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# Resisting the Image: Heidi, Sheep and *Swiss Trash*

JONATHAN K. GOSNELL

## Abstract

The novel *Swiss Trash*, written by Dunia Miralles in 2000, interrogates stereotypes around immigration and nationhood in contemporary francophone Switzerland, with the intention of turning some notions on their head and letting others fester, uncomfortably. The French-language text underscores the divisions, the startling differences present within a seemingly perfect “Heidiland.” Its English title hints at complex and often equivocal cultural denotations extant within the Helvetic Confederation. A simultaneous reading of *Swiss Trash* and *Heidi*, of familiar Swiss citizens and intrusive immigrants, offers, this article contends, revealing visions of a dismal present/future and an idealized past. Read alongside works of literature, this essay examines powerful political images conveying a foreign threat on Swiss billboards during referenda in 2010–2011 in the city of Geneva. It compares divergent visual, journalistic and literary depictions of Swiss and other-ness, interpretations that investigate the oxymoron “Swiss Trash.”

*Our lives are Swiss—  
So still—so Cool—  
Till some odd afternoon  
The Alps neglect their Curtains  
And we look farther on!*

—Emily Dickinson

How observant of poet Emily Dickinson of Amherst, Massachusetts, to have understood something so patently Swiss (“so Cool”) and to have gazed beyond the obstructionist Alps in 1859.<sup>1</sup> There is certainly more to Switzerland than Alpine pastures, cheese and chocolate, yet as casual and scholarly observers have noted it is difficult to get beyond the postcard-perfect representation. Perhaps it takes a poet such as Dickinson to help transcend obstacles—both figurative and real. Some twenty years ago, Dunia Miralles’s novel *Swiss Trash* became a bestseller in the French-speaking region of the country, *la Suisse romande*, in part by giving voice to alternative and often disturbing images of a Switzerland rarely seen publicly.<sup>2</sup> Miralles’s depiction of *la Confédération helvétique* is populated by immigrants of a decidedly

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Hillman (ed.), *The Pocket Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Dunia Miralles, *Swiss Trash* (Saint-Amand-Montrond, France: Éditions Baleine, 2000, 2015). All subsequent references to this title are given in the text.

sinister nature: drug addicts, petty criminals and sexual deviants. The novel draws a sharp contrast between images of semi-urban dystopia in francophone Switzerland and the more common reiterations of Alpine bliss, a bucolic Swissness perhaps best conveyed by the mythical Germanic character Heidi originally created by author Johanna Spyri in 1880. The term *Röstigraben*—literally “potato divide”—appears periodically in critical works and the mass media to describe the cultural borderland between French and German regions.

*Swiss Trash* underscores the divisions, the startling differences present in a seemingly perfect “Heidiland”. The novel interrogates stereotypes around immigration and nationhood, turning some on their head while letting others fester, uncomfortably. A simultaneous reading of *Swiss Trash* and *Heidi*, of Swiss citizens and immigrants, offers, I contend, pertinent views of a dismal present/future and an idealized past. Read alongside works of literature, this article examines powerful political images conveying a foreign threat on Swiss billboards during referenda votes in the city of Geneva in 2010–2011. It compares divergent visual, journalistic and literary depictions of Swiss and other-ness, interpretations that investigate the oxymoron “Swiss Trash”. Foreign immigrants perhaps best represent “trash”, people rendered worthless because not “Swiss made”. It is interesting to note the English title of a book about Swissness, immigration in francophone Switzerland and a troubling deviation from the German norm. This article unpacks resonant and, for some, disturbing representations strategically used during electoral periods to describe a “besieged” Swiss nation.<sup>3</sup>

The Swiss People’s Party (SPP), responsible for the circulation of stark imagery rejecting difference, built its base by pushing back against perceived dangers from afar,

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful for the suggestions of the anonymous readers and would also like to thank my colleagues at Smith College who helped to improve this article—Greg White and Mary Irwin. Frank Citino generously edited and formatted the images. Photographs in Geneva were taken by the author.

exaggerating notably the Muslim threat to the rule of Swiss law. As we will see, Switzerland's uber-nationalist faction painted migrant populations as un-Swiss in broad unsavoury strokes in the high-volume advertisements that dotted city squares for weeks leading up to national referenda in November 2010 and February 2011. The far right attempted to milk fears that some Swiss harboured about risks to their way of life. These tactics have not changed in the last decade as recent votes attest, for they often produce favourable results.<sup>4</sup>

