Savage embraces: James Purdy, melodrama, and the narration of identity

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CHAPTER 5

The Unknown Nephew: Transforming the National Symbolic

In *Children Is All*, Purdy draws a scene in which familial and national identities are pitted against each other. The play demonstrates how an investment in the National Symbolic subsumes identification across familial ties, and eventually even erases the possibility for autonomous self-identification, as Edna starts to lose her mind at the end of the play. *The Nephew* (1960), published one year prior to *Children Is All*, explores a similar theme. In this novel, too, we find a mother figure who has been separated from a relative, or more precisely, her nephew. Like Edna in the play, the protagonist of *The Nephew*, Alma Mason, has to redefine her relationship with her nephew in the course of this separation. Despite their similarities, the play and the novel differ from each other on a crucial point. While Edna's relationship with Billy is established through the theme of (mis)reading, Alma's relationship with her nephew is made manifest in the theme of writing: when at the beginning of the novel Alma learns that her nephew has gone missing during the Korean War, she decides to memorialize him in writing.

While the works discussed in previous chapters already show a strong affinity with the theme of writing, embodied mainly by characters such as Eustace Chisholm, Parkhearst Cratty, and Bernie Gladhart, their relationship with identity is nevertheless expressed in the act of reading. Eustace is a struggling poet in Depression-era Chicago. Parkhearst is, similarly, an author who fails to finish any project because he cannot remain focused on his subjects. Still, it is in their guise as readers that the characters raise the questions of identity that Purdy is so interested in. Eustace reads a homosexual identity into Amos's placement in an Oedipal mise-en-scène, Fenton's body language is misread as passive anal desire, and finally Edna, too, misreads her son Billy because his time in prison has changed his appearance to such an extent that he has become unrecognizable for Edna's all too literal reading of him.

Like other characters, *The Nephew*'s Alma is also an "unsuccessful" writer. Unlike Eustace and Parkhearst, Alma is not portrayed as a professional author, but it is her attempt at writing that forms the central action of the novel. In considering Purdy's resistance to narratives of identity, the shift from the act of reading to the act of writing to establish characters' relations to identity production is, I believe,

significant. Writing suggests a different kind of agency than reading, and thus the identity production that is embedded in writing the lives of others is bound to a different dynamic than the identity production that follows the act of reading. Moving from reading to writing, then, allows me to think through Purdy's assessment of identity production from a different perspective, and foreground Purdy's general apprehension of the violence inherent to constructions of social identity. If the act of reading already proved to contain a violent force – either by negating a person's self-identification, as in *Eustace Chisholm*, eliciting violent reactions as we have seen in *63: Dream Palace*, or by letting someone perish because of the fundamental misreading that is part and parcel of every act of reading, just as we saw in *Children Is All* – the act of writing brings into view a different form of identity production. Pausing on the difference between reading and writing in relation to identity production will also help me draw a clearer picture of the ways in which Purdy's protagonists resist the constraints of identity. Edna's tragedy shows us that in Purdy's novels reading is associated with a passivity that violently forces its protagonists to assume a fundamentally misread and socialized identity. *The Nephew*, on the other hand, offers writing as an empowering alternative to reading. Whether the act of writing is successful or not, it nevertheless offers a means to reimagine identifications across familial ties and it helps the protagonists of Purdy's universe redefine their own relationships to the state.

Another significant difference between *Children Is All* and *The Nephew* is their treatment of the tension between individual and social identity: the latter does not enact a struggle of opposing subject positions. Instead, it stages the transformation of the single point-of-view of its main character. While in *Children Is All* national and familial identifications engage in direct confrontation, *The Nephew* leaves no space for any rebuttal against the position of the National Symbolic. If Billy can at least attempt to reclaim his familial identity in the face of Edna's misrecognition, the subject of *The Nephew*, Cliff Mason, is so completely erased from the equation that he does not even appear as a character in the novel. The erasure of his familial identity as Alma's nephew happens without the slightest interference on his part; from the outset of the novel he is already declared missing in action during the Korean War and, later on, is declared dead by US military officials. Still, it is exactly because of his failure to appear that the tension between the necessary erasure of his individual and familial identities and the assertion of the National Symbolic can be acted out.

Just as *Children Is All* is set against the backdrop of Independence Day, *The Nephew* is likewise framed by one of the central public holidays of the American national narrative. The fabula of the novel takes up the space of exactly one year, opening

and closing on Memorial Day. Opening and closing the narrative on the same public holiday, albeit a year apart, places its action between two parentheses. The action of the novel seems to be triggered and find closure by the same event. However, a close look at the different ways in which Memorial Day is described in the opening and closing scenes, and the different ways in which Alma engages with the observance of its rituals, alerts the reader to a fundamental change within the novel's protagonist that has occurred in the course of the novel. Alma's belief in the narratives that constitute the American nation, here represented by Memorial Day, is shaken by her recognition that the sacrifice of her nephew to the National Symbolic also means the erasure of any familial identification that had thus far given her life purpose. Eventually, her relationship with the state, as mediated by her relationship with her nephew, transforms from an identification that is organized by an investment in the National Symbolic based on Puritan values, to a democratic identification that includes the plurality of identifications found in her community.

The symbol that organizes the transformation we witness in Alma also changes its meaning. In my analysis of the novel, I argue that we can liken Alma's writing to the figure of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A significant detail is that the Unknown Soldier of the Korean War was inaugurated at Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day in May 1958, shortly before Purdy started writing *The Nephew* (Powys "Powys to Purdy 41" 71). Drawing on the Unknown Soldier allows Purdy to address his complex relation to the National Symbolic and its myths of "good citizenship", which are represented by this very figure. Since the Unknown Soldier is presented as bereft of ideology, it can function as a screen onto which any identification with the state can be projected (Anderson 17–18; Wittman 9). Whereas *Children Is All* relied on the ideologically charged Independence Day as its background, *The Nephew*'s setting of Memorial Day and its thematization of the Unknown Soldier offer a version of the national narrative that is ideologically much more ambivalent.

Purdy offers us his own version of the National Symbolic by narrating the procedures through which Cliff's missing body takes on the properties of the Unknown Soldier memorial. This process is literally reproduced by Alma's inability to write her memorial to Cliff: the empty pages of which, I argue, result in the production of an entirely new meaning, rather than the failure that previous commentators Bettina Schwarzschild and Stephen Adams have read into it. Yet, besides the pages of Alma's memorial remaining empty, the narrative also gradually strips Cliff of any individuating qualities, which renders his image unidentifiable and universal enough to function as the Unknown Soldier. Not only does his body go literally missing, as "there wasn't enough left of him to ship home" (338), Cliff's biography, too, becomes

lost. Each time Alma discovers something about him that might jeopardize his representation of the ideal citizen, such as his suspected homosexuality or communist sympathies, she lets herself be convinced by her neighbors that these character flaws were not at all manifest in her nephew. As the narrative progresses, Cliff is both stripped of his physical body and of his individuating character traits. In the last section of this chapter, then, I take a closer look at the strategies that are used to transform Cliff into the figure of the Unknown Soldier. It is exactly through these strategies that the novel dramatizes the tension between narratives of individual identity and norms of social identity, which we have seen emerge in *Children Is All*.

Civic Myths and the Cold War

The Nephew is set in the fictional Midwestern town Rainbow Center at the beginning of the Cold War, or more precisely during the Korean War. Here we encounter Alma Mason, a retired out-of-state schoolteacher who learns that her nephew Cliff, who was placed in her custody when his parents died, has gone missing in action in Korea. At first she refuses to face the likelihood of his being killed in combat, but after some coaxing by her neighbors Alma decides to write a memorial in his honor. While trying to write about his life, Alma realizes she knows little to nothing about her nephew. She starts to interview her neighbors, friends, and other acquaintances who have played a part in Cliff's life, and to her consternation realizes that the image she has always had of her nephew is the total opposite of the person he was according to her interlocutors. Instead of being a quiet, family-loving small-town boy, Cliff hated living with his aunt, admired his communist teacher, and was closely associated with a homosexual couple. After learning these details about her nephew, Alma cannot write the memorial and finally abandons the project altogether.

Previous critics have construed Alma's failure to write a memorial to her nephew as establishing her status as a tragic heroine. According to Schwarzschild, Alma is marked by a profound sense of self-sacrifice, a tragic mother figure who continues to love her child despite the cruelty and hardship she must endure, and for whom there is no understanding in her society (41–42). Schwarzschild writes, "had Alma lived in a simpler society, where the old are not useless and unpopular, she would have had no trouble commemorating Cliff. In such a society it is the task of the aged to tell the myths and reveal the secrets of religion and culture to the young" (41). Alma's self-martyrdom prevents her from finishing the memorial, since in Cold War America, there is no patience for such sacrifice. Henry Chupack takes a different perspective

and interprets her actions not as being misunderstood by her community, but rather the result of her misunderstanding the community she lives in. He notes that Alma prioritizes condemning her neighbors and friends over writing Cliff's memorial. In her interviews Alma keeps moralizing about her neighbors' moral shortcomings. Yet, as the narrative develops, so does Alma's understanding of the people in her community. Chupack argues that Alma does not abandon the memorial because she realizes that she never knew Cliff, but rather because she finally begins to acknowledge and accept the flaws of her neighbors and friends without judging them (59). Stephen Adams, however, is a harsher critic of Alma: he accuses her of being strapped into a "puritan strait-jacket" in her "attempts to manipulate people according to some ideal version of them". This, for Adams, ultimately represents the hypocrisy of suburban American values that "can only hoard up empty *things* and caress surfaces beneath which the 'body' has fled" (62, original emphasis).

