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"I, Too, Was Liege to Rainbows": Hart Crane's "The Dance" and Breaking the Mirror's Pledge

In "Legend," the introductory poem of his first and only book of lyrics called White Buildings, Hart Crane likens the self-destructive thrust of his desire upon a figure of "the moth" drawn to "the still / Imploring flame." Characteristic of Crane who tries to activate in the image of narcissistic specularity ("As silent as a mirror is believed") a densely-packed cluster of metaphorical associations, the moth in the poem is incinerated by fire and turned into "white falling flakes," whose flickering trajectory is then superimposed upon an ecstatic quiver of the lovers' kisses—another version of the moth's suicidal plunge into the flame as the most rewarding experience: "And tremorous / In the white falling flakes / Kisses are,—/ The only worth all granting." Besides introducing an exemplary emblem for a Liebestod which is a quintessential motif of Crane's poetry ("Again the smoking souvenir, / Bleeding eidolon!") (3), a narcissistic figure of the poet looking at his mirror image dissolving into the white, snowy fragments has served to perpetuate the famous association of Crane with whiteness and narcissism.¹ Alongside the "white falling flakes" in "Legend," a series of tropes evocative of both whiteness and self-reflexivity can be found throughout his oeuvre, including the beauty of his own poetic constructions (like "white buildings" of New York skyscrapers glittering in the sunlight) to a wide range of figurative whiteness from a meta-poetic tabula rasa to an ecstatic vision of the sexual-textual dissemination of the poet's corpus. Harking back to Stéphane Mallarmé’s la page blanche, Crane's heavy use of whiteness points toward the poet's inability to inscribe anything but a fixed attention to his own narcissistic

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self-consciousness. For all the close link between his poetry and self-reflexive whiteness, however, Crane should be remembered also as a poet who, during the brief period of his productive life, consistently expressed the longing for an intimate relation with the world. Despite its difficult diction, Crane’s poems stand as a testimony to the poet’s creative struggle in which he was engaged in exploring relational possibilities of narcissism by negotiating such racial categories as “blackness” and “redness.”

This essay examines the challenges involved in Crane’s project to reimagine narcissism as a connective medium by looking at “The Dance,” a section of “Powhatan’s Daughter” in The Bridge. “The Dance” introduces Crane envisioning the white speaker’s homoerotic union with an Indian chief, who is supposed to be, in Crane’s racial fantasy, in possession of the key to recover an intimate communion with the American soil. As many critics point out (often critically), however, the Native American in “The Dance” seems to be nothing more than a stereotype of “the Indian,” which is arbitrarily concocted from several different tribes plus the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. Furthermore, the Indian chief is divested of his “redskin” to be appropriated by the white speaker whose interest lies, to use Crane’s problematic phrasing, in “possessing the Indian and his world as a cultural factor.” But if we take a closer look at the sacrificial process where Crane tries to “become identified with the Indian” (347) who burns at the stake, it turns out to be the speaker himself who, overwhelmed by masochistic pleasure-pain, willingly sheds his “white”-skin to dissolve into the other. In so doing, Crane undoes the very opposition between the white speaker as an aggressive invader and the Indian chief as a marginalized object to be appropriated.

In the course of reading “The Dance” and by focusing on Crane’s “inaccurate” representation of Native Americans, I propose that there is a case for taking “The Dance” out of its recent critical disregard and placing the poem within a broader context concerning Crane’s reformulation of narcissistic subjectivity. Diverging from the traditional meaning of narcissism as excessive love of one’s self which aims to reduce the other-as-difference to the mirror-like sameness, the narcissistic twinning between the white speaker and the Indian displays an alternative possibility of narcissism in which the very concept of the difference with the other becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of one’s subjectivity. Paralleled with Leo Bersani’s provocative reconceptualization of the Freudian narcissism, “The Dance” would offer a unique insight into the ways in which Crane expands his
narcissistic mode of projecting the other not to annihilate its otherness but to carry it into what Bersani calls an "impersonal" relational field where the poet could transform his narcissism into "a precondition for love of the other" (72).

