retribution (Smith 1873). The Theban mythos recounting the fate of Labdacus and his descendants is an evocative example of the ancient Greeks' belief in the superiority and inevitability of *thémis*. *Thémis* as a form of an ultimate order, comprising fundamental laws and morality, is sacred. As such it takes precedence over the imperfect human laws, which are *de facto* only flawed renditions of its contents, and the act of its betrayal leads to the removal of the perpetrator—and his victims—from the circle of humanity. The violation of *thémis* can be repented and repaired, but only at an extremely high cost. Tragedies such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, or Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*, which

illustrate this deeply ingrained conviction, for centuries remained a vital source of the European and European-influenced cultural traditions.

The evidence of the strength of this belief may be found even today in the concept of the spirit of the law (Garcia, Chen & Gordon 2014). The dichotomy of the spirit of the law as the perceived intention of law versus the letter of the law as its literal meaning is deeply rooted in the broadly defined Western cultures, and its origins can be traced not only to the Greek mythology and philosophy as well as the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, but also to other Indo-European mythologies and folklore. The perceived superiority and higher moral value of the spirit of the law against its letter is also, curiously, the underlying foundation of the concept of a vigilante. Since antiquity the ultimate power of “what’s right” had been juxtaposed with the flawed human laws and their fallible interpretations, bringing forth a whole slew of vigilantes: from Antigone or Robin Hood to Batman, Captain America, or Dirty Harry. Vigilantism as “law enforcement undertaken without legal authority by a self-appointed group of people” (Oxford Dictionary 2017) remains one of the prevalent themes in contemporary culture.

Vigilantes as self-appointed defenders... of *thémis*

A vigilante operates in a particular area of confluence between violence, justice and vengeance. The idea of a lone avenger of law has fallen on a particularly fertile ground in American culture, spread, according to Richard Slotkin (1998a, 1998b, 2000), between two exceptionally significant and influential narratives: the myth of captivity and the concept of regeneration through violence. The captivity narrative, structured around the historical incidents of Indian attacks on colonial settlements, kidnappings and individuals’ acculturation to different ways of life, emerged as an unlikely result of the clash between the harsh reality of life on a dangerous frontier of conflicting cultures and peoples and the Puritan religious ideas of earthly trial and rescue by the God’s grace. The myth “reduced a complex of religious beliefs, philosophical concepts, and historical experiences to a single, compelling, symbolic ritual-drama” (Slotkin 2000, 101) and has been transformed throughout the years into a potent symbol of victimization, sacrifice and redemption. The concept of regeneration through violence, originated in roughly the same time but rooted in the experience of “savage war,” depicted a conviction that successful resolution could only be brought about through the total destruction of the enemy. The myth of regeneration through violence views any cultural and axio-normative differences between the antagonists as inconsolable—and therefore, soluble only through eradication. One of the crucial aspects of this myth is the exigency of confirming one’s power through its unlimited exercise. Consequently, the themes of Messianic acceptance or even willingness for passive sacrifice and the avenging, unforgiving spirit of crusades can be found—alternately, or simultaneously—in the majority of artifacts of American culture, significantly influencing the social discourse and political decisions. The long-existing American figure of speech, “destroy in order to save” (Carter 2018) allows us a glimpse into the inherently dialectical roots of this foundational mythology. It’s duality, however, can be resolved through

the analytic application of the category of *thémis*. *Thémis*, defined as both sacred law and its everyday incarnation of "what's right," here must be viewed not only as a set of abstract ideas, but also an increasingly real, tangible, space- and time-bound phenomenon. For *thémis* delineates the boundaries of the human community: within them it creates and preserves a safe haven of shared, intersubjective reality. Beyond its limits, wilderness rules: a lawless, savage space where everything is possible and where the only law is the one kept – or not – within oneself. This inner recognition of and adherence to *thémis* constitutes the sole, fragile link with one's community and culture in the wilderness beyond the physical boundaries of "what's right." Moreover, it forms the foundation, the very center of one's perceived self in the wild initially conceived of as bereft of social structures, institutions and norms. That peculiar space of beyond, existing simultaneously as a physical and axio-normative phenomenon, earned in the American mythology its own name: Indian Country.

The uniqueness of the situation of the early American settlers did not lie in the fact that the wilderness they encountered beyond the boundaries of their own communities was inhabited; inter-group relations had been, after all, a constant element of every human civilization. The peculiarity of the American situation is encapsulated in the ambivalence of their relation with the encountered Other. The Indian tribes seemed to the Puritan settlers at once completely alien and threatening as representatives of a separate, fully formed society exhibiting different culture, language, social structure and axio-normative system, and yet frustratingly similar in their generalized humanity that their way of life, their culture and beliefs formed a challenge—and in some cases even significant competition—to the formerly unquestioned *Lebenswelt* of the colonists. The meetings with the Other, nearly continuous and considerably varied in their socio-environmental dynamics, had arguably exacerbated the myth-derived responses of the early Puritan settlers. Thus Indian Country became a place of testing, both in the Messianic narrative of captivity, which formed a highly symbolic pattern of passive resistance to cultural conflict, with its inherent resolution in the form of miraculous deliverance after the endurance of trials,³ and in the myth of regeneration through violence, which in essence constitutes an incarnation of the ancient concept of eternal return, replayed, however, in the decorations of "savage war." Due to the fact that both the passive Messianism and the exceedingly aggressive myth of violent redemption can be viewed as highly individualized responses of early American society to outside threats to *thémis*, their evolution is conjoint. Thus, the waning of the former in the rapidly changing American society of the twentieth and twenty-first century, partly in response to the increasingly expansionist American worldview (Schlesinger 1977), and in part due to evolution of the forms of popular religious symbols and experiences, was accompanied by the largely unrestrained growth of the latter. Indian Country, immortalized in the early American myths as the place of testing, soon became an object of twin desires: to pitch oneself against the alluring and hostile power of physical and moral wilderness—and to emerge victorious, as the avenger of inculcated values and norms in the face of constant temptation. Final victory over Indian Country equated with its destruction, the dominance of civilization realized

both as a literal understanding of the Biblical commandment to subdue the earth and hold dominion over it, and as an iteration of the prevalent Indo-European myth of eternal return through destruction to sinless beginnings (Eliade 1959). The irrefutable, continuous virility of the powerful symbol of Indian Country as a hostile, challenging place/presence can be seen in many American conquests to date—from the original conflicts rooted in the colonial expansion of the eighteenth century, through the Vietnam War, to War on Terror (Hasford 1979, 129; Herr 1991, 255; West 2012, 4).

In the universal narrative structures of myth one of two fates awaits the lone figure facing trial in the place of testing: he can either become the hero, thus confirming the supremacy of his community's *thémis*—his exploits and trials retold in myths and stories, further reaffirming the sacred nature of the community's laws and rules—or, if he fails, he will become something else altogether: the villain, the evil twin, the hero's axio-normative opposite, whose fate serves as a warning, paradoxically further fulfilling the same social function of asserting and upholding the existing social norms. The unflinching avowal of values in the face of dire antagonism is the mark of all heroic figures of the American mythology: from the lone hunter, through the equally lone ranger, a Wild West sheriff, a private detective of dark, industrial cities teeming with vice and temptation, to the modern superhero. Thus the figure of a vigilante, harkening back to the reimagined reality of the Frontier as a "mythic space" and time of origins of a new nation (Slotkin 1998b, 61) and construed as a worthy successor to the self-sufficient and self-contained mythical figures of old, can be viewed as an indispensable element of the modern American identity. The key component of the concept of vigilante is his natural affinity with the spirit of the law defined as the ideal form of *thémis*; his understanding and dedication to the upholding of the abstract, divine law stands in stark contrast with the usual imperfect interpretation and implementation of law by the communities in need of his help. And yet the allure of the character of a lone hero is manifold, embedded simultaneously in the universal and particular aspects of individual consciousness as well as cultural identity—and hence, nearly irresistible as an incarnation of both oldest myths and modern longings. He is the mythical hero on a quest: an embodiment of human ability to act in the face of adversity; yet at the same time—from the perspective of the communities in which he acts—he is the Other, forever remaining beyond community's ken, but always bound just as its members by the common, all-encompassing *thémis*. It is in this light that the vigilante's apparent alienation and loneliness should be analyzed: as a willing tool of the sacred retribution, a human personification of Erinyes, a vigilante is required to remain beyond the borders of any community. His appearance and actions are a consequence of the violation of *thémis* and while the retribution enacted by him might restore balance to the afflicted community, the mantle of the avenger of justice prevents him as an individual from ever acquiring peace. Tantalizingly, he becomes at once the avenger of *thémis* and the scapegoat, in the meaning proposed and brilliantly elucidated by René Girard (1986). As the internal strife of a community can be solved through the ritual of sacrifice, thus breaking the cyclical nature of collective violence, the vigilante, already marked as Other, willingly becomes the sacrificial victim.

