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A Cosmopolitan Conceptualisation of Place and New Topographies of Identity in Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men*¹

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In an interview coinciding with the publication of his novel *Gods Without Men*, British author Hari Kunzru explained how this fictional text originated during his 2008 fellowship at the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center in the New York Public Library when researching on the subject of sixteenth-century India for his planned book. This initial project, which had been the motivation for Kunzru’s temporary relocation to the United States where he is still resident, was soon overridden by his American experience and his consequent need to process it intellectually and artistically. As Kunzru declares, ‘I’d underestimated what it would mean to be in America, surrounded by Americans, having to deal with and understand America in a way that I hadn’t before. It seemed the only sensible thing I could write about was America’.² Although Kunzru does not explicitly claim to have written an American novel in the traditional sense of the term, with its associations to a specific national ethos, *Gods Without Men* is a notable contribution to the reconceptualisation of the American novel and of American literary history in the current context of globalisation and transnational exchanges.

In his earlier work, Kunzru has also engaged critically with the consequences of globalisation processes on individual and collective identities. Significantly, Peter Childs and James Green selected Kunzru’s work as representative of a twenty-first century British fiction which ‘assumes a common backdrop, which can be described in terms of the forces of globalization [which took] precedence over national contexts’.³ Kunzru’s second novel *Transmission* (2005) epitomises this fictional focus, by analysing the consequences of transnational interconnectedness facilitated by modern technologies in a global age. Far from being a paean of contemporary global mobility, Kunzru’s work shares a concern with the type of ‘totalising mode’ that, as David Lyon observes, discussing an age as ‘global’ can produce.⁴ Kunzru’s fiction is marked by global mobility in different epochs and denounces the disruptive consequences of totalising narratives of the global on individual and collective identities.⁵ This is what unites such apparently disparate novels as *The Impressionist* (2002), *Transmission* (2005) and *Gods Without Men* (2009). Whereas *The Impressionist*, as Shane Graham contends, shows how ‘the cracks in structures of colonial domination [...] give[e] characters space to recreate their identities and their collective

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⁴ Childs and Green 8.
⁵ This critical view of global mobility is also a key component in Berthold Schoene’s analysis of contemporary fiction in his seminal study *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009). As Schoene contends, global, transnational mobility ‘as a commodity is by no means unproblematic; it remains a fraught and divisive manifestation of the unequal distribution of both socio-economic and cultural capital’ (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, 3).
memories’, his second novel *Transmission* (2005) continues this critique of the damage caused by totalising narratives by focusing on the contemporary discourse of global interdependence. Set in present time, the novel maintains the theme of transnational mobility and exposes the deficiencies of a positivistic discourse of the ‘global’ that emphasises the advantages of transnational flows of information, people and goods. By centring on the figure of the slightly dysfunctional computer geek Arjun Mehta, the novel problematises, as Phillip Leonard argues, ‘neoliberal narratives of global inclusion and points instead to an alternative politics of social intervention.’ Kunzru’s latest novel further elaborates on this thread of critiquing totalising narratives, also traceable in *My Revolutions* (2007). However, whereas in Kunzru’s earlier work the global took precedence over national contexts, as Childs and Green claim, *Gods Without Men* focuses on the American national context in order to contest narratives of the nation that exclude the role of global interconnectedness from their definition. Kunzru’s novel is a significant contribution to this change of the national narrative that has already been noted by contemporary analyses of the transformation of the American national novel.

As Richard Gray observes in his analysis of the contemporary American novel in what he terms ‘a time of crisis’, since the late 1980s American fictional writing has become increasingly defined by the work of authors of migrant background produced in the conditions of cultural mixture fostered by globalisation. As often observed by the numerous analyses of the current globalising process, improved transport systems and communication technologies have played a crucial role in the increase and intensified pace of transnational flows of people, goods, and information. According to Gray, in the American context, this has implied not only the augmented presence of American culture internationally, but also the internationalisation of national culture, and, consequently, a deepening awareness of the profound transformation in traditional definitions of national identity and its literary expressions. As Caren Irr contends, ‘accelerated migration and increased interpenetration of global markets [have changed] the face of US literature’; the national novel has changed shape in the process of ‘incorporat[ing] politically charged elements of the global scene.’