Similarly to Adams, Schwarzschild comments on the Puritan foundations on which Alma's moralizing is based, calling her "Alma Mason, the Puritan spinster", "Alma the Presbyterian", and "Alma the Protestant", while accusing her of "Calvinist pride" (35, 40–41). Recognizing Alma's moralizing as Puritan, as these critics do, places the novel in a literary tradition that reflects on early American lawmaking and nation-building through subscription to a strict religious moral code. Of course, New England Puritanism ended around 1700, thus Alma's moralizing cannot simply be equated with historical Puritanism (Gorski 57). Still, Adams and Schwarzschild draw attention to the continuation of certain Puritan cultural values that undergird the moral superiority of the American National Symbolic to which Alma seems to subscribe. These foundations translate into civic myths that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have sought to draw parallels between citizenship and the "founding ideals [that] persist in the United States" ranging from "founding fathers", the "virgin land", or "manifest destiny" (Thomas 5). As Brook Thomas posits, these civic myths incorporate the National Symbolic into narratives of historical continuity. Many of these civic myths envision the American nation as a utopian site that promises "liberty" and the "pursuit of happiness" as a continuation of the religious freedom sought by the Pilgrims when they migrated to the "new world", where they "found a more fertile soil for civic participation than in England" (28).[1]

Philip Gorski concurs with this reading of the American National Symbolic as rooted in myths and narratives of the nation's Puritan origins. "Still", he writes, "the

1 This notion of religious freedom that the Puritans sought, was, of course, limited to the freedom to practice their own Calvinist version of Protestantism.

greatest legacy of the Puritan founding is surely the Exodus narrative itself. This story of oppression, flight, and freedom has long had, and still has, an enduring resonance for an immigrant nation like the United States" (59). Similarly, Stacey Olster sees a continuation of Puritanism in later secular narratives onto which citizens can project their attachment to the National Symbolic:

> Earlier writers often directed their works to the propagation of millennial design and portrayed American history in accordance with whatever variant most suited their time – the Puritans with respect to a religious scheme that stretched from the Fall of Man to the establishment of New Heaven and Earth, the later Yankees with respect to a secularized Manifest Destiny that spread democracy from sea to shining sea. (2)

In her study *Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction* (1989), Olster analyzes the relationships of American writers of the Cold War era to different accounts of time and history, including that of Puritan theology. The paranoia that structures works of novelists such as Thomas Pynchon, she suggests, "forms nothing less than the basis of Puritan historicism, a vision of continuity that encapsulated two forms of time – secular and sacred" (75). The political tensions between the United States and the USSR that governed cultural production during the Cold War extended a Puritan apocalyptic view of history to mid-twentieth-century America. Of Pynchon's work Olster writes, "his musings of apocalypse are only twentieth-century versions of those earlier exhortations with which his ancestors were quite familiar" (82).

The Nephew, too, is first and foremost a novel produced by and about Cold War paranoia. Since the action of the plot is catalyzed by Cliff's disappearance in the Korean War, the political tensions of the Cold War continuously haunt the novel's protagonists, as is often hinted at in passing: "Dreaming, Boyd saw a hydrogen bomb fall on Rainbow Center" (321). Purdy's novel can be read alongside other Cold War-era novels: Robert Hipkiss (1976) reads Purdy alongside Jack Kerouac, J.D. Salinger, and John Knowles; Jean E. Kennard (1975) reads him together with Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut. Similar to many of these novelists, Purdy uses the political background of the Cold War to reflect on the American citizen's relation to the state, its politics, and her or his own sense of self.

The novel certainly seems to reflect critically on the civic myths that organize Alma's sense of "good citizenship", as her moralizing to her neighbors is consistently met with annoyance and irritation. In fact, she and her closest neighbor and moraliz-

ing ally, Mrs. Barrington, are at some point described by one of her interlocutors as "two de-sexed pillars of the American Revolution" (304). This passing reference to the Revolutionary War is telling of the civic myths that establish the National Symbolic against which Alma's ideas of citizenship transform. That is, the American Revolution itself has achieved the status of what Donald Pease calls "mythos", "a political fiction capable of organizing the lives of many Americans" (*Visionary Compacts* 8).[2] The Revolutionary mythos gave credence to the liberty fantasy as the absolute American value, extending the Pilgrim "Exodus" narrative to a post-Revolutionary United States in what Sam B. Girgus calls "a secularization of the Puritan religious impulse" (11).

By drawing upon Puritanism and the American Revolution in the context of a novel set during the Cold War, Purdy subsumes the United States' Puritan foundations into its Revolutionary mythos of progress. The description of Alma and Mrs. Barrington as "two de-sexed pillars of the American Revolution" introduces what Purdy sees as a Puritan sexual worldview into the myth of the American Revolution, suggesting a continuation of American attitudes towards sexuality, rather than a complete rupture effected by the Revolution itself. Yet, on closer inspection, Purdy offers a more complex account of the transformation of symbolic narratives that are "capable of organizing the lives of many Americans" (Pease 8), and which place *The Nephew* within the broader concern of postwar American literature: how to imagine America's Puritan inheritance within its modernist values of liberty and individualism.

Perhaps, then, it is as surprising as it is illuminating that I consider Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* an important intertext for my interpretation of *The Nephew*. In his most famous novel, Hawthorne proposes a temporal continuation of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary America. His account of America's origins in Puritan moral laws can be read as a critique of the historical amnesia that the "culture of the Revolution" promoted: "when acknowledged as 'Revolutionary,' everyday events could be described as progressive rather than [...] merely successive" (Pease, *Visionary Compacts* 54). Unlike the radical break with which the Revolutionary mythos seems to distance America's Revolutionary genesis from its Puritan past,

2 This particular description of Alma and Mrs. Barrington carries a faint connotation of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a lineage-based women's organization founded in 1890 that is "dedicated to promoting historic preservation, education, patriotism and honoring the patriots of the Revolutionary War" (*Daughters of the American Revolution*). A later mention in the novel of their involvement in the Knights of Pythias, a likeminded fraternal organization, corroborates a reading in which Alma's moralizing is founded in the civic myths that cast the American Revolution as the continuation of the "Exodus" narrative that grants mythical status to the Pilgrims' search for religious freedom.

Purdy imagines a continuation of Puritan values that are transported with the reconfiguration of symbols that establish the relationship between the citizen and the state. Instead of elevating Cliff in her proposed biography to the symbolic status of mythical Revolutionary hero, the novel frustrates Alma's memory of him, which causes her to abandon her initial project and turn to her own relationship with the National Symbolic.

Paired with *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Nephew* can be read as a reimagination of the very symbol through which its protagonist defines her own relationship with the state. Of course, there are significant differences between the two novels. Whereas in Hawthorne's novel this symbol is the scarlet letter *A* embroidered on Hester Prynne's clothes, in *The Nephew* Alma turns to the figure of the Unknown Soldier to reflect on her changed relationship with the National Symbolic. More importantly, while Alma has the liberty to choose her own symbol through which she defines her relationship with the state, the scarlet letter is forced upon Hester by the very same state with which she is trying to negotiate her relationship – a difference that affects the ways in which Alma and Hester attach differently to their respective symbols.

Hawthorne's work has arguably been of tremendous influence on Purdy's own writing. Jon Michaud (2015), for example, recalls Purdy's claim that his affinity for authors such as Herman Melville and Hawthorne is based on what he considers their "Calvinist sensibilities", while Susan Sontag likens Purdy's work to the romance genre of Hawthorne, which "[has] often prospered in our [American] fiction at the expense of the novel" (5). There are some thematic parallels between *The Nephew* and *The Scarlet Letter* that could warrant a side-by-side reading of the two novels. Both novels present an object that symbolizes the political organization of the communities in which we find their protagonists; in both novels this symbol has a mediating effect between a mother figure (Hester and Alma) and a child figure (Pearl and Cliff); but most importantly, both novels dramatize the transformation of the protagonists' relationship with the state through the changing function of these symbols over the course of the narrative. Hester's embroidered letter changes meaning in the years after her reentry into the Boston community. Her relationship with that community changes, and because of that, the people of Boston begin to read the embroidered letter differently. Alma's memorial to Cliff, too, marks a changed relationship with the community of Rainbow Center. In her case, however, the memorial starts to change meaning for her before it changes meaning for the community altogether. Before I elaborate on this parallel, I will first briefly address the location of Rainbow Center and the narrative's framing between two consecutive Memorial Days, both of which incorporate in different ways the Puritan foundations of the American National Symbolic.

The community against which Alma measures her notions of "good citizenship" is the fictional Midwestern town of Rainbow Center, by some critics identified as Bowling Green, Ohio, where Purdy went to college in the 1930s (Miller 422; Snyder 115). While hardly the birthplace of the pre-Revolutionary American Colonies, such as the Puritan settlements of New England were, the Midwestern setting updates the nation's moral order for the Cold War era. Far removed from the progressive pockets of the East and West coasts, the Midwest is "often positioned as the 'norm,' the uncontested site of middle-class white American heteronormativity" (Manalansan et al., 1). According to Pease, the American heartland, as represented in popular and foundational narratives about the Midwest, has taken over the moral heritage of the colonies in the myth of "the frontier". The temporal rupture effected by the American Revolution could be translated into a spatial rupture by means of the vast unclaimed territories of the Midwest. If the Revolutionary mythos allowed American political life to imagine itself free from a pre-Revolutionary history, then the frontier effected something similar for its national space. "Both mythoi, that of the Revolution and that of the frontier, defined American freedom as the negation of any prior formation whatsoever" (Pease, *Visionary Compacts* 75).

The other benchmark for Alma's sense of "good citizenship" and her relationship with the state is the national holiday that frames the action of the novel. When Boyd comes home from a short trip to Kentucky and pulls the car into the driveway, he notices that the flag is flying over their house to commemorate Memorial Day, the national holiday that honors fallen American soldiers. Alma and Boyd are strict observers of Memorial Day rituals, for Boyd's initial reaction is one of guilt and disappointment, as he feels he has forsaken his duty to raise the flag himself (196). Memorial Day, or Decoration Day as it is sometimes called, originated in the mid-1860s, immediately after the Civil War, from several local initiatives to honor fallen soldiers (Kammen 102–103). Festivities and memorial services during this day had a "nationally desired note of reconciliation", incorporating both veterans of the Southern Confederacy and the Northern Union in order to bring the states together under a single national narrative (Kammen 102).

Three years after the war, in 1868, the United States government officially endorsed these memorial initiatives and it soon included not only the fallen soldiers of the Civil War, but also those of other wars, most notably the American Revolutionary War (162). This inclusion meant a separation between the public mourning and celebration of the events that were foundational to the narrative of the American nation. Michael Kammen points out that this separation could be considered an attempt to break from the nation's Puritan foundations in the imagining of its own

National Symbolic. He writes, "when May Day [Memorial Day] became the occasion of music, merrymaking, and popular entertainments, an editorial acknowledged that the Pilgrims and Puritans would have considered such activity as 'heathenish,' which was absolutely true" (255). As American citizenship transformed into a secular attachment to the nation state, its symbols also transformed into more secular forms of public mourning and celebration. Alma's emphatic observation of Memorial Day, however, changes the second time we encounter Memorial Day in the novel. This change, I argue, is symptomatic of her changed investment in citizenship and the National Symbolic.