While the phenomenon of a vigilante is especially notable in the modern American culture, prompting some scholars to claim that it forms the basis for a particular type of monomyth (Jewett & Lawrence 1977, 2002), it nevertheless isn't singular to it. According to René Girard (2013), the specific convergence of violence, justice and vengeance inherent in the concept of a vigilante characterizes all human societies. Girard defines vengeance as "an interminable, infinitely repetitive process"—and indeed, blood feuds or gang wars can last decades, decimating whole populations and communities, as in e.g. Albania's case (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2015). From such a perspective, a vigilante, operating alone and usually masking their true identity, becomes the final instance of justice, the end stage of the vengeance circle: there is simply nobody else on whom the retaliation can be enacted. The fantasy of final punishment, of revenge without further retribution, fuels the vigilante myth all the more for its unattainability. For as Girard argues, modern societies chose a different path of ending the vicious circle of revenge: for the sake of social self-preservation, private vengeance as a retaliation for a prior crime has been substituted by a judicial system which limits the vicious circle of violence "to a single act of reprisal enacted by a sovereign authority specializing in this particular function" (Girard 2013, 16–17). And yet, the desire for revenge seems to remain a universally human experience, entrenched in modern conflicts from Kosovo, through Israel and Palestine, to South Africa (Summerfield 2002). Furthermore, the judiciary system—as any other social construct—can fulfill its functions and obligations only when social actors put enough faith in it (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

The Punisher and the betrayal of 'what's right'

The Punisher is a fictional anti-hero created in the 1970s (Conway, Romita Sr., Andru et. al 1974). The character was first introduced in the comics as a troubled foil to the "good guys", such as Spider-Man, but has since appeared in many comic book series owned by Marvel Comics and soon became one of the key characters in Marvel's ensemble of superheroes. In the mid-80's, after the end of the Vietnam War era, the anti-hero became the protagonist of his own comic series which perfectly mirrored the social mood of that time: it was pessimistic, brutal and dark, and offered no recourse to the power of law, which in itself was portrayed as corrupted and flawed. Contrary to the majority of the other Marvel titles, which kept a lighter profile suitable for younger readers, the subsequent installments of *The Punisher* presented various forms of graphic violence as the only means of achieving justice. The series since then consistently presented a cynical view of human nature as something inherently imperfect and susceptible to evil. In such a morally deficient world, only a chosen few are still able to comprehend the difference between right and wrong and act upon this understanding. In the anti-relativistic view, historically prevalent in American society, of reality as a phenomenon essentially accountable to unambiguous moral judgment, the foundations of which are intersubjectively shared within the community in the form of sacred law, *thémis*, the ultimate judgment rests with an individual. This concept arguably pervades the texts and various subsequent interpretations of the main

legal documents of the United States: the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Rooted in the religious beliefs of Puritan colonists and combined with the significant traditions of civic militias, distrust of institutions, strong emphasis on the value of the individual versus the communal, and the continuously resonant symbolism of the frontier (Turner 1893), the notion produced a remarkably fertile ground for the violent fantasy of vigilantism. This early development had been further buttressed by the industrializing meanders of American history, slowly taking the society's awareness away from the disappearing, gradually civilized Indian Country, toward wilderness inherent in the increasingly urbanized American territory; as Slotkin states, "The crucial sources of modern American social violence are found, not in the "exceptional" environment of the Frontier, but in "the peculiar conditions" of life in the American "metropolis"—the settled core of American society in which most Americans, then and now, have lived. Although the "frontier experience" is not a *cause* of American metropolitan violence, the elaboration and use of a Myth of the Frontier is one *effect* of the culture's attempts to explain and control the various forms of violence which originate in the social conditions of the metropolis" (Slotkin 1998b, 558). It should come as no surprise, then, that the most popular characters of vigilantes from main comic book power-houses, Marvel and DC, from Captain America and Batman to Spider-Man, Daredevil or Superman, molded after heroic figures of American mythical past, inhabit a hyper-realistic phantasm of urban wilderness. All of them seem to perfectly fulfill the social longing for a simpler world without cutting moral dilemmas, grey areas or lesser evils. However, even among them the character of the Punisher is singular.⁴ The difference between him and other modern superheroes can be essentially reduced to two distinctive traits: 1) moral rigidity resulting in incapability to compromise—and, at the same time, in lack of moral qualms in enforcing his vision of justice by all means necessary, including murder, torture and kidnapping, which manifests in visibly increased levels of graphic brutality, 2) alienation, both physical and metaphorical.

The character of Punisher can be considered an extreme stage of development of the vigilante concept. Punisher operates on his own. He is the judge, jury and executioner for all those who by his measure breached the spirit of law. Devoid of empathy and forgiveness, remaining outside any community or social structure, and relentlessly pursuing any betrayal of law, Punisher doesn't allow room for improvement nor a second chance. In his *modus operandi* he closely resembles one of the ancient Furies, or Erinyes. His alienation is both a result of his tragic past and an intentionally chosen way of life. The Punisher is an alter ego of Frank Castle, a highly decorated war veteran, skilled marksman and an exceedingly trained elite soldier. The comic storyline grounded his character in the Vietnam war era;⁵ the war itself, seen mostly through others' eyes, is depicted as an Achillean betrayal of *thémis*, in which soldiers dutifully obeyed their orders, fulfilling their part of the compact between the leaders and the led, at the same time realizing that the orders themselves were morally wrong and their commanders inept, uncaring and cowardly (Ennis & Robertson 2003). This betrayal of "what's right" has been compounded by an Odyssean violation of *thémis*, which happened upon Castle's homecoming. A carefree picnic in the Central Park of

the Castle's family turned into a slaughter when Frank's wife and children were killed by a mob for witnessing the murder of a police informant (Conway & DeZuniga 1975). The loss of his family, which during the war had been the only fixed point of Frank's existence, engendered in him a vicious psychological circle of desperation, alienation and trauma—and vengeance. It was the second defining moment for the emerging persona of the Punisher, when Castle understood that his idealistic vision of the USA as a near-Utopia, a free country living up to its proclaimed values, was false. The loss of innocence and the feeling of betrayal Frank had experienced in Vietnam had been drastically aggravated by the realization that the cultural and social contents of his foundational reality were broken. While Castle fought in the jungles of Vietnam, the society he belonged to and fought for rejected the very values that had sent him abroad. In Castle's eyes, America became a promised land of criminals, thieves and murderers, where justice and law were only empty words, forming a façade of order underneath which grew corruption, plutocracy, and crime (Conway & DeZuniga 1975).

While it may be tempting to see the character of Punisher through the lens of Campbell's concept of monomyth (Campbell 2004), or the subsequent reworking of his ideas by Jewett and Lawrence (1977, 2002), I contend that the Punisher's emergence and subsequent "life" in popular culture can be more thoroughly comprehended through the application of Mircea Eliade's concept of myth as a narrative of 'sacred history' (Eliade 1963).⁶ Eliade's assertion that "[b]ecause myth relates the *gesta* of Supernatural Beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities" (Eliade 1963, 6) can be directly applied to the concept of *thémis* as a simultaneously ethical and religious category, and the consequences of its violation.⁷ The Punisher undeniably constitutes a modern—or even post-modern, deliberately patchwork at times—incarnation of a mythical protagonist, the lone hero: a faithful novice tested and tried by the wilderness, a ruthless avenger of violated *thémis*, finally: an ambiguous Other simultaneously alienating himself from and, as the scapegoat, ultimately shunned by the very community he embarks on a quest to help. Yet while the simplified trappings of 'a hero with a thousand faces' on a ritual journey are all there, an attempt to fit the Punisher into the monomythic mold would result only in obfuscation: for the crux of the problem does not lay with the hero himself, but with *thémis* he protects. In other words, the character of the Punisher should be viewed here as an archetype in the meaning proposed by Eliade: a paradigmatic model "for all the responsible activities in which men engage" (Eliade 1959, viii), in this particular case—a personified response to the perceived outside threat to the shared notion of "what's right."