The profound transformations in the national outlook following globalisation which, in the literary sphere, have effected these redefinitions of the national novel have been most notably analysed by German sociologist Ulrich Beck. In his seminal piece *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, Beck argues that, in the present era of reflexive modernity, there has been a shift from a national to a ‘cosmopolitan outlook’, which is characterised by a ‘conceptual reconfiguration of our

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8 Richard Gray, ‘Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis,’ *American Literary History* 21.1 (2009): 128-48. Gray’s ‘time of crises’ includes the death of America’s ‘sinister other, the USSR’, as well as ‘the birth of a world characterized by transnational drift, the triumph of global capitalism, and the re-emergence of religious fundamentalism’ (128). Interestingly, Gray’s term suggests the anxiety that derives from phenomena related to the contemporary process of globalisation.


10 Irr 661.
modes of perception’. This reconfiguration results in an epistemological shift in which the either/or logic characteristic of the former national methodological paradigm is replaced with a logic of ‘inclusive differentiation’. In this new cosmopolitan logic, or ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’, the purportedly clear-cut boundaries of the units of research of various disciplines are radically transformed; binary opposites such as local vs. global, national vs. international, internal vs. external enter a both/and relationship which emphasises interconnectivity and expresses the overlapping coexistence of possible worlds that characterises a cosmopolitan view of present reality.

Beck’s cosmopolitan vision informs what Emily Johansen terms ‘territorialized cosmopolitanism’, namely ‘a consideration of the everyday experience of global connections in local places’ that characterises contemporary transnational fiction. As Johansen contends, this fiction, in which she includes Kunzru’s Transmission, emphasises how modern citizenship is shaped by mobility between the global and the local. However, against more traditional understandings of rootless cosmopolitanism, this mobility does not imply a detachment from local culture, but is rather ‘situated in and influenced by material place’. The relational outlook promoted by Beck’s ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ and which informs Johansen’s ‘territorialized cosmopolitanism’ has fostered a reconfiguration of key terms in definitions of national identity, a theme which is specifically relevant to Kunzru’s Gods Without Men. It is my contention that Kunzru’s novel thematically and in terms of narrative structure contests the national outlook and suggests the need for a redefinition of individual and collective identities from a cosmopolitan perspective. Whereas Johansen’s analysis of Kunzru’s Transmission highlights the relevance of mobility in and between various localities in shaping modern citizenship, Gods Without Men emphasises how the local, metonymically identified with national identity, is intrinsically informed by global interconnectedness, a view that is made obvious when the local is considered from a diachronic perspective. By historicising and re-examining from a current global viewpoint traditional understandings of the sense of place characteristic of constructs of national identity, with special attention to the inextricably

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12 Beck 5.
14 Johansen 4.
15 In this sense, Kunzru’s use of history is in line with Douglas Coupland’s interpretation of this feature as characteristic of what he terms ‘translit novels’, namely narratives that ‘span geography without changing psychic place’ and which place ‘the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present’ (Douglas Coupland, ‘Convergences’ [Review of Gods Without Men], New York Times 8 March 2012.). In what he terms this ‘new literary genre’, Coupland includes Michael Cunningham’s The Hours and David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas. To this, it must be added Mitchell’s Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet (2012), which, by revisiting the conventions of the historical novel subgenre, suggests that this use of history with a view on the present is not as new as Coupland seems to imply. As Kunzru claims, this use of history as ‘a sort of distancing device to heighten some set of situations or ideas’ is in line with conventional historical novels. However, the second view of history is its interpretation as ‘a way of interrogating the present’ (Max Haiven, ‘An Interview with Hari Kunzru: Networks, Finance Capital, and the Fate

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interrelated concept of spirituality, Kunzru provides a cosmopolitanised narrative of America, which underscores the complexity and relationality of experience.