1. "Love" as a "White, Pervasive Paradigm" : Crane as a White Narcissist

While Crane's view of his poetry as a medium for relating to marginalized others informs some pieces in White Buildings, it can be The Bridge that presents the poet dealing most fully with his epic ambition for synthesizing diverse cultures and voices of America by connecting with the racially marginalized peoples as African Americans and Native Americans. As Edward Brunner argues, in "The River," another section constituting "Powhatan's Daughter," Crane represents "a host of multihued black, brown, and sepia faces moving together" in their "revolutionary urge to break free of constraint, to escape from bondage" (193–94). In a similar vein, Daniel Gabriel remarks that "The River" presents Crane's sympathetic treatment of "the hoboes and the spirit of the Native American." By emphasizing the poem's "indigenous element," Gabriel claims "The River" as "the most democratic in spirit" of "all the sections of The Bridge" (96). As for "The Dance," Crane's visionary power to imagine the world where Native Americans are "spiritually wed to the physical nature of their land" has been recently praised by John T. Irwin who maintains that Crane's view of an American future represented in "The Dance" is "not romantically boisterous and naïve but unavoidably realistic" (xii).

Despite Crane's "democratic" project of urging various outcasts to reimagine themselves as one "tribal" community, undeniable is the fact that Crane, like other white modernists, was subject to then dominant and still contentious biases against Native Americans. Reading a series of letters in which Crane comments on "The Dance," we notice the poet's denial of the enormous variety of cultural differences among Native American tribes. Pocahontas, for instance, is recast as an Earthmother symbolizing "the physical body of the continent, or the soil" (345). Unfortunately, moreover, Crane applauds himself in a letter to his patron Otto Kahn that he "really succeeded in getting under the skin of this glorious and dying animal, in terms of expression, in symbols, which he himself would comprehend" (347). As Brian Reed observes, indeed, we find in The Bridge Crane's "disquieting, uncritical embrace of U.S. racial myths" (139). Seeing Crane praising himself for becoming this "glorious and dying animal," we could not help being
uncomfortable with his susceptibility to "the sympathy of romantic racism," which is, as Aldon Lynn Nielsen observes, "the sign post of modernism's discourse on the nonwhite" (21).

As suggested by Crane's passionate apostrophe in the finale of The Bridge for "Love" as "white, pervasive Paradigm" (which is "translating time / Into what multitudinous Verb") (73), a series of thematic strands in The Bridge can be eventually subsumed into "Love," a possibility of intimate connectedness between the poet and the world. Reminiscent of the close affinity between Crane's use of whiteness and the narcissistic self-reflexivity, however, the "Love" in The Bridge is imagined as an all-subsuming, transhistorical "Verb" which would project nothing but a desired image of the poet's own artistic construction ("O arching strands of song!") (72). This can partly hold true to "The Dance," where the longing for embracing the Indian might be Crane's self-serving reduction of the other to his ideal self-image, which could transport him into an intimate communion with the archetypal body of America.

2. "Before It Is Over"?: Crane's "Imperialist Nostalgia"

In a letter to Otto Kahn, Crane comments on his intension and thematic substance of "The Dance" as follows:

Here one is on the pure mythical and smoky soil at last! Not only do I describe the conflict between the two races in this dance---I also become identified with the Indian and his world before it is over, which is the only method possible of ever really possessing the Indian and his world as a cultural factor. I think I really succeed in getting under the skin of this glorious and dying animal, and in terms of expression, in symbols, which he himself would comprehend. Pocahontas (the continent) is the common basis of our meeting, she survives the extinction of the Indian, who finally, after being assumed into the elements of nature (as he understood them) persists only as a kind of "eye" in the sky, or as a star that hangs between day and night—"the twilight's dim perpetual throne." (347)

Given Crane's drive in The Bridge to mediate the "iron dealt cleavage" (43) that separates the poet from the intimate relation with the American soil, it is no wonder that in "The Dance" he sought to negotiate "the conflict between the two
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races," supposedly, the strife between Euro-American colonizers and Native Americans. When reading the poem, however, we find Crane’s reference to "the conflict between the two races" more than disorienting. Whereas the word "conflict" signifies a state of strife between opposed sides of nearly equal strength, such a suspended power relation between whites and indigenous peoples is barely noticeable throughout the poem. On the contrary, the Native Americans are transfigured into "the Indian" inhabiting the "pure mythical and smoky soil." Far from the actual Native Americans containing a constantly changing identity of specific groups with distinct, ethnic traditions, the Indian in "The Dance" is an invented revenant summoned back by Crane from the imagined state of "the extinction."