Writing and Citizenship

It might be the coincidence of Memorial Day and the news that Cliff has gone missing that prompts Alma to begin her memorial to her nephew. The novel's opening draws a very strong connection between Alma's investment in this national holiday and her apprehensive feelings about Cliff's enlistment. Alma strongly identifies with Cliff and feels that his army service has already begun to change their relationship. Both she and Boyd question Cliff's decision to enlist; always having taken Cliff as "a young fellow [who] wanted to settle down", both are slightly amazed that "he enlisted before he had to" (197). And while they regularly receive letters from him, Alma bemoans the fact that Cliff "*doesn't* say much in his letters" (197, original emphasis) and faults the army for Cliff's lacking communication. Yet, Alma believes that this will nevertheless improve and implores Boyd to keep Cliff's letters so that they will "form a kind of diary of what he did" (198).

Alma's investment in the importance of writing is underlined by her comment to Boyd that "we must encourage him to write to us more often, and tell us more" (200). This opening scene, however, also subtly introduces the element that frustrates Alma's attempts to know her nephew. Because of Cliff's service to the American nation while in the army, he can provide her with only limited information. When they discuss Cliff's letters, Boyd suggests that "it's better to communicate too little than too much, since he's in service" (198). Early in the novel, then, Purdy establishes a strong connection between familial identification and the act of writing. Alma establishes her relationship with her nephew through his writing, yet the lack of information in his letters also immediately destabilizes their relationship. Juxtaposed to writing's association with familial identity is the state that frustrates this personal form of writing, and, by extension, also Alma's familial identification with Cliff. The

conflict between familial and national identity in the act of writing is a central theme in the novel. Alma's unsuccessful mission to memorialize her relationship with Cliff unwittingly leads to Cliff's undoing. In Alma's failed attempts at writing Cliff's life, his familial identity is also subsumed by the National Symbolic.

Shortly after Memorial Day, Alma receives a telegram from Washington, DC, stating that "Cliff [is] missing in action, after having been wounded a week earlier in Korea" (207). This ominous message is written in "casual and empty wording" and contains "several misspellings" (207). The empty wording of this official message echoes the lack of information in Cliff's earlier letters, just like the misspellings communicate a lack of care for both Cliff, who died in service of the state, and Alma, who has to suffer this loss. Similarly, any information that would affect Alma's relationship with Cliff fails to be communicated as it "did not convey to her the dreadfulness of the import" and "again, like Cliff's letters, the 'content' did not quite come through" (207). Indeed, Alma is left with the feeling that the message she received is incomplete and that more information should arrive soon.

Alma refuses to believe anything is wrong with Cliff; after all, missing does not necessarily mean that he is dead or would never return. Instead, she thinks that "the Government is duty-bound to write a long letter at regular intervals concerning Cliff, a communiqué sort of thing, complicated and detailed" (210), as if Cliff could be made present through such official writing. Like Edna in *Children Is All*, Alma displays a naive relation to the state. But whereas Edna's naive relation to the state is made manifest in the act of (mis)reading, Alma's ideals of citizenship are bound up in her ideas about writing. Alma's attitude towards citizenship is an active one; if the relationship between the citizen and the state is established through their mutual writing, then, a civic relationship based on reading betrays signs of passivity, as is the case in Edna's failure to perform her civic duties and her ultimate misrecognition of Billy. This sentiment is echoed by one of Alma's neighbors, Mrs. Laird, who places the act of reading as diametrically opposed to patriotism and active participation in civic duties: "come in here, dear, and salute the flag with me, and get your mind out of the gutter reading those books and papers" (272).

Despite her steadfast belief in an active and participatory relationship between citizen and the state, the latter does not respond to Alma's naive investment in the actualizing potential of writing. Apart from that one telegram informing her of Cliff's disappearance, the state remains frightfully silent. To make things even worse, soon after this news Cliff's letters cease arriving. It is perhaps because of this non-writing by both Cliff and the government that Alma decides to take up a writing project of her own. When Alma speaks to her neighbor Clara Himbaugh about Cliff's situation, the

latter draws upon her faith in Christian Science to console her. Although Alma seems to distrust Christian Science, one suggestion that Clara offers nevertheless sticks in her mind. Clara suggests that Alma writes down her memories of Cliff in a book, and although Alma initially refuses to take Clara's proposal seriously, the idea slowly germinates into her memorial-writing project. Alma's word choice is particularly telling here, for she is not writing a memoir or a biography of Cliff's life. Instead, she insists on calling it a "memorial", which connotes the act of commemorating a tragic event or someone who has perished. Indeed, even in its nonexistence, the memorial that Alma sets out to write provides a means to mourn the loss of her nephew before she can even be certain of his demise.

Renegotiating Failure

The three critics of Purdy's work discussed above – Adams, Chupack, and Schwarzschild – agree that the central action of the novel is Alma's failure to write Cliff's memorial. Chupack calls it a "nonperformance" (60); for Schwarzschild her failure is exactly what leads to her gaining self-knowledge (38); and Adams juxtaposes Alma's ineptitude with examples of successful writing to show that her failure is a symptom of the emptiness of the American suburban life in which she is so invested. As Adams writes,

> Alma's inability to write contrasts ironically with other examples of "writing" in the novel as apparently innocuous details reorganise themselves esoterically around the central axis to discharge their wry humour. Her mother, for instance, had blessed the world with a "memorial" to her culinary expertise which immortalises in "firm precise hand-writing" the recipes that had been second nature to her. Elsewhere, Mrs Barrington is seen to rule the neighbourhood from her spinet writing desk by the summonses and edicts that flow from her "model Spencerian hand." With such women for alter egos, it is no wonder that the "untidy" Cliff seems to escape all the categories into which Alma would place people. Yet as she suspends the determination to write *things* down, a new kind of perception unfolds. The puzzling welter of feelings that are unlocked constitute the first hesitant steps in a discovery of what was previously missing in her existence. (61, original emphasis)

I quote Adams at length because he touches upon several of the novel's elements that I consider to be running themes in Purdy's oeuvre. First, Alma is an unsuccessful author like those I have discussed in previous chapters. In contrast to her failure, the novel offers examples of successful writing, and compared with these, the consequences of her own failure are far-reaching. Although Alma imagines her life to meet the moral and bourgeois standards of American suburban life, the project of writing confronts her with a deficiency that she has previously been blind to. As she discovers that she cannot fit Cliff into the categories that she had once held dear, she also terminates her production of the written memorial, which, for Adams, inevitably results in her changed attitude towards her neighbors. Once she comes to terms with the fact that her idealized image of family life does not correspond to her lived reality, she no longer measures her community against her moral standards either. The absolute morals that fail to be codified within the context of Cold War American society give way to a more democratic political order in which moral standards are relative to the community itself.

The negative meaning that Adams assigns to failure is also present in Kennard's interpretation of Purdy's literature. In fact, she calls the running theme of failed authorship in Purdy's oeuvre his "fidelity to failure". She writes, "Purdy's own novels give us precisely that sense of attempted expression which fails, of art struggling against its own impossibility. Yet they exist, expressions of the paradox of their own existence. Like all novels of number they take the reader towards nothingness; each novel, like its reader, struggles but fails to make sense of the experience it records" (84). Her reading of *The Nephew* echoes this somewhat bleak and nihilistic view of Purdy's work, as she argues that Alma's failure to write a memorial to Cliff should be read as an extension of his disappearance. Not only does he disappear physically, but her failure to record his disappearance also causes him to recede even further away. "The action of the novel is a movement towards the void", Kennard argues, and eventually, according to her, the novel should be read as a commentary on "art's struggle with its own impossibility" (93–94).

Failure, however, is not just the lack of a successful speech act, a nonperformance, or the failure to produce something positive. Failure is in and of itself also an act that establishes new meanings, is open to interpretation, and produces new opportunities and situations that the failing subject can act upon. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam calls for a renewed appreciation of failure, or rather, for an understanding of failure as a practice which "recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (88). However

unintentional it might be, failure uncovers alternative possibilities and allows the failing subject to rethink and renegotiate his or her attachment to the failed object. For Alma too it is not so much she who changes, but rather her relation to the object she has produced. Unlike previous critics, I maintain that we should not consider Alma's project as a failure per se. In line with Halberstam's suggestion to rethink the meaning-making of failed projects (24), I propose to interpret Alma's project as a wholly different one.[3] After all, when Alma proclaims that she has stopped writing her memorial to Cliff, she does not claim to have abandoned it. Instead, she reframes the whole memorial as something entirely different:

> "I've decided not to write anything about Cliff after all, Boyd," she said in loud expressionless tones.
>
> He scowled.
>
> "After all the fuss and bother everybody's been to in town." His old temper flared – to her relief and yet to her inexpressible sadness.
>
> "The memorial is finished," she said, in words perhaps as surprising to herself as to him.
>
> "You've written it?" he cried, a strange pleasure and surprise on his face.
>
> "No," she replied. (337)

In a sudden moment of clarity Alma realizes that she does not have to write the memorial in order to finish it. On the contrary, the memorial is finished exactly because she has not written it. The title of the chapter in which this scene takes place affirms this reading, as it, too, is titled "The memorial is finished" (335). The memorial no longer functions as a biography of Cliff. It might no longer be about Cliff, her nephew, at all. Its new function is that of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier – the epitaph for those anonymous soldiers who have fallen in battles and fought for the safekeeping of the nation's integrity, and which serves as a screen onto which the National Symbolic can be projected. The figure of the Unknown Soldier allows Alma to replace her view on citizenship, within which she can no longer frame her

3 For another consideration of failure in American literature, see Gavin Jones's *Failure and the American Writer* (2014). In his study, Jones counterpoints the myth that American literature is mostly concerned with the narration of success. Instead, Jones suggests that recognizing the failure of canonical nineteenth-century authors contributes to a fuller understanding of their contribution to the constitution of the American national identity.

relationship with Cliff, with a democratic relation to the state that allows her to redefine her identification with Cliff and her community. In this, I follow Thomas's notion that with the end of Puritanism and the shift to a secular state during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the conceptualization of citizenship, apart from the idea of "participation in or membership of a community", obtained the additional notion of being "inextricably bound to the nation" (225). In the course of the novel, Alma, who represents the Puritan values of suburban America, is forced to redefine her relationship with the National Symbolic. Even if she first adheres to a moralizing involvement in her community, at the end of the novel her notions of "good citizenship" are rewired through the changed meaning and purpose of her memorial to Cliff.