The Punisher, contrary to the majority of the other masked vigilantes, does not hide his civil personality inasmuch as overwrites it, allowing the image of personified vengeance to become his main—or even only—identity. His self-appointed role of a ruthless guardian of the spirit of the law is expressed in his costume: black Kevlar suit with an image of a big white skull covering most of the front (Conway et al. 1974). The white skull serves as a symbol of death to the wrongdoers, a reminder of the ancient

idea of *memento mori*, but at the same time it signifies the Punisher himself as one “marked by death,” transgressing the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. In many storylines he is portrayed as more a force of nature than a real person, thus emphasizing his status of an outsider to the broad circle of the human community and embodying the abstract character of depersonalized, sacred retribution (Ennis & Corben 2004; Rucka & Checchetto 2011). This depersonalization indicates both the fact that the Punisher serves as a vehicle for the transmission of certain views and values, firmly ensconced within American culture, as well as the nature of this character as a *de facto* social construct, a merging of a slew of personal histories, real and imagined, into a modern symbol of a morally wounded veteran—and a source of social guilt. Yet first and foremost, he is an incarnation of the Erinyes—a modern, mythicised response to the violation of *thémis*. The acts of betrayal of “what’s right” and their brutal consequences both in the realm of war and in the world of everyday life arguably remain the dominant themes of *The Punisher* comics and TV series—together with what Gray called in Biblical terms the “lust of eye,” the delight in seeing and perpetrating violence (Gray 1998).

Ambivalent relations between the American society and its Army

The character of the Punisher emphasizes the ambivalence characterizing the American society’s relation with war in general and its veterans in particular. As Bacevich claims, “Today as never before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power,” and due to that fact “the global military supremacy [...] became central to our national identity” (Bacevich 2005, 1). The United States announced the beginning of the global War on Terror in 2001 and remains engaged in various military conflicts associated with the purposefully vague term to this day. War, a phenomenon which for the better part of the U.S. history had been viewed by the American society and its political leaders as an emergency, a short-lived test of endurance of the nation’s values, from the second half of the twentieth century became the new norm, or even, as Schlesinger Jr. claims, a confirmation of the long-foretold American destiny rooted in the religious, Calvinist outlook (Schlesinger 1977). On one hand, patriotism expressed in the form of active duty is still considered prestigious and laudable, an approved way to improve one’s status and to achieve a measure of social respect (Finley E. 2011). Military power and ideals, embodied in the image of a U.S. soldier, translated into a measure of the country’s strength and prosperity as well as the confirmation of its special status in the world. U.S. soldiers became the symbol of American military presence and actions around the globe, both in the eyes of the American society and the international public opinion. On the other hand, however, the United States maintains an even longer tradition of limited trust toward military forces (Royster 1996; Balko 2013), originated by the Founding Fathers and most memorably encapsulated by Elbridge Gerry, the fifth US vice-president, who called a standing army “the bane of liberty” (Kurland & Lerner 2000).

According to Schlesinger Jr., the change in the social attitude and the turn toward militarism can be traced back as far as Blackburn’s “imperialism of righteousness”

(1898), and through the “messianic demagoguery” of the first half of the twentieth century to the Vietnam War and its far-reaching consequences (Schlesinger 1977). However, it wasn’t until the Vietnam War, the social image of which effectively destroyed the good standing and authority of American military, when the American society started not only to heroize its veterans as a vivid symbol of its ambition, ideals, and accomplishments, but also to vilify them (Bacevich 2005; Shay 2002; Berinsky 2001). Incidents such as My Lai massacre or torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib indisputably and deeply aggravated the moral standing of American soldiers—as individuals and as a specific social group—in the eyes of both the U.S. society and the international public opinion (Shipler 2015; Drash 2009), yet they failed to engender a deeper, systemic reflection on the role of the military institutions within the American state. However, far more consequential had been the rift between military and civil society which appeared as a result of the process of professionalization of the army (Bacevich 2008; Finley E. 2011; Sherman 2015). The veterans of the War on Terror have been hailed and welcomed as heroes upon coming home, but when the greeting ends they very often end up feeling abandoned, not only by the institutions designed to take care of them, but also by the society itself (Gruszczuk 2017; Finley E. 2011; Shay 2002; Sherman 2015). The professionalization of the army coupled with the enduring tradition of symbolic and structural separation of the military within the society might have influenced the increasingly popular collective assumption that modern-day war veterans, having freely chosen their profession and concluded extensive practical training, should have been prepared for whatever war brought them. The risk is calculated into the pay—or so it would seem to the civilian part of the society (Dyer 2005; Bacevich 2008). Uniformed soldiers are often perceived as a personified symbol of the state’s right and might; the uniform lends them both anonymity and authority. Yet, it also brings them—as a visibly discernible group, and as individual members of the group—under close social scrutiny in the event of failure, misconduct, or crime. This ambivalent treatment of soldiers and veterans as both heroes and villains, tormentors and victims, finds its reflection in almost every aspect of the American culture and as such forms an apt representation of the broader issue of Americans’ simultaneous deep fascination and repulsion by violence. The character of the Punisher is a peculiar embodiment of American collective fears and longings, a merger of a slew of horrifying real and imagined individual experiences, at once a violent dream of power inherent in mythical justice and a warning of the true costs of war.

The Punisher as a morally wounded soldier and veteran

This socially reinforced image of a morally injured—as well as morally ambivalent—veteran is especially vivid in the 2017-2019 Netflix TV series, *Marvel’s The Punisher* (Lightfoot 2017, 2019). The newest on-screen incarnation of Frank Castle debuted in the season 2 of *Marvel’s Daredevil* (Petrie & Ramirez 2016), followed subsequently by a separate TV series dedicated solely to the titular antihero. The vision of the Punisher proposed by Netflix, a private entertainment company specializing in online streaming and content-production, requires a detailed analysis as a pop-culture image creat-

ed for a wide, fairly young, well-educated and multicultural audience (Sweney 2017; Dunn 2017). The critical reception of the series had been mixed but predominantly favorable,⁸ while the audience response was overwhelmingly positive, both in the assessment of its entertainment value and of its thoughtful depiction of US veterans and the troubles they face upon their return (Betancourt 2017; Dibdin 2017). The series' first season met with interest and approval of the veterans, many of whom have been included in the production both as members of the cast and as consultants (Illing 2017; Damore 2019), and garnered prevalently positive responses from the veterans among the audience (Riesman 2017; reddit 2017-2019). Frank Castle in the Netflix series is a veteran of War on Terror, coming home to New York after years of fighting in the desert hell of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a crucial change: the Vietnam War, a conflict which undoubtedly deeply influenced the social identity and memory of the American society, here has been substituted with or by the current War on Terror. The full consequences of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have not yet been determined and won't be known for a while longer (Costs of War, 2011-2019; Crawford 2018). Yet it is obvious that the impact of this war on American society in all aspects, symbolic and cultural, psychological as well as economic and political, had already been profound (Gruszczyk 2017).

Castle's conscience is burdened with the awareness of having committed war crimes on the orders of his leaders and commanders; the commands to torture and kill an innocent prisoner were explained as "lesser evil" and justified as a necessary measure in what was depicted as a brutal conflict of values, but Castle had been well aware of their moral bankruptcy. The moral wounds from doing the wrong thing while doing the right thing—obeying orders from his supervisors—put a strain on Castle's self-awareness and broke his self-image as a decent person. According to Shepherd, moral wounds can be explained through the concept of split loyalties: "of having to make the impossible decision of betraying one ideal for another" (Shepherd 2017). Castle's decision to follow commands he knew to be morally wrong can be seen in this light as a moment of splitting loyalties: being a good soldier, remaining enclosed in the tight comradeship of his second family—his brothers in arms—essentially meant betraying the values and ideas of his original, foundational *Lebenswelt*. It contradicted everything he believed himself to uphold and, in effect, fractured his identity, his image of the self. This same moment, however, can be also seen as a betrayal of *thémis* perpetrated by Castle's superiors: their demands of his obedience in executing immoral orders constituted a betrayal of the unspoken yet incredibly powerful social sanction of "what's right". The wrath it engenders, the feeling of powerful, all-encompassing anger resulting from a deep violation of the common notion of justice and fairness, is mixed with an equally strong emotion: guilt.

Thus the first moral wound of Frank Castle stems from two sources: the first one internal, rooted in the fact of having been forced to make an impossible choice between one allegiance over another, and the second one external, emanating from the act of betrayal of the communally upheld notion of "what's right" by the authority figures. As such, it becomes an Achillean violation of *thémis*, a sundering of the social

identity constructed and assumed within the military "primary group." In a reaction similar to Achilles', Castle cuts the ties with his erstwhile comrades as soon as he heads back home, unwilling to make any contact with them—with the singular exception of Curtis Hoyle: a US Navy Hospital Corpsman, a group therapist for veterans, Castle's friend and ultimately a source of his guilt, for Frank holds himself responsible for Hoyle's impairment.