From the very outset of the poem where Crane evokes the speaker's "blood remembering its first invasion of her secrecy, its first encounters with her kin, her chieftain lover...his shade that haunts lakes and hills" (45), the specific individuality of the Indian lovers is robbed by the white speaker's universalizing gaze:

The swift red flesh, a winter king—
Who squired the glacier woman down the sky?
She ran the neighing canyons all the spring;
She spouted arms; she rose with maize— to die. (45)

Just as Pocahontas is transformed in the memory of the speaker's "blood" into a fertility goddess, so the male escort (who "squired" Pocahontas) is turned into an abstract "winter king." His corporeal characteristics are ruthlessly reduced to a monotonous "[s]wift red flesh," which would represent nothing but a then widespread image of the "redskin" primitive. In accordance to the intention outlined in the marginal notes ("your blood remembering its first invasion of her secrecy"), Crane employs traditional high diction in the iambic-based quatrains, whose artificial tonality could not sound more effectively for evoking the Euro-Americans'self-defensive "invasion" of the American soil: "There was a bed of leaves, and broken play; / There was a veil upon you, Pocahontas, bride—/ O Princess whose brown lap was virgin May" (45). Rather than addressing "the conflict between the two races," Crane represents in fact a psychological drama of the self-centered, appropriative white speaker. As he writes in a letter to Yvor
Winters, Crane tries to assimilate “the currency of Indian symbolism” (288) into his own cultural repository where the otherness of the historical Pocahontas can be domesticated and absorbed into the benign figure of “Virgin May” (punning on Virgin Mary). Even in the passage suggestive of Crane’s white guilt for interrupting the lovers’ flirtation (“There was a bed of leaves, and broken play”), it may not be hard to notice his reparative impulse operating mainly to romanticize and thereby sublimate the particular guilt for the “invasion” into a universal lamentation for the loss of the Eden-like “primitive” felicity, in which the actual cruelty of the white invaders could be magically deemphasized.

Crane’s project in “The Dance” surely has a reclamatory aspect in which he attempts to rescue the “dying” state (so he presupposed) of Native Americans and restore their cultural inheritance into a binding symbol of the American nation. However, “The Dance” brings to sharp relief Crane’s version of “imperialist nostalgia” (Renato Rosaldo) where he conjures up the ghosts of the Indians and relegates them again into the immemorial past so that he could eulogize and perpetuate their state as the “glorious and dying animal”:

Mythical brows we saw retiring — loth,
Disturbed and destined, into denser green.
Greeting they sped us, on the arrow’s oath:
Now lie incorrigibly what years between . . . (45)

As Gordon A. Tapper argues, the Indians’ “greeting” which is sent “on the arrow’s oath” encourages us to note that Crane’s “involuted syntax and elided prepositions” produces “the ambiguity as to whether they are welcoming or fleeting us, or whether in fact we are fleeting them” (126). Seen from a different perspective, however, what is “incorrigibly” established in the above passage is the marginalized role of “the Indian” as a humiliated outcast (“Disturbed and destined, into denser green”), whose “oath” is sent only to be broken, leaving “years” of irreconcilable cleavage “between the two races.” By claiming the ambiguous status of the Native Americans in “The Dance” as Crane’s version of “The Primitive,” a “complex mixture of an idealizing universalism and a skeptical relativism” (102), Tapper observes that “the Indian” remains as Crane’s “extremely elusive, mercurial object of desire” (128). Differently put, however, what is “extremely elusive” and “mercurial” is not the represented figure of the Indians per se but the poet’s
narcissistic subjectivity, which is driven, as I address below, by a self-satisfying impulse to simultaneously expand itself and consolidate its boundary by reducing the otherness of the Indians to the familiar “Mythical brows” and expelling it into the distant periphery (“denser green”).

A motif of a wandering in the foreign lands would not be a more appropriate setting for The Bridge with which Crane provides an encyclopedic capacity to appropriate a vast field of cultural references. Nevertheless, the process of exploration, started by the speaker leaving behind the public sphere (“the village”) as well as the collective pronoun (“we”), starts revolving within a tightly closed or closeted domain called “cobalt desert closures” (48), in which “the currency of Indian symbolism” can be utilized as a prop for furthering the poet’s narcissistic exultation:

I left the village for dogwood. By the canoe
Tugging below the mill-race, I could see
Your hair’s keen crescent running, and the blue
First moth of evening take wing stealthily.

What laughing chains the water wove and threw!
I learned to catch the trout’s moon whisper; I
Drifted how many hours I never knew,
But, watching, saw that fleet young crescent die,—(46)

Rather than involving a threatening experience of the unknowable which would force us to cast away the conventional mode of perceiving the world, the realm of the Indian chief is represented as the recognizably “mysterious” land which is never beyond the widespread stereotype of “the Indian” as a nature worshipper who could access the esoteric knowledge of nature: “What laughing chains the water wove and threw! / I learned to catch the trout’s moon whisper.” This passage initiates the speaker’s narcissistic merger with his shadow-like twin, the Indian chief (whose “shade . . . haunts lakes and hills”) through whose perspective the speaker imagines himself reclaiming a sense of communion with the elements surrounding him. Beautiful and memorable as Crane’s synaesthetic phrasing may sound, the lesson the speaker “learned” (“the trout’s moon whisper”) betrays Crane’s narcissistic investment in the Indian in whose stereotypically shamanic
figure Crane sees his self-image as a Rimbaudian *voyant*, whose poetic expertise includes the notorious "logic of metaphors" or, in Lee Edelman's words, "the radical mixing of metaphors . . . improper naming of objects or actions that lack proper names of their own" (7–8).