The narrative in *Gods Without Men* pivots on the specific locale of the Pinnacles in the Mojave Desert, a quasi-metaphysical location in which the various storylines, set at various points in time since the eighteenth century, crisscross to weave a multi-threaded pattern, whose final product refracts a bounded notion of place, or what Marc Augé calls ‘anthropological place’. In Augé’s terms, this symbolic construction of space is defined as ‘the indigenous fantasy of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil outside which nothing is really understandable,’ and with spiritual traces that inhabit it, ‘traces of chthonian or celestial powers, ancestors or spirits which populate and animate its private geography’ and which inform foundation narratives. The short story that opens the narrative of *Gods Without Men* partially evokes this construct, and the opening line alone meets the distinctive features of the above definition of anthropological place: ‘In the time when the animals were men, Coyote was living in a certain place.’

The absence of specifically named temporal and spatial referents, together with the presence of the anthropomorphised Coyote, a familiar figure in Native American Indian traditional legends, vests the story with the legendary quality that is associated with foundation narratives. However, in this story Coyote is not a creator god, but rather a figure of destruction that concentrates his creative energies in the production of methamphetamine by reducing tablets of pseudoephedrine. In this manner, the nature of the old symbols of foundation narratives is perverted, suggesting that the certain place and society to which they are related are infused with a veneer of modern decay and anxiety. Although this short narrative concludes with the announcement of Coyote’s departure and the end of events, this sense of finality is subverted by Kunzru, who, in a quasi-tongue-in-cheek mode, implicitly impersonates Coyote as a trickster narrative creator. Thus, after tricking the reader into believing that the story and Coyote see their end after three pages, closing the story with the lines: ‘And Coyote left that place. That is all,’ Coyote emerges repeatedly throughout the novel in the form of various secondary characters in the different storylines, which suggests their inescapable interconnectivity and the relational creation of meaning. Thus, the location of the story in the apparent marginal paratext of the novel, together with the recurrent presence of Coyote, underscore the necessary interpretation of the story as a preface to the novel; this prefatory narration suggests that the traditional definition of anthropological place has been transformed by what Beck identifies as contemporary global threats, symbolised in this story by the use of drugs, a transnationally spread ‘bad’.

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17 Augé 42.
19 According to Beck, the cosmopolitanisation of reality is a consequence of ‘global trade and global threats, such as climate change, terrorism or financial crises’ (19), to which, as argued in this article, the commerce of illegal drugs can be added as an example that simultaneously embodies forms of global trade and a global threat. These threats have evinced the limitations of the institutions of the nation-state to regulate the spread of these ‘bads’ across national borders, and have in turn caused the formation of transnational interdependencies, based on the shared

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interpretative line for the remainder of the novel, namely an analysis of the transformation of the bounded, self-contained sense of place, characteristic of unified constructs of collective identity, into a ‘global sense of place’.

In the 1990s the influence of globalisation on the field of geography caused a resurgence of the interest in definitions of place and space, and the articulation of various theories of place, characterised by their emphasis on ‘openness, connectivity, mobility and exchange’. These theories promoted the understanding that place as unbounded and translocal is the dominant paradigm. In this sense, Doreen Massey analyses the effects on a local sense of place and society of what global studies have termed the ‘time-space compression’ characteristic of the present era, resulting from the accelerated and mass transnational flows of information, people and goods. Various theories of globalisation have emphasised the dissolution of borders and disruption of horizons, which generate a sense of postmodern anxiety at the loss of reference points, which, in turn, echoes Marx’s ‘annihilation of space by time’. In her analysis, however, Massey counters the argument of the dissolution of place and the local as an aftermath of globalisation. She contends that the local does not dissolve and that ‘social meaning’ does not evaporate, in opposition to what Manuel Castells argues in his theory of place articulated in The Informal City. Rather, place is transformed into ‘a meeting-place, the location of the intersections of particular bundles of activity spaces, of connections and interrelations, of influences and movements.’ This relational global sense of place informs Beck’s conceptualisation from a cosmopolitan perspective, in which the social meaning of place is reconsidered. According to Beck, national societies are transformed by a process of ‘internal cosmopolitanisation’ in which place becomes ‘the locus of encounters and interminglings or, alternatively, of anonymous coexistence and the overlapping of possible worlds and dangers.’ It is this type of ‘internal cosmopolitanisation’ that the rock formation of the Pinnacles in the experience of crisis, which are translated into the configuration of what Beck terms a ‘world risk society’.