The SPP depicted the general population as innocent sheep no longer willing to be sheared. During the frequent occasions when the Swiss are called to vote, signed and unsigned posters appear around city centres and residential areas. Evocative images, either menacing figures creating fear of others, or benign animals evoking sympathy, dominate these political tracts. They help effectively to create a nation by way of explicit separation of Swiss insiders and outsiders. The Swiss nationalist party, the UDC in French (*Union Démocratique du centre*), created idyllic imagery of animals, emphasizing the human danger posed to them by foreigners. The image-making apparatus of the party sought to demonstrate that Switzerland's violent deviants in cities endanger Heidi and the Alpine heartland, including the symbolic and unwitting sheep. The sheep of Swiss nationalist politics have received a fair amount of attention, particularly from journalists in Switzerland and abroad, but there has been little synthesis of this imagery. The novel *Swiss Trash* has similarly received minimal scholarly attention.<sup>5</sup>

Outsiders have long dictated how the small, insular nation of Switzerland is defined. Scholars noted that foreign tourists and writers have helped to disseminate a picturesque

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<sup>4</sup> The Swiss nationalist right used imagery of angry Muslim women successfully to ban the burqa in the referendum of 7 March, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> For a rare critical assessment, see Thérèse Migraine-George, "Swiss Trash: l'autre Suisse de Dunia Miralles", *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 10: 1–2 (2007), 173–191.

snapshot of the country's natural bounties beginning in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Switzerland is a nation trapped by its persistent images, for they often appear as impervious to change as the aforementioned Alps noted by Dickinson. Theorist Michel Foucault, borrowing from surrealist artist René Magritte, famously helped critics to understand more fully that all pipes (or mountains) are not what they seem.<sup>7</sup> Some are representations, Roland Barthes states, and as such, they convey specific socio-economic and cultural assumptions about the world. Swiss stereotypes clearly circulate in the press and media, in literature and the visual arts, resulting in the conflation and simplification of reality, argues François Walter.<sup>8</sup> The study of a contested and often contentious Swiss "nation" is relevant today because it has withstood storms that have proven fatal to many modern countries. Switzerland has remained intact for centuries despite a high level of cultural difference. *Röstigraben*, the cited divide that separates hearty Swiss German consumers of *röstis* from more restrained French eaters, conveys only one Swiss fault line.<sup>9</sup> Historian Antoine Chollet claims that the country possesses significant physical and figurative frontiers traced notably by the German, French and Italian cultural quadrants. These same divisions constitute a unique conception of the nation, accepting of largely sovereign territories within the country.<sup>10</sup>

Switzerland has long been a model of national integration of cultural difference, or one might say, of benign indifference to diversity. Since the sixteenth century, when French Huguenots came to Switzerland in search of freedom from persecution (and inadvertently helped a luxury watch industry flourish), the role of Geneva in international exchange has

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<sup>6</sup> Antoine Chollet, *La Suisse, nation fêlée: essai sur le nationalisme helvétique* (St Croix, Suisse: Presses de Belvédère, 2006), pp. 77–78.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> François Walter, *La Suisse au-delà du paysage* (Paris: Découvertes Gallimard, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Christoph Büchi, *Mariage de raison: Romands et Alémaniques, une histoire suisse* (Carouge, Switzerland: Éditions Zoé, 2001), p. 270.

<sup>10</sup> Chollet, p. 169.

been prominent. We see this tradition of asylum inscribed on the inner walls of the city (Figure 1). Given its strongly decentralized political and cultural traditions, there are fewer national myths circulating in Switzerland, especially in comparison to neighbouring France.<sup>11</sup> In putting the nation first in public, in consecrating the homeland as sacred, the Swiss right rejected a tradition of international collaboration that journalist and author Joëlle Kuntz calls “le génie de la dépendance”.<sup>12</sup>

SPP images of un-Swissness are contrary to the *esprit de Genève*, the welcoming spirit at the philosophical core of refuge for the foreign and often needy migrants carved into the city’s architecture. It is fitting that *Swiss Trash* is set primarily in outlying Geneva and neighbouring enclaves in the Jura mountains. It calls attention to *romande* otherness, a French difference referred to somewhat pejoratively as *welsch* in Swiss German. *Swiss Trash* reminds readers not to exclude the Alpine country from the global debates around immigration in the modern nation. An examination of immigration in the Swiss nation, and the reaction to it, provides a counterexample to the more common French case.

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<sup>11</sup> Chollet, p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> Joëlle Kuntz, *La Suisse; ou, Le génie de la dépendance* (Carouge, Genève: Éditions Zoé, 2013), p. 8.



Figure 1. "Geneva, city of refuge", Place du Molard, Geneva.