Reading the first phase of "The Dance," we perceive Crane's longing for a boundless expansion of his ego in such passages as "I / Drifted how many hours I never knew," "I took the portage climb, then chose / A further valley-shed; I could not stop," or "O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge" (46). At the same time, however, the motif of narcissistic self-reflexivity comes to be more than suggestive as he goes on a river-journey where the speaker envisions the figure of Pocahontas scattering into a series of fragmentary images reflected on the mirrors of "lakes" and "mill-race" ("By the canoe / Tugging below the mill-race, I could see / Your hair's keen crescent running"). Increasingly, Crane's quest for "the Indian" comes to reveal the specular nature of the poet's desire, which tends to satisfy itself by obliterating the otherness of the world.

In addressing the inseparability between the self-defensive aggression toward the other and the "extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment" that Freud discussed in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Bersani regards "Freud's most profound originality" as Freud's recognition that in the narcissistic mode of aggression "the sexualizing of the ego is identical to the shattering of the ego" (66). Bersani's recapitulation of Freudian theory would be helpful in thinking about dilemmas Crane might have confronted in appropriating the Indian in "The Dance." Crane acts in the first phase of the poem as an omnipotent explorer of the Indian's territory ("Over how many bluffs, tarns, streams I sped!") (46). When trying to unite with the Indian dancing ecstatically, however, the speaker finds his appropriative subjectivity yielding to the destructive desire for self-annihilation.

3. "Lie to us," "Medicine-man": Wrapped—Rapt - in a
Disenchanting Awareness

As the speaker finally faces the object of his quest, the Indian chief dancing in the thunder cloud which signals the coming of the spring ("A distant cloud, a thunder-bud—it grew"), he notes that the "rhythm" of the Indian's dance "[s]iphoned the black pool from the heart's hot root!" (46). Given Crane's choice of a trope for narcissistic specularity ("black pool") along with the pun on his own
genital ("the heart's [Hart's] hot root"), it may not be difficult to imagine the poet transferring here his homoerotic desire onto the "black pool" churned by the tumultuous steps of the Indian chieftain called Maquokeeta (whose attributes are conspicuously phallic ones):

A cyclone threshes in the turbine crest,
Swooping in eagle feathers down your back;
Know, Maquokeeta, greeting; know death's best;
—Fall, Sachem, strictly as the tamarack!

A birch kneels. All her whistling fingers fly.
The oak grove circles in a crash of leaves;
The long moan of a dance is in the sky.
Dance, Maquokeeta: Pocahontas grieves . . . (46–7)

Subscribing to the myth of the Indians' inevitable ("strict") extinction, Crane represents Maquokeeta as another stereotype of the Indian ("Sachem") who is doomed to share the fate of the trees collapsing in the thunderstorm ("Fall, Sachem, strictly as the tamarack"; "A birch kneels"). In the following scene where the speaker begins to merge with Maquokeeta, however, the very opposition between an appropriative subject and a passive object is collapsed. In surrendering his self-protective subjectivity to the masochistic pleasure-pain in Maquokeeta's dance of death ("know death's best"), the speaker's appropriative gaze is turned back on itself:

And every tendon scurries toward the twangs
Of lightning deltaed down your saber hair.
Now snaps the flint in every tooth; red fangs
And splay tongues thinly busy the blue air . . .

Dance, Maquokeeta! snake that lives before,
That casts his pelt, and lives beyond! Sprout, horn!
Spark, tooth! Medicine-man, relent, restore—
Lie to us, —dance us back the tribal morn! (47)
Rendering Maquokeeta's entranced state, Crane forces the Indian to go through a series of violent aggressions and transfer his spirit to the speaker ("That casts his pelt, and lives beyond!"). Simultaneously, however, the speaker himself sheds his own skin to experience the sacrificial scene for himself. As the speaker's homoerotic desire for dancing with the Indian increases, he starts eroticizing Maquokeeta's body pulsating like a "twang" of arrows, which resonates not only with a stereotype of Indian hunters but also with the eroticizing arrows of Cupid. Accordingly, Crane puts on an act of releasing his authorial control over the ongoing versification. In enacting the erotically charged moment, Crane unfetters his verbal restraint and employs a volley of alliterations in quick tempo ("toward the twangs"; "deltaed down"; "busy the blue") and a neologism ("deltaed") to both aurally and intellectually enchant himself / the reader.