Castle comes back to his homeland a fractured, conflicted man, convinced of his own evil and inadequacy in the time of trial. But the moment of his breakdown doesn't happen until his family is killed in what seems an eruption of a gang war during a Sunday picnic in the Central Park. At that moment Castle experiences a second moral wound originating in the broader, Odyssean betrayal of *thémis*—the breaking of the social compact pertaining to the most fundamental values of individual and communal life within the sphere of his primary socialization. The assumption of safety and predictability of the world of everyday life, the notion of individual sacrifice willingly exchanged for the insurance of that safety for important others in an essentially moral pact between the soldier and his society—are broken. The murder of his whole family completely alienates Castle from the society: all his social ties within the *Lebenswelt*, fulfilling the needs of love and belonging (Maslow 1954), are severed in one traumatic, inexplicable event which sends the antihero beyond the accepted borders of the society and its institutions. Castle doesn't want to form any ties with the people who by his reckoning had breached his trust and broken the unwritten compact; he intentionally chooses alienation as a result of the ultimate betrayal of the notion of "what's right". The *thémis* undone in the act of the Castle family's murder had laid at the foundations of his primary identity and had formed his fundamental worldview, influencing every decision and judgment he made. Faced with the destruction of the basic tenets of his self, Castle erupts in anger and violence, all the more brutal for the underlying guilt he feels from the earlier, Achillean in nature, betrayal of *thémis*.

As the Odyssean violation of *thémis* ultimately destroys the notion of a moral or physical community, it also engenders rightful fury and a thirst for retribution. Castle, traumatized by his experiences, perceives his society as indolent, corrupt and rotten: a spiritual and material wilderness ruled by the strong, greedy and ruthless, bereft of justice and the spirit of the law. Moreover, he sees it as a place of war, governed by the rules of war: an unforgiving Indian Country, seductive, corrosive and utterly destructive, thus necessitating its own annihilation. In this, he is not far from Odysseus, who, when faced with the threat of rebellious suitors, applied the rules of violence and vengeance from the Trojan war to his home soil. Just like Odysseus, who at his home, far removed from realities of war, exploded in a fit of bloody frenzy, Frank Castle in New York decides to wage an all-out war against those whom he perceives as the traitors of *thémis*. And just as Odysseus, dressing himself as a beggar, a figure of Other in the culture of ancient Greece (Finley 2002), for his final act of heroism, Castle dons the uniform of Punisher—vengeance corporeal and incorporated, a vindictive spirit seen only in a moment of bloody and violent death – and begins what he considers a quest for justice. His actions can be justifiably called suicidal; not only because Castle

as the Punisher plans to single-handedly eliminate all of the New York gangs, but also because the need to exact vengeance and complete what he views as his mission is the only thing keeping him alive. Chris Hedges, a long-time war correspondent, calls the self-destructing drive of soldiers and veterans *ekpyrosis*, once more reaching into the cultural heritage of ancient Greece. *Ekpyrosis*, a great conflagration consuming the world so that it can be recreated in a pure, unadulterated state, seems to him a perfect metaphor of the soldiers' flirtation with war viewed as a lethal addiction (Hedges 2003). The concept of *ekpyrosis* constitutes only one of many culturally varying iterations of the universal myth of the eternal return, founded, according to Eliade, upon the "lunar perspective" of the continuous cycle of death and rebirth (Eliade 1959, 88): total destruction of life through return to primordial, amorphous, undifferentiated chaos is perceived as an indispensable prelude to its subsequent renewal and reinvigoration. Through that violent, inevitable self-sacrifice, the world can begin anew, sinless and faultless, in the state of primeval perfection. The uncanny power of this cosmogonic myth can be detected even in modern cultures, governed predominantly by the linear, and not cyclical concept of time: it clearly underlies the pervading theme of American culture—"regeneration through violence." In this view, destruction becomes the ultimate goal, for only annihilation is capable of bringing forth renewal and redemption. This attitude can be easily ascribed to the character of the Punisher, who doesn't plan—nor does he imagine—his life past the point of fulfilling his self-appointed mission. He believes that his gloriously violent sacrifice, his personal *ekpyrosis* is fated to bring a measure of edification to the world; thus the Punisher, both in the comic books and in the TV series, is a character driven by an addiction to death.

Presumed dead upon the completion of his bloody vengeance, Frank Castle destroys his Punisher suit and continues his existence as an outcast, beyond the borders of human community, under an assumed name. But when he learns that the gang war in which his family was killed had been only an elaborate cover-up for the crimes of his own brethren from the military, Castle once again assumes the mantle of Punisher. It is in fact an intriguing transformation, as if the man's vengeance could have been completed only by his vigilante persona, and the punishment of the wrongdoers would not have been valid nor justified without the presence of the uniform embellished with the insignia of death. The act of donning the recognizable black-and-white uniform symbolically transforms private vengeance into an instance of sacred retribution. Thus, once again the audience's attention is directed toward the figures of ancient Furies—the aggressively correcting forces of the moral order, something simultaneously more and less than human, remaining beyond the borders of community as the ultimate, sanctified guardians of its cohesion. When *thémis* is violated, the state of normalcy collapses, for the individual and for the community alike; the restoration of the order may be brought about only by equally abnormal forces. Hence, the Punisher's *mênis* transcends the realm of humans as a consequence—and a remedy—to the betrayal of *thémis*. The moral wounds of Frank Castle serve not only as means of rationalization of his behavior but also as a form of its legitimization. Indeed, it is through the occurrence of his moral wounds, through his experience of the ultimate

violation of *thémis* and his subsequent alienation, that Punisher attains the right—and the *de facto* obligation—to become a socially approved force of restoring the communal balance, created to avenge the fractured notion of “what’s right.”

Conclusion

The character of Punisher showcases the ambivalent attitude of the American society toward its veterans, rooted in the mixed feelings of responsibility, indebtedness and indifference to those who intentionally choose the military career paths (Eikenberry & Kennedy 2013; Pew 2011). Furthermore, both the Marvel comics and the Netflix’s TV series are an evocative testament to the deeply rooted American perception of the cultural interdependence between the notions of violence and justice. This perspective is fueled not only by long-established cultural patterns and traditions: from the concept of “regeneration through violence” and the pervading themes of savage war and captivity so aptly analyzed by Slotkin (1998a, 1998b, 2000), to the anti-relativist and highly individualized concept of reality underlying the Bill of Rights, but also by the common vision of the past, reiterated in the shared, negotiated contents of the social memory. The interconnection between violence as—even if not fully legitimate then at least emotionally defensible—means to attain justice and justice seen as an ideal embodied in the notion of the spirit of the law has been one of the foundational tenets of the American social identity. Furthermore, the character of the Punisher can be also viewed as a quintessential symbol of the conflicting yet inseparable American attitudes toward violence: the visceral, ecstatic “delight in seeing” (Gray 1998, 36), most vividly expressed in the aesthetic fetishization and cultural prominence of guns, and the repulsion rooted ultimately in the fear of pollution (Douglas 2003). Last but not least, the Punisher is a personified representation of post-war trauma, and his mythicized narrative serves as a highly effective medium in the process of communalization of trauma, synthesizing the content of individual traumatic experiences into a cohesive, relatable whole and transmitting it to the social, intersubjective sphere of awareness where it has a chance of becoming an accepted element of shared collective identity.

Marvel’s The Punisher constitutes a powerful pop-cultural image of a morally wounded veteran, but can also be seen as a potentially influential voice in the ongoing cultural negotiations concerning the contemporary contents of the American social memory (Halbwachs 1992) and, ultimately, social identity. The a-morality and destructive force of war, the plight of homecoming veterans and their troubles, from addictions, crimes, social maladaptation and suicides of individuals to inadequate social and institutional support offered them, has been the topic of many cultural artifacts—mostly related to the Vietnam War. The social and cultural effects of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on the American society to this day are arguably nowhere near as influential as the output of the Vietnam era, which subsequently affected—in various, distinctive ways—the social memory, policies and the identity of the American society. Although the War on Terror has already produced a noticeable amount of cultural responses, from literary works: novels, autobiographies, reportages and non-fiction

books, to movies and TV series, most of them failed to elicit a general reaction or even reach a wider audience. It can be argued that with the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, the problems of war and its participants faded into the background of the dominating social discourse.