### Swiss literature, politics and representation

In the twenty years since its publication, Dunia Miralles's *Swiss Trash* has faded somewhat from the public eye, although a collection of the author's short stories appeared more recently, and a 2015 reprinting of the original text refocused attention on Helvetic detritus of foreign descent.<sup>13</sup> Miralles is the daughter of Spanish immigrants to Switzerland. The subject of immigration to Europe as a whole has perhaps never been so relevant in recent years, as individuals and families have fled war-torn areas in the Middle East and Africa seeking asylum. Today, across the European continent, hostile assertions of nationalism greet men, women and children in flight or seeking refuge and threaten to expunge them from traditional and well-policed "Heidilands". Reformed Swiss laws of immigration and asylum prevent many from entering the country.

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<sup>13</sup> Dunia Miralles, *Fille facile* (La Chaux-de-Fonds: Éditions Torticolis et frères, 2012).

*Heidi* and *Swiss Trash* vividly juxtapose the distance separating rural and urban Switzerland. The former text is certainly the more well-known Swiss work, while the latter exists on the periphery of *la littérature romande*, on the margins of an already decentred francophone orbit. Literature of *la Suisse romande*, an all too often forgotten part of *la francophonie*, took shape in an effort to flourish far from the long shadow of Paris.<sup>14</sup> Recent critical analysis maintains that not all *francophonies* are the same and that non-French, European *francophonies* in particular tend to be underexamined.<sup>15</sup> *Swiss Trash* might best be understood through the lens of an off-centre immigrant perspective in the francophone literary tradition. In late twentieth-century *Beur* literature, depicting the lives of second-generation North African immigrants living in French suburban slums, we find youth experiencing dismal prospects and despondency like their Swiss counterparts.<sup>16</sup>

Set in the picturesque countryside at the end of the nineteenth century, *Heidi* harks back to an earlier, happier time, a pre-industrial period in traditional German-speaking Switzerland. The story, which has been retold in a variety of different forms (play, movie, opera) and languages, is well known: a young orphan goes to live in the Alps with her grandfather, who has fled the societal pressures of the traditional village. While Grandfather has withdrawn from society, young Heidi helps to facilitate his return. She quickly finds her haven in the alpine pastures, communing with fauna and flora, and easily wins over the heart of her cranky grandfather as well as that of goat shepherd Peter.<sup>17</sup> It is when societal pressures pull Heidi away from her mountains, flowers and family that readers, both contemporary and

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<sup>14</sup> Denis Bertholet, *Suisse romande, terre du livre* (Lausanne, Switzerland: ASDEL, 2006), pp. 6–13.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Taminiaux, “Francophonie globale, communauté linguistique et diversité culturelle”, *Francosphères* 8: 2 (2019), 167–181.

<sup>16</sup> See Mehdi Charef, *Le Thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983). In its gritty, explicit portrayal of immigrant life in France, it is similar to *Swiss Trash*.

<sup>17</sup> Johanna Spyri, *Heidi*, trans. Jeanne-Marie Gaillard-Paquet (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 17, 22. The original 1880 title in German is *Heidi's Lehr- und Wanderjahre*.



past, better understand their centrality to the myth of Swissness. It is imperative that Heidi return to her beloved countryside. Here, Grandfather can be redeemed as well.

The Swiss countryside is full of the benevolent creatures that the populist right chooses to represent its national aims. They incarnate all that is pure and authentic about an idealized Switzerland, like fictional Heidi. Gentle, congenial animals are party favourites in disseminated political imagery. The biblical undertones of sheep are perhaps too powerful for nationalist politicians to ignore: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”<sup>18</sup> Certainly not a shepherding far right protective of its flock. Circulating throughout the city on Geneva public transportation, a colourful 2010 UDC ad exclaimed “Assez d’être tondu”, speaking perhaps for sympathetic and unsympathetic viewers alike, tired of being shorn like sheep. The Swiss vote UDC, the ad concluded, to shelter them from insecurity and high taxes. Opponents contended that only sheep (i.e. the heedless or blind) voted UDC.

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<sup>18</sup> Luke 15: 4.



Figure 2. UDC sheep, December 2010, Geneva, posted on tram.

For a highly ambitious party, frequently at the centre of self-created media storms over immigration, it is purposeful that *signed* UDC tracts favour these innocent animals of the farm. In campaigns signalling the agricultural origins of the party, one finds frequent examples of such endearing creatures, strikingly different from the negative associations made about dangerous immigrants on unsigned documents. One occasionally discovers the

innocuous hedgehog (Figure 3) on party paraphernalia created to influence voters.<sup>19</sup> It is a soothing symbol, a furry beast crawling over an apple with a crossbow on it, harking back to the William Tell legend. While the city represents a source of evil for nationalists, the UDC offers cleansing, authentic images of living organisms. The graffiti counter that “idiots” vote for the party.



Figure 3. UDC party symbolism during the 13 February 2011 vote.

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<sup>19</sup> See official party website in French: <[www.udc.ch](http://www.udc.ch)>.