Whereas those passages may imply Crane's irresponsible indulgence in a self-satisfying fantasy, his way of imagining the process of "becoming identified with the Indian" reveals a peculiar quality which is rarely associated with a subject's narcissistic exultation. On the one hand, indeed, Crane seems to be immersed fully in his poetic ideal for redeeming "the tribal morn," which can stand for a primordial state of intimate connectedness with the Indian, who "squired" Pocahontas, a supposed American genius loci. On the other hand, however, Crane simultaneously displays the calm, demystified awareness that such a sympathetic merger with the other must be impossible, for it is nothing more than a "lie" or a poetic fabrication of "Medicine-man." By suspending himself between the seemingly opposed roles of a poet-charmer and an object to be enchanted, Crane allows the speaker at once to be self-conscious about the virtual nature of his narcissistic fantasy and to be enraptured by the self-consuming energy for eroticizing the very scene which might have never taken place except in his imagination.

As we have seen so far, the clichés-laden figure of Native Americans can be considered as an evidence of Crane's vulnerability to the primitivist myth. However, Crane's self-defeating (if not self-critical) manifestation that he is ready to be entranced by the "lie" of "Medicine-man" who is nothing but the poet's narcissistic double encourages us to observe that the "inaccurately" represented figure of the Indian can be a product of Crane's strategy, intended to highlight the fictitious nature of Maquokeeta.

Crane's risky mode of taking Native Americans in his own terms may be linked
to a fundamental project of The Bridge. As Thomas E. Yingling maintains, Crane's modern epic sees the poet struggling to present a "powerful sense of possibility and love (not only in providing a literal cruising place . . . but by offering itself as a symbol for the transformative structure of homoerotic experience as well)" (194). To echo back Yingling, indeed, the homoerotic dance with Maquokeeta can be read as a medium for Crane to access an awareness of an intimate connectedness with the presumed origins of America. In what follows, I argue that Crane's indifference to an "authentic" representation of Native Americans may be served as a means to a particular form of exchanging with the other. For Crane's utopian fantasy of salvaging the buried "tribal" community of various outcasts entails an alternative vision of America in which a number of uprooted, nameless exiles including himself could be united each other in a trans-personal (and trans-generational) comradeship.

4. "I Saw More Escorts Wake": The Sameness with the Other
(yet in Motion)

In the climactic phase of "The Dance," Crane presents the speaker viscerally identifying with Maquokeeta by internalizing the humiliating consciousness of being a conquered object to be shot by a rain of arrows. Casting off the role of the white appropriative observer, the speaker finds himself now "scream[ing] from the stake" with and as Maquokeeta:

Spears and assemblies: black drums thrusting on—
O yelling battlements, - I, too, was liege
To rainbows currying each pulsant bone:
Surpassed the circumstance, danced out the siege!

And buzzard-circleted, screamed from the stake;
I could not pick the arrows from my side.
Wrapped in that fire, I saw more escorts wake—
Flickering, sprint up the hill groins like a tide. (47)

The speaker's oath of allegiance to the suffering of Maquokeeta manifests Crane's willingness to be the anguished /enraptured Indian, whose body is synaesthetically
captured as being skewered with “rainbows” (punning on the rain of arrows). Just as the Indians represented in the earlier phase “greet[ed]” the whites only to be betrayed, so the speaker as another “dying animal” exposes his naked “side” and gratuitously offers himself as a sacrifice, who “[s]urpassed the circumstance, danced out the siege.” We see clearly in the above passage the speaker’s desire for going beyond the boundary of his ego by means of the self-consuming energy of the dance.

Given Bersani’s observation about the suicidal tendency inherent in Freudian narcissism, that is, the compatibility between the ego’s project of mastering the world-as-difference and its self-shattering impulse, we might be tempted to take the speaker’s drive for transcending his recognizable individuality to fuse into the other as a sort of narcissistic exaltation, which would be, according to Bersani’s account, followed by a subject’s self-annihilation. However, Crane’s narcissistic doubling distinguishes itself from the specular replication of a self-image defined as a stable pairing of selfsame terms. For, in the very moment of uniting with Maquokeeta, Crane’s doubling activity takes the form of the subject’s tumultuous multiplication in which he sees through a spectrum of the pluralized “rainbows” an ever-shifting, prismatic assemblage of his inexactly duplicated self-images.