In Kunzru’s novel, though, the sense of community characterised by transcultural, transhistorical interdependencies is based on an understanding of the transformation of spirituality under the influence of globalisation, and the transnational human need for spiritual meaning that is the basis of all religious denominations and cults. As Kunzru observes, ‘Gods Without Men’ is a book about God, the way that to be human is to find some liveable way of orienting yourself towards the unknown or the unknowable, whether you decide there is some sense of transcendental meaning or some sort of stable or theoretical story you want to tell, or whether you feel there is some sort of void you’re in relation to’ (Haiven 19).

23 Quoted in Massey, Global 24.
25 Massey, Conceptualization 59.
26 Beck 9.
27 Beck 10.
Mojave Desert symbolises. However, whereas current reconceptualisations of place mostly focus on the transformation of the sense of time and space as a result of present socio-historical events, Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* foregrounds the need to historicise the sense of place and, thereby, decompress the global concept of time-space compression so as to contest arguments for the flattening effect of globalisation on time and space, and a postmodern sense of an ‘end of history.’

The specific locale of the Pinnacles in *Gods Without Men* acts as a symbolic anthropological place which is redefined when considered from the perspective of contemporary globalisation and transnational interconnectedness. Kunzru’s choice of the Pinnacles to articulate his views on present America is arguably justified by the classification of this rock formation as a National Natural Landmark, under the protection of the American National Park system. The synechdochic interpretation of this location in Kunzru’s novel as a symbol for the whole nation is supported by the understanding that the main aim of the National Park System is to underscore the ‘ability of […] national historical sites, cultural symbols, and natural environments to contribute to the public sense of a shared national identity.’ If sites like the Pinnacles are understood as carriers of national meaning, a relevant question when analysing the Pinnacles in *Gods Without Men* is, therefore, what meaning about the nation Kunzru is constructing in his novel. Whereas this unusual geological formation is popularly known for its natural value and association with Native American tradition, Kunzru constructs an additional range of ‘possible worlds and dangers’ through the stories that crisscross the caverns of the Pinnacles.

The two main plot lines are, on the one hand, that of Jaz and Lisa, a New York couple of Punjabi and Jewish origins respectively, and their autistic son Raj, and, on the other, the story of the development of the cult founded by a troubled aircraft engineer named Schmidt in post-Second World War America. These two narrative lines, though initially separate, meet in the Mojave Desert in unexpected and apparently fortuitous circumstances. These plot lines are also counterpointed by the stories of the Spanish Franciscan friar Fray Francisco Garcés, a missionary and explorer in the colonial Viceroyalty of New Spain in 1770s; a Mormon miner in 1871, who is murderously racist against the Chinese mine workers; the post-First World War shell-shocked amateur ethnologist Deighton and his neglected wife Eliza, who will eventually abandon him for the Indian Mockingbird Runner/Willie Prince; the Iraqi teenager Laila, who is living in California with her uncle Hafiz, ‘the proudest American she knew’; and the English rock star Nicki Capaldi, who has moved with his band to the United States with the aim of conquering the American market. This deceptively arbitrary narrative structure echoes other

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28 In his review of *Gods Without Men*, Douglas Coupland argues that, as a translit novel, Kunzru’s text suggests a type of ‘post-era era’, ‘an aura-free universe in which all eras coexist at once – a state of possibly permanent atemporality given to us courtesy of the Internet.’ However, one of the main strengths of the novel is its emphasis on the need to maintain awareness of the existence of a past, with its own particularities, which significantly relates to the present in various ways. Kunzru himself does not share Coupland’s views on this purported flattening of time. As Kunzru remarks, ‘I think we live in a highly historically specific moment that has its own texture, its own quality and that will in turn be historicised in the future’ (Haiven 18). As suggested in the present analysis, Kunzru’s textrevolves on re-examinations of American cultural history from a contemporary global perspective.


