



INTRODUCTION

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In the introduction of *American Borders: Inclusion and Exclusion in US Culture* (2023), Paula Barba Guerrero and Mónica Fernández Jiménez draw from the fields of space studies and cultural geography in order to trace a theoretical genealogy of how our understanding of borders has moved from that of a physical demarcation or a tangible frontier to a more complex strategy of sociopolitical exclusion—one that marks, albeit in less obvious or visible ways, certain bodies as unbelonging or separate from the nation on the basis of racial and ethnic difference. The whole volume describes how American national ideals are partially constructed and sustained by dynamics of exclusion that position racialized communities as disposable, undesirable and Other, and they characterize “[a]nti-Black violence” and dispossession as one of these “structures of control” (5) that are both foundational to and ever-present in American life.

This special dossier is concerned with the ways in which these social, political and cultural boundaries pierce African American bodies and experiences, often casting them through false binaries as supposedly inhuman, uncivilized or primitive in comparison to their (perceived) white counterparts. The articles included in this issue aim to subvert these forms of “bestialization and thingification” (Jackson 2020, 13), turning towards literature, music, history and cultural production as sites from where to contest or even rewrite these stereotypes. In this way, the six essays that make up “The Boundaries of US Identity and the African American Experience” deal with not only historical, audiovisual and narrative representations of Blackness and its relationship with Americanness, but also the invisible borders that surround them.

Benjamin T. Lynerd opens this special dossier with an article titled “Early Black Nationalism and Its Moral Demands,” where he examines, through nineteenth-century writings, the demands of Black nationalist projects of the era and how these movements used different rhetorical and political strategies to reclaim Black personhood and communal freedom. Drawing from the history of the Haitian Revolution, the popularization of religious narratives of “exodus” within racialized activist spaces and the founding of the American Colonization Society as part of a complex historical context, Lynerd renders visible the similarities and differences of the different Black nationalist movements of this period—emphasizing the era as a political “awakening” in the face of racial domination. He brilliantly closes the article by connecting the moral duties and expectations of early Black nationalism with more contemporary rhetorics of “wokeness,” lamenting

how the current use of the term seems to ignore and even erase the history of Black liberation within the United States.

The special dossier continues with Sergio García Jiménez's "Racial Borders and Supernatural Fears in Little Marvin's *Them: The Scare* (2024)." In his essay, García Jiménez explores how the everyday violence associated with inhabiting a Black body might be represented through horror and through an audiovisual piece such as the second installment of the television series *Them*. García Jiménez showcases how horror and the supernatural reinterpret, through alternative genre conventions, the weight of a white supremacist system over racialized bodies; insisting on how constant institutional surveillance serves as a way to inflict harm over Black communities. By arguing for the possibility of understanding storytelling as a tool of social and political transformation, the article positions *Them: The Scare* as a site of cultural resistance that deliberately question exactly what kinds of bodies are seen as monstrous.

We move from horror to the post-apocalyptic with Nicholas Sumares's "What is Discovered in the Post-Black Wasteland? Black Agency and Identity in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*." In the article, Sumares draws from affect theory to inspect the characterization of the novel's protagonist, Mark Spitz, in a supposedly post-racial zombie narrative, while also contributing to larger discussions of whether Whitehead's work can be categorized as "post-Black." Sumares interrogates the affective expectations placed upon Spitz, highlighting the racial stereotypes that pierce the lives of African American men and insisting on the difficulties of reclaiming one's agency in the face of dehumanization and Otherization.

In fourth place, Daniel Domingo Gómez examines the history and documentation of work songs by enslaved people in "Work Songs in the Memories of Formerly Enslaved Individuals: Testimonies from the Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers' Project (1936–1938)." Domingo Gómez draws from oral history scholarship to examine how interviewers' biases, precarity and racial inequality impacted how musical practices of formerly enslaved people were archived and studied during the mid-twentieth century. While noting the limitations of the Federal Writers' Project, he also insists on the ways in which its interviews shed light over both how memories of slavery were passed down and, thus, protected, through generations, and how music can be understood as a communal practice that fosters solidarity and mutual care. Domingo Gómez's work, then, positions the retrieval of musical production as a form of protecting individual and cultural history in the face of historical erasure.

Afterwards, Martina Lombardo focuses on the boundaries that separated those considered American subjects and those deemed as Other in her article "Blurring the Boundaries. Rethinking "Americanness" in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*." Looking at Bennett's work as being in conversation with "Great American Novel," Lombardo closely inspects how the main characters of *The Vanishing Half* move through gendered and racial

boundaries, emphasizing not only the porous and artificial nature of these borders, but also, how they are built upon—and serve to maintain—the marginalization of Black women. In her analysis, Lombardo points out how antiblackness and racial violence are enacted and perpetuated through different generations, weaving history, narrative and performativity closely together.

Finally, Frances Rowbottom closes this special dossier with her essay “Breaking Out of the Ring: Blackness in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*.” Borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois’ metaphor of the “color-line,” she argues for the figure of the “circle” or the “ring” as representative of racial delimitations and boundaries within the novel. Through this alternative geometry, Rowbottom explores issues of passing, identity and racial ambiguity in the 1930s South, paying particular attention to the character of Joe Christmas and the violence he both carries out and is subjected to—echoing the themes of belonging, liminality and systemic violence that permeate many of the articles contained in this special issue.

WORKS CITED

- Barba Guerrero, Paula, and Mónica Fernández Jiménez. 2023. “Introduction: Beyond Borders—Inclusion and Exclusion in American Culture.” In *American Borders: Inclusion and Exclusion in US Culture*, edited by Paula Barba Guerrero and Mónica Fernández Jiménez. Palgrave Macmillan.
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