

## When Caesars Dance, Masks Multiply: Celebrating the Soul's Otherness and Dionysian Initiation in Carole Maso's *Ghost Dance*

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### Abstract

*With reference to Carole Maso's Ghost Dance and focusing on one specific character, the Italian American grandfather, Angelo, the present paper tried to study the archetypal images of Caesars which fed the self-centred patriarchal Western 'ego' and, thus, poisoned the character's soul, hindered his freedom, and affected his relationships. While the first part dealt with the four manifestations of 'Caesar': the Christian God, the patriarchal Father, the white Anglo-centric man, and the Italian 'master,' the second part attempted to highlight the importance of masks in freeing the 'ego' from the dominance of Caesars. The soul selects 'its' own society by discovering other images, gods, spirits, and ghosts and the character's freedom depended on the 'remythologization' of these multiple facets of the psyche.*

**Keywords:** Archetypes, the Dionysian, Otherness, Shamanism.

As Holly E. Martin notes, U.S. ethnic writers revolt against the hegemonic idea of a “completely unified subject or self” (Martin 85) by including figures or ‘presences’ from ‘pagan’ myths and legends because the flexibility of these personages and their multiple facets might inspire the modern person with stories of transformation to facilitate the process of shifting identity in a multicultural world. Carole Maso is an Italian-American woman writer known for her avant-garde style in novels such as *The Art Lover*, *AVA*, and *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*. Her first novel, *Ghost Dance*, portrays the life of an American family between the legacies of the past and the promises of the future. The present is in flux with the main character, Vanessa, looking for “some philosophy” (81) inside her. During her ‘dance’, Vanessa tells us about her artist mother, Christine Wing, her father, her brother Fletcher, and her grandparents.

This paper focuses on Vanessa’s Italian-American grandfather Angelo. Angelo tried to escape his ‘Old World’ to become ‘somebody.’ He came to the New World with his wife Maria seeking a new life, a new beginning for, as he says, “Europe became for the birds” and “Italy is for the birds” (77). However, Angelo reached a land where the history he tried to leave behind him was also there waiting for the little Caesars to feed the ‘American Self.’ After a long journey of searching for his ‘self’ in the New World, the Italian American character discovered Shamanic rites of transformation inspired by Native American Shamans, or Medicine Men, such as the ritual of the ‘Ghost Dance’. To become more human, the Ghost Dancer learns to accept the multiplicity of the ‘soul’ by embracing his own ‘otherness’.

### The Realm of Caesar

Angelo cannot find his ‘new beginning’ because he is blinded by the American dream. He is bound by a “perfectionist obligation” (Miller 7) that makes him think about the end, the purpose, and the goal. As David L. Miller states, “[a]ll our nurture—in education, religion, life—taught us to look for the end” (27) for “to be perfect is to be at the end, to end, happy ending” (Miller 25). The Italian-American character finds himself repeating the history of his ancestors: trying to become ‘the Greatest’, the richest, the most successful, the happiest, the perfect, the ‘real American’: “‘Maria,’ my grandfather said one day long ago, ‘today your name is Mary. Today I change my own name from Angelo to Andy. Today we are real Americans’” (76). Indeed, Angelo wants to become a hero for, as James Hillman argues, the hero myth is the model for ego-development in the Western world (*Blue* 231) and as Vanessa proceeds, telling her grandfather’s story:

The evening of their second day here, my grandfather registered both of them for English classes at the local school. Right from the start he was a model student, staying late, trying to improve his pronunciation, preserving.

“I leaf in New Hope, Pencil-bannia,” he said hesitantly, concentrating impossibly hard on every syllable. “I live, I live, I live in New Hope, Pencil, Pencil-vay-knee-a in the United States of America.” I’m sure my grandfather smiled when he got to the America part, for he could say it perfectly. He had been saying it his entire life.

“America begins and ends with the letter A. America. . . .

“The accent must go,” he said each night before bed. “The accent must go,” he said in the morning to his small son, Michael. “An accent is no good in this new country.”

Maria sighed, exhausted by so much enthusiasm. (77)

The character left Italy, but he could not leave “the realm of ego, of Caesar” (*Blue* 216). In his *Myth of Analysis*, Hillman describes this ego as one ruled by an “Adamic-Apollonic consciousness” (269). The archetype of the ‘Divine Child,’ the ‘Chosen One’ or the ‘Saviour’ who carries with him the cultural ‘baggage’ of his predecessors, haunts the Western world and makes people strive to achieve an unattainable perfection of the ‘self’. With this ‘Child,’ there is the ‘Father’ or the ‘Mother’ who nurtures the hero’s fantasies of ‘monotheism’: wholeness, oneness, pureness, whiteness, homogeneity, and, in a word, ‘Caesarness.’