Life in German Catholic Switzerland hinges on wholesome pleasures: open air, mountains, wind, colours. God, church and country certainly appear to be aligned with Heidi, while the urban materializes as un-Swiss in the narrative, for the *Heimat* or heartland is elsewhere. A rural and clearly white Swissness represents the very opposite of dreary, ethnic metropolitan zones described in *Swiss Trash*. There is no sign of any liberating or transformative nature in industrial, laissez-faire and Protestant francophone Switzerland of the 1990s, backdrop for the early twenty-first-century novel. It delivers instead depictions of a bleak, apocalyptic future.

There is nothing pretty or uplifting, no higher calling guiding people to a better place, only violence, ugliness, and exploitation. *Swiss Trash* offers a narrative of immigrant despair as in a typical postcolonial country such as France. Switzerland is populated by those ejected from the implosion in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Muslims fleeing the Balkan wars travelled to Switzerland in significant numbers, and the novel tells their story, and not without a dose of irony and realism, a tale of working-class people whose lives have been shattered. While we find migrants portrayed as addicts and deviants in literature, their political equivalents are invasive insects. A Green Party ad (Figure 4) comments on political asylum for immigrants in Switzerland by labelling UDC ideology as xenophobic. People allegedly identified by the UDC as parasitic vermin guilty of theft, rape and drug trafficking are, upon inspection, respectable family members as well as upstanding citizens.





Figure 4. Swiss Green Party ad, 9 June 2013 vote.

Miralles is not the first to write about the tribulations of immigrants in Switzerland, or about Swiss otherness, but she captures a transcendent element in the attention drawn to a well-known human story. Interestingly, the protagonist Cathy is unproblematically Swiss, but she is also an “anti-Heidi” who blames herself for the death of her boyfriend and seeks oblivion in dangerous and anonymous sexual encounters. Her best friend Véronique dies from a drug overdose, and Cathy later uses drugs and has an abusive relationship with the

stereotypical immigrant dealer Drago. This is the danger that the swarthy foreigner poses to Swiss women. Drago's brother Ivan, whose promising soccer career is ended by injury, also descends to life as a drug user, much to the chagrin of his mother Milanca (pp. 46–47). She is sure that it is the whore Cathy who is responsible for the fall of her beloved sons whose lives she had imagined differently back in the old country: "Là-bas, en Yougoslavie, ils seraient déjà fiancés avec de gentilles filles, des filles honnêtes qui ne couchent pas avant le mariage. Et elle, serait bientôt grand-mère. La vie aurait un sens" (p. 91). Milanca is lost in Switzerland; she does not speak the language or understand the ambient culture.

As a first-generation immigrant adrift, she might have inspired sympathy but Miralles provokes an altogether different sentiment. In a downward spiral in the novel, Milanca threatens to have Cathy killed if she does not release her beloved Ivan from her clutches. Among more minor characters of the novel, life appears no better. Marie seeks solace in alcohol and drugs, while Gloria chases upward mobility by sleeping with the jet set of Geneva. She is saved by Constance, an androgynous she-man whose ambition is to dominate an unknowing Gloria sexually (pp. 169–171). Only Cathy seems to have any chance of redemption, of rising above her suffering.

At the centre of well-heeled Swiss German cities such as Bern, drug addiction is rampant, a visible, gaping sore in the novel (p. 31). The story is set at the time of open drug markets in the late 1980s and early 1990s meant to destigmatize addiction. Readers discover that drug addiction affects Swiss and non-Swiss youth alike, throughout the country. The children of Switzerland are dying in what seems to be a strangely serene atmosphere: "Dans leur dos, le Palais fédéral profite placide des derniers rayons du jour, tandis qu'à son pied, crèvent les enfants de la mythique Helvétie" (p. 34). We find decay at the core of a wealthy protestant Rome, Geneva, at the Place du Molard, not far from the noted sign (Figure 1)

welcoming migrants (p. 153). There is a cultural, societal and military war going on, with overdoses and casualties in profusion. As bombs fall on Sarajevo, migrants scatter, landing in Switzerland and other places, but ultimately, they perish. Radio news of bombing during the war provides a dull buzz, background noise as characters such as Milanca falter. Even the prose is depressing. Miralles makes use of abrupt, colloquial phrases that are purposefully jarring. One wonders if it serves to reject the Swiss representation of perfection further.

In *Sexagon*, Mehammed Amadeus Mack discusses the “sexual nationalism” that has emerged to prevent the potential rape of Europe by Muslim immigrants such as Ivan and Drago: “Xenophobic politicians and groups have portrayed the presence of Muslims in Europe as a sexualized invasion or rape, whose aim is to bring about the *grand remplacement* (great replacement), a dystopia in which the complexion of Europe changes for the darker.”<sup>20</sup> Television, film and the written press among other media helped to demonize the Arab male as particularly dangerous to civilized European life. The 1908 Ferdinand Hodler painting of immovable national hero Guillaume or William Tell, crossbow in hand, could easily be imagined today providing security at the Swiss border, ordering Muslims to halt.<sup>21</sup> We will return to this iconic piece of Swiss art.

### **Perspectives from the Swiss nationalist right**

Since its founding more than a century ago, the Swiss German populist party, also known as the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), steadily rose in influence all the while experiencing accelerating growth in its role as cultural gatekeeper beginning in the 1990s. The party

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<sup>20</sup> Mehammed Amadeus Mack, *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Walter, p. 10, includes a colour reprint of Hodler’s iconic painting. The historian contends that the work of art conveys national Swiss sentiment.

assumed its legitimacy, its “democratic” nature, by asking people (*Volk*), to express an opinion about endangered Swiss existence with a yes or no response to referenda questions. According to Swiss law, if a political bloc obtains 100,000 signatures in response to a pressing national question, it can organize a referendum.<sup>22</sup> This is one of the foundations of the Swiss democratic tradition, the popular initiative annually proposed and considered by the people. The Swiss nationalist right succeeded in organizing several referenda in the first decade of the twenty-first century, many related to political asylum and immigration. Such votes on the “immigrant threat” did not have much success early in the party’s history, but results began to improve with more effective advertising later.<sup>23</sup>

Christoph Blocher, longtime leader of the Swiss ultra-right, is responsible for the party’s national rise, spearheading a consequential rejection of membership in the European Economic Community, or European Union, in 1992. Blocher’s control over the German-speaking and isolationist Swiss majority outweighed the pro-European minority in francophone Switzerland in 1992. The upward national trajectory of the party began here, a rise that continued into the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2009, the party succeeded in passing a law by referendum banning the construction of Islamic minarets in the country. Propelling this victory was usage of political posters plastered throughout Swiss hamlets and cities in bold black, red and white colours depicting a defamed Swiss flag. In hopes of suspending the installation of Muslim people and Islamic institutions in the country, the party portrayed ominous black temples set upon the red and white flag and a woman in a burqa. Veiled women juxtaposed against the Swiss flag brought the party national and international attention, if not infamy. Some believed that this represented yet another blow to

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<sup>22</sup> Mix et Remix, *Institutions politiques suisses* (Le Mont-sur-Lausanne, Switzerland: LEP, 2007), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Mix et Remix, *L’image de la Suisse* (Le Mont-sur-Lausanne, Switzerland: LEP, 2014), p. 117.



the country's already tarnished image, bruised by the banking scandal and Swiss economic collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War.<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times* ran an article entitled "When Fear Turns Graphic", noting several examples of sombre and dramatic iconography created to provoke and sway voters by ultra-right parties in Switzerland and indeed throughout Europe.<sup>25</sup> A longstanding Swiss national-democratic tradition has clearly not sheltered it from extremism.

The UDC led campaigns in 2011 and 2012 to stop "massive immigration", beginning at strategic moments such as the Swiss national holiday (1 August). Before the holiday in both 2011 and 2012, signed UDC posters went up around Geneva showing the legs and heavy boots of immigrants moving freely into Switzerland, figuratively disrespecting the Swiss flag (Figure 5). We find the same, suggestive colour scheme: black silhouetted invaders ("trash") defile the red and white national colours of Switzerland. It does not require much imagination to envision UDC-designed boots trampling Heidi's pristine mountains and pastures. They belong to the numerous immigrants brazenly, and perhaps illegally, invading the country. This sort of party imagery recycles old, tired myths about immigrant invasion.

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<sup>24</sup> See Ian Hamel, *Et si la Suisse ne servait plus à rien* (Évreux: Larousse, 2010), pp. 5–6.

<sup>25</sup> "When Fear Turns Graphic", *New York Times* (17 January 2010), Arts and Leisure section, 1, 26.



Figure 5. Signed UDC ad, Geneva, Switzerland, August 2011.

The UDC assertively conveyed, to pedestrians and drivers along city streets, immigrant presence and insidious desire. The nationalist party spoke for immigrants, dictating the narrative and the definition of characters, asserting total control over the framework. Sociologist Roland Barthes noted the duality and power of the representation: “[L]e mythe a effectivement une double fonction: il désigne et il notifie, il fait comprendre et il impose.”<sup>26</sup> UDC images inform and create a particular reality. What is noteworthy is that people, particularly opponents, enter into exchange with these representations. By design, the party placed hard-to-ignore, unpleasant images of (un)Swissness in people’s faces. The symbols hung on walls throughout the country became part of an ongoing and dynamic visual exchange. Passersby observed them on the way to work or school or the supermarket and read them from across the street at the tram stop. One is almost obliged not only to view but to

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<sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 190.

react to them. The images stay posted for a few weeks before being tagged or ripped down in protest. The symbolic power of these images lingers far longer in people's minds.

The 2010–2011 period represented a high point in the UDC's political life and certainly also in the success of its advertising campaign. It became the largest party in the 200-seat National Council, with 56 seats or more than 25 per cent of the elected representatives. It had long hoped to attain the symbolic threshold of 30 per cent of the Swiss electorate.<sup>27</sup> This is quite a success story for a regional party representing peasant interests in eastern Switzerland in its early history, with minimal immigrant presence, becoming one hundred years later the first national party of the land (1917–2017).<sup>28</sup> Several more victories (and defeats) followed the heights of the 2010s, including a 2013 asylum vote and a 2014 initiative to impose quotas on immigration. During increasingly international debates on migration, the party spearheaded efforts to restrict the granting of asylum in Switzerland.<sup>29</sup> The Swiss right and its successful electoral rejection of immigration were exemplary for other European populists.<sup>30</sup> Marine Le Pen, leader of the French Rassemblement National (RN) party, was particularly inspired by visibly effective UDC tactics.<sup>31</sup> The party consistently rejected the longstanding dependence upon which the Swiss nation had been built, asserting

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<sup>27</sup> Yves Petignat, "En agitant 'le peril sur les valeurs suisses' l'UDC vise 30% des voix", *Le Temps* (26 October 2010), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Gabrielle Sassoon, "Du parti des paysans au premier parti de Suisse, un siècle d'UDC", *Tribune de Genève* (17 March 2017), <<https://www.tdg.ch/suisse/politique/parti-paysans-premier-parti-suisse-siecle-udc/story/26516349>>, accessed 24 January 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Traynor, "Switzerland Backs Immigration Quota by Slim Margin", *Guardian* (10 February 2014), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/09/swiss-referendum-immigration-quotas>>, accessed 19 December 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Philippe Bach, "La Droite identitaire d'Europe s'inspire du modèle UDC", *Le Courrier* (22 November 2010), 1, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Danthe, "Victoire de l'UDC: beaucoup de Français enthousiastes", *Le Temps* (19 October 2015), <<https://www.letemps.ch/suisse/victoire-ludc-beaucoup-francais-enthousiastes>>, accessed 18 December 2015.

its autonomy vis-à-vis the European Union and the United Nations.<sup>32</sup> Le Pen, however, softened her stance on the EU to give the RN more legitimacy in France.

In 2010, Swiss nationalists helped to ensure passage of a measure supporting the automatic expulsion of violent criminals from the country (28 November 2010 referendum). The question posed by the UDC initiative asked voters, “Acceptez-vous l’initiative ‘Pour le renvoi des étrangers criminels (initiative sur le renvoi)’”? They would determine whether foreigners guilty of heinous crimes should be deported. Throughout the autumn of 2010 and following spring, the local French-language press, including the daily *Tribune de Genève* and *Le Temps*, printed articles about the immigration debate. As the weekly *L’Hebdo* reported, the UDC favoured getting rid of dangerous foreign criminals, getting them off the flag, and thereby freeing the country.<sup>33</sup>

The party printed an ad in which a lightly complexioned man presumably from ex-Yugoslavia named Ivan (!) is labelled a rapist (Figure 6). Ivan exhibits a closely shaven head, an undershirt and an ostentatious silver chain, the very opposite of the understated Swiss citizen. Mehammed Mack, in his examination of “competing visions of sexual diversity” in France, dissects an evocative image of a young Arab man on the cover of *Vogue Hommes International* revealing gold “bling”.<sup>34</sup> He happens to be Olympic gold medallist Brahim Asloum, not exactly “French trash”, which intimates that images can indeed be deceptive. “And soon to be Swiss?” the ad in Geneva asks rhetorically about Ivan. The implication is that Swiss and rapist are mutually exclusive. We cannot see the man’s face, protecting “Ivan S.’s” identity and shielding the UDC from a lawsuit. The “dangerous” foreign element echoes

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<sup>32</sup> Kuntz, p. 137.

<sup>33</sup> Tasha Rumley, “Les Fausses Promesses de l’UDC”, *L’Hebdo*, 45 (11 November 2010), 19–21.

<sup>34</sup> Mack, p. 71.

former US president Donald Trump’s description of Mexicans during the 2016 presidential campaign.



Figure 6. *Ivan the Rapist*, UDC ad, September 2010, Geneva, unsigned.

There is something foreboding in this portrayal of immigrant aggression using and abusing the vaunted Swiss system. Such images demand that you confront them; they are large and subtly invasive. Ivan peers directly down, menacingly, at pedestrians. Set high along the Geneva streets, the billboard physically dominates viewers.<sup>35</sup> The Swiss ad advocates a state of permanent vigilance. “Ivan S.” must be prevented from becoming Swiss, from fleecing the country. Immigrants often represent ominous, unwanted guests in host nations, wrote critic Mireille Rosello.<sup>36</sup> Neither guest nor host can ever really establish home as a result.

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<sup>35</sup> The Ivan ad measured approximately four metres in length and two and a half metres in width.

<sup>36</sup> Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2001), p.

Almost 53 per cent of Swiss voters decided to support the UDC line of expelling foreign criminals for violent crimes. Fifty-two per cent of the population voted in the November 2010 referendum, a larger than usual turnout. On its cover illustration the day after the referendum, the *Tribune de Genève* presented a stereotypically Swiss (i.e. white) rapist, dressed in traditional red and white attire, in direct opposition to the garish Ivan. The newspaper suggests slyly that this Swiss criminal is unlikely to be deported.<sup>37</sup> The breakdown of the vote gave rise to declarations of the oft-cited *Röstigraben*. All of francophone Switzerland voted against expelling foreign offenders (except the alpine canton of Valais where the vote was split between French and German speakers) and all of German Switzerland voted in favour of the initiative.<sup>38</sup> The Swiss countryside, the *Heimatorte* or home towns in German Switzerland, voted overwhelmingly to rid the country of foreign felons. It is in Heidiland that the apocalyptic UDC message had the greatest resonance, where immigrants are sparsest, and where the wasteland that Miralles depicts is the furthest removed from reality. In dire economic times, threatening outsiders are easy targets; clamouring at the gates, scapegoats serve to protect unsuspecting sheep. In 2010, Switzerland like other nations was recovering from the downturn of 2008. Post-vote media coverage was heavy, nationally and internationally.<sup>39</sup> News reports asked, as they had in 2009, if Switzerland was xenophobic; people took to city streets in protest.

“Plus rien ne semble pouvoir arrêter la progression de l’UDC,” claimed *Le Temps* following the victory.<sup>40</sup> Not only did the Swiss vote to expel dangerous men like Ivan, they

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<sup>37</sup> *Tribune de Genève* (29 November 2010), 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Le Temps* (29 November 2010), 1–5, and *Tribune de Genève* (29 November 2010), 1–5, 20, provide full electoral results for all Swiss cantons including Genève.

<sup>39</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce, “Swiss Right Wins Vote on Deportation of Criminals”, *New York Times* (28 November 2010), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/world/europe/29iht-swiss.html>>, accessed 14 January 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Yves Petignat, “Plus rien ne semble pouvoir arrêter la progression de l’UDC”, *Le Temps* (30 November 2010), 7.

also voted to take up arms against him. The UDC headed another successful campaign, this time to reject an initiative from the political left to disarm Swiss citizens, by referendum on 13 February 2011: “Acceptez-vous l’initiative populaire ‘Pour la protection face à la violence des armes?’” Parliamentarians called on the Swiss to participate in a *votation* on removing deadly weapons, thereby protecting homes from the threat of violence. The right, however, cast the vote as a referendum on a valued Swiss custom. The tradition of the armed Swiss citizen ready for combat was at stake. The image of the Swiss citizen-soldier contradicts that of peaceful neutrality associated with the country but echoes a history of mercenaries descending from mountain hamlets to fight the wars of other powers. The Swiss Guard still protects the Vatican today. Switzerland is full of contradictory images, as *Swiss Trash* well illustrates.

The UDC stated that the Swiss, like national hero William Tell, had every right to carry lethal weapons. “Should criminals monopolize guns?” the party asked the Swiss electorate. NO, it responded clearly (Figure 7). The ad is assertive, polished and clearly created by the UDC although unsigned. The artistic lines are similar to those in the signed poster seen earlier, “stopper l’immigration massive” (Figure 5), suggesting use of a party artist. The billboard presents a sniggering, smoking man again of ambiguous ethnic origin with a large gun pointed at the viewer. The cartoonish illustration communicates the unworldly situation created by immigrants. It is a graphic novel depiction of an endangered Swiss future, one suggesting that fiction can become reality if not actively rebuffed. “Ivan” not only threatens the Swiss but derides them with an insidious laugh, pressuring to plunge the country into an abyss. Ivan’s identity is again hidden, here behind a pair of sunglasses. He is all the more menacing as a result because he is anonymous. Can people like Ivan not only become Swiss but lethally intimidate them?





Figure 7. Fully armed Ivan, January 2011, Geneva, unsigned.

The compelling symbolism of the armed citizen-soldier carried the day on 13 February 2011 and Swiss citizens retained loaded weapons to combat Ivan. On the front page of the *Tribune de Genève*, a shock-producing political cartoon signed by the illustrator Hermann depicted Swiss hero William Tell in the artistic pose immortalized by Ferdinand Hodler in



1908, but now blowing his head apart with an automatic weapon instead of a crossbow.<sup>41</sup> The illustration on the cover of *Le Temps* is less sensationalist; cartoonist Chappatte shows a typically Swiss home with a sign indicating the presence of an armed and dangerous militiaman.<sup>42</sup> The *New York Times* noted the Swiss electoral decision, this time to maintain “an ever-ready citizen militia”.<sup>43</sup>

Fewer people voted in comparison to the criminal deportation referendum (48.8 per cent of the voting population), but they clearly rejected (by 56.3 per cent) the motion to protect the family and prevent accidental death by removing loaded weapons from the home.<sup>44</sup> Voting patterns demonstrated wide divergences, again, in attitudes across the country between men and women, young and old, rural versus urban dwellers. There were marked differences according to levels of education. The *Röstigraben* could again be cited due to the disparity between French and German Switzerland, but the details reveal variance across the linguistic, cultural and religious divide. A cultural gulf between Swiss city and country paints a telling picture of profound ideological difference, a phenomenon that can be witnessed globally. Not even Heidi could bridge this persistent geographic and cultural gap.

### **Swiss internationalism versus Ivan**

The UDC monopolized control of the image of Switzerland a decade ago. As noted emphatically in the media, the Swiss opted for an armed populace in 2011 to confront “Ivan the Rapist”, the cancer at the heart of the country, and to deport him. At issue was what it means to be Swiss in the twenty-first century: a small, independent nation with global

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<sup>41</sup> “L’Arme reste à la maison: Genève pris à revers”, *Tribune de Genève* (14 February 2011), 1.

<sup>42</sup> “Le Choix des armes”, *Le Temps* (14 February 2011), 1.

<sup>43</sup> “Swiss Reject Ban on Keeping Army Weapons in Homes”, *New York Times* (13 February 2011), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/europe/14swiss.html>>, accessed 11 March 2011.

<sup>44</sup> “Les Suisses garderont”, *Tribune de Genève* (14 février 2011), 2.

influence, no imperial past or present, but a large immigrant population. The Swiss ultra-nationalist party effectively spearheaded this movement but the implementation of legislation has proven to be difficult, however, due to conflicting human rights laws. In the summer of 2011, according to an article in *Le Temps*, the UDC's momentum had stalled.<sup>45</sup> A visibly frustrated party started a petition to put into effect the deportation proposal approved in November 2010.<sup>46</sup> In a 27 September 2020 referendum, the party lost its latest attempt to stop “massive” immigration but managed to restrict use of the burqa in Switzerland in the 7 March 2021 vote.

The UDC faced sustained opposition to its measures in the early 2000s. Progressives in Geneva countered with inclusive images combating xenophobia by underlining the advantages of receiving immigrants and linking people of various nationalities with the Swiss tradition of cooperation. They used a format similar to the UDC to impress upon people that immigrants were not a menace to society but were well integrated socially, economically and culturally. Many immigrants in Switzerland had been born in the country; they had degrees and contributed to society. Are they still foreign, posters in the streets of Geneva asked: “Melissa T., Avocate stagiaire, née à Genève toujours étrangère?” and “Samir M., Manœuvre, 16 ans à Genève, toujours étranger?”<sup>47</sup> These portrayals rejected the false and reductionist image of “Ivan”.

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<sup>45</sup> Yves Petignat, “L’UDC en perte de vitesse”, *Le Temps* (2–3 July 2011), 1, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Valérie de Graffenried, “Renvoi des étrangers criminels, nouvelle bataille”, *Le Temps* (25 July 2012), <<https://www.letemps.ch/suisse/renvois-etrangers-criminels-nouvelle-bataille>>, accessed 26 July 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Sandra Moro, “Quand la Ville de Genève affiche ses bons sentiments”, *Le Temps* (16 décembre 2010), 11.



Figure 8. Counter images, Geneva, October 2010

As the posters begin to appear well before the vote on expulsion and remained afterwards expressly to counter the slick UDC ads, one can surmise their relative level of ineffectiveness, at least in terms of swaying the electoral tide. Left-leaning advertising did not pack nearly the same punch as that of the nationalist right, yet the UDC failed to rid Switzerland of “Ivan”. Counter images, even the disturbing kind witnessed in *Swiss Trash*, call attention to iniquities that still exist in a wealthy “paradise” nation and serve to resist stereotyping.

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