30 Beck 10.
contemporary fictional texts that have been identified as ‘fictions of the global’.

Following this narrative model, episodes from the various plot lines are randomly arranged in a manner that, although each story independently maintains a chronological organisation of events, the narrative as a whole subverts the linear narrative of the traditional novel form. Although this structure is initially perceived as arbitrary, the numerous echoes that are scattered in all stories – such as ‘the Itinerary of the Spanish friar Garcés’ (221) which Deighton reads; or the Ashtar record made by the UFO cult in 1971, found in 2008 by Nicky Capaldi in a record store in a Mojave town, and eventually bought by Laila (276) – reverberate, creating the cumulative effect of inevitable interconnectivity of these various culturally diverse moments in time. Kunzru the trickster initially deludes the reader only to reveal, as the narrative progresses, that there is actually method in this apparent madness. This method and its aim are indirectly revealed by Cy Bachman, the mind behind the creation of Walter, a Kabbalistic computer financial model that is based on finding apparently random connections in the occurrence of events around the world. As Bachman informs Jaz in their discussion about this model,

[t]here’s a tradition that says the world has shattered, that what once was whole and beautiful is now just scattered fragments. Much is irreparable, but a few of these fragments contain faint traces of the former state of things, and if you find them and uncover the sparks hidden inside, perhaps at last you’ll piece together the fallen world. (138)

As Bachman further clarifies, in order to find the link between the different pieces of ‘the fallen world,’

you can’t just rummage about like you’re at a yard sale. You have to listen. You have to pay attention. There are certain things you can’t look at directly. You need to trick them into revealing themselves. That’s what we’re doing with Walter, Jaz. We’re juxtaposing things, listening for echoes. (138).

Thus, through the highly stylised narrative structure, mirrored by the financial model’s functioning, Kunzru makes the readers ‘listen for echoes’ and, thereby, heightens the readers’ awareness of the most prominent meaning in the narrative, namely, the fact that the conditions of cultural mixture that are often regarded as characteristic of the present era are not new. As Beck notes in his definition of the cosmopolitan outlook, ‘what is new is not forced mixing but awareness of it, its self-conscious political affirmation, its reflection and recognition before a global public.

As many of the stories suggest, one of the most characteristic results of cultural mixture has historically been the experience of culture clash, often tainted with the opposition between different understandings of religion and spirituality. In his debut novel The Impressionist,
Kunzru already displayed his interest in analysing the tragic effects on the individual of the racist attitudes that derived from cultural encounters in colonial contexts, specifically in India at the turn of the twentieth century. Both *The Impressionist* and *Gods Without Men* are concerned, to a large extent, with the instability of identity and its causes. However, whereas in the former the analysis of the causes is heavily influenced by postcolonial discourses, *Gods Without Men* centres on a re-examination from a global, cosmopolitan perspective of the culture war discourse that has been dominant in the United States, especially in the media and political spheres, since the early 1990s, and which was further fuelled by the events of 9/11.

This culture war is associated with divergent understandings of the national ethos, and expresses political polarisation between traditionalist, Christian and progressive, secularist views on a number of socio-political issues, including policies of multiculturalism. The term was revived with the publication of sociologist James Davison Hunter’s *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991). In later analyses on the state of American culture, Hunter confirms his partial and ominous view of America by arguing that ‘every day presents us with disheartening signs that America is fragmenting’ and that ‘tensions over social issues […] are undermining the cohesion of our union’. Against the background of this religiously ignited socio-political debate, Kunzru maps in his narrative the spiritual topography of the United States over the last two centuries in order to foreground the points in which the different worldviews that conform the cultural geography of America overlap. This analytical viewpoint provides the framework which contributes to finding what the character Cy Bachman calls ‘echoes’ to remodel ‘the fallen world’ (138) and discover ‘the face of God (139), that is, the logic behind an apparently random selection of timeframes for the various story lines in Kunzru’s narrative, and which roughly corresponds with the maps of American religious history outlined by Martin E. Marty in *A Nation of Behavers* (1976), and the changes in spirituality since the 1990s as identified by Wade Clark Roof in *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999).