In *Ghost Dance*, there are four manifestations of this ‘Caesarness’ that possess the male character: The Christian God, the patriarchal Father, the white Anglo-centric man, and the Italian ‘master’. Monotheism is associated with dogmatism, racism, and colonialism. As Margot Adler argues, “Monotheism is a political and psychological ideology as well as a religious one” (24). The crux of the problem is the Judeo-Christian understanding of ‘God’ as the omnipotent transcendent ‘One.’ In the name of this supreme God, hierarchal structures have become the norm in patriarchal societies granting those who are on top of the pyramid more power and legitimacy to ‘become divine’ and superior beings. As Whitehead remarks, “When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers” (342) and since then, monotheism has been the doctrine of the higher races and ‘the Religion’ of chosen people while the narrow minds of the ‘inferior and the primitive’ cannot comprehend the idea of a “Supreme Creator” (Adler 26).

A perfect example of a ‘Divine Child’ is the figure of ‘Christ the Shepherd’ because “the shepherd is a fundamental image of the sense of perfection” (Miller 11). He is the “good” (Miller 11) child who teaches his followers how to become ‘perfect’ lambs, “One Flock” (Miller 11): “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (MATTHEW 5:48 qt. in Miller). This ‘Father’ is an archetype, a Patriarch who has been acquiring more power and supremacy thanks to an evolutionary reading of history, sociology, archaeology, arts, and geography, depriving the human being of his ‘freedom.’ This Father is also what haunts the imagination of artists like the Italian ‘masters’ who inspire Angelo. These masters reproduce the ‘Father-Divine Child’ archetypes by looking for ‘deification’ through ‘art’. To them, “Art is customary thought as a comforting form of relaxation, a kind of reward or bonus a prosperous society is able to afford certain f its members” (Isaak 55). The master enjoys the “comfy chair” (Isaac 55) of an artist, a ‘Creator,’ while his followers want to show their elitism by admiring ‘his’ Art/Creation. But James Hillman wonders: “[w]hy must the person who lives largely in terms of the creative instinct be damned out of common humanity?” (*Myth* 39).

The image of God in patriarchal cultures is an expression of the reverence of the ‘eternal masculine stereotype’ and its manifestations:

There are a number of conceptions embedded in this picture. The image is hierarchical, based in ancient and feudal notions of kingship –God is above the world and rules it like a king. It is patriarchal, based in notions of the father’s power as supreme and unchallenged. It is racist—the heavenly Father is white, while sin and evil are dark and black. It is dualistic, separating the world into above and below, higher and lower, earth and heaven, time and eternity, good and evil. God’s realm, heaven and eternity, is both higher and better than earthly reality. (Christ 27)

The white Anglo-centric culture of the New World reflects this belief in whiteness as related to 'perfectionism,' 'goodness,' and pureness. Indeed, as Liz Fawcett remarks, this dominating group uses religious discourses to "reinforce the notion of [its] innate superiority" (9) and transform the stories of their ethnic choices into a 'nationhood' rhetoric. Hence, national identity becomes more important than ethnic ones and the 'Other' ethnic groups are "constantly reminded that they 'belong' to a particular nation" (Fawcett 4).

In nation-states, the sense of grandeur is what predominates and leads to the construction of "superethnos, called *the* Germans, *the* French, *the* American people whose members think they have founded [the state] or should have a special role in running it" (Baumann 31). Angelo admires "[t]his wonderful place, America, beginning and ending with A" (77) and as Baumann further explains:

Since modern nation-states arose in the West, roughly from 1500 AD onward, they had to overcome the boundaries of ethnicity among their citizens, and they did so by turning the nation into a superethnos. The nation is thus both postethnic, in that it denies the salience of old ethnic distinctions and portrays these as a matter of a dim and distant pre-state past, and superethnic, in that it portrays the nation as a new and bigger kind of ethnos. Most nation-states, however have failed to complete this project in that they included some ethnic groups and excluded others, or privileged some and marginalized others. (31)

The reason why superethnic nation-states are the predominant productions in patriarchal cultures is that this model enables small elite to control the majority by defacing ethnic and cultural differences to impose their hegemonic views on people. In the United States, for example, the elite's version of the story focuses on the mixed origins of people and, then, "everyone's present identity would be the same = super ethnically American" (Baumann 34). For this reason, Angelo tries hard to efface his 'ethnic' identity; 'the accent must go' and, moreover, as he confesses to his wife Maria, "We need new clothes for a new country;" he 'must' look like an "authentic" American and, hence, he bought "his own blue jeans and work shirts and boots" (77).