Overwhelmed by the phantasmatic vision of a “tribal” community (“Spears and assemblies”), each of the speaker’s “bone” or the essential basis of his subjectivity upon which his narcissistic twining with Maquokeeta is grounded is “curr[ed]” or re-arranged by those transporting “rainbows” into a promiscuous assemblage of anonymous “escorts” that are “wak[ing]” to compel the speaker toward the periphery of his subjectivity (“Wrapped in that fire, I saw more escorts wake—/ Flickering, sprint up the hill groins like a tide”). As the phrase “more escorts” implies, Crane identifies the speaker / Maquokeeta (who “squired” Pocahontas in the first stanza) with another member of those “escorts” each of whose individual personality remains unspecifiable. Crane’s imaginary affiliation to those “tribal” “escorts” is then modulated into the process of ecdysis in which the recognizable character of the speaker is further deemphasized to an extent that a sense of intimacy not only with Maquokeeta alone but with a number of the trans-personal, sexually promiscuous companies comes to preside:

O, like the lizard in the furious noon,  
That drops his legs and colors in the sun,
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—And laughs, pure serpent, Time itself, and moon
Of his own fate, I saw thy change begun!

And saw thee dive to kiss that destiny
Like one white meteor, sacrosanct and blent
At last with all that's consummate and free
There, where the first and last gods keep thy tent. (47)

Enacting Maquokeeta's sacrificial death and subsequent transformation, Crane does not show any interest in elaborating his individual distinction. Rather, Maquokeeta is transfigured into a highly abstract emblem of "Time itself." Crane encapsulates his desire for impersonal yet intimate communion with the other in an image of the "lizard" that "drops his legs and colors in the sun," demonstrating his indifference to the very attributes ("legs and colors") which would consolidate Maquokeeta's specifiable identity (tribal, sexual, or whatever). In exploring relational possibilities of what he calls "impersonal narcissism," Bersani argues as follows:

If we were able to relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism, what is different about others (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized, or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness. (86)

In the process of transformation, Maquokeeta goes through a series of violent disfigureations in which he is captured as a grotesque composite of "snake," "eagle," "raven" and "stag" ("And stag teeth foam about the raven throat") (47). Resonating with Bersani's description of "impersonal narcissism," however, each distinctive attribute that Maquokeeta assumes is imagined by Crane as, in Bersani's phrase, "the envelope" within which Crane sees Maquokeeta still retaining the "profound part" of his "less fully realized" being ("pure serpent, Time itself, and moon / Of his own fate"). This ouroboros-like "pure serpent" could be taken then as an emblem of the dynamically shifting "sameness" with the speaker's ideal self-image, dwelling in the presence of his imaginary, "tribal" ancestors (and descendants to come), who share what Bersani calls the speaker's "universal singularity" (86) as a disjointed outcast who does not conform to the early 20th
century American normalcy ("Like one white meteor, sacrosanct and blent / At last with all that’s consummate and free / There, where the first and last gods keep thy tent").

5. A Taxi Cruising for Dancers: Endless Rides across "Our Native Clay"

Crane’s indifference to the ethnologically verifiable representation of Native Americans invites us to diverge from the main text for a while and dwell on the poet’s biographical anecdote concerning the Indian’s name Maquokeeta. According to a letter to Waldo Frank, Crane appropriated the name from one of his anonymous friends, a "NY taxi-driver" who claimed "Maquokeeta" as his Indian name (qtd. in Tapper 195). Wondering whether Yvor Winters could "let [him] know the name is 'sufficient' to the role it plays in the poem," Crane consulted Winters (whom Crane considered as an authority on Native Americans) about his employment of the name. Having known that Winters could not verify the specific origin of "Maquokeeta," Crane responded to Winters with apparent relief as follows: "Even if it has no existence as a name it’s quite practical for my purposes, as it certainly sounds Indian enough to apply to a redskin" (qtd. in Tapper 105–106). Bearing the above epistolary exchanges in mind, we can presume again that Crane’s representation of Maquokeeta as an assemblage of the racial clichés seems to have been derived from his determined unwillingness to render Maquokeeta as a fully verifiable figure with a definite personal background. In another letter to Winters, Crane goes on to comment on the unspecifiable provenance of "Maquokeeta":

I think that the Indian chieftain’s name is all the better for not being particularly definite —especially as Pocahontas had a thousand Indian lovers for the one white marriage license to the English planter. I shall continue to depend on taxi drivers for all matters of folklore. (qtd. in Tapper 107)