Following the chronological classification of the mapping of American religious history, the story line of the Franciscan friar Francisco Garcés corresponds, in terms of its temporal setting, with the territorial mapping of established churches of the colonial period (1600-1775). However, Kunzru significantly focuses on Garcés as an individual representing one of the Christian branches that were in the minority at that time in the thirteen English colonies. Similarly, in the denominational mapping of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kunzru singles out one of the minority denominations in the figure of the Mormon miner Nephi Parr, with the action set in 1871, as well as outlining Native American religious beliefs in the story of Deighton’s encounter with an indigenous community in the story that spans from the

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34 For a detailed analysis of the persecution of the Catholic Church in the pre-Revolution colonial period, see Terrence Hagen’s *Grandpa’s US Colonial History to 1800* (Bloomington, IN: Abbott Press, 2013). In this historical study of the thirteen English colonies, Hagen provides a number of examples of the intolerance against Catholics that was ironically shown by the Puritans, who had escaped from the continent due to the persecution they suffered because of their religious beliefs. As Hagen notes, ‘for example, a 1700 Massachusetts law mandated that all Roman Catholic priests were to leave the colony within 3 months under threat of life imprisonment or execution. Maryland, in 1704, passed “An Act to Prevent the Growth of Popery within this Province” which basically closed down all Roman Catholic Churches and schools’ (Hagen xiv).
1920s to 1940s. Regarding the political mapping of the 1950s to late 1960s, against the dominant generalised Protestant-Catholic-Jewish American worldview of that time, Kunzru chooses to select the story of the formation of a new cult developing from the late 1940s, founded by Schmidt in the Pinnacles. This cult, representative of the fourth map of American religion propounded by Marty and characterised by its attention to group identities and social belonging, displays in Kunzru’s fictional representation the perverse consequences of abusing individuals’ yearning for social belonging. This is performed through the focus on the character development of Dawn, one of the cult’s adepts until the late 1980s, who, at a point of heightened self-awareness, decides to abandon the life of drugs and prostitution to which she had been drawn by the cult in order to become the owner of the motel in the Mojave Desert where most of the action in 2008 unfolds.

In this moment of transition in her life, Dawn reflects: ‘Was the life she’d led just another bardo, another intermediate state? Waking consciousness was a bardo, between past and future existences’ (274). From a narrative viewpoint, Dawn’s thoughts echo the necessary ‘juxtaposing [of] things’ (138) propounded by Cy Bachman in the creation of de-ontologised meaning, and which accounts for the narrative structure of the novel. In thematic terms, this display of her capacity for self-reflection and her articulation of these thoughts through the use of Buddhist vocabulary is evidence, not only of transcultural influences, but also of the transition towards a spirituality that enables a greater focus on the individual, which is characteristic of the present age. As Roof observes, ‘the energizing forces [of identity] arise out of quests not so much for group identity and social location as for an authentic inner life and personhood.’ In contemporary society, as set in 2008-2009, this spiritual quest is represented by Jaz and Lisa, on the one hand, and the English rock star Nicky Capaldi, on the other, all three separately embodying different forms of contemporary secularisation. Despite their national and socio-cultural differences, these characters share a need to fill with ‘personal meaning’ an inner void which their particular life circumstances have created; in the case of Nicki Capaldi these difficulties derive from a lack of direction in his life, which culminates with the failure of his band’s American adventure. For Jaz and Lisa these difficulties derive from the individual vs. the collective conflict of an intercultural marriage and the loss and later recovery of their son Raj, who after being found in the desert is inexplicably overcoming his autism.