The patriarchs believe in the supremacy of the powerful; the one who has possession has the right to rule and to conquer and, as a consequence, they tend to claim their ownership of the roots, history, geography, arts, and stories. In these 'superethnic' states, ethnicity "invokes biological ancestry and then claims that present-day identities follow from this ancestry" (Baumann 19). Accordingly, nation-states cannot be religiously neutral. In the United States of America, narratives of the 'chosen people,' the 'promised Jerusalem,' the 'Saviour,' and the 'Sacred Book' define 'Americanness' and inspire 'The Americans' with symbols to institute a "religion for all citizens" (Baumann 42). This civil religion is what marks 'American nationhood' which means that the United States is not a secular state because it is a superethnic nation-state where religion is rather 'organized' by the dominant elite that controls the 'ethnoreligious capital' of this "Nation under God, whose constitution stresses its 'duty before God' to ensure, in turn, the 'rights of man [that] come from the hands of God,' much as Tom Paine put it first. Its commonest means of social exchange, the dollar bill, bears three religious inscriptions and symbols" (Baumann 44).

The religious rhetoric of the 'Chosen People' and their supreme 'masculine' God provides patriarchs with the moral resources and symbolic images to construct what Liz Fawcett terms a "denominational religion" (Fawcett 9) and occupy the "cultural mainstream of their particular society" (Fawcett 10). This means that the dominant group makes of his religion a marker of nationhood to encourage "the ritual of collective worship" (Fawcett 5). Those who do not participate in this 'collective worship' of the "A," "America" (77) are seen as 'unauthentic' hyphenated Americans and, hence, in nation-states, one is not allowed to 'be' ethnic. Therefore, 'becoming' ethnic is a subversive 'choice' that requires a revolt against the 'religion' of the nation-state and, thus, challenges the myths of Anglo-Saxonism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism.

### Dionysian Becoming

When Angelo left for the New World, he becomes an 'Other'. The 'hero' has fallen and is now an 'ordinary man,' a stranger in a land that has its Caesars. In his paper "The Stranger," Alfred Schutz studies the figure of the 'stranger' and considers his/her role in subverting cultural hegemony: The stranger is 'another Self' (37);

[he], therefore, approaches the other group as a newcomer in the true meaning of the term. At best he may be willing and able to share the present and the future with the approached group in vivid and immediate experience; under all circumstances, however, he remains excluded from such experiences of its past. Seen from the point of view of the approached group, he is a man without a history. (97)

'Without history,' Angelo becomes able to move from the centre of the 'mandala,' that coherent symbol of unity and perfection, to the 'borderland' of outsiders and 'Others'. He is looking at this white, patriarchal, Christian, and American culture from an 'Other's' perspective. There, He is no longer a Caesar and, thus, discovers that this New World is different from what he expected and this is "the first shock to the stranger's confidence in the validity of his habitual 'thinking as usual'" (Schutz 99).

With this 'discovery' and the loss of "his status, his rules of guidance, and even his history" (Schutz 104), Angelo distances his 'Apollonic ego' who stands 'there' with American Caesars while 'he,' as a 'soul', is present with the 'Primitive Others' and, as the grandfather confessed to his grandchildren, "Primitive man was better" because "we had invented a system of hatred and fear so elaborate and so subtle and efficient—in short, so perfect—that it would be nearly impossible to crack" (129). Angelo feels "betrayed at the core" (130) and with this experience, he is reborn. Angelo's awakening starts with a 'vision in a dream' where he is visited by a Native American 'medicine-man.' Thanks to this dream, Angelo enters, what James Hillman terms, a "Dionysian consciousness" (*Myth* 263) and "[t]o 'enter' means 'to be initiated, and the Dionysian cult require[s] initiation" (*Myth* 281).