Far from a mere ignorance or indifference, Crane appears to have believed that the Indian name had better remain unidentifiable (as opposed to "the English planter") while it must simultaneously "sound Indian." What is at stake here is the near-indefinability (or near-authenticity) about the origin of "Maquokeeta." Interestingly, moreover, the "NY taxi driver" Crane talks about in the letter to Frank is, reminiscent of the speaker in "The Dance," pluralized or multiplied in the letter to
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Winters into a number of "taxi drivers," which Crane seems to associate with the homoerotic community of Pocahontas's "escorts" ("a thousand Indian lovers"). In this context, Crane's decision not to assign an ethnological traceability to the origin of the very subject he chose to "become identified with" can be regarded as a maneuver, designed to keep open the possibility for a fragmentary yet intimate communion with other members of his imaginary "tribe." That is, Maquitoeta must be represented in "The Dance" as an impersonalized figure (to a certain extent) so that he and the speaker could be initiated into a trans-personal community of those "escorts" who share an alternative vision of the native soil called Pocahontas by relaying each other in an ever-expanding network twisting and stretching out in Crane's vision of America.

What links the Indian "escorts" and the "taxi driver(s)" can be found also in the epigraph of "Powhatan's Daughter" which is from A History of Travaile into Virginia by William Strachey. In that epigraph, Pocahontas is described as follows:

—Pocahuntus, a well-featured but wanton yong girl...get the boyes forth with her into the market place, and make them wheele, falling on their hands turning their heels upwards, whom she would followe, and wheele so herself, naked as she was, all the fort over. (38)

Echoing back "The Dance" for sure, along the course of their rapturous transportation "into the market place," not only the individual distinction between those boys but also their distinctions from Pocahontas's would be blurred, since Pocahontas (a "wanton" girl herself) starts imitating those dancing boys and thereby affectively merging into their dance ("whom she would followe, and wheele so herself").

Aside from the close connection between the boys accompanying Pocahontas and the "NY taxi-driver[s]" called "Maquitoeta" (who is observed, like Crane himself, as a "beautiful, rum-drinking, firewater wassailing friend of mine") (qtd. in Tapper 195), both are related to each other in their shared role of an "escort" carrying a vision of Pocahontas / the continent, around and upon whose body they are cruising for a company to ride with and having a temporary yet intimate exchange with each other in a closed space of the vehicle (a taxi / a poem). Through their performance of dancing / transporting ("wheeling," "falling", and "turning" [each act is charged with sexual connotations]) that leads to a communal,
gathering place ("market place"), those "escorts" would yield their distinctive individuality to the shared desire for exchanging more of the same, yet not exactly duplicated images of each other (because in this homoerotic fantasy those "boys" / "lovers" do not have a strict personal individuality for the other to duplicate from).

It is no wonder then that Pocahontas in The Bridge is imagined not as a central object of desire (in "Cape Hatteras" section Crane notoriously calls her "our native clay") (54). For Crane invokes Pocahontas mainly as an intermediary feminine principle to facilitate the speaker’s union not only with Maquoikeeta who shares the speaker’s "universal singularity" but also with the homoerotic "assemblies" of the other "escorts" by whose vertiginous mobility he is carried into the vision of the ecstatic orgy ("Wrapped in that fire, I saw more escorts wake—/ Flickering, sprint up the hill groins like a tide. / I heard the hush of lave wrestling your arms, / And stag teeth foam about the raven throat . . .").

Having transformed Maquoikeeta into an "eye' in the sky" which would "gaze" beyond the whites' violence against "bivouacs of thy angered slain" (48), Crane still regards Maquoikeeta as a noble "escort" ("Prince") who accompanies the speaker into an ever-renewing vision of Pocahontas ("immortal in the maize") (48). With an awareness of the immense correspondences between natural elements, Crane reimagines the "folklore" of "a thousand Indian lovers" of Pocahontas in a vision of the ever-expanding promiscuity reenacted by the flowering process of the American continent where each dancer / natural element can relate to the other without activating any monopolizing interest:

High unto Labrador the sun strikes free
Her speechless dream of snow, and stirred again,
She is the torrent and the singing tree;
And she is virgin to the last of men . . .

West, west and south! Winds over Cumberland
And winds across the Ilano grass resume
Her hair's warm sibilance. Her breasts are fanned
O Stream by slope and vineyard—into bloom! (48)

Compared with the climactic phase of "The Dance" in which the speaker unites with Maquoikeeta and finds himself "scream[ing] from the stake," the poem's
conclusion reads, as Crane admits to Winters, as “anti-climax” (429) in the ways that can demystify the very premise of “Love,” the binding principle of *The Bridge* through which the poet’s subject would open to the world. As Crane himself was well-aware, his ideal of the “tribal” brotherhood might be shared only by “the Indians” of “folklore” inhabiting the poet’s narcissistic fantasy. The concluding stanza thus shows the poet inclining toward a solipsistic monotony:

> We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms,
> In cobalt desert closures made our vows...
> Now is the strong prayer folded in thine arms,
> The serpent with the eagle in the boughs. (48)

Despite the interjunctonal bravado, we see “anti-climax” elements that qualify the speaker’s hyperbolic self-applause for the “brave” performance. Far from reconciling the “conflict between two races,” the dance with Maquokeeta was enacted within a hermatically closed space of Crane’s narcissistic consciousness (“cobalt desert closures”), which isolates the speaker from the public sphere dominated by the Euro-American colonizers’ normative family economy (“we danced beyond their farms”).