The Unknown Soldier

If we consider Alma's failure to write her memorial not as the impossibility of meaning-making, but as the transformation of the object through which Alma negotiates her relationship with Cliff, and in extension her attachment to the state, we begin to recognize parallels between her memorial and that other national memorial to fallen and missing soldiers: the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This kind of memorial, erected in nations across the globe, stands out for various reasons, two of which are closely related to the themes that I have identified in *The Nephew*. Firstly, the history of Unknown Soldier memorials shows that for many nations their erection was a pivotal moment for the redefinition of the relationship between the state and its citizens, especially during times in which this relationship underwent crisis engendered by war. Secondly, the remains that are immortalized by the Unknown Soldier memorial are, and must be by definition, anonymous. For such a memorial to function as a symbol for all citizens, the Unknown Soldier has to remain – or become, as is the case with Cliff – unidentifiable. Only then can the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier function as a placeholder for a cross-ideological identification with the National Symbolic.

Benedict Anderson opens his seminal study of the cultural roots of nineteenth-century nationalism with a brief observation about the curious phenomenon of the Unknown Soldier memorial. Most of these monuments were erected after the First World War, a period in which Western nations sought to redefine the narratives that constituted their national identities and needed new symbols to invest their citizens in this renewed national framework in the aftermath of devastating wars.

The Unknown Soldier is particularly interesting in this endeavor since it houses multiple contradictory meanings within its relatively simple outlook. Anderson writes, "void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings" (17, original emphasis). The National Symbolic haunts the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, not because the remains that it contains are invested with meaning and identity, but rather because the remains' *lack* of identity is invested with meaning. In relation to the Unknown Soldier, individual identity is erased in favor of a national one. Indeed, Anderson claims that the identity constituted by the Unknown Soldier cannot but be a national one. Historically, monuments to Unknown Soldiers have played an overwhelmingly nationalist role, eschewing other state ideologies and political movements. Thus, there are Italian, French, and British Unknown Soldiers, but there are no tombs to commemorate the unknown socialist, the unknown fascist, or the unknown pacifist (Anderson 17–18, Wittman 9). Rather, sovereign powers seem to inscribe and re-inscribe the National Symbolic represented by the Unknown Soldier easily across ideological beliefs. Thus, the Italian monument for the Unknown Soldier, interred next to the Vittoriano in Rome, was intended as a unifying and pacifying memorial after the First World War, but was endowed with new nationalist meaning as soon as the fascists came to power, only to later function as a national symbol for the democratic regime after the Second World War (Wittmann 6). Although the ideologies behind the investment in nationalism changed over the course of these three different regimes, the symbol that was employed to effect these feelings of nationalism remained the same.

Although Anderson does not go on to explore the figure of the Unknown Soldier in much detail, his observations do point towards an inherent conflict between individual and social identity that lies at the core of the National Symbolic. The Unknown Soldier can only function as a national symbol once every trace of the individual identity of the interred remains is erased or obscured. At the same time, these remains should be identifiable enough as a subject to the nation that the tomb represents. This is what Wittman calls "shared anonymity" (10), and makes the Unknown Soldier memorial so effective as a placeholder for the National Symbolic that attaches citizens to the nation across ideological affiliations.

Identification through and with the Unknown Soldier ties a community to the National Symbolic, as it offers a narrative on which the values of a nation can be founded. Questions of identifiability, such as the sex or race of the remains, are therefore often suppressed in favor of the memorial's symbolic value. Yet this suppression is precarious since it is continuously haunted by certain properties of the

Unknown Soldier's remains that are at once undeniable but which might become unwanted in certain political climates. Individualizing properties of sex, race, and class that fail to correspond with community values linger around the Unknown Soldier's bones as a reminder of the constructed nature of their unifying symbolism. The American practice of adding new remains of Unknown Soldiers to their complex of Tombs of the Unknowns – as was done after the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War – illustrates this precariousness as it problematizes the possibility of shared anonymity.

Returning to the practice of raising a memorial to the Unknown Soldier in different historical and political contexts – during the Cold War and the post-Cold War era – reintroduced debates about nationality and the identifiability of the interred bones within different, larger national debates of citizenship. At stake in these debates were the questions of who is represented in the National Symbolic, and which ethnicities, sexualities, or classes are excluded from this representation. While these debates were present during the erection of Unknown Soldier memorials in Europe after the First World War (Wittman 95), the reopening of these debates in the United States has touched upon a reevaluation of what the Unknown Soldier symbolizes in relation to American citizens, who are supposed to identify with the nation through this very symbol. If the first Unknown Soldier memorial organized American citizens around a single unifying symbol, debates surrounding the inaugurations of the Korean War and Vietnam War Unknown Soldiers challenged the universality of this symbolism by bringing into the equation questions of race and nationality (Wagner 646; Schwartz and Bayma 958).

Sarah Wagner offers a critical reading of such debates surrounding race and citizenship in relation to the Unknown Soldier during the transition from Cold War to post-Cold War America. She analyzes the debate in which the anonymity of the remains in the Vietnam crypt of the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery was the subject of vehement discussion. Developments in DNA analysis allowed forensic scientists to identify the unknown remains more precisely, which prompted the demand for disinterment of the already-buried remains. The call for excavation and further analysis of the now-identifiable remains, however, was not necessarily provoked by these scientific developments – after all, similar demands were not made of the Unknown Soldier memorials commemorating the First and Second World Wars or the Korean War. The reason the public began to question the legitimacy of the memorial itself was the initial selection procedure used to pick one set of unidentifiable remains among other possible "unknowns" (635). The remains of the Unknown Soldier can never be wholly unknown, since

certain aspects of his identity can or should be made plausible for him to fulfill its function as the Unknown Soldier. For example, forensic scientists can, based on the analysis of the remains alone, already identify the race, sex, height, and age (Wagner 636). Moreover, the remains should plausibly belong to a subject of the nation in question; it must be made plausible that this subject had served in the armed forces belonging to this nation; and it must be made plausible that the subject had fought and died during campaigns in the war that the memorial is commemorating (Wagner 637).

The combination of these attributes and basic criteria – those already-known and those that need to be made plausible – problematize the uncritical adoption of shared anonymity. If certain attributes of the remains are always already known, then these attributes will most certainly affect the decisions made when trying to decide the criteria for inclusion into the citizenship status that is so essential to the function of the Unknown Soldier memorial. The criteria that need to be made plausible are influenced by the already-known facts, effectively including or excluding certain remains of the Vietnam War from selection. To make plausible that the selected remains for the Unknown Soldier memorial of the Vietnam War belonged to an American citizen, in the episode Wagner describes, the decision was made to select only remains that were identifiable as Caucasian and to dismiss remains that were identified as South-East Asian. The selection committee argued that it could not guarantee that the South-East Asian remains belonged to a U.S. citizen, even though South-East Asian Americans had also fought in the Vietnam War (639). Certain demands made of the remains have the effect that, in a political landscape that becomes increasingly racialized and individualized, the promise of shared anonymity that once tied the Unknown Soldier to the National Symbolic can no longer tie all subjects of the nation to the National Symbolic in the same way. Responding to rumors about the possible identity of the Vietnam War Unknown Soldier, the Department of Defense ordered a DNA analysis of the interred remains. Following this analysis, a name was connected with the Unknown Soldier, who was, as a result, no longer unknown.

The fact that the Unknown Soldier memorial of the Vietnam War still holds its function as a national monument, despite its remains being no longer unknown – in fact, the tomb currently remains empty – attests to the changing nature of commemoration from the communal function of shared anonymity to more individualistic practices in the second half of the twentieth century (649). This move towards individualization during the Cold War is touched upon by Purdy's treatment of the Unknown Soldier in *The Nephew*. While predating the Unknown Soldier memorial

of the Vietnam War by several decades, its narrative nevertheless mirrors the latter discussion about the identifiability of the Unknown Soldier's remains. Yet, while in this discussion the increased knowability of the remains attests to a growing practice of individualized commemoration in the United States, *The Nephew* reverses this narrative. The more Alma seeks what she knows about Cliff, and the more she realizes she never knew him at all, the more she begins to identify with the community that previously could not live up to her own moral standards.

The novel offers a mode of commemoration that allows Alma to identify with the National Symbolic during the Cold War while acknowledging the increased individualization of American society. To see this in action, we need to draw attention to another important aspect of the Unknown Soldier memorial – its status as a publicly commissioned work. Even if Wagner's account of the Vietnam War Unknown Soldier memorial stresses the increased individualization of the political landscape after the Cold War, she also shows how the memorial is first and foremost a public work. The public demand for disinterment and subsequent analysis of the remains in fact highlights its function as a public memorial that promises a shared identification with the state for its citizens.

A closer look at *The Nephew* tells us that the inhabitants of Rainbow Center are, indeed, not the homogenous group usually associated with suburban America. Still, the memorial that Alma is writing becomes, like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, very much a public project. While Alma realizes that her work slowly stagnates, the neighbors around her become increasingly invested in the memorial's completion. Alma is fully aware of this public investment: "All her neighbors – Mrs. B., Faye Laird, Clara Himbaugh, Mrs. Van Tassel, not to mention Professor Mannheim and Boyd – *expected* her to write something, even if only a page, and Cliff's biography was, one might say, publicly commissioned" (310, original emphasis). Earlier, in conversation with Boyd, Mrs. Barrington had also expressed how important it was that Alma finish her memorial because "*then* and only then … can she forget it" (278, original emphasis). However, the communitarian work that is implied in Alma's writing frustrates the possibility of her identifying fully with its subject, Cliff. When she tells Boyd that she has decided to quit writing the memorial, she voices this sentiment clearly: "did it ever occur to you that you were all babying me, an old-maid schoolteacher with nothing to do, writing a book about a young nephew she didn't really know from Adam or probably understand?" (337). At the same time, this distancing from her idealized image of Cliff allows her to engage with the people in her community differently. In the remainder of this chapter, I look more closely at how the disappearance of Cliff, or rather, his transformation into the symbolic figure of the Unknown Soldier,

enables Alma's renewed identification with the other inhabitants of Rainbow Center. In order to do so, I want to draw a parallel with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, since reading these novels alongside each other allows us to understand how a changed identification with the same symbol might reflect a transformation in attitudes towards the National Symbolic.