And yet the issue of war veterans seems to occupy a singularly important place in the American social subconscious. The uneasiness and ambivalence universally surrounding war as an unwanted chaotic intrusion into the *Lebenswelt* seems to spread to the soldiers, irrevocably tainting them with the mark of the Other: those possessing an experience beyond the limits of the socially shared reality. People in war perform acts beyond the scope of normal experience of members of modern, regulated societies; and even after returning to civilian life they cannot shed the realization of what they are able to—or made to—do. What had been indubitable for Greeks in ancient times remains so today. As symptoms of what is presently called “combat PTSD” are being analyzed in such diverse places and times as ancient Assyria (Abdul-Hamid & Hughes 2014) and modern day South Africa (Summerfield 2012), it becomes apparent that human experiences in war are a universal phenomenon, bridging otherwise seemingly impassable gaps between disparate civilizations and cultures. The fundamental message of the tragic costs of war—both for the involved nations and societies, as well as for individuals embroiled in conflict regardless of their wishes—needs to be heard all the louder in times of ostentatious jingoism and superficial praise for war heroes, which is completely disconnected not only from their treatment upon coming home, but even more from the reality of war. Modern societies tend to treat war as an instrument of politics, having read only the first few pages of Clausewitz (1997) and conveniently forgotten the experiences of their own members in uncountable wars. American flirtation with war, ostensibly rooted in the myth of “regeneration through violence,” but *de facto* originated on a much deeper level of the mythical reality of eternal return and the universal, dichotomous division between right and wrong, as well as—deeply religious in nature—the belief in necessity of sacrifice in defense of shared values, is only one, although admittedly particularly conspicuous, example of this worldview and its consequences.

The recent Netflix production, *Marvel's The Punisher*, a bloody and violent pop-cultural image of American social unconscious, boldly aims at broadcasting that message while at the same time paying a well-deserved—even if unintentional—homage to the cultural archetypes and traditions not only of modern America, but also, and more importantly, to ancient human myths. For the Punisher, as for Heracles, or Achilles, the occurrence of the violation of *thémis* transforms itself into a liminal experience, a point of no return: there can be no happy endings for heroes. The essence of the Greek concept of heroism is, after all, ambivalence: the hero, a half-deity destined to become larger-than-life, is the paradoxical personification of the best and the worst traits of humanity, revered and feared at once for its nearly unlimited potential (Nagy 1999; Papadopoulou 2004). The character of the Punisher, for all his outwardly American trappings: from the sense of patriotic duty and the ethos of a Western-bred vigilante, to the vast array of deadly combat skills and weapons, bears eerie resemblance to this

ancient concept of a hero.⁹ His story, substituting the allegorical figures of gods with the concept of human agency better suited to current sensibilities, nevertheless retains the acute sense of tragedy inherent in a hero's fate.

Dealing with increasingly valid and profound themes of traumatic war experiences, alienation and addiction to violence and vengeance in an entertaining, visually arresting way, *Marvel's The Punisher* may have a fighting chance of recommencing the wider social discourse concerning the concept of heroes, the dangers of war, its intrinsic amorality and the ethical responsibility of states and societies engaging in it. The cultural image of war prevailing in the majority of contemporary societies is one of a noble and worthy endeavor. What can be further from reality, in which so many human beings touched by war return irrevocably broken?

Notes

- 1 *Lebenswelt*, the "lifeworld," is the socially shared, intersubjective world of everyday life, founded on uncontested, obvious and common assumptions about its existence, as well as on preexisting socio-cultural structures. *Lebenswelt* is the area in which singular subjective perspectives of individuals can meet and, to a degree, share and partake in a broader, intersubjective perspective. See: Alfred Schütz, "On Multiple Realities", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1945, 5: 533–576, and *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Northwestern University Press 1967.
- 2 "Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans." Homer, *Iliad* 1:1-2, translated by Samuel Butler (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999); <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2199/2199-h/2199-h.htm>.
- 3 As the captivity narratives circulated in the Puritan colonies had recounted only the incidents of captives returned to their communities, carefully omitting stories of those who willingly remained with their captors in the Indian societies, the myth of necessity remains one-sided.
- 4 While there exist many superficial similarities between the two main Marvel superheroes representing the military, notably the Punisher and Steve Rogers as Captain America, the differences between them had been succinctly encapsulated by Mark Millar in the *Civil War* storyline, perfectly underscoring the significance of the post-Vietnam War trauma: "Same guy, different war". The Punisher, through the experience of identity-shattering moral wounds, finds himself incapable of forgiveness and of trust in social institutions, instead fully assuming the role of a lone avenger of justice. While the rigidity of his moral code, coupled with the unwavering belief that adherence to its tenets should be valued higher than life itself, is indeed singular, its contents are not dissimilar from those of Captain America. See: Mark Millar, Steve McNiven, *Civil War* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006).
- 5 The timeline for most of the comic book superheroes is changeable and slides forward to maintain an illusion of "now." The MAX imprint of Marvel, designated for mature readers, grounded the character of the Punisher within a set period. The other imprints, however, do slide his character forward in time, anchoring his veteran past to e.g. the first Persian Gulf War. See: Greg Rucka, Marco Checchetto, *The Punisher* (New York: Marvel Comics 2011–2012).

- 6 The fact that the concept of monomyth oversimplifies myths from various times and cultures in pursuit of some form of confirmation for the universal unity of the foundations of human psychology, emphasizing similarities (often misconstrued) and glossing over significant differences, is well known, and beside the point. More importantly, however, Campbell considers the mythical hero a personification of an individual's life path, and the heroic journey inherent in myths a pattern for individual spiritual growth. Jewett and Lawrence attempted to circumvent the limitations of Campbell's concept, delineating a particular variation of the monomyth they labeled uniquely American, molded upon tales of violent redemption instead of rites of passage: "A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 6). The analytical issues of the concept as well as the question of validity of examples provided by Jewett and Lawrence should not concern us here; however, the problem of the concept of the American Monomyth which directly pertains to the analysis of the phenomenon of the Punisher is twofold: firstly, it is based on an assumption that the American version of myth of redemption in the broad definition furnished by Jewett and Lawrence is somehow unique to the American cultural environment—it is not. Naturally, certain aspects, such as distrust of sexuality in general and the requirement of sexual abstinence of the redeeming hero in particular, as well as modern fetishization of guns, are indisputably more prominent in the American version of the myth, but its general structure closely corresponds to other redemptive tales from Indo-European culture, such as the twelve labors of Heracles, the myths of Theseus, or even the exploits of Knights of the Round Table. The various forms of the myth of redemption had been brilliantly examined by Mircea Eliade as iterations of the universal myth of the eternal return. The search for roots of the American Monomyth predominantly in the historical experience American society results in an important omission of the foundational role of older, archetypal myths—such as the myth of the eternal return. Secondly, and more importantly, the concept of American Monomyth continues to focus in Campbellian manner on the perspective of an individual, the journey of the redemptive hero, thus nearly completely overlooking the collective aspects of myth—mainly, the functions of myth such as social meaning-making and construction and explanation of intersubjective social reality, in which *thémis*, as a foundational axio-normative structure of the society creating the myths, plays a crucial role—as does violence. That said, the singular relationship of the United States with violence requires further analysis, which I intend to pursue beyond the scope of this article.

For the analysis of ubiquitous, or even universal nature of violence in the sacred in general, and in redemptive myths in particular, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013), and Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959). On the social functions of myth, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

- 7 Eliade himself conducted an insightful analysis of the many contemporary ways in which "mythological stories" are "simply camouflaged under 'profane' forms" (Eliade 1963, 192), such as prose narratives, especially novels, or comic books. See: Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper Row, 1963).
- 8 The IMDB's rating is currently at 8.6/10, the second highest of all Netflix adaptations of Marvel comics to date, the Rotten Tomatoes score aggregating critics' reviews equal or higher than 3.5/5 is 62/100, and Metacritic score for S01 was 8.3/10 ("universal ac-

claim"). The RT audience rating for two seasons is 87%. See: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5675620/?ref_=nv_sr_1, <http://www.metacritic.com/tv/marvels-the-punisher>, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/marvel_s_the_punisher.

- 9 A particularly insightful analysis of the Greek concept of heroism can be found in John G. Fitch's *Introduction to Seneca's Hercules Furens*. See: Seneca, *Seneca's Hercules Furens. A Critical text with Introduction and Commentary*, edited by John G. Fitch (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1987), pp. 13–63.

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Response

Fitting into Place: A Response to Gruszczyk's "The Punisher: A Cultural Image of the 'Moral Wound'"

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Superheroes have been compared to classical heroes since their inception: Jerry Siegel reported inventing Superman while thinking of "a character like Samson, Hercules, all the strong men I'd heard tell of rolled into one" (Steranko 1970, 37-39). More recently, C.J. Mackie (2006) connects Superman to Achilles and Batman to Odysseus; in doing so, he reminds us that additions to a genre often arise in response to what has come before. The Punisher's first appearances in comics (*The Amazing Spider-Man*) and television (*Marvel's Daredevil*) place him in contexts that directly respond to earlier aspects of the genre.

As with most meetings between Marvel superheroes, in the Punisher's first appearances he is an antagonist for the established heroes. In the comics, the Jackal, relying on recent misinformation that Spider-Man is a murderer, hires the Punisher to kill Spider-Man (Conway & Andru 1974). Though the Punisher's motive is a mystery, his agenda is clear: he wants to eliminate crime and is willing to kill to do so. During their fight, Spider-Man convinces the Punisher that he is not a murderer, and the two-part ways without enmity. In *Daredevil*, they fight because Punisher is trying to kill a criminal who has gone to Murdoch's legal firm for protection.