It is precisely the quest for spiritual depth and a need to fill an ‘inner void’ which is shared by all the protagonists in the different stories. As Kunzru observes in relation to this novel, ‘I’m very interested in the way the structure of religious yearning and mystical experience is very constant, but the contents change.’ This conceptual overlap between stories and their protagonists’ concerns is symbolised by the crisscrossing of the stories in the rock formation of the Pinnacles. Noticeably, this specific location remains seemingly invariable throughout the times in its quasi-metaphysical force, but its definition alters depending on the spiritual viewpoint from which it is described. For Jaz and Lisa, for example, ‘the three-fingered hand of

36 Roof 7.
37 Haiven 19.
the Pinnacle Rocks’ is a ‘vast emptiness, an absence’ (381),\(^38\) whereas for Fray Garcés the ‘three-spired shape [is] considered auspicious as a representation of the Trinity’ (383). Thus, as suggested by the contrapuntal analysis of the mapping of American religion in *Gods Without Men*, Kunzru’s focus lies on undermining given constructs of identity, in this case of religious identities, with their close associations to the characterisation of a sense of place in national feeling. This subversion is mainly performed by revealing the constructed nature of this mapping through focusing on the minority religious or spiritual beliefs that have been marginalised in these topographical enterprises. Concomitantly, though, the juxtaposition of these individual stories reveals not only a different ‘face of God’ (139), or map of American spirituality, and by extension, of collective identity, metaphorically expressed through a sense of place as embodied by the Pinnacles, but it also serves to question the conservative worldview of a divided American society between traditionalist and progressive positions propounded by the advocates of a ‘culture-war’ paradigm since the 1990s.

As argued in this article, the juxtaposition of the different narratives in Kunzru’s novel enables the historicisation of traditional understandings of a sense of place, with special emphasis on the role of spirituality in constructions of individual and collective identity. The narrative structure plays a double role in, on the one hand, recognising difference by preserving the individuality and historical conditioning of each of these separate stories, and, on the other, emphasising the spiritual void as the common fear that runs through cultural and historical differences, thus foregrounding transcultural connections within the nation. Interconnectivity at a narrative level echoes the re-examinations of place and its societal meaning that emphasise relationality, unboundedness and openness as a way to counter what Beck regards as the essentialism of the national outlook which ‘separates historically interwoven cultural and political realities.’\(^39\) From this cosmopolitan perspective, the conceptual mappings of place, identity and spiritual beliefs are revealed as fluid and contextually defined or influenced, according to Johansen’s ‘territorialised cosmopolitanism’, by material place.\(^40\) As suggested from a cosmopolitan viewpoint, signifiers such as place, borders, locality, and nation do not dilute in the mesh of globalising influences; the signifiers are maintained, though, repeatedly throughout the times, they have new layers of interpretation added, which are shaped by their socio-historical context. Thus, the Pinnacle Rocks and their attraction for their capacity to inspire sublime awe remain unchanged throughout history. However, this awe is differently interpreted in relation to the spiritual belief that dominates the individual worldview. Similarly, the intermittent appearance of Coyote throughout the novel in animal form (14) or anthropomorphised and his mystical attachment to the Mojave Desert have the cumulative effect of suggesting the lack of finality in the creation of meaning and its multiperspectival character. Thus, Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men*, with its juxtaposition of story lines and their numerous echoes, suggests the need for a new interpretative model which uncovers ‘the same national

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\(^38\) This description of the desert is suggestive, as Kunzru reveals, of negative mysticism, ‘the idea that the divine is an eternal mystery, forever invisible and unfathomable, and can only be divined by what it is not. God is an absence, a void: the empty desert, the alien that never responds.’ (Rollo Romig, ‘Staring into the Void with Hari Kunzru,’ *The New Yorker* 13 March 2012.).

\(^39\) Beck 30.

\(^40\) Johansen 4.

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reality differently, and different, additional, realities in new ways,\textsuperscript{41} thus also contributing to contemporary redefinitions of the American novel as characterised by transcultural and transnational concerns. This theme is structurally translated in the new meaning that the ending of Kunzru’s prefatory short story acquires on completion of the novel. It is in hindsight, through the knowledge gained in the reading experience of this text, that the short story’s ending ‘and Coyote left that place. That is all, thus it ends’ (3) acquires new significance. In Kunzru’s narrative, when Coyote, symbol of historicised interconnectivity, makes his way out of a place and a story this is merely to signal that ends are only new beginnings; doors that open to a myriad of interdependent stories and ‘possible worlds’ of interpretation, and that, by extension, apparent finality of history or traditional collective constructs of identity are constantly re-evaluated through a historicised view of present concerns.

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\textsuperscript{41} Beck 31.