A Pillar of the Community?

Both *The Nephew* and *The Scarlet Letter* dramatize the transformation from one civic order into another through the changed meaning attributed to the symbol that initiated the narrative in the first place. Thomas argues that in *The Scarlet Letter*, the notion of "good citizenship" changes when the embroidered letter on Hester Prynne's chest gains a different meaning in the eyes of her community (Thomas 44). At first the letter functioned as an imposed symbol of Hester's adultery. Yet, although society no longer demands that she wear the letter, she nevertheless continues to wear it voluntarily. Hester wears the letter as a sign of her transgression of moral and colonial law, and throughout the novel the letter serves as a reminder of her place within, or rather outside, the Puritan community and socio-political order. However, the symbol changes meaning over the years, mostly informed by Hester's good works: "many people refuse to interpret the scarlet *A* by its original signification. They said it meant Able" (Hawthorne 149). For Thomas, that Hester's actions alter the significance of the symbol for the community indicates that she transforms the terms of what "good citizenship" entails (44). The letter that Hester wore as a testament of her transgression of New England law through her good deeds comes to symbolize redemption rather than penance.

Although the letter's meaning changes over time, Hester continues to wear it to define her own relationship with her community. This might be best exemplified by the scene in the forest in which Hester casts off the symbol in an act of rebellion. At first, Hester feels liberated from the burden of shame. Soon after, however, she is troubled by the fact that, without the letter attached to her chest, her daughter Pearl refuses to approach her as if she no longer recognizes her own mother. Only after Hester reattaches the letter does Pearl return to her mother. Thus, the letter has not changed significance altogether. Through her daughter's attachment to it, the letter continues to organize Hester's position in the community; she is unidentifiable without the symbol that signifies her shame. This changes with the public revelation that Pearl is the illegitimate daughter of the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, which

is closely followed by his death. In doing so, Dimmesdale not only further absolves Hester in the eyes of the community, but also secures her return as one of them: "After exhausting life in his efforts for mankind's spiritual good, he had made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike" (Hawthorne 241). Nonetheless, after Dimmesdale's death Hester disappears, only to return years later. When she does, she is wearing the Scarlet Letter, but it is no longer a mark of shame, but rather a symbol that should be "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (245). As the letter *A* has lost all connotations of her earlier relation to her community, Hester dedicates herself to counseling women who, much like her, rebel against Puritan society. Of this ending, Thomas writes: "on her return Hester has a different relation to the Puritan community. On the one hand, she acknowledges the importance of civil order as she did not in her rebellious days. On the other, Hester is now accepted by the people who once spurned her" (43). Her redemption, then, is the result of a two-directional transformation. Not only does the Puritan community open up to Hester again, but Hester has transformed her own attitude towards the community as well. She can only return to the community when the significance of the scarlet letter has not only changed for the Puritans, but also for herself.

As Thomas notes of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne wrote his novel during a period marked by a "religious disestablishment that moved churches into the sphere of voluntary association" (47). Yet, partly because of Hawthorne's own contribution to the myth-making of the Puritan roots of the United States, the political organization that replaced these Puritan foundations has, Thomas argues, contributed "to the mistaken belief that the political system that developed in nineteenth-century America should be seen as a secularized version of a Puritan theocracy, with citizens having the same structural relation to the state as Puritan subjects had to the political representatives of God on Earth" (47). The narrative of the United States' Puritan foundations, then, has become a civic myth of its own. Thomas follows Sacvan Bercovitch, who claims that Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in response to this secularization of American politics, in which the relation of the citizen to the state became based on the ideology of individualism, as opposed to the communitarian Puritan ethos (30–31). As such, we can consider Alma's investment in a moral community as the inheritance of the myth that the post-Revolutionary National Symbolic is modeled on pre-Revolutionary Puritan values. Her sense of community is based upon a moral system in which alternative individual attachments to, or disidentifications with, the state have no proper place.

Opposite to Alma's imagining of the National Symbolic stands the civic myth of individualism that characterized the United States as a capitalist society during the Cold War, and which tarnishes her ideals of patriotism, marriage, and procreation. Reminiscing about Cliff being decorated with the Purple Heart she also recalls her other nephews, all of whom have abandoned her by first serving in the army, then marrying, and finally moving farther West (226). Although Cliff actually disappears while serving in the army, for Alma these other family members are the ones actually "missing", since they stopped writing her letters while still alive. Her other nephews achieve success in life by abandoning their community, and thus their individualism taints the ideal image of "good citizenship" that their success otherwise could have embodied. The challenge that the novel presents to Alma now that "the letters from Cliff [have] stopped" (210), now that he has also gone missing, is to incorporate his disappearance into a transformed definition of citizenship, without suffering a moral crisis.

Thomas notes that a Puritan organization of citizenship can be read alongside Freud's thesis that civilization needs some degree of repression for it to "maintain a just civil order" (35). Contesting this idea, Herbert Marcuse sought to imagine a civilization based on a non-repressive foundation. Thomas traces Marcuse's response to Freud back to early-nineteenth-century debates on "good citizenship" and argues that Hawthorne's novel about the Puritan rule of law can be read as an inversion of Marcuse's utopian challenge of Freud. The civic myth of "virgin land" suggests a wilderness for the Pilgrims to conquer and tame under their moral law. As such, narratives that constitute the myth of Puritan lawmaking in the colonies establish a binary opposition between nature and law at the heart of American citizenship (Thomas 33). Or, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, it places the domain of citizenship under the auspices of the repressive superego which "Freud eventually theorized as the site of social law" and "draws on all the unconscious energies it is meant to tame" (9). Purdy, in turn, challenges such a Freudian account of the repressive Puritan foundations onto which the American nation is built. As we have already seen in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *63: Dream Palace*, Purdy is highly suspicious of popular psychoanalytic narratives that have structured Cold War American thinking about sexual identity.[4] In Alma's renegotiation of her relationship with the National Symbolic, Purdy shows himself equally suspicious of narratives that formulate the repressive nature of the citizen's relation to the state. However, with the task of preventing a moral crisis

4 See van den Oever 21–22, and Kimmel 261–290.

at hand, Purdy offers Alma a way to redeem her relationship with her community through the memorial that she has set out to write. In renegotiating the function of the memorial in her commemoration of Cliff, Alma is also able to renegotiate her relationship with her community, just as Hester does in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Thomas argues that even though the scene of Hester's redemption restores her to the existing civil order, this restoration prompts a reconsideration of citizenship which no longer agrees with its Puritan predecessor. Hawthorne's model of citizenship at the end of the novel is an interactive one: Hester's reintroduction to her community is formed by a sympathetic identification that produces "independent citizens capable of choosing where they can best develop their capacity" (45). Thomas recognizes this move as a transition from a Puritan formulation of citizenship, which is based on obedience to the law, into the foundations of liberal democracy in which consensual citizenship is governed by communal and historical ties:

> Hester's decision is freely chosen in the sense that no one forces her to make it, but it is certainly not a decision made without pressure from many complicated historical and psychological factors, just as one's decision as to where to maintain or seek citizenship is not simply a rational choice about possibilities for political or economic freedom but one conditioned by numerous factors that one cannot control. (45)

Ultimately, Thomas's claims that "the civil order to which she submits has also changed" – that is, that the Puritans no longer "try to control all aspects of life" – is evidenced by the way that the scarlet letter itself starts to circulate differently within the community: no longer as symbol of damnation, but as symbol of redemption (46).

If Alma's failure to write a memorial to Cliff signifies a transformation in her views of citizenship and her relationship with her community, what, then, is Alma's attitude towards her neighbors to begin with? I have already mentioned Alma's disapproval of Clara's indulgence in Christian Science. Clara is introduced through an episode that Alma remembers and in which her religious beliefs are said to have almost caused Clara's death. After having her teeth pulled without the aid of anesthetics, as the use of medicine runs counter to the dogmas of Christian Science, Clara was found by Alma in a delirious and semiconscious state (211). Alma is convinced that she saved Clara from a painful death, and they regularly have bitter arguments about Clara's religious convictions. Alma's distrust of Christian Science inspires a vigilant attitude in Alma as to Clara's every movement, since she fears that Clara might try to convert other members of the community (249). Finally, as the self-appointed guardian of the

community's values, Alma plots with her neighbors against this threat of conversion to "the wrong church" as she is "fired with enthusiasm at the thought of stepping in between Clara and a proselyte" (313).[5]

The aggression with which Alma tries to undermine Clara's religious beliefs echoes what Lauren Berlant recognizes as Puritan "desires for counterrevolution [...] or the return of the (sexual) repressed" that are proposed by Hawthorne's imagining of America's pre-Revolutionary National Symbolic (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 132). Alma cannot bring herself to associate her memorial with the teachings of Christian Science, since it deviates from her Calvinist convictions. The suggestion to write a memorial originated in Clara's attempt to convert Alma to Christian Science, but when Alma tells Boyd about the initiative, she refuses to admit the idea came from Clara in the first place (225).

Alma's zealous moralizing stretches beyond her religious feud with Clara. Two friends, Faye Laird and Mrs. Van Tassel, are also measured against Alma's moral convictions. While their transgressions play a lesser role in the narrative, they still function as negative formulations against which we can discern Alma's conception of "good citizenship". Alma suspects Faye, a middle-aged spinster who lives with her bedridden mother in order to take care of her, of taking delight in her mother's illness (219). Mrs. Van Tassel bears Alma's moralistic scorn for renting out a room to Minnie Clyde Hawke, an alcoholic widow who refuses to remarry (214). Again, her disapproval prompts her to become the self-appointed arbiter of decency. When Boyd shows no interest in her concerns over Mrs. Van Tassel's tenant situation, she tells him: "I don't think what happens to a friend and neighbor can be construed as just talk. If you had any kind of community feeling, you would *care* what happens to little Mrs. Van Tassel" (216–217, original emphasis). Her condescending tone towards Mrs. Van Tassel underlines her own sense of moral superiority which frames every interaction that she engages in.