According to Jung, 'rebirth,' as a concept, has "five different forms," and in Maso's *Ghost Dance*, Angelo undergoes an "indirect rebirth," a "participation in the process of transformation," as Jung calls this fifth form of 'rebirth', where "one has to witness, or take part in, some rite of

transformation” (114-15). The metamorphosis of Angelo begins in his dreams when he is visited by a ‘Dionysian’ presence. This rebirth journey of “the transcendence of life” (Jung 117) involves the character in an “immediate experience,” a “spontaneous, ecstatic, or visionary experience” (Jung 118) where the character hears the ‘voice’ of the ‘underworld,’ the ‘unconscious,’ the deep realm of the ‘soul,’ the ‘Lord of Souls,’ another name for Dionysus. Then, Angelo meets his ‘psyche’ and recognizes that the “soul knows things we never taught it,” he tells his grandchildren, “[t]he soul remembers things we didn’t think we knew. It knows languages we never learned” (80). This happening is what Jung identifies as a “natural transformation” or “individuation” that usually occurs through dreams and, hence, the initiate encounters the “other being,” or “the other person in ourselves—that larger and greater personality maturing within us,” that is to say “the inner friend of the soul” (130-31).

Welcoming this invitation to join the dance of his ‘inner friend,’ Angelo decides to go to this forgotten land to learn the languages of the soul. He voyages to visit the Native American ‘shaman,’ named ‘Two Bears,’ “I dreamed of you,” Angelo says addressing the medicine-man, “I am here to learn” (78). The medicine-man helps him to “fetch” the soul that “has gone off” (Jung 119). He cannot learn the Ghost Dance without a soul; for this reason, “[t]o help make the soul pure and the body, too, the Indians have something that they call the sweat lodge ritual. Heat and steam are made by sprinkling water on huge white-hot rocks” (133). This ‘participation in a transformative rite’ allows the character to communicate with an “endless variety of figures,” the ‘daimones,’ Underworld spirits (Hillman, *Blue* 43). The darkness of the lodge and the flowing waters recall the Underworld and summon the spirits from the “chthonic depths of the soul” (Hillman, *Blue* 43). The dream images become ‘presences’: James Hillman calls ‘remythologization,’ a process through which “psychic contents become *powers, spirits, gods*” (*Blue* 85).

With this rebirth, Angelo resurrects Pan and “when Pan is alive, then nature is too, and it is filled with gods” (Hillman, *Blue* 97). In this ‘ensouled world,’ “[a]ll things show faces” (Hillman, *Blue* 99). These faces mask Angelo’s ‘ego’ and frees him from Caesar: “Maria,” he says addressing his wife, “today your name is Wonderful Thunder” for the ‘Indians’ taught him about “the secret of rain, the dances of the sun, and the earth’s songs” and named him “Dreams of Rain” (79). They taught him how to do the Ghost Dance:

Everyone . . . must dance. There will be food and sweet grass. And the white man will become small fish in the rivers . . . . [E]veryone men and women began dancing the Ghost Dance. They wore the magic Ghost Shirts that were painted with sacred symbols and impenetrable to the bullets of the white man. . . . After doing the dance for a long time, men and women fell into trances. . . . When they came back from the trances they told their dreams to others. (197-98)

The ceremonial practice of the Ghost Dance is a rite of passage that enables the soul to find its images and to make “substitutes” (Hillman, *Blue* 105) by creating masks. The festive landscape with the frenzy shouts, the sweating bodies, and the coloured ‘masks’ create an atmosphere that is considered by Hillman an “initiation into the cosmos of Dionysus” (*Myth* 264). The result of this spiritual journey is to learn the ‘way of the shaman’ because a ‘Dionysian ‘madness’ helps the character to ‘become conscious’: with the blurring of religious and cultural boundaries, Angelo becomes “aware of [monotheistic] fantasies” (Hillman, *Blue* 39).