If, as Gruszczyk asserts, the Punisher personifies a "response to the perceived outside threat to the shared notion of 'what's right,'" (p. 33) we can then analyze that personification in structural relation to other heroes. Daredevil and Spider-Man do not occupy the same position vis-à-vis Punisher: their motivations are quite different, as is the division between superhero and everyday identity. Daredevil's legal firm serves as extension of his superheroics. Spider-Man's reliance on photographing himself in action contributes to his income but is not otherwise related. Subsequent meetings between Punisher and Spider-Man tend to resemble their first meeting: the Punisher thinks he's a criminal, and Spider-Man has to convince him otherwise. Over years, the Punisher develops a relationship with the rest of the Marvel heroes, and only after some time does his willingness to kill become prominent. Over the course of just a few episodes of the Daredevil show, however, the Punisher tries to demonstrate to Daredevil the necessity of executing criminals, which makes their conflict as much philosophical as it is physical.

Gruszczyk's assessment of the moral wound at the heart of the Punisher cannot be extended to the superhero genre as a whole, which makes both the analysis and the Punisher valuable contributions to the genre. The trauma stimulating the superhero origin is not always moral in nature—there is no clear violation of *thémis* in Daredevil's origin. Spider-Man becomes a hero in large part because of guilt associated with the dire results of his own inaction—which we can theorize as a violation of *thémis* on his own part. Daredevil, by integrating civil and heroic identities as much as possible,

makes a stronger contrast with the Punisher because his profession is social and legal. Spider-Man's recurring message "With great power there must also come great responsibility" (Lee & Ditko 1962, 11) generalizes his experience but does not apply it to real-world contexts. Punisher's story, especially as told in the Netflix shows, provides a direct commentary on real-world social conditions, though heightened by the conventions of the superhero genre. This direct connection to real-world conditions makes the ambivalence apparent in Punisher stories all the more effective.¹

Gruszczyk's characterization of the moral wound inflicted when Punisher is ordered to do "the wrong thing while doing the right thing" (p. 36) does not fit the narratives of other superheroes. Superheroes are often born from trauma of some kind, be it the murder of their parents or having their inaction come back to haunt them. The superhero's pro-social mission (Coogan 2006) arises from personal injuries that reveal general problems. It is translated into ongoing narrative, which differentiates it from the heroes of ancient epic. Achilles returns to his society to assuage the effects of the violation of *thémis*. Odysseus returns home and learns how to appease Poseidon's wrath. Their stories end. The Punisher, like Spider-Man and Daredevil, is denied closure. Capturing the man who killed his uncle does not heal Spider-Man's self-inflicted wound. Daredevil is repeatedly confronted by the failings of the criminal justice system. The Punisher universalizes his own trauma, projects it onto criminals as a whole, and so his story does not conclude even after he gets revenge. The vigilante must remain vigilant.

Spider-Man and Daredevil resonate semantically with Americans, but they do not represent facets of the real world as clearly as the Punisher represents the horrors of war, and specifically the horrors of war brought home. Americans mythologize violence, but they do so at a distance. The ambivalence described by Gruszczyk is possible because the Punisher stories foreground his military training and weaponry, in stark contrast to Daredevil's acrobatics and billy club. The bright colors of most superhero costumes make them seem carnivalesque, and against them the black and white of the Punisher feels all the more realistic. The Punisher is possible only in the context of the post-1970s; his story is unimaginable amid the patriotic and pro-war iconography of the 1940s. His opposition to the typical superhero highlights the very ambivalence of Gruszczyk's conclusion. The Punisher brings the war home with him. His conflicts with other heroes reveal the versatility of the genre. It encompasses flights of fancy alongside profound contemplation of post-war conditions.

Notes

- 1 The film *The Punisher* (2004) excises the military connection, thereby eliminating the first of the two violations of *thémis* described by Gruszczyk. The removal might have affected the film's reception. It's worth noting that the Punisher has become iconic among some American military personnel (Collard 2015).

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Reviews

The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America. By Greg Grandin. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019. 370 pages, sources, notes, index.

In the summer of 2015, Donald Trump descended the escalator of his posh, Fifth Avenue tower to announce his candidacy for President of the United States. Condemning illegal immigration and the North American Free Trade Agreement, Trump declared his intentions: "I will build a great wall." And with this declaration and subsequent actions, as historian Greg Grandin, a professor of history at Yale University and a previous finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for 2009's *Fordlandia*, demonstrates in this timely book, Trump has supplanted the symbol of the frontier, representative of imagined limitless and universalism, a "proxy for liberation, synonymous with the possibilities and promises of modern life itself" (7), with the symbol of a wall, denoting restraint, boundaries, and limits, as America's "new myth" (9). Nearly one hundred and twenty-five years after historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously articulated the significance of the frontier in American history and declared it closed, Grandin argues the *myth* of the frontier, too, has ended.

The End of the Myth is a sweeping account, spanning over four hundred years, beginning with the European colonization of the Americas in the seventeenth century, the subjugation, enslavement, and killing of indigenous peoples, and the perpetual recreation promised by westward expansion. For early colonists, "Expansion," Grandin notes, "became the an-

swer to every question, the solution to all problems, especially those caused by expansion" (30). Benjamin Franklin understood the continent's abundant resources would provide a swelling populace with labor and wages and give the nation's bustling manufacturing economy much-needed agricultural supply. Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison believed westward expansion essential to American democracy and freedom. As Madison wrote in Federalist 10, "extend the sphere" to protect the rights of citizens from "mob majority or a tyrannical minority."

Yet despite the significance of westward expansion in the post-independence era, by the early nineteenth century, the terms "frontier," "border," and "boundary" were still synonymous, used interchangeably, and were not yet endowed with mythic or identity-defining powers. In fact, the first English dictionary published in the United States did not even include an entry for "frontier." However, as Euro-Americans embarked on a new century, one that would be defined by the coordinated removal and extermination of Native Americans, the enslavement and forced labor of Africans and African Americans, and the suppression of ethnic Mexicans, the concept of a frontier would be transformed. As Grandin writes, the frontier became "a state of mind, a cultural zone, a sociological term of comparison, a type of society, an adjective, a noun, a national myth, a disciplining mechanism, an abstraction, and an aspiration" (116). The frontier became a way of life for white America, a home for race-based violence and the perpetuation of white supremacy.

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At the end of the nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner “emancipated” the concept of “frontier,” crediting “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward” for “American development” (113). Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” revolutionized the way future generations would come to conceptualize American history, identity, and politics. American greatness did not originate in Europe, as “germ theory” had long posited, but emerged, as Turner described, in the transformation of nature, for through the process of taming the wild, Euro-Americans developed independence, initiative, and individualism, which, later, would blossom into society, capitalism, and democracy. This order of settlement—first, the individual and then, only later, the government—is an oft-misunderstood point, especially when used to define the relationship between economy, rights, and sovereignty. Grandin notes how politicians have used Turner to limit the state’s role to only protecting those inherent, individual rights—the right to *have, to bear, to move, to assemble, to believe, to possess*—that existed in nature *before* the arrival of government. A similar line of reasoning is also used to delegitimize legislation on expanding social or economic rights, such as the right to receive health care, education, and welfare (124). These arguments, Grandin argues, reflect a misunderstanding of Turner, who elsewhere acknowledged the government’s role in bringing settlers west and, ultimately, believed the frontier would lead to the creation of a stable social democracy rooted in cooperation, progress, and equality.

For me, Grandin is at his best when he, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before him, describes how the existence of a

frontier has “allowed the United States to avoid a true reckoning with its social problems, such as economic inequality, racism, crime and punishment, and violence” (4). In so doing, Grandin separates this book from the work of other scholars of the American West like Richard White, Patricia Limerick, and Richard Slotkin. For while *The End of the Myth* examines many of the same significant figures and events that shaped the frontier, the book is most provocative when it illustrates how, first, the frontier, and, later, the *myth* of the frontier have been used to channel white hostility, resentment, and extremism on the one hand, and to reject, as un-American, efforts to expand social rights to all Americans on the other. By the time Trump announced his candidacy in the summer of 2015, Americans had grown suspicious of the myth of the frontier after decades of “new” frontiers and promises of continued expansion in an ever-flattening, shrinking world. Trump’s wall is America’s new symbol, representing a nation that “no longer pretends, in a world of limits, that everyone can be free—and enforces that reality through cruelty, domination, and racism” (275).