Against the moral lapses of her neighbors, Alma imagines herself the embodiment of American values: the small-town, or in her case suburban, belief in surveillance and condemnation that also shaped the social fabric of the early Puritan settlements – at least as represented in *The Scarlet Letter*. This is evidenced by her condescending tone towards her community and her sense of entitlement that leads her to expect extended personal correspondence from the government regarding the whereabouts

5 As is often the case in Purdy's novels, the name of the protagonist is significant. Alma, in Latin, means "nourishing" or "nurturing". Both towards Cliff and towards her community, Alma imagines herself as *alma mater*, or nourishing mother.

of her nephew. But her desire to subject her community to her own moral code is perhaps best represented by her attempts to literally colonize her community. Alma has been systematically buying up plots of land surrounding her house, and indeed, at the beginning of the novel she discusses the possible purchase of yet more land, the purpose of which, we learn, is to protect her own suburban way of life. "If the business part of town continues to move down here", she exclaims, "we will be protected against office buildings and the like springing up around us, for the first thing a business concern would buy up would be a greenhouse, especially if Mrs. Van Tassel were the owner!" (204). By buying up the land surrounding her house not only does she physically colonize the land, but it also enables her to shore up the moral bastion onto which she founds the very reasoning that justifies her colonization. The community is in danger of moral corruption and thus Alma sees it as her civic duty to take control of her neighbors' property before corporate America has the chance to do so. Again we see in Alma's actions the traces of civic myths that make up the narratives of the American National Symbolic. We recognize in Alma's physical and moral expansionism the topos of Manifest Destiny, which is so closely tied to the myth of the frontier and Midwestern America (Pease 20).

Alma's zealous desire to safeguard her community against moral turpitude, however, forces her into an awkward position when she has to interview precisely the people that she accuses of un-American behavior for her memorial. While Faye, Mrs. Van Tassel, and Mrs. Hawke do not adhere perfectly to Alma's image of virtuous citizenship, she nevertheless considers them friends. Furthermore, they can provide her with only little information about Cliff. Because of their limited association with Cliff, Alma's idealized image of her nephew does not risk contamination with their lower moral standards. She does not need to actively disavow their moral failings, as she did with Clara's Christian Science. Other members of her community, however, are less fortunate as they were deeply involved in Cliff's life and thus have the most information that can help Alma write her memorial.

Three men, Professor Mannheim, Willard Baker, and Vernon Miller, pose the greatest threat to Alma's views of citizenship, as they represent communism (Professor Mannheim) and homosexual desire (Willard Baker and Vernon Miller). As their political and sexual identifications are misaligned with the ideal citizen which Alma imagines her nephew to be, she must work hardest to disavow their identifications and prevent any contamination by their perversion with her memorial to Cliff. Yet Alma's relationship with these three neighbors is complex and her investment in them is shaped by contradictory impulses of abjection and attraction. This dynamic is central to the transformation of her memorial, and its function as mediator between

Alma and the National Symbolic. The more she attempts to untangle the problematic associations of her nephew with an avowed communist and practicing homosexuals, the more she pushes the image of her nephew into abstraction, stripping him slowly of any individuating qualities and disolving his image into the unidentifiable remains that inhabit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Communist Threats

Professor Mannheim, Cliff's former college professor, is highly suspicious of Alma's moral zealousness. His position is clearly expressed when he describes Alma as a "de-sexed [pillar] of the American Revolution" (304). When he is first introduced in the narrative, Alma does not mince words either. She remembers how he had cheated on his wife, who died under mysterious circumstances, after which he married the student with whom he had an affair (234); she mentions how she refused to let him enter her house, boasting that "such a moral leper would never step into her front room" (235); and finally she accuses him of being a drunk (236). Yet, Alma also needs Mannheim's testimony, since "Cliff *liked* Professor Mannheim" (236, original emphasis). Discussing with Mrs. Van Tassel the need to talk to Mannheim, the two friends express a mutual desire to qualify Cliff's relationship with his former teacher, or at least disclaim the effect that Mannheim could have on Cliff's moral constitution.

> "Professor Mannheim lent him so many books. He was a real influence on Cliff. Cliff spent hours there, you know."
>
> "Well, it never affected Cliff, I'm sure." Mrs. Van Tassel rolled her eyes vaguely. "Cliff was such a … good boy."
>
> "Of course we know Cliff didn't know about Professor Mannheim," Alma intoned, and then stopping, colored violently. (237).

The thought of Mannheim's blatantly un-American politics and the possible influence this might have had on her nephew fill Alma with anger. Still she realizes that she will have to engage in conversation with the professor if she wants to write about Cliff's experiences in college. It is through the expression of her contempt for Mannheim that we get the strongest sense of Alma's fantasies of "good citizenship". Her consideration of Mannheim's communist political views "dangerous, if not treasonous" (233), in combination with her constant confusion about his nationality, frames Mannheim as an alien threat to Alma's suburban values. Ironically, consider-

ing the Cold War context in which the novel was written, Mannheim's communism poses a threat alongside, and not against, the encroaching capitalist businesses from which Alma tries to shield herself by colonizing her neighborhood.

When Alma expresses her desire to talk to Mannheim, she and Boyd are confused about whether Mannheim is Dutch or German (241). The external narrator, too, muses on his perceived foreignness. His first wife was German-born (232), there is mention of his English seeming "another language in sound and pronunciation" (302), and a few pages later he is said to smoke a German pipe (304). The most condemning opinion of his foreignness, however, is expressed by Alma's ally, Mrs. Barrington. She "disapproved of him at every level of his being. His being a Jew was the least of it there, and his political opinions – which he now never uttered – and his books were less unacceptable than the way he wore his clothes and spoke English. Mrs. Barrington could not reconcile what he *was*, in fact, with what she thought a lifelong resident of Rainbow [Center] and the college campus should be" (295, original emphasis).

Bearing in mind that the novel was written under the cultural influence of the Cold War – and indeed, noting that the novel is set against the backdrop of the Cold War's first great proxy war and the political climate of McCarthyism – it is unsurprising that the constant focus on Mannheim's foreignness is equated with his un-American politics, and even the suggestion of treason. Given the novel's historical context, his Marxist beliefs might form the biggest threat to Alma's idealized image of Cliff, which is why she must disavow his potential influence on her nephew time and again. For Alma and her moral equals, Cliff's Americanness must render him unsusceptible to Mannheim's corrupting ideas: "'And what would Mannheim know about an American boy?' [Mrs. Barrington] went on. 'An old sitting-room pink of a past generation'" (277). Mrs. Barrington here serves once again as Alma's ally in delineating the boundaries of their moral worldview. In conjunction with Mrs. Barrington's estimation of the value of Mannheim's information about Cliff, Alma too doubts the validity of Mannheim's contributions. Yet this time she also introduces the issue of gender that makes her question any contribution to her memory of Cliff that does not align with her and Mrs. Barrington's moral paradigm: "Professor Mannheim, like Boyd, was only a man and could never tell her – could never tell Mrs. Barrington, that is – the certain things she felt she must know if she were to write the memorial" (254).

Alma's suburban values, then, are placed outside of the communism-capitalism binary. Instead, her values are based on a relationship with the state regardless of its ideological organization. For her, it is this relationship that is first and foremost the property of "good citizenship" and individual beliefs should be disregarded in the interest of the state. This corresponds to what Berlant identifies as the "social theory

of the Puritan conscience" in which "the subject's personal identifications – bonds of family, class, race, ethnicity, gender, or nation – are subsumed under the more pressing project of acting in the colony's providential, political interests" (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 98). As we have seen, a similar disregard for personal identifications can be found in the Unknown Soldier memorial: the strong identification with the state that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier represents runs across ideological, familial, classist, or ethnic identifications (Anderson 17–18; Wittman 9). The shared properties of Alma's attachment to the state, and the cross-ideological identification to the nation that the Unknown Soldier represents, allows for Alma to redefine her own ideas of "good citizenship" without suffering a moral crisis.

If I have dwelt at length on the moral high-ground that Alma imagines herself to occupy in relation to the "un-American" Professor Mannheim, that is because the greatest shift in Alma's understanding of citizenship can be understood through her changed attitude towards him. Alma's initial definition of citizenship was informed by a belief in a self-governing community that is organized around an absolute set of morals, held in place by social control and surveillance. Alma's commitment to surveillance as a means of safeguarding the community's moral values is based on her conviction that she could write the "*formal* facts about him [Cliff]" so that she is able to "know all there is fundamentally to know about Cliff" (258, original emphasis). The redefinition of her relationship with her neighbors that is effected by her changing image of Cliff pushes Alma away from a notion of citizenship that is based on absolute morals and surveillance, and towards a more democratic view of community in which moral laws are relationally defined.

Alma's investment in Cliff's memorial is based on her belief in an absolute and fundamental truth embodied by her nephew. The shift in her attitude towards citizenship, then, is provoked by her understanding that she could not possibly write a biography of Cliff. Despite her belief in surveillance, she has failed to know him. Furthermore, she realizes that Cliff shared more in common with those neighbors she had so abhorred than with the absolute moral law to which she had always subscribed. Her conviction that Cliff wanted to remain in Rainbow Center (197), her firm belief in his excellence (199), and her pride in his being awarded the Purple Heart (228) begin to ring false as her idealized image of Cliff is slowly chipped away by the intimations of those she once deemed unworthy of Cliff's attention. The realization that her image of Cliff as ideal citizen, which was so crucial to the establishment of her moral position within society, had always been false catalyzes Alma's transference of his image onto the secular symbol of the Unknown Soldier. Through Alma's search for a symbol to help her redefine her own position within the community, Purdy's novel questions

the validity of the American National Symbolic's Puritan foundations. If the image that for her epitomized the moral foundations of "good citizenship" are revealed to be misconstrued, what would a more secular and democratic National Symbolic look like for Alma? Would there still be room for her nephew in her transformed relationship with the National Symbolic?