The same can be said for the totemic emblem by which Crane concludes the poem (“The serpent with the eagle in the boughs” which is “folded in” the Indian’s “arms”), for its several fold self-enclosures can signify the speaker’s desire for immersing himself solely in his homosexual fantasy. Nevertheless, this emblem should be remembered also as a subtle recapitulation of Crane’s vision of narcissistic relationality which is based on the awareness of the *imperfectly* specular sameness with the other, or to use Bersani’s words once more, a “universal singularity” whose viability one could imagine positively in such a moment as of experiencing a sense of “belonging to a family of singularity without national, ethnic, racial, or gendered borders” (86).

On the one hand, the image of “the serpent with the eagle” (both are unequivocally phallic images) enclosed in “the boughs” and “folded” in the Indian’s “arms” may ensure the poem’s “anti-climax” conclusion which Crane goes on to elaborate as “a gradual decrescendo to a final repose and statement” (429). On the other hand, however, a range of possible meanings and significance offered by this emblem can be too wide and too rich to be pinned down, since it has been shared
over a long period of histories by peoples in different cultural communities. Indeed, this totemic emblem would serve as a mirror which would reflect a self-image of the narcissistic interpreter. Owing to its near-transparency and radical inundation (or privation) of meanings projected there, however, what the emblem signifies constantly changes in the eye of the beholder.

Turning back to Crane's affinity with whiteness, the absence of a unique, individual Native American in "The Dance" can be reconsidered now as a particular sort of whiteness in which the white speaker could envision the process of appropriating the Indian chief to erase his individual personality, who eventually had to "dive to kiss that destiny / Like one white meteor" (47; emphasis added). At the same time, however, its whiteness or the fabricated impersonality of Maquokeeta enables Crane to go on re-viewing the other and himself in its rainbow-like, ever-shifting process of imaginative self-reflection.

By willingly suffusing the poem with the very self-conscious tropes around narcissism that evoke the poet's inability to represent the Indian "accurately" (non-narcissistically), Crane suggests paradoxically a possible way out of his narcissistic appropriation of the otherness of the other. In so doing, the speaker in "The Dance" evades at least the mirror-like narcissism in which a subject tries to master the other as once "the English Planter" would monopolize Pocahontas by the "one white marriage license." Whereas Crane could not break loose from his narcissism, he could make us see an alternative mode of narcissistic gaze, which is fixed on the kinetic image of ever-shifting "rainbows" through whose prismatic passage a figure of the poet's "universal singularity" continues to be multiplied, enacting a non-possessive "wanton" play with the world-as-near-sameness.

Notes

1 Herbert A. Leibowitz observes, for instance, white is the color which "figures centrally" in Crane's poetry (111). For a detailed discussion on Crane's narcissism, see Yingling (48–50) and Irwin (246–47).

2 For a further resemblances of imagery and theme between Crane and Mallarmé, see Irwin (371–83).

3 For an extended study on Crane's "invention" of "the Indian," see Tapper (101–48).

4 For a summary of the critical history of "The Dance," see Tapper (196).
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5 In “Black Tambourine,” for example, Crane deals with a problem of the black man who is imprisoned in a suspended state between the bipolar, and equally romanticized racial stereotypes of African Americans.

6 In a letter to Waldo Frank, Crane writes with a touch of self-derision that “Rimbaud was the last great poet that our civilization will see” (259). As for Crane’s self-affiliation to a group of visionary poets, see a letter to Harriet Monroe where he claims William Blake along with T. S. Eliot as his exemplary precursor (278-83).

7 For a detailed discussion on Crane’s homoerotic treatment of the Indian, see Jared Gardner’s article. By focusing on the racial and sexual identity, Gardner considers “The Dance” as Crane’s poetic enterprise for connecting “the nation’s Indian inheritance with a myth of homosexual origins” (25).

8 Although Crane’s sources for the emblem have not been well-documented, Lawrence Kramer points out a number of inter-textual echoes from other (extra-)literary pieces (52).

Works Cited