The End of Myth is a superbly written intellectual history of the role of the frontier in America’s past and present. Grandin expertly situates contemporary calls from the political right to fortify the borders with the racial animus that animated portions of white America throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, just as he connects the growing popularity of social democracy among younger voters of the political left with earlier attempts to expand social rights.

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The Story of Myth. Sarah Iles Johnston, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 359, note on transliterations and abbreviations, notes, references, index, acknowledgments, index of names and terms, index locorum.

The *Story of Myth* seeks to examine the nature of Greek myths as narratives and then explores the power these narratives held to foster and sustain belief. More specifically, author Sarah Iles Johnston argues that “particularly during the Archaic and Classical periods... hearing myths narrated and watching myths performed... contributed substantially to the Greeks’ belief that gods and heroes existed and could wield significant power over humans” (8). However, Johnston also asserts that the goal of these Greek narrators was not to “induce belief” but rather “to tell engaging stories, which often carried institutional or personal agendas, as well” (284). Inducing belief, instead, was an unintended but significant consequence of the Greek myths’ engaging narratives and their particular narrative elements.

Johnston is delightfully methodical in her investigation. In the book’s first chapter, Johnston neatly describes her goals and methodologies. *The Story of Myth* employs comparativism across cultures and genres of narratives—including not only mythic narratives of other cultures but also fairytales, contemporary novels, and television series—as well as close readings of Greek myths framed within the understanding of these works as literary creations. In explaining how myths as narrative works created and fostered beliefs, the book draws from previous

analyses in narratology, sociology, and folkloristics to create its decidedly fresh testament to the lasting power of myth and, therefore, of story.

Beyond its first chapter, the book consists of six subsequent chapters—of which Johnston helpfully provides summaries in the book’s introductory chapter—and an epilogue. Chapter 2 argues firmly against the historical “ritualist approach” held by scholars that directly connected myths and rituals, and in its extreme form, asserted that “myths were created in order to explain or justify the existence of rituals” (34). Johnston soundly demonstrates that the transmission of Greek *aita*, or “myths that tell about the origin of a ritual” (22), did not by any means occur solely in conjunction with ritual, nor were rituals always accompanied by such *aita*.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Greek myths “emotionally and cognitively” engaged audiences (66). Johnston cites the dramatic and skillful performances of these myths as the source of such engagements, and, when these performances occurred together with festivals, they further underscored the premise of both: that gods and heroes existed and routinely interacted with mortals. In this chapter of *The Story of Myth*, Johnston makes a particularly interesting comparison between the contemporary parasocial relationships of fans with celebrities and Greeks with the characters of myths. Chapter 4 then further serves to investigate how myths engaged audiences by examining the “story world” of Greek myths. Here, Johnston asserts that Greeks preferred portraying the “Secondary World”—the imagined setting of Greek myths—closely within the

established parameters of the “Primary World”—the real world in which the Greeks lived—with only the addition of a few key supernatural elements. This lends credence to both the belief that these stories occurred in a larger narrative framework and that the supernatural could reasonably impact the Greek’s existing world (146).

Chapter 5 explores the plurimedial—represented across various media—and accretive—acquiring traits across those various media—nature of the Greek myths’ characters. *The Story of Myth* notes that the constantly reiterating conceptions of the characters of Greek myths are encapsulated under the characters’ names, allowing for the preservation of core character identities and the enabling of constant revitalizations of these characters. This chapter also argues that the fallible nature of Greek gods and heroes—despite their supernatural abilities—allowed for more interesting narratives and more relatability for their Greek audiences.

Chapters 6 and 7 depart somewhat from the investigations of chapters 3–5 as they examine not the general manner in which Greek myths engaged audiences—through engaging performances and their connections with festivals and the “Primary World,” i.e., the lived world of the Greeks for example—but on specific narrative elements of Greek myths: metamorphoses and heroes. In these chapters, Johnston investigates the use of these narrative elements using specific Greek myths as case studies. While other myth traditions often feature shape-shifting and fairytales feature ultimately reversible transformations, Greek myths feature metamorphoses—permanent

changes from human to animal, plant, or creature—far more prominently. Such myths “challenge the ontological boundaries of the world” (179) and express Greek anxieties about the boundaries between humans and animals as well as the extent of the gods’ power.

In chapter 7, Johnston notes the omnipresence and mass cultural appeal of heroes within Greek myths, defined by Johnston as “humans who either are born with or acquire status and abilities beyond that of other humans which they retain after death and can use to benefit the living humans who worship them” (222). Johnston emphasizes that the mortality of heroes necessitated narrative arcs within myths wherein each hero is born, lives, and dies. In contrast, the stories of immortal gods do not necessitate the progressive change that makes narratives more compelling to audiences. The story of the remarkable human, as a narrative by humans and for human audiences, also provided these myths their lasting draw.

The Story of Myth truly is an engaging and thoroughly well-supported investigation of how Greek myths served to support Greek belief in gods and heroes. Johnston is consistently deliberate and organized in every argument she makes, beginning each section with an outline of exactly what she plans to argue and how she will argue it, before completing said argument with compelling precision. Perhaps most vitally, the book outright invites similar investigations of the power of narratives as sustainers of belief. With its frequent comparisons between the narratives of Greek myths and those of other cultures—including those of contemporary media—the book actively

encourages the reader to question how these other narratives sustain belief and what exactly those beliefs may be. For these reasons, *The Story of Myth* is a must-read for those interested in narratology, sociology, or folkloristics, and most assuredly will spark further explorations into the topic of myths as narratives.

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Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan. By Benjamin Gatling. Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Pp. xiii+233 pages, acknowledgments, introduction, notes, bibliography, index.

In his *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan*, Benjamin Gatling provides a first-hand insight into the post-Soviet Sufism in the nation-state of Tajikistan. Employing an ethnographic approach, Gatling examines a wide range of expressive forms to demonstrate how Sufis transcend the oppressive politics against religious communities of contemporary Tajikistan. Through a close encounter with nostalgia, historical narratives, ritual, and embodied practices, Gatling shows how Tajik Sufis associate their faith and practice with the religious and expressive traditions of Central Asian Islam. Gatling explains this relationship through an investigation of different eras and conceptualizations: the Persian sacred past, the paradoxical present, and the Soviet era. By observing how the Sufis think, act, and negotiate their world, Gatling offers new insight into how Sufis in Tajikistan construct their identity as Muslims in contemporary Central Asia.

The in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in Tajikistan enables Gatling to go beyond classical theoretical frameworks of James Scott's "hidden transcript" and Alexei Yurchak's "performative masks," and illustrate that the persistence of the Sufi past in the present is "media for action" (16). In other words, he shows that Sufi narratives are not simply an act of resistance, but a way to shape the Sufi experiences of the present. By exploring the

relationship between Sufi's expressive forms and politics, and their agency over the state's homogenizing narratives, the author indicates how tradition provides "agency's grammar" that "enabled forms of life that transcended the state and the lurking presence of its security apparatus" (15).

The book contains an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. Most of Gatling's writing relies on first-hand sources and original research data. He meticulously examines the works of Tajik Sufi books as "material communication" and how these books "materialized sainthood" and "carried with them special traces of saintly power" (17). Further, Gatling asserts that the textual artifacts of Tajik Islam are not limited to printed forms, but they circulate within the boundaries of oral performances. Gatling also elaborates on *zikir* (remembrance), a contemplative practice generally assigned to followers by their shaykh, whose authority in providing the *zikir* extends back to the prophet through an unbroken initiatory chain. His ethnographic data shows that while, according to this norm of practice, *zikir* cannot be composed in the present time, there are frequent uses of recently composed poetries during the *zikir* ritual events. This finding paves the path to new research about the complex relationship between the assigned *zikir* formulae, the practitioners, the shaykhs (Sufi masters), and authoritative Sufi pasts.

Gatling's methodology of ethnography of the Sufis in Tajikistan can be helpful for scholars who aim at working on Sufi communities from a different perspective than the prevalent Sufi studies frameworks. He offers reflections on defining the spatial and temporal boundar-

ies of his study and emphasizes the roles of hagiographies, prayer manuals, and other Sufi texts along with interviews and participation as the primary sources of data in studying and understanding Sufism in Tajikistan. Gatling's approach in understanding Sufi life differs from the enigmas of "transcendent reality" and "Sufi knowledge," which "only exists within the context of an initiate's ongoing relationship with a pir" (8). This approach enables the author to expand his research to include religious life among the Sufis instead of concentrating exclusively on "Tajik Islam."