A closer reading of the novel suggests that Alma's transition from a Puritan to a democratic National Symbolic is not without its sacrifices. As discussed above, crucial to the effectiveness of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is the inherent tension between the identifiability and anonymity of the remains that it houses. As Alma's memorial to Cliff transforms from a biographical project into the empty vessel that represents national fantasies, Alma is also faced with a melodramatic impossible plot situation that makes her choose between familial identification with her nephew and national identification with the Unknown Soldier. To redefine her place within her community, Alma must relinquish Cliff altogether. While previous critics identify Alma's failure to write her memorial as a "nonperformance", I argue that this failure produces a new sort of meaning-making. Alma's failure transforms her project into a memorial through which she can renegotiate her understanding of "good citizenship". The record book that was supposed to become a biography of Cliff remains empty, but its emptiness makes it no less a memorial – just a different kind of memorial. Yet, before the memorial can take up a wholly different function – that of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – the narrative must also ensure that Cliff disappears as well.

Cliff's Disappearance

In addition to from being declared MIA, Cliff goes missing on multiple levels in the narrative. At first, his disappearance is enacted by the discontinuation of his letters. As the narrative moves forward, other parts of Cliff to which Alma still grasped also recede into the background, making him vanish both physically and as a character with individuating features. This latter disappearance is set in motion by information that Mannheim offers Alma after she has sufficiently distanced Cliff's memory from his Marxist politics. After some intervention by both Boyd and Mrs. Barrington, Alma musters up the courage to approach Mannheim and ask him for some of Cliff's old exams and papers. Instead of giving useful information for the biographical memorial that Alma still at this point intends to write, Mannheim offers her the first gesture that transforms her project into the erection of an Unknown Soldier

memorial. After expressing his disbelief that "his papers should have been the ones to survive", the most relevant information that Mannheim has to offer is that Cliff "did not distinguish himself". Even if there had been something exceptional about the boy, it had yet to develop (299). Despite this unfulfilled potential, Cliff did not stand out from his peers, although Mannheim had kept Cliff's old schoolwork, but none of any of his fellow students. These written traces of Cliff's life seem insufficient to amount to even a biographical sketch. On the contrary, the external narrator suggests that it is exactly because Mannheim still holds on to these traces of Cliff that his character slowly recedes from the narrative: "Cliff's biography – if he had one – was likely to consist of the very elements which a man would not be apt to tell a woman. Even supposing that the professor knew the elements, he might not be able to know or to recognize the important ones – the real ones – in Cliff's life, and would perhaps content himself with relating anecdotes that could have happened to anybody" (254).

Mrs. Barrington's estimation of Cliff as a typical American boy and Mannheim's comments that he did not distinguish himself make Cliff's image all the more ubiquitous. That is, especially in his failure to stand out, he could be each and any American boy. In an ironic turn, the quality of Cliff that enabled Alma to distance his memory from Mannheim's communist affiliation – Cliff's being all-American – is also what strips his individuality from him – what could have happened to Cliff could have happened to anybody. Mannheim's remarks about Cliff's failure to stand out begin to resonate with the changing purpose of Alma's memorial. Her imagining of his identity, or any individuating qualities out of which she could construe a narration of his identity, are replaced by a shared anonymity that Wittman identifies as the Unknowns Soldier's transformative relation to the state (10).

However, there is one piece of information, which Mannheim doesn't share with Alma, that might have made Cliff much more distinguishable. Yet when Mannheim hints at this information in conversation with his wife, he immediately ties it to Alma's inability to write. Cliff had once confided in Mannheim a secret which the latter has kept to himself ever since. It is this secret that Mannheim considers "the only thing about him worth telling", yet at the same time the secret is also something that "you couldn't write down or that his aunt would never understand enough to be able to write down" (306). Otherwise completely indistinguishable, Cliff's most defining feature, according to Mannheim, defies being written down. Especially by Alma, who after all tries to write down the story of Cliff's life, based on the sheer notion that she would be unable to understand what this secret might mean.

While Cliff's identity slowly vanishes from memory, his physical body goes missing too. I have already pointed out that at the beginning of the novel Alma receives a

telegram saying that Cliff was missing in action in Korea, and that his letters, which consisted more of lack than of text anyway, stop arriving as well. The papers that were still in Mannheim's possession, too, remain missing for a long time: only after Alma has made amends with the realization that she will never write Cliff's memorial does she receive his old school records and assignments (362). In conjunction with Cliff's missing body and Alma's realization that her connection to him is voided, the memorial she is writing also remains empty. Alma manages to write in her "record book" only "a few indecisive sentence fragments" (309). The written traces that testify to Cliff's existence have disappeared alongside him, or they signal his disappearance in other ways. The letter that eventually confirms his death states that there "wasn't even enough left of him to ship home in his casket" (338). As Alma bemoans that there "should have been something left *from* him for us" (338, original emphasis), she realizes that Cliff was not only missing physically, but was also missing from every aspect of their lives, to the extent that Alma can no longer claim kinship to her nephew. That is, the Cliff that Alma had imagined for herself was never really there in the first place. In a startling revelation Alma exclaims that she "never *knew* Cliff", to which Boyd responds: "we're all pretty much strangers to one another" (338, original emphasis).

Patrick Brantlinger offers a thematic reading of all characters and events that go missing in *The Nephew*. He argues that this prevalence of absent persons signifies a lack at the center of our sense of the self: "Our seemingly substantial experience is never truly present, its center (essence, meaning, origin, goal) is always mysteriously decentered, sliding away, and we ourselves are 'missing in action'" (28). This seems true for Alma's understanding of Cliff's identity. The more she learns about him, the more she realizes that what she held to be true about him slips away from her understanding. Cliff turns out to be wholly decentered and so is Alma's memorial to him – completely void but for those "indecisive sentence fragments."

Brantlinger's assessment of Alma's empty memorial as a testament to the lack at the center of Cliff's identity is reminiscent of Geoffrey Hartman's play on the "whodonut", which imagines identity as having a core that defies representation in language.[6] Yet, as Barbara Johnson already suggests, on the referential level, what we perceive as a lack already functions as a signifier (496). If we read Alma's empty memorial through the lens of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, we see that despite the perceived emptiness at its center, her memorial still signifies, only in different ways than she originally imagined it would do. Acknowledging that the narratives

6 See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of Hartman's and Johnson's use of the "whodonut" figure.

Alma has created about Cliff are empty inventions, Brantlinger interprets her gradual realization that she never really knew her nephew as her resignation to the fact that she will never know a nephew other than the one she had invented. Brantlinger makes the move from "knowing" to "believing" and argues that in the final pages of the novel "Alma appears to solve the mystery of her missing relation by 'believing in' Cliff" (40). By reducing Alma's discoveries about her nephew to a personal crisis, Brantlinger fails to account for her changing attitude towards her neighbors and to recognize its significance: that she has reimagined her sense of citizenship through her unwritten memorial.

"Cliff hated Rainbow"

Afraid that Cliff will recede even further into anonymity, Alma's mind lingers on the secret that Mannheim hinted at, but refused to share with her. While this secret represents for Alma the last point of possible attachment to Cliff, as soon as she discovers what it is, it too contributes to the further stripping away of Cliff's individuating features. In a series of events and conversations with two of her other neighbors, Alma discovers some details about Cliff's life that again shake her belief in an idealized image of her nephew. However, it isn't only this falling from grace that challenges the symbolic value that Alma has attributed to Cliff. The final and definitive blow to Alma's idealization is the literal destruction of Cliff's image – a destruction that not only effaces Alma's idealized image of Cliff, but also contributes to his physical disappearance.

Where Professor Mannheim is the political adversary to Alma's ideas of "good citizenship", two other neighbors, Willard Baker and Vernon Miller, represent her sexual adversaries, even if she at first refuses to acknowledge this. Throughout the novel several characters suggest that the two men are in a romantic relationship. It seems that the whole neighborhood is aware of their homosexuality, except for Alma. When at the beginning of the novel Boyd hints at Willard's homosexuality, Alma expresses ignorance on the subject: "If there's something I should know about him, for heaven's sake tell me, and don't imply that there's more to his character than I could ever hope to understand" (204). This self-imposed ignorance allows Alma to engage with Willard and Vernon, since as long as she is able to deny their homosexuality, she can ask them about their relationship with Cliff without soiling her memory of him.

Just as Alma's resistance to Mannheim's anti-nationalist ideologies is rooted in her investment in absolute morals, so too does her blindness to homosexuality

stem from a worldview in which homosexuality deviates from "good citizenship."[7] If part of her idealized image of Cliff hinges on the disavowal of Mannheim's political convictions, then the disavowal of possible homosexuality seems even more pertinent to her project of immortalizing Cliff's memory. When Faye Laird confronts her with Willard and Vernon's homosexuality, Alma can only respond with a dismissive "I don't know homosexuals" (333). However, this dismissal is immediately followed by Alma's realization that her worldview does not correspond to the reality of her community: "I am afraid I don't know a good many things" (333).

While for Alma the revelation of Willard and Vernon's homosexuality certainly comes as a surprise, she has already begun to change her attitude towards her neighbors. The disavowal of Cliff's possible homosexuality, which Alma eventually coaxes from Vernon, can thus be explained in two ways. For one, it could be a means to safeguard her memory of Cliff from contamination with identifications that run counter to her ideals of citizenship. But perhaps, when read through the lens of her memorial's transformation and her changing relationship with her neighbors, this disavowal rather amounts to another attempt to divest Cliff of any individuating qualities. In stripping him of homosexuality, Alma again turns Cliff into the empty canvass – the average, indistinguishable American boy – onto which Alma's changed relation to her neighborhood can be projected without presenting her with a moral crisis.

To elaborate on this second possibility, I will consider two pivotal events that both thematize Cliff's disappearance and Alma's falsely idealized image of Cliff. When Vernon and Willard are away on holiday, Alma is asked to look after their house. One night, the night during which Boyd has a nightmare of a hydrogen bomb exploding on Rainbow Center, they notice that Willard and Vernon's house is on fire. Running into the house, they discover that the fire mysteriously started in Vernon's locked room. Alma eventually succeeds at forcing the door open, but what they find inside the room is perhaps more shocking than the fire: "A series of almost life-sized photos of the nephew stretched across the walls of the room by wires, raced giddily before them in the reflection and consummation of the fire" (323). As soon as they make

7 The fact that communism and homosexuality appear in conjunction as the greatest threats to Alma's conception of "good citizenship" adds to the political background of the Cold War against which the novel is set. Senator Joseph McCarthy's campaign to purge the United States of any "un-American activity" often brought combined charges of communism and homosexuality against defendants who had to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. This period was later dubbed the "lavender scare" by David Johnson (2004). See also Kimmel (236–237) and van den Oever (32–36).

their discovery, these pictures are consumed by the flames. Once again any physical traces that testify to Cliff's identity vanish altogether. Since early in the novel Alma laments that she has only one photograph of her nephew, this final gesture seems all the more compelling. Right at the moment she rediscovers the image of her nephew, it immediately disappears in flames, and he recedes ever further into anonymity.