After performing the 'Ghost Dance', Angelo learns to communicate with his soul and free his 'self' from the domination of a heroic ego. He discovers that "[t]he soul is a beautiful boat, the soul is a slow, beautiful boat" (80). As Hillman further explains on such 'Dionysian' performances: "Training in sensitivity, participation in groups, and emphasis on body experience and imagination have become necessary first-level attempts to awaken psyche by making us aware of soul as it is extended through body, into others, and out to the imaginal realm" (*Myth* 28). According to Michael Harner, the father of 'Core Shamanism,' a

Shaman (pronounced SHAH-maan) is a word from the language of the Tungus of Siberia, and has been adopted widely by anthropologists to refer to persons in a great variety of non-Western cultures who were previously known by such terms as "witch," "witch-doctor," "medicine man," "sorcerer," "wizard," "magic man," "magician," and "seer." (25)

Shamanism is a term that resumes the thoughts of ancient, medieval, and renaissance thinkers who were trying to understand the connections between the human, the natural, and the spiritual worlds. Shamans believe in the existence of spirits which can be encountered when the human being enters a "state of consciousness," a trance, and thus becomes able to commune with creation and affect reality. As a practicing shaman, 'Dreams of Rain,' the Native American name of Angelo, "felt the wind against him on the mountaintop and praised, praised the Great Spirit. . . . He looked at the stones, knelt down and touched their smooth, flat heads. He knew the oldest gods lived there in stone. He lay on the sacred earth for a long time, and listened to the stones that speak" (77-78).

This Dionysian becoming is a universal rite inasmuch as Dionysus travels through the 'imaginal realm' to take different shapes and labels. While Hillman finds him in "Pan" and Wotan, to Jung he is the 'Trickster', the shaman or medicine-man that we find in characters like Hermes, Mercurius, and Yahweh (255-256). He is known for his "powers as shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine" (Jung 255).

In Dionysus, borders join that which we usually believe to be separated by borders. The philosopher is also lover; Socrates is a drinking Silenus; the riotous Dionysus has but one wife, Adriane. Dionysus presents us with borderline phenomena, so that we cannot tell whether he is mad or sane, wild or somber, sexual or psychic, male or female, conscious or unconscious. . . . He rules the borderlands of our psychic geography. There the Dionysian dance takes place: neither this nor that, an ambivalence which also suggests that, wherever ambivalence appears, there is a possibility for Dionysian consciousness. (Hillman, *Myth* 275)

Entering Dionysus does not mean that the Caesar archetype disappeared, but that Angelo is no longer possessed by Caesar since, through 'remythologization,' he becomes open to a "multiplicity of voices" (Hillman, *Blue* 39) that awaken the character's psychic archetypes. The masks represent the 'Babel' of the inner world because "[w]e are never only persons; we are always also Mothers and Giants and Victims and Heroes and Sleeping Beauties. Titans and Demons and Magnificent Goddesses have ruled our souls for thousands of years" (Hillman, *Blue* 5). Angelo is surrounded by Two Bears, Lone Star, Running Antelope, and other presences who "took [him] into their prayers. The sacred person prayed to the spirits of people who had died, of animals, of birds, . . . and he

prayed for [Angelo:] ‘Help the man who sits with us holding in his heart the whole burden of his race’, they chanted” (133-34).

Therefore, not only does Angelo change his Christian conception of God as a patriarchal male, but also reconsiders his Christian understanding of the human relationship to God. Human beings should not see in worshipping any deity a way to become a ‘Divine Child,’ an Apollo, because this kind of consciousness sanctions religious, social, and cultural hierarchies and leads to the birth of ‘Caesars’ who wear the perfect “mask of the divine patriarch” to “keep human beings in a state of infantile subjection” (Daly 18) waiting for the ‘Hero’ to save them. There should be a process of ‘becoming human’ to learn to respect each other’s humanity. After the fall of Caesar, Dreams of Rain identifies with his ‘Others’ and accepts his Otherness; he joins African Americans and Native Americans in the protest rally: “he suddenly felt the need to disassociate himself from the [watching white] people he stood with and . . . crossed the line and lay down with the demonstrators” while ‘Whites’ around them shouted, “Nigger-lovers!” and a white woman tried to “step on them” and Angelo shouted “Freedom now” (127).

### **Conclusion**

Angelo’s dreams as a young man were about America as the Promised Land where one becomes able to nurture his ‘Self’ and enjoy a life of a ‘Caesar.’ But, then, another dream, “sometime later, something quite different, though unmistakably American, too” (223) saved him from his ‘ego’ and guided him to discover other possibilities: Angelo recognizes his ‘Otherness’ and becomes able to commune with a multiplicity of souls through the Ghost Dance. Then, he embraces his contradictions and learns to celebrate life. In Nature, every human being has access to this Divine language, but only those who open their souls to the ‘unknown,’ this Dionysian Underworld, and dare to doubt and question their ‘monotheistic fantasies’ can break free of an ‘Apollonic ego.’

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