Concerning the terminology used in the book, Gatling collects various Tajik terms such as *ahli tariqat* (people of the path), *tariqati* (of the path), *tasavvufi* (people of Sufism) and translates all of them as "Sufi" without commenting on the differences between their literal meanings (9). While it looks justifiable to use the term "Sufism" in its broad sense in western scholarship for convenience, it fails to depict the historical debate over its use when referring to the followers of the Sufi path indifferently. Moreover, his ethnography shows that the term Sufi is seldomly used by the followers in Tajikistan in describing themselves and their practice. Additional information about the differences between the variety of terms used by Tajik Sufis in self-description could have added great insights into the religious, social, and political reasons behind the followers' reluctance in using the term.

Gatling's book can be read in conversation with *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* by Karen Ruffle and *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discours-*

es in Modern Shi'i Islam by Kamran Scott Aghaie. These books use an ethnographic lens in studying the socio-religious roles of women within the minority Shi'i groups and challenge the patriarchal narratives that present men as religious figures. Readers will benefit from the comparison between different ethnographic methodologies among minority groups and find other perspectives in further studying Sufism in Tajikistan.

Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan contributes significantly to the scholarship of Sufism, even though it could have had benefitted more from engagement with other Sufi Studies. Gatling offers a rich and a new perspective in the studies of Islam in Tajikistan. His study provides a broader picture of Islam in everyday life and recent history instead of merely focusing on the concept of Islamic revival in the post-Soviet Union era and the rise of fundamentalism, which are predominantly the main subjects of many studies on Tajikistan. In closing, *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan* is a precious contribution in the field of Islamic and religious studies. Gatling's multilayered study of Sufism in Tajikistan combining ethnography with nuanced theoretical discussions is also a great addition to the fields of folklore, Central Asian studies, and cultural studies. The book is both engaging and accessible, and an excellent resource for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

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Craving Supernatural Creatures: German Fairy-Tale Figures in American Pop Culture. By Claudia Schwabe. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. 293 pages, notes, index.

In Charles Perrault's 1697 rendition of the Little Red Riding Hood story, "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge," a young girl is greedily devoured by a hungry, beastly wolf. In the 2005 film *Hoodwinked!* (directed by Corey Edwards), the wolf becomes an investigative reporter and works both against and with Little Red Riding Hood to solve a case of theft and deception. The two tales, recognizable in their shared elements of wolves, red-capped girls, and grandmotherly disguises, diverge widely in their interpretation of characters. Both, however, are grounded in moral lessons. Both tales also rely on a sense of the uncanny to establish their narratives and connect the audience to the characters. That uncanniness, the sense of being unfamiliar or perhaps not quite at home, can be as dizzying as trying to compare Perrault's literary rendition of the red-cap tale (ATU 333) with a 2005 children's animated feature film, but in *Craving Supernatural Creatures*, Claudia Schwabe uses that head-spinning and unsettling dissonance to reconcile the oral and literary stories of the past with their popular culture interpretations of the present. Primarily, Schwabe is concerned with the way contemporary renditions of fairy-tale narratives rehabilitate and humanize the monstrous or villainous characters in the stories. She explores how "North American media culture takes the uncanny or *unheimlich* fairy-tale figures of German fairy-tale tradition...and recasts

them as *heimlich* creatures that appear familiar” (21). Through the process of reimagining, Schwabe asserts, American pop culture reframes the stories to topple accepted moral interpretations and offer something fresh in ways that highlight the characters’ personal identities and complex emotional states.

In *Craving Supernatural Creatures*, four distinct types receive this makeover from unambiguous villains to fleshed-out characters: automatons, witches, wolves, and dwarfs. To examine these character types, Schwabe primarily draws upon the several versions of the Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, although she also includes other German literary sources such as Goethe and Ludwig Tieck, along with several non-German authors like Perrault and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Schwabe begins with a dissection of the automaton—the quintessential flat character, a soulless being, often programmed by its creator, with no personality of its own, Foundin stories like “The Golem” or Tieck’s *Die Vogelscheuche* (*The Scarecrow*, 1835), the author reframes this figure by comparing it to its contemporary counterparts. The traditional automaton calls up the underlying discomfort of something animate and humanoid, yet without the moral and spiritual endowments that supposedly guide humanity. Connected to contemporary renditions of pop culture golems such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), automaton figures are imbued with purpose and emotional depth in ways that evoke deep sympathy from the audience. Schwabe also points out that even through this imaginative rehabilitation, tensions over doppelgangers and artificial humans linger, and

she cites the chilling fears found in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) that arise again in films like the 1975 *The Stepford Wives* and its 2004 remake.

In Chapter Two, Schwabe turns her attention to the witches and evil queens of Grimm and Disney. Specifically, she explores the tale of “Shcneewittchen” (“Snow White”) with an eye toward the 1937 Disney film interpretation. The German tale places a dark emphasis on pubescent transformation, cannibalistic rituals, and the brutal final punishment of the antagonist, which sits in sharp contrast to Disney’s muted rendition of these themes. The Queen’s death in Disney’s film, for example, is meted out by nature rather than enforced by a sinister human justice of dancing to death in red-hot iron shoes before an assembled crowd. From the seeds of these differences, tendrils of rehabilitative imagination transform the Wicked Queen and other fairy tale witches into sympathetic characters, with even the Disney version finding redemption in the *Once Upon a Time* television series (2011-2018). Schwabe notes that in other recent media the character may be portrayed as evil, as in Michael Cohn’s *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997) and Rupert Sanders’s *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), or comical, as in Tarsem Singh’s *Mirror Mirror* (2012), but all renditions seek to flesh out her motivations and background, humanizing her magic beyond mere sorcerous vanity and dealing with questions of motherhood or family politics.

Chapters Three and Four turn toward the monstrous body, and focus on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and on the stock characters of dwarfs (sometimes “dwarves”) in German lore and contem-

porary American pop culture. Schwabe points out that the sexualization of the story—clearly present in Perrault’s concluding moral—became muted in the Grimm version, only to be resurrected in tales like Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” (1979) and Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods* (1986). She makes some strange leaps at times, at one point asserting that Red Riding Hood is “primarily a male creation and projection” only a few pages after pointing out that the Grimm brothers received their version of the tale from sisters Jeanette and Marie Hassenpflug (171). She also contends with the Freudian lens and the lasting legacy of Bettelheim’s reading of the tale as one of father figures and castration, but manages to reposition the discussion as one about the intrusion of the “wild” onto the “home” rather than any strict parental fantasies. Schwabe shows how later refigurings of the wolf character emphasize the feelings of control and release, using the key sidekick in the television series *Grimm* (2011–2017)—a werewolf named Monroe who essentially adopts a “reformed” lifestyle because of the stories *he* grew up with of Grimm descendants hunting his kind (178–79).

While wolf characters reveal an inner struggle with the wild, dwarfs, for Schwabe, are far more about outer layers of diversity. She elucidates the ways that dwarfs in pre-twentieth-century fairy tales often are stripped of individuality, and even the term “dwarf” can be interchangeable with other creatures such as elves or gnomes. The dehumanization of different-bodied persons makes them uniformly comical, dangerous, or undesirable, and traits such as greed and

lechery (or conversely complete sexlessness) override any sense of personality. Contemporary dwarfs in pop culture, ranging from the seven in Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to those in Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* films, all work to create strongly differentiated bodies and characters. Some narratives dispense with the dwarf entirely, instead focusing exclusively on the differentiation, as in Joe Nussbaum’s *Sydney White* (2007) which reimagines the dwarfs as “seven dorks” with traits that map onto Disney’s characters. In addition, Schwabe spends a good bit of time looking at one well-defined dwarfish character: Rumpelstiltskin. She follows him into television’s *Once Upon a Time* through the character of Mr. Gold, who lives with a disability that sets him apart bodily and marks him as a dwarf type, even though he plays a number of different roles ranging from the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* to the Crocodile from *Peter Pan*.

Throughout her work, Schwabe sees the struggles of the monstrous “Other” in contemporary retellings as a way of dealing with contemporary issues. Audiences seek redemption for the Other, even when they are also villainous, because the emphasis on individuality and heterogeneity also ask for “increased mutual tolerance” and an “acceptance of differences” (293). She looks to the critiques of modern fairy tale adaptations of Jack Zipes without embracing some of his more cynical points about modernized tellings and draws upon fairy tale scholars like Maria Tatar and Cristina Bacchilega to augment and expand her interpretations of the villainous witches and wolves. Importantly, Schwabe also looks to the audiences of these narratives

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to support her points. She incorporates digital culture through viewer responses in online forums and even notes how players of video games like Disney's *Kingdom Hearts* often embrace the monsters and villains more fully than the heroes. The interpretive process, she says, is one that makes space for the monsters in our world, one that offers young children glamorized *Monster High* or movies like Disney's *Descendants* (2015) as a way to embrace marginalized identities, such as disabled bodies or LGBTQ orientations. When we redeem the monsters, Schwabe shows, they can help redeem us.

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