Another event that convinces Alma that her idealized image of Cliff is mistaken happens right after she shares the news of Cliff's death with Boyd. In response, Boyd hands Alma a sum of money that had belonged to Cliff. Boyd confesses to Alma that he had found Cliff coming home drunk from a farewell party at Willard and Vernon's, and the money had fallen out of his pocket. Not sure how to respond to this new information, Alma now begins to connect her suspicion of Willard and Vernon's homosexuality to Cliff. Alma finally realizes that she needs to adjust her image of Cliff, which no longer corresponds to her notion of "good citizenship". "I was afraid that maybe his image had got spotted for you", Boyd cautiously tells her, to which she responds: "It has upset things a bit, I suppose" (341).

After being notified of the fire in their house, Vernon and Willard hurry home and in their haste end up in a car crash that kills Willard and leaves Vernon with his leg in a cast. Desperate that she has only Vernon left to ask about their relationship with Cliff, Alma forces herself to set aside her prejudices and asks him directly about the events that occurred just before Cliff left for the army. Alma interrogates him about the photos in his room, the money, and finally her suspicion that Cliff was homosexual. Even though she invites Vernon into her house, her engagement with him is still rooted in feelings of moral superiority. Despite the realization that her image of Cliff has been mistaken, she still looks to Vernon to deny any suspicion of what she considers to be immoral behavior in her nephew. When Vernon claims he recognized something of himself in Cliff, a harsh "what does that mean" from Alma prompts Vernon to add, "he wasn't a homosexual, if that's what you're worried about" (348).

At this point Alma's moral superiority receives a final mortal blow. If she had hoped for another chance to redeem her idealized image of Cliff by Vernon's denial of Cliff's homosexuality, Alma learns a secret even more terrible than Cliff's possible sexual deviance. "Cliff hated Rainbow", Vernon tells Alma, who is in a state of shock:

> He hated taking your and his uncle's charity. You were his Children's Home. He hated everything, I think. He hated being without parents and thinking he was unwanted. He hated for you to feel you had to love him. He never wanted to come back here or hear from anybody. He told me, 'If I had the money I would never be back.' (348)

The final blow to Alma's idealized image of Cliff is that he felt he did not belong in Rainbow Center. He did not want to, or felt that he could not, conform to Alma's notion of family, or beyond that, vision of citizenship. Instead, he wanted to escape the stringent moral worldview that he felt was imposed upon him. At the beginning of the novel Alma had transferred her moral beliefs to her conviction that she would be able to write a record of Cliff's life that reflected her idealized notion of citizenship. Learning that her nephew felt contempt for the notion of citizenship she wanted to write into his biography, Alma can no longer subscribe to that image either.

Threshold of Assent

Reading Alma's realization that she cannot contain her image of Cliff within her ideals of citizenship as the beginning of her own transformation into a democratic citizen offers a viable alternative to the repressive foundations of the American National Symbolic. Towards the end of the novel, Alma has made a somewhat utopian turn and has come to view her relationship with her community as democratic rather than autocratic. The chapter in which this occurs, curiously entitled "Threshold of assent", illustrates not only Alma's changed attitude towards her neighbors, but also indicates her changed ideas of what "good citizenship" entails.

After Alma has come to terms with the fact that she has lost her familial bonds with Cliff, and peace and quiet has been restored to Rainbow Center, the novel makes a full circle by ending again on Memorial Day. This time, however, Alma has not yet hoisted the flag in commemoration of the national holiday. Instead of a pristine flag flying over their house, Boyd actually rips the flag when he tries to retrieve it from the attic. Even though Alma tries to repair the torn fabric, it turns out the flag "was not so easily repaired … once she began working over it" (353). The flag had apparently been in poor shape for a long time now: "other long hidden snags and rents in the material suddenly asserted themselves, as if in conspiracy with the first rent in the fabric, and soon Alma saw that what she held was a tissue of rotted cloth, impossible to mend" (353). The symbol that previously represented Alma's belief in the American nation, and in which she had taken so much pride, is now reduced to a disintegrated piece of fabric that has lost its ceremonial function.

S. Adams does not read the title "Threshold of assent" as signifying a change in Alma's estimation of her neighbors. Instead, he remains convinced of her moral constitution that, however it might have been shaken, continues to measure her neighbors' shortcomings against her own fortitude and remains deeply rooted in

her steadfast moralism. He writes, "Alma opens herself to the healing faith, to the calming authority of one who has known similar sorrow and can 'read' the 'omissions' of others in the dazzling light of her own, and so she arrives at the 'Threshold of assent' as this last chapter is so aptly entitled with its further hint of her readiness for the final peace of that other 'Great Physician' – death" (73). Adams frames Alma's "assent" much differently than Chupack, who calls her "a more understanding Alma" (59). Schwarzschild, too, sees a positive change in Alma, who in the final chapters renounces "the rules and tradition that prevented her from loving" (43). Now that Alma has shed the convictions that brought her to condemn the moral failings of her neighbors, she is finally able to make peace with them.

Once the memorial is finished, the community moves on and restores the "civil order" that had governed it before Alma began her disruptive queries. Professor Mannheim's reputation at college is vindicated, Vernon Miller and Faye Laird decide to marry after the events that had befallen them, and even the alcoholic Minnie Hawkes receives her redemption and takes the bedridden Mrs. Van Tassel on a restorative trip to South Carolina (351–352). Alma even brings herself to include Vernon in her immediate circle of friends. During their interview after the car crash, Vernon remarks that "this is the first time [he'd] been invited inside a Rainbow house" (344), after which Alma writes a dedication on his cast reading "*To Vernon Miller/From His Friend And Neighbor/Alma Mason*" (345, original emphasis) and urges him to call her Alma instead of Miss Mason (350).

The significance of these scenes of reconciliation are underlined by another, but final transformation of Alma's memorial. After seeking her peace with Vernon Miller, the subject of Cliff's secret – his money – also becomes part of the transformative process that was initiated by her memorial. Vernon suggests that Alma "use those four thousand dollars as some kind of memorial for [Cliff]", and proposes "a plot of flowers or flowering trees or something between your property and mine" (350). The plot of land that Vernon refers to is exactly the one that Alma wanted to buy in her colonizing attempt to protect the neighborhood from corrupting capitalist influence. Turning it into a garden as a memorial to Cliff signifies that the memorial itself has now also obtained a different relationship with the community. Although Alma felt that her biography was publicly commissioned, it nevertheless remained a private project through which she renegotiated her relationship with Cliff and the state. A garden between two properties, on the other hand, is by definition a public memorial through which all members of the community can define their relationship with the National Symbolic. Rather than a singular and absolute vision of how Cliff embodied "good citizenship", Alma's memorial literally becomes a symbol that connects her

with the elements of the community that she used to abhor. Whereas Alma's idea of "good citizenship" used to entail a community that expressed a steadfast belief in absolute morals, safeguarded through surveillance, she now sees her community as relational. She no longer invests in absolute morals against which to measure her neighbors. Instead, she creates a space in which the members of her community can meet despite their differences. Alma's relation to the National Symbolic, through this final change in her memorial project, changes from autocratic and monolithic to democratic and inclusive.

In this chapter I have directed the focus of my reading of Purdy's work away from a strictly narratological methodology, and introduced intertextual readings and interpretational framing devices that each interact differently with the novel's conceptualization of citizenship. Reading *The Nephew* alongside *The Scarlet Letter* places the novel in a tradition of literary works that reevaluate the Puritan foundations of the United States by scrutinizing the objects that represent the relation of these works' protagonists to the National Symbolic. Just as Hester Prynne can be seen as renegotiating America's Puritan heritage after the Revolution, Alma Mason can be read as renegotiating her outlook on citizenship in the political climate of the Cold War.

By reading Alma's mission to write a memorial to her missing nephew against symbols that structure American citizens' relations to the National Symbolic – national holidays such as Memorial Day, civic myths such as the frontier and virgin land, and national monuments such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – I have traced how her complex feelings about "good citizenship" transform along with the changing function of her own writing project. What other critics have seen as failure, I see as an opportunity for Alma to renegotiate her own relationship with her community. Reading failure not as the absence of signification, but as an performative act in and of itself as Halberstam urges us to do, has opened the novel to a redemptive reading of Alma's attachment to her nephew. The changing nature of the symbol through which Alma attaches her own identification with the state, which is prompted by her failure to write it, exposes how the National Symbolic is not a fixed set of narratives and symbols, but rather a screen onto which different identifications are projected differently, each producing different results. Unlike *Children Is All*, then, *The Nephew* offers a hopeful reading of our attachment to the National Symbolic. Despite Purdy's obvious cynicism towards Alma's naive investment in her own moral worldview, as clearly expressed by the characters surrounding her, Alma participates actively in the transformation of the symbols that represent her views on citizenship.

Finally, if we see her failure as a performative act, as an act that produces new meanings, we recognize that Alma has learned to accept Cliff's disappearance without suffering a crisis of faith. Returning to the second Memorial Day with which the novel closes, Alma suggests to Boyd that this day "was his day" (363). Cliff is now represented by the national holiday that commemorates fallen American soldiers and that is so closely tied to the rhetoric of the Unknown Soldier memorial that now symbolizes her new relation to the nation. Cliff is no longer missing; he is now part of Alma's transformed, democratic vision of citizenship, which allows for a more inclusive identification with her community. This inclusion is the assent that Alma moves into. Now she can interpret Cliff's failure to write substantial letters to her in the light of her own transformative failure: "Cliff knew we cared … and that made him care too, at last, though he never said it, and he didn't have the gift, you and I know, to write it" (363).