

**Fantasies of Oblivion:  
Post-9/11 Literature and the Passion for the Real**

by

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## Abstract

*Fantasies of Oblivion* proposes that a series of post-9/11 literary texts – including David Foster Wallace’s *The Suffering Channel*, Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs*, Martin Amis’ “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* – reveal contradictions inherent to the dominant historical narratives of 11 September 2001. In their fiction, these authors stage a set of cultural, social and historical fantasies that obscured the material and symbolic implications of the terrorist attacks, but show those fantasies to be misleading and incomplete descriptions of American history and identity. My project converses with two dominant strands within studies of post-9/11 literature: one strand claims that the current archive of texts reproduces the ideological myopia already evident so soon after the attacks; the other contends that the texts participate in a necessary and therapeutic project of personal, urban and national healing. In contrast, my dissertation argues that Wallace, Moore, Amis, Cole and Pynchon take oblique approaches to 11 September 2001 in order to displace the dominant temporal genres of traumatic shock, nostalgic return and melancholic futurity that circulate around the tragic events. I claim these temporal genres are fantasies of “oblivion” not just because they are fantasies fixated on erasing the traumatic spectacle of *real* death at the hands of foreign powers, but also because they facilitate disavowal of *symbolic* death, preventing the realization that America is non-identical with its self-image and in fact, this non-identity is built into its self-image. If the nation retreated into its founding myths of altruism, innocence and exceptionalism, and thus missed an opportunity on 11 September 2001 to better understand itself and its role in the world, then the post-9/11 literary archive reveals the limitations of this retreat and in doing so generates an opportunity to traverse the fantasies of the nation and re-open the void the nation too quickly closed, the abyssal “Ground-Zero” of the psyche.

**Keywords:** 9/11 Literature; 11 September 2001; American culture and politics; psychoanalytic criticism

*To my parents*

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## Introduction.

### Fantasies of Oblivion

*The Ground is where history lay. Remy turned from side to side, taking the whole thing in, feeling incomplete, cheated in some way, as if they'd taken away his memory along with the dirt and debris. Maybe his mind was a hole like this—the evidence and reason scraped away. If you can't trust the ground beneath your feet, what can you trust? If you take away the very ground, what could possibly be left?*

-Jess Walter, *The Zero* (307)

*The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative.*

-Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future"

As Remy, the protagonist of Jess Walter's *The Zero* – one of many post-9/11 American novels that try to narrate that day and time in American history – surveys the destroyed World Trade Center site – a mass grave of sorts, a construction site and now a memorial – he speculates on the symbolic resonances between cleaning up the material destruction and the processes of forgetting taking place in his psyche. Throughout the narrative, gaps in memory plague Remy, who struggles to recover the missing knowledge of his own motivations and allegiances as time moves forward uncontrollably. His predicament, echoing the anxieties of numerous other post-9/11 novels, figures the dilemma of the post-9/11 subject and by extension post-9/11 literature. This literature, like Remy, attempts to retroactively reconstruct the fantasies, discourses and material conditions informing the disaster and thus place the haunting traces of the historical trauma into a narrative of cause and effect, rather than, like the American state, nation and media, reduce the past to a nostalgic, pre-lapsarian fantasy, the present to a state of perpetual crisis and the future to a project of national restoration. In "Homeland Insecurities," Amy Kaplan argues that the emergence of the term "Ground-Zero" to describe the site of the WTC collapse, despite its apparent historical reference to the

detonation sites of nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, actually enables a disavowal of history. This is drastically asserted, Kaplan proposes, in the “claim that the world was radically altered by 9/11, that the world will never be the same, that Americans have lost their former innocence about their safety and invulnerability at home” (83). “This way of thinking,” Kaplan argues, “might be called a narrative of historical exceptionalism, almost an anti-narrative, claiming the event to be so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis” (83). If 11 September 2001, and all it has come to symbolize, destabilized the “ground” on which American ideological fantasies of exemption from history are built, as well as the nation’s certainties about its privileged identity and place in a global world, then what comes after history intrudes so dramatically on this oblivion?

The dominant political and cultural language for discussing the events of 11 September 2001 largely mystifies this question. According to the narrator of Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*, “as forces in whose interests it compellingly lies to seize control of the narrative as quickly as possible come into play... dependable history shrinks to a dismal perimeter centered on ‘Ground Zero,’ a Cold War term taken from the scenarios of nuclear war so popular in the early sixties... without shame or concern for etymology” (327-8). Similarly, Marc Redfield, echoing Jacques Derrida, contends that the repetition of “9/11” as the accepted signifier for the attacks in the United States enacts a “double movement of inscription and effacement” which while connoting a specific historical date also resists comprehension and thus mourning in the automatism of its repetition (i.e. Mayor Giuliani’s broken-record speeches) (“Virtual Trauma” 60). Whereas a banner declaring “we will never forget” was quickly erected at the site of the WTC collapse, the rhetoric of radical rupture encapsulated in the signifiers of “Ground-Zero” and “9/11” attest – even in their implicit mapping of coordinates between the event and some shallow notion of historical significance – to how the discourses surrounding September 11 are predicated on mechanisms of disavowal, which promote the reiteration of unprecedented trauma without wanting to explore the cultural context shaping reactions to the events.

My dissertation, *Fantasies of Oblivion*, proposes that a series of post-9/11 literary texts – including David Foster Wallace’s *The Suffering Channel*, Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate*

*at the Stairs*, Martin Amis' "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," Teju Cole's *Open City* and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* – reveal contradictions inherent to the dominant historical narratives of 11 September 2001. In their fiction, these authors simultaneously stage a set of cultural, social and historical fantasies that obscured the material and symbolic implications of the terrorist attacks, but show those fantasies to be misleading and incomplete descriptions of American history and identity. *Fantasies of Oblivion* starts from Slavoj Žižek's premise that "on September 11, the USA was given the opportunity to realize what kind of world it was a part of. It might have taken this opportunity – but it did not; instead it opted to reassert its traditional ideological commitments: out with feelings of responsibility and guilt towards the impoverished Third World, we are the victims now!" (*WTDR* 47). In response to this premise, my project converses with two dominant strands within studies of post-9/11 literature: one strand claims that the current archive of texts reproduces the ideological myopia already evident so soon after the attacks; the other contends that the texts participate in a necessary and therapeutic project of personal, urban and national healing. In contrast, my dissertation argues that Wallace, Moore, Amis, Cole and Pynchon take oblique approaches to 11 September 2001 in order to displace the dominant temporal genres of traumatic shock, nostalgic return and melancholic futurity that circulate around the tragic events.

Instead, these works of fiction informed by the historical moment engage 11 September 2001 as what Fredric Jameson calls an "absent cause" – an empty relay for disavowed fantasies, affects and temporalities – that cannot be seen directly, but even in its relative absence registers as the essential narrative subtext and occasion for writing.<sup>1</sup> The texts I examine suggest the need to both mark and critique the role of September 11 in driving a multitude of fantasy constructions which ultimately have served to efface rather than record history. I claim these are fantasies of "oblivion" not just because they are fantasies fixated on erasing the traumatic spectacle of *real* death at the hands of foreign powers, but also because they facilitate disavowal of *symbolic* death, preventing the realization that America is non-identical with its self-image and in fact, this non-identity is built into its self-image as it strives to achieve a mythical purity. If the nation, as Žižek suggests, retreated into its founding myths of altruism, innocence and exceptionalism, and thus missed an opportunity on 11 September 2001 to better understand itself and its role in the world, then the post-9/11 literary archive reveals the

limitations of this retreat and in doing so generates an opportunity to traverse the fantasies of the nation and re-open the void the nation too quickly closed, the abyssal “Ground-Zero” of the psyche.

## **Resisting Closure**

My inquiry, which springs from the nexus of genre, periodization and literary form, is driven by a basic question: what is “post-9/11” literature? As no prefix of “post” can signify a clean break – whether formal, affective or historical – with what came before the attacks, I propose such an absolute partition only reinforces the dramatic assertions that “everything changed” or that the event itself must be viewed as the only relevant starting point for investigating what happened on that day. Instead, I use “post-9/11 literature” simply to name literature that comes *after* the historical events of September 11, 2001. While 9/11 serves as a locus of gravitation for the archive of post-9/11 texts this dissertation addresses, they approach the present through both continuities and discontinuities with the past. Consequently, I read periodization through what Raymond Williams refers to in *Marxism and Literature* as the dominant, the residual and the emergent, terms which help to complicate the illusion of periodization as total closure or as defined exclusively through the hegemonic way of thinking at a particular historical moment. As Williams argues, “In authentic historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance. It is necessary to examine how these relate to the whole cultural process rather than only to the selected and abstracted dominant system” (*Marxism and Literature* 121). Building on Williams, Fredric Jameson contends that only by thinking through these interrelations, rather than falling into homology, will a more complete picture of periodization emerge. He sees a period “not as some omnipresent or uniform shared style or way of thinking and acting, but rather as the sharing of a common objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible, but always within that situation’s structural limits” (“Periodizing” 178). Post-9/11 literature is organized through its relation to 11 September 2001 and encourages us to register the historical importance of the events, but in its imaginative treatment of the common “objective situation” produces a number

of non-homologous readings of this situation irreducible to single dominant historical logic. Whereas I identify the hegemonic politics of the military state and neoliberal capitalism as the ideological dominant that reconstructs historical time during the War on Terror, I argue this reconstruction draws on residual fantasies of national innocence, domestic stasis, omniscient surveillance, national inviolability and military-state security that post-9/11 literature stages, examines and, ultimately, unsettles.<sup>2</sup> In this way, post-9/11 literature provides a unique occasion for reflecting on the competing historical impulses implicated in the politics of the War on Terror.

Such reflection and re-evaluation is particularly valuable since the American state and media looks so negatively on the emergent counter-histories and counter-discourses of nationhood and security that this literature actively engages. If, for the American nation, September 11 signals a clear before and after (or pre- and post-) and thus sets in motion temporal discourses promising to restore a fantasized American past or avert a fantasized apocalyptic future, then post-9/11 literature can help upturn what Jasbir Puar calls the “paranoid temporality” of the moment – which guards against future terrorism-induced catastrophe by focusing on keeping things the same and suppressing the new – in drawing our attention to temporalities of haunting presences and present absences of the past, but also “ghosts of the future that we can already sniff, ghosts that are waiting for us, that usher us into futurities” and the “becoming-future [that] is haunting us” (*Terrorist Assemblages* xx). Thus, while my project retains the generic designation “post-9/11 literature” to indicate a literature that comes after the event, it recognizes the category as imperfect, and proposes the archive itself, through its inquiries into foreclosed temporalities, resists it in any absolute sense.

It is impossible to begin the literary analysis of 11 September 2001 with the day of the attacks, for the texts I examine do not even begin there themselves. The extant discourse of traumatic rupture and post-traumatic recovery in literary studies of 9/11 (which I take up in the next section) overemphasizes the clarity of a period break and thus fails to think historically about how the literature simultaneously embraces dominant, residual and emergent forces that cannot be categorized so easily around a rupture. For authors such as Wallace, Cole and Pynchon, the events of 11 September 2001 are less of a break than a nodal point through which texts that represent 9/11 must

transit in order to tie together the present and the past. And, rather than being literary representations of the moment and event of 9/11, these texts reflect upon and disentangle the processes through which the terrorist attacks assume their symbolic place in narratives of American nationhood. Likewise, they attempt to open up counter-histories of the War on Terror that do not fall back on similar restorative myths. Instead, the historically reflexive texts stage larger critiques and pose larger cultural questions through unexpected resonances that emerge in their counter-narratives between 11 September 2001 and the aestheticization of suffering in late capitalism (Wallace), the spatial histories of violence against racial others (Cole) and the betrayal of utopian desire (Pynchon) which belong within longer and often less comforting histories.

There have been a plethora of studies in post-9/11 fiction, but I take my bearings from two recent ones – Samuel Cohen’s *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (2009) and Phillip Wegner’s *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture and the Long Nineties* (2009) – which situate 11 September 2001 within a different set of temporal coordinates than the absolute pre- and post- 9/11 periodization allows. At first glance, it may appear as a dislocation to privilege two studies with an ostensible focus on the decade prior to September 11 as superior examples of literary and cultural scholarship to those which take this date as their starting point, but it is precisely this sort of temporal displacement of the events that I argue the field needs. Both Cohen and Wegner, who see 11 September 2001 as part of a longer *durée* of American history, encourage us to think historically about the events and see them not as a creation “out of the blue,” but as an uneasy symbolic closure to an interregnum period spanning the end of Soviet communism in 1989, signalled by the fall of the Berlin Wall, to another image event, the collapse of the World Trade Center. Their respective periodizations usefully reorient post-9/11 literary scholarship’s assumption that this collapse heralded a traumatic historical rupture, a critique which I expand below in relation to the work of Kristiaan Versluys and Ewa Kowal in particular. Instead, Cohen and Wegner identify 11 September 2001 as the uncertain symbolic end to a period in which literature (such as Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*), freed from the ossified symbolic order of the Cold War, began “constructing counter-narratives tracking the careers of American exceptionalism, triumphalism, and national American identity generally through the nation’s history” (Cohen 28) and in

which a series of ambitious theoretical projects (including the work of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Spivak and Slavoj Žižek) enacted a “movement beyond the paralyses of the postmodern in the theoretical domain at least and a resurgence of the radical transformative energies of the modern” (Wegner 34). Although post-9/11 fiction is not identical in its concerns, it remains essential to think about it both through its ruptures *and* its continuities with these literary and theoretical projects, which – while such studies point the way forward methodologically – need not necessarily be restricted to making connections with the 1990s, but can instead further decenter dominant historical narratives.

To begin, it is worth considering post-9/11 literature and its perception of rupture with the national structures of feeling at play just prior to the attacks. Looking backwards through the post-9/11 archive, I argue, reveals how it is embedded in – although not entirely beholden to – a historical moment in which a new symbolic order comes into being following the fading of another: the so-called “end of history.” Philosopher Francis Fukuyama famously declared in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man* that historical antagonism had come to an end with the 1989 fall of Soviet Communism, which he argues signaled a linear trajectory towards inevitable global acceptance of liberal democracy and free market capitalism as the ideal organization of social life. In hindsight, Fukuyama’s utopian pronouncement referred less to historical reality than to the popular imagination. Joshua Clover argues, “if we understand Fukuyama to have been making the more modest if still tragic claim that 1989 witnessed the end of historical *thought*, that the public imagination of the West had abandoned a conception of ongoing historical process, of alternative arrangements of daily life—then his suggestion is considerably less laughable” (emphasis in original, 1989 2). The methodological question for literary scholarship thus becomes how to preserve the value of narrative in relation to history when that history supposedly ceases to function as a concept. Both literature and literary criticism emerging from the events of 11 September 2001 speak to a renewed sense of responsibility to a shifting historical context, a desire to participate in the conversations about how a major event reshapes the ways we locate ourselves in time and space. It is this impulse that a “post-9/11 literature” names, at least in part.

Almost immediately after 9/11, literary authors began gesturing to the end of Fukuyama's exemplary utopian dream. For instance, Don DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future" captured the indeterminacy of the moment in which one historical period ends and we wait for another one to take shape. DeLillo's essay formally enacts the perceptual shifts folded into the event of September 11 through a collage of voices, narratives and images – both real and fictional – that inform our disoriented consciousness of an emergent era: distanced observers of and desperate participants in the catastrophe, terrorists and their victims, amongst others, clash in a cacophonous series of vignettes. In particular, DeLillo suggests that 9/11 marks the convergence of the "utopian glow of cyber capital" that defined the previous era with the emergent "world narrative [belonging] to terrorists" – a narrative of reductive, violent "plots" to "bring back the past" – to which he opposes the palimpsest of stories clashing and overlapping but not necessarily moving towards conceptual synthesis, stable representation or metaphorical analogy.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Deborah Eisenberg's short story "Twilight of the Superheroes" suggests that 11 September 2001 disrupted the temporal narrative of American triumphalism and perceived exemption from historical antagonism produced by (and informing) Fukuyama's "end of history." It too captures the sense of one era (and its imagined future) sliding into the uncertain beginning of another era:

Oh that day! One kept waiting—as if morning would arrive from before that day to take them all along a different track. One kept waiting for that shattering day to unhappen, so that the real—the intended—future, the one that had been implied by the past, could unfold. Hour after hour, month after month, waiting for that day to not have happened. But it had happened. And now it was always going to have happened. (28)

In the story, Eisenberg's narrator reflects on the manner in which 9/11 does not simply happen *in* time so much as it happens *to* time. The passage points to how the attacks alter the perceived linear flow of events, knocking history on to a "different track" that deviates from the "intended future" and accepted teleology – the end of history is over, but what comes next?

In short, the texts reject the injunction to too quickly historicize, opting instead for a model closer to Williams' oscillating processes and forces of change, which opens 9/11's place in history to other analyses and speculations. While perception, built



through media iteration, holds that the 11 September 2001 attacks constitute an unprecedented event, inaugurating a clear and absolute break in historical continuity, more careful cultural critics have instead emphasized how the historical implications of these attacks have always been unclear. “[H]istorical events,” Fredric Jameson writes, “are never really punctual—despite the appearance of this one and the abruptness of its violence—but extend into a before and after of historical time that only gradually unfolds to disclose the full dimensions of the historicity of the event” (“Dialectics of Disaster” 301). Similarly, Jacques Derrida had also cautioned against too quickly historicizing what still seems opaque, noting how the unthinking reiteration of “9/11” indicates that “we do not in fact know what we are saying or naming” (“Auto-Immunity” 86). Despite its obvious implications as a world changing occurrence, Jameson and Derrida point to the difficulty of pinpointing the exact *symbolic significance* of 9/11 because of how it resists situating the events within clear understandings of before and after so soon after it occurred, simply because we had not had time to adequately think it through.

As a contribution to this thinking, post-9/11 fiction leverages dramatic irony in order to reflect on the counter-symbolic places of the event. From the vantage point of historical knowledge after the attacks, the texts that I consider often return to the “before” of September 11 and consequently shift our perspective on the past as well as the present in temporalities of anticipation and retrospection. Wallace’s *The Suffering Channel* conveys a tone of ominous doom hanging over the months immediately prior to the attacks, which serves as an ironic counterpoint to the hipster-shallowness of pre-9/11 New York City he constructs in the novella. Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* features child characters who travel to the top of the World Trade Center months prior to the attacks and express a misguided confidence in the indestructibility of the towers (94-5). In Cole’s *Open City*, the protagonist reflects on the palimpsest of spatial histories overwritten by the triumphalism and privileged mourning of a hegemonic white American culture. Each case of anticipation and retrospection transforms September 11 into a moment for re-articulating American history in its relation to the present. The texts repeat the event within shifting historical, spatial and ideological contexts, testing its relation to different constellations of thought that reach beyond the traumatic and immediate.

These texts then continue the retrospection of 1990s literature that Cohen analyzes, a retrospection which looked over the span of American history to identify symptomatic elements of the past which take on new significance as time passes. “Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier” Žižek explains, “changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way” (*Sublime Object* 56). For instance, Eisenberg’s traumatized characters, rather than numbed with shock, are initiated into a previously unforeseen historical situation which, “it’s now obvious, had itself been implied by the past; and the terrible day that pointed toward the future had been prepared for a long, long time, though it had been prepared behind a curtain” (“Twilight” 32). Here, Eisenberg refers to an entire disavowed geopolitical history that suddenly emerges undeniably into vision: “The plane struck, tearing through the curtain of that blue September morning, exposing the dark world that lay right behind it, of populations ruthlessly exploited, inflamed with hatred, and tired of waiting for change to happen” (33). “Twilight of the Superheroes” – first published in 2004 – roughly coincides with the publication of the official analysis of the attacks, the *9/11 Commission Report*, and both partake of the same retroactive impulse. One of the startling revelations of the *9/11 Commission Report* was the ample evidence, obvious in retrospect, of the coming catastrophe, which had been meticulously planned and even prefigured in smaller attacks on American embassies in East Africa and the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole navy ship in 2000. The literary return to the past, through the benefit of hindsight, re-narrates this history so that it includes these previously less significant elements – such as when *The Suffering Channel* traces the contours of death and suffering otherwise disavowed within late capitalist media, or when “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” imagines a panoptic surveillance network already tracking the lead 9/11 hijacker before he has the opportunity to commit his horrendous acts – and they thereby question the closure of time.

Yet, a discontinuity emerges with the literature of the 1990s when we ask post-9/11 literature to look forward. Novels like *A Gate at the Stairs* and *Open City* feature protagonists who struggle with imaginative stasis, as if September 11 negated the future horizon, leaving them to circulate aimlessly through regional, domestic or urban space respectively. In this way, post-9/11 fiction diverges from the anticipation of alternative

futures and instead carries in what happens after the symbolic closure of those fantasies of a future takes hold. As the work of Phillip Wegner demonstrates, the question of the “Event” preoccupied a myriad of cultural productions in the extended decade between the end of Soviet communism and the event of September 11, 2001. Wegner’s *Life Between Two Deaths* argues that this period served as a time of transition between the symbolic order of the Cold War – the imagination of a geopolitical order based on two diametrically opposed great powers with radically different approaches to social life – and a then unforeseen new symbolic order inaugurated by the 9/11 attacks and eventually solidified into the so-called War on Terror. In contrast to Fukuyama and his neoliberal acolytes, Wegner sees this “long nineties” as both a moment of ideological stasis *and* revolutionary possibilities, which not only “feels like a moment of ‘terrifying monsters,’ of hauntings by a living dead past,” but is also, “experienced as a moment of ‘sublime beauty,’ of openness and instability, of experimentation and opportunity, of conflict and insecurity—a place, in other words, wherein history might move in a number of different directions” (9).<sup>4</sup> For Wegner, the paradigmatic novel of this period is Don DeLillo’s sprawling 1997 historical narrative *Underworld*, which he notes begins with the inaugural moment of the Cold War – the successful 03 October 1950 Soviet detonation of a nuclear weapon – but ends eight hundred pages later with no definitive sense of either narrative or historical closure. In this way, he argues, “DeLillo directly takes up the fundamental question of beginnings and endings: How do we know, DeLillo’s work asks, when a period begins? And equally significant, when can it be said to have come to its conclusion?” (48). Wegner claims that 11 September 2001, serves as the symbolic closure for which DeLillo’s novel, and the period it describes, searches, pointing a way out of the uncertainties that came along with globalization (and its discontents) to install a new symbolic order, a new schema for determining historical meanings: “September 11 enabled the United States, in a way impossible in the immediate, uncertain aftermath of the Cold War, to assume a global mantle, giving rise to the so-called Bush doctrine of unilateralism and pre-emptive military violence... thereby marking the final closure of the world historical situation of the Cold War and the opening of a new period in global history” (25).

As Wegner is well aware, the September 11 attacks only provide an illusory closure for this period of uncertainty and thus do not constitute the longed for “Event,”

which, following Alain Badiou, he defines as, “the very possibility of a new beginning, the inauguration of that which was unexpected, unknown, and unencountered” (23). Wegner’s point is not that nothing actually occurred on 9/11, but that the attacks were instead the symbolic repetition of an earlier Event – the “Fall of the Wall” in 1989 – which had truly inaugurated a new beginning. However, only with this second fall, Wegner argues, do we fully grasp, in retrospect, the actual implications of the initial trauma of 1989: “it is only with the fall of the twin towers that the destruction of the ‘symbolic universe’ of the Cold War, lingering on as it did in strange twisted forms in the first Gulf War and through the subsequent decade, is finally and definitively accomplished and a true new world order is put into place” (25). Here, Wegner describes the transformation of the ideological dominant following 9/11, which promoted the notion of unprecedented historical rupture, producing a state of emergency used as an alibi to re-energize the ideological project of restoring a shaken American greatness at the expense of alternative narratives (many of which were tied to the optimistic discourses of the anti-globalization movement). Where post-9/11 fiction can and does intervene is by questioning this rapid closure of alternative readings that might, for instance, open different possible meanings of 9/11 and argue that the events have something to do with America’s long term geopolitical strategies or its blithe economic indifference to the suffering of others and the globalization of this project under the Washington Consensus. Yet, 9/11 fiction often fails to devise utopian alternatives to this historical situation; instead, these narratives succumb to the flattening of the future that also seems to follow the closure of the “long nineties” and its political possibilities. I will return to this issue in the project’s afterword on *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge*, two post-9/11 Pynchon texts which resist this closure by placing the event of September 11 within a history of utopian longing and its ideological betrayals.

The challenge taken up by post-9/11 literature entails countering the closure the event is supposed to have imposed so that it can rearticulate the terrorist attacks within counter-histories of American culture and politics and therefore also through counter-histories of American dominance. Doing so necessitates recognizing not only the trauma of the event itself – the loss of life and material destruction – but also the symbolic trauma of the event and the acts of the American state – done in the name of security at home and abroad – against further terrorist attacks. What exactly changed on

September 11 will always be a matter of retroactivity in which the effects will come to posit historical necessity, a trajectory that promises to displace the centrality of the specific event and thus direct our critical attention towards the material and ideological processes through which it assumes its symbolic place. There is nothing inherently self-evident about what we have collectively witnessed. Now, looking back over the near decade and a half after the Twin Towers fell, perhaps it has finally become possible to more soberly consider how what we call “9/11” and “Post-9/11 America” have unfolded in our collective imaginations.

## **Affective Genres**

As many commentators observed, it is not a given that everyone was traumatized on September 11. Shifting our terms away from the discourse of traumatic rupture allows for a fuller investigation of the nationalization of affect after 9/11. Trauma becomes a powerful tool of the state seeking to manufacture a militaristic national response, the goal of which has been to repair American exceptionalism following the attacks that contradicted it in such a spectacularly visible and humiliating fashion. Continuing her work from the 1990s, Wendy Brown questions our “wounded attachments” because, she claims, identifying with trauma can condemn us to live in a present dominated by the past (*Edgework* 92). Similarly, Lauren Berlant attempts to set aside the “fundamentally ahistoricizing logic of trauma” in hopes of opening up the present (*Cruel Optimism* 10). Not only does trauma dominate our cultural framings of September 11, its apparent universality also marginalizes a number of different affects – such as disgust, nostalgia, boredom, melancholy and hope – which unsettle temporalities of shock and healing. The texts in *Fantasies of Oblivion* produce far more affectively ambivalent readings of the attacks which, rather than addressing a collective national psyche traumatized by the unexpectedness of the events of 9/11, questions the multiple (failed) ways the state, nation and media attempt to relegate this narcissistic humiliation to oblivion.

Organizing this study in opposition to the dominant trauma discourse does not dismiss the actual suffering 9/11 caused, so much as it expands and deepens our understanding of the origins and legacies of terrorism and counter-terrorism, a task which post-9/11 literary criticism sometimes fails to adequately perform. A symptom of

its inability to do this fraught work of historicizing, and thus the reason the field remains stuck in a repetitive circuit, is the difficulty of moving past traumatic shock as an explanatory paradigm for the events. Shock quickly became one of the keywords that defined the events of September 11, 2001 and the state's responses to it. The both murderous and suicidal dives of American 11 at 8.46 A.M. and United 175 at 9.03 A.M. into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the blast of American 77 as it shot into the Pentagon at 9.37 A.M., and the downing of United 93 in a Pennsylvania field at 10.03 A.M., all seemed like bolts "out of the blue" (a popular book title after 9/11), referring to the clear skies on that morning that were stained with nightmarish apparitions. When the dust finally settled in New York, the flames subsided in Washington and the astonishing destruction could be assessed, it became evident that the United States faced enemies like Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda operatives, determined to visit more terror on its populace, and the state re-acted with shock tactics of its own. Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* argued that the military tactics of "Shock & Awe" deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed something essential about our neoliberal world, which itself thrives on modes of exploiting crises she calls "shock therapy": "[This] is how the shock doctrine works: the original disaster—the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane—puts an entire population in a state of collective shock" which enables the state to enact otherwise politically disadvantageous policies" (19). Similarly, Sven Lütticken argues that modern governments, through their coordination of war, bombing campaigns and terror alerts, have always been savvy manipulators of shock, not unlike famous filmmakers. Using Steven Spielberg's 2005 remake of *War of the Worlds* as an example, he notes how it, like the state, draws on the "freneticism of shock-and-awe special effects in what seems like an attempt to overwhelm the audience with the serial shocks of a roller-coaster ride... [and] thus functions as a machine for producing acquiescence, encouraging a fatalist acceptance of the colonization of time and history by spectacular terror" ("Suspense" 105). Thus, terrorism and counter-terrorism, as the Retort collective observes, join together in a war of horrific images intended to shock the target populations into submission.<sup>5</sup>

Under such circumstances, it is understandable that literary critics look wearily on the ideological effects of narratives which primarily register shock, but this suspicion,

when misplaced, can also do disservice to their objects of study. Initially in an article titled “Opens Doors” and later a monograph titled *After the Fall*, Richard Gray argues that 9/11 literature fails to do much else but recapitulate the immediate affective reactions to the event. With Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* in mind, Gray claims, “[w]hat we are left with is symptom: in this case, the registering that something traumatic—perhaps too dreadful for words, unsusceptible as yet to understanding—has happened” (“Open Doors” 132). Not only does Gray blithely misread *Falling Man*, which, as Linda S. Kauffman demonstrates, is deeply invested in examining the history and aesthetics of terrorism, but he unfairly reduces the array of literary reactions to the events to a single temporal and affective genre.<sup>6</sup> (Even if we admit Gray’s initial assessment is an early one, limited to a few texts, he does nothing to correct this conceptual mistake in his 2011 book.) Writing several years after Gray, Elizabeth Anker shows a similar disappointment with the apparently narrow interrogative range of this archive, in which she feels the aesthetics of the sublime continue to dominate. “Both defamiliarizing and estranging the wounds of 9/11,” she claims, “such reliance on the sublime extinguishes the ambiguities that riddle 9/11 as a socio-cultural and political reality, ironically purifying it of indeterminacy through hyperbole” (“Allegories” 473). While Anker makes an admirable turn toward analysis of the “ideological landscape of late capitalism and many species of speculation that sustain” the post-9/11 novel (474), she incorrectly diagnoses a lack of curiosity regarding these issues in the texts themselves, which perform other work besides registering, again and again, traumatic rupture.

Trauma discourse’s dominance over the emergent field of post-9/11 literary scholarship necessitates re-evaluation. Some scholars have already begun to register this necessity, if not openly call for revolt. In a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* dedicated to post-9/11 fiction on the tenth anniversary of the attacks, editors Duvall and Robert P. Marzec seem almost apologetic regarding the difficulty of “[moving] the discussion of 9/11 fiction past the dominant theoretical paradigm for understanding it—trauma studies” (395-6). Like any form of analysis, this approach comes complete with advantages as well as its own troubling assumptions. “A problem with so many of the submissions we received,” they note, “was that they seemed primarily to confirm a truism of trauma studies—the notion that trauma is unknowable and that, whatever novel was under consideration, it finally underscored the inability of any narrative to mediate

9/11 in a way that would make it knowable to others” (396). There are several possible causes for the dominance of this trauma studies paradigm in the study of post-9/11 fiction. The first of these involves the ease with which commentators could import the tools already developed through scholarship focused on the impact of the Holocaust and other humanitarian atrocities (such as the Rwandan genocide and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia) in the 1990s, which had, according to Ruth Leys amongst others, developed into a veritable “trauma culture.”<sup>7</sup> The second pertains to the fiction itself, with novels such as *Falling Man*, *Windows on the World* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* building narratives around the singular event and thus steering criticism towards concentration on the shock and terror it precipitated, even if the texts actually offer more complex narratives than this shared reference point implies. Studies of post-9/11 fiction with titles such as *Out of the Blue* (Versluys) and *After the Fall* (Gray) tend to take these texts as their primary archive; they situate the events of that day in a clear before and after and thus “appeal to a sense of lost innocence” (DeRosa 608). Similarly, the contributions to the *Trauma at Home* anthology by theorists of Holocaust trauma such as E. Ann Kaplan, Marianne Hirsch and Judith Greenberg connect personal witnessing with apprehension of some rupture in the collective everydayness of New York City, showing admirable attention to personal suffering and shared dislocation but making few contributions to historical or ideological analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Judith Butler critiques what she calls the “narrative dimension” to explanatory frameworks of September 11 that “begin the story by invoking the first-person narrative point-of-view” (*Prearious Life* 5). With such narratives, Butler argues, “It is that date and the unexpected and fully terrible experience of violence that propels the narrative” and thus they “[absolve] us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation of events” (5). We see this problem writ small in the title of Kristiaan Versluys’ book, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. In a move that is tellingly causal, before the colon, he places the shocking, unexpected appearance of the hijacked planes that would initiate the processes that became the War on Terror; after it, the novel appears as a means of working through the event, which organizes his book as a trajectory from the melancholy of *Falling Man* to the encounter with the “Other” in John Updike’s *Terrorist*.<sup>9</sup> Versluys thus narrates the events of September 11 through a project that focuses on how fiction starts with and then alleviates the effects of a specific trauma: 9/11 “is a limit



event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making and semiosis” (1), Versluys claims, but, “The discursive responses to 9/11 prove, over and beyond their inevitability, that the individual is not only made but also healed—made whole—by the necessary mechanisms of narrative and semiosis” (4). Similarly, Ewa Kowal’s *The ‘Image Event’ in the Early Post-9/11 Novel* argues that works of post-9/11 fiction published between 2004 and 2007 “fulfil a therapeutic role – for the readers and the authors alike – by contributing to the discourse on terror, and ‘domesticating’ it, even when calling it ‘inexplicable’” (143-4). Like Versluys, Kowal sees motifs such as childhood in this fiction as examples of “magical thinking” which “becomes particularly activated at times of crisis, when the inability to actually affect reality in our favour breeds the need to involve oneself in substitute activities restoring psychological balance, providing comfort and hope” (143). Both of these critics take September 11 as the starting point of a narrative fiction which answers traumatic rupture with healing.

In doing so, they fail to ask more difficult questions about whether trauma and recovery is necessarily an ideologically neutral framework, let alone one which animates post-9/11 fiction. “In taking the trauma inflicted by 9/11 as the starting point,” Elizabeth Anker writes in her review of *Out of the Blue*, “Versluys leaves unexamined the very question of how 9/11 became understood and experienced as trauma, not only for those directly implicated but for the very nation that brandished its collective suffering like a sword in the years following the events” (“*Out of the Blue*” [book review] 472). Anker’s critique could be posed to the body of post-9/11 fiction and scholarship more generally: what questions does the exclusive attention to individual suffering of Americans, however well meaning, enable them to evade? One answer to this question is that remaining fixed on a narrative of personal shock, loss and recovery can nullify attempts to think through the historical conditions into which the attacks intervened, leading, as Susan Sontag laments, to the replacement of politics with “psychotherapy” (*At the Same Time* 107). Unlike Lacanian psychoanalysis, the traditional American practice of psychotherapy focuses on the restoration of a healthy ego as the ultimate teleology for treating the patient, a temporal structure Versluys reproduces in his study. What may work on an individual level, however, falters in the register of cultural analysis. Following Marc Redfield, we should simultaneously respect the trauma of victims on September 11

and question the validity of trauma as an exhaustive explanatory framework for the events (“Virtual Trauma” 56). Recognizing this separation will help scholars avoid the conflation of traumatized victims with a traumatized nation that has, amongst other things, enshrined an ideology of national victimhood mobilized by the state as license for a variety of violent retributions overseas and securitization measures at home.

Put differently, in addition to acknowledging the suffering and recovery of victims, we need to reflect on the ideological frameworks that register and produce large scale trauma and question whether it is the best or only viable genre of response. In *Edgework*, Wendy Brown argues that the American nation’s imaginary identification with its own wounded goodness (through the figure of suffering victims) after September 11 inevitably entails symbolic identification with patriotic ideals of American innocence (32). Drawing on the work of Rey Chow and Slavoj Žižek, Brown notes how symbolic identification is often ignored because, unlike imaginary identification, it does not rely on resemblance between subjects; rather it asks on behalf of what (disavowed) social forces and mandates this imaginary identification takes place. Another way to approach this distinction might be through a simple question: when we empathize with the suffering of the victims at the World Trade Center – whether the workers in the Twin Towers, their bereaved families, or the first responders – *to the exclusion of all others*, who become objects of fear and targets of violence, what organizes the sense of felt similarity?<sup>10</sup> While the feelings of sympathy are laudable, they necessitate, as Judith Butler and Jill Bennett contend, careful examination of who counts as a victim in the national conversation, who is excluded from being a “grievable life” (Butler), and how that exclusion serves the interests of power.<sup>11</sup> Doing so reveals that the patriotic idealization of the United States after September 11 set the conditions within which identification with national victimhood, however genuine, acquires its symbolic meanings as part of forging the unity of the nation, or what Benedict Anderson calls the “imagined community,” against Islamic terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

The emerging symbolic order of the War on Terror evoked a perpetual state of emergency to justify the reassertion of national strength against America’s terrorist enemies, an impulse which imposed a new stability through intensifying long worn national myths. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek spotlights the

ideological utility of this response to the crisis: “What if – as the massive display of American patriotism seems to demonstrate – the shattering experience of September 11 ultimately served as a device which enabled hegemonic American ideology to ‘go back to basics,’ to reassert its basic ideological co-ordinates against anti-globalist and other critical temptations?” (46-7). If globalization had been perceived to threaten the primacy of the nation-state, then 9/11 was an unprecedented opportunity to simultaneously remake the nation and the national subject.

“The manufacture of a national scale of response,” Neil Smith argues, “cannot simply be explained as the result of dense media bombardment. Powerful images were matched by a very practical hardening of national geographies and identities” (“Scales of Terror” 100). Indeed, following 11 September 2001, nation-states increasingly erect both literal and figurative walls that divide and protect them from more marginalized populations – inside and outside of its borders – and thus prop up their fantasies of geographic integrity: “September 11...heralded an era in which new walls were seen emerging everywhere: between Israel and the West Bank, around the European Union, along the US-Mexico border, but also within nation states themselves” (Žižek *Tragedy Farce* 3). These structures mirror the calls for national security institutionalized through the two Patriot Acts and speak to the increasing impediments to border crossing, mobility and cultural hybridization that accompany anxieties regarding the waning of nation-state sovereignty within globalization and its dark double, global terrorism. According to Wendy Brown, “the new nation-state walls are iconographic of [a] predicament of state power” in which other global forces increasing produce a borderless world (*Walled States* 24): “In a context of declining protective capacities of the state, diluted nationhood, and the increasing vulnerability of subjects everywhere to global economic vicissitudes and transnational violence, we need to understand the political wishes for potency, protection, containment, and even innocence that may be projected onto walls” (114). Following 11 September 2001, the American nation-state, its vulnerability exposed, turned towards what Jeff Derksen calls the “production of a series of outsides,” based in the expulsion of both perceived threats and unwanted immigrant bodies from the nation, which also produces forms of national subjectivity: “With the hardening of geographic borders, there is also a hardening of the borders of the national subject” (*Annihilated Time* 210).

The apparently spontaneous shift in national priorities towards un-reflective patriotism and unconditional support of military operations, as well as recourse to sentimental discourses of violated national innocence and unprecedented victimhood, interpellates citizens in a renewed project of national idealization. As Žižek observes, this symbolic identification is by no means natural:

In the aftermath of September 11 the Americans en masse rediscovered their American pride, displaying flags and singing together in public, but I should emphasize more than ever that there is nothing 'innocent' about the rediscovery of American innocence, about getting rid of the sense of historical guilt or irony which prevented many Americans from fully assuming their national identity. What this gesture amounted to was 'objectively' assuming the burden of all that being 'American' stood for in the past – an exemplary case of ideological interpellation, of fully assuming one's symbolic mandate, which comes on the scene after the perplexity caused by some historical trauma... [It] is precisely in such moments of transparent innocence, of 'back to basics', when the gesture of identification seems 'natural', that are, from the standpoint of the critique of ideology, the most obscure – even obscurity itself" (*WTDR* 5)

It remains difficult to disentangle the apparent spontaneity of sympathetic feeling from its nationalization in the renewal of the American project. "To get at the real historical event itself, you feel, one would have to strip away the emotional reaction to it. But even to get at that emotional reaction, one would have to make one's way through its media orchestration and amplification," Fredric Jameson argues: "[I]t is instructive to step away for a moment and to deny that it is natural and self-explanatory for masses of people to be devastated by catastrophes in which they have lost no one they know, in a place with which they have no particular connections" ("Dialectics" 297-8). The first two chapters of this dissertation on Wallace and Moore respectively will return to this topic to explore how fantasy does and does not enable subjects living far from the epicenter of national trauma in New York City to reconcile their lived experiences with the national totality. In both cases, the nation serves as a master-signifier into which the characters are expected to fold the contents of their necessarily disparate perspectives on the event and thus serves as the narrative which mediates between the individual and the social.

Choosing to formulate this project through a relatively nation-bound literature runs against the grain of the general consensus in post-9/11 scholarship that this archive is most critically productive when it makes an ethical turn towards the "other." Scholars

including Georgiana Banita, Richard Gray, Martin Randall, Pankaj Mishra and Kristiaan Versluys have each suggested that the way to move beyond the jingoistic, nativist, myopic and intolerant appeals of American nationalism is to expand beyond the nation's borders and thereby integrate more diverse perspectives.<sup>13</sup> While I do not question the value of opening the canon of post-9/11 texts to a multitude of otherwise excluded voices such as Mohsin Hamid, Claire Massud and Joseph O'Neill, a multicultural or transnational model does not necessarily question the national fantasies which shape post-9/11 America. As Michael Rothberg observes in "Failure of Imagination," for instance, whereas the sentimental, domestic cast of the post-9/11 novel is not ideal, a turn to fictions of immigration "risks a form of re-domestication" (155), such as in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, which Rothberg contends actually reinforces the pluralistic narrative of America rather than seriously questioning the War on Terror (157). Before moving beyond what Gray calls the assimilation of September 11 into the "familiar structures" of domesticity that "dissolve public crisis in the comforts of the personal" (a claim I question in chapter 2) in order to engage in encounters with "strangeness" (*After the Fall* 17), scholars must first confront the strange already at the heart of the familiar; they must set aside politically proscriptive definitions of "good" multicultural literature or "bad" nation-bound literature (supposedly less concerned with the problem of the foreign other). I am more interested in texts which inhabit but also undermine fantasies of the nation, which break with traumatized victimhood and engage in foreign encounters with the national self during the War on Terror. What Cohen argues regarding the historical novels of the 1990s applies to post-9/11 texts as well: "I see them... as implicitly arguing, through their own performance of it, a return to the familiar stories, a resistance to their conclusions, an insistence on recognizing the deforming shape of certain narratives and on using imagination to redraw the connections those narratives wish to cut" (*After the End* 27).

## **Ashes of American Flags**

In the preface to *Cloning Terror*, W.J.T. Mitchell proposes that the War on Terror "can be broken down into two histories: what happened, and what was said to justify, explain and narrate it as it was happening" (xi).<sup>14</sup> One of the most immediate questions of post-9/11

literary scholarship is how texts after 11 September 2001 interact with “what was said” within the state and media about the historical meaning of “what happened.” Yet, I follow the thread of *what was not said* in the narration of what was happening on September 11, 2001: what is symbolically inadmissible in the American popular response to what happened? Of course, this question is another way of posing the problem of Jameson’s “political unconscious” to post-9/11 fiction: what unspoken anxieties, desires or assumptions animate the contemporary War on Terror and how do these constitutive forces of distortion register in the texts I am considering? The September 11 attacks not only induced traumatic shock but also exposed long gestating anxieties regarding the stability of the American nation-state and its governing ideology of American exceptionalism, or the widespread belief that the United States was not only a universally beloved force for good in the world – spreading the philosophy of democracy, free enterprise and individualism – but also territorially exempt from global war and violence. Rather than absorb this knowledge, and use it to change its actions at home and abroad, the nation produced restorative fantasies of innocence, moral superiority and absolute security that disavowed the symbolic damage done by the attacks, but also the symbolic damage done by an ongoing history of such events, ranging from the atrocities in Vietnam to the support for dictators friendly to American economic and geopolitical interests throughout the Arab world.

The American state fetishizes the affect surrounding the *historical* trauma of 11 September 2001 in order to disavow this *structural* trauma at the core of American identity. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between these two types of trauma in their respective relations to loss and to absence. Historical trauma, he proposes, refers to a specific event, easily locatable in space and in time and linked to concrete losses of life or material destruction. I take September 11 to be this sort of precisely dated occurrence, an identification which, judging by the dominant response, resonates with LaCapra’s warning that historical trauma can tempt us to think of the event in terms of “absolute uniqueness,” imbuing it with a “sublime, sacral quality” that “becomes the basis for personal identity” (724). Arguably, the American nation was encouraged to treat the historical trauma of 9/11 as an unprecedented event of this nature, and certainly one sacred and thus beyond historical comparison or critical questioning. In contrast, structural trauma is “not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related

to the potential for historical traumatization” (725). This type of trauma is more like a “condition of possibility for historicity” without being identical to history, a condition which suggests that there never was a full “intactness, wholeness or communal identity” to fall back on (727). The public discourse surrounding September 11 disavows the symbolic damage the event does to belief in the ideology of American exceptionalism. I call this damage “structural” because it refers to the fundamental non-identity of the nation with its founding fantasies, marking a contradiction which is generated by any number of examples beyond a single specific historical trauma, and which produces repeated acting out of these fantasies again and again in an attempt to conceal the inconsistencies of the national narrative.

The true danger, LaCapra estimates, is when we confuse loss (due to historical trauma) with absence (the condition of structural trauma), a confusion which, following Michael Rothberg, I argue plagues post-9/11 culture and its retrospective fantasy that the nation lost its innocence due to the attacks, or that it can return to a more ideal time of full identity, unity, consensus and community. As LaCapra argues,

[L]osses cannot be adequately addressed when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence, including the absence of ultimate metaphysical foundations. Conversely, absence at a ‘foundational’ level cannot simply be derived from particular historical losses, however much it may be suggested or its recognition prompted by their magnitude and the intensity of one’s response to them. When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia of utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (698)

Although LaCapra wrote these words prior to 11 September 2001, they show remarkable prescience regarding that event and the reassertions of American identity that would follow. According to Rothberg, “While the losses of September 11 are legion and essential to identify, we need to be careful about confusing their particularity with a pre-existing or more general absence... in the United States. We should be suspicious of assertions that such ‘lost’ (but actually absent) unity needs to be reasserted to compensate for the threat posed to the ‘homeland’ by ‘terrorism’” (“No Poetry” 152).

Instead, Rothberg questions the ideology of mythic innocence that arose after 9/11. He claims it obscures the structural trauma of a nation non-identical with its own myths (an issue I take up in more detail in chapter 4). However the fact is disavowed, the country mistreats “many people on the margins of the local and global political order, both inside and outside the United States, for whom the absence of peace, security, and even home is a structural condition” (152).

The comparison of two scenes involving ash in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* further illustrates the confusion of historical trauma with structural trauma in post-9/11 culture. Ash frequently appears in fiction of the World Trade Center collapse, in which a specific event comes to signify a more general condition of indeterminacy, both in history and in language. “The traumatic fall of the World Trade Center precipitated us into a more primitive anxiety of obliteration,” Claire Kahane argues: “it shattered our symbolic certainties, forcing us to acknowledge the reality of disintegration and annihilation through the very materiality of the ash and debris raining down on Lower Manhattan and, more uncannily, through the *absence* that it left behind, the sheer space a powerful reminder of the event” (“Uncanny Sights” 110). While Kahane does not necessarily mean “absence” in the sense LaCapra and Rothberg do, her use of it nonetheless gestures towards how the metaphor of ash mediates between the trauma of the historical event and a structural trauma that generates anxiety over the stability of the symbolic order. Take, for instance, DeLillo’s description of the 11 September 2001 attacks in *Falling Man*, which marks an emergent void in our understanding prompted by a specific historical trauma:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night... In time he heard the sound of the second fall. He crossed Canal Street and began to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them. (3-5)

Keith, DeLillo’s disoriented protagonist, wanders through an urban wasteland in which the streets appear deprived of their affective substance, reduced to a series of mere



“things” left “unfinished” and the text’s repetition of “whatever that means” only further accentuates the failure of the symbolic order to account for the events. While McCarthy shifts focus to wider terrain in *The Road*, his anonymous narrator nonetheless maintains this focus on a reality devoid of clear reference points: “He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief” (11). The two novels each gesture towards catastrophes as definitive turning points marking the passage from a meaningful world in which things made sense and everything felt “right,” to one in which notions of stable place, language and affective attachment are critically missing. The prominence of the ashes in both passages suggests a particular sense of the nation and the self as reduced to detritus—synonymous with corporeal destruction—floating in the place where meaning once existed.<sup>15</sup> The historical trauma stands in for a more general, far more disturbing trauma of structural absence, in which the symbolic order crumbles along with a historically specific material reality.

It is tempting to frame this disturbance as linked exclusively to 11 September 2001, but to do so would elide the more general absence at the heart of American culture that transcends a specific, datable event like the one DeLillo describes, and more closely resembles McCarthy’s depiction of the country without a stable foundation in the real. All of the rhetoric claiming that the 2001 terrorist attacks revived an authentic American identity is indicative of a fantasy meant to compensate the nation for the absence of that identity at a foundational level. Susan Faludi proposes that September 11 “broke the deadbolt on our protective myth [or] the illusion that we are masters of our security, that our might makes our homeland impregnable” (*Terror Dream* 15), while Richard Gray claims 9/11 was “a demolition of the fantasy life of the nation in that it punctured America’s belief in its inviolability and challenged its presumption of its innocence, the manifest rightness of its cause” (*After the Fall* 11). Both Faludi and Gray suggest the attacks disturbed a dominant national myth of security and innocence that conceals a more fundamental absence of a material basis for the fantasy of American exceptionalism. According to Donald Pease, “September 11, 2001, precipitated a ‘reality’ that the national mythology could neither comprehend nor master” (*New American*

*Exceptionalism* 157). He argues that this incomprehensible “reality” destabilizes a pre-9/11 dialectic of “belief” and “disavowal” in which the myth of the national territory as an innocent and inviolable “Virgin Land” predominated, disavowing the long history of conquest, dispossession and upward wealth redistribution that underwrites its hegemony: “At Ground Zero the fantasy of radical innocence upon which the nation was founded encountered the violence it had formerly concealed,” forcing the United States to generate a new national myth based on the defense of the “homeland” (162). Although he neglects to acknowledge the gendered connotations of the “Virgin Land” metaphor – a particularly fraught issue in light of the resurgent national nostalgia for home, family and reproduction that I discuss in the second chapter on Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate At the Stairs* – Pease does correctly identify the precarious status of belief in the efficacy of the state during the American War on Terror, as well as the opportunity it created to reconfigure its ideological myths.

Following these critics, it is worthwhile to again separate the historical trauma associated with 11 September 2001 from the structural trauma – the symbolic damage – done to American identity, not through a single event but over the longer duration of the nation’s history. Conflating the two conditions transforms September 11 into a fetish, isolated from its historical and ideological context, which enables disavowal of the multiple temporalities, spatialities and affects that trouble the event’s privileged place as the origin of American decline and the point for rearticulating a trajectory towards a restored future. In literary scholarship on post-9/11 literature, both Gray and Anker perform this theoretical task admirably, but do not give the archive enough credit for its own interrogation of not just the sublime event but also the ideological fantasies which establish the place of that event in discourses of the nation.<sup>16</sup>

This interrogation necessitates keeping the sublime immediacy of the attacks at a proper distance. Readers will no doubt notice the conspicuous absence of actual terrorism from the narratives in *Fantasies of Oblivion*, which direct our attention towards a constellation of other factors besides traumatic rupture that come to the forefront. In his recent survey, John N. Duvall argues that post-9/11 fiction responds to 11 September 2001 in one of two ways: “by directly representing the terrorist attacks or by displacing the attacks historically, allegorically, or metafictionally” (“Fiction and 9/11”

181). *Fantasies of Oblivion* primarily addresses works that fall into the latter category, if only to shift the general emphasis on the former in the current field of post-9/11 literary studies, which expends disproportionate critical energy on a handful of texts – including, for instance, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and Johnathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* – where the terrorist attacks are described more directly and can thus serve as a major plot device. Whereas a great deal of valuable work has been done and might yet still be done on such novels, I am more interested in narratives that take even more oblique views of the event because they bring forward some of the unacknowledged ideological assumptions, beliefs and fantasies from which the repetition of a particular historical trauma, however critical, can sometimes distract.<sup>17</sup>

The field needs to frame post-9/11 fiction in terms that account for its displacement of the injunction to do representational justice to the event itself.<sup>18</sup> The archive of post-9/11 literary texts I take under consideration, which mention the events only sparingly, shifts attention away from the sublime shock of September 11 in order to interrogate what Redfield calls the “symbolic damage” done by the attacks to a series of deeply entrenched American fantasies of national innocence, altruism, unity, security, tolerance and futurity. Thus, this project considers a retrospective impulse in post-9/11 literature that nonetheless intervenes into the ongoing legacies of the event, which haunts but does not entirely account for the era popularly known as the War on Terror. Although September 11 magnetizes a field of inquiry as an object of anxiety around which literature circulates, the texts demonstrate an uneasiness with fetishizing its traumatic impact because the narrative of victimization and recovery this fetish produces enables the disavowal of an auxiliary, symbolic trauma: the antagonisms the event revealed in America’s ideological certainties about its identity and place in history. *Fantasies of Oblivion* is a small contribution towards breaking the “dismal perimeter” post-9/11 America builds around the World Trade Center site as well as around the minds of national subjects. It proceeds from the belief that only once we change the ideological fantasies that structure our libidinal investments in terrorism can a compelling counter-narrative emerge.

## Fetishistic Disavowal

*Fantasies of Oblivion* reads the post-9/11 ideological fantasies of the United States through the formulation of “fetishistic disavowal,” a concept which enables the articulation of an equally materialist and psychoanalytic reading of the contemporary War on Terror. This reading does not suggest that the political problem of post-9/11 culture is a lack of facts. After the Abu Ghraib photo scandal, two questionable wars in the Middle East, billions of dollars spent, the “manufacture of consent” and countless other problems, the evidence of maleficence is abundantly clear. As in the Greek myth of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, the mystery is not what lays behind the veil; the mystery is the veil itself.<sup>19</sup> Post-9/11 fiction knows it. The archive after the attacks struggles to dislodge the dominant ideological modes for imagining the significance of 11 September 2001. Characters such as Skip Atwater in *The Suffering Channel*, Tassie in *A Gate at the Stairs*, Muhammad Atta in “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” Julius in *Open City* or Maxine in *Bleeding Edge* symptomatically register the limits of their partial perspectives and the uncomfortable oblivion which prevents them from arriving at a more panoramic view of the social totality during the War on Terror, one that does not serve as their central preoccupation but is evident at the margins of their texts nevertheless. Rather than attempt to leave behind ideological fantasies, the texts demonstrate how those fantasies are partial and inconsistent. Thus, these narratives are not repetitions of a founding national and historical rupture, but attempts to come to terms with forms of knowledge otherwise omitted from the dominant narrative of the nation and mark the moments of blockage or stasis in the collective understandings of the post-9/11 world. The texts index a sense of some larger reality at the margins of their focalizing protagonists’ awareness but nonetheless at the hidden core of their experience, the knowledge which simply does not yet translate into belief.

Marx’s famous definition of commodity fetishism as a “definite social relation between men that assumes... the fantastic relation between things” (*Marx Reader - Capital Vol.1* 321), emphasizes how the isolation of a particular element (commodities) within a social situation (in this case, capitalist production) obscures both relations and processes (labor) that help to produce that element. Although not false, the fetish is necessarily a partial, incomplete and mystifying view of reality: “what is really a structural

effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of those elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements” (*Sublime Object* 24). The events of 11 September 2001 function as precisely such a fetish in American culture and politics, held in place by a range of disavowed fantasies. The excessive emphasis in the state and media on national trauma, suffering and victimhood – only small elements of a much more complex picture – necessarily restricted the ability of Americans to cognitively map the economic, social and political relations that precipitated the terrorist attacks. Early critical attempts from Susan Sontag, Arundhati Roy and Sunera Thobani to draw public attention to the imperialist economic and military practices of the United States as a potential source fueling anti-American sentiment in the Arab world inspired immediate repudiation in the media.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the American political class continued to accentuate hatred of American “freedom” and “values” and “innocence” as the motivation for the attacks. Fetishizing the traumatic events of September 11 – abstracting them from a global set of geopolitical relations – became the means through which the emergency state could advance the calls for revenge which sustain its military agenda.

Critics sympathetic to Marx’s analysis have seen in this formulation a mode of reading ideology that cannot simply be reduced to piercing fiction in order to access the reality subtending it (a “false consciousness” model of ideological critique exemplified by popular leftist figures like Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn). Rather, scholars such as Stuart Hall and Fredric Jameson see ideology as a limit imposed on our modes of thought and analysis, produced when our perspective becomes reified to such an extent that we disavow the conditions that go into producing a particular element of our social world, or, as Stuart Hall argues, “substituting one part of the process for the whole” and thus creating not so much a false explanation but an “inadequate” one (“Marxism without Guarantees” 36). For his part, Jameson makes the connection between ideological fetishism and the narrative operations of literary texts through his formulation of “strategies of containment.” Drawing on the work of Georg Lukács, he argues that Marx’s theory of ideology is not “as widely thought, one of false consciousness, but rather one of structural limitation and ideological closure” (*Political Unconscious* 52). In his analysis of cultural production, intellectual limitations and foreclosures become formal ones that artistic works manage through processes of repression, displacement,

condensation and utopian compensation (53).<sup>21</sup> *Fantasies of Oblivion* reads post-9/11 fiction as the formal registration of “structural limitation[s]” and “ideological closure[s]” unique to the dominant symbolic order of the War on Terror. The texts under consideration are not political in the sense that they advocate for a specific national party or a particular policy, but because they imaginatively think the contradictions of their historical situation in narrative form. They thus put the events of September 11 into dialogue with the disavowed ideological fantasies of the American nation, and in doing so expose the crisis within the symbolic order these fantasies are meant to explain, testing their coherence as well as their illusory claims of wholeness.

I will turn frequently in this project to Slavoj Žižek’s formulations of Lacanian psychoanalysis – including fetishistic disavowal and fantasy – because they significantly undermine the reigning ideological “common sense” and explain, at least in part, what unconscious passions animate the War in Terror. As Žižek argues, whereas the notion we live in a post-ideological world – common to our neoliberal moment – appears to suggest that the transparency of brutal economic exploitation and political oppression negates the project of ideological critique, in actuality, the apparent obviousness of our present conditions necessitates the critical tools of psychoanalysis (in particular) more than ever because,

Psychoanalysis opens up a way to unmask [the] apparent proof of its uselessness, by way of detecting, beneath the deceiving openness of post-ideological cynicism, the contours of fetishism, and thus to oppose the fetishist mode of ideology, which predominates in our allegedly ‘post-ideological’ era, to its traditional symptomal mode, in which the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms, qua ‘returns of the repressed’, cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie. Fetish is effectively a kind of *envers* [inversion] of the symptom. That is to say, the symptom is the exception which disturbs the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts, while fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth. (*Enjoy Your Symptom! x*)

Fetishistic disavowal takes the structure of “I know very well X is the case but I will nonetheless act as if Y is true,” as in “I know very well that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks, but I will nonetheless act as if invading Iraq will prevent more attacks...” or, “I know very well the state failed to protect the country on

9/11 but will nonetheless act as if enhanced security measures will stop global terrorism...” The question of interpretation thus hinges on the problem of how the obscene exercise of state power at home and abroad, for instance, is often in plain sight, but can still reinforce the opposite of the logical or expected reaction of the general public. Through what ideological processes do we cancel the full impact of the reality right in front of us, even cynically acknowledged by leaders such as Vice President Dick Cheney through his claims America must now walk on the “dark side”?

The predominant mode of post-ideological cynicism today is what Žižek, following Alain Badiou, calls the “passion for the real.” In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek argues, in contrast to the utopian plans of the nineteenth century, “the twentieth century aimed to deliver the thing itself,” or the “direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality” and its deceptive appearances (5).<sup>22</sup> To support this claim, he cites numerous examples, including the ideological projects of Soviet Communism, the terrorism of the Red Army Faction, the revolution in Cuba, and cultural touchstones, such as Hollywood special effects, extreme pornography and self-inflicted violence. For Žižek, 11 September 2001 is the culmination of this socially pervasive twentieth-century passion to break through signs, surfaces and simulations and thus access and act upon a more authentic world. Yet, the attacks also reveal the inherent paradox of this passion, which, despite its horrifying reality, “culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle” (9). Žižek cites the way the attacks, in their spectacular framing, resemble any number of apocalyptic big-budget action films, and thus blur the distinction between reality and fiction. The event radicalizes the passion for the real because it demonstrates, in its traumatic or excessive character, that it can only “be sustained” if it is “perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre”; we are compelled to screen the attacks through a “fictional mode” that draws from our own apocalyptic cultural fantasies (19).<sup>23</sup> Thus, Žižek’s dialectical reversal frames the passion for the real as a strategy for *disavowing the real as much as possible*, or, in other words, for maintaining a proper distance from it that mitigates its disturbing qualities. “The problem with the twentieth-century ‘passion for the real,’” Žižek writes, “was not that it was a passion for the real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the real*” (his emphasis, 24). It is thus a fundamentally cynical passion.

The passion for the real becomes especially problematic for Žižek when it enables us to disavow the inherent transgressions of the dominant ideology, in this case of the War on Terror, in which the horrific potential violence of global terrorism becomes the object that must be eradicated at any cost so the nation can return to its ideal condition of innocence or purity. In contrast to identifying with the “dirty obscene underside of power” charged with this eradication (30), Žižek advises abandoning notions of the sublime thing it is impossible to confront directly (like the imagined terrorist plot), and to see it as an ideological lure: “the very idea that, beneath deceptive appearances, there lies hidden some ultimate Real Thing too horrible for us to look at directly is the ultimate appearance – the Real Thing is the fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency” (31-2). Of course, Debord made a similar argument years ago: the democratic state, unable to deliver on its promises, wishes “to be judged by its enemies rather than its results” (*Comments* 24). Continuing in this long tradition, the cynical ideology of post-9/11 America uses the excuse of imminent terrorist attack to justify the state of exception – including extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention, torture, curtailed civil rights and foreign military intervention – and create a comfortable psychological distance between its own violent response to the attacks and the ideals of freedom and democracy it claims that response protects, as if one does not obviously contradict the other.

Post-9/11 culture is rife with symptoms of this “passion for the real” – including false claims that September 11 marks the “end of irony”; or the elevation of a found-footage real-time aesthetic; or the claims that America can return to some more authentic pre-lapsarian version of national unity and innocence – but the apparent craze for a return to “reality” after a period of mass illusion is sustained by fantasies which orient the desire of citizen-subjects towards the nation-state in a time of its obvious failure.<sup>24</sup> Again, this is the paradox of the passion for the real: the real that returns necessarily does so in the form of another semblance; it is only sustained, as is the War on Terror, by a fantasy.<sup>25</sup> The phrase “fantasies of oblivion” refers to the ideological fantasies which compensate for the void the 11 September 2001 attacks opened in the certainties of American global dominance and the country’s invulnerability from outside attack, in the belief in the big Other’s permanence.<sup>26</sup> Each text raises one of five such



fantasies – the atemporal fantasy of shocking immediacy (Wallace), the nostalgic fantasy for a lost home and homeland (Moore), the panoptic fantasy of real-time surveillance omniscience and total security (Amis), the commemorative fantasy of national healing and forgetting (Cole) and the apocalyptic fantasy of state military pre-emption and closure of the future-past (Pynchon) – which register pervasive post-9/11 cultural desires to circumvent surfaces, simulations and semblances. Consequently, in reading the emergent post-9/11 literary archive, this dissertation accentuates how post-9/11 literature registers the political unconscious of the historical moment, the passion for the real otherwise marginalized within the current discussion. Fantasy names a history that – although urgently necessitating reckoning – has not yet become part of the official historical record.

Following the work of Žižek and Jameson, fantasy is not treated as a synonym for escapism or false consciousness, so much as a narrative form that mediates between the symbolic order and material reality. As Jameson long ago argued regarding literary critics, “we are not here distinguishing between fantasy and some objective reality onto which it would be ‘projected,’ but rather... asserting such fantasy or proto-narrative structure as the vehicle for our experience of the real” (*Political Unconscious* 48). Post-9/11 fiction provides an opportunity for literary scholars to evaluate more than the trauma of the events, because this fiction stages the disavowed ideological fantasies that give the trauma its particular meanings and thereby orient subjects within national and imperial desire. These texts help explain how subjects in the precarious present of terror and crisis assume their proscribed positions in relation to the event, but also how the fantasies that enable them to do so cannot maintain coherence in consideration of their mounting contradictions. Consequently, each chapter (1) delineates a particular ideological fantasy; (2) puts this fantasy into conversation with a work of post-9/11 literature representative of a primary subgenre of that literature; (3) suggests how the chosen text(s) stage this ideological fantasy but also reveal(s) its limits; (4) and considers how the text(s) thereby reorient(s) readers towards key political questions of the post-9/11 world.

**Chapter 1** argues that David Foster Wallace’s often overlooked novella-length *The Suffering Channel* (the last story in his final published collection of short fiction,

*Oblivion*) figures the cultural moment immediately preceding 11 September 2001 through the tropes of psychoanalytic discourse – repressed symptoms, unconscious slips, foreclosed knowledges, and the most unsubtle invocation of pre-oedipal anal infantilism possible – in order to evoke the otherwise disavowed uncanniness of American life at the end of the “long nineties.” The narrative thus serves as a retroactive recoding of the past dependent on dramatic irony; its return to pre-9/11 culture only makes sense, I argue, from the standpoint following the terrorist attacks. From this vantage, the text complicates fantasies that imagine the attacks ruptured a foundational national innocence. Although the characters are certainly ignorant of the coming events, *The Suffering Channel* demonstrates that this ignorance cannot dispel how the creeping threshold for disgust in late capitalist media contributes to the sublimation of those events from an abject horror into an uncomfortably pleasurable spectacle, a process which repeats and intensifies the derealisation of suffering rather than exploding it violently into public consciousness. In the course of the chapter, I also claim Wallace’s novella questions popular readings of September 11 through cinematic representation – the widespread notion that it looks “just like a movie” – as complicit in the flattening of diverse local affects into a single monolithic response. Instead, the text, in its cuts between mid-western America and the epicenter of late capitalist spectacle in New York City, stresses the role a variety of non-cinematic media – including magazines, television and even avant-garde art – play in shaping the event.

**Chapter 2** repeats Wallace’s spatial displacement, this time examining how fantasies heralding the private sphere as an escape from public acts of violent terror both disavow the centrality of domestic fantasies to the reproduction of the nation in times of crisis and, in doing so, impose normative conceptions of family, femininity and home on a far less homogenous domestic geography. It places these fantasies into conversation with Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs*, a domestic novel set in the fictional Wisconsin towns of semi-rural Dellacrosse and liberal college Troy. Whereas critics such as Richard Gray, Michael Rothberg and Pankaj Mishra have denounced the domestic turn in the post-9/11 novel as politically regressive because, they allege, it reproduces the myopic indifference of the nation to the outside world after the terrorist attacks, I build on Georgiana Banita’s claim that such novels can in fact function allegorically, and as a result estrange the national whole for which the family home is

meant to metonymically substitute. *A Gate at the Stairs* achieves this estrangement through the unorthodox subjectivity of its protagonist, Tassie, a twenty-year-old college student whose own casual obliviousness towards the historical events of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan indirectly contribute to the death of her younger brother, Rob. The seemingly distant international context resonates powerfully with a domestic one when Tassie becomes a nannie for an affluent restaurant owner who attempts to adopt a mixed-race child but who harbors a devastating secret which thwarts reconstitution of the family through the domestic idyll. In both the cases of Rob and of Sarah Brink, *A Gate at the Stairs* engages in what I call “failed reproduction” where homes do not cohere according to ideological scripts of ideal family life and national unity, but instead break down into less predictable spatial and affective relationships catalyzed by shared loss.

**Chapter 3** moves from discourses of the unified nation to those of the paranoid surveillance state in which the real and imagined terrorist threat feeds increased security measures based in fantasies of total panoptic omniscience and sovereign control. It takes up the anxieties over identifying, tracking and containing terrorist otherness through Martin Amis’ controversial short story, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta.” Although post-9/11 surveillance fiction, as Banita notes, often reveals the dangers and limits of surveillance technologies, as well as their potential to foster anonymous forms of resistant collectivity, Amis’ fiction stands out for its staging of a surveillant revenge fantasy. Although ostensibly providing the missing record of the final day of Muhammad Atta – the lead hijacker of the 9/11 operation who would fly American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center that morning – its formal and thematic allusions to temporalities of boredom and repetition suggest a different agenda. In the story, Atta’s character occupies a purgatorial “life between two deaths” which acknowledges his biological demise but nonetheless postpones his symbolic passing until his debt to the victims has been repaid in full. I argue that this prolongation of Atta’s life also enacts a retroactive fantasy in which the reader, perversely identified with the surveillance state, enjoys a total knowledge of the protagonist before he ever has a chance to commit his horrifying crimes. It thus enables the reader to forget the incompetence of the security agencies that failed to detect and stop the plot before it actually came to fruition and to indulge in the accumulation of Atta’s suffering as he or

she continues the reading that sustains his excruciatingly painful limbo. Drawing from Amis' essays and public comments, I contend that his short story is symptomatic of anti-Muslim sentiment as well as an emerging surveillance society that fetishizes the perceived difference of others but disavows its own dehumanizing practices.

**Chapter 4** moves the center of discussion back to New York City through its analysis of Teju Cole's *Open City*. Whereas Amis' text caricatures the subjectivity of America's exemplary terrorist enemy, *Open City* instead focalizes the post-9/11 city through Julius, a German-Nigerian immigrant who casts a critical eye on the hegemonic practices of memory written into urban spaces. If September 11, 2001 established New York City as the site of national trauma, Julius, through a series of walks around Lower Manhattan, reminds us that violence, trauma and its convenient (although often thwarted) erasure have always been part of American history. Fantasies of New York as an "open" city to immigrants – a land of opportunity and mobility – disavow the other foreclosed racial histories of displacement, slavery, profiteering and genocide that fail to wound the national psyche like the void left by the collapse of the Twin Towers, an imbalance indicative of the political power written into city space. Yet, *Open City's* critique targets more than the dominant discourses of the national or the urban. Whereas Julius excavates these disavowed sites of collective memory, his detached liberal aestheticism problematizes his narrative authority. Although endlessly insightful, repeated references to "blind spots," both in the historical record and his carefully constructed narrative persona, suggests the limits to intellect disassociated from affect as well as the dangers of maintaining the coherence of a single narrative or ideological perspective which is necessarily partial and therefore incomplete. Julius seems like the ideal outsider to what Ali Behdad calls the "forgetful nation," but his own disavowed complicity in suffering, his inability to jump out of his role as a gifted observer and into one of radical possibilities to change politics or spaces, means he inadvertently reproduces the melancholy of the country he identifies, except on a personal scale that prevents him, like the nation, from moving forward in any meaningful way.

In the **Afterword**, I argue that the melancholic loss of the future in post-9/11 discourses of national security and military pre-emption misses the fruitfulness of untimely critique Wendy Brown advocates, as well as the utopian thinking Thomas

Pynchon's post-9/11 novels – particularly *Against the Day* (2006) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) – inscribe into their literary form. These works stage an ongoing antagonism between what Ernst Bloch calls the “utopian impulse” and the collusive forces of state and capitalism which traverses the division between pre- and post- 9/11 culture. For *Bleeding Edge*, the site of this antagonism is the technological utopianism of the internet during the 1990s, while *Against the Day* situates it in the utopian longings for transcendence that infuse the generic conventions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century popular literature. In its analysis of these texts, this afterward contributes to a provisional reorientation of critical focus away from an archive organized around the event of 11 September 2001, and towards one structured through a recovery of hope from the past. It stresses the hidden openness of the present and thus the possibilities for a future beyond continuation of the entrenched War on Terror.

## Chapter 1.

### Uncanny Objects: Sublimation, Disgust and Pre-9/11 Culture in *The Suffering Channel*

#### 1.1. The Horror of 'the Horror'

When *Rolling Stone* magazine called upon popular contributor David Foster Wallace to comment on the September 11 attacks, his response betrayed anxieties regarding how easily spectators resorted to the language of popular entertainment to describe their experiences. Set in Bloomington, Illinois, "The View From Mrs. Thompson's" provides a fictionalized account of how Wallace and his circle of friends reacted to the events as they unfolded on the television in the title characters' living room. As biographer D.T. Max observes, the story contrasts the innocent sincerity of Wallace's friends from church (a thinly veiled allusion to his addiction recovery group) with the character of Duane, who repeatedly asserts that the images of destruction remind him of a movie (*Ghost Story* 263). The narrator privileges a sincere disgust over Duane's euphoric pleasure in order to create a distance between his friends' reactions and any attempts to classify September 11 as mere "disaster-porn." Wallace's narrator states, "I'm trying to explain the way part of the horror of the Horror was knowing that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my own—mine... and poor old loathsome Duane's—than these ladies" (*Consider the Lobster* 140). For Max, this passage raises the ethical question of whether Wallace was trying to suggest that a certain part of America *did* deserve what it got (GS 263), but Duane's recognition of the paradoxical intersection between the spectacle of suffering and the enjoyment of popular entertainment also prompts us to consider the cultural period into which the terrorist attacks would intervene.

David Foster Wallace's writing before and after 11 September 2001 frames ambivalent cultural reactions to terrorism through a pervasive "passion for the real," or what Slavoj Žižek, following Alain Badiou, defines as the twentieth century's repeated attempts "at delivering the thing itself" (*WTDR* 5). Žižek argues that within the increasing virtualization of reality, in which we experience more and more of the social world as a staged fake "deprived of its substance" (11), violent events like the 11 September 2001 attacks seem to provide access to a reality beyond postmodern simulation. Yet, for Žižek, the uncanniness of the attacks – which many witnesses found both too real *and* an unreal spectacle – suggests matters are not so simple. Citing the resemblance of the attacks to countless Hollywood films from *Independence Day* to *Escape from New York*, he contends, "in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise" (16). Žižek thus calls into question any discourse claiming September 11 was an unmediated horror that shattered the coordinates of late capitalist consumerism.<sup>27</sup> Instead, he claims, "what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality... [i]t is not that reality entered our image" (16). From this perspective, since the "real" of terrorism can only be sustained through the fantasies of our own destruction that terrorists exploit, 9/11 confirms, "the fundamental paradox of the 'passion for the real' [is that] it culminates in a *theatrical spectacle*" (9). Although skeptical towards evocations of cinematic spectacle, Wallace, like Žižek, troubles discourses of the event claiming direct access to the "Horror of 'the Horror'" – whether through violent images, journalism, reality TV, excremental art or even literary fiction – and instead suggests there can be no sublime horror within postmodernism without sublimating it into more approachable forms of consumer desire. Consequently, Wallace sets aside the traumatic shock of terrorism to explore how spectators sustain or disavow the horror of "the Horror" and in turn how this equivocation enters into late capitalist spectacle. At stake in his fiction is traversing the fantasy of the September 11 attacks as a strike against American innocence. If anything, it suggests that these events are inseparable from American entertainment's receding threshold for disgust, as the culture industries transform violence and other forms of human suffering into a source of voyeuristic enjoyment potentially complicit with terrorism.

Rendering the sublime as the ridiculous, Wallace's bizarre 2004 novella *The Suffering Channel* (*TSC*), presents American culture struggling to negotiate a tension

between repulsion and attraction to violence in the months immediately prior to 11 September 2001. Although it does not immediately trigger associations with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, several clues indicate that the events of that day form the implicit background against which the pre-9/11 narrative unfolds. Set just before the 10 September 2001 issue of the fictional *Style* magazine, the novella details the struggles of professional soft-news journalist Skip Atwater to find the “upbeat human interest angle” that will convince his editors to allow him to write a column on Brint Moltke, an Indiana plumber with the inexplicable ability to unconsciously shape his excrement into arresting works of art as it passes through his rectum. The strangeness of this narrative conceit – rendering the overpowering sublime as the comically mundane – achieves greater legibility in the context of mass mediated terrorism, a connection to which Wallace’s text repeatedly draws readers’ attention through oblique references to September 11. For instance, we learn that the offices of *Style* magazine are located on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor of World Trade Center 1 (241) and discover that various characters are destined to survive in the attacks (245) or die in those events we know will occur the day after the publication of the issue in question (346). The narrative premonition of September 11 raises the issues of why Wallace returns to the cultural moment immediately *prior* to the attacks – a move which troubles the definition of the 9/11 novel as concerned with the event’s traumatic impact and its after-effects in the work of critics like Versluys and Kowal – and what the narrative he builds around this now immanent historical certainty retroactively reveals about this moment.

## 1.2. Irony of the Banal

*The Suffering Channel* confronts its readers with the paradoxical sense of latency a major historical event like 9/11 introduces into the past, as if one ought to have seen it coming, but also that in some expected ways, one did without avowing it. The most striking feature of the text is how it intertwines numerous allusions to psychoanalytic discourse – disavowals, symptoms, fetish objects, dream sequences – with its narrative exploration of pre-9/11 American culture.<sup>28</sup> These allusions to psychoanalysis enable the narrative restaging of the cultural unconscious of the pre-9/11 moment and help mark a fundamental form of collective thinking about the sublime immediately preceding



the attacks. The impact of this reconstruction relies on the cultural knowledge of its readership, whose experiences of 9/11 retroactively re-signify the historical moment and recognize in the narrative an absent place only visible after the fact – the place, or gap, in Žižek’s formulations, of the “sublime object” – into which the terrorist attacks would emerge. The dramatic irony maintains the specificity of the local in its shifts between small town Bloomington and hyper-postmodern New York City, but unsettles the specificity of feelings about the terrorist attacks, because it refuses to re-contain “the Horror” as an individual, subjective experience, which, as Jameson’s contends “can only be designated by recourse to an aesthetic of *expression*—the unspeakable, unnameable feeling, whose external formulation can only designate it from without, like a symptom” (“TWL” 70-1). Instead of using an aesthetic of *expression* that captures *individual* unease, *TSC* constructs a pervasive *social* unease through the text’s uncanny allegory, in which even apparently visceral, spontaneous reactions to Brint’s disgusting artistic productions – or what Sara Ahmed calls the “performativity of disgust” (*CPE* 82) and Sianne Ngai calls disgust’s “psychosomatics” (“Poetics” 102) – are shaped by the mediating influence of the late capitalist culture industries. Here, narrative holds together television, print media and visual art in a relational structure built around the constitutive screening of violence as an object of aesthetic contemplation.<sup>29</sup> The distance from the immediate trauma of the event built through this narrative screening provides an opportunity for readers to reflect on how mediation of “the Horror” both produces and fails to produce particular forms of national feeling.

Although widely known as a critic of postmodern narcissism, Wallace’s journalism during this period often interrogated the vexing cultural problem of *jouissance*, an enjoyment twisted into pain or vice versa, whether in the commanded pleasure of a luxury cruise ship in “Shipping Out,” the unapologetically vulgar yet undeniably sad pleasure of a national porn convention in “Big Red Son,” or the delicious but sick pleasure derived from boiling creatures alive in “Consider the Lobster.” All of these articles point to the disavowal of a barely concealed suffering. His late career fiction, culminating in the short story collection including *TSC*, titled *Oblivion*, also disturbed these unconscious disavowals. For prominent Wallace scholar Marshall Boswell, *Oblivion* functions as an uncanny aesthetic object within Wallace’s corpus because of this disturbance. Boswell claims that whereas *Infinite Jest* redeems “non-stop input and

entertainment” through the “empathetic bond Wallace creates between text and reader” and thus “dramatizes and alleviates the loneliness of interior experience,” *Oblivion*, in contrast, “repeatedly undermines many of the techniques for alleviation that Wallace had already established,” substituting “the possibility of a sublayer of interior experience that precedes language and, in many cases, masters it” (*Companion* 165-6). Although Boswell declines to name this sublayer as the “unconscious,” Wallace’s personal library indicates he maintained at least a passing interest in the concept, primarily through re-readings of and contentions with Sigmund Freud’s work, such as Timothy D. Wilson’s *Strangers to Ourselves* and William Miller’s *The Anatomy of Disgust*, as well as essays which frame the work of artists such as Franz Kafka and David Lynch in terms of psychoanalysis. Despite Wallace’s apparent interest, scholars such as Josh Roiland, Heather Houser and Mary K. Holland have only recently begun accentuating the disturbing rather than the therapeutic in their analysis of the author’s work.<sup>30</sup>

The plot of *The Suffering Channel* gives us further reason to consider the relationships between Wallace’s texts and psychoanalytic discourse, an approach current criticism touches on indirectly but does not fully explore. For instance, Toon Staes’ attempt to make sense of this truly bizarre narrative focuses on it as an allegory for individual artistic suffering within late capitalist spectacle, while Thomas Tracey argues that “important actions of the narrative are seen to occur only on the extreme periphery of the narrator’s awareness” in order to “call for greater attentiveness to our peripheral surroundings” (“Trauma” 178). Both of these readings, which, to their credit, point to Wallace’s concern with the margins of consciousness, neglect to engage with the blatant psychoanalytic motifs central to *TSC*. Throughout the narrative these motifs proliferate in the form of disturbing dreams, disavowals, and perhaps the most unapologetically unsubtle invocation of pre-Oedipal anal infantilism possible, thus helping Wallace to construct a dialogic space between writer and reader which encourages interpretive engagement with the text and the historical period it describes. This engagement relies on a shared affective disturbance which unsettles the unity and stability of individual consciousness, instead implying a shared unconscious disavowal of actually existing violence and suffering. The novel does so through figuring a disturbing excess of the self, the social and the aesthetic that resists empathetic identification and mutual symbolic recognition; Brint’s excremental sculptures, for instance, serve as the

foreclosed remainders of discourse, uncanny objects that although excluded from thought nonetheless bind subjects together in mutual disgust.

Thus Wallace's turn to the formal motifs of psychoanalysis entails abandoning expectations of either narrative closure or common sense historical "representation" of pre-9/11 America. Instead, the novella pursues resonances across unconscious levels of experience which accentuate the uncanniness lurking at the heart of any otherwise seemingly "transparent" or "coherent" historical context – or narrative *text* for that matter – splitting it from within and implying the presence of double meanings. "It seems to me that one of the things about living now," Wallace proposes in an interview, "is that everything presents itself as familiar, so one of the things the artist has to do now is take a lot of this familiarity and remind people that it's strange" (Kennedy and Polk 19). One of the effects of *TSC* is to take the familiarity of the moment immediately prior to September 11 and to bring forward its disavowed strangeness through the invocation of the artist as an absence that cannot provide meaning; in turn, this narrative shift empowers the reader within a dialogic framework.

Consequently, *TSC* operates under what Wallace terms the "irony of the banal." Although critical of his generation's typical forms of cynical ironic distance in essays like the landmark "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," this second form, "refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter" (*Supposedly* 161). Shifting into an aesthetic consideration of late capitalism, art critic Boris Groys argues this double-ness arises from the ubiquity of designed surfaces, which in their aestheticization of both politics and the self inadvertently generate a fantasized, shadowy world placed just beyond the visible: "the world of total design is a world of total suspicion, a world of latent danger lurking behind designed surfaces" ("Self-Design" 3).

Groys' argument links the banality of mass cultural image reproduction to its obverse, the imagined uncanny secret world of suffering, truth and authenticity that also resonates with pre-9/11 literary works, like Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama* – which narrates the life of a male high fashion model seduced into a clandestine cell of

terrorists, composed of fellow models – and Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* – which pits the influence of the high modernist literary auteur Bill Gray against Abu Rashid, a terrorist who better epitomizes the dominant image cult and simulation culture. Both texts, through their concern with the “dominance of technologies of mass mediation” and the “role of globalized consumerism in reshaping the world,” as Peter Knight notes, “map the shift from secure paranoia of the Cold War to the insecure paranoia of a post-national age in which everything is connected” (“Beyond the Cold War” 194). In this form of post-Cold War paranoia, Groys contends, “we can only accept a catastrophe, a state of emergency, a violent rupture in the designed surface, as sufficient reason to believe that we are allowed a view of the reality that lies beneath.” In other words, this hidden “catastrophe” (3) – seen by Ellis’ and DeLillo’s characters, who posit violent brutality of terrorism as the hidden truth of simulation – indexes the real presumed to exist beyond the ubiquitous designed surfaces of late capitalism.

Groys historicizes this observation in relation to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, in which, “Even the most committed theorists of postmodern simulation began to speak about the return of the real as they watched the images of September 11” (“Self-Design” 5). Indeed, for Lacanian theorists such as Žižek, as we have seen, this return was a Badiouian “passion for the real” (*WTDR* 5), while Jean Baudrillard, who famously claimed that the Gulf War did not take place, called 9/11 a spectacular event which added a terrifying “*frisson* of the real” (*Spirit of Terrorism* 29). *TSC* projects into the past a retroactive awareness of the catastrophic confrontation with this real soon to come, which lurks within the *belle epoch* of American globalization. *TSC* thus implies the hypocrisy of what Claire Kahane calls “the discourse of foundational innocence on which Americans had established [the] public identity [that] had hidden a more rapacious reality” (“Uncanny Sights” 109). “Given the rapidly expanding international gap between the culture of plenty and the culture of poverty,” Kahane argues, “would it be surprising if many of us unconsciously anticipated envious acts of retaliation from the margin, from unknown antagonists ‘over there’?” (109). The irony of the banal produces an uncanny double-ness to reality that points to some shared, felt yet unsymbolized anxiety that the real would violently respond to these disavowed geopolitical imbalances and thus destroy the symbolic certainties of American exceptionalism, power and innocence. Rather than individual, this level of experience is *historical* as well as *collective* and

speaks to the symptoms in this period that disrupt fantasies which enable national disavowal of the global suffering of others. *TSC* reproduces these limitations as formal gaps in the narrative, rendered particularly uncanny through its refusal to explain the unusual talent of its paradigmatic artist, Brint Moltke. Through Brint, the narrative traces the contours of a void in our understanding – figured as textual, historical and bodily – but in doing so also sets in motion our interpretive desire for the uncovering the real that we can, tragically, now only register in retrospect.

### **1.3. ‘Some Kind of Unconscious Visible Code’**

In addition to television and film, to which I will turn in the next section, *The Suffering Channel* raises questions of narrative mediation and the construction of affect and representation. In its own failure to figure Brint’s un-sublime sculptures, the novella consequently suggests the impossibility of the Horror’s full representation in narrative form. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson argues that history is not a “text,” for it is “fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational,” yet it also remains “inaccessible to us except in textual form” (82). Similarly, *TSC* translates the affective equivocation towards these objects of visual disgust – like the visual “horror” with 9/11 lived in Mrs. Thompson’s living room – into a formal deadlock. If the textual is in contention with the visual culture, what can it add to that culture? The excremental object’s unimaginable qualities escape direct representation, lurking instead like the latent thought infusing the manifest content of the “dream-work,” serving as an absent structuring principle but nowhere present as a positively existing entity within the text. In its uncanny gaps, traumas, repetitions, condensations, displacements and exaggerations, *TSC*’s reconstructs the historical moment immediately prior to the September 11 attacks in order, borrowing again from Jameson, to capture “a grisly and terrifying objective real world beneath the appearances of our own world: an unveiling or deconcealment of the nightmarish reality of things, a stripping away of our conventional illusions or rationalizations about daily life and existence” (“Third World Literature” 70). Ultimately, this narrative “deconcealment” spotlights how the sublimity of the terrorist attacks emerged into a postmodern spectacle already fascinated with the

aestheticization of trauma and suffering, but blissfully unaware of the impending doom the conditions of its relentless self-distancing from others portended.

*TSC* produces the uneasiness of reality prior to the event through Moltke, who offers no meaningful insight into his unusual talent, but instead shifts interpretive responsibility on to his unknown audience; their sincere “intimacy” with the artist emerges from his disappearance as a subject and thus the initiation of their analytic curiosity. While we learn that he suffers from a strange combination of “extreme personal shyness and need for privacy” as well as an “involuntary need to express what lay inside him,” through his art, neither provides any interpretive clues regarding his motivations (*Oblivion* 271). Brint hardly speaks at all – at least he makes no critical statements on his work – and the single time the artist communicates he relays nothing meaningful about his condition (256). In fact, the only information we receive about the source of Brint’s artistic impulse comes from his fame hungry wife, Amber, who unconvincingly explains to Atwater that his talent originates in extremely cruel toilet training and other parental abuses (269). Differently put, since nothing in the narrative satisfactorily explains his uncanny strangeness, something about Brint Moltke fundamentally escapes common sense description. Instead, through Skip Atwater, *TSC* repeatedly draws attention to the artist as a fissure in the symbolic order that marks the limits to our understanding. In the process, this cypher functions as a sort of vanishing mediator whose function is to alert readers to a crack in the edifice of designed surfaces which dominate the moment immediately prior to September 11. His role is not explanation but disappearance and through this vanishing act, readers potentially gain a disturbing apprehension of something out-of-joint in the social order as a gap opens in its designed surface.

The invocation of psychoanalytic motifs in the novella aid in signaling this double-ness. In particular, Brint’s enigmatic hand gestures perplex Atwater in ways that recall the role of the unconscious as the point at which sense inevitably fails:

A further idiosyncrasy that Atwater noted in Gregg shorthand was the arrangement of the artist’s hands: their thumbs and forefingers formed a perfect lap level circle, which Moltke held or rather somehow directed before him like an aperture or target. He appeared to be unaware of this habit. It was a gesture both unsubtle and somewhat obscure in terms of what it signified. Combined with the rigid smile it was almost the stuff of nightmares. (*TSC* 248)

Although noting an obvious analogy between Brint's bizarre (and unsubtle) hand gesture and the orifice through which he enacts his unorthodox artistic process, Atwater nonetheless struggles to articulate the ultimate meaning of it. Instead he can only describe the gesture in terms of the unsettling quality of the unconscious (and artistic) dream-work:

No analogy for the digital waist level circle or aperture or lens or target or orifice or void seemed quite right, but it struck Atwater as definitely the sort of tic or gesture that meant something—the way in dreams and certain kinds of art things were never merely things but always seemed to stand for something else that you couldn't quite put a finger on—and the journalist had already shorthanded several reminders to himself to consider whether the gesture was some kind of unconscious visible code. (*TSC* 253)

The parallel between dreams and art in Atwater's reflection draws our attention to the possible analogy between Brint's corporeal signifier for the absence of meaning and the limitations of *TSC* as a narrative corpus enacting similar demarcations between what can be symbolized and what necessarily evades symbolization in any direct way. Thus, the enigma of Brint's "lap level circle" also marks the narrative's internal point of failure around which its action circulates, a point which paradoxically coincides with the excess of the artist's excremental production. As uncanny objects emerging out of the "aperture or lens or target or orifice or void" of the unconscious, these artworks place a similar pressure on capacities for sense making that the narrative refuses to reduce to a simple explanation. Through this apparently banal bodily function, the text dramatizes the empty void and the emergence of this obscene excess but leaves the work regarding what they mean – if anything – up to its readers.

Descriptions of Brint Moltke's smile only further underscore the character's strangeness. In his first encounter with the artist, Skip Atwater immediately notes something uncanny in his appearance, which combines the child-like with the menacing: "Brint Moltke sat hunched or slumped with his toes in and his hands in his lap, a posture reminiscent of a scolded child, but at the same time smiling at Atwater. As in smiling the entire time. It was not an empty professional corporate smile, but the soul effects were similar" (248).<sup>31</sup> Brint's "strange fixed smile," which he feels is not "trying to signify anything beyond itself" (312) continues to vex Atwater throughout the story.<sup>32</sup> What

might otherwise seem like a sign of welcoming transforms into a disturbing doubleness through two anecdotes associating smiles with death. In the first anecdote, Atwater recalls, “the lone time that Atwater believed he was seeing his own father smile, it turned out to have been a grimace which presaged the massive infarction” that led to his untimely death (251). In the second, Atwater remembers how a man committed suicide in his youth, “after which the son in their class and everyone else in the family had gone around with a strange fixed smile that seemed both creepy and courageous; and something in the hydraulics of Brint Moltke’s smile on the davenport reminded Skip Atwater of the Haas family’s smile” (255). Both of these brief anecdotes trouble the smile as a banal signifier of contentment; rather they point to the ominous enjoyment of human suffering infusing even the mundane dimensions of the narrative.<sup>33</sup>

Herein resides one of the two obvious references made by the silly dual-metaphor of the title: Brint Moltke functions as a channel through which the unsigned “raw matter” (Ngai) of experience – such as but not limited to suffering, pain and death – emerge into conscious awareness.<sup>34</sup> As Wallace claims regarding many of filmmaker David Lynch’s characters, Brint is a “[node] of identification and [engine] of emotional pain” (168). In the following section I will address the analogous television “channel,” but for the moment will hold that in suspension in order to consider the figurative role of Moltke’s body in *The Suffering Channel*. In particular, the corporeality of the artist provides an allegorical figure for the passage of obscene remainders from the internal into the external. Brint’s anus is not only the literal boundary of his body but also the imaginative boundary separating consciousness from the unconscious, holding back or passing through the obscenity of raw matter threatening to break into everyday reality and achieve external form. The gap inscribed on to this corporeal surface resonates as the terminus for the titular “suffering channel,” which then, in the most restricted sense, refers to Brint as an individual desperately seeking to “express” his own personal pain through art – underscored by his nocturnal gift to Atwater of the message “Help Me,” written in his own excrement (314) – but which in a broader sense could also serve as the externalization of the lurking real society would rather not think about. After all, Brint is twice referred to as a “mode of production” (271; 297) and thus his excremental remainders have larger metaphorical implications. *TSC* simultaneously locates Brint



Moltke as an object within a broader set of social relations and as a subject who allegorizes the social limits demarcating interiority from exteriority.<sup>35</sup>

#### 1.4. The Dream of the ‘Two Front Doors’

The dread associated with the possibility of breaking this symbolic boundary manifests in the nightmare of *Style* executive intern Laurel Manderley, which implies that Brint’s shameful productions raise uncomfortable problems that are both personal *and* political.<sup>36</sup> After encountering “digital photos of Brint Moltke’s artwork,” Manderley feels overwhelmed by an “ominous vatic feeling,” which she finds strange because, “she normally believed about as much in intuition and the uncanny as US Vice President Dick Cheney did” (301). Manderley’s unexpected invocation of VP Cheney at the end of this passage is too conspicuously placed in a narrative that largely avoids any political allusions to suggest mere coincidence and, as a result, colors the content of the entire recollection of the dream which follows in the next paragraph. Whereas many such interpretations are possible – in fact their both/and multiplicity is likely the point – the foregrounding of the dream as in need of analytic intervention at all only serves to reinforce the way in which *TSC* encourages this work on the part of the reader. The limit to understanding which it traces draws us in to the interpretive act as we, like Freud, search for the “navel of the dream.”

Manderley recalls how her dream begins in the small house that she “somehow knew” was the one that belonged to the “lady and her husband in Skip Atwater’s story” (301). Although she acknowledges that there was “nothing overtly surreal or menacing in the scene” Manderley nonetheless asserts how unsettling she found it and what in particular amplified her anxiety:

It seemed more like something generic or vague or tentative, like an abstract or outline. The only specifically strange thing was that the house had two front doors, even though one of them wasn’t in front but it was still a front door. But this fact could not begin to account for the overwhelming sense of dread Laurel Manderley felt, sitting there. There was a premonition of not just danger but evil. There was a creeping, ambient evil present, except even though present it was not in the room. Like the second front door it was somehow both there and not. She couldn’t wait to get out. But when she stood up with the excuse of asking

to use the bathroom, even in the midst of asking she couldn't stand the feeling of evil and began running for the door in stocking feet in order to get out, but it was not the front door she ran for, it was the other door... whatever the overwhelming evil was was right behind it, the door, but for some reason even as she's overcome with fear she's also reaching for the doorknob, she's going to open it, she can see herself starting to open it – and that's when she wakes. (302-3)

It would be difficult to compose a nightmare more *unheimlich* than this one. Indeed, Manderley's disturbing dream of the "two front doors" not only invites psychoanalytic interpretation, it is a passage so perfectly suited for it that one can only imagine the dream being written within a post-Freudian universe, which is to say with prior knowledge of Freud's discoveries and methods. While it is where we must start, reading the dream exclusively within the framework of individual psychopathology forfeits the possible political reading invited by the mention of Vice President Cheney. In the both/and logic of the dream work, we must instead hold these two levels in mind simultaneously.

Her dream begins in the Moltke's house, which Manderley asserts has two front doors, the first of which actually faces the front while the latter paradoxically faces backwards. The front facing door of the house bears obvious significance as the access point through which the inhabitants typically interface with the public realm via speech. However, the spatial dislocation of the second door directs our attention to an otherwise shameful access point out of place in its relation to public knowledge.<sup>37</sup> In considering first Manderley's assertion that she speaks certainly of the Moltke's house and second the nature of the strange ability which brought about the nightmare, the corporeal analogies of the two doors immediately present themselves. The front facing door figures the organ of speech, the mouth, a metaphor which might extend to all forms of publicity, including *Style* magazine. The second "back door" apparently refers to Moltke's anus – typically coded as a low status and shameful area of the body – but here is the site of artistic production for excremental sculptures. Displacement of this second door from the back to the front of the house creates an uncanny coincidence between the organ of publicity and the organ producing shameful excess.<sup>38</sup> Thus the formal distortion evident in this fictional dream-work betrays Laurel Manderley's anxieties regarding the

looming impossibility of reconciling these two functions in *Style's* September 10<sup>th</sup> story on Brint's miraculous ability.

Yet, returning to Cheney, the political unconscious of the dream resides in the possible correlations between these anxieties and the threat of externalizing the evidence of America's own shameful and disavowed excesses. Here Dick Cheney's supposed lack of belief in the "uncanny" speaks to how both of these "doors" start to coincide with the September 11 attacks and the War on Terror, where the realities of death, torture, violence and suffering subtending the apparent end of history emerge into public conscious awareness. However, since Manderley's dream occurs in a pre-9/11 context, this obscene excess of American power only manifests as a "creeping ambient evil" pulsating behind a historical door that had yet to open. The evil corresponds on one level to Moltke's excremental artworks that speak not only to his individual relationship to suffering but also to a broader cultural one towards an entire national illusion of innocence predicated on keeping the suffering of others out of sight and mind, or what Judith Butler has called the regulation of what one can consider a "grievable life" (*Precarious Life*). When after September 11, Dick Cheney publically declared fighting terrorism necessitates "walking on the dark side," he does so speaking out of two front doors: the public ideology of benevolent American domination and its dirty obscene underside: war, torture, exploitation, death and the suffering of countless unseen others.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the Vice President makes obvious the uncanniness of American reality evident in ideological logics long predating the attacks.

The narrative makes readers work through difficulty to reconstruct historical knowledge for themselves. For the most part, obvious historical referents remain conspicuously absent from *TSC*, except as the irony of the banal that betrays them. Nowhere do its characters reflect on the short-sightedness of American military interventions or on neoliberalism's global production of poverty and suffering. In other words, these concerns never become *content* proper. Only the distortions and gaps of the narrative *form* create a formal possibility to access these disavowed truths of the 1990s which struggle towards representation. The two figures for this struggle are Brint Moltke's excremental artworks and the content of the suffering channel television network. In both cases, these figures stand in for the ideologically disavowed historical

reality that Wallace writes into the formal composition of his text through gaps and failures. The following remarks move us from consideration of narrative *absence* to confront these two aesthetic figurations as inverse methods for obliterating analytic involvement through the overwhelming *presence* of the obscene, which fails to produce a similar space encouraging analytic intervention.

## 1.5. Fetishes of False Immediacy

Wallace's novella also takes up this issue of how cultural mediation and imagination shape the event, but nuances a psychoanalytic critical discourse that tends to both flatten the varieties of mediation involved and reduce the complexity of affective responses to it. Specifically, Richard Grusin draws attention to the limitations of reading the events of 9/11 as a cinematic mediation through his critique of Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the event. Baudrillard argues in *The Spirit of Terrorism* that countless disaster films "bear witness" to the latent "suicidal" fantasies of the West (6-7); however, Grusin contends that this emphasis on cinema as the privileged medium for encountering 9/11 is not specific enough to the various media through which most people encountered the attacks, such as television and newspapers. Surely, he argues, because there are "psychological or structural differences between the media of television and film," for instance, these different media change how the event is experienced (14). This challenge to Baudrillard's analysis (Grusin mentions Žižek and then tactfully sidesteps directly criticizing him) resonates with *The Suffering Channel* because the novella builds a media environment composed of avant-garde art, television and magazines rather than film. Thus, the ghost of Duane and his impolite invocation of cinematic precedent in "The View From Mrs. Thompson's" haunts the narrative, as this "sick and obvious po-mo complaint" that the "Horror" is just like a movie (*Consider* 140) comes into conflict with the predominantly televisual "felt sense of a larger world" which the narrator describes in Bloomington (134). If the cinematic reading of 9/11 strikes Wallace's narrator as a cynical and limited affront, articulated from a privileged (and possibly complicit) position of cultural capital, then television represents for him bonds of community: "what you do in Bloomington is all get together and watch something" (134). *TSC* dramatizes the encounter with the sublime through an artistic, televisual and

eventually print rather than cinematic medium, evoking the sense of countless other irreducible experiences of the unfolding events across the country, in many similar living rooms all equally national in focus but doggedly local in affect.

Yet, *TSC* does not disintegrate into discrete localism, as if Bloomington is entirely disconnected from New York City or Los Angeles. In fact, the novella spotlights how spectators of sublime events negotiate local and national positions enabled through late capitalist media. The characters of Brint and Amber Moltke, the soft news journalism of Skip Atwater, and the Reality-TV fantasies of media mogul and “Suffering Channel” owner R. Vaughn Corliss, each translate horrifying human suffering and pain into pleasurable spectacles enjoyed across this division, and in doing so speak to the challenges mass events like 9/11 pose to spectating subjects, caught in a liminal space between materiality and fantasy, home and nation, community and self. Whereas scholars such as Fredric Jameson questioned not only the “sincerity” of traumatic feelings about September 11 but also the “sincerity of all feelings” (“Dialectics of Disaster” 297), Laura Tanner’s re-evaluation of how subjects negotiate traumatic affect suggests this common Leftist suspicion towards non-mediated national feeling, although invaluable in the analysis of ideological manipulation, nevertheless “fails to explore how the public’s reaction to 9/11 has been shaped by a screen culture that renders the very opposition of distance and intimacy a false distinction” because “digital culture undermines materialist models of spatial location and materiality” and has thus “expanded how we experience connections through the body and space” (“Shifting Grounds” 61). *TSC*, while equally suspicious of an affective attunement at a national scale, examines how local subjects of late capitalism nonetheless negotiate these connections within a national media-scape. In every form of mediation the novella represents – such as excremental art, reality television, and soft journalism – it stages the paradoxical sense of attraction and repulsion exerted by the sublime, mediated on a variety of scales and through a variety of media.

The “suffering channel” of the title implies two possible references. The first reference, as I have discussed, is to Brint Moltke’s anus, which in addition to serving as the artistic medium or “channel” for his work, also has a more metaphorical resonance as a passage through which his personal suffering travels from the intimacy of his

psyche into the external world. The second refers to those external conditions through which his ability ultimately becomes known: the cable network known as the “suffering channel” dedicated to the continuous broadcast of crime, rape, murder and other examples of human anguish. The narrative converges where these two figurative “channels” coincide through the transformation of personal suffering into a source of aesthetic experience. At this nexus, Wallace identifies the paradoxical coincidence of the excremental art movement and reality television in the 1990s, both of which accentuate the shocking through the pretense of lifting the screen of mediation in display of the “real thing.” Whereas narrative in *TSC* heightens our awareness of a libidinally invested absence that fails to signify, these alternative aesthetic modes represent an inversion that obliterates reality in favor of the horrifying excess of the Real. As we shall see, neither example of this inversion leaves any space remaining for the subject, who in her encounter with the obscene “partial” object split off from the totality – just as excrement is a partial object split off from the body – forfeits sense making in an intensity of affect also recognizable in the reactions to America’s most recent historical trauma.

September 11 emerged as an event within the existing conditions of spectacle that we might broadly define as “modernist” and “post-modernist” aesthetic variations on the refusal of narrative mediation. Whereas one form of modernist avant-garde aimed to shatter the coordinates of bourgeois society while also exploding the false consciousness of the masses, postmodernism, as Fredric Jameson famously claimed, domesticated and institutionalized this impulse, “from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance,” which “no longer scandalize anyone” (*Postmodernism* 4). The cultural reactions to the September 11 roughly correspond to these positions, perhaps demonstrated most poignantly by the comments of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who called the attacks “the greatest work of art ever... the greatest work of art for the whole cosmos” (a typically modernist position), and those identified by Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, who, refuting Stockhausen, contend the attacks have been all too quickly transformed into sentimental postmodern kitsch: “Pose for a picture: mix disaster and death with stardom and beauty. Feel the scale. Absorb it. Go down in history. Move on. Understand it all. Find closure” (“Groundzeroland” 359). The major weakness in both the modernist and postmodernist reactions to September 11 is their mutual inability to map the connections

between traumatic events and historical or ideological contexts. In *The Suffering Channel*, Wallace attempts to dramatize these limitations and to gesture towards the mapping they steadfastly refuse by situating them in relation to one another and thus revealing their role in obscuring and aestheticizing the causes of human suffering. Here Wallace's literary dream-work plays the role of drawing unconscious analogies between two aesthetic modes of experience in pre-9/11 culture and, through its own retroactive mediation, determining how those trajectories might help explain cultural reactions to September 11.

These reactions frequently involved disgust, as the headline for the 26 September 2001 issue of the satirical newspaper *The Onion* indicates: "Holy Fucking Shit: America Under Attack." In a similar fashion, Wallace's novella turns to imagery of excrement familiar in contemporary art prior to 9/11 in order to reflect on this sublimated ("Holy"), excessive ("Fucking"), and disgusting ("Shit") reaction. This turn is a common one in the 1990s. In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster argues that the "shift in conception – from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma – may be definitive in contemporary art, let alone in contemporary theory, fiction and film" (146). In particular, Brint Moltke's excremental sculptures recall mutations in the modernist inspired aesthetics of shock during the 1990s. Increasingly during this period, avant-garde artists confronted viewers with blood, excrement, decay and other signifiers that break the boundaries of the corporeal, a figure for the "social" body. "This is the primary realm of abject art," Hal Foster argues, "which is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body" (*Return* 152). These works, in which "parts are displayed as residues of violence and/or traces of trauma" (152), point to disavowed waste, the obscene excesses of society, and are meant to challenge aesthetic conventions of beauty often associated with bourgeois art and the culture industries. They do so by taking what we normally assume belongs out of sight and out of mind and placing it in the unorthodox context of the gallery.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the works of these artists frequently invoke the scatological imagination, drawing on the near automatically excluded status of the excremental in ways that tend to shock museum spectators. Examples of this trend include Andres Serano's *Piss Christ* (1987), in which he suspends a statue of Jesus on the cross in a jar of urine; John Miller's *Dick/Jane* (1991) which buries a blue-eyed brown haired doll in a mound of shit substitute; and Mike

Kelly's embrace of anal infantile provocation of paternal order in works such as *Nostalgic Depiction of Innocence of Childhood* (1990) and *Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ* (1991), where abjection is meant to challenge symbolic difference.<sup>41</sup> In all of these cases, human waste becomes a provocative way to confront museum goers with the disturbing raw matter that falls out of the fantasy frames created through everything from institutional practices to political ideologies.

In particular, the display of *shit* – whether real or simulated – in art galleries provokes both fascination and uneasiness. In an offhand comment, Jacques Lacan remarked that perhaps what distinguishes humans from animals is not the capacity for higher reasoning so much as the fact that humans are the only species who consider the disposal of their waste to be a serious problem. Žižek attributes this problem not to the bad smell, or even disease, but to the fact it “came out from our innermost selves” (*On Belief* 59). “We are ashamed of shit because,” he argues, “in it, we expose/externalize our innermost intimacy... when our innermost self is directly externalized, the result is disgusting” (59-60). The externalization of excrement is pivotal in the way it invokes disgust. *Style* executive intern Laurel Manderley articulates this point in a similar way: “When [saliva is] in your mouth it’s not gross, but the minute it’s outside of your mouth and you consider putting it back in, it becomes gross... I think with poo, it’s more like as long as it’s inside us we don’t think about it. In a way, poo only becomes poo when it’s excreted. Until then, it’s more like a part of you, like your inner organs” (307).<sup>42</sup> Excrement, in other words, is meant to remain “unseen” because if it is visible it implies there must be something wrong, that “there’s a hole or some kind of damage” (307). As a metaphor, shit represents any excess that breaks the boundaries demarcating inside from outside, whether read at the scale of the body or of the larger culture. Its power as a figure resides in its polyvalence, which because of its state of flux enables any number of potential meanings to be folded into it, serving as a “particular kind of representation that represents its own non-representability, its lack or failure to meet expectations of a representational ideal” (Ngai “Poetics” 109). In other words, shit evokes anything that we normally keep out of sight and out of mind because of its ugliness, which we cannot represent in proper speech, including any obscene waste or excess that provokes our anxiety if brought too close.<sup>43</sup>



What position does Wallace's text take on this over-promixity of the disturbing? According to Toon Staes, "feces in *The Suffering Channel* vividly illustrate Wallace's assertion that good art is apt to make viewers uncomfortable" (466). Although Staes attempts to draw an analogy between Brint Moltke as an artist figure and Wallace's own aesthetic agenda, Wallace's often cited interview with Larry McCaffrey suggests he looks more skeptically on the aesthetics of shock. In particular, Wallace questions the "continual avant-garde rush forward without anyone bothering to speculate on the destination, the *goal* of the forward rush... the rule breaking has got to be for the *sake* of something... When rule-breaking, the mere *form* of renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho*'s nipple shocks and Alice Cooper eating shit on stage" (emphasis in original, McCaffrey 27-8). For Wallace, the continuous display of shocking images reinforces rather than counteracts the spectacle of consumption, an argument he makes in relation to Mark Leyner's exemplary postmodern pastiche, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. Specifically, he draws attention to the text's "central preoccupation" with "digestion and elimination" (*Supposedly* 80-1). "Its mocking challenge to the reader," Wallace contends, "is the same one presented by television's flood of realities and choices: ABSORB ME—PROVE YOU'RE CONSUMER ENOUGH" (*Supposedly* 81). In light of these comments, it seems unlikely Wallace would identify with Moltke, for *TSC* stages the confrontations with the artist's work and situates them within the particular historical context of mediation, rather than attempt to shock readers into some sort of recognition. For Wallace, good art does indeed seem to make people uncomfortable, but that discomfort entails the unsettling of reality rather than provoking shock, which he shows to now be a part of the very spectacle it apparently positions itself against.

However, Wallace's novella does not dismiss the provocation of disgust so much as it narratively situates these aesthetics in relation to the context of mediation into which the *disgusting* events of September 11 would occur. Sara Ahmed argues that the common framing of 9/11 as "disgusting" involves contradictory affects mediated through the images of destruction. "Disgust," she claims, "involves a fascination with the event as image, in the desire to get closer to the image as if it were a salient object in the present," yet this "fatal proximity of the event is such that it can register its impact only through a perpetual recontamination of the homes and bodies of 'the disgusted'" (*CPE*

96). In this simultaneous dual sense of fascination and contamination, disgust generates the borders of the self, the community, the ethical, the thinkable and the imaginable. Situated within the context of mass mediated terrorism *TSC* constructs, this sort of disgust, directed at Brint Moltke's bizarre scatological artworks, problematizes the production of these stable borders, insofar as it locates disgust within late capitalist spectacle and its capacity to metabolize the horrifying, a spectacle endlessly able to transfigure and thus mobilize disgust's latent capacity to produce uneasiness within spectating subjects. Through the repetition of traumatic images, this spectacle also reproduced disgust, transforming 9/11 into a fetish object marking the border between "us" and "them" (or "subject" and "other") through the act of repudiating the images as disgusting. "The disgust reaction creates an object, which we can describe as a border or fetish object," Ahmed proposes, "insofar as it admits to a prior contamination. The very 'pulling away' from the event is what allows it to acquire this fetish quality. At the same time, the generation of the object also creates the subject. By naming the event as disgusting, the subject 'stands out' in the 'standing apart' or 'pulling away' from the event" (*CPE* 96). If anything, *TSC* demonstrates the affective difficulty of this "standing apart" by "pulling away," constructed as the vacillation between ugliness and aestheticization involved in acts of mass mediated terrorism.

This uncomfortable intermingling of attraction and repulsion is demonstrated in the second meaning of the novella's title, which points from Brint as a producer of uncanny artworks to a cultural mediascape eager to transform those disgusting artworks into commodified images. The narrative draws an analogy between Brint's excremental sculptures and the "Suffering Channel," the television network dedicated to human tragedy which ultimately broadcasts the national exposure of the artist's talent. The scatological fantasies of R. Vaughn Corliss, founder of the Suffering Channel, make the connection between these artworks and the television network all but explicit. We learn that Corliss's "most tightly held secret vision or dream" would be a "channel devoted wholly to images of celebrities shitting" (*TSC* 295). While he maintains no illusions regarding the possibility of such a channel today, he sees in the slow, creeping violation of intimacy represented by reality television unlimited future potential: "How far along the arc would Slo Mo High Def Full Sound Celebrity Defecation be?" (296).<sup>44</sup> Of course, Brint Moltke offers Corliss the ultimate opportunity to test this question when *Style*

decides his talent is simply too radical for them to cover directly. In the final instance, the story's point seems to regard millennial social reality. In fact, Corliss also dreams of "advanced alien species studying this footage in order to learn almost everything necessary about planet earth circa 2001" (295). His vision thus reflects a certain social moment, epitomized by the popularity of so-called "Reality TV," that elevates pushing the boundaries of obscenity to a strange, twisted ethical imperative. Television, however misguidedly, absorbs the shock aesthetics of avant-garde provocation and puts them to work for the circulation of capitalist spectacle.

The "Suffering Channel" provides the vital link between Brint's expressions of personal suffering and suffering on a larger social scale. Aesthetically, the television station displays a similar tendency towards decontextualization as do the sort of avant-garde artists Wallace accuses of reproducing nothing but shock. Rather than excrement, however, this analogous "channel" provides a constant stream of looping images mixing personal anguish with major historical traumas:

At first it's just montages of well known photos involving anguish or pain: a caved in Jackie next to LBJ as he's sworn in on the plane, that agonized Vietcong with the pistol to his head, the naked kids running from napalm. There's something about seeing them one right after another. A woman trying to bathe her thalidomide baby, faces through the wire at Belsen, Oswald crumpled around Ruby's fist, a noosed man as the mob begins to hoist, Brazilians on the ledge of a burning highrise. A loop of 1,200 of these, four seconds per, running 5:00 PM-1:00 AM EST; no sound; no evident ads. (288-9)

While these images of suffering, pain, and murder ripped from late twentieth century American history might strike us as excessive – indeed, precisely the vulgar sort of "shit" for which critics often dismiss television – they nonetheless perform a social function. Their running on a continuous loop repeatedly brings the traumatic back into people's living rooms by initiating mediated encounters with the Real, rendering the images as a potential aesthetic pleasure detached from their original contexts. The fragmented nature of the network short circuits attempts to organize any coherent space within which to situate the events unfolding on the screen. In an exemplary postmodern aesthetic, what we get instead is a series of signifiers gesturing to absent historical realities. The affective disturbance is missing because the reality of individual human

suffering disappears in the radically decontextualized flow of fragmented images, which flash up one after another until viewers disassociate them from disgust.

It would neither be difficult to imagine the fictional Suffering Channel as a precursor to the spectacle of terrorism and its publicity of suffering, nor would it seem impossible that the September 11 attacks and their aftermaths – themselves endlessly looped on television – belong as part of this programming. Thus, this channel is particularly relevant to the state of post-9/11 culture in which an emergent obsession with the obscenity of violence and death moves into a dominant position defined by the shameless display of mean-spirited ugliness. “Since September 11, 2001,” Giroux argues in *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism*, “a different type of spectacle has emerged in which fear and terror become its most salient organizing principle, and politics reveals itself through the raw display of power and brutal violence” (48). This spectacle coalesces most viscosly in the images of terrorism and the War on Terror, whether they depict collapsing skyscrapers, bombs dropped on innocent civilians, grainy beheading videos like the ones circulated of journalist Daniel Pearl or entrepreneur Nicholas Berg, or Saddam Hussein hung until dead by an enthusiastic mob, or photographs of torture and humiliation at American prisons such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Whereas, as Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, the spectacle of human suffering has long been central to the intimidation necessary for the state to maintain social order, the present moment in the accelerated technological reproduction and dissemination of images intensifies the instrumentalization of suffering towards control and promotion of detachment from those in pain which critics such as Sven Lütticken, Boris Groys and the Retort collective argue<sup>45</sup> is shared both by democratic states and terrorists alike.<sup>46</sup>

The link between the aesthetic form of the channel and spectacles of violence recalls other representational precedents from films and literature in the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps the most obvious corollaries would be the mysterious snuff pornography videos produced and circulated by a right wing extremist group and broadcast on a local cable television station in David Cronenberg’s 1983 film, *Videodrome*, or David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (on which Wallace reported in an article for *Premiere* in 1996) in which characters “start getting incredibly mysterious videotapes in the mail” with the climactic

video showing “Bill Pullman standing over the mutilated corpse of Patricia Arquette,” his character’s wife (*Supposedly* 155). Arguably, these cinematic precedents inspired the central Macguffin of Wallace’s own *Infinite Jest*, a mysterious videotape produced by experimental filmmaker James Incandenza that resembles Wallace’s description of the Suffering Channel programming. Moreover, at once violent and pornographic, these examples stage voyeuristic fantasies eroticizing the spectacle of pain, twisted, like the suffering channel programming, into a form of consumer *jouissance*. Post-9/11 culture has only witnessed an intensification of the violent images as a source of entertainment. As Susan Sontag notes, the Abu Ghraib torture photos feature military perpetrators genuinely enjoying the spectacle of suffering – detainees in “stress positions” or sexually humiliating poses – they had staged for their cameras: “the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken... with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives” (*At the Same Time* 132). Yet, rather than isolate them, Sontag argues they belong to part of a broader culture, in which “violent crime is down, yet the easy delight taken in violence seems to have grown” (135): “America has become a country in which the fantasies and the practice of violence are seen as good entertainment, fun” (136). “What is illustrated by the photographs,” Sontag concludes, “is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality” (137).

As *TSC* suggests, and as Jameson argues, the enjoyment of seeing others suffering Sontag identifies after 9/11 was actually always latent in American culture. Wallace’s often quoted “E Unibus Pluram” proposes that the irreverent, ironic form of contemporary television cynically distances viewers from more pressing personal and historical realities.<sup>47</sup> His conclusions in this 1990 essay roughly align with those of Fredric Jameson in his work on postmodernism.<sup>48</sup> Whereas the figurative codes of postmodernism – including fragmentation, pastiche and depthlessness – retain stylistic dominance during the 1990s, Jameson reminds us of the material conditions this aesthetic mode actively disavows: “postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world... the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror” (*Postmodernism* 5). However fleetingly, the September 11 attacks revealed this obscene underside to the “end of history,” and Wallace retroactively figures the inability

of the 1990s to articulate the dirty truth of American power in anything but fragmented images distanced from their original context and alienated from genuine human suffering. This inability to confront difficult truths unites Brint's excremental artworks, Corliss's detestable channel and the War on Terror just on the horizon.<sup>49</sup>

Despite this interest in examining the curious attractiveness of the disturbing, both through Brint's excremental artworks and the content of the eponymous channel, Wallace does not simply attempt to shock his readers. Rather, the revelation of unthought truths is a decisively narrative operation which provides a complex mediation of the historical moment. Nor does Wallace reduce the shocking to the postmodern play of signs and surfaces where textual games of infinite mirroring and recursion undermine the notion of a non-textual outside. So, rather than fall into this modernist trap of counter-posing authoritarian social order and the artistic transgression depending on it, or the postmodernist one of relentless cynical distancing, Wallace chooses to position Brint Moltke's obscene objects in relation to the constellation of possible aesthetic mediations in the period. The purpose is not to shatter the existing social order but to trace its internal points of rupture and crisis, thus indexing the symbolic as always already failed, inconsistent and split against itself by its own disavowed contradictions. Wallace's narrative depicts how late capitalism attempts to manage – or channel – those internal eruptions of the Real.

## **1.6. 'The Transfiguration of Disgust'**

In the previous two sections I have discussed two forms of mediating the encounter with excesses otherwise excluded from symbolic reality, to which I will now add a third. In the first instance, narrative form in *TSC* traces the contours of an absence at the core of familiarity through invocations of the uncanny and implicates readers in an unconscious desire to approach the terrifying truth; in the second instance, excremental forms of avant-garde provocation and postmodern forms of spectacular fragmentation obliterate the interpretive faculties, leaving the cognitive mapping of social reality relatively untouched, while disturbing viewers through obscenity's overwhelmingly excessive presence. The third and final approach to mediation I will discuss alerts us to the dynamics of sublimation and disgust at work in the journalistic attempts to transfigure

Brint's artistic process into a purified source of aesthetic pleasure suspended somewhere between attraction and repulsion. In this effort to elevate the disgusting to the beautiful, Skip Atwater and *Style* magazine pursue an impossible synthesis between terms in three pairs of opposites – distance and proximity; abstraction and embodiment; private and public – that define the mediation of September 11. The final section of this chapter examines how Wallace figures the paradoxical forms of synthesis through encounters with the Real that transfigure the repulsive into the curious, the fascinating and the desirable.

William Ian Miller's *The Anatomy of Disgust* (a book, incidentally, present in Wallace's library at the time of his death) explores the cultural significance of disgust as a social rather than individual emotion. If Franz Kafka and David Lynch provide formal models for the affinity of the grotesque and unconscious truth in Wallace's fiction, then Miller fills in the social background for this aesthetics. Contrary to the commonplace understanding of disgust as an innate physical and behavioral response to obscenity (like nausea), Miller emphasizes that disgust is linked to "social and cultural paradigms that make sense of those feelings by giving us a basis for knowing when they are properly felt and properly displayed" (8). As a "richly social, cultural and linguistic phenomena," disgust includes the ways we deem legitimate for categorizing and talking about it (8). Miller's book shadows Wallace's fictional reconstruction of pre-9/11 culture, in which talk of orifices, toilets, excrement and other examples of the disgusting enable him to explore the historical conditions determining the receding threshold for revulsion prior to September 11. Disgust in this instance acts as a surrogate for the problem of the Real and its mediation, for while a spectacular image event, the terrorist attacks also involved an affective response located within the individual body that resembles Miller's definition: "a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion" (2). Both the moral and social aversion to terrorism is complicated by the equally powerful desire for entertainment in the suffering of others which pervades *TSC*. It asks, What are the limits to what we can consume and what the spectacle can metabolize?

Wallace's focus on disgust as a response to September 11 brings his novella into conversation with the work of Slavoj Žižek, no doubt the dominant post-1989 theorist of

the Real. The difference between the two is less one of kind than one of emphasis. Whereas Žižek explores the issue of sublimation and the production of desire for terrorism through popular culture in the years leading up to 9/11, Wallace instead emphasizes the affective modalities and performative grammars of disgust the event generated. Each looks at the flip sides of September 11 in the cultural imagination, which vacillates between the desire to look (scopic drive) and the equally powerful impulse to pull back in horror from “the Horror.” Here, the event serves as an *objet petit a* of critical discourse, the simultaneous void and excess of the Real. For Žižek, the twentieth century was defined by a paradoxical dynamic between the “passion for the real” and its flip side, the postmodern “passion for the semblance.” In his extended response to the September 11 attacks, Žižek argues that the experiences of the attacks as both more real than reality and also reminiscent of mass mediated fantasies of terrorist destruction entails the transformation of excess into familiar cultural codes: “precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition” (*WTDR* 19). In this passage, Žižek suggests that the reality of suffering registers as a fictional semblance in order to screen the event’s traumatic effects. While he provides an abstract explanation of mediation, Wallace’s discourse of disgust in *TSC* attempts to bring these concerns with the desires swirling around September 11 back into discussion of visceral personal experience. The disgusting, while it cannot preclude sublimation entirely, can temporarily disturb the oblivion of passive consumption, breaking down the structural categories that separate ordinary objects from socially constituted objects of aesthetic or political desire. If terrorism is what we talk about when we talk about shit in *TSC*, then the attempts to mediate its social obscenity in the narrative demonstrates the failures in the aestheticization of the attacks and how they move into and out of the cultural frameworks that screen them (in the dual sense of “screen” as “exhibit” and “mediate”).

Discourses of sublimation and disgust typically draw on the common language of structure and excess. According to Žižek, the “fundamental feature” of the sublime object is that “the place logically precedes objects which occupy it” (*Sublime Object* 194). The sublime object, he explains, does not acquire its sublime status from any qualities intrinsic to it; rather it only becomes sublime as a result of the structural place it inhabits:



“according to Lacan, a sublime object is a ordinary everyday object which quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire” (194). Thus, the desirability of such an object paradoxically has little to do with the object itself but is socially produced through a system of relations; even shit can be elevated to sublime status under the right conditions. Conversely, anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that disgust entails removing the object from its designated location within a structure. In *Purity and Danger*, she contends that dirt (or any such “excess”) is best thought of as “matter out of place” that as the excluded by-product of systematic “ordering” and “classification” helps establish social and psychic stability (35). For Miller, however, the “risk to this kind of structuralism is that it ends in tautology. If something pollutes, it doesn’t fit; if it doesn’t pollute then it does fit” (*AofD* 44). In contrast, Miller contends that “it is not that things don’t fit; it is that they fit right at the bottom of the conceptual grid” and “by virtue of being low are always a risk to threaten or misbehave, to harm and contaminate the high who know they are high because the low are there to provide the necessary contrast” (45). So, the disgusting object, in Miller’s estimation, can disturb the ordering of social hierarchy while nonetheless occupying a place of low status within it, both acknowledged and dangerous all the same. The question becomes not one of inclusion and exclusion, but rather how society mediates what we might call the “included exclusion”: how it does or does not authorize, legitimate or elevate the uncanny object in its midst and whether that mediation challenges established hierarchies of sense, taste or morality. Thus such an object can be both disgusting and desirable simultaneously, a problem which pervades *TSC*.

When the disgusting object becomes visible it provokes threatening anxiety that portends the collapse of social distinctions and thus its appearance necessitates appropriate caution. In *TSC*, the toilet serves, in its combination of the hole and excess disappearing in or emerging from it, as an apt metaphorical device for discussing this social problem of obscenity and the social mediations of its proximity from consciousness. As a character in *The Suffering Channel* observes, each culture has invented its own unique solution to the potentially uncomfortable proximity to excess and each of these respective solutions reflect something about their culture’s broader ways of thinking. For German toilets, she states, “the hole into which the poop is supposed to disappear when you flush is positioned way in front, so that the poop just sort of lies

there in full view and there's almost no way you can avoid looking at it when you get up and turn around to flush," noting how this is "stereotypically German" (264). With "French toilets," in contrast, "the hole tended to be way in the back so that the poop vanished ASAP, meaning the whole thing was set up to be as elegant and tasteful as possible" (264-5). Finally, they arrive at the construction of American toilets with the "hole in the middle and all this water so it all floats and goes around and around in a little dance before it goes down" (265). The characters appear befuddled in their attempts to explain the difference, but perhaps Žižek's discussion of a strikingly similar example provides some further insight.<sup>50</sup>

Wallace seems to lift this discourse on toilets almost wholesale from one of the philosopher's favorite motifs. According to Žižek, each of the German, French and American toilet designs indexes some ideological truth beyond mere utility, resulting in "three different attitudes towards excremental excess": "ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way" (5). The Anglo-Saxon (English or American) toilet, he posits, "presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles – the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it – visible but not to be inspected" (4). Working in a similar scatological register, Wallace's story serves as an extended dramatization of how exactly Americans dispose of their "shit," whether it is literal excrement or some metaphorical equivalent (like terrorism), through a similar synthesis: suspended between morbid fascination and quick disposal, pleasure and revulsion. Does not this third option accurately describe the War on Terror: look on this terrible spectacle of human suffering, but do not *inspect* it? Significantly, this disposal is not a disposal at all but a suspension within a particular place where the obscene erupts into visibility but does not come so close that it seriously disturbs our safe autonomy or points of narcissistic identification. If post-9/11 culture entails the mediation of the terrifying through spectacular images, then the toilet bowl – like Brint Moltke – humorously figures the medium standing between conscious awareness and unconscious thought. (As if to accentuate this point, at the end of the narrative, the producers of the Suffering Channel actually mount a small camera inside Brint Moltke's toilet bowl to capture his "artistic process.")

For Žižek, the toilet serves a figurative function in which the hole and the specter of returning waste are analogies for the dynamic between the unconscious and a variety of obscene objects emerging from it: “[The] domain to where excrement vanishes after we flush the toilet is effectively one of the metaphors for the horrifying sublime ‘beyond’ of the primordial, preontological chaos into which things disappear” (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 238). The confrontation with the sublime object emerging out of the unconscious “beyond” repeatedly returns in his writing on popular culture and historical events.<sup>51</sup> In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek argues that the cultural trauma of the Titanic disaster occurred because of unconscious libidinal investment in the event, which then unexpectedly emerged from fantasy into reality, and in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, he makes a similar contention regarding September 11:

[The Titanic], also, was a shock, but the space for it had already been prepared in ideological fantasizing, since the Titanic was the symbol of the might of nineteenth century industrialization. Does not the same hold for these attacks? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested... That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. (15-6)<sup>52</sup>

Both the Titanic disaster and the September 11 attacks serve as examples for how cultural fantasy elevates certain purely virtual events into sublime objects of desire that are pleasurable so long as they remain fantasies but become horrific once those fantasies materialize in real life: “when we get too close to the desired object, erotic fascination turns into disgust” (Žižek 6). Thus, regulating the dynamic of proximity and distance proves essential towards maintaining the status of the object within its fantasy framework; its malignant properties must be properly mediated – or, rather, *disposed of* – for it to function as a sublime object of desire.

The attempts to “flush away” the disturbing qualities of Brint Moltke’s excremental artworks speak to the difficulty inherent to this task. When Skip Atwater first approaches *Style* magazine with his proposal to write a story about the artist’s creations, he encounters immediate resistance from the editors: “Are you out of your mind. People are not interested in shit. People are disgusted and repelled by shit. That’s why they call it

shit” (244). The journalist counters this objection by claiming the “whole embarrassment and distaste of the issue is the point, if it’s done right”: “The transfiguration of disgust” (245). Neither of these attitudes towards this obscene excess entirely captures the uncanny combination of attraction and repulsion these artworks elicit. Indeed, all of the encounters described in the narrative confront readers with how difficult it is to negotiate intertwined dialectics of distance and proximity, and of intellectual abstraction and bodily affect. *Style* editor Ellen Bactrian’s response to viewing them speaks to the uncertainty surrounding their aesthetic value: “standing several feet away, her posture somewhat S shaped because of the twin impulses to approach and recoil” (294). Laurel Manderlay echoes this uncanny experience when, on the night the “digital photos of Brint Moltke’s work had appeared on the floor below the fax... [she] felt the twin impulses both to bend and get them and to run as fast as she could from the cubicle complex” (301). Even Atwater, when confronted with Brint’s artworks, simultaneously wants to move closer and to retreat in the other direction (315).

The ambivalent reactions to Moltke’s artwork defy our common understandings of aesthetic beauty in so far as these pieces derive their curious power of attraction at least in part from their anti-aesthetic qualities.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as Miller argues, there is nothing necessarily repellant about the disgusting: “It is a commonplace that the disgusting can attract as well as repel; the film and entertainment industries, among which we might include news coverage, literally bank on its allure” (*Anatomy of Disgust* x). Miller’s reference to news coverage as one location for the transfiguration of disgust resonates with the uneasy reception of the September 11 attacks, which in their conscious imitation of Hollywood disaster films were both horrifying and yet still curiously fascinating. Journalists covering the event and its aftermath were forced to manage the unsettling combination of desire and disgust, two terms not so much opposed as deeply interrelated through the dialectic of prohibition and transgression. Since disgust erects obstacles between the subject and her unconscious desire, “transgressing the barrier itself produces the sense of excessiveness that provides pleasure as well as disgust and shame for it, all felt in some strange simultaneity, pleasure and aversion augmenting each other in a kind of ecstasy” (Miller 120). Miller’s description of disgust as one term in twisting pleasure into pain and pain into pleasure parallels Žižek’s identification of this *jouissance* in the experience of September 11. The compulsive repetition of watching the

planes hitting the Twin Towers over and over again puts viewers in the uncomfortable position of at once seeing both the horrifying reality of suffering and the enjoyable spectacle of destruction. Disgust describes the moment when fantasy frameworks breakdown and the later consequently reverses into the former. Like the attacks, Brint's artworks are suspended within these moments of traumatic encounter and vacillate back and forth between them.

Wallace's narrative return to the months leading up to the attacks enables him to locate this ambiguous reaction in the conditions leading up to September 11, in which rather than dispose of the disturbing excess, culture continually escalates sublimation (or "transfiguration") of disgust into desire, pushing back the moral threshold marking the boundaries of what counts as entertainment. His choice to focalize this idea through Skip Atwater and the institution of soft journalism speaks to Wallace's own extensive experience as a cultural correspondent. During his literary career, Wallace also produced countless articles for magazines like *Premiere*, *Harper's*, *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone* that while more prestigious than the fictional *Style* magazine, nonetheless exist within the same industry of what characters in the story call "BSGs" or "Big Soft Glossies."

Wallace built his reputation and refined his persona in the wildly successful article "Shipping Out" – which detailed his "supposedly fun" vacation aboard a luxury cruise liner – through wry observations regarding the obscene excesses of mass culture.<sup>54</sup> Here Wallace demonstrates a form of disgust with the commanded pleasure of the cruise, based largely on aversion to the surfeit of food, comfort and pleasure options available to him, but he also observes that this surfeit relies on the disavowal of existential dread. Just like the characters in *TSC*, he turns to the metaphor of the toilet to better articulate his point. Confronting his cabin's vacuum toilet in which "your waste seems less removed than *hurled* from you" (*Supposedly* 305), Wallace claims that "it's pretty hard not to see the connections" between the "eradication of animal wastes and odors" and "the death-denial/existential transcendence fantasies that the 7NC Luxury Megacruise is trying to enable" (305 fn. 71).<sup>55</sup> Although here Wallace implies that mass culture seeks to evacuate consciousness of suffering as quickly as possible, the creeping coarseness and vulgarity of this culture, which constantly pushes at the

threshold of disgust, eventually leads Wallace to reverse direction. What is Brint's talent if not the reversal of this rapid disposal through the *expulsion* of disavowed excess into public awareness? Like Wallace's journalism, Skip Atwater provides readers with a window into the obscene underside of American comfort, except here in ways that prefigure the coverage of September 11.

Atwater's vehicle for mediation of the obscene is the "What in the World" column, which represents the most outrageous example of the BSG mission to "turn meaning" into "the very most demotic kind of human interest" (296). His work is "Not curiosity as in tabloid or freakshow, or rather all right sometimes borderline freakshow but with an upbeat thrust" (297): "Style's WITW items were people centered and always had to be both credible and uplifting, or laterally there at least had to be ancillary elements that were uplifting and got thumped hard" (298). Atwater considers himself to be a "professional soft news journalist" who is a "polished, shallow, earnest, productive consummate corporate pro," qualities which make him ideal for his job spinning the strange into the palatable, and the abstract into the immediate and concrete (298). Whereas *TSC* presents literature as capable of finding the irony of the banal, showing where the macabre is lodged within the mundane, Skip Atwater, like the journalistic form he represents, excels at rendering the unusual as the obvious. His work relies on disavowal of the ambiguous, unpleasant and disturbing. The critique an early editor levels against him in a performance review underscores how Atwater has "no innate sense of tragedy or preterition or complex binds or any of the things that made human beings' misfortunes significant to one another" (270). In other words, because the actuality of human suffering has no place in his work, Atwater serves as the ideal figure to transfigure disgust into desire. The sublimation of disgust, even into tepid forms of desire like "human interest," necessitates abstracting human suffering into a pleasant spectacle for easy consumption which grants access to the strange but does not bring it excessively close (as it does in the unmediated encounter with Brint's artworks). Differently stated, Atwater stands in for the social mediation of obscenity on a larger scale: what do we obsessively try to flush away but returns nonetheless?

At the same time as disgust is kept at a proper distance, the problem of the curious attractiveness of the feces artworks resonates with the eroticization of excess in

the lives of the story's characters. Take, for instance, the descriptions of the lust between Skip Atwater and Brint Moltke's wife, Amber. During a scene in which their car is trapped in a storm and seems to be stuck, sinking deeper and deeper into the mud, we are offered an insight into Atwater's desire for the manifestly obese woman, "less a person than a vista" (250), whom he nonetheless finds "pulverizingly attractive" (271). Indeed, Atwater seems to feel this lust not despite but because of her excessiveness:

Atwater's notebook already contained a description of Mrs. Moltke's fatness as being the smooth solid kind as opposed to the soft plumpness or billowing aspect or loose flapping fat of some obese people. There was no cellulite, no quivery or pendent or freehanging parts – she was enormous and firm, and fair the same way babies are. A head the size of a motorcycle tire was topped by a massive blond pageboy whose bangs were thick and not wholly even, receding into a complexly textured bale of curls in the rear areas. In the light of the storm she seemed to glow. (260)

The details offered by Atwater aestheticize Amber's "fatness" which while excessive not only does not disgust the journalist but serves as the basis for his desire. This excess forms an "immense sexual forcefield around Mrs. Moltke" that he finds difficult to resist. The description places emphasis on Amber's excessive scale as she consumes him. She is "simply huge" and "extrudent in all three dimensions," Atwater notes (260). "Her release of the seatbelt," we are told, "produced an effect not unlike an impact's airbag" (260). During their conversation, she moves closer and closer to Atwater, overwhelming him. When the two finally consummate their mutual attraction, "Atwater was kissing at the left corner of Amber Moltke's lip, while her mouth covered nearly the entire right side of the journalist's face all the way to the earlobe" (288). As Amber moves closer to the journalist "anyone trying to look in either side's window would have been unable to see any part of Skip Atwater at all" (288). Amber Moltke serves as another figure for the excesses of the body that depending on the situation can vacillate between repulsion and attraction.<sup>56</sup> Whereas distance, artifice and mirroring define the *Style* interns, Amber Moltke achieves gigantic dimensions approaching a sort of overwhelming presence.<sup>57</sup>

Humorously, Amber appears too large even for Atwater's analogies and he desperately turns to the language of the sublime: "Mrs. Moltke's was perhaps a sort of negative beauty that consisted mainly in its failure to be repellant... he had compared her face and throat to whatever canids see in the full moon that makes them howl" (250).

The narrative suggests that Amber Moltke's sublime dimensions are connected to her obsession with entering celebrity culture. In a rare moment in which Atwater permits himself to think "abstractly," he speculates that Amber's desire to transform her husband's disgusting and potentially humiliating talent into a means for fame is symptomatic of an American culture obsessed with obtaining celebrity at any cost (284). Exposure of Brint's ability, Amber explains, gives her and her husband a chance to "somehow stand out" and to somehow "distinguish themselves from the faceless mass of folks that watched the folks that did stand out" and "feel people's eyes, the weight of their gaze" (283). Thus, Amber desires to be the subject under the fantasized gaze of R. Vaughn Corliss' "all devouring eye." She wants to be not only *consumer* but also *consuming*, which the narrative comically figures in the sinking car sequence. Her otherworldly size represents the exteriority and publicity of excess that offers only the necessarily partial glimpse of an unrepresentable disgusting truth of American life that soft journalism tentatively but, in the final instance, only obliquely approaches.

The final sequences of *TSC* converge on the televised exposure of Brint's actual production of the artworks. Deemed too disgusting for *Style*'s WITW feature, the fate of the piece is decided by two executive interns (Ellen Bactrain and Mrs. Anger) while they exercise in a fitness center located within the south tower of the World Trade Center (315). Surrounded by banks of "television monitors" and obsessed with the appearance of their respective bodies, this choice of setting situates their conversation on the best mediation of disgust within what would shortly become the epicenter of the terrorist spectacle. Appropriately, their conversation regarding Brint's artworks focuses on aesthetics: "Is the miraculous poo phenomenon art, or miracle, or just disgusting [?]" (321). Finally, they arrive at the conclusion that another layer of mediation is necessary to make the story possible: "The real angle is about coverage. *Style* is not foisting a gross or potentially offensive story on its readers. Rather *Style* is doing soft coverage on a controversial story that already exists" (322).

The Suffering Channel television station will perform the "foisting" of Brint's artworks on the public in order to generate the required "controversial story." Their decision places Brint in the paradoxical situation where his most private suffering becomes an occasion for the sickest sort of public consumption, a mere one day prior to



September 11. What his situation reveals is how the lived experiences of 9/11 as fascinating or repulsive or both are not anomalies so much as part of a culture in which terrorism becomes one in a series of Real objects invading the excessively mediated reality of American life. These psychic conditions provide the raw material through which Wallace's narrative shapes the comical yet also sick, disturbing and threatening encounter with the obscene underside that constitutes yet remains otherwise unacknowledged within social order except through its subsequent mediations and re-mediations. Ultimately, *The Suffering Channel* provides a narrative mediation at a higher dialectical level, folding the numerous other cultural mediations of excess before September 11 into its own horizon, drawing into itself the unconscious precedents that set the stage for those spectacular events, which in retrospect flickered in the periphery of American consciousness as some as yet unrealized horror of emergence from the soothing comforts of oblivion.

## Chapter 2.

### Failed Reproduction: Domesticity and Disunited States in *A Gate at the Stairs*

#### 2.1. Ordinary Crisis

Like *The Suffering Channel*, at first glance, Lorrie Moore's 2008 novel *A Gate at the Stairs* appears to have little to do with the events of 11 September 2001. Although it is set in the months following the attacks, the novel, again like Wallace's novella, refers infrequently and if then only obliquely to them. Yet, this apparent weakness in its status as a post-9/11 novel is actually its secret strength. Through this relegation of the War on Terror to sideways glances, Moore's novel suspends the traumatic immediacy of the events and instead moves the narrative center of national attention from New York City to the homes of Wisconsin, providing a unique perspective on terror and its effects. Rather than concentrate on the paradigmatic traumatized subject of post-9/11 America, it focalizes the narrative through the eyes of Tassie, a twenty-year old college student who moves from her small rural hometown of Dellacrosse, Wisconsin, to the nearby liberal college town of Troy, and in the process becomes entangled in the life of Sarah Brink, a newly arrived restaurateur who hires Tassie as a nanny for her adopted mixed-race child, Mary-Emma. Although taking place soon after the events, during the narrative, the trauma witnessed in New York City on 9/11 recedes into the background, instead focusing readers on its personal, local and domestic settings.

The novel's shift away from the epicenter of national trauma highlights what Lauren Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness." In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant, taking issue with theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Giorgio Agamben, argues that while trauma has dominated the last eighty years of both "critical theory" and "mass society" as the "genre

for viewing the historical present,” it is more productive to think of how the “affective impact” of crisis “takes form [and] becomes mediated” in the ongoing everyday (9-10). “Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness,” she claims, “but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (10). If we take the 9/11 attacks as the paradigmatic example of a traumatic occurrence, then the treatment of the event in *A Gate at the Stairs*, through its focus on the post-9/11 everyday, does not narrate a universal rupture produced by an exceptional shock in national consciousness so much as it follows the attempts of its young narrator to negotiate her place within a post-9/11 historical present in which nostalgic, compensatory fantasies of domestic stability – evoked by the state to conceal its own failures in preventing the terrorist attacks – elide the complexities of the home and the ordinary in times of crisis. Rather than offer the home as an authentic real to which the country could return following the shattering trauma of 9/11, the novel demonstrates that this singular, unified and homogeneous home is little more than ideological fantasy.

*A Gate at the Stairs* represents a subgenre of post-9/11 fiction which investigates, to varying degrees, the ideological opposition of domestic comfort to terrorist violence. Since September 11, novels such as Paul Auster’s *Man in the Dark* (2008), Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Ken Kalfus’ *A Disorder Peculiar to this Country* (2006), Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) and Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2006) have deployed domestic melodrama as a lens through which to view the attacks and their effects. In doing so, they show the ongoing consequences of terrorism in how Americans conceptualize home. Thus far, literary scholars have largely read this turn in post-9/11 fiction as symptomatic of the nation’s own myopic failure to think beyond its own borders. Work in *American Literary History* from Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg respectively considers the literary move towards this genre to be as equally politically counter-productive as the national retreat into domesticity and the private sphere following September 11, when emphasis fell on reconstituting a lost sense of security through stable family life.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, they see these novels as soothing escapist fantasies based in satisfying predetermined generic expectations. According to Gray, “relying on a familiar romance pattern – in which couples meet, romantic and domestic problems follow, to be concluded in reconciliation or rupture – books like this... simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures” (“Open Doors” 30). In his response to

Gray, Rothberg concurs that such texts “domesticate” the tragedy, refusing the task of confronting power through their recourse to the “private sphere” and “emotional entanglements” (“Failure of Imagination” 154).

However, as John Duvall and Robert Marzec observe in a recent special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, these readings, in their recourse to proscriptive categories, do little to “look very closely at what 9/11 fiction sets out to do because they are both sure that they know what 9/11 fiction ought to be doing” (“Narrating 9/11” 384). For critics such as Gray and Rothberg, they argue, there is little to distinguish these novels, formally, thematically or critically, leading them to flatten out their significance into little more than a reflection of hegemonic ideology (384). There is something deeply unsatisfying about this reduction of a wide array of texts to a single reading. Even if this subgenre does not adequately probe international geopolitics, the question remains: what do these texts focused on home, domesticity and family actually accomplish and is it possible that they can exceed the reproduction of American national myths and their accompanying ideological myopia?

Positioned against the conclusions of Gray and Rothberg, Georgiana Banita’s work demonstrates that the latent allegorical complexities of this subgenre give readers abundant reason to think this reductive categorization misses its *estranging* function. “It is precisely by drawing on clichéd narrative tropes that post-9/11 fiction manages to disrupt, with the violence of surprise, the benign domesticity of the terrorist plot as a painful yet ultimately surmountable personal and national crisis” (*Plotting Justice* 109—110), Banita argues: “the transference of the public into the personal... may constitute precisely the kind of defamiliarizing, formally innovative strategy [Gray and Rothberg] had been seeking” (110). I do not wish to dispute Banita’s claim but instead hope to shift its accent to different but related matters more specific to Moore’s novel. Whereas Banita’s analysis focuses on the potentially disruptive function of romance and sexuality, this chapter instead engages with the symbolically freighted issue of reproduction, in which the private home and the maternal body figure the reproduction of the social order. The allegories of *A Gate at the Stairs* draw attention to the inconsistencies in the nostalgic compensatory fantasy of restored domesticity, both at the scale of the home and the nation, which emerged after 9/11. Moore’s text estranges this monolithic

construction of homogeneity, instead exploring personal and local refractions of the national structure of feeling through the ongoing “crisis ordinary.” The concern of *A Gate at the Stairs* with problems of home, family, maternity and maturation confronts, rather than thoughtlessly reproduces, the generic closures promoted by nostalgic fantasies of return to a mythical domestic stability. In doing so, it diagnoses and offers space for critique of the dominant model for national subjectivity propagated by the state on behalf of restored security following 11 September 2001.

## 2.2. ‘Good-Life’ Fantasies

The national fantasies of the domestic frame it as a cultural site for the nostalgic return to a lost, harmonious past: if the government could not guarantee safety from an omnipresent threat then the traumatized nation could draw strength from the imagined stability of the American family, signalling a turn from one narrative trajectory of the nation to another. Mirroring the nation’s domestic reorientation, 11 September 2001 marks a shift in what Lauren Berlant calls “good life fantasies.” Berlant asks, “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?” (*Cruel Optimism* 2). One answer to her question might be the need for comfort or reassurance regarding the stability of social order when facing adversity in other registers. We witness this desire at work after 9/11, as American culture and politics shuffled the terms of its structuring good-life fantasies, bringing a residual nostalgic formation of national unity to the forefront based in the perpetually thwarted return to “family values,” in which many could find solace from a newfound sense of vulnerability to terrorism. At least temporarily, the events of 9/11 shifted the accent of good life fantasies (though not necessarily realities) from the rampant acquisition of material wealth (represented by American directed globalization as well as the dot-com boom) to family, home and a nostalgic restoration of a lost domestic realm, both pastoral and “pre-fall.”

Concordantly, several texts after 9/11 critique the cynical sophistication before the events, contrasting it to the more comforting values of the “home,” often located elsewhere than in the presumed shallowness of pre-9/11 New York City. Deborah

Eisenberg, for instance, has responded to the attacks by situating their traumatic impact against the aspirations of a privileged American socio-economic class that dominates Manhattan. In her “Twilight of the Superheroes,” Eisenberg focalizes the attacks through the eyes of a group of twenty-something New Yorkers subletting the lavish apartment of a successful real estate developer, the view from which – before 9/11 – “had been like looking down over the rim into a gigantic glass of champagne” (*Twilight* 7). This image of the city through the distorting lens of privileged, inebriated luxury resonates when Lucien, an art dealer, reflects on the deluded emptiness in this fantasy of the good life he and these young adults yearned for previous to the WTC’s fall: “he and even the most dissolute among his friends have glided through their lives on the assumption that the sheer fact of their existence has in some way made the world a better place” (17). Just as the clever, stylish and cosmopolitan Lucien cannot relate to his deceased wife’s more stereotypically ordinary relatives back in the Midwest, so too does David Foster Wallace register the gulf that for him separates the postmodern sophistication of New York City from the “startling lack of cynicism” around him in Mrs. Thompson’s Bloomington, Illinois living room (“View” 139). Similarly, Jay McInerney’s aptly titled *The Good Life* marks this shift between loci of fantasy, as former Wall Street investment broker Luke discovers, in the wake of the September 11 tragedy, the value of family, which he finds (along with his troubled daughter Ashley) back at his childhood rural Tennessee home. Each example demonstrates a dominant structure of desire moving from the “good life” of postmodern wealth, sophistication and independence to the “good-life” of the family home located a long way from the big city’s temptations and dangers.

Problematically, these shifting good life fantasies, however temporary, attempt to move from the realm of appearances – surfaces, simulation, sophistication, shallowness – into those of essences, associated with authenticity, sincerity and the real: Lucien wonders if his class is morally bankrupt; Wallace questions those who cannot see anything in the attacks but a “movie”; Luke contemplates abandoning his rich friends, lucrative career and beautiful but shallow socialite wife. However, as I argue throughout this dissertation, the apparent “essence,” rather than provide an “authentic” alternative to the tyranny of simulation, only inevitably produces more images and thus surfaces to be read: it is where the passion for the real reverses into the theatrical semblance. Good-life fantasies of the home evoked in the work of Eisenberg, Wallace and McInerney say

more about the restructuring of national desire through the images of domestic fantasy – what Philip Roth a decade earlier ruthlessly critiqued as the “American Pastoral” – than they do about that domestic itself, a process working both since 9/11 and over a much longer duration of American history.<sup>59</sup>

Recent invocations of the imperilled “homeland,” which draw on fantasies of the stable family home as a metonym for the American nation in need of protection, recall countless other nostalgic appeals to an authentic domestic idyll, free of antagonism, ranging from Reagan’s “Morning in America” political campaign to the “family values” conservatism of the Christian Right and the “ownership society” principles of the first President of the War on Terror, George W. Bush. Since 9/11, this American nostalgia for an ideal present modelled on an idealized image of the past manifests most poignantly in fantasies of the good life – located in the fetishes of the personal, familial and domestic – which form the political unconscious of *A Gate at the Stairs*.

### **2.3. Restorative Nostalgia and Domesticity**

While part of a historically particular formation, post-9/11 culture draws on pre-existing domestic fantasies. These domestic fantasies encompass two conceptions of “domestic” space – the national homeland and the family home – often spoken about in terms which implicitly suggest their inherent identity with one another. Home ownership, for instance, has long been associated with realizing the financial stability and fulfilling family life of the “*American Dream*.” At the same time, politicians often pursue policies in the name of securing the integrity of the nation – and by extension the family home it contains – against potential attack, both from within and from without. Gray’s and Rotheberg’s largely dismissive readings of post-9/11 literature fail to account for either the challenges to the domestic fantasies in Moore’s novel or the critical opportunity the novel affords for unsettling the post-9/11 conflation of home and homeland. In the text, home becomes a powerful metaphorical tool for questioning the coherence of a national whole, a critique enacted through its mobilization of familial affect and confrontations with loss. In doing so, it investigates political ideologies of femininity, home and family embedded in the ordinary after the event and unearths disavowed tensions in nostalgic fantasies of domesticity intrinsic to the emergent hegemonic construction of a unified and

homogeneous national “homeland.” Thus, *A Gate at the Stairs*, rather than conflate a nostalgic, innocent, pre-fall American nation with the patriarchal, heteronormative family home, instead, through rewriting the domestic fantasy, figures a *disunited states* and thereby accentuates the impossibility of fully assimilating the domestic part to the imagined whole for which it is supposed to substitute. In short, *A Gate at the Stairs* explores the allegorical relation between the home and the nation in post-9/11 culture and politics, but rather than treat the former as emblematic of national unity, the text articulates how the domestic scale problematize the nation’s perceived coherence.<sup>60</sup>

Before turning to the novel, however, it is necessarily to delineate the nostalgic domestic fantasy of the nation in a time of crisis, and particularly how that imaginary draws on the family to maintain a sense of lost continuity. Following September 11, the American state exploited the shared sense of simultaneous trauma, articulating the inherently multiple, diverse and fragmented experiences of violent televisual spectacle that Wallace explores within a neo-conservative project producing a monolithic and homogeneous conception of the nation as the imperiled *homeland*, a term enshrined by the 2002 passage of the Homeland Security Act and the subsequent establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. Whether or not intended, the term “homeland,” often associated with unity, ethnic purity and shared heritage, problematically recalls the myth of organic community associated with Nazi Germany and its imperial aspirations, albeit adapted and recirculated to serve the unique challenges of the War on Terror and neoconservative governance, by positing a lost, innocent nation, free, for instance, of racial, class or gender conflict.<sup>61</sup> “In terms of deep structure,” Richard Gray contends in *After the Fall*, “the story or subtext moves from the presumption of initial innocence to an encounter with forms of experience that are at once dire and disorienting” (3). He goes on to observe how, “Innocence is shattered, paradise is lost, thanks to a bewildering moment, a descent into darkness, the impact of crisis” (4). Although Gray incorrectly denies most post-9/11 texts any agency in reflecting on this narrative (he sees *The Road* as a notable exception), his comments nonetheless resonate with the modes of thinking about history after the attacks. The story of crisis and return deflects attention from the ideological work the nostalgic fantasy of the past accomplishes as a historically specific invention of the present, which can conceal, for instance, antagonisms in the more optimistic trajectories moving from temporary crisis back into some imaginary sense of



unified community and identity, “a golden paradisiac age... [which] is situated at a point of origin that could be recuperated or regained in an ideal future” (LaCapra “Trauma” 702).

The state attempted to rebuild the nation through restorative temporalities, which both look backwards and forwards in shaping current politics. Of course, the etymology of nostalgia links domesticity to both a felt sense of losing the past and the production of desire for its future restoration. Derived from Greek, *nostalgia* consists of two terms, the first of which, *nostros*, connotes the mythical collective “home,” while the second, *algia*, suggests “yearning” for a past state. The temporalities of nostalgia perpetually defer the realization of desire for return to the lost home, which can help maintain an ideologically useful narration of an ideal past that never needs to be tested against reality. Susan Stewart argues,

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, the past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality.... [The] point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. (*On Longing* 23)

Following September 11, 2001, the American state narrated national strength, community and fortitude through multiple nostalgic versions of the past: World War II bravado against the reconstituted “axis of evil,” this time including Iraq, Iran and North Korea; Cold War maneuvering against the terrorist network framed as a battle against the similar “evil empire” of Communism; cowboy fantasies of the President clearing brush at his Crawford, Texas ranch; the staged photo-op of a crowd toppling Saddam Hussein’s statue in Bagdad just as mobs in former Communist states demolished statues of their defeated leaders after 1989. In the cultural sphere, nostalgia, as we shall see, manifested in the ideological return to traditional definitions of family adapted to the burgeoning vulnerabilities and anxieties of the post-9/11 world. Through a temporality that returned to an imagined past and circulated images and discourses that tapped into – and produced anew – a nostalgia that defied the U.S.A.’s waning position in the world

system (countering the rise of China, for example), a cultural structure which shaped the experiences of living through the War on Terror as a comforting leap into an ideologically sanitized version of the American past projecting military strength, economic dominance and cultural consensus.

Despite its commonly negative connotations, however, nostalgia can narrate the past in multiple ways. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym differentiates between two articulations of this condition towards the past that “give shape and meaning to longing” produced through felt lack. We will return to the second term in relation to the novel shortly, but the first proves especially helpful for understanding national fantasies after 9/11 the text positions itself against. Boym calls the first of these articulations “restorative nostalgia,” which, “puts emphasis on *nostros* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps.” Restorative nostalgia, she claims, is particularly relevant to calls for renewing tradition. “This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols... Restorative nostalgia manifests in total reconstructions of monuments of the past” (41). Following the attacks, restorative nostalgia displaces the particularity of homes in favor of installing a monolithic national homeland under threat and in need of protection, engaging in precisely the “anti-modern myth making of history by means of return to national symbols” of which Boym warns, all the more ironic after globalization discourse declared that the nation and nation-state were dissolving.

As Changez, the Pakistani narrator-protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* observes, post-9/11 culture nostalgically recalls a nationalist version of the past: “There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring words such as *duty* and *honor*” (Hamid 115). These and other preexisting national symbols nostalgically evoked an essentialized American fortitude against adversity through military spectacle. Whereas the terrorists attacked symbols of American globalization and militarism, instead symbols of American nationalism became metonyms for the tragedy, such as pictures of the burning rubble shot to include the Statue of Liberty and images of firefighters raising the American flag over the World Trade Center site in poses

reminiscent of the soldiers in the Washington D.C. Iwo Jima memorial. “When it was figured within the Homeland Security Act,” Pease contends, “the Homeland engendered an imaginary scenario wherein the national people were encouraged to consider themselves dislocated from their country of origin by foreign aggressors so that they might experience their return from exile in the displaced form of the spectacular unsettling of homelands elsewhere” (*New American Exceptionalism* 170). Americans mobilized nostalgic desire in the wake of the attacks, which promised – through military action, collective sacrifice and retreat into its own myths heralding its global mission – to restore the nation’s exceptional and exemplary status. As Neil Smith argues, recourse to these and other mythic symbols become part of the “manufacture of national scale” after 9/11, in which the nation – with its essentialized history and character – became the dominant frame through which to read the attacks, obliterating other local and global scales of analysis (“Scales” 99-100).<sup>62</sup>

The nostalgia fueled nationalist revival was quickly transferred from the public into the private, where domestic fantasies of insecurity could become allegories for larger national anxieties. “The intrusions of September 11 broke down the dead bolt on our protective myth,” Susan Faludi argues, “the illusions that we are masters of our security, that our might makes our homeland impregnable, that our families are safe in the bower of their communities and our women and children are safe in the arms of their men” (*Terror Dream* 15). The nostalgic domestic fantasy of the homeland draws on and shapes the affect attached to the family home, which the American state treats as its metaphorical substitute, also requiring defense from foreign threats. As Amy Kaplan explains, “*domestic* has a double meaning that not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home” (“Manifest Domesticity” 581).<sup>63</sup> The War on Terror polices this boundary, elevating the protection of domestic values – indicative of the “American way of life” allegedly under attack – to a political and moral absolute in the defense of the homeland. Within this logic, home, as metaphor for the mythical nation in jeopardy, serves as a libidinally invested object around which national anxieties regarding vulnerability and violation – as well as their alleged antonyms of security and strength – circulate in public political discourse.<sup>64</sup>

## 2.4. Reflective Nostalgia

Rather than succumb to this conflation of home and homeland, the novel actively engages these discourses through a version of what Boym terms “reflective nostalgia.” In contrast to the restorative nostalgia of the American state, which attempts to reconstruct a phantom homeland (“*nostros*”) through familial reference and project its fictional values on to the family home, reflective nostalgia, “dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” and “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and time” (*Future* 41). Released in 2008, *A Gate at the Stairs*, set in the year following 9/11, reflects on the domestic fantasies of the War on Terror through Tassie’s retrospective narration and thus produces a pseudo-memoir and *bildungsroman* emphasizing the act of remembrance and the distance that separates ideological narrations of the past and the particularities of her memories. While the American state encouraged good-life fantasies of the family home – focusing its citizens on the restoration of a lost mythic past of unity, coherence and stability – Moore’s novel instead reflects on the contradictions and inconsistencies of these fantasies within the setting of Wisconsin. In doing so, it questions the monolithic construction of nationalist desire through the metonym of the family home and suggests that the home, rather than offering a comforting escape from loss and suffering, is deeply implicated in the idiosyncratic and unpredictable translation of the hardships of national (and personal) trauma into lived experience. It speaks to the embedding of this experience as it is woven back into a national narrative that leaves little room for counter-discourses.

Thus, *A Gate at the Stairs* suggests restorative fantasies of national unity misread the ways Americans responded to the attacks and thus over-accentuate the metaphorical privilege of a national whole. Here, the novel resonates with Wallace’s suspicion towards universalized readings of the event and his novella’s attempts to formally represent the affective discontinuities flattened out by national media. In order to represent the nation, *The Suffering Channel* turns to an aesthetic of alternating spatial displacement as the narrative cuts between the Moltkes’ Indiana hometown and New York City, each location representative of a particular American “way of life” united by the spectacle mediating Brint’s astonishing ability. Its quick cuts between the two

otherwise discrete spatial sites holds them in a relational structure and thereby imitates the aesthetic of television, which through similar juxtapositions of images formally sutures the nation into an illusory spatial totality. Conversely, *A Gate at the Stairs* focalizes the moment immediately following the attacks through Tassie, whose subjectivity, although no doubt shaped through the culture of television so central for Wallace's text, enables a different mapping of the nation equally as suspicious of the homogenized whole. Instead of montage, her narrative uses the scale of the home to trace a diversity of local, personal responses that complicate fantasies of national unity and homogeneity implied through the installation of "homeland" as a master signifier suturing domesticity to a resurgent American nationalism.<sup>65</sup>

Early on, the novel emphasizes the multiplicity of local responses to the attacks, shaped more by personal history than national affect. In its opening pages, Tassie, offers one of the novel's few direct references to the events of September 11, 2001. Rather than register traumatic shock or open on to national geopolitics, this brief, oblique glimpse serves as the raw material for an unapologetically particular imaginative exchange between Tassie and her college roommate, Murph. After briefly explaining that September 11 "seemed both near and far" Tassie almost immediately shifts to how Murph had met her new boyfriend on September 10 (5). When Murph jokes, "It was a terrible price to pay for love, but it had to be done," Tassie retorts, "You sick slut! People were killed! All you think about is your pleasure!" (5). Although Tassie and Murph provide an idiosyncratic reading of the attacks – even one inarguably crass in its slippage between public mass murder and the trivialities of their college promiscuity – this conversation nonetheless reinforces the sense of the nation as an imagined community of discrete, alienated spectators united through media in their simultaneous but local, personal and therefore unique experience of this pivotal historical moment.<sup>66</sup> Few will share their odd sense of humor, but readers can nonetheless imagine this conversation as one amongst many possible representative examples, a far cry from the presumption of universal trauma, grief and nostalgia for a lost pre-9/11 state of American innocence.

The resistance to these fantasies of national domestic unity not only manifests in the register of content, but also in the register of form. Instead of homogeneity, the novel emphasizes discontinuities as Tassie moves between and within different versions of

domestic space, all of which are mediated through her idiosyncratic, retrospective narration. The subsequent linguistic subterfuge of the paragraph to follow her brief reference to 9/11 – in which Tassie absent-mindedly meanders through ruminations on marching poli-sci majors, the *Mona Lisa* and the pronunciation of “Dubuque” – gives readers an immediate sense of her fleeting attention span as well as her estranging detachment from the nation’s dominant structure of feeling. Yet, the digression also suggests that Tassie lacks focus: “La Gioconda! Its very name like a snake, its sly, tight smile encased at a distance but studied for portentous flickers” (5). Similarly, Tassie’s prose snakes around September 11, keeping it at a proper distance, like the glass does for the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, the slipperiness of language enabling her to evade confronting the events head on, always deferring recognition through another series of digressions into countless other matters, from references to her college classes to her collecting of fortune cookies (the deferral repeats itself when a patriotic yoga teacher prompts Tassie to admit, “mostly, our conversations slid back shockingly, resiliently, to other things” [6]). Ultimately, these linguistic digressions, deferrals and evasions imply Tassie is a less than ideal chronicler of the idealized national everyday after 11 September 2001, whose nostalgic reflections, rather than retroactively impose a rose colored view of the past, instead explores the imperfect and necessarily partial act of remembrance which does not always conform to a nationalist framework promising restoration.

If 11 September 2001 touched on a variety of personal, local and domestic histories that refract them, then Tassie is paradigmatic of the nation in her very obliviousness towards the national whole outside her immediate experience. Although the novel calls on the young narrator to mediate a national spatial totality that seems distantly relevant to her, it also paradoxically nonetheless conducts a provisional form of mapping through the substitution of the home as a more manageable scale of analysis that can stand in for the nation without violently reducing it to a single, monolithic reading. Whereas the American state and media typically discuss the *domestic* in terms of the national “Homeland” under perpetual threat of terrorist attack, Moore’s novel does not treat the implicit enfolding of home and family into this category as proof of unity and homogeneity. Through Tassie’s narration, *A Gate at the Stairs* instead explores the

internal contradictions presented by race, class and gender in the homeland as Tassie serves as a nodal point quilting together spaces representative of the American nation.

## 2.5. Disunited States

Ultimately, the allegorical image of the national totality she presents does not figure the home – conceived both as the individual family dwelling and regional space – as an unproblematic metaphorical substitute for the national fantasy of the homeland. Rather, Tassie captures the metonymic circulation of desires for home that are always necessarily absent, inconsistent, deferred, displaced, and located elsewhere on a map where the *symbolic* representation of space – the national homeland – fails to register what psychoanalytic scholar Julia Kristeva calls the *semiotic*, or the various tones, rhythms, contradictions, silences, losses and absences which – while failing to provide a viable alternative to the dominant national system of meaning – test that system’s premises. Through Tassie’s eyes, *Gate* brings forward spatial codes which show how Tassie’s experiences her social being as embedded within the contradictory social geographies of Wisconsin – acting as a microcosm of a divided “Red State” and “Blue State” America – as opposed to abstract and homogeneous national ones or the more narrowly conceived traumas of New York City residents. It depicts the individual family dwelling as divided yet dynamic and emphasizes circulations within and between spaces which are distinct from their common ideological reductions. Unlike nostalgic national fantasies, home is not a real place to which one can return, but a perpetually deferred destination, generating an absence into which any number of ultimately inadequate versions of home can metonymically slide.

Tassie’s alternative conceptualization of home emerges in the representations of space and particularly in the relation between Tassie’s rural hometown (more like a village), Dellacrosse, and her new temporary home, the liberal college town of Troy. The novel juxtaposes these spaces in a way that mirrors what Tassie learns in her Art 102 class, namely that the “future” would be “the surrealism of two unfamiliar things placed unexpectedly side by side” (60). Whereas the nation quickly hardened into illusions of unity following September 11, *A Gate at the Stairs* forwards the idea of “Red State” and “Blue State” geographies. The novel emphasizes that these spaces are neither entirely

opposed nor internally coherent in themselves through the unexpected continuities and discontinuities between as well as within them. Due to this complexity, Tassie struggles with the parallax shift she must enact between the conservative-rural and liberal-urban axes. She implicitly compares her own situation to the theory of quantum mechanics that “allowed for something being dead and alive at the same time: if a particle could also be a wave, if it could morph and part company with itself, then an entire being composed of those particles could also go wavy and be in two places at once, heaven and hell, bar and ballpark, life and death” (308). Within Tassie’s analogy, seeing from one position – say rural Dellacrosse or college town Troy – obliterates her vision of the other, rendering it impossible to see from both positions simultaneously, much the way one cannot hold the image of an object stationary while closing one eye and then switching to the other.

For her, this parallax position results in “parallel universes” which “existed for all options” and “in theory... observation of one universe was the only thing that deprived the other of reality” (308). Quantum mechanics thus provides a metaphor to describe Tassie’s impossible existence in two places at once, both particle and wave, in the flux between parallel universes governed by radically different worldviews. Yet, her underlying impulse towards this bifurcation into mutually exclusive, homogenous and autonomous spheres, elides not only the internal antagonisms of these spheres but ultimately also the necessity to deconstruct their apparent differences. In attending to this necessity through Tassie’s experiences, the novel presents a more complex picture of post-9/11 America, where the microcosmic “home” proves less determined by the abstract and reductive imperatives of the “homeland” than the state or media would care to admit, but never achieves a coherence in and of itself. There is no authentic home to which the country can return, just multiple, internally inconsistent versions of it.

Indeed, rather than a stable sense of home, Tassie frequently moves between Dellacrosse and Troy, belonging to both and neither simultaneously. Her mobility runs contrary to the commonplace associations of home with familiarity, dullness and stasis. According to Rita Felski, whereas the everyday takes place in multiple spaces, home is its privileged symbol, treated as a fixed position, taken for granted as a grounding of the self (“Invention” 22). Being “at home” in the world is an “affront to the existential homelessness and anguish of the modern intellectual” insofar as the vocabulary of



modernity is “anti-home” and privileges exile, boundary crossing, mobility, movement as the basis for “resistance” (23). Tassie’s characterization deconstructs the opposition of home and those qualities of movement typically excluded from it, arriving at a version of dwelling based in estrangement, exile and displacement where home becomes geographically and affectively plural rather than fixed and static as she metonymically slides between multiple sites.

As David Brauner and Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson claim, Moore’s work often involves “intelligent and restricted women, whose sense of place and space define their identities” and in particular “reveals how the contours of the domestic sphere shape the lives of the girls and women within it” (“Lorrie Moore” 547). In Tassie’s case, however, rather than weary intelligence, her sense of exile accompanies a professed ignorance about the world, which she underscores through comparison of herself to the “priest-child of a Columbian tribe” who was “made mystical by being kept in the dark for the bulk of his childhood and allowed only stories—no experience— of the outside world” (4). Initially, this exile fills Tassie with excitement: “The flat green world of my parents’ hogless, horseless farm—its dullness, its flies, its quiet ripped open daily by the fumes and whining of machinery—twisted away and left me with a brilliant city life of books and films and witty friends. Someone had turned on the lights. Someone had led me out of the cave” (4). However, the events of the story lead her to a more complex notion of home based less on hard oppositions between urban and rural. She instead comes to occupy the contact zone between that anxiously suspends “sense of place” and the “contours of the domestic sphere.” Tassie’s naïve narrative voice guides us through their breakdown into numerous possible options in varied geographies of home, where we encounter the internal dislocation and alienation that splits her – and by extension the country – from within.

Indeed, when read allegorically for the nation, personal and local histories can more readily reveal spatial and political divisions within the deeply divided politics of the country. In recent American presidential elections, Wisconsin, although increasingly trending Democratic, has served as a paradigmatic “purple state” embodying tensions between a strong organized labor movement and a more white, rural and conservative populism, which recently came to national attention in 2011.<sup>67</sup> When Republican

governor Scott Walker aided the passage of a “budget repair bill” through the state legislature – a law designed to constrain the collective bargaining rights of public sector unions – he prompted a narrowly failed recall election. Perhaps the conflict garnered national media interest because these tensions within Wisconsin serve as such a ready-made allegory of national tensions just as agents of neoliberal austerity, such as Wisconsin congressmen, Ayn Rand enthusiast, and current intellectual leader of roll-back conservatism, Paul Ryan, resist the broader Democratic neoliberalism of President Barack Obama, who, despite the state’s divisions, has won Wisconsin twice by comfortable margins. Although Moore released her novel in 2008 and thus could not have been aware of how prominently Wisconsin would figure in national news coverage in 2011, these are long standing tensions in a state that could be both the home of Scott Walker as well as the reliably liberal former senator, Russ Feingold. Regional Wisconsin, in this sense, stands in for a divided rather than a unified nation.<sup>68</sup>

The issue of restoration depends on where exactly one stands in this exemplary political conflict. Although *A Gate at the Stairs* was published prior to these events, Moore’s blog post for the *New York Review of Books* titled “Which Wisconsin?” indicates the issues of political division Governor Scott Walker and the Democratic push to recall him raise were an inherent part of Wisconsin state politics long predating 9/11. Contending with David Brooks’ argument that Americans increasingly “live in more like-minded communities than ever before and are therefore cut off from values at variance with their own,” Moore notes that the recall election exacerbates always existing local tensions and pits “neighbor against neighbor” leading many only now to choose sides and thus refer to it as a “civil war.” She explains how the “the split that has always existed along various fault lines across the state has re-emerged, this time cutting through small town neighborhoods, Indian tribal land and even academic departments”: “Wisconsin has long been considered a collective of liberal communities connected by interstates crisscrossing the farmland. But especially with the rise of suburban sprawl, it had become much more unpredictable than that.” Moore’s understanding of “self-contradictory Wisconsin” informs her novel as, in the same way as the recall election, its internal divisions serve to allegorize the nation as a whole, split through similar antagonisms of class, race and politics.<sup>69</sup>

Through Tassie's negotiations of space, the text deconstructs the supposed rural village and college town binary that sustains the competing versions of regional identity. To borrow a formulation from Rey Chow, it demonstrates, through acts of locating the difference once thought to be between two entities as one actually already within those entities, how identity is always temporally and spatially deferred ("Poststructuralism" 199). Indeed, Tassie's portrayal alerts us to the alterity internal to regional American life and identity. Her subjectivity allows neither conservative nor liberal political entities to claim internal coherence since each proves essential to the definition of the other. Consequently, the novel enacts a relentless criticism of liberal leftist posturing to accompany its implicit protest against the neo-conservative genres of masculine insecurity. If conservatism's imaginary solution for the impasse of America's division necessitates war with racial others elsewhere, the liberal solution, which entails "adopting" the racial other as a personal cause via multicultural tolerance, proves equally as suspect. As Elizabeth Anker notes, in this regard, the novel offers a "nuanced meditation of the failures of liberal multiculturalism in the twenty-first century" ("Allegories" 478). Take for instance, Sarah, who insists, for political reasons, on adopting a *black* baby. "People would rather go to China," Sarah complains, "all the way to China before they would take in a black kid from their own state!" (80). Their home city of Troy functions as a symbol for the superiority of liberal America, which Tassie frames as a smug self-satisfaction soon deflated by racist reactions to Sarah's adopted mixed-race child, Mary-Emma. Tassie fumes, "Here was so proud of itself. Here was so progressive and exemplary. Here was so lockstep lefty. Here was so—white" (151). In contrast, Sarah reacts with the declaration, "I'm forming a support group" (152). Her somewhat limp response to the structural realities of American racism meets with Tassie's disapproval. "Troy was a piece of smug, liberal, recycling, civic minded monkey masturbation," Tassie, who grew up in the much more conservative country-side, complains. "That it was gestural" and "trying to make itself feel good" sickens her, and she sees Troy's "lack of reality" as being its "true crime" (153).

At the foundation of her indignation towards Sarah's politics is Tassie's apparent distrust of simply giving "voice" to racial grievances through what she sees as a condescending advocacy spoken from her employer's unacknowledged position of liberal privilege. The text figures this distrust of voice during Sarah's racial support group

meetings, in which local parents have philosophical conversations about prejudice while Tassie tends to their kids, including Mary-Emma, in the nursery upstairs. Though Tassie notes that although the children are primarily “of color” in a “range of shades from light to dark,” most the parents downstairs were “white” (154). Her surveillance of their conversation emphasizes the distance between the space downstairs and the one containing the children – and her own invisible labor – through the inaudible voices which would “waft up through two floors, out of interest and earshot for the kids” (155). Whereas the adults downstairs discussing racial inequality indulge in what Tassie sees as ultimately pointless squabbles, her and the kids sit in their “sequestered nursery behind and above the baby gate at the stairs,” where, “there was scarcely an argument” (158). Here Tassie refers to the image of the “gate,” using it to figure the barrier separating the lives of these children from the disembodied voices below apparently discussing their welfare. From Tassie’s perspective then, there is a lack of harmony between the subject matter and those discussing it. The speakers exist in a “spiritually gated community of liberal chat” (186). What little of the conversation Tassie hears she describes as “like an orchestra made up entirely of percussion” (157).<sup>70</sup>

Tassie’s indignation towards what she feels to be the ineffective liberalism of Troy does not mean she elevates her conservative hometown of Dellacrosse into a purer expression of home, however. Instead, as her recollection of the town’s attempt to brand itself as a tourist attraction attests, she sees it as equally if not more deluded. “Everyone here,” she confides, “seemed like a stranger, if not an outright alien,” an ironic statement considering the town, eager to join the spectacle, had once “decided to try to remarket itself as an extraterrestrial tourist site” (66). The analogy in her mind between the status of Dellacrosse’s residents as aliens and the village’s attempt to insert itself into the novelty tourist economy continues as Tassie, one foot in and one foot out, begins to document how her “own friends... were now like Martians” (67). Apparently, after a brief burst of commerce and traffic, public interest quickly vanished, and the village council had “packed everything up in a rocket and sent it back to its planet, leaving some strays behind” (66). These Martian strays, Tassie complains, “guzzled brandy straight from the bottle” and “drank TheraFlu recreationally like toddies on weekends,” celebrated Dellacrosse’s reputation as a speed trap with T-shirts and twisted grammatical declarations of time into near unrecognizable tenses (67). The sense of the uncanny

“Martians” Tassie experiences in the village figures her “alienation” not only from what one might expect as a refuge from the hypocrisy of Troy; but, rather than holding up Dellacrosse as the paradigmatic lost home, the narrator gently ridicules it in the style only someone who knows it all too well can achieve. Of course, her mocking criticism just as easily might be reversed in so far as she far better represents the intergalactic traveler, who has successfully navigated between one world and another, belonging in both and neither simultaneously, occupying multiple spaces splitting her identity from within.

Tassie’s comparisons broaden to include not only space aliens but also other manifestations of the uncanny which express the inherent yet often disavowed strangeness of small town life, echoing the treatment of Indiana in *The Suffering Channel*. Indeed, from Tassie’s perspective, Dellacrosse resembles less the stable, tranquil and comforting home town of American myth and more an uncanny temporal backwater located somewhere in *The Twilight Zone*:

To me, they had taken on a repellant creatureliness, like ancient monsters that were thought to live in deep northern lakes, or like the dinosaurs rumored still to be roaming the vast interior of Africa, the world having rushed forward into the future without them. And so, I imagined, when the glacier had retreated it had trapped the resident driftless knuckleheads of Dellacrosse, whom time forgot. Or else they all were the dimmerwits from outer space who’d forgotten to get back on the spaceship and so the ship had left without them. Deliberately! Dellacrosse had the aspect of having been left behind by many ships. It seemed the outer space of outer space. (68)

Along with this feeling of stepping into a fringe space, Tassie’s description of common speech patterns, particularly verb tenses as they relate to time, compounds the temporal strangeness of the village. “It was the hypothetical conditional past, time and intention carved so obliquely and so fine that I could only almost comprehend it, until, like Einstein’s theory of relativity, which also sometimes flashed cometlike into my view, it whooshed away again, beyond my grasp,” she explains (67). Compared to Troy, the residents of Dellacrosse seemed to “live in some isolated corner of the time-space continuum” (67). Dellacrosse’s status as Tassie’s “hometown” does not mean it offers a more natural, more homogenous answer to Troy. She remains stuck in-between.

## 2.6. Family as Metaphor

The dissolution of national space accompanies an interrogation of political and cultural discourses figuring the nation, in turn, through family, the body and genre. To address the first in this series, Tassie's sense of dislocation unfolds as a challenge to the co-option of "family," a floating signifier that could be articulated in the queer position of the "chosen family" or the labor movement's conception of "working families," but which takes on different connotations in the current conjuncture. Post-9/11 culture discusses the strength of national security in terms of reconstituted masculine, patriarchal protection of weak and vulnerable wives, mothers and children. In a novel with no strong male characters (jumping ahead a step in the argument), Tassie is able to narrate the domestic through the eyes of complex female characters like Sarah Brink who are not exemplary of alleged national trends towards a specific sort of post-9/11 family. The familial metaphor instead decays.

One way restorative discourse circulates is through the equation of the state with the family. Not only do Americans see themselves as productive citizens through home ownership (Bush's "ownership society"), but cultural understandings of the state as "homeland" have been defined through the notion of family. "The trope of 'homeland' has worked to reformulate a familial imaginary since its official deployment in 2001," Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert argue, as well as "[to reinscribe] the nation-state as the apotheosis and most legitimate form of political organization, and [affirm] affective attachments to the nation-state through its familial reference" ("Families at War" 266-7). While noting how the "terrorist attacks have been interpreted as a loss to families, with the grief of the nation and of families conflated at official commemorative events," Cowen and Gilbert nonetheless maintain that the ideological centrality of the familial fantasy in post-9/11 culture intensifies, rather than transforms, ongoing processes of neoliberalism which shifts on to the family "more and more of the responsibilities formerly assigned to the welfare state" and thus "naturalize[s] the family as a site for social reproduction" (263). For these reasons, family performs a powerful ideological function in American politics, serving as a restorative fantasy evident not only in the rise of the Christian Right and their lamentations over the perceived erosion of "family values" – epitomized by opposition to abortion, the "welfare queen" and single mothers –

but also in former President Bill Clinton's (recently struck down) Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), in which, "Congress asserted that the nuclear family is the foundation of a successful society and, as such, should be actively promoted by the federal government" (264).

In these examples, the integrity of the family figures the integrity of the nation, structuring desire for the social and political reproduction of the state through restorative nostalgic fantasies. Cowen and Gilbert argue that following September 11 the American state mobilized these figurative dimensions of the family, making it "central to the production of political space" referred to as the homeland:

We are suggesting that "homeland" is not simply a new kind of national metaphor, but, rather, that the family is becoming a model of political relations with familial spaces like the home commanding our political geographic imaginaries. The domestic and international reformulations of nations as families described above signal a new way of conceiving the family not only as an institution through which neoliberal states can govern, but also as the model of political relations that underpin the new, "soft paternalism" of the U.S. [state]. (269)

As Cowen and Gilbert suggest, post-9/11 discourses of gender, sexuality, family and domesticity participate in reshaping American fantasies of the nation. The personal and the political cannot be separated so easily. Inevitably, the familial fantasy of the country participates in the construction of communal feeling across social registers that binds individuals to the state in dynamics of belonging or repudiation, domination and subordination, power and weakness, albeit wrapped in the rhetoric of American democracy. As Claire Synder argues, "traditional family is central for neoconservatives because they view it as the 'seedbed of virtue' that undergirds democratic self-government" ("Allure" 18).

*A Gate at the Stairs* questions the fantasies of post-9/11 domesticity, hyper-masculinity and female contentment in subordinate roles, ideologies which sustain restorative fantasies. In post-9/11 culture, if fathers serve as the masculine protectors against foreign threats, then mothers figure the home in need to protection. Since September 11, the American state and media has drawn on dormant fantasies of biological reproduction – thought key to the restoration of domestic stability – as a figure

for social reproduction of the nation in a time of crisis. Within this ideological logic, so goes the home, so too goes the nation. *A Gate at the Stairs* demonstrates that the analogy between these two registers of the domestic fantasy also provide an opportunity for imaginatively unsettling the gendered metaphors and the political reductions of the home to a synecdoche for a lost, unified whole in need of restoration. In other words, *how* authors use the figures of home, family and gender deserves greater attention. *A Gate at the Stairs* uses domestic allegory to unsettle the intertwined ideological fantasies of women's inherent domestic contentment and its role as the fantasy supplement to masculine national strength, presenting domestic counter-discourses of gender and affiliation that do not necessarily reproduce the logics of the homeland through the regressive representation of the home.

The dynamics of restorative nostalgia in post-9/11 America interlock with the logics of patriarchy. According to Susan Faludi, the production of national unity after September 11 – which exacerbates the crisis of symbolic investiture afflicting the contemporary American state – has largely depended on forwarding a patriarchal fantasy of domesticity which could compensate for the dormant national insecurities the terrorist attacks reawakened. She argues that media, entertainment, advertising and the state “declared the post-9/11 age an era of neo-fifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood” (4). Faludi thus frames the ideological convergence of these archetypes as responding to the nation's “emasculatation” at the hands of the terrorists, activating a long tradition of “male panic” over the perceived weakness of patriarchal protection that seeps into narratives as a “sexualized struggle between depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood” (11-2). Thus male insecurity gets transcoded into allegories of the domestic which attempt to resolve the contradictions of failed masculinity through nostalgic fantasies of returning to the patriarchal authority perceived as lost: the father is dead but he can be restored under certain conditions of feminine disempowerment. Projecting on to women the desire to abandon their educations and careers in order to conform to the image of the happy housewife and mother, imposes a particular script of womanhood rather than returning to one, where the nation heals – becomes unified and whole again – through eliminating men's narcissistic humiliation at the advances of feminism, another version of the much feared “foreign” threat. Instead, the nation supposedly wanted an anti-critical



return to regressive gender norms, patriarchal myths and domestic idylls that would sustain rather than challenge existing social and political power.

The coordinates of these fantasies involve evoking familiar narrative tropes of a mythical masculinity capable of rescuing the national family in peril. One aspect of this fantasy, as Faludi notes, involved the eroticization of masculine authority figures – such as firemen, police officers and soldiers – a theme which appears in novels such as *Disorder*, *The Good Life* and *Bleeding Edge*.<sup>71</sup> These phallic men, supposedly possessing qualities of strength, bravery and leadership, compensated for a deeper sense of male inadequacy. Concordantly, another more anxious aspect of this fantasy involved probing the imperiled authority of patriarchal protectors. Slavoj Žižek identifies these anxieties in the “family myth of ideology” at work in Steven Spielberg’s 2005 remake of the classic film *War of the Worlds* – in which a failed father (Tom Cruise) gets the chance to prove his manhood to his estranged children – insofar as the “story about the conflict of larger social forces (classes and so forth) is framed in the coordinates of the family drama” (*Lost Causes* 52). In her book, Faludi argues that the historical trauma of 9/11 actually touched on much deeper structural trauma regarding the failure of American men to defend the nation (and she, like Žižek, cites *War of the Worlds* as an example).

By no means are these tropes limited to cinema. Although using slightly different terms, literary critic Elizabeth Anker argues that post-9/11 literature has figured the “larger social forces” of American nationhood and the War on Terror through the “coordinates of the family drama” as well, pointing to how they express a nostalgic longing for a lost masculinity. In “Allegories of Falling,” she claims, “[N]ostalgia within the 9/11 novel encodes sentiments at once idealized and regressive, which is to say that these narratives partake of a longing to return to a bygone era of American omnipotence wherein white, heteronormative, patrician masculinity was still sacrosanct” (468). Even while participating in this nostalgic myth, post-9/11 novels such as *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Windows on the World*, often reveal its limits through their focus on masculinity tested in the aftermath of the attacks. As Anker contends, the “metaphor of the male mid-life crisis indexes American ineptitude, or the disavowed truth of late imperial impotence and failure” in this emerging genre, displacing

anxiety over the intuited loss of American global dominance on to a “perceived menace to paternity” and the jeopardy it poses to the “father-son bond” (“Allegories” 464).<sup>72</sup> From this perspective, post-9/11 literature figures the American nation through the imperiled father who embodies the decline of what psychoanalysis refers to as the “paternal metaphor” which instantiates the symbolic law.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, whereas failed fathers abound in post-9/11 culture, *A Gate at the Stairs*, which features hardly any subjectively rich male characters, instead focuses on failed mothers as metaphors for the nation, or, more precisely, mothers who fail to fulfill the patriarchal fantasy of the contented housewife tending the home. Neither Sarah Brink – privileging her professional obligations as a chef and restaurant owner over the domestic and affective labor she contracts out to Tassie – nor Tassie’s mother – regretful of her domestic role as caregiver and the limits it places on her autonomy – exemplify what Faludi terms the “nesting nation,” a fantasy in which feminist critique withers and women welcome more vulnerable, docile social roles such as the “security mom” or the “damsel in distress,” buttressed by a media promoted “beatification of the ideal post-9/11 American woman—undemanding, uncompetitive, and most of all, dependent” (*TD* 168). Instead, their discontent portrays women as ambivalent desiring subjects, struggling within symbolically over-determined domestic roles. They serve as evidence of Moore’s “meta-fictional feminism,” which, according to Heidi Stendhal MacPherson, defines the author’s short story collections, such as *Birds of America*, as well as *A Gate at the Stairs*. She argues that Moore’s work is suffused with “women characters who attempt a variety of escapes from their presumed narrative closures and who also struggle with feminism and its consequent impact on their narrated lives” (“Escape” 565). In this analysis, MacPherson usefully spotlights Moore’s ambivalence towards feminism in the novel, but her article neglects to mention how *A Gate at the Stairs* places this ambivalence unambiguously within the context of post-9/11 America. I want to concentrate in particular on how desire circulates in the text and more specifically how Tassie’s defiance of the restorative narrative desires for home and motherhood speak to a broader resistance to the nostalgic closures offered to women on the home-front of the War on Terror.

## 2.7. Failed Reproduction

One of the narrative closures available to Tassie is motherhood, which in post-9/11 culture increasingly figures the reproduction of the nation at the scale of the domestic and the bodily. For instance, in her essay “Wounded New York,” Judith Greenberg problematically frames 9/11 as an attack on the maternity of the nation: “Our first home, of course, is the body—the maternal body and then our own. If the home can be interpreted through the body, then the shattering of a sense of a secure national home may evoke feelings about the shattering of the collective body” (26). Her analysis conflates the maternal and national when she associates both of them with the trauma of thwarted reproduction, thereby folding each term into the other, as if material destruction is analogous to maternal death. “The collapsing of bodies together into smoke, detritus, or whatever remains,” she contends, “introduces a profoundly disturbing distortion of the fusing of infant and mother, Self and Other, animate and inanimate” (26). Recalling a dead pregnant woman found in the wreckage, Greenberg observes that the “attacks claimed the maternal body, housing a growing fetus, a victim” – presumably analogous to all the other victims in the collapsed WTC towers – but then shifts to the symbolism of the national “mother”: “If the New York symbolized by the Statue of Liberty offers the hope of a mother welcoming immigrants with open arms, then of September 11 (with the statue in the background) it witnessed a desecration of the maternal body” (26). Greenberg’s reading of the national as the maternal and vice versa yokes the thwarting of biological reproduction to the thwarting of symbolic reproduction, marking an apparent loss of continuity, simultaneously felt in the body, the home and the traumatized country they figure. Cast as the tragic victims of terrorism, her example of the dead pregnant woman and her unborn child resonates with anxieties over America’s inability to narrate the restoration of a secure future via the rich metaphor of the maternal body.

Through the ideological trope of motherhood, and its association with care and stability, Greenberg’s deceased maternal body anticipates what Susan Faludi identifies as the complimentary myth of the post-9/11 “baby-boom” in which the media declared that “it was time for women to prove their loyalty by enlisting in Uncle Sam’s reproductive services” (*TD* 162). Drawing from her research into primary documents of various news outlets, Faludi identifies a cultural shift after 9/11 towards what she terms the “nesting

nation,” a fantasy predicated on the erroneous assumption that middle-aged, career oriented women now hoped to accelerate their entry into marriage and motherhood (the public face of its obscene underside, so-called “terror sex”). “Whether actual women married and had babies or not didn’t seem to faze the media,” Faludi contends, “which pressed on inexorably to its grand domestic finale: the beautification of the ideal post-9/11 woman—undemanding, uncompetitive, and, most of all, dependent” (*TD* 168).

In its concentration on dissolving families, post-9/11 fiction confirms Faludi’s suspicion towards these nesting fantasies. Characters such as Joyce in *A Disorder Peculiar to this Country* and Corrine in *The Good Life* each negotiate the demands of motherhood alongside their own desires for independence and fulfillment. *A Gate at the Stairs* takes an additional step away from nesting fantasies, depicting mothers ambivalent or unsatisfied with their domestic roles. For instance, Tassie’s employer Sarah Brink offloads the majority of her home’s domestic tasks, including the affective labor of caring for Mary-Emma. The text further distinguishes itself through its emphasis on achieving maternity through adoption rather than biological reproduction, as Sarah looks to rescue a mixed-race child from an underprepared, lower-income mother, who assumes the labor of *labor*. Here, domesticity does not cohere according to a “nesting” fantasy. In these texts, the ideal-post-9/11 woman, completely and happily subordinate to the reproduction of traditional, patriarchal family life, so important to the ideology of the nesting nation, is nowhere to be seen.

Indeed, as Faludi notes, the return to traditional marriage and maternity has no evidentiary basis in reality either, which did nothing to dull its media luster. “The trend of a reconstituted ‘traditional’ womanhood seemed viral, immune to the antibiotics of common sense or statistical hard evidence,” she observes (*TD* 186). And, when middle-aged women failed to conform to the nesting fantasy, the myth turned to defining the nascent desires of college-age women instead, who were supposed to want to forgo their educations and future careers in favor of romance and motherhood (184). The construction of Tassie, the college-aged protagonist of the novel, contradicts this teleological narrative of the good life, opting for an ambivalence that maintains the possibility for critique and also opens space for a variety of possible futures. Her story contradicts fantasies of national restoration through a reconstituted domestic fantasy

because it concentrates on *failed reproduction*: homes do not manage to cohere through restorative tropes providing escape from trauma, but are shown as deeply implicated in the experience of loss. Rather than promote home as a safe, removed space for the reconstitution of stable family life, the text shows the inherent vulnerability, instability and precarity of all affective ties – personal, local and national – which prevent escapist fantasies.

These fantasies of the nesting nation do not hold up under Tassie's critical scrutiny, through which she treats promises of perfect domestic contentment with uncertainty. Accordingly, Tassie suspects Sarah Brink's home and its artifice, which appears in her first encounter with the title "gate at the stairs."<sup>74</sup> One of many such gates in the story, the appearance of the gate at the threshold of Sarah's house undermines the domestic fantasy of the perfect family home through its emphasis on disrepair, which to Tassie indicates, "someone's ill-disguised decrepitude, items not cared for properly but fixed repeatedly in a make-do fashion, needful things having gotten away from their caregiver" (10). Not only does Tassie associate the appearance of the gate with caring for a child, but a series of analogies which follow associate this broken threshold with both the home it belongs to – the home where Tassie will encounter a frayed domestic fantasy – and Sarah Brink, who will employ Tassie to take care of those very "needful things" Sarah claims to value most highly in abstract, if not always in practice. Underlining the association of domesticity and motherhood, the text encourages readers to think of the house and its occupant as analogous through this series of details. Whereas the house is decorated with "dessicated mums" (moms?), Sarah's appearance resembles the rusted metal hinge: "Her hair was cropped short and dyed the fashionable bright autumn of a ladybug. Her earrings were buttons of deepest orange, her leggings mahogany, her sweater rust colored, and her lips maroonish brown. She looked like a highly controlled oxidation experiment" (10-1); we learn her features are like "light porch furniture after a wind" (81); she has nose hairs, "like the crisscross of branches seen from the base of a tree" (12); her laugh is like the "chimes of a doorbell" (23). Sarah, in a sense, *is the house* for Tassie, somewhat too composed as an image that fully identifies the owner with her domestic place.

The (somewhat heavy handed) foreshadowing provided by the recurrent image pattern of the gate in the novel points to flaws in domestic fantasy. Like Sarah, mothers in the novel do not exemplify authentic domesticity – which post-9/11 culture counterposed to the artificiality of pre-9/11 life (including feminism) – but instead open a space for dissatisfaction within their performance of this symbolic role. Although they occupy different versions of domestic space, Tassie’s mother and Sarah Brink, rather than function merely as fantasy figures compensating for male weakness, are each represented in ways that draw attention to their unfulfilled desires within their prescribed roles as women. For instance, Tassie explains her mother succumbed in her youth to a number of “mirages,” from the misguided belief she had married a wealthy son of the college president, who instead became a hobby farmer and moved her to rural Dellacrosse, to her mistake of flowers in her new garden for perennials when they were really annuals, a figure for her disappointment with life (54). Tassie informs us that her mother, on the other hand, is nothing like the sophisticated Sarah Brink, who has achieved success outside the home and outside of her husband’s control, as an accomplished chef (23). Yet, Sarah also suffers from discontent with a traditional domestic role, handing off as many of the household duties as possible to maids, gardeners and nannies and pursuing her own career outside the home. Despite Tassie’s contrast between these figures for motherhood, however, they share a talent for artifice, for keeping up appearances. Tassie’s mother compensates for the inadequacy of her flowerbed by installing mirrors which double the apparent size of her garden (54). Sarah proves particularly adept at maintaining the appearance of perfect contentment, but cannot help but betray her performance to Tassie, which manifests in her “quasi-socially constructed laugh” (23). She has a “shiny artifice” of hair (31). She even endeavors to adopt a child in order to repair the edifice of a marriage that to any outside observer would appear to be beyond repair. Both of these characters indicate that the novel aims for less cartoonish representations of motherhood than normally produced in post-9/11 culture, ones not so invested in glorification of “nesting” as the most desirable narrative teleology for women. Yet, in their attempts to maintain the appearance of contentment, they also reveal how women often work within these limitations nonetheless, despite their dissatisfaction, producing further surfaces for Tassie to read. They struggle, in other words, through a sense of lives in narrative closure.

Ultimately, Sarah's character reveals the limits of the post-9/11 fantasy of domesticity as a compensation for loss, here figured in the register of the personal rather than that of the public. Initially, Sarah is the one most invested in the reproduction of domestic fantasy, albeit without sacrificing her career in the process, a juggling of responsibilities she finds difficult to sustain. As the novel progresses, we learn that the persistence of her investment in her fantasy despite these difficulties articulates itself in relation to a traumatic loss she cannot fully mourn. Here, the metaphor of the gate also recalls the irksome threshold between public and private realms figured during Laurel Manderlay's uncanny dream in *The Suffering Channel*, in which the apparent banality of the home conceals a darker, hidden truth. In one of the unexpected revelations of the novel, Sarah Brink indicates that she is at the *threshold* of a confession. "Too preoccupied to smile," Tassie notes, "she seemed on the brink of something": "Not for nothing were people named what they were named" (225). (In this clunky way, the text reminds us of the author's somewhat overbearing presence in the grating "cuteness" of names, which renders Tassie's narrative voice all the more suspicious as a construct.) The novel formally figures Sarah's unwillingness to discuss the death of her first child, Gabriel, through a sudden desire to confess followed by a series of delays, where each attempt is thwarted by interruption. When she finally reaches the traumatic incident of her story, the contours of the restorative fantasy promised through Mary-Emma's adoption become more distinct. Apparently, years ago in Massachusetts, Sarah and her husband – then named Susan and John – left Gabriel on the shoulder of the highway in order to teach him a lesson in manners, only to find they are unable to return and pick him up. When they finally do reach him, he's been struck by a car and lays dead in the road. Although charged with criminal negligence, they are acquitted, and both Susan (Sarah) and her husband, under assumed names, begin life again in Troy, seeking to adopt a new child and hiring Tassie to care for her. Sarah's confession to Tassie retroactively sheds some light on the artificiality of her character's domestic image. Her full identification with the home in the novel is not the typical nesting fantasy so much as it is a defense formation against the truth of her past from which she seeks to build a restorative, nostalgic refuge.

However, domesticity proves to be a poor defense against traumatic loss: just as the (national) home promises to restore stability, like the gate, it too can fall into

disrepair. Initially, Tassie associates the latching of the gate behind her with a “certain satisfaction... of tidiness, of restoration, of magic me!” but then also notes how the reality of the situation means “[s]oon the entire gate would have to be held together with a bungee cord” (10). Here the novel foreshadows the make-shift repairs characters make to domesticity in the aftermath of its inevitable disruption by death and loss. Due to his mostly unspoken centrality to the narrative, Gabriel is an appropriate name for Sarah’s absent son, with connotations of the angel Gabriel, typically associated with apocalypse, here to Sarah and the caring home she as a mother is supposed to represent. Combining destruction, prophecy and revelation, the secret of his death foreshadows Tassie’s loss of her own brother, Rob, who at eighteen years old joins the military and tragically dies soon after deploying to Afghanistan. Contrary to the nation’s politically romanticized fantasies of reproduction and futurity, in the novel the domestic fantasy heals nothing and protects no one; both male and female caregivers often fail. The domestic is always on the threshold of collapse, a fact stereotypes of masculine protectors and feminine caregivers cannot mitigate, which the novel only underscores when the adoption of Mary-Emma falls through and the past repeats itself. The fact the repeated rupture of domestic security involves the loss of children necessitates we turn to the figurative function of children in the restorative fantasies of national reproduction.

## **2.8. Non-Reproductive Futurism**

In addition to her association with this space, Sarah’s last name, “Brink,” indicates the association of the character with metaphorical thresholds – or gates – Tassie encounters in the novel, whether those are between one phase of life and another, one space or another, one version of womanhood and another. Tassie initially approaches Sarah’s status as a surrogate mother with ambivalence. As Tassie struggles to form her adult identity, she negotiates her relation to multiple maternal models, yet rejects any absolute affiliations with a particular one. In her liminal capacity, her desires made and unmade through these models, Tassie embodies the ambivalence Rita Felski identifies in the “Mother-Daughter” plot, in which every act of separation circles back around to questions of continuity with maternal representatives of home.<sup>75</sup> The novel thus moves against a linear, teleological plot that reproduces the ideological narrative closures of a future



restoration. It resists generically figuring the rebirth of the social order through the birth and development of the child.

Although *A Gate at the Stairs* is a pseudo memoir cast in the mold of a *bildungsroman*, a narrative of growing up where children learn life lessons, acquire valuable experience and become wiser, mature adults, unlike the classic nineteenth-century novel of development, the children of the story – narrator, Tassie, adoptive daughter, Mary-Emma and young soldier, Rob – do not seem to learn much, whether the result of obliviousness, death or other circumstances. Through their non-conformity with the linear temporalities typical to the coming-of-age genre, these three child figures cannot be inscribed within what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism.” In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman proposes that the ideologically invested figure of the Child “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” and thus helps to “affirm a structure” as well as “authenticate social order” in the political fight for the “future” (3). Reproductive futurism names the cultural fantasy which figures the world to come through the heteronormative family structure, in which securing the future is cast in terms of making a better world for one’s children.

Scholars have already registered the prevalence of this fantasy in post-9/11 cultural production. In her *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination*, Karen Engle takes up the “Four Freedom for which we Fight” – a series of Norman Rockwell images depicting idyllic family life which were digitally altered and reprinted in the *New York Times* following September 11 – to illustrate how children are “typically objectified in political rhetoric as ‘the future’ [and are] seen, among other things, as icons of hope, as repositories of energy to be harnessed for productive work, and, of course, as future consumers” (124). Similarly, in *Reproductive Acts: Sexual Politics in North American Fiction and Film*, Heather Latimer approaches director Alphonso Cuarón’s film *Children of Men*, which depicts a near-future dystopia where the inability to conceive figures the dissolution of society into terrorism and state authoritarianism, as a meditation on the figure of the child in the biopolitical reproduction of post-9/11 social order (149). *A Gate at the Stairs* serves as an unorthodox entry into the genre of reproductive futurism in post-9/11 culture because its three child (or young adult) characters – Tassie, Mary-

Emma and Rob – all fail as figures for the future of social order: Tassie refuses the injunction to marry and reproduce as her only narrative “resolution”; the complications surrounding Mary-Emma’s adoption undermine Sarah Brink’s attempts to reconstitute her marriage around family; and the death of Rob in Afghanistan violently cuts short the imagined future his youth should promise. If the Child, as Edelman proposes, figures the reproduction of social order, then *A Gate at the Stairs* engages in a non-reproductive futurism in which the social order cannot cohere around a nostalgic return to childhood innocence, maternity, patriarchal authority or family unity.

The positive qualities of this generic non-reproductive futurism exist in tension with another trend in what Stephen Marche identifies as the middle-brow pretensions of contemporary literary fiction. He argues that this genre is primarily concerned with using the coming-of-age story centered on college as an allegory for the aspirations of the upper-middle class suddenly threatened with financial (and other forms) of insecurity. “Camps and universities are natural subjects for the bourgeois novel of the moment because they have become expensive ways of replicating privilege, of falling in with the right sort of people, of learning the prerequisite social codes,” he writes (“Second Gilded Age”). Several dimensions of *A Gate at the Stairs* – its pseudo-Proustian prose style, recurring image patterns, painfully allegorical naming, metaphorization of academic knowledge and, ultimately, refusal of closure – locate it within the emerging genre of the middle-brow bourgeois novel, which includes, for instance, Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* and Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot*. The stakes of such a novel, Marche contends, inevitably become the mastery of self-as-image. “In the 19th-century bourgeois novel, the child through adventures comes to possess property as an adult,” Marche claims: “In the 21st century, developing a successful mode of self-presentation is the adventure. It’s an inner Pygmalion story” (“Gilded Age”). Despite some similarities, this category does not adequately address the specificities of Moore’s novel. Tassie certainly worries about her self-presentation within the variety of unsettled domestic contexts in the novel, but her maturation takes her away from the lauded institutions of the American college system. While she applies her knowledge (awkwardly) to her lived experience, going to class or signaling academic privilege figures minimally in the novel. When Moore has Tassie, who is narrating the story, turn to signifiers of education to explain an actual situation, these signifiers are almost inevitably poorly marshalled and

unconvincing. Moreover, the novel takes pains to spotlight that Tassie does not come from the privileged socio-economic background Marche critiques as the central preoccupation of the contemporary bourgeois novel. Her non-identity with this position is the very impetus behind her seeking a job and thus meeting Sarah Brink. What *A Gate at the Stairs* promotes is both an affection for and satirical distance from its narrator, who does not entirely fit the generic expectations that her storytelling implies. The novel does follow the bourgeois trajectory of self-development, but infused with a dry sense of humor that exposes the gap between truth and memory, posturing and insight, which Tassie herself does not entirely comprehend.

Although Sarah and Tassie form the central pairing of the novel, the respective stories of which are most closely intertwined, the choice to focalize *A Gate at the Stairs* through Tassie's subjectivity alone tentatively suspends the conventional narrative closure of the nesting nation, traditionally enacted through reproduction of the traditional romantic pairing or heteronormative familial structure. Tassie is in no hurry to fulfill these expectations. Thirty minutes into a garishly dressed friend's wedding, which she finds both "tawdry" and "embarrassing," Tassie realizes, emphatically, "I never want to marry" (65). Contemplating Sarah's loneliness, even as an adoptive mother, Tassie muses that she has no need to hurry into this form of adulthood anyway: "After a childhood of hungering to be an adult, my hunger had passed. Unexpected fates had begun to catch my notice. These middle-aged women seemed very tired to me, as if hope had been wrung out of them and replaced with a deathly, walking sort of sleep" (36). Her resistance to assuming a normative position of womanhood becomes emphatic when her seemingly unfulfilled mother gives her a pearl necklace. "And now, with no man in my life, even though I was only twenty," Tassie explains, "she would be the one to bestow this artifact of womanhood, this rite of passage, this gyno-noose, upon me" (55). Her sense of insult caused by this "gyno-noose," which ties her to the space of the home and all its attendant ideologies of "Republican" womanhood, only becomes more pronounced in contrast to her parents' gift to Robert of a "handheld instant star and constellation identifier" (55). Whereas Tassie's gift binds her to reproduction of a stereotypical domestic role, Rob's instead represents the expectation that, as a man, he will venture beyond the home and navigate into other spheres (the two primary ways men are supposed to be able to escape Dellacrosse into the wider world are truck

driving school or the military [57]). The novel resists framing Tassie through the traditional narrative closures implied by the ideology of the nesting nation.

In place of reproducing the domestic fantasy, Tassie resides in everyday repetition, a temporality which puts her in opposition to dynamics of historical change. Tassie admits that she does not “have any good solid plans” for her life, “no plans at all,” and “the lostness of that, compared with the clear ambitions of my friends (marriage, children, law school) sometimes shamed [her]” (29). Nonetheless, she also sees her “condition as morally and intellectually superior” because her “life was open and free” (29). These competing narrations of her life as both lost and free often manifest in Tassie’s descriptions of her guitar playing. For example, she explains how playing bass, like her own experience, is “full of wanderings that would return to fetch back the melody, or maybe only a handful of its notes, before venturing off again” (276). Here, melody parallels the structuring functions of plot, through which Tassie also weaves in and out, particularly in her relation to Sarah’s Brink’s tragic story and the larger narrative of post-9/11 America. Indeed, she tries to “find the midway place between melody and rhythm” musing, half mockingly, “was this searching not the very journey of life?” (137). Tellingly, she makes this comparison following a long description of her irredeemably messy apartment, which signifies her unwillingness to embrace a stereotypical domestic role, or her tendency to “make mincemeat of domesticity” (251). Tassie’s meandering bass playing provides a model of home based on repetition with infinite variations but without restorative or reproductive endpoints. Its repetitive temporality reinforces the sense of stasis, the refusal to move from one stable domestic realm into acceptance of a restrictive gendered place within another. Instead, Tassie presides over a messy apartment, where everything of presumed value remains suspended between places: “We had put almost all our possessions in storage, which was a metaphor for being twenty, as were so many things” (263). Taken together, these details suggest Moore’s text continues to resist the restorative temporalities of reproductive futurism.<sup>76</sup>

This suspension of narrative closures, however, produces ambivalent results. On the one hand, the novel resists the typical constructions of feminine social roles following 9/11, and the resulting formal amorphousness of the story moves emphasis away from domestic (and social) reproduction and towards everyday repetition. As a result,

temporal codes with clear progression or teleology, like the marriage plot and female *bildungsroman*, collapse into the shapeless moments of Tassie's present. Situated between these fantasies of motherhood and unsure how to negotiate them, Tassie must construct her own definition of "home" not so beholden to their reproductive logics. The results are a subjectivity that collapses temporal codes of reproduction in favor of more fluid movement between spaces which only ambivalently approaches the future. In this case the "gate" functions as a threshold between multiple narrative closures Tassie ultimately rejects: will she choose to reinscribe her mother's more traditional domestic role, or will she pursue the professional career Sarah Brink possesses, or will she find some difficult synthesis between the two? *A Gate at the Stairs*, with its often plotless meandering prose, resists these closures on the level of form, suggesting the suspension of these teleologies in favor of a more amorphous sense of identity created by logics of displacement, deferral and loss. If marriage and motherhood seem like the available narrative outcomes for Tassie's life, then she instead chooses to move laterally, reinserting the spatial into the empty historicism of post-9/11 American unity and homogeneity.

## 2.9. Meaningful Silences

Tassie's constant movement from one space of social being to another allows her to continue deferring the conflicts within each one, since she escapes from one imaginary narrative reality into another whenever it suits her. Moreover, it denies the necessity of seeing the place of the individual and the home within broader scales of analysis – such as the national and the global – central to the War on Terror. Thus, rather than reproduce the obliviousness that Gray and Rotheberg identify in the post-9/11 domestic novel, Tassie's narrative diagnoses it powerfully: excessive fetishization of "home" disavows disunited states of domestic belonging and in the process potentially obscures the geopolitical realities of the War on Terror.

"In every book there's a lot of white spaces," Tassie observes, discussing possible omissions from the Qur'an, "so, who knows what's going on, really, between the lines? All those meaningful silences!" (208). By the end of the novel and the revelation of Rob's death in Afghanistan, the novel poses this question of "white spaces" and

“meaningful silences” to its readers as well. What is really going on “between the lines” of Tassie’s narrative? What does she keep out of sight through her humorous yet elliptical deferrals, geographic escapes and circulations? For one, throughout the novel, Tassie seems particularly oblivious to the danger her brother faces when he graduates high school and decides to join the U.S. military, even if that potential danger sometimes forms the basis for some clunky foreshadowing of Rob’s death.<sup>77</sup> Even this foreshadowing points to Tassie’s inability to articulate the potential for loss. Take, for instance, when army recruiters enter Rob’s high school in order to sign up graduating students for military service, Tassie’s draws attention to problems of language. “These far away countries that had intruded on our consciousness seemed odd to me,” she admits, continuing, “but what did it mean now to fight in or at—there was no preposition... for?—a place like Afghanistan?” (58). “Afghanistan’s over,” Tassie’s brother assures her, prompting her to ask, “Is it? I’ve been studying for finals” (54). Of course, readers in 2009 will know the foolishness of Rob’s statement (the war in Afghanistan is scheduled to come to an official close by the end of 2014) and will likely also recognize Tassie’s obliviousness as indicative of how many Americans treated the conflict, until at least just a couple years before the 2008 election of anti-war candidate Barack Obama: out of sight and out of mind. The moment also foreshadows his eventual deployment to Afghanistan. “If I don’t come back, you know, alive,” Rob states, “don’t let them bury me in some big-ass coffin” (58). Despite the very real possibility of this outcome, their conversation again gets mired in reflection on the language of the war, whether “*enduring* freedom” or “letting freedom ring,” as if they are avoiding the painful topic at hand (59). When Rob does come back dead from Afghanistan, this outcome seems as if plainly signaled, inherent although strangely absent from the narrative and its myriad of shapeless wanderings.

Just as it does with Sarah Brink’s confession about the death of Gabriel, Rob’s death retroactively imposes some thematic shape on to the proceeding amorphousness of the novel’s structure, showing its nesting and wandering to be articulated around their respective instances of personal loss. In the case of Tassie’s loss, the novel figures this retroactivity of the signifier through the arrival of a proverbial “purloined letter” from the past. Following Rob’s funeral, Tassie opens an e-mail from her brother she left unread during the incidents surrounding Mary-Emma’s failed adoption, only to discover he had

all but pleaded with her to dissuade him from joining the military (306-7). After wishing, with Superman's assistance in reversing the rotation of the Earth, she could go back in time and reply to the message, Tassie explains, "I locked Robert's e-mail back up in the archives and never looked at it again" (308). Tassie's decision to relegate this information to where it will never again see the light of day – leaving the historical record partial and incomplete – parallels the mistakes of Sarah Brink, who also thinks it possible to simply forget, move forward and nostalgically restore stability as if nothing has happened. This fantasy of oblivion denies how past loss as well as its potential in the future impact the personal attachments of the entire country embroiled in numerous foreign wars but banned by the state from even marking the deaths of young-men coming home in "big-ass coffins." In light of these respective losses, the domestic tale of tragedy is also the tale of political tragedy, "brining the war home" through the contact between domestic space and unsettled homelands elsewhere, as one context, however distant, begins to impinge on another.

Finally, the novel brings Tassie to the paradigmatic threshold between life and death, a point of transition, or gate, where language proves inadequate but also the only tool she has to address that inadequacy, to try and coax what she can back into life. Tassie foregrounds the role of lack in this process of remembering when she reflects on the word "dearth," which to her "sounded like a cross between death and birth, a miscarriage perhaps" (122). Starting with this definition, perhaps the sort of autobiography that *A Gate at the Stairs* imitates responds to Tassie's sense of "miscarriage," of life's reproduction unexpectedly derailed by sudden circumstances that although unanticipated at the time begin to make a cruel sort of sense when brought again out of the black hole into which she had initially banished the memory. The lack created by the untimely death of her brother serves as the occasion for raising what she can bear to remember from the past back into visibility, if only to trace the contours of a traumatic loss.

Humor serves as the primary means of encircling it, which Tassie shows through the games played by some children she babysits: "Sometimes one would pretend to be unconscious or dead while the other one forced her back to living, which was indicated by giggles... Sometimes it seemed to me that children believed death occurred in

different forms than adults did, in varying degrees, and that it intersected with life in all kinds of ways that were unofficial” (228). Rob’s death remains “unofficial” within the narrative, although, as a retrospective, Tassie most certainly knows it will happen the entire time. This fact provides perspective on her strange act of consolation in which she climbs into Rob’s “big-ass coffin” with his unrecognizable, fragmented body and attempts to coax the remains back to life. “I would lie there and preserve him somehow with memories,” Tassie proposes: “I would reassemble him with chat...I would not be no guy’s sister” (300). From this bizarre moment, we can gather that, for Tassie, Rob is where death intersects with life in unofficial, unacknowledged and often unspoken ways in the American culture of disavowal; he is where all nostalgic fantasies of restoration disintegrate to reveal a vulnerability to loss she never thought could touch her from somewhere so seemingly far away. In the end, all she has is language: tricky, misleading, funny, creative and ultimately inadequate.

The home in *A Gate at the Stairs* serves as the space in which the characters register personal trauma and loss, rather than losses experienced at a boarder national scale. Its narrative thus challenges the conflation of home and homeland in the construction of a homogeneous “post-9/11 America,” shifting attention from the patriarchal story of masculine insecurity and domestic reproduction and towards the complexities of women’s domestic lives otherwise obscured within the ideological logics of national security. Yet, within these complexities, the novel confronts the types of personal and political oblivion that even alternative narratives of home can promote, whether based on escape into various permutations of personal identity, or the evasions of loss, memory and suffering enabled through detachment from the effects of war that nonetheless end up at Tassie’s doorstep.



## **Chapter 3.**

### **Dead Time: Surveillance Circuits in 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta'**

#### **3.1. Surveillance Fantasies**

When Edward Snowden, former Central Intelligence Agency employee and National Security Agency contractor, disclosed classified information detailing the extent of surveillance activities undertaken by the United States government, he not only revealed the potential susceptibility of every citizen to the technologies of counter-terrorism, but also inadvertently spotlighted continuities in the exercise of social power that complicate the temporal boundaries of the War on Terror. Years after the Obama administration quietly stopped even calling it a “War on Terror,” intensified practices of surveillance continue under the mandate of counter-terrorism, with various organizations secretly gathering data on phone records, search histories, electronic correspondence and other activities. These practices not only continue after the official War on Terror, but they gesture to a disavowed history. As surveillance scholar David Lyon points out, “the establishment of ‘surveillance societies’ that affect the lives of all ordinary people was already well under way long before 9/11. The aftermath of the attacks helps us to see more clearly what is already happening” (*After* 4). Instead, this disavowed history points to what Didier Bigo calls the “governmentality of unease,” defined by “practices of exceptionalism, acts of profiling and containing foreigners, and a normative imperative of mobility” that are not the product of September 11 alone so much as of “long term social processes and public acceptance of the routines of surveillance” (“Security” 47). Bigo argues that through these processes, the state of exception which ideologically justifies surveillance is “banalized” to the point of near invisibility (47). Only when someone like Snowden forces an anomaly into this banalization do these surveillance systems emerge

into our awareness, suggesting histories of voyeuristic watching and control disavowed by rhetoric claiming “everything changed” and cloaked in a new bio-politics. On rare occasions, fiction can also register this disavowal, particularly through an aesthetic over-identification with contemporary surveillance systems, one which counter-acts their banal invisibility and instead spotlights the “passion for the real,” or their operator’s desire to make terrorists totally transparent, legible and thus controllable.

Surveillance studies – which examines the diffusion of monitoring, data aggregation and categorization into everyday life – offers a great deal to debates between critics such as Anker, Gray, Mishra, Rothberg and Versluys regarding the cultural representation of otherness in the field of 9/11 studies.<sup>78</sup> While this debate usefully illuminates the ethical struggle over how to portray the other in post-9/11 literature, it largely neglects how this struggle is mediated through surveillance systems dedicated to racial profiling and other manifestations of state power, meant to discipline racialized bodies believed to pose a threat to national security. These practices have become so routine, as Bigo notes, that we forget terrorist otherness is constituted through a variety of interlocking gazes and overlapping networks of surveillance, classification and discipline – border screenings, closed-circuit television (CCTV), identification cards, biometrics and so forth – that while presented as “objective” assessments of identity actually display, as Maria Los observes, a problematic “new positivism” in which “de-humanized and de-socialized scripts” trigger automatic consequences based on racial criteria, sometimes even without direct human intervention (“Looking” 89). The terrorist is in part produced by systems that impose stable representation, based on identitarian categories of likeness or difference, in attempts to protect against the unknown. Any examination of post-9/11 literature must attend to how fantasies of the other exist within regimes of capture constructed through a multitude of fragmented gazes. These gazes mark the instability of identifications, not only with terrorist victims but also of/with terrorists and the surveillance systems hoping to apprehend them. Without this work, relying on the problem of representation alone provides only a partial vantage point that proves insufficient for the task of critiquing popular, ideological and institutional investment in paranoid surveillance fantasies that aim to produce an impossible, total knowledge.

Publication of several novels concerned with emerging global surveillance networks already suggests that most literary scholarship currently lags behind the material. Most notably, a series of three William Gibson novels – *Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007) and *Zero History* (2010) – map possible trajectories away from September 11 as a founding trauma (an issue which continues to preoccupy the field), and towards more nuanced understandings of networked surveillance in the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 worlds. Georgiana Banita, a welcome exception to the critical omission of surveillance studies, proposes that we recognize an emerging sub-genre of 9/11 literature she calls the “surveillance novel,” citing, along with *Pattern Recognition*, works such as Lorraine Adams’ *Harbor*, Pat Barker’s *Double Vision*, Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist* and Walter Kirn’s *The Unbinding* as salient examples. She argues that “surveillance—whether as visual panopticon or postoptic data mining system—can be used as a thematic and structural heuristic to interpret how post-9/11 literature dramatizes the ethical challenges posed by increased securitization to the public’s privacy rights” (*Plotting Justice* 252). While Banita’s contribution is indispensable because of its attention to the relationship between surveillance and literary form, it could focus more on the often disavowed fantasies of foreign otherness which animate this “increased securitization.” If literature stages these fantasies, providing essential supplements to the reign of new positivism, then post-9/11 studies has an opportunity to contribute to surveillance studies and its critique of the security state.<sup>79</sup>

This chapter examines surveillance aesthetics in which state security intersects with literary fiction. These aesthetics draw on fantasies of indexical verisimilitude, temporalities like repetition, seriality, duration and “real-time,” and affects such as boredom that promise access to the terrorist psychology. They integrate surveillance into their fictional structure and in doing so generate questions regarding the social investment in omniscience as well as affective circuits accumulating hate towards the terrorist. Although our culture imbues video surveillance and its images with authority, as Winfried Pauleit observes, “every reflection on the medium itself and on surveillance apparatuses seems to be ruled out [because] only that which is shown by the camera is allowed to be assessed; the camera itself and the context of its image production become a blind spot” (“Surveillance” 474). Here is where fiction can step in to “reframe” surveillance and the fantasies of omniscient control which animate its political uses.

According to David Rossen and Aaron Santesso, “far from passively reflecting or responding to developments in surveillance history, poets and novelists have often, for their own self-interested reasons, been *generators* of that history” (emphasis in original, *Watchmen in Pieces* 10).

In a post-9/11 context, the initial publication of Martin Amis’ short story “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” in *The New Yorker* – focused on the last (repeated) day before its title terrorist would crash American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center complex – proves of special interest because of how the surveillance trope of the closed-circuit video loop (popularly known as CCTV) informs its narrative structure, enabling it to imagine a missing, all-knowing historical gaze. Although exemplifying a version of racial profile for the Islamist “dependent mind” that Amis develops in his essays after 9/11, Atta also implicitly enters an imagined field of visibility that compensates for the lack of knowledge regarding his movements and motivations – which (retroactively) mark his potential as a threat – with a voyeuristic fantasy of total disclosure in which his mind and body become the entirely readable object of our gaze. Through its allusions to the surveillance gaze, Amis’ text fantasizes privileged access to the real Atta which can paradoxically only emerge through overt fictionalization, rendering the terrorist banal and thus recognizable within paradigms of racial profiling, but also turning readers/spectators into accomplices with an otherwise disavowed surveillance system. As readers slip into and out of identification with these systems and, one might add, with the terrorist other, the text problematizes the issues of seeing, being seen, seeing oneself and seeing oneself being seen within the ongoing War on Terrorism.

### **3.2. Profiling the ‘Unknown Known’**

Despite assurances of security as well as pervasive fears of total panoptic social control, 11 September 2001 proves that surveillance systems are highly fallible. For one, their supposed panoptic omniscience is animated by what Rossen and Santesso call “the assumption of interpretive competence,” which presumes narrative ordering comes before – and not *after* – a catastrophic event (*WP* 12). Although, as they note, we can now see quite clearly that Atta and his accomplices were always being watched by

surveillance of some sort or another, it is easy to overestimate the coordination of these systems and their (often absent or distracted) operators, who, without the narrative conclusion of the 9/11 attacks, have no compelling reason to link surveillance footage in a Wal-Mart to that in the Portland, Maine airport, let alone untangle a complex secret plot to devastate New York City. Although the fantasy of total knowledge persists, “Atta and Al-Omari were nothing but anonymous and alone” (*WP* 11). Indeed, not only does *The 9/11 Commission Report* detail the numerous intelligence failures that lead to the success of what al-Qaeda leadership called the “planes operation,” but there remains a great deal that even the most sophisticated surveillance technology cannot ever see, including the secret desires inside its subjects. Consequently, terrorist subjectivity serves as the object-cause of surveillance desire, the point around which its network of gazes circulate, in hopes of bringing to light any hidden plot that threatens to derail security. This elusive object – what Amis calls the “unknown known” – is the murderous desire of the object that stares back at the surveillance system, the *punctum* marking the limit to its omniscience. In response, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” allows readers to indulge in the compensatory fantasy promising total knowledge of the terrorist other that retroactively fills in the information missing from Atta’s pre-9/11 profile and thus domesticates his latent danger.

Initially, Amis’ views on Islam appear impossible to separate from his fictionalization of the terrorist other, views which align the author with the state seeking to define the terrorist “personality” for the purposes of anticipation and thus detection of potential threat. The story of his first attempted narrative of terrorism repeatedly draws attention, however, to the fact Amis only inadequately imagines his subject. Amis’ earlier essay, “Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind,” interlaces his criticism of militant Islamism’s culture of abstraction, misogyny and death with a recounting of his failure to complete a fictional work focused on this culture. Titled “The Unknown Known,” Amis describes the unfinished story as a novella length satire in which Ayed, a fictional al-Qaeda operative, works to produce the “conceptual breakthroughs” or “shifts in the paradigm” of mass terrorism (53). Amis weaves the story of his artistic failure – which he admits to be (somewhat “reassuringly”) the result of simply having too much difficulty thinking up a potential paradigm shift on the shocking level of 9/11 (51) – throughout the wide ranging essay on the dawning age of the War on Terror, leaving the matter of the

title until the last pages. “Attentive readers may have asked themselves,” Amis speculates, “what it is, this ridiculous category, the *unknown known*. The unknown known is paradise, scriptural inerrancy, God. The unknown known is religious belief” (emphasis in original, 89). This “ridiculous category” names both the limits of Amis’ imagination as well as the fantasies of the emergent Islamist enemy meant to compensate for those limits. Thus, like the surveillance state, he is stuck in an impasse: how can he penetrate the otherwise opaque terrorist mind?

This implicit identification with the security state is evident in the origins of his title. Presenting terrorist subjectivity as an “unknown known,” Amis openly draws his proposed sketch of terrorist violence into conversation with what he calls the “haiku-like” statements of former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (51), who in an August 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 press conference famously categorized the American state’s knowledge of the threat against it in terms of “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” and “unknown unknowns”: “As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”<sup>80</sup> Amis takes up Rumsfeld’s implied final category of the “unknown known” and thus suggests an identity between the prerogatives of the American Defense Secretary and those of the post-9/11 author: to confront how we do not know what the terrorists know, or cannot know in the same anti-secular or death-driven way that Amis alleges they do. Both Amis and security professionals share anxiety over this limit to understanding, portending terrifying possibilities for future disasters like 11 September 2001.

Whereas Amis abandoned novella “The Unknown Known” falters due to the self-professed limits of his imagination, the second, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” unapologetically compensates for our lack of knowledge regarding the movements and motivations of its title character with fiction, a mission it foregrounds in its opening epigraph from *The 9/11 Commission Report*: “No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence provides a convincing explanation of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al-]Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11” (“Last Days” 153). An

evident student of the *Report*, Amis addresses this gap in the historical record through a narrative that fantasizes the final day of Atta's existence prior to when he and his accomplices would crash American Airlines 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, explaining both his trip to Portland, Maine and what character flaws drove him to the point of suicide-mass-murder. It thereby reduces the threat of the unknown known and instead provides a definitive profile of the terrorist enemy.<sup>81</sup>

Amis' range of writing on contemporary terrorism suggests he would prefer that we see Atta as totally alien, although he replaces religion as the source of difference with a broader, quasi-religious fundamentalism. The production of difference emerges from a series of para-texts to "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta." Following 9/11, Amis used a combination of essays and fictional works to promote the West against its emergent terrorist antagonists, but expanded this advocacy to include a general critique of Islam based in the opposition of Western values – choice, democracy, freedom of thought and expression – with his imagination of Islamic ones – abstraction, negation, severity, fundamentalism and, most curiously of all, boredom. His essays on Islamism in *The Second Plane* identify boredom as an unbridgeable gulf between a distinct us and them. "The other face of the coin of Islamic terror is boredom—the nullity of the non-conversation we are having with the dependent mind," Amis contends: "It is a mind with which we share no discourse" (*SP* x). Amis provides an unorthodox and somewhat unexpected definition of the dependent mind as a bored one that feeds into his criticism of "Islamism." In "Terror and Boredom," he argues that the "age of terror" might as well be known also as the "age of boredom" and combines the two in his definition of the "dependent mind": "To be clear: the opposite of religious belief is not atheism or secularism or humanism. It is not an ism: it is independence of mind—that's all. When I refer to the age of boredom, I am not thinking of airport queues and subway searches. I mean global confrontation with the dependent mind" (76). According to Amis, the post-9/11 world necessitates fighting not only the violent excess of terrorism but also confronting fanatical belief, because, for him, the "dependent mind" of the zealot is synonymous with the negation of "humor, joy, games, arts, and women" he claims to comprise contemporary "super-boredom" (76-7). Thus, for Amis, boredom necessitates immediate action because its unwavering severity is foundational for the recourse of

terrorists to spectacular violence. So-called “super-terror” and “super-boredom” in his view are in fact the same problem: Islamism.<sup>82</sup>

He cites several reasons for this perceived irreconcilable division between Islamism and its opponents, focusing in particular on how “Islam is totalist” in that “it makes a total claim on the individual” (77). “Islam,” he notes, “means ‘submission’—the total surrender of independence of mind,” which he claims to result in “the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture” (77). Consequently, it is, he argues, like Hitler and Stalin, “Anti-Semitic, anti-liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and, most crucially, anti-rational” and that it openly promotes “cults of death” (78). Although Amis tries to distinguish between forms of Islam – “Naturally we respect Islam. But we do not respect Islamism, just as we respect Muhammad and do not respect Muhammad Atta” (50) – the frequent slippage between the use of moderate “Islam” and radical “Islamism” in the essay make the gesture appear disingenuous, especially alongside his declaration that any civil war within the Islamic world between these factions has already been won by the extremists, while the moderates remain conspicuously silent (50). The binary opposition Amis constructs is not so much the typical orientalist one between the rational West and the irrational east, but between the forces of Enlightenment secularism and those of fundamentalist religious belief, whether Islamic, Jewish or Christian – elsewhere he equally criticizes fundamentalist Christian conservatives like George W Bush and the inexplicable thriving of religiosity in the political culture of the United States (*SP* 23-5). Nevertheless, thought of within the discourse of Western anti-Islamic sentiment, his fictional constructions of the terrorist other end up reinforcing racial (and other forms of) profiling.

Amis’ discourse on the “dependent mind” fetishizes one element of the War on Terror and thus disavows the ideological beliefs – or “unknown knowns” – which sustain Western worldviews. As Sven Lütticken argues, these polemics do not fail on the level of “manifest content” – many Muslim societies do suffer a “lack of democracy” and are rife with “intolerance and anti-Semitism” as well as the “oppression of women” – but the “problem lies in the latent content of their discourse”: “By presenting all problems in Muslim societies and communities as an inevitable outcome of ‘Islam,’ they deflect attention from the West’s destructive political, military and economic operations—



including support for various charming dictatorships” (*Idols* 15-6).<sup>83</sup> Although Lütticken neglects to include them, Martin Amis’ statements on Islamism soon after the London bombings known as “7/7” exemplify this deflection, but bring forward its latent prejudice.<sup>84</sup> In a 2006 interview with Ginny Dougary, Amis admits to a “definite urge” to say, “The Muslim community will have to suffer until its gets its house in order,” which would include, “Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip searches people who look like they’re from the Middle East or Pakistan. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough on their children” (“The Voice of Experience”). Amis’ comments would draw the ire of Terry Eagleton, now his colleague at Manchester University, who in the new preface to his reissued *Ideology: An Introduction*, admonishes Amis for his hysteria, which he characterizes in a later article as similar to “the ramblings of a British National Party thug” (“Rebuking”). While Eagleton agrees that suicide bombers must be “stopped forcibly in their tracks to protect the innocent,” he also argues that “there is something rather stomach-churning at the sight of those such as Amis and his political allies, champions of a civilisation that for centuries has wreaked untold carnage throughout the world, shrieking for illegal measures when they find themselves for the first time on the sticky end of the same treatment” (“Rebuking”). In a later survey of the disagreement, *Guardian* reporter Ronan Bennett identifies Amis’ attitudes as “symptomatic of a much wider and deeper hostility to Islam and intolerance of otherness,” which can fuel disavowal of the creeping “new racism” infiltrating the West. “It is one thing - and the right thing - to challenge at every turn anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, incitement to violence and hatred where it exists among Muslims,” Bennett claims, “just as we should where it exists in the police, the church, the political parties, newspapers or anywhere else” (“Shame on Us”).

Amis’ initial response to Eagleton and Bennett accuses them of using his statement out of context in order to bolster ideological positions, which he distinguishes from his own independent thought: “Do you want the voice of the individual, or the aggressive purity of the ideologue?” (“No”). Regarding Bennett’s more damning charges, Amis writes “Well, this is what’s new about the new racism: it isn’t racist... It is about ideology” (“No”). The distinction Amis draws with “ideology” – through which he conflates “Islamofacism” and leftist dissent – infuses the essays of *The Second Plane*. Reactions

to this collection in the literary press indicate few reviewers found this argument compelling. Michiko Kakutani, literary critic for *The New York Times*, calls the volume “chuckleheaded,” full of “gross generalizations” through which reason becomes “skewed and specious,” making for a “weak, risible and often objectionable” analysis. In particular, she admonishes his straw-man argument against “Western liberals [who] acted as if ‘suicide-mass-murder’ committed by Islamic terrorists was ‘reasonable, indeed logical and even admirable’” (“Crash Course”). These, she claims, are little more than “ridiculous paper tigers to knock down easily” (“Crash Course”). Writing for *The Guardian*, Christopher Taylor concurs, arguing “Amis is taking aim at conspiracy theorists and people who think that the Arab world's grievances not only help create support for terrorism but make it a good thing: a fairly marginal view” (“Beware”). Kakutani and Taylor reveal the flaw in Amis’ simple binaries, which not only identify many of the above features of Muslim extremism as essentialized cultural (rather than political or economic) problems, they also frame any potential shift of critical focus back towards the West as apologetics for terrorism, thus joining the chorus who condemns outspoken voices such as Susan Sontag, Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky and others who suggested the West might have created the conditions for the attacks, which differs, as Judith Butler notes, from saying that the West caused them (*Precarious Life* 11).

Amis thinks of the War on Terror in terms of binaries that establish the “independent mind” (his own) as the necessary opposite of Islamist dogmatism, and thus ignores another reading of the “unknown known.” Regarding Rumsfeld’s crucial missing term, Slavoj Žižek writes that “the ‘unknown knowns’, the things we do not know that we know” are analogous to the “Freudian unconscious” in so far as this phrase indicates “the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves” (9-10). The shift from Amis to Žižek is one between two forms of reading the ideological situation of the War on Terror. For Amis, this conflict originates in a clear cut dualism between the Western Enlightenment paradigm and the horrifyingly unknown psychopathological hatred he sees as inherent in Islam, whereas, for Žižek, the current conflict challenges the West’s claims to self-knowledge and thus its moral certainty and superiority, demanding examination of the disavowed fantasies that structure its own responses to global terrorism.

Amis' story tells us more about this second "unknown known" than it tells us about the first, insofar as it illuminates our fantasies of terrorist psychology rather than revealing that psychology to us. Through Atta, Amis composes a startling profile of an Islamist zealot that heavily accentuates his otherness. It portrays Atta as someone who ignorantly levels out differences into an undifferentiated flatness which not only renounces joy but finds it offensive. "This feeling had been his familiar since the age of twelve or thirteen," he recalls: "Cairo, Hamburg, even the winter dawn over Kandahar: they had all looked the same to him. Unreal mockery" ("Last Days" 161). The narrative further develops this hatred through his hostile orientation towards both fun and sexual desire. It describes Atta as hating "laughter": "Muhammad Atta never laughed... because he found nothing funny" (155). Moreover, he despises music because "even the most emollient melody had entered his mind as pain" (159). Most of all, Atta hates women, with a "blend of extreme hostility and extreme weariness" that leads him to fantasize about murdering them (154). Thus the narrative seems to render the terrorist as the ideal example of an absolute other whose passionless detachment from the world leads to antipathy towards its very existence.

Amis' portrait of Atta raises the problem of how to integrate and explain real life murderers in fiction. "Their novelist-host," as Pankaj Mishra observes, "has to overcome much fear and revulsion in order to take seriously murderous passions aimed at his own society" which, unfortunately, cut off from sympathy, often "reduces individuals as well as movements to stereotypical motivations" ("End of Innocence"). These motivations frequently originate in the all too familiar tropes of discontent used by Western authors, including Amis (Atta is arguably part of a continuum of despicable male characters in Amis' fiction).<sup>85</sup> Mishra's analysis of post-9/11 literature includes Amis in a series of writers who engage in a "genitals-centric analysis (constipation and sexual frustration) of radical Islam" ("Paranoia"). Other texts have resorted to this trope, including John Updike's "Varieties of Religious Experience," which also focuses on the last day of Muhammad Atta, apparently spent at a strip club, and his *Terrorist*, which depicts potential jihadi Ahmed's struggles between his strict anti-materialism and his overflowing sexual desires for an African American classmate, Joryleen. Moreover, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* spotlights the sexual frustration of the terrorist Hammad (a fictional accomplice of Atta), who has sexual fantasies about girls in a nearby apartment, but is

reduced to “step[ping] over a brother prone in prayer as he made his way to the toilet to jerk off” (80). Critics have found this sexual dimension of Amis’ narrative profoundly misguided. “The genital theory of history may be novelistically useful, but it is analytically silly,” Leon Wieseltier argues in *The New York Times*: “the threat of suicide bombing, and from the political cultures that prize it, is founded on deformations more wordly and more substantial than a harem fantasy” (“The Catastrophist”).<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Amis’ short story exemplifies the trend towards depicting terrorists as the product of deviant or misdirected sexuality, which makes them legible within Western paradigms of individual psychopathology rather than expanding the purview of 9/11 fiction to include an analysis of a fundamentally global problem, a feat accomplished to greater effect, for instance, in Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*.<sup>87</sup>

Although similar, unlike Updike and DeLillo, Amis makes no pretense to depicting the convergence of the Islamist worldview with more commonly Western ones, instead opting to isolate, identify and track his protagonist, reducing him to clichéd tropes of the terrorist mind. This choice generates a fantasy that we can fully understand his otherness from surfaces alone. His focus on Atta’s individual psychopathology collapses the boundary separating the inside of the terrorist’s psyche – the “unknown known” – from his external appearance. The story constructs Atta hatred through repeated returns to the question of his face, which is supposed to provide evidence of this hatred so obvious that it cannot possibly escape detection. “The detestation, the detestation of everything, was being sculpted on it, from within,” the narrator claims (153). He muses that Atta’s face gives away the hatred Atta tries so hard to keep in check until he can execute the operation. Because of this hatred, the authority’s profiling “wouldn’t need to be racial; it would be facial, merely” (153). When Atta is asked if he would be willing to die for the cause of jihad, the Sheikh claims that the answer is not necessary because it is written in Atta’s face (154). His appearance eschews personal features and assumes the fictional ugliness of Islamist detestation. In constructing this hatred the story projects a fantasy of instant surveillance recognition, in which one presumes that “‘the truth’ can be gleaned directly from the body, a feat otherwise requiring various tests, new biometric technologies and digitization,” and thus bypassing the need for “subjectivity” and “moral choice” in making security decisions (Los 87). Of course, this fantasy contrasts with the reality of a bungling American security apparatus, unable to detect what now looks so

obvious in retrospect, particularly after the revelations in *The 9/11 Commission Report* of how many opportunities were missed for preventing the attacks. Thus, like *The Suffering Channel*, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” struggles with dramatic irony, but while the former identifies the latency of historical trauma in popular entertainment, the later inserts the notion of a transparent – “facial, merely” – surveillance profile of the famous terrorist into the past after *he has already established the pattern that the story uses to identify him*. Its imagination of Atta’s otherwise opaque thoughts and attitudes provides the subjectivity to match that profile, or the pathologized “unknown known” which reduces terrorists to a knowable psychological character type readable on the surfaces of their bodies.

Atta’s portrait supplements surveillance systems unable to determine the psychological contours of the dreaded “unknown known” that plagues (and provides occasion for) extended security measures. The text’s construction of the Islamic terrorist other through the embittered philosophy of a single individual serves as a strategy of containment designed to fix and thus master the anxiety provoking object of terror, Muhammad Atta.<sup>88</sup> According to Eric Stryker, terrorist attacks set off a representational battle between the unchecked proliferation of images and the impulse to manage the threat they pose through a concerted individualization of specific terrorists, like Osama bin Laden, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad and others on America’s “most wanted list.” Whereas, on the one hand, the anonymity of terrorists enables them to become “iconic signifiers of a nameable collective identity” that permit “abstraction of [the] individual self into a universal” where the “body as sign” can infinitely magnify their presence in the media (“Assailant Image” 33), on the other, the focus on individual terrorists “indicate[s] desires to individualize political opponents” and thus “strip[s] them of the ability to signify anything but individual identity” (33).<sup>89</sup> Naming, labeling and controlling promises the power to contain the terrorist threat, which relies on destabilized representation and the “complete dissolution of a figure/individual into spectacle of destruction” in order to generate a “terrifying potential” (34). Thus, Amis’ choice of approach to Atta, which focuses readers on the fantasy of a single terrorist, stuck in the day before he generates the terrifying images of 9/11, functions as a form of capture, a strategy of containment seeking to arrest the destabilizing proliferation and circulation of terror and in doing so invert a passive position of victimhood at the hands of terrorism into an active position of

judgment and surveillance on the part of readers. Atta's psychologization, however, is ultimately doomed insofar as the story suggests the falsity of these limits. It instead places the terrorist in an affective economy that exceeds his individual psyche. "It is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies," Ahmed writes ("Affective Economies" 128). "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" concentrates on how surveillance fantasies help "generate the surfaces" of racialized "collective bodies" in the War on Terror.

### **3.3. Muhammad Atta Between Two Deaths**

On 11 September 2001, Muhammad Atta died along with his victims and accomplices but he simultaneously became part of our language, synonymous with that day, and in a sense he thus continues to live on as his name circulates in discourses of terror, terrorism and national security. Perhaps for this reason, the fictional Atta fixates on his future significance in the last moments of his life: "He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war cycles that would flow from this day" (163). His legacy aside, Atta does all of the cycling as a prisoner of the text, enduring an existence with neither beginning nor end, which is figured through reference to looping image-reproduction technologies. On the visual front piece of its initial publication in *The New Yorker*, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" (24 April 2006) features a series of four gray, grainy surveillance images from the Portland, Maine jetport, purported to be the last record of the terrorist before he and his accomplices would crash American Airlines 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The reference to the repetition of the video loop resonates across Amis' essays and fiction in response to the terrorist attacks. In the title essay, Amis argues that the "second plane" – in a literal sense, United 175, which would crash into the WTC's South Tower at 9:03 that morning – was the "defining moment" because the repetition of a second plane for a second tower fundamentally transformed the symbolic impact of the unfolding events: "Until then, America thought she was witnessing nothing more serious than the worst aviation disaster in history; now she had a sense of the fantastic vehemence ranged against her" (*SP* 3). Perhaps inspired by the videotaped catastrophe, the short story draws attention to similar moments of suspension between one state and another, the gap between an occurrence and its

symbolic repetition, yet one in which the terrorist suffers rather than the spectators. The text figures this suffering through Atta's final excruciatingly boring day of existence before perpetrating the attacks which would symbolically and institutionally transform both geopolitics and everyday life.

Drawing on the reiterative structure of the closed loop, the text constructs a situation in which the eponymous protagonist is imprisoned within a boring purgatory in which all time is "dead time" ("Last Days" 155, 157). While its first section begins by describing terrorist hijacker Muhammad Atta's mundane and non-eventful final day leading up the World Trade Center attack and ends with the moment his plane hits the WTC North Tower (killing many of the fictional characters at Wallace's *Style* magazine), the brief second section opens by repeating the first line of the story – "On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 A.M., in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began" (153, 163) – suggesting a never-ending cycling of the narrative from start to finish and back again. For this reason, as Kristiaan Versluys notes, the title does not refer to the "last *day*" of Muhammad Atta, but the "last *days*" of Muhammad Atta (*Out of the Blue* 161). The plural "days" suspends Atta within what Jacques Lacan calls the "life between two deaths," in so far as the story locates Atta in the gap that separates his biological demise from the symbolic recognition of his passing.<sup>90</sup> Žižek explains that "Lacan conceives this difference between the two deaths as the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization, the 'settling of accounts,' the accomplishment of symbolic destiny" (SO 135). Žižek, like Lacan, uses the example of Antigone to illustrate how symbolic death (her exclusion from the community for insisting on the burial of her brother) can precede actual death, but Muhammad Atta's case in the story is closer to what Žižek identifies as the plight of Hamlet's father: "actual death unaccompanied by symbolic death, without a settling of accounts" explains why he "returns as a frightful apparition until his debt has been repaid" (135). Atta's "debt" is to the living who are horrified by the terrorist's murderous acts, for while he died instantly on the moment of impact, many feel he could never suffer enough for the death and destruction he caused, could never "settle accounts" with his thousands of victims and their bereaved loved ones. Consequently, the story resurrects him, prolonging his final day, only to cut and begin again when it reaches the moment of his biological death, the suicidal dive of American 11 into the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001.

Its denial of this finality punishes Atta both for the destruction caused on that day and also the “dead-time” in which his act ultimately resulted. In this manner, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” serves as a revenge fantasy inverting the condition of “super-boredom” Amis argues the “dependent mind” promotes and retooling it as a purgatory from which Atta can never escape. A somewhat familiar trope, the device of the temporal loop is also used in Terry Gilliam’s *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and the films of the *Terminator* franchise, amongst others.<sup>91</sup> The concentration of this science fiction sub-genre on temporally dislocated protagonists usually entails them enduring the same painful events again and again until lingering deadlocks have been resolved or crises have been averted. Indeed, after 9/11, several films – such as *Source Code*, in which a soldier (Jake Gyllenhaal) awakens to discover he occupies the body of an agent trying to stop a bomb from detonating on a Chicago train – and television shows – such as the later seasons of FOX series *Fringe*, in which a paranormal investigative force endeavours to avoid an undesirable totalitarian future – involve resetting the historical clock before a terrible event can even take place. In these sorts of narratives, we encounter what Phillip Wegner calls a “time loop paradox” in which the protagonist or a group of protagonists struggle against dramatic irony, and in doing so “draws cause and effect into a closed loop, where not only future events are caused by past ones, as in conventional linear narrative, but where these same future occurrences in turn cause things to happen in the past” (*LBTD* 70). The generic construction of the “time loop paradox” also speaks to the temporalities of surveillance in which, as Rossen and Santesso argue, “a coherent, sequential narrative [can] only be constructed in retrospect” (*WP* 12). Referring to Atta’s final surveillance photos, they point out that our knowledge of the attacks is what ensures their significance, meaning the future, in a sense, generates the past: “The power of the image comes from an event that has already taken place but which within the still’s own time frame is yet to happen; indeed, the motive for isolating this particular moment in the video loop [at the Portland, Maine airport] depends on the narrative having already been brought to completion” (257).<sup>92</sup>

What differs in the text from the more traditional “time loop paradoxes” listed above is its anti-utopian refusal to undo the traumatic event. Whereas these examples end in success, resetting the undesirable future-past and breaking the loop, Atta is instead caught within a never-ending traumatic repetition without hope of symbolic



redemption. His time loop paradox involves his act of mass terrorism on 9/11 retroactively producing the purgatory of dead-time which would lead to that event's occurrence, but does not fantasize a utopian intervention into history. In fact, Amis' version of Atta repeatedly moves forward to the attacks on the WTC towers, unable to achieve symbolic closure, as if his violent biological death resets the cycle, but does not allow him escape into oblivion. "Muhammad Atta did not believe in the virgins, did not believe in the Garden," the narrative reports: "He didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion. And, strange to say, he would find neither" (155).

The position Atta occupies between life and death – his continual state of temporal suspension – plagues him with an unending yet oddly familiar suffering. While conducting his dull morning rituals, for instance, "The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day" (153). Later on, when answering what he calls the three "dreaded questions" in the airport security line, Atta, (perhaps a little overwrought) laments,

Oh, the misery of recurrence, like the hotel elevator doing its ancient curtsy on every floor, like the alien hair on the soap changing its shape through a succession of alphabets, like the (necessarily) monotonous gonging inside his head. It had occurred to him before that this condition, if you could call it that, was merely the condition of boredom, unbounded boredom, where all time was dead time. As if his whole life consisted of answering those same three questions, saying "Yes" and "Yes" and "No." (160)

Atta exists in a life between two deaths, which combines interminable duration with constant repetition, the serial reproduction of the same. And "sameness" in Atta's mind means enduring the ever increasing pressure of his hatred. For him, "every day was the worst day because every day was the most recent day, and the most developed, the most advanced (with all those other days behind it) toward the pan-anathema" (162). In other words, the text implies that Atta's purgatory originates in the profile of the dependent mind whose hatred for the world renders it devoid of life. Until the curse is broken, like Amis writes of influential Egyptian scholar of jihad, Sayyid Qutb, Atta is "doomed to a leaden witted circularity [in which] the emptiness, the mere iteration, at the heart of his philosophy is steadily colonized by a vast entanglement of bitterness" (*SP* 60-1).

### 3.4. Surveillance Aesthetics

Whereas the text's fantasized insight into Atta's psychology suggest his numerous afflictions originate in his own pathological hatred of the West, the references to boredom, recurrence and looping also reveal how the aesthetics of surveillance structure the narrative, making Atta's otherness readable from the fantasized position of an omniscient camera operator. To understand the narrative's evocation of these aesthetics necessitates turning to the history of surveillance in cinema. In "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of 'Real Time,'" Thomas Y. Levin argues that cinema over the past fifty years has enacted a "move away from a *thematic* to a *structural* engagement of surveillance" (583). Levin contends that whereas modernist cinema maintained a separation between the "scopophilic frame narration" and a "diegetic surveillance gaze," making surveillance a representation, narrative subject or thematic concern present in the content of the film (think of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*), postmodern cinema increasingly blurs this distinction, instead engaging surveillance as a structuring principle of cinematic form (581). Levin notes that this "slippage" of the surveillance gaze is already evident in Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation*, but reaches a more dominant position in late 1990s cinema – such as *8mm*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Menace II Society*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Snake Eyes* – where the temporal structures and imagined indexical function of surveillance aesthetics gradually displace the narrative conventions of classical cinema and its presumed artificiality. "Last Days" formally mimics the aesthetics of surveillance in its attempt to penetrate the mysteries of Atta's thoughts, desires and movements. It ostensibly presents itself as the *real* record missing between the frames of our existing knowledge, the surveillance footage that never actually existed but which nonetheless promises to provide the absent objective truth of terrorist psychology, or the "unknown known."

Post-9/11 cinema only intensifies the impulse to fold the referential back into the fictional through the surveillance aesthetics that Levin observes at work in late 1990s films. Following the terrorist attacks, a social and political call for "realism" registered in film, which in turn created an even more pronounced move away from classic cinematic storytelling and towards aesthetics more focused on "reality." For instance, director Paul Greengrass' use of handheld cameras lend his post-9/11 films in the Jason Bourne

franchise (starring Matt Damon as an amnesiac secret agent) a grainy and shaky (and thus somewhat disorienting) quality that are meant to signify their apparent authenticity; moreover, through devices such as manic jump-cut editing they attempt to represent narrative events (albeit spectacular ones) as if they are captured in “real time” and without artistic premeditation. This technique reaches its apotheosis in Greengrass’ film *United 93*, which draws on records of phone conversations, participant testimonials and other documentary evidence in order to reconstruct the obscure events that lead to the title plane’s passengers rebelling against the hijackers on 9/11, possibly averting another spectacular catastrophe.<sup>93</sup> Greengrass structures the entire narrative through a surveillance aesthetic, as if cameras had simply been present on the day in question to “capture” the events as they unfolded both in the air and on the ground; he even uses some of the day’s actual participants to play themselves and thereby add an additional layer of verisimilitude.<sup>94</sup> These cinematic examples shed some light on the literary form of “Last Days,” which in its visual front-piece and looping narration resonates with this post-9/11 extension of Levin’s original argument about the late 1990s: surveillance, as a structure of narration, betrays a desire to probe the otherwise unknown and thus access the real, both defined against the triviality of fiction and the postmodern culture of simulation. In the case of Atta, it betrays a “passion for the real” built on the presumption of offering access to the “thing itself,” the hidden truth of the terrorist’s daily life, thought processes and desires.

This surveillance aesthetics powerfully disavows its fictional point of reference. It denies that through these aesthetics, audiences and readers do not encounter some unmediated realism, but instead, in Žižek’s terms, another “theatrical semblance”: the truth of Atta’s actual existence is so inaccessible that Amis’ attempt to fill in the gaps can only occur through overt fictionalization. It depends on a narrative understanding of events only available in a hindsight that puts the disparate moments of surveillance back into a readable order, structured through the retroactivity of the signifier “9/11,” which marks the anxiety-producing limits of surveillance systems. As Rossen and Santesso contend, Atta’s unhindered walk through airport security is “the single most notorious surveillance-generated image of the last several decades—notorious mainly as an emblem of surveillance that has *failed catastrophically*” (emphasis in original, *WP* 255). Although proposing itself as a missing documentary record of Atta, “Last Days” actually

produces a fantasy hoping to compensate readers for the persistent opacity of the terrorist figure and the pre-9/11 situation, putting them back in the pivotal historical moment so their knowledge can finally be total, and, in a wish-fulfilment, it can be so *before the event even occurs*.

The documentary claims of the narrative and the retroactive act of recovery it performs manifests in the temporal slippage between what Levin calls “recorded observation” and “real time” variants in surveillance aesthetics. According to Levin, “recorded observation” entails treating cinematic surveillance footage as a form of memory instantiated through its facility for repetition (588). From this perspective, we see Atta’s last continuously reiterated day and it slowly becomes a part of collective memory through its very cycling. Conversely, “real time” involves temporal immediacy, generated through the apparent “live-ness” of surveillance’s scopophilic invasions (591); here, we are supposedly watching Atta *then* but also *right now*, in the moment of our reading the impossible gaze of hindsight also places us back in an exact historical moment so surveillance can unequivocally *succeed* where previously it had tragically *failed*.

The first clue to Atta’s experience of these two temporalities occurs in the shower where he “spent an unbelievably long time trying to remove a hair from a bar of soap” (153). “The alien strand,” the description continues, “kept changing shape—question mark, infinity symbol—but stayed in place; and the bar of soap, no bigger than a matchbook when he began, barely existed when he finished” (153). The changing shape of the strand of hair indicates his temporal predicament: the “question mark” suggests the missing detail that the story will fill in using “real-time” observation of Atta, unedited for unpleasant realities like his constipation and flat, boring character, while the “infinity symbol” frames the narrative time as of an endless duration, repeating over and over again like the continuous skipping playback of a scratched record on a turntable. When combined, these temporalities constitute the two sides of a compensatory fantasy which promises to document the otherwise undocumented life of Muhammad Atta as it happened in “real-time,” while also punishing him, through eternal repetition of this “recorded observation,” for the terrorist acts he performed on September 11. Even as time appears to pass and the bar of soap disintegrates, like Atta’s brief final day,

marking its passage, the terrorist, now visible down to the smallest detail, occupies a perpetual loop of everyday tedium he can neither break nor evade.

Both “enacted narration” and “real time” – the two sides of Atta’s “dead time” – necessitate the suspension of traditional realist conventions such as linear storytelling or psychological character depth. Instead, “surveillance aesthetics” evokes the non-narrative, non-event and non-character viewpoint of video technology, often spotlighted in late twentieth century artistic practice, but also in terrorist visual provocation. The surveillance aesthetics of “Last Days” recalls experiments of video art such as Andy Warhol’s 1960s film *Empire* – which positions a single stationary camera across from the iconic Empire State Building, resulting in over eight continuous hours of colorless, slow, inert cinema – or its unofficial post-9/11 sequel, William Basinski’s *The Disintegration Loops* – a multi-part musical composition accompanied by a distant continuous shot of WTC site on 11 September 2001 that captures the gradual breakdown of its orchestral loops, like the fallen structures, into a heap of fragments.<sup>95</sup> Curiously, these surveillance aesthetics prove equally as prevalent in Islamist visual culture. Militant Jihadists (eschewing their reputations as anti-modern) exploit the same anti-spectacular qualities of video as Warhol and Basinski, albeit to different ends.<sup>96</sup> According to Joshua Simon, terrorism usurps this image reproduction technology of the West, for instance, through the genre of the suicide bomber video – both a “suicide note” and a “murder confession” (“Thoughts” 43). These “notes,” he argues, rely on an aesthetic which combines desaturated color and long, formulaic speeches with the “limitless duration and continuity of video” (47). Similar to Atta’s spectral limbo, these videos replace the “singularity” of the terrorist attack with the perpetually infinite reiterations of a “state between life and death” (47). Consequently, Simon’s aesthetic analysis resonates with *The New Yorker* front-piece to “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta.” Indeed, he cites the very same set of surveillance images, noting how this airport video camera captures Atta’s non-existent “suicide tape” (46). Whereas, for al-Qaida, the success of the September 11 attacks relied on producing the most spectacular and horrifying images of death and destruction possible, shocking audiences, the aesthetics of video in other forms of image reproduction and circulation they deploy instead suggest the parallel integration of terrorist visual culture with anti-spectacular temporalities of repetition, seriality, duration and thus boredom already evident in surveillance aesthetics.

These surveillance aesthetics involve indefinitely prolonging the attention readers pay to Atta, thereby enmeshing them (like Warhol and Basinski do) in the ambivalent distinctions between the boring and the interesting. Sianne Ngai argues in *Our Aesthetic Categories* that the “wavering between the boring and the interesting” is internal to the same aesthetic and affective state, generating “a feeling so indeterminate that it can even be hard to say whether it counts as satisfaction or dissatisfaction, or feels good or bad... [it] becomes a feeling of not knowing exactly what we are feeling” (135). Within the “ambivalence, coolness or neutrality” – which are “affects not associated with irony” – this type of art suspends the spectator or reader in a “structural indeterminacy” (135) which “extend[s] the period of the act of aesthetic evaluation” (170). In Atta’s case, however, this protracted duration (which resembles Benjamin’s “optical unconscious”) permits not aesthetic evaluation but implausibly detailed critical scrutiny of the unknown terrorist. The story accomplishes the “wavering between boring and interesting” as it accumulates, catalogues and assigns meaning to a series of mundane everyday moments that are otherwise peripheral to understanding 9/11. For instance, a long passage describes Atta’s daily bathroom rituals, or the “chore of ablution, the ordeal of excretion, the torment of depilation” which includes a hair on a bar of soap, cheap hotel towels, his hangnail, his chronic constipation, shaving and many other boring, presumably irrelevant details (153). Few would find these moments particularly significant in the portrait of a mass murderer, but their quotidian nature speaks to how the aesthetics of surveillance shape this retroactive document. Not only does the accumulation of everyday details imagine that nothing passes notice, it slows down narrative time as it lingers over the unthought and the unseen in Atta’s story, assigning those details a previously underappreciated significance; it thus asserts compelling reasons for our *interest*. When readers learn that Atta’s long overdue relief from constipation coincides with his suicidal/murderous dive into the World Trade Center (161; 163), for example, the story suggests a certain latency written into Atta’s body that becomes visible only with the increased scrutiny it provides. Surveillance operators must find even the most boring fact somehow interesting, since it could eventually prove an essential clue for untangling an impending plot; the non-event of Atta’s life sets the stage for the terrorist event of 9/11 yet to come.

### 3.5. Affective Circuits

Although surveillance draws on similar formal conventions and temporalities as avant-garde art and suicide videos, they deploy them to the different ends of identifying, tracking and containing the potential threat posed by terrorists. Rather than allowing their message to proliferate, “Last Days” shows how surveillance uses video as a form of containment which captures the terrorist within its frames and recirculates his image within a closed affective economy of hate. Of course, unlike the terrorists making the suicide notes, this narrative’s loop is not set by Atta himself, who left no such record. Instead, the surveillance tape serves as a model for a narrative structure imposed to punish him, rather than promote terrorist causes, as Simon explains, or ethical engagement, as Georgiana Banita has suggested in her work on the post-9/11 “surveillance novel.”

Citing William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, Banita contends that “the ethical purchase of the post-9/11 surveillance novel resides in its formal and conceptual emplotment of the transnational connectivity facilitated by surveillance and counter surveillance circuits” (*PJ* 254). Although convincingly sustained in her analysis of her chosen novels, Banita’s claim that these plots necessarily promote ethics falters when applied against “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” where, rather than ethical questioning, surveillance aesthetics serve as a sadistic means for revenge against the title protagonist. Moreover, its politics appear out of tune with Banita’s emphasis on resistance. “Oscillating between larger narratives of social control and a focus on the individuals under the vigilant eye of surveillant devices,” she continues, “they reveal how individuals react subversively to surveillance in ways that can no longer be fully orchestrated by official policing stratagems” (257). Problematically, Atta neither reacts “subversively” to the disciplinary containment of the text nor even do the conditions of his incarceration under the imagined “vigilant eye of surveillance devices” emerge as content proper. Instead, the text encourages readers to indulge in fantasies of his total submission within a field of visual control, one with which they prove complicit in their act of reading. Rather than stage subversion of surveillance, in other words, the story encourages our identification with the watchful eye of the surveillance cameras.

That is to say, in order to (re)stage Muhammad Atta's subjectivity for its readers, the text must also stage the gaze of the security systems that watch the terrorist. Banita persuasively claims *Pattern Recognition* embraces an "open circuit transnational ethics" through its formal reflection on contemporary networks of surveillance, but "Last Days" identifies with what she opposes to this reflection: "closed circuit television" (*PJ* 287-8). Omniscience has long been a device of the novel form, but contemporary technologies of surveillance like CCTV fantasize an ever more detached neutrality of the fact-gathering gaze. "What is made visible are the misdeeds of the subjects of discipline," Lewis MacLeod argues: "what disappears are the bodies of the regulators of discipline" ("Matters of Care" 578). Although these reader-bodies may experience this surveillance gaze as if they are simply neutral observers, in so far as they watch Atta, they occupy a position of imagined omniscience over him – not even his constipation, nausea or headaches escape detection (!) – that is conveniently also the operative fantasy of an all-seeing surveillance system. This omniscience involves what Levin calls a "spectacle of real-time CCTV tracking" in which "a certain regime of narrative cinema [is] fundamentally complicit with certain aspects of the visual economy of surveillance" (589). If we swap out "cinema" in favor of "literature," then Levin's reading makes some sense of our narrative perspective on Atta, which enacts the impossible omniscient gaze of a surveillance camera, god-like in its location relative to his prolonged exposure to scrutiny.

The analogy of a surveillance gaze to an omniscient divinity emerges as the text explains the all-seeing position through caricatures of Islamic religious rhetoric, suggesting that Atta's compounded suffering within the never-ending loop is a version of Islamic purgatory in which we occupy the place of a punishing Allah. In particular, the text builds the connection between this lifeless tedium and divine punishment in Atta's final meeting with the imam, Amis' fictional explanation for why the terrorist went to Portland, Maine before the attacks, and thus the ostensible occasion for composing the story. During this encounter, Atta, although not religious, confronts the imam with a scripture from the Qur'an that troubles him. He recalls it as follows: "Whoever kills himself with a blade will be tormented with that blade in the fires of Hell... He who throws himself off a mountain and kills himself will throw himself downward into the fires of Hell forever and ever... Whoever kills himself in any way in this world will be tormented in



that way in Hell” (158). Despite the imam’s dismissal, this passage of the Qur’an resonates with Atta’s predicament so strongly that it becomes the pivotal moment of the narrative: in this exchange, the text aligns its reiterative temporality with the imprisonment of Atta within a Hell of his own making. As the scripture makes clear, those who commit suicide are condemned to repeat the conditions of their death over and over again into eternity.<sup>97</sup> Since Atta’s suicidal dive into the World Trade Center results, according to Amis, in an exponential increase in world-wide boredom, the story records Atta’s divine punishment as he relives his painful last day of existence in an endless Islamic version of purgatory, even if, by reading his short story, readers take up the role of punishing deity who retrospectively imposes the condition of dead time on him, reversing their vulnerability to terrorist violence and submission to boring security routines into position of judgment, punishment and god-like, omniscient surveillance.

The shared experience of Atta’s plight through this surveillance suggests his location outside of himself in the circulating images of the surveillance systems tracking him. As Atta circulates beneath the all-seeing surveillance gaze of the story, aligned with our own, he also potentially accumulates negative affects that stick to his image. Sara Ahmed observes that emotions like hatred towards the foreign other act within an affective economy: “[H]ate does not reside in a given subject or object. Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement” (“Affective Economies” 119). One question of “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” is how fiction produces the boundaries between “us” and “them.” Indeed, national repudiation of terrorism proves essential for the self-reproduction of the state because of how the transference of mutual disgust from the images of terrorist violence – like those in *The Suffering Channel* – on to images of the terrorists themselves – as in “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” – facilitates group boundary formation. Ahmed argues, “the word ‘disgust’ is articulated by the subject, as a way of describing the event, which works to create the event as a border object, as a marker of what we are not and what we could be. The word ‘disgust’ is then transferred from the event to the bodies of those others who are held responsible for the event” (*CPE* 97). Through his narrative resurrection, Atta enters into an economy of hate that depends on the alignment of the surveillance gaze with the gaze of readers, which not only entails

his resurrection but a chance to see his specter punished over and over again for his disgusting acts.

This alignment transfers the hate Atta accumulates from the lower status realm of what Hito Steryl calls the “poor image” to the higher status realm of *The New Yorker*. Steryl defines the “poor image” as the “copy in motion” which through its lack of picture quality and resolution circulates at an accelerated pace through digital technologies (“Poor Image” 1). “Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly,” Steryl writes: “They lose matter and gain speed” (7). The surveillance pictures of Atta from the Portland, Maine airport – which *The New Yorker* quotes in its front-piece to Amis’ story – qualify as poor images: they easily circulate through online searches that enable popular access to this last known visual record of the terrorist. These grainy, out-of-focus images are both poor in visual information and poor in factual information. They tell us little to nothing about Muhammad Atta. In contrast, Amis offers us a more high-resolution portrait of Atta that decelerates his circulation primarily for the perusal of the presumably literary-minded, higher status readers of *The New Yorker*. “Focus is identified as a class position, a position of ease and privilege, while being out of focus lowers one’s value as an image,” according to Steryl (1). Although distinct from the “poor image,” Amis’ higher resolution portrait of Atta does not aim to elevate this figure – a mass murderer – to the status afforded by the literary pretensions of his publication venue. Rather, his sharpened focus on Atta, at least in its initial print publication, accentuates the elevated position of both author and reader over the terrorist. Whereas the poor image operates “under the rule of a global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety” (Steryl 8), Amis removes this accumulation of affects against Atta from the masses and instead places it within a prestigious publication, which further legitimates an already widespread hatred of the terrorist. Atta circulates as part of a new symbolic economy over which the state sanctioned surveillance gaze dominates.

### 3.6. The Perverse Loop

The shared libidinal bonus generated by Atta's implied suffering within this closed temporal loop suggests an uncomfortable alignment of our gaze with the perverse gaze of sovereign power. Structuring Atta's final day as an infinite repetition recalls what Žižek calls the "closed loop of perversion," which he claims to define post-political subjects who, rather than subordinate their enjoyment to the paternal law, are actively encouraged to enjoy their perversions and "subvert" the Law, so long as they do not (hysterically) question power (*Ticklish Subject* 248). "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" places its readers at the center of precisely this sort of perverse economy in which voyeuristic fascination with the mysterious terrorist and the enjoyment of his prolonged suffering are enabled by their gaze. Yet, libidinal investment in the story's figurative loop disavows the other potential positions a subject can assume in relation to the scopic drive and thus misses the complexity of reader identification. Moreover, it elides the fact that not even surveillance operators really know for what they are looking, meaning their gaze could easily be trained on anyone, including us.

Surveillance fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence actually manifest as an assemblage of three positions Sigmund Freud identifies as constitutive of the drive's perverse loop: active (to look), reflexive (to look at oneself) and passive (to be looked at). In "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," Freud argues that the scopic drive, as these three positions suggest, frequently involves "reversal into its opposite," with the subject becoming an object rather than agent of looking, inverting voyeurism into exhibitionism (126-32). "Last Days," drawing on the aesthetics of surveillance, manifests these vicissitudes in their tracking of the terrorist other. First, we look at Atta through an impossible voyeuristic fantasy (active); then, Atta's boredom forces us to look at our identity differently (reflexive); finally, we realize our position as the object of the Other's gaze (passive), which both guarantees our being but also, potentially, serves as an occasion for paranoia. The looping libidinal economy of surveillance, which circulates around the terrorist subjectivity as its object-cause of desire, obscures the multiple positions readers occupy in relation to the gaze of the security state. Thus, unsettling the presumption of a pure or neutral gaze necessitates hystericizing subjects caught in the perverse loop of Atta's punishment.

No gaze is ever neutral. The overlap between the readers' gaze and the fantasized surveillance systems tracking Muhammad Atta in the story suggest identification with a "spectatorial position that is in large part identical to that of the surveillance operator" (Levin 590). The subjectivity of such a spectator is fundamentally perverse, but in what sense? Psychoanalytic theory suggests the answer resides in the confluence of looking, fantasies of being looked at, and the exercise of power. Žižek defines perversion at its most elementary as the "coincidence of the subject's view with the gaze of the big Other" (*Looking Awry* 108). We have already encountered this coincidence in the slippage between religious rhetoric and surveillance technologies as explanations for Atta's eternal looping: both cases suggest the "god-like" perspective of a punishing deity watching over the terrorist, which is at once Allah, the security state and Amis' readers. Placed in this position, we all become perverse, albeit in a strictly Lacanian sense of working for the big Other's enjoyment. Žižek explains that the bearer of the perverse gaze – rather than simply a subject who renders the other as an object of punishment – involves imagining oneself as the object-instrument of the big Other's will; as an example, it necessitates staging the infliction of pain on someone else for the gaze of the Other, and seeing oneself from its position of fantasized approval or disapproval. Following Lacan, Žižek argues, "The pervert does not pursue his activity for his own pleasure, but for the enjoyment of the Other—he finds enjoyment precisely in this instrumentalization, in working for the enjoyment of the Other" (*LA* 109). This "O-ther," in the case of Amis' narrative, is the post-9/11 security state, which, in the midst of a War on Terror, exercises sovereign power over its enemies. Our implicit identification with its surveillance gaze aligns us with this sovereign power to classify and contain in so far as Atta's punishment in the "life between two deaths" depends on our attention. Since it prolongs Atta's suffering, in reading, we execute the big Other's will and thus become implicated in its dehumanizing enjoyment of this historical reversal of victim and victimizer.

"Last Days" presents Atta's suffering under our gaze through the conflict between the abstraction of his mind and the symptoms afflicting his body. Although the perverse gaze shared by the spectral sovereign and engaged readers imprisons and tortures Atta through constructing a never ending loop of boredom, his body rebels against this incarceration within surveillance. Indeed, in a comic twist on torture, his imprisonment

produces a series of chronic and severe corporeal symptoms such as nausea, headaches and constipation that result from Atta's advanced psychological repression. Of course, the bad joke here is that there could be no worse torture for Atta *than to be himself*. In his "repression," the terrorist submits the entire substance of his being to the abstract purity of the transcendent cause, hoping to produce total non-being without remainder, but in Atta's case, this personal mission fails when it comes to his body: "Muhammad Atta's mind and his body were not separable: this was the difficulty; this was the mind-body problem—in his case, fantastically acute" (154). His rigid adherence to anti-Western dogma encourages Amis' terrorist to embrace this negation of self and world that precludes physical indulgences, a choice which, strangely, only distinguishes him from his counterparts. Unlike his fellow jihadists, who had convinced their bodies that they had "achieved sublimation by means of jihadi ardor," writing them a sort of blank check to indulge in excessive eating, drinking and smoking, Atta's body had not "gone along with it" (154). Instead, following the imam's advice, Atta is able to "forget and be oblivious of the thing which is called World" and motivate himself not through desires of the flesh but through the "core reason alone" (154). Thus, the text suggests Atta's negative affect translates into his physical suffering as he remains inscribed within his imagined surveillance loop until the final, excruciatingly painful moments of his death after the impact on the North Tower.

Without diminishing Atta's genuine disdain for human lives, his darkly comical condition reverses victimizer into victim, echoing recent Western practices against its adversaries and suggesting the specter of sovereign power haunts the narrative. The American state fantasy of total knowledge of terrorist minds combines with one of total control over terrorist bodies and reaches its real-world apotheosis in the practice of indefinite detention. At the war prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay (as well as numerous other "black site" facilities), American authorities submit suspected terrorists – named as "enemy combatants" rather than as "prisoners of war" and therefore excluded from the protections afforded by the international Geneva Conventions – to a state of exception permitting mental and physical torture, euphemized as "enhanced interrogation techniques." In "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," this literal containment becomes a fantasized one in which the terrorist is disciplined by the gaze of the reader, who maintains Atta's spectral existence in purgatorial limbo. Yet, a second specter, the

specter of sovereign power, also haunts this narrative as the uncanny double of both the imprisoned terrorist and the complicit reader, who is perversely identified with it. The absence of this gaze as an empirically verified entity in the text, which never refers to an actual camera or set of eyes tracking Atta, speaks to its inherently fantasmatic character: it is no more than a “blind spot in the field of the visible from which the picture itself photographs the spectator” (Žižek *Enjoy!* 228). It relies, as Žižek argues, on our imaginative activity – like ancient cultures that build monuments whose contours are only visible from an impossible aerial view – to sustain it: “the most elementary fantasmatic scene is not of a fascinating scene to be looked at, but the notion that ‘there is someone out there looking at us’” (229). By using surveillance aesthetics as a structuring principle of its narration, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” generates the fantasy of this missing omniscient gaze (as well as the security state bearing it) approving of readers harshly judging Atta and prolonging his punishment through their reading. Whereas he suffers, we, his torturers, enjoy.

This form of enjoyment proves essential to the War on Terror. According to Žižek, perversion is not the radically transgressive act postmodern theory (he includes Deleuze, Foucault and Butler) suggests it to be. Against this reading, he argues that the alleged “subversive potential of perversions” obfuscates how “perversion is always a socially constructive attitude” (*Ticklish Subject* 247). Perversion is an essential part of reproducing power, which constructs itself through the secret (unconscious) binding properties of its own inconsistencies and violations. For instance, he argues that the transgressions of the public symbolic law, rather than undermining social cohesion, can become its sustaining condition; counterintuitively, the obscene “Thing” (an illegal act of violence, for instance) in the midst of the law can strengthen the social bond through shared complicity: “the Thing is what ‘holds together’ the social edifice by means of guaranteeing its fantasmatic consistency” (*Enjoy!* 141). Concordantly, Žižek contends in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* that the American public after September 11 identifies (in a disavowed way) with the “dirty underside of power,” which he defines as the outlook of “‘Somebody has to do the dirty work, so let’s do it!’” (*WTDR* 30). This perverse identification manifests in any number of examples from the era, but perhaps emerged most poignantly in President George W. Bush’s 2003 State of the Union Address in which he catalogues his administration’s apparent victories in the nascent

War on Terror: “All told, more than 3,000 suspected terrorists have been arrested in many countries. And many others have met a different fate. Let's put it this way: They are no longer a problem to the United States and our friends and allies.” For Jodi Dean, “Bush’s repulsive smirk” during these remarks betrayed his disgusting enjoyment in the obscene violence of torture and war as well as the vicarious enjoyment of that violence the nation experienced through him: “His clear enjoyment when mentioning torture and death made the speech compelling and unbearable—horrifying and unavoidable” (*Žižek’s Politics* 28). Dean’s example illustrates how perverse identification involves activating a fantasy of the Other’s enjoyment that animates one’s activity and demonstrates the extent to which some Americans identified with the abuse of military force, a sad fact only underscored through the Abu Ghraib photo scandal.

These photos, rather than directly contradicting the country as an object of patriotic love and idealization, served as the “inherent transgression” of this ideology, thus providing the libidinal underpinning for the obscene identification with the nation, state and military during the War on Terror. Yet the photographs – which depict torture, sexual humiliation and desecration of sacred Islamic texts – again raise the problem of our complicity in the perverse gaze tracked on the suspected terrorists. There is a sense that the military personnel are performing for imagined spectators, who are meant to enjoy their activities, ostensibly undertaken on our behalf by the American state. As Susan Sontag notes, “the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken—with the perpetrators posing, gloating over their helpless captives” (*At the Same Time* 132). Just as with “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” the audience assumes a position of spectatorship identified with the camera eye, in this case of soldiers – agents of the military state – complicit (and presumably also enjoying) the sadistic scenes the photographs depict. While the conditions differ, the text stages the torture of Atta as well, prolonging his personal suffering. In other words, the detainees’ place “between two deaths” – the place of what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, a figure who is symbolically dead in the withdrawal of legal protections, although still biologically living – resonates with Atta’s predicament: he suffers a form of “indefinite detention,” caught within sadistic technologies of social control that work on both his mind and his body as a forms of punishment. Like the occupants of America’s overseas prisons, Atta faces containment

in retribution for his acts, but in doing so also satisfies a longing that stages a past in which the preemptive suspension of the law by sovereign power would have contained the threat he posed before it could even emerge. Our gaze becomes the gaze of the state exercising this obscene underside of its power on our behalf, rendering us passive, but perversely invested, spectators. Rather than critical subjects, we become the objects enjoying through the state, reduced, as Žižek describes, “to a paralyzed object-gaze” (LA 110).

### 3.7. Dead Time

However, “Last Days” also implies the instability of this perverse surveillance gaze which potentially fails to stick to the right bodies. Even though Atta exemplifies the terrorist other, his portrayal also uncannily aligns his experience with experiences of boredom already familiar to many of us left with the consequences. In other words, Amis’ fantasies of Atta as a bored, dogmatic subject can also lead to a curious form of identification through which, as Kristiaan Versluys and Martin Randall have already noted, the supposed difference of the terrorist begins to dissipate, if not disappear.<sup>98</sup> Boredom is the crux of this slippage in identification whereby the unfamiliar psychology of the terrorist transforms into a more familiar condition of disenchantment with the Western world.<sup>99</sup> Although the story associates it with Atta’s diseased psychopathology, his aversion to budget motels, elevator *muzak* and airport security are an oddly sympathetic dimension of his “pan-anathema.” Consequently, the story not only portrays Atta’s alien difference, but also anxiously explores his uncanny similarity to his host, posing further problems for the success of surveillance systems unable easily to separate self from other. It suggests that we are all subject to the dead time of surveillance systems, stuck in a life between deaths. Once we were watching; now we are being watched.

Although his acts remain repulsive, we likely share Atta’s experience of boredom within the systems of the security state, which the narrative calls “dead time.” The phrase takes on a certain irony considering Atta’s purgatorial repetition in the “life between two deaths,” but it also designates the frustrations of bureaucratic tedium within (however necessary) lineups for airport security screenings, the lasting paradoxical



consequence of its inverse, the shocking horror of terrorism. Dead time is empty, meaningless time, time without significant events, an affectively impoverished limbo within the cycles of everyday life. In the context of the intensified security state, it is the privileged temporality of surveillance. Despite performing a valuable function, the bloodless measures designed to combat terrorism institute a discernable bureaucratic tedium which blurs the distinction between terrorists and everyday citizens, who are all screened at the same check points and walked through the same security lines, thus raising the question of whether boredom actually originates in the dependent mind or from the social order itself.

As an exemplary Islamist, Atta's boredom serves as a shorthand throughout the story for the duration, repetition, drag and emptiness of his imagined experience it calls the condition of "dead time." The description of Atta's final day proceeds from mundane detail to mundane detail, as he ever so slowly moves towards accomplishing his murderous intent, held back only by decelerated temporality. For instance, Atta waits in the "weak glow" and "piped music" of the hotel lobby and then eats a "wordless" breakfast, while the text simply notes that "more dead time passed" (155). Unable to overcome this temporal inertia, the world Atta inhabits serves as "unbounded boredom where all time was dead-time" (160). He answers pointless questions at the airport and moves through a series of mundane daily rituals. His abstraction of self from the world leaves that world empty, meaningless and mechanical. The narrative makes the implicit link between boredom and terrorism more explicit as Atta reflects on enduring the bureaucratic procedures necessary to pass through airport security:

Whatever else terrorism had achieved in the past few decades, it has certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom. It didn't take very long to ask and answer those three questions—about fifteen seconds. But those dead-time questions and answers were repeated, without any variation whatever, hundreds of thousands of times a day. If the planes operation went ahead as planned, Muhammad Atta would bequeath more, perhaps much more, dead time, planet-wide. It was appropriate, perhaps, and not paradoxical, that terror should also sharply promote its most obvious opposite. Boredom. (157)

Atta's act of mass murder is supposed to disrupt tedium, but his statement anticipates this act's inevitable failure. Tedium will not cease with his death on September 11 so

much as it will multiply exponentially as security lines get longer and the dreaded “three questions” balloon into even more redundant bureaucracies. What if Atta did feel the boredom his acts would inspire? He killed thousands of people on 9/11, but his future victims, including himself, will endure the security nightmare he caused through a fictional reconstruction that uncannily aligns with the current state of air travel; his pan-anathema lives beyond his diseased psychopathological Islamism. In “Terror and Boredom,” Amis complains about being stuck in these boring redundancies when he spotlights the irony that his “slight little blonde” young daughter “with big brown eyes and a quivery voice” draws the suspicion of airport security: “I stood for half an hour at the counter while the official methodically and solemnly searched her carry-on rucksack—staring shrewdly at each story tape and crayon, and palpating the lengths of all four limbs of her fluffy duck” (*SP* 74-5). Although he describes the “trace of inanition that weaved through [him]” as “boredom,” he also clearly states, in reference to the Islamic extremists he argues cause it, that “boredom is something that the enemy doesn’t feel” (*SP* 76). How do we square this unequivocal statement with his depiction of Atta as a bored subject stuck in the same sort of airport queues Amis occupies with his comically suspicious daughter?

We possibly share some of Atta’s boredom, not because we approve of his violent reaction against it, but because it speaks to our common enmeshment in security networks that survive as part of the everyday long after the spectacular event is over. Legislation such as the two Patriot Acts, as well as Snowden’s revelations of spying conducted by the National Security Agency, demonstrate how surveillance increasingly permeates post-9/11 society. Besides the destruction of 9/11, Muhammad Atta’s lasting legacy is intensifying a surveillance society, which places us uncomfortably between perversion (in the enjoyment of tracking terrorists) and paranoia (in the sense that this same surveillance could be tracking us) as it seeks to make all areas of life transparent to its multiple gazes and thus submit us to the protracted duration and critical scrutiny of surveillant dead time.

The perversion evident in the support of extended surveillance during the War on Terror parallels cultural trends towards perverse visibility in practices of everyday life, leading to an overdue revision of the panoptic paradigm. Identification with this imagined

sovereign gaze is complicated by cultural ambivalence towards the emergent system of surveillance diffused within the security state, but also in the dynamics of our daily existence within late capitalism and its burgeoning scopic and cybernetic technologies. Surveillance studies scholars such as David Lyon, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Erickson contend that the diffusion of the gaze into a variety of networks and the increasing acceptance of exposure to multiple gazes, throws the Bentham-Orwell-Foucault panoptic model into question.<sup>100</sup> New technologies render the surveillance gaze omnipresent but nonetheless curiously invisible, prevalent but fragmented, constantly displacing the presumed locus of the classical panopticon in ways that necessitate abandoning the understanding of perversion as a strictly personal psychological deviance. “Voyeurism, exhibitionism, and narcissism,” instead are, “transformed from individual-psychological criteria to social categories” (Weibel “Pleasure” 208). In other words, perverse modes of behavior produced by and productive of surveillance gazes structure the social link within late capitalism, qualitatively morphing from “illegitimate to legitimate pleasures...afforded new liberties in the social realm” (208). At least two cultural reactions to this displacement emerge – perverse incitement of the absent Other to watch us and, conversely, both paranoid fear that there is no longer any place outside of such observation and fear that no observer could succeed in his security mandate – which form the obverse sides of the surveillance Mobius strip. The easy reversal of one into the other potentially reconfigures our relation to the spectral gaze of sovereign power, showing average citizens are the defacto targets of the imperfect systems meant to keep them safe, and thus inverting a voyeuristic spectatorship into a position as object of surveillance.

Yet, despite these complication to the panoptic paradigm, belief in it persists. Even as we identify with these imagined or real capacities for monitoring terrorist suspects (the objective truth of this capacity is beside the point) we too are also paranoid subjects of their gaze. Again, in Žižek’s reading of the Jacques Lacan, the gaze is “the point from which the viewed object itself returns the gaze and regards us, the spectators” and thus “it involves a reversal of the relationship between subject and object... the gaze is on the side of the object, it stands for the blind spot in the field of the visible from which the picture itself photographs the spectator” (*Enjoy!* 228). Thus, while the gaze of surveillance never manifests as content proper in the literary object, it nonetheless

maintains an uncanny spectral presence, directed at Atta, but also at us as readers; we are both sustaining it and under its power, left uncertain whether we look through it or it looks at us. Sianne Ngai nicely illustrates this uncomfortable “uncertainty over authorship of the visual field” in her reading of director Francis Ford Coppola’s classic 1974 surveillance film, *The Conversation*. She cites one scene in particular: Harry Carl (Gene Hackman), a surveillance professional, enters a hotel room to examine it, and whereas the camera initially identifies with his perspective it soon detaches itself and moves on its own as it pans across the room, transitioning from “subjective to objective” and implying that Harry, who normally does the watching, will soon become the watched (*Ugly Feelings* 18-9). Readers of “Last Days” encounter a similar mechanism of slippage between objective and subjective in Atta’s subjectivity: his severely bored gaze imposes his dogmatic worldview on his surroundings, but only emerges under the impossible gaze of a narrative which resurrects him through the allusion to documentary evidence of his painfully mundane life (evidence which simply does not exist). The loop only ends to initiate a new sadistic repetition once his act of suicidal terror takes control of the image machine and thus exceeds the containment capacities of the imagined surveillance gaze.

Due to the instability of identification, our alignment with this imagined gaze of the surveillance state could just as easily slip into paranoid fantasies regarding the extent to government reach and omnipotence as that gaze is also potentially turned against us, a fate frequently suffered by the protagonists in Hollywood films such as *Enemy of the State* (1998), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), *Eagle Eye* (2008), or *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). Similar to these films, the narrative’s cataloging of Atta’s final day in its minute detail suggests a situation where privacy no longer exists, exposing everyone to the disciplinary mechanisms activated against suspected threats to security. “As shopping centers and government buildings are controlled by security checks at every entrance, until proven otherwise,” Simon speculates, “these measures are aimed at us: we are all potential terrorists” (46). Of course, in its pursuit of security, the state shares this fantasy of total knowledge, a fantasy which animates its representations in popular culture, from the television drama *Homeland* (2011-Present), in which CIA officer Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) sits in a living room surrounded by multiple screens displaying surveillance footage from the home of a suspected terrorist

(Damien Lewis), to director Steven Spielberg's blockbuster film *Minority Report* (2002), in which a near-future police department has devised a technological method for predicting and thus preventing murders before they happen. While the ostensible target of these panoptic fantasies, materialized in the technologies, practices and institutions of national security, is suspected terrorists and criminals, they also serve as an implicit coercion of the general population which, as Žižek argues, who sustains its precarious sense of freedom, at least in part, against the fantasmatic background of an all-powerful network of knowledge (*WTDR* 96), a belief evident, for instance, in the work of leftist provocateurs like Noam Chomsky and others who invest the surveillance state with (paradoxically comforting) belief in its growing omniscience. From this perspective, Atta's predicament implicates readers in fantasies of their own capture within state surveillance machines, fantasies that serves as a compensatory structural inversion of that state's manifest ineffectuality at stopping the terrorist plotters of 11 September 2001. As Simon argues, referring to the proliferation of surveillance technologies, we are all "potential terrorists, our tape is already set" (46).

## Chapter 4.

### **In the Blind-Spot: Post-9/11 Subjectivity and Urban Spaces in *Open City***

#### **4.1. Immigration Fantasies**

Whereas *The Suffering Channel* and *A Gate at the Stairs* direct our attention away from the epicenter of the event, focusing us instead on the respective local geographies of Indiana and Wisconsin, Teju Cole's 2013 novel *Open City* reintroduces the urban into the discussion of post-9/11 literature. In the novel, Julius, a mixed-race immigrant from Nigeria working at a New York hospital as a resident in psychology, reflects on history, art and philosophy during a series of extended walks, primarily through post-9/11 New York City and later through Brussels. Unlike the surveilled terrorist other in "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," Julius' racial and class background enables him to move fluidly across multiple borders – cultural, national, ethnic – and thus between a myriad of social spheres. Consequently, the novel is organized in a non-linear fashion, which lessens its reliance on relationships of cause and effect, and instead accentuates a nodal structure, through which a series of disparate encounters with people, cultural artifacts and urban spaces are held together and kept at a particular narrative distance by the use of Julius as a structural focal point. His story consists of a meandering palimpsest of thoughts layered over one another like the historical strata of his urban settings, through which the novel not only produces the spaces of the city but also produces Julius as a subject.<sup>101</sup> The novel constructs a dialectic between the psychological/libidinal state of the character – a liberal, mixed-race, transnational aesthete – and the social/collective state of post-9/11 New York City – a repository of conflicting trauma narratives – through which private contemplation and personal memory oscillates in tension with public history and hegemonic ideology. Overall, this

narrative technique tends to guide readers through the city as Julius sees it; his unique perspectives challenge them to question the ideological closures that prevent engagement with the record of American historical atrocities he identifies as written into the materiality of urban spaces, Lower Manhattan in particular, whether Battery Park, Trinity Church or “Ground Zero.” Yet it also demonstrates how those spaces, and the ideologies they materialize, transform the subjectivity of the narrator. Thus *Open City* repeatedly inverts and inverts again the privilege of the private and public, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political.

In doing so, *Open City* challenges the legitimacy of American ideologies of multiculturalism which might otherwise mediate between immigrant characters like Julius and his new adopted home, especially after 11 September 2001. Out of the tension between American multiculturalist idealism, based on the logic of assimilation and the material practices of American power, emerges a subgenre of post-9/11 fiction; within this subgenre *Open City* is both representative and idiosyncratic. Including texts such as Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the subgenre typically places immigrant characters in the unfamiliar setting of the United States after 11 September 2001 in order to provide perspectives that trouble how the nation narrates itself as a land of multicultural opportunity and in order to reverse the hegemonic gaze and thus estrange the country as an object of patriotic idealization. Whereas, according to Ali Behdad, “[s]uccessful immigrants are strategically deployed by both liberals and conservatives to reaffirm the nation’s principles of capitalism, communalism, liberalism, and the traditional family” (*Forgetful Nation* 13), these fictional immigrants often find themselves at odds with their adoptive homes and the ideologies of success that bring them to the faltering imperial center.<sup>102</sup>

*Open City* represents this genre by placing the story of an immigrant seeking career success in New York City alongside allusions to the histories of injustice perpetuated by the United States, but differs in the target of its critique. Whereas Hamid, O’Neill and Cole all focalize their narratives through unreliable narrators, equal parts refreshingly insightful and tragically self-deluded, Julius displays unequaled affective indifference to what he witnesses and in what he participates. Indeed, his character changes little (if at all) in the course of the book. He comes to no obvious epiphany, but,

similar to Tassie, remains emotionally static, content to carry on just as before despite all he has seen and heard in his walks and travels. Instead of publically denouncing the ideological status quo, Julius remains locked within his endless circling from place to place, image to image and thought to thought. The object of his attention continually dissolves behind a screen of references, allusions, inter-texts and observations. Through this dissolution, *Open City* stages the failure to think critically about the problem of post-9/11 America from the postcolonial perspective of the outsider that Julius evokes as aesthetic events only to then allow them again to subside into oblivion. The novel proposes that memory is necessarily partial and thus inadequate to the past, but also that there is no access to history except through the imperfect medium of subjectivity, itself riddled with disavowals and inconsistencies, even if postcolonial, multicultural, mixed-race or transnational.

Any attempt at a readerly identification with Julius' contemplative stance faces multiple hurdles in the novel which unsettle intellectual complacency and in particular the desire to automatically accept *Open City* as an exemplary multicultural narrative – even despite the allure of Julius' globalized identity. In his *American Literary History* article "Open Doors" and later in his monograph *After the Fall*, Richard Gray articulates the fantasy that narratives of immigrants will revitalize post-9/11 fiction through "hybridity" that uses a "strategy of deterritorialization" to "[subvert] the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them, West and East, Christian and Muslim" (*After the Fall* 17). Michael Rothberg's response to Gray's proscription correctly acknowledges that while a "grappling with otherness" is "necessary," it is also "not entirely sufficient" ("Failure of Imagination" 153). Whereas Rothberg usefully advocates for a literature of *reterritorialization* that maps the political, military and economic imposition of American power during the War on Terror, *Open City* instead attempts to reveal *from within* the limitations of Gray's benevolently multiculturalist fantasy of open borders – which open the minds of racial others *to us* through literature and open our minds *to the other* in the same way – as the solution to America's analytical solipsism and racially charged rhetoric. If anything, Julius' limited, insightful yet oddly oblivious perspective, demonstrates how excessive fetishization of hybridity, mobility and border crossing can enable the disavowal of how the figure of the American immigrant is embedded within a variety of material and ideological forces for which discourses of tolerance, inclusivity



and individualism cannot account. *Open City* is not a novel which fetishizes the perspective of the immigrant other; rather, it spotlights how such figures face the same challenges involved in overcoming disavowal and recovering history in the post-9/11 moment as any other focalizing subject. Consequently, the novel positions him within this liminal space between critique and complicity, insight and blindness, knowledge and fantasies of oblivion.

## 4.2. Mirrors and Misrecognitions

On first approach, Julius appears to satisfy Gray's call for border-crossing fiction. He is affluent, well-educated, insightful, curious, productive, transnational and racially hybrid, a German-Nigerian immigrant who has successfully adapted himself to American life. In fact, Julius stands as a complex figure within the American liberal fantasy of the immigrant because he contradicts every xenophobic invocation of the ubiquitous foreign threat made by neoconservatives calling for tighter border control and other disciplinary measures against immigrant bodies – conflated with those of terrorists – since 11 September 2001. “In contrast to the threatening other whose alterity is deployed to define a homogeneous, imagined community,” Ali Behdad observes, “the model immigrant is held out as the proof of America's exceptionalism” (*Forgetful Nation* 13). In *Open City*, Julius presents an ideal synthesis of attributes. Thus his portrayal contradicts neoconservative xenophobia by elevating the visibility of those immigrants who are not easily reduced to negative racial categories; at the same time, it reaffirms the benevolent image of liberal America as a tolerant, welcoming land of opportunity and of the city as “open” to a number of multicultural perspectives.

Julius' appearance as a model immigrant might strike readers as ironic, however, considering his reluctance to discuss his racial background, which the novel allows to emerge only gradually. Whereas readers eventually learn about his ethnic and national origins, *Open City* refuses to claim for Julius a *particular* racial identity defined against a white *universal* one. His homes are multiple and extra-territorial; he is not bound to one or another but is constituted through their relations. Indeed, for at least the first portion of the narrative, we might be forgiven if we feel unable to racially categorize Julius at all. His closest narrative progenitors seem to be white Europeans like Sebald, Benjamin and

Camus, although he proves knowledgeable about a wide range of narrative traditions, including the Yoruba myths of Nigeria. Julius' recourse to asserting his racial anonymity resists the mechanisms of ideological projection governing discourses of multiculturalism. For post-9/11 American culture, the other as model immigrant provides the necessary ideological inversion of the terrorist other who must not be tolerated, thus transforming symptom into supplement to the national fantasy. Since the bodies of immigrants become screens for the projection of anxieties over the integrity of the national self, Julius' self-abstraction enables him to escape the responsibility to represent a particular racial identity alone. Thus, the novel responds to what Slavoj Žižek argues is the problem with the discourse of multiculturalist tolerance and hospitality: it establishes a particular position (and a position of particularity) without adequately critiquing the universality of the hegemonic group doing the tolerating. For this reason, Žižek contends, "multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a 'racism with a distance'—it 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position" ("Multiculturalism" 44). The identitarian fantasy of authenticity this discourse articulates through the racial other does not adequately account for Julius, who defies simplistic ethnic or national affiliations through his disengagement from them. Moreover, it ignores the exclusionary practices of citizenship – intensified since 9/11 through the power afforded to the new Department of Homeland Security – that contradict the tenets of hospitality.<sup>103</sup> Julius gives this fantasy the slip at the expense of a particular identity.

Julius' portrayal avoids presenting his national, cultural and racial self as the reified object of the symbolic order's gaze. In doing so, the novel refuses to make Julius a mere reflection of the nation's dominant images of the other, which it illustrates through its description of an arresting moment Julius experiences when peering out the window of a Chinatown junk shop at a slow, solemn parade of Chinese performers:

I experienced the sudden disorientation and bliss of one who, in a stately old house and at a great distance from a mirrored wall, could clearly see the world doubled on itself. I could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began. This point-for-point imitation, of every porcelain vase, of each dull spot of shine on each stained teak chair, extended as far as where my reversed self has, as I

had, halted in midturn. And this double of mine had, at that precise moment, begun to tussle with the same problem as its equally confused original. To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone. (192)

This dense passage establishes relationships between the kitsch, faux-authentic objects in the explicitly racialized junk shop, Julius' own mirrored image, and the spectacle of racial performance happening outside. As his description indicates, Julius' triangulation of these three reference points raises the problem of mirroring and the splitting of the self into an object possible to apprehend within the visual field, rather than reinforcing his persona as an original subject who does the apprehending. The infinite recursion of his image – as reflection doubles again and again and again into yet another reflection – lacks any grounding in the ideology of the unified and autonomous liberal subject. Moreover, its implicit connection with race (framed through the simulacrum of the junk shop) illustrates the fear Julius feels towards potentially suffering misrecognition at the hands of others. He does not wish to be seen within prevailing narratives, as a shadowy reflection split off from his own unique, embodied experience of the city and the nation.

The text constructs Julius as uncomfortable with being labelled as a visible racial minority. It accentuates Julius' aversion to misrecognition by having his character actively disparage several attempts to identify him with some essential Africanness or blackness. When a cab driver, looking at Julius in a rear-view mirror, greets him, "So, how are you doing, my brother?", the connotations of racial solidarity prompt Julius to declare, "I am in no mood for people who try to lay claims on me" (*Open City* 40). Later, he feels irritated by Kenneth, a black security guard who, like the cab driver, is trying to say, "Hey, I'm African like you" (53). Following this incident, the novel demonstrates the unseen dangers of misrecognition when Julius is mugged by two young black men as he returned home from one of his walks. This scene accentuates the fractures between various racialized identities, rather than their affinities with one another, when Julius reflects on how a misread exchange of a "nod" of recognition had concealed the danger the young men posed to him. "There had earlier been, it occurred to me, only the most tenuous of connections between us, looks on a street corner by strangers, a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being 'brothers,'" Julius reports: "These glances were exchanged between black men all

over the city every minute if the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each man's mundane pursuits, a nod or quick smile or greeting. It was a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out here" (212). In this instance, Julius reads this culture of fleeting solidarity incorrectly, and his failure precipitates a violent attack that suggests Julius' wealth and affluence separate him from his less privileged urban black neighbors. Here, the politics of mutual recognition proves inadequate to other possible fault lines in assumptions of an unproblematic racial identity between "brothers." Julius resists the simplicity of this identification with the same vehemence as he detests the infinitely doubling images in the junk shop mirror that split him off from himself.<sup>104</sup>

Doing otherwise would compel him to accept the terms of this proverbial mirror-stage where he loses control over his own self-image. Moreover, it would necessitate a degree of self-consciousness about race that might disturb Julius' careful self-construction. Instead, the novel prefers to have Julius do the observing, to focalize the post-9/11 world through what he can see rather than how others see him. At the same time as this preference narrows the scope of the novel's vision, Julius' unique perspectives – particularly on the nation and the city – leads, as James Wood contends, to the "productive alienation" of the flaneur who, even if he proves reluctant to intervene in it, also proves capable of mapping the coordinates of his environment through the mode of aesthetic distance ("Enigmas"). Accordingly, *Open City* embraces a nonlinear plot and a richness of voice and perception that follows Julius' meandering yet fascinating thoughts through their shifting permutations, rather than reducing them to a single racial, national or ethnic identitarian perspective.

### **4.3. Blind Spots**

*Open City* neither refutes the discourse of the city as full of cosmopolitan possibilities nor does it falsify the city's potentials to liberate subjects like Julius from fixed racial, ethnic or national identities. Rather, the novel explores these possibilities and potentials while simultaneously tracking how the prevalent ideological narrative which celebrates the multicultural "open" city can also efface what personal, urban and national histories this narrative *forecloses*. Julius enjoys an unencumbered freedom of movement across the streets of New York City, but his travels consistently lead him back to inequalities in

commemorative politics of urban spaces, which elevate certain traumas, like the 2001 World Trade Center disaster, but ignore others, like the complicity of northern banks in the transatlantic slave trade. Similarly, Julius benefits from a relative anonymity and autonomy that allows him to evade the constrictions of a particular racial identity (he instead affects a hybridized sense of self enhanced by a rich liberal education), but also disregards his own moral lapses before his move to New York City. Even as the novel recognizes Julius' tangible privilege, both instances also cast the very notion of openness into doubt. As textual constructions, urban space and individual identity in *Open City* are riddled with disavowals, inconsistencies and even outright contradictions. To be "open" in these circumstances entails readers recognize that the cosmopolitan image of New York City as a space of freedom and the multicultural image of Julius as a philosophically insightful aesthete are not wrong so much as they are inadequate descriptions of the dynamics between the post-9/11 city and the post-9/11 subject.

*Open City* builds this case by questioning the epistemological certainties attached to seeing and reading. "[My] entire being was caught up in a blind spot," Julius tells readers (256), an ironic statement considering the centrality of vision to his narrative.<sup>105</sup> Through Julius' eyes, *Open City* densely packs visual details – including allusions to Dutch figurative painting, scale model making, monumental architecture, and urban planning – into a nodal narrative framework that imitates his wandering past city streets and through museum exhibits in New York City, Brussels and Lagos. Besides being a visually allusive novel, it is also a self-consciously intertextual one, illuminated in the cross light of both tacit and overt references to Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*.<sup>106</sup> The constellations of the visual and the textual likely reflect Cole's own interests and cultural milieu. A graduate of Columbia University, teacher of literature and history at Bard College and frequent contributor to publications like *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books* and *The Atlantic*, Cole is identified on the book jacket of *Open City* as "a writer, photographer, and professional historian of early Netherlandish art." The obvious cultural knowledge on display in Cole's novel informs Julius' character, whose sensitivity as both spectator and flaneur allows him to offer unique perspectives on familiar cultural objects and spaces. Yet, his reference to his being as caught in a "blind spot" suggests a dialectical relationship between illumination and opacity, insight

and blindness. Put another way: if Julius interrogating the visual and the symbolic produces nuanced commentaries at the nexus of cultural, economic, spatial and ideological histories, the “blind spot” describes how, taken in isolation, each of these partial perspectives on post-9/11 New York, constructed through language, necessarily fail to achieve total clarity in describing its topic. Hence, Julius attempts to constellate the facts in such a way as to overcome these limitations, but, either unable or unwilling to trace the full implications of his insights, or what they possibly enable him to conceal, even he falls short of total knowledge: the blind spot in the point from which any “mirror” of reality – whether of vision or language or identity or spatial representation – cannot see.

*Open City* develops this concept of philosophical sensitivity as a screen for deeper personal and social antagonisms through Julius’ repeated references to sight, insight and blindness. Early in the novel, Julius defines the rhetoric of insight which accompanies blindness as “romantic ideas... of unusual creativity and genius” granting spiritual gifts to compensate those no longer able to see the physical world (37), yet his encounter with Farouq, a budding Moroccan social theorist, complicates this myth. Referring to the work of Paul de Man, Farouq reverses the terms, claiming that “insight... can obscure other things... can be a blindness” (127). While for Farouq, a Muslim, the “insight that is a form of blindness” refers to rationality and rationalism that obstruct the human relationship to God, his words resonate differently with Julius’ well trained visual acuity and matching talent for profound philosophical observation. While his narration offers multiple insights into disavowed global and historical realities, as well as seemingly perceptive apprehensions of his own character, this insight, as we discover later in the narrative, enables the text to construct a picture of Julius’ past which elides certain opaque, unpleasant dimensions of his character.

As Julius admits, he had been constructing a “secure version of the past” since his immigration from Lagos to the United States in 1992, but “there was another irruptive, sense of things past”: “The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa” (156). Although he does not appear to know it consciously when he makes this statement, the reappearance of Moji, the “someone” from out of his relegated past to

which he refers, portends the collapse of his carefully constructed persona as an insightful, cultured, civilized connoisseur of fine art and classical music when she accuses him of sexual assault, pointing to a violent past held under erasure by his pretensions as an aesthete. Tellingly, the text even frames this disturbing encounter through the terms offered by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (which Julius reports to have read while vacationing), an intertext linking the revelations of the unconscious with the reading of visual culture: “photographic ‘shock’... consists less in traumatizing than in revealing what was so well hidden that the actor himself was unaware or unconscious of it” (*Camera Lucida* 32).<sup>107</sup> When it comes to Julius, this shocking moment forces readers to retroactively question whether his constant references to the visual, however insightful, also serve as strategies of either willed or unconscious blindness. Yet, it also demonstrates the difficulty inherent to the preservation of cultural memory, in which broader examples of historical atrocities disappear in the act of narrating history from the particular and necessarily limited position of the nation invested in the reproduction of its collective myths, just as Julius is invested in the reproduction of his personal ones.

Thus, the novel constructs a sense of the social world, as well as the image of the unified subject, as potentially deceptive and illusory (reaffirming the long established critique of subjectivity in postmodern theory). Julius’ insight proves ironic considering his profession. Completing his residency in psychiatry at a New York City hospital, Julius works to alleviate a variety of psychological disorders and he expresses his frustration with the lack of correspondence between the external manifestation of symptoms and the internal mechanisms of the mind. Because psychiatry relies on what the patients can tell doctors about themselves, Julius explains, “the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic” (238). His choice of words again suggests the problem of vision which does not guarantee total disclosure. Although the fact he looks at symptoms through a “lens” of language from his privileged position as an observer is a common enough metaphor, it acquires additional poignancy from how he extends it to describe the “mind’s opacity” in terms of the dark area directly behind the bulb of the eye (239). The paradox of this area is that precisely “where too many neurons associated with vision are clustered” is also where “vision goes dead” (239). Julius likens this place to that of the mental health practitioner, whose work involved “a blind spot so broad that it had taken over most of the eye,” which thus ensured “what we knew... was so much

less than what remained in darkness” (239). As we shall see, the blind spot in views of the world – whether personal, historical or ideological – prevents the total absorption of Julius into a coherent picture of external reality or the self: an unsymbolized real always contradicts fantasies of full visibility within and omniscience over a stable reality, showing how precisely where the visual field seems to shelter the greatest insight is where blindness can become near total.

When the novel engages with the slippery dynamics between sight, insight and blindness it suggests that the construction of historical knowledge – whether personal, urban or national – necessarily produces these blind spots: opaque or unsymbolized histories, disavowed within the official accounts, accounts which construct, fix and fetishize the past (and the subject) in order to avoid uncomfortable questions of complicity or responsibility that potentially disturb the comforts of oblivion. *Open City* identifies several of these blind spots in how the American nation mourns the tragedy of 11 September 2001 as a violation of a foundational national innocence and how that mourning shapes the cultural-political discourses of urban space in Lower Manhattan. The novel focalizes readerly encounters with these blind spots through Julius, who occupies a blind spot in post-9/11 national conceptions of race, which are more overtly focused on intensified oppositions of white and Arab identities, or traditional conflicts between white and African Americans, rather than the symbolic place of a German-Nigerian immigrant. Julius’ relative anonymity within these national narratives allows *Open City* to accentuate his idiosyncratic perspective on post-9/11 New York City even as his selective remembrance of his own past produces blind spots in his character which call into question the possibility of achieving total narrative transparency through the fetishized perspective of the sensitive, cultured and insightful immigrant. The pervasiveness of these respective blind spots in the narrative indicates the entanglement of urban space, nationhood, race and subjectivity in processes of fetishistic disavowal and the limitations these processes place on the construction of adequate personal and historical knowledge as the subject confronts (or fails to confront) haunting absences within the presumption of moral clarity or intellectual insight. *Open City* exposes the function of narrative memory in shaping historical truth and its constitutive blind spots.



#### 4.4. Scale Models

*Open City* suggests that certain ideological blind spots are constitutive of American identity after 9/11. The American nation largely fails to fully mourn the tragedy of 11 September 2001, or even adequately account for its conditions of possibility, because post-9/11 culture remains both enthralled by the particularity of the nation's own trauma and uninterested in other historical traumas for which that nation bears responsibility. The novel mediates the readers' relationship to the city through Julius' subjectivity in opposition to the ideology of national innocence that currently defines the relationship between those same readers and the history written into city spaces. It narrates Lower Manhattan in ways that diverge from New York City's transformation into a national space of trauma and mourning after the attacks and, as a result, exposes the gulf separating the history of suffering and atrocities Julius encounters and the rhetoric of national innocence produced by the American state and media following 9/11.

In *Tourists of History*, Marita Sturken argues that “virtually every traumatic event of twentieth- and twenty-first century U.S. history, from Pearl Harbor to the Vietnam War to 9/11, has been characterized as the moment when American innocence was lost” (16). Regarding the traumatic event of 11 September 2001 she contends, “the narrative of innocence enabled the U.S. response to avoid any discussion of what long histories of U.S. foreign policies had done to help foster a terrorist movement specifically aimed at the United States and its allies; thus the historical disavowal of American empire (in this case, U.S. policies in the Middle East) allows U.S. global interventions to be understood in a framework of benevolence rather than imperialism” (16-7). Struken's analysis underscores how this persistent ideology of innocence constructs the former World Trade Center site through an oblivious political and cultural discourse that frames the attacks as a completely unique moment of violence in American history:

The idea of ground zero as a blank slate or as the targeted center of the bombing... sets into motion a set of narratives about 9/11, both the narrative of lower Manhattan as the symbolic center of the event and the narrative that 9/11 was a moment in which the United States lost its innocence. Both enable a very particular narrative of exceptionalism, one that proclaims the events of 9/11 to be unique in the history of violent acts. This sense of historical exceptionalism hovers behind the nomenclature of lower Manhattan as Ground Zero—not only in disavowal

of the original meaning of the term but also in the belief, widely circulated and deployed politically, that history itself was transformed on 9/11.” (167)

*Open City* works against this narrative of American historical exceptionalism – long critiqued by scholars such as Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease – by spotlighting how multiple traumatic histories, particularly of migrant and indigenous peoples, have always been a disavowed part of the nation and, in particular, the symbolic center of New York City. In doing so, the novel continues the valuable academic work done in American Studies during the fifteen years prior to 11 September 2001, work like the anthology *Cultures of United States Imperialism* which unsettles the myths of foundational American innocence that, despite such critical efforts, became an even more entrenched cultural dominant after the attacks. *Open City* points to how these histories again have been forgotten due to the project of national healing and commemoration of 9/11, which is insufficiently attentive to alternative readings of the space now best known as the site of a nationalized American trauma. Julius’ location at the street level of Lower Manhattan, and his construction as a uniquely insightful observer, takes readers into the often unspoken and unseen histories of the city obviated by the overhead view of “Ground Zero” from which it looks like little more than one spectacular wound in the cityscape, exacted by a single spectacular event, rather than the product of multiple, more diffuse traumas.

The novel juxtaposes the partiality of Julius’ street-level perspective on a series of extended walks through New York City with one that reorients readers’ gaze from an imaginary position that floats above the city. From this vertical location, the city becomes an abstraction disconnected from its multiple spatial histories and thus more amenable to being subsumed into reductive, ill-informed, partial or inadequate national readings. Despite the obvious disengagement inherent to this overhead perspective, Julius’ encounter with a scale model of New York City at the Queens Art Museum stages a spatial language that assumes to leave no gap between the signifier and the signified, which the novel indicates through an allusion to Jorge Luis Borges 1946 story, “On Exactitude in Science.” “The attention to detail,” Julius observes, “was so meticulous that one could not help but think of Borge’s cartographers, who, obsessed with accuracy, had made a map so large and so finely detailed that it matched the empire’s scale on a ratio of one to one, a map in which each thing coincided with its spot on the map” (150). The

analogy Julius draws to Borges' cartographers – whose act of mapping is occasioned by injunctions to represent the space of imperial power – demonstrates how such models of the totality can abstract the city from its social relations, spatial histories and material processes to the point where the territory resembles the idealism of the map. Flying over the city in an airplane, Julius notes the power of this abstraction when he looks down and cannot help but be struck by how New York City recalls the museum exhibit so that, “it was the real city that seemed to be matching, point for point, my memory of the model” (151).<sup>108</sup>

Most of the nation occupied a similar position in relation to New York City on 11 September 2001 from which, as Lisa Ann Parks observes, “it was primarily through live satellite feeds, remote sensing images, and satellite relayed phone calls and email messages that citizens... tried to make sense of the rarity of these historic events and position [them]selves within them” (*Cultures in Orbit* 176). The fantasized position of the satellite image, located above the city as if it were the model in the Queens museum, imagines a provisional mastery over and stability of an observer as well as the stability of the image he or she observes. As artist Hito Steyrel argues, “many of the aerial views, 3D nose-dives, Google Maps, and surveillance panoramas do not actually portray a stable ground. Instead, they create a supposition that it exists in the first place” (“In Free Fall” 8). This supposition, she claims, establishes a certain form of subjectivity: “Retroactively, this virtual ground creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior spectator safely floating up in the air”: “Just as linear perspective established an imaginary stable observer and horizon, so does the perspective from above establish an imaginary floating observer and an imaginary stable ground” (8). Our vertical relation to the scale model involves not *falling* from the heights of buildings, like disoriented 9/11 jumpers from the World Trade Center, but *floating*: rather than tumble through vertiginous space, we are weightlessly suspended above the ground, enacting a fantasy of liberation from the constraints the city places on vision and the body. This spatial perspective parallels the disinterested detachment of a national consciousness perceived as autonomous from its social conditions. The miniature New York City over which Julius presides depends on the reconfiguration of scale. It inverts his partial perspective as he moves from an urban space too large for his full understanding into an enlarged perception capable of grasping the city as an abstraction. This abstraction is so

distant from its imagined ground that it becomes a relay for national structures of feeling that do not necessarily match the shifting space, its histories or people's conceptions of it, but profoundly shape them nonetheless.<sup>109</sup>

By constructing a more ground-level position for Julius through his series of extended walks, the text, unlike the museum's scale model, resists reproducing the city through the nation's ideological disavowals, which are enacted from a distant position of abstraction and historical wish-fulfilment. Admiring all the many "fine details" presented by the model, Julius observes, "the pair of gray blocks on the southern tip of Manhattan, each about a foot high, representing the persistence in the model, of the World Trade Center towers, which, in reality, had already been destroyed" (151). On one hand, this discrepancy points to the historicity of the scale model, which was originally commissioned, as Julius tells us, for the 1964 New York World's Fair (the WTC towers were presumably added in the 1970s) and thus presents a lost, pre-9/11 moment of the city; but, on the other hand, it highlights the model's place outside historical time. Such models attempt the impossible task of perfectly reproducing the city from above, thus enabling the spectator, from an abstract, disembodied point of omniscience, to absorb the exterior world into an interior space of private contemplation.<sup>110</sup> Thus, the model produces nostalgia for identity between the signifier and signified, the dream that the fully comprehensible miniature city can metaphorically coincide with its actual counterpart, and thus become a fully legible object through its more perfect, but far removed, representation. "The image that is produced not only bears the tangible qualities of material reality," Susan Stewart claims, "but also serves as a representation, an image, of a reality which does not exist... the miniature is often a material allusion to a text which is no longer available to us, or which, because of its fictiveness, never was available to us except through a second-order fictive world" (*On Longing* 60). The collapse of the WTC towers suggests the inherent limits on the comprehensive visual mastery of the totality such models promise, as terrorism intervenes into their exemption from time, pulling space back into history.

*Open City* provides a different mode for reading New York after September 11 that attends to the constitutive blind spots in the national perception of Lower Manhattan. Julius' walks (the motion of his body and perception through the streets) suggest that the

static, timeless overhead view of pre-9/11 New York City through which the nation fixes a universal narrative of trauma and loss cannot capture the layered palimpsest of histories that constitute the World Trade Center site at the ground-level. Thus, the novel demonstrates that the revival of the World Trade Center towers in the cultural imagination pulls in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, these disavowed spatial-cultural histories that engage Julius are also the central topic of the wide-ranging anthology, *After the World Trade Center*; the film documenting Phillip Petit's 1974 high-wire walk across the chasm separating the Twin Towers, titled *Man on Wire* (2008); and numerous post-9/11 novels such as *A Disorder Peculiar to this Country*, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Falling Man*, *The Good Life*, *Windows on the World* and *The Zero*. All of these texts investigate the fraught and complex associations American culture has with the World Trade Center site. On the other hand, the towers have been fetishized and idealized in the culture at large, retroactively imposing a single, rose-colored reading of their symbolic significance as they were quickly transformed into emblems of American strength and kitsch commodities, gracing key-chains testifying to the tourist's brief encounter with public history.<sup>111</sup> Before the attacks, the Twin Towers had few defenders (particularly on aesthetic grounds), but after 9/11, spectators began to invest them with newfound meaning.<sup>112</sup> "Once we gazed upon this site as a landscape of power," Sharon Zukin speculates, "but since September 11, we have viewed it in sorrow—as if it holds both the dark side of grandeur and our unspoken fear of decline" ("Our WTC" 13). It was perhaps in response to this unspoken fear that global real-estate developer Donald Trump suggested (with a dash of inspired madness) to rebuild the Twin Towers, exactly as they were, except one story higher.

The association of the site with the events of September 11 takes precedence over its variety of other possible significations, enacting a partial erasure that both retains and excludes some narratives of suffering in the very attempt to inscribe a particular tragic history. When a tourist asks where he can find "9/11" – confusing the temporal marker of the event with its spatial locus – Julius suggests that the WTC site functions as a "metonym" of its disaster in which a "date" is "petrified into broken stones" (*Open City* 52). Yet, contrary to the nation's tendency towards reducing the spatiality of Lower Manhattan to this event, Julius also sees the site as "a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten" (59). His restless movement around Wall Street, Ground-

Zero, Battery Park and several other Lower Manhattan locations draws attention to the incomplete erasures of traumatic counter-histories resulting from selective processes of memorialization that privilege the suffering of white citizen-subjects, in spaces written and re-written through capital's creative-destruction of the city and the commemoration practices of the state. "Acts of commemoration," David Simpson contends, "are particularly sensitive occasions for assessing the balance of change and continuity within the culture at large" (*Commemoration* 1). For Julius, these occasions can sometimes distract from the palimpsest that makes up urban space.

The text itself progressively rewrites the space, against the grain of monumental narrative, through Julius' eyes. It spotlights power's impulse towards selective remembrance of the past during his trip to Belgium, when he notes how a monument to Paul Claudel – a right-wing, Nazi collaborator – pardons him because he was an exceptional writer (144). Brussels, he contends, is a "city of monuments" where "greatness [is] set in stone and metal" as "obdurate replies to uncomfortable questions" (145).<sup>113</sup> Implicitly, this description of Brussels portends the future of New York City, another urban space that regimes of commemoration gradually transform into a dead, symbolically inert museum dedicated to sorting the tragedies worth marking from those worth forgetting, a task which is often undertaken by those who history has treated more kindly. The stubborn replies of the World Trade Center space in the novel remain in flux for Julius as new balances and continuities have yet to take permanent hold at the rapidly changing site.<sup>114</sup> Instead of mimicking this monumental history and its denial of how space is mediated through subjectivity and its myriad of disavowals, *Open City* presents readers with a wandering viewpoint oscillating between the interior of the narrator-subject and the exterior, panoramic analysis of the post-9/11 symbolic order and the spatialities in which Julius is embedded. Thus, we see the post-9/11 social order through a number of scale models – the individual subject, the urban and the national – that traverse one another, reconfiguring our interpretive horizons into a palimpsest of thoughts, memories, histories and spaces rather than reifying them into a single, distant, overhead perspective.

## 4.5. Decryptions

While Julius acknowledges how the forbidden depiction of bodies falling from the towers and the conspicuous absence of their remains constitute the most immediately perceptible erasure of upsetting associations with the space, he also insists this censorship is “not the first erasure on the site” (58).<sup>115</sup> Whereas post-9/11 texts such as *Falling Man*, *Windows on the World* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* each attempt to overcome the disavowal of these falling figures in particular, Julius offers longer historical views that attempt to show how space and time can be read relationally with the wandering subject in order to exhume the other bodies written out of the historical archive by the allegedly singular trauma of September 11. Several such histories traverse the World Trade Center site, which Julius observes contains a subway train cutting across the worksite like a “livid vein drawn across the neck of 9/11,” a giant open wound in the earth and in the mind (58) that recalls Remy’s psyche in *The Zero*. The narrator’s historical excavation of Lower Manhattan focuses in particular on the immigrant histories obscured by the dominant narratives of collective trauma, loss and recovery popularly associated with the area. Although disavowed through ideological blindness, each one of New York City’s “past moments was present now as a trace” (54) and Julius exposes these buried traces to readers, expanding the possible significations for the space and its surrounding area otherwise relegated to the blind spot in ideological constructions of the city.

Whereas the concept of the “open city” has long been associated with urban centers fortunate enough to avoid military violence, Julius’ examinations of the spaces and symbols of New York instead confront the spatial and symbolic violence done in the name of power (but obscured by narratives of national innocence), whether of capital, the state or the nation: not the singular event but the ongoing systematic processes and their disavowals of history.<sup>116</sup> As Julius notes regarding Brussels, which negotiated for its survival with invading powers during WWII, to be an “open city” entails escaping history by collaborating with the enemy: “Had Brussels’s rulers not opted to declare it an open city and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War,” Julius observes, “it might have been reduced to rubble. It might have been another Dresden. As it was, it had remained a vision of medieval and baroque building periods” (*Open City*

97). Applying the same logic to New York City suggests a similar exemption from historical violence was punctured by the shocking acts of 11 September 2001. However, this assumption misreads urban space. That the attacks were constructed as a singular event, rather than a more spectacular and violent repetition of the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing, or the 1997 Oklahoma City Bombing, or the 1920 bombing of JP Morgan, spotlights an oblivious approach to history that Julius seeks to dismantle through his urban perambulations and excavations. *Open City* proposes that New York City never escaped from violence – it foreclosed it.

The city is thus “open” to Julius in a different sense: he is sensitive to its ignored past, which he reads as if the city were a text in need of interpretation. From his perspective, the novel adeptly exposes numerous foreclosures in American ideology following September 11, which for him betray cultural symptoms of melancholic illness. In a brief allusion to Sigmund Freud’s essays *Mourning and Melancholia* and *The Ego and the Id*, Julius focuses on the country’s failure to fully integrate its losses:

Freud suggested that, in normal mourning, one internalizes the dead. The dead are fully assimilated into the living, a process he called introjection. In mourning that does not proceed normally, mourning in which something has gone wrong, this benign internalization does not happen. Instead, there’s an incorporation. The dead occupy only a part of the one who survived; they are sectioned off, hidden in a crypt, and from this place of encryption they haunt the living. The neatness of the line we had drawn around the catastrophic events of 2001 seemed to me to correspond to this kind of sectioning off... [T]he mourning had not been completed, and the result had been the anxiety that cloaked the city. (208-9)

Julius’ clinical diagnosis of melancholy as a national structure of feeling following September 11, in which both the city and the nation fail to properly acknowledge the dead, draws on Freud’s own reorientation of psychoanalysis away from treating the individual and towards understanding the social. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” he contends that although melancholia often entails the “loss of a beloved person,” it can also refer to the loss of “an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as the fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on” (310). From this vantage point, the failure of mourning implicates itself in the broader social and historical abstraction which Julius tries to grasp, in which the World Trade Center disaster becomes a metonym for the loss



of national innocence. However, this implication necessitates probing the other unacknowledged losses within the national psyche.

*Open City* suggests that collective disavowals prevent the country from closing the book on 9/11, once and for all. Critics often concur with the assessment of the national structure of feeling the novel builds through Julius' observations, noting how post-9/11 politics and culture tends to fetishize particular losses while ignoring others, relegating them to a sort of cultural crypt. Like *Open City*, David Eng contends that "the nation-state itself can be melancholically structured" through the "refusal of the nation to confront its other losses" ("Silence" 92) and that this is a "melancholic history of particular institutionalized political, economic, and cultural exclusions, domestic and abroad that repeatedly return and cannot be laid to rest" (92). Similarly, in *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler argues that mechanisms for mourning the losses of September 11 – such as *The New York Times* "Portraits of Grief" series, or the national outpouring of sympathy for 9/11's victims and their families – can unintentionally obscure the losses of others both inside (racial minorities, queer subjects) and outside (residents of Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan) the American nation: "we have to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving, how they sometimes operate in tandem with prohibition on the public grieving of others' lives, and how this differential allocation of grief serves the de-realizing aims of military violence" (37).<sup>117</sup>

Responding to these failures of mourning, Julius' brief glimpses of historical insight belie a national tradition of forgetting in the United States. Dr. Saito, Julius' friend and former professor, points to the amnesiac memory of war as an example of this phenomenon. He claims that connecting "all the intended and unintended consequences of invasion" in Korea, Vietnam and now Iraq represents the "mental battle for a different generation" that is combating its own forgetfulness (170-1). For his own part, Julius sees this forgetfulness as a product of the West's lull into a false sense of security (200): "We try to forget that other cities in other times have seen worse, that there isn't anything that immunizes us from plague of one kind or another, that we are just as susceptible as any of those past civilizations were, but we are especially unready for it" (201). These statements point to an inability or unwillingness of the United States to avow its

complicity in suffering and its own vulnerability to violence both at home and abroad. Processes such as colonialism, displacement, slavery and systematic racism enter the crypt of America's national ego, which instead fetishizes the ideologies of freedom, equality and opportunity. Cole explains in an interview with *NPR*,

My view of writing about those things [like Sept. 11] is that you can best write about it by writing about other things, by understanding that catastrophic trauma is not new in this city. There has been extreme violence all through the history of New York that has been suppressed. So, the way to process what happened on 9/11 is to cast back and be sensitive to previous traumas, such as the erasure of the Native American past, such as the erasure of the slave owning past in this city... the past is present with us. ("An Immigrant's Quest")

In the novel's frequent references to underworlds of the city, Julius presents a topographical model for locating encrypted histories beneath the feet of everyday New Yorkers. For instance, whereas Julius describes his daily walks as "therapeutic," he in contrast sees "masses of people... pushed by a counter-instinctive death drive into movable catacombs" where strangers, in solitude, are "reenacting unacknowledged traumas" (7). These traumas, in other words, are stratified into city space. The association only shifts to death later on, when he reflects on the Paris Metro and the ancient city of Heliopolis as places of "underground travel" containing "numberless dead, in forgotten cities, necropolis, catacombs," a realization he makes just before the city appears below him during the descent of his plane into New York City (93-4).<sup>118</sup>

Although potentially complicit in abstracting space from history, seen from this overhead perspective, the city itself tellingly begins to resemble a giant crypt, an observation not beholden to the accuracy of the model but indicative of that model's failures to fully comprehend the space it represents. When returning to New York from Belgium, Julius claims, "I was saddled with strange mental transpositions: that the plane was a coffin, that the city below was a vast graveyard with white marble and stone blocks of various heights and sizes" (150). Despite this overhead position, *Open City* suggests that even a model that perfectly reproduces the city fails to account for a number of startling blind spots.

Other references to graveyards in the narrative point to how the city and its commemorative practices manifest power dynamics spatially by disavowing counter-histories of death. In particular, they suggest how commemoration of the hegemonic white culture attempts to erase the deaths of the African Americans used to build Lower Manhattan. The trappings of power materialize for Julius in the Trinity Church graveyard, full of proclaimed American patriots like Alexander Hamilton, but comically unwilling to offer him shelter from the poor weather (49). This grander graveyard contrasts with an almost entirely forgotten one located in the shadow of the immigration building. The “tiny plot,” located between two huge buildings, is only accompanied by a small inscription that “identified it as a memorial for the site of an African burial ground” (220). Once six acres, “most of the burial ground was now under office building, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government” (220). “Into this earth, had been interred the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves,” Julius explains, “but then the land had been built over and the people of the city had forgotten that it was a burial ground” (220). These two contrasting graveyards present radically different degrees of commemorative recognition and thereby reflect the melancholic incapacity to incorporate the slave dead into the symbolic-spatial economy of the city and, implicitly, the nation as well.

Julius’ project of uncovering these buried histories echoes a historical biography written by one of his patients, titled *The Monster of New Amsterdam*, a “comprehensive study” of Cornelis Van Tienhoven, a “notorious... seventeenth century scout of New Amsterdam, officially empowered to enforce the law among the Dutch colonialists of Manhattan Island... [and] known for his many brutal acts” against the local indigenous population (25-6). “The blurbs on the flyleaf, written by leading American historians” Julius observes, “were fulsome, praising the book for shedding light on a forgotten chapter in colonial history” (26). Although not sharing their enthusiasm and seemingly only interested in the book as a document illuminating his patients’ chronic depression (essentially sacrificing the broader picture to the relatively narrow detail), Julius’ own insights perform similar labor, exhuming the largely forgotten histories of Dutch settlement, black slavery and Native American displacement. As Freud’s model suggests, these histories, however elided within the national ego, are not lost to us and are thus in urgent need of excavation from their crypts. Julius’ scholar-patient complains,

“It’s a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past,” especially since, “it’s not even past, it’s still with us today; at least it’s still with me” (27). Her slippage between “us” and “me” reveals the overlapping lacks of the melancholic racial subject and the melancholic nation, both of which cannot move forward without public reckoning of those disturbing remainders of colonial history that the country otherwise disavows.

“[E]ach period of history that has made and remade Lower Manhattan,” John Kuo Wei Tchien argues, “placed priority on power and exclusion, and each gained momentum from earlier inequalities” (*After WTC* 36). The novel figures this lineage through his connection of white whale portents in the Dutch colonial era of NYC, Trinity Church, the slave trade and the current regimes of finance capital. Julius recalls that “Trinity Church was chartered in the waning years of the seventeenth century; seafarers in general and whalers in particular had set out on their outbound journeys with the blessings of its congregation” (49). Among the benefits for the church of this arrangement is that it had “full rights over any shipwrecks or beached whales on the isle of Manhattan” (49). In one 1647 incident, when an albino whale washed up on Manhattan, unlikely in inland waters, it was read as a powerful portent in New Amsterdam (50). Such a reading continues in a tradition prior to America’s settlement. Previous whale beachings back in the Netherlands had led its people to read “a link between this monster and the atrocities committed by the hated Spanish troops in the principality of Cleves in August that same year” (51). By recounting this superstition in the spatial context of contemporary New York City, Julius draws an analogy between one set of historical atrocities and another, perpetrated this time by the Dutch, in the New World: “For the Dutch, who were attempting, at the time, not only to define their new republic but also to consolidate their hold on New Amsterdam and other foreign possessions, the spiritual meaning of the whale was ever-present” (51). While Julius does not indict Trinity Church directly, he does observe that they benefitted from the atrocities of slavery and dispossession on which the New York City his patient documents in her book is literally and figuratively built.<sup>119</sup>

*Open City* observes that capitalism benefitted as much as the religious establishment from these power relations. If his description of the beached albino whale maintains the relationship between whiteness and Dutch colonialism, then Julius’

descriptions of Wall Street and other emblematic spaces of finance capital as white suggest that this relationship continues today, but with the addition of an oblivious sense of transcending the past. His journey begins at the Wall Street subway station, where the “high, white [ceiling] consisting of a series of interconnected vaults”, the “rows of columns running alongside its length,” the “glass” and the “dominance of white in the color scheme” render it “more reminiscent of a cathedral” (46). Here, the access point to the center of American finance capitalism appears as if it has a religious connotation, not unlike Trinity Church, but one associated with artifice rather than spirituality. Its appearance to Julius as a “gigantic assembly of white plastic” underscores the sense of a cheap, manufactured illusion of transcendence, altering his “original impression of the grandeur of the space”: “The columns could have been wrought from recycled plastic chairs, and the ceiling seemed to have been carefully constructed out of white Lego blocks” (46). His final impression of “being in a large scale model” recalls the miniature cityscape he encounters at the Queens Art Museum. As Susan Stewart writes regarding dollhouses, another sort of abstract miniature structure, this space functions as a “pure façade” that is “metonymic with the larger set of property relations outside of it” (*On Longing* 63). In the station’s case, the emphasis on the color white implies a connection between this space, the history of Dutch colonialism and the myth of the beached white whale in New Amsterdam. Even though the New York Stock exchange, illuminated by its “footlighting” almost seems to “levitate” (48), unanchored in material reality, floating above the construction zone and security measures below it, Julius looks awry at this symbolism when he notes that City Bank of New York, “like the other companies founded by merchants and bankers in the same time period” profited from slavery through making it possible for southern plantation owners to “pay for the purchase of slaves” (163). In this way, “the moral guilt they [incurred] was equivalent to that of the slave traders themselves” (163). The images of the pure, clean, *white* institution conceal these stains on its hermetically-sealed-from-reality façade.

*Open City* proposes that Lower Manhattan remains a site of contestation where the official historical narrative comes into conflict with histories written out of that record by the disavowed power relations of the nation and thus demonstrates how some losses receive more attention than others. Julius’ “open city” refers not only to New York City as a site of cosmopolitan possibility but also to the open wound – the “livid vein drawn

across the neck of 9/11” – that marks the forgotten racial histories which cut across these urban spaces and disturb the fantasies that otherwise shape and are shaped by them.<sup>120</sup>

## 4.6. Liberal Aestheticism

*Open City's* insight into space and history makes the affirmative case for Julius' highly sensitive, literate subjectivity. "I think there are ways of doing history that are not restricted to academic history," Cole contends: "Academic history has necessary restrictions on it but I think there is another kind of history that a creative writer can contribute: the affective history that comes from one's interaction with the trace of the past" ("Teju Cole"). Through its construction of Julius, *Open City* explores the role of subjectivity in the production of knowledge after 9/11, but also suggests that this second "affective history" can prove restrictive in its own way: Julius' narrative focalization as he moves across urban space necessarily imposes structural limits on what readers can see about him and how they can see it, limits similar to those imposed by materialities and representations of space. Although the novel spotlights the disavowed formations of racism, xenophobia, violence and exclusion that disrupt the appearance of American exceptionalism, *Open City* also explores how oblivious modes of subjectivity are produced by and productive of blind spots in personal, national and urban self-presentations after 11 September 2001.

*Open City* constructs Julius' subjectivity as a dialectical tension between his withdrawal from the public and political, and the clearing of space for Julius to make the insightful observations that reconstruct memories of American atrocities and thus destabilize the ideological fictions of national innocence. Even while Julius' liberal aestheticism – his profound economic privilege, education and philosophical sensitivity – problematically distances him from the world and his moral responsibility to it, this very distance from direct action, the *privilege* of his liberal aestheticism, enables him to question the world around him. *Open City* explores this paradox by complicating constructions of post-9/11 space, history and subjectivity.

Cole has written extensively on the paradox that privilege (racial, economic, educational) is both enabling and disabling. Counterintuitively, he argues there are in fact instances in which a rich educational privilege, rather than helping to improve the world, can instead enable the disavowal of more difficult to assimilate truths of contemporary politics. Take, for instance, his discussion of President Obama's literary consumption, which coincidentally includes *Netherland*, and production, such as the sophisticated memoirs *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. In an essay on the contradiction between Obama's vaunted reading habits and the unabated executive drone strikes program, Cole challenges the easy equation of ethically sensitive literature and cultivated literary taste with moral practices: "We praise literature in self-evident terms: it is better to read than not to read, for reading civilizes us, makes us less cruel, and brings the imaginations of others into ours and vice versa. We persist in this belief regardless of what we know to the contrary: that the Nazis' affection for high culture did not prevent their crimes" ("Reader's War"). In Obama's case, Cole argues, literary sensitivity serves as a screen for a myriad of moral lapses, including the execution from afar of hundreds of innocent civilians. "Literature fails us here," he proposes, because it leaves unanswered the question of, "What makes certain Somali, Pakistani, Yemeni, and American people of so little account that even after killing them, the United States disavows all knowledge of their deaths?" ("Reader's War"). Whereas some Americans might prefer to believe Obama – the superior reader, writer and (presumably) intellect – presents a complete departure from the misguided policies of his gut-following predecessor, George W. Bush, the assumption does not always match the reality.<sup>121</sup> Let us not forget that even Bush, popularly ridiculed for his lack of intelligence, felt obligated to show his learning through a widely publicized reading contest with his advisor Karl Rove, as if speed-reading ninety-five books would burnish his tarnished presidential credentials and mitigate public doubts regarding his own morally rash decisions.

Yet, that is not to say that literature accomplishes nothing unique or valuable. Using Cole's questioning of the alignment between reading and morality, *Open City* itself deals with the occasional disjuncture between a rich liberal education and active ethical engagement. Midway through the novel, Julius reveals one essential ethical "blind-spot" in his own perspective that shows the limitations of his intellectually engaged but

affectively detached subjectivity. Having travelled from New York City to Brussels on holiday, he meets Farouq, a Moroccan immigrant whose studies in Marxist critical theory lead Julius to question his own political commitments. Despite this brief flirtation with Farouq's ideas, however, he comes to see them as a mirror-image of the violence perpetrated by the very anti-Muslim forces the young man critiques, corrupted by the attractive yet empty "rage" and "rhetoric" of direct action: "A cancerous violence had eaten into every political idea, had taken over the ideas themselves, and for so many, all that mattered was the willingness to do something. Action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone, the way to catch the attention of the young and recruit them to one's cause, was to be enraged" (107).<sup>122</sup> Julius' analysis of Farouq suffers from a dangerous conflation of critique with terrorism and offers his own apathy as an unsatisfactory alternative. "It seemed," he writes in response to his image of Farouq, "as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties" (107). Julius acknowledges this idea as itself a possible "ethical lapse," but the real issue is how he poses the problem: those who abhor violence against strangers either advocate more reciprocal violence or must withdraw into a distant and disengaged solipsism, an ethical, moral and analytical oblivion which renounces serious political commitments of any kind.

Through Julius' focalization, *Open City* responds to the affective limitations of this withdrawal, tracing its constitutive foreclosures of a missing third position: genuine sympathy with and outrage over human suffering. Throughout the narrative, Julius disengages himself from any affective investment in the problems of others because they disturb his comfort. Instead, maintaining his distance, he frequently transforms this suffering into occasions for detached contemplation, or simply avoids the matter entirely. When Julius talks with Saidu, an illegal immigrant in federal holding facility awaiting deportation, he disregards the immigrant's extraordinary story of passage to the United States as fiction, then agrees to visit him again but never does (70). Moreover, he affirms his fondness for his former literature teacher, Dr. Saito, but ceases to visit him once he discovers the sudden advance of the professor's terminal medical condition. Julius also recalls a memory in which, when he was a child, his driver in Nigeria hits and fatally wounds a little girl while he watches, but Julius reports, "I didn't think about that little girl later that day, or the day afterward, or at any time at all afterward, I didn't talk



about her to my parents or anyone else” (226). Since Julius seeks to maintain his safe autonomy, he avoids all unpleasantness, a character flaw of which he seems aware. When watching *The Last King of Scotland*, a film about political strongman Idi Amin and the Ugandan genocide, he admits, “I wished to believe that things are not as bad as they seemed. This was the part of me that wanted to be entertained, that preferred not to confront the horror” (31). Although he cannot will this comfort, he nonetheless wonders “what the use was of going into these recesses of the human heart” (31). Through its construction of Julius’ subjectivity, the novel investigates the withdrawal from politics, inter-personal feeling and the public sphere into private contemplation. In place of these things, Julius’ freedom of thought and movement promotes numb engagement with New York City, Brussels and Lagos (the “open cities” of the novel) and its populations, a sort of affective disinvestment from suffering in the world.

Yet, the value of this position is more ambiguous than it might at first appear. Whereas Julius’ subjectivity seems to doom him to private contemplation, at the same time, his aptitude for suspending the injunction to political or social action, to revel in slowness at a time of dizzying change, generates the space within which he can discern the antagonisms that otherwise pass notice under the ideological guise of his “objective conditions.” The tension between these terms in the novel, which relies as much on its contemplative pauses as it does on its strategic avowals, produces a mood of alienated detachment that isolates Julius from the din of the surrounding world and thus facilitates his contemplative immersion in details otherwise lost to perception. “I’m trying to create a space where something can enter into your head—usually it’s something that is connected to cities and usually it’s something that has to do with trying to find a way to turn the volume down—so that something strange can happen,” Cole explains (“Pitch Forward”). Julius’ encounters with the Lacan’s “*tuche*” or Barthes’ “punctum” in visual phenomena (like with the paintings of John Brewster he examines) relies on this critical desire to slow things down and, even at only 259 pages, *Open City* is undoubtedly a *slow* novel, depending not so much on plot as the nodal points created by the narrator’s fleeting impressions and their productive juxtapositions. “[S]ince I’ve focused more on writing fiction and writing essays,” Cole admits, “I find that the training has been a great help to me because it has actually helped me to slow down and to be very deeply interested in bringing slowness into basically everything that I do” (“Pitch Forward”).

The distance of Julius' character from the social recalls Adorno's comments in *Aesthetic Theory* on what he calls "autonomous art." Arguing against the apparent irrelevance of art to society, Adorno, in a characteristic dialectical reversal, claims that it is that very separation from society which enables art's greatest contribution to it: the ability to register tensions external to the work as formal problems within it. "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form," he argues (*Aesthetic Theory* 6). In the way Adorno describes, the construction of Julius' disinterested detachment in the novel manifests a tension within contemporary liberal subjectivity between independence of mind (to recall Martin Amis) and the disavowed conditions of oppression, denial and violence that such an independence enables it to contest even while proving complicit in its reproduction. Throughout the novel, the notion of a consciousness autonomous from its social conditions both constrains and frees Julius: it *constrains* in the sense of restricting him to the sphere of private contemplation; it *frees* in the sense of distancing him from the conditions of his surroundings, giving him space to reflect on their origins. Julius' dominant mood of affectless drift and numb intellectual engagement is in constant friction with the atrocities he observes all around him, creating a self-conscious tension within the text that its readers must negotiate (just as readers must also do when confronted with the materialized suffering of troubled Brint Moltke's excremental sculptures in *The Suffering Channel*).

The novel presents Julius as the ideal liberal subject who is tolerant, flexible and open minded but ultimately prone to private, inert and alienated contemplation. In "The Arrival of Enigmas," *New Yorker* literary reviewer James Wood claims that the novel "seems a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism common to thousands, if not millions, of bookish types." For Wood, Julius captures an "engaged but disengaged" form of "political activity," a "curiosity perhaps purchased at the expense of commonality," where "selfish normality, this ordinary solipsism, this lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul is an obstacle to understanding other people, even as it enables liberal journeys of comprehension" ("Enigmas").<sup>123</sup> Wood correctly identifies Julius' detachment, but the narrator's alienated perspective could be further historicized within the post-9/11 moment because this representation of bourgeois aestheticism also describes the temptations faced by the liberally minded intellectual in post-9/11 America, able to recognize the mounting contradictions of global American hegemony and the

injustices perpetuated by the country on the poor, other and oppressed, but stuck within a stifling political and cultural climate that makes retreat into private contemplation seem like the only viable alternative to social ostracism. Outspoken intellectuals have suffered the consequences of choosing more confrontational public roles, but Julius, even as his analysis often concurs with theirs, inverts their courageous publicity, preferring instead to keep critique personal and thus maintain his privileged place within his adoptive homeland.

#### **4.7. Dialectical Histories**

Put differently, Julius' liberal aestheticism is based on the fetish of privileged distance potentially aligned with rather than opposed to forgetting insofar as it reproduces the fantasy of him as a stable and autonomous universal subject who places himself outside of history, withdrawing from both the social and the political if only to rescue a contemplative posture. In this way, Julius stands, it seems, in stark contrast to Cole himself, who publically critiques American imperialism both in online essays and on Twitter, yet this opposition actually gestures to another, disavowed side of Cole's social persona. Specifically, Cole uses *Open City* to work through the negation of his own political publicity: the disavowed privilege of relatively unencumbered mobility, free thought and comfortable distance from direct involvement in urban and global violence that enable him to articulate his critique in the first place. Fiction allows Cole to explore, through the construction of Julius, the tension between his persona as a cosmopolitan public intellectual and a withdrawn liberal aestheticism produced by and potentially complicit with the affective disinvestment from history promoted within a national culture of forgetting.

Through Julius, Cole produces a "different kind of history" that takes into account the affective orientation of the post-9/11 subject, which becomes more apparent when we compare the character's encounter with forgotten historical atrocities to Cole's intellectual activism. *Open City* is Cole's first novel (in North America), but his entanglement in a recent controversy surrounding the viral *Kony 2012* video – a publicity campaign meant to draw attention to and thus enable the capture of an indicted African war criminal – testifies to his ongoing interest in confronting the West's mechanisms of

disavowal, especially when it comes to the racial other.<sup>124</sup> In provocation to the impassioned cultural responses to the video and their constructions of Africa as in need of benevolent U.S. intervention, Cole, himself an immigrant from Nigeria, wrote a series of seven Tweets developing his critique of what he calls the “white savior industrial complex.” “The white savior,” he argues, “supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.” Rather than seeing as positive the outpouring of Western disgust regarding cult and militia leader Joseph Kony’s brutal exploitation of child soldiers, Cole instead claims these reactions have nothing to do with “justice” so much as “having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.”<sup>125</sup> His essay argues that the outrage is condescending because there is “close to 1.5 million Iraqis [dead] from an American war of choice” which no one will worry about in the least. Considering the imperial violence perpetrated by the United States against racially denounced enemies during the War on Terror, Cole’s essay identifies the hypocrisy in making one (albeit incontestably immoral) African man the exclusive source of human brutality.

In *The Atlantic*, Cole continued to openly challenge the pleasing ideological fantasy of America as the world’s altruistic savior of racial others that he believes this campaign promotes. Writing a response to those who accuse him of sympathy with racism and genocide, he points to how the lack of “direct speech” and the unwillingness to acknowledge privilege are symptomatic of a broader American inability to speak honestly about the suffering of others and its true causes. He argues that “Kony 2012,” however well intentioned, simply gets the “issues wrong” because it fails to see the “larger disasters behind it”: “militarization of poorer countries, short-sighted agricultural policies, resource extraction, the propping up of corrupt governments, and the astonishing complexity of long-running violent conflicts over a wide and varied terrain” (“White Savior”). Although readers should not treat Julius as little more than a proxy for his author, his reactions to an “African film” displays a similar weariness with the “convention of the good white man in Africa” where “Africa was always waiting, a substrate for the white man’s will, a backdrop for his activities” (*Open City* 29). Julius observes, much like Cole, how the Western fetishizing of outraged activism enables the disavowal of structural causes for oppression and more carefully considered explanations that “connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated

'disasters'" ("White Savior"). Yet, Julius lacks Cole's knack for publicity (coincidentally, he is conspicuously uninterested in technology). The text restricts his critical insight to private contemplation, thus placing a structural limit on what he can observe for us – what "dots" he can connect or "patterns" he can see – and the effects that observation can have in the world. Thus, the text constructs Julius as the disinterested obverse of Cole's publicity: his privileged class position or his relative exemption from the hassles of post-9/11 security measures that give him the space to think more slowly and carefully about the structural origins of global violence.

If Cole conducts an ideological critique of the prevailing American common-sense about the origins of African crises, then Julius provides a differently focused, more obviously subjective portrait of a privileged immigrant subject whose humanistic insight produces its own problematic blind spots. The narrative's explores how subjectivity shapes ours views of truth and knowledge as much as any "objective conditions" do. The assumption that Julius – shaped by an interplay of narrative convention and multicultural acceptance as a reliable narrator – uncovers and contextualizes every significant detail is a fantasy complicit with bourgeois individualism that enables the text to conceal his past from readers. We only discover the personal secret his own blind spot harbors – and the limits to his disinterestedness – when Moji accuses him of rape (244). Although Julius never mentions this incident directly – indeed he claims to not even remember Moji when he first runs into her at the supermarket (156) – it forces us to retroactively look for clues to its veracity in the structure of the novel. "We experience life as a continuity," Julius explains, "and only after it becomes the past, do we see the discontinuities" (155). What few discontinuities appear testify to conveniently amnesiac attributes of Julius' characterization: "The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float" (155). Julius' treatment of the past as this "empty space" speaks to the ephemerality of memory, particularly when it is not underwritten by whoever is in charge of the narration, a problem by no means limited to Julius but rather indicative of the more general conditions of historical disavowal faced by immigrant subjects in the United States. When Julius claims that Nigeria was a "great expanse of nothing" like to one he describes, when he claims only to recollect through certain incidents "with an outside

intensity” that drown out all else (155), he identifies the mechanism of selective memory that plagues society both in the registers of the individual and the cultural.

In light of Moji’s claims, statements of Julius’ selective memory are particularly evident in his attitudes towards gender in the text. Without undue psychologizing, the fact Julius reports to despise his mother looks different following the revelation: does he have some sort of latent anger towards women? One incident finds Julius looking out his window at a women’s protest march immediately after telephoning his estranged girlfriend, Nadaje. He briefly notes their chants of “*Women’s bodies, women’s lives, will not be terrorized*” and then shuts his window to the cold, drops the topic and begins talking about the changes in weather (23). Why would Julius, an exemplary figure of meditative contemplation, so quickly desert this rich topic of consideration? In another moment, Julius recalls how his mother implied that perhaps his grandmother had been raped by Russians following the liberation of Berlin during the Second World War, a revelation which he attributes to his mother’s displacement of grief over losing Julius’ father on to the “primal grief of rape” (80). Why would his mind move so quickly to this unsubstantiated alternative explanation? These and other curious moments in the text begin to constellate around Moji’s accusation, casting into doubt Julius’ reliability as a narrator and thus the model of transparent subjectivity he appears to represent. The details which fail to interest him become as significant as those that successfully do so. Since subjectivity always mediates our relationship to the past, *Open City* demonstrates how memory and history do not necessarily coincide.

As if to emphasize Julius’ control over his own story, *Open City* never offers a satisfactory answer to Moji’s accusations. Julius very carefully talks around the incident, claiming neither guilt nor innocence. Soon after his expression of frustration with “blind spot directly behind the eye” (238), Julius recounts how he simply left the party where he speaks with Moji (242), only to have us discover in a flashback two pages later that at that party she had calmly leveled her charges against him (244-5). In between, he claims that “each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point of normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him,” and declares his own satisfaction with his ethical choices (243). At the same time, he acknowledges that Moji, in his professional opinion, does not appear to be lying: she

genuinely believes her accusation, making Julius the “villain” in someone else’s story (243). In other words, Julius never denies the charges against him. In a way, their factual truth matters less than the disparagement their very existence casts against the narrator’s characterization and the reorientation towards the social that they require of him. Suddenly, Julius must recognize himself less as the isolated monad he affects and more as a subject constituted through his relation to others. Doing so calls into question his capacity for insight, particularly if this insight facilitates fetishistic distance from uncomfortable truths.

The problems this revelation raises regarding the partiality of Julius’ morality and ethics trouble his apparent disinterestedness, but his lack of transparency as a subject also suggests a mode for reading the moral and ethical blind spots of the social, cultural and political contexts in which he is embedded. Like Julius and his presentation of the self, post-9/11 America presents a selective, idealized image of the country which omits or otherwise disavows its own traumatizing acts. In particular, being an immigrant in post-9/11 America, however disavowed, links Julius to a violent national history that periodically irrupts into his vision, temporarily disturbing his safe autonomy by indexing his place in a complex web of social relations that decenter him and traverse fantasies of his autonomous, free-floating perspective.

Even at the novel’s end, Julius continues his circulations through urban space but he lacks the will to overcome his own solipsism and enter into the social and political realms informing his fascinating but limited point of view. Although richly insightful, Julius’ melancholic analysis of the city ultimately proves unsatisfying because it lacks an adequate orientation towards the future, the loss of which, as Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek inform us, is itself a symptom of melancholic illness.<sup>126</sup> However, the dialectical construction of Julius also complicates the fantasy of the racial, cultural or ethnic other as an inherently more authentic source of historical knowledge; instead, *Open City* affirms through Julius that subjectivity and memory inescapably shape and are shaped by personal, urban and national histories fraught with disavowal and fetishistic distance. In the case of 11 September 2001, this fetishism and disavowal entails writing the particular traumas other than those suffered during the terrorist attacks out of the historical record in order to rescue the nation’s myth of lost innocence. *Open*

*City*, even while recording the prevalence of fetishism and disavowal, holds out hope that quiet thinking, removed from the imperative for immediate action or sympathy, will maintain the gap separating the amnesiac memory of Lower Manhattan as the locus of national trauma from its history as the site of countless unacknowledged events buried in the urban strata beneath the World Trade Center.



## Afterword:

### ‘this little parenthesis of light...’

*[I]n its essence, utopia has nothing to do with imagining an impossible ideal society; what characterizes utopia is literally the construction of a utopic space, a social space outside the existing parameters, the parameters of what appears to be ‘possible’ in the existing social universe.*

-Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq* (123)

*This is our age of exploration...into that unmapped country waiting beyond the frontiers of the seas of Time. We make our journeys out there in the low light of the future, and return to the bourgeois day and its mass delusions of safety, to report on what we’ve seen. What are any of these ‘utopian dreams’ of ours but defective forms of time travel?*

-Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (942)

*Fantasies of Oblivion* has interrogated the ideological fantasies structuring the War on Terror. Its chapters examined negations to thinking, the disavowals both acknowledged and cancelled, which evade understandings of September 11 and its global consequences. Although these negations are always messy – constellating through what Raymond Williams calls dominant, residual and emergent formations – the project has thus far only contended with the dominant and residual. In conclusion, it now turns to the emergent—discourses of utopia and affective economies of hope endangered by the intensified challenge of institutionalized national security states, data collection, secret agency surveillance and executive drone strikes. Rather than singular, the clash of utopian ideologies and their temporal discourses involves multiple, contradictory versions of time and the future. These ideological discourses include the “Bush Doctrine” of pre-emptive war and detention, in which certainty of a catastrophic future is used to justify the sovereign suspension of legal rights (albeit, as Judith Butler argues, inscribed within neoliberal governmentality and biopolitical management), but also another time, a counter-time, described by Wendy Brown as the “untimeliness” of critique.<sup>127</sup> Post-9/11

works by Thomas Pynchon register these competing impulses struggling to define the course of the future and our imaginations of it, producing counter-discourses that trace cracks in the ideological politics of time practiced by the American state during the War on Terror.

In *Edgework*, Brown argues that widespread dismissal of critique after 11 September 2001 – as if it was simply not the right time to question the motives of the Bush administration or to discuss the conditions that led to the attacks – only further affirms critique’s necessity (4). Critique must be untimely, must brush against the grain of closures in historical thinking, if it is to matter at all. “If the charge of untimeliness also inevitably fixes time,” she contends, “then disrupting this fixity is crucial to keeping the times from closing in on us. It is a way of reclaiming the present from the conservative hold on it that is borne by the charge of untimeliness” (4). Brown’s call for critique as rupture – “a rupture in a political imaginary, a rupture in a collective self-understanding dependent on the continuity of certain practices” (7) – recalls the provocative image of the critic as bomb thrower “about to make the continuum of history explode” forwarded by Walter Benjamin in his “On the Concept of History” (*SW:V4* 395). Critique entails smashing the “dials of clocks” (395) owned by the ruling order in order to open a new politics of time, but without succumbing to the ineffectual stupidity of terrorism. Rather than destruction, it depends on the production of a counter-time, a ghostly and utopian parallel universe latent but unrealized within the confines of the dystopian present, a present which has already been disingenuously narrated by the historical victors as the best possible world we can expect.

September 11 reminds us of the historical contradictions which Derrida claims “haunt” dominant utopian temporalities of neoliberal security and free market democracy: these global arrangements and the histories they disavow reappear – sometimes with tragic violence – as a return of the repressed. “After the end of history,” he writes, “the spirit comes by coming back [re-ve-nant], it figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again” (*Specters of Marx* 10). However, instead of examining the “specters of Marx” that Derrida suggests haunt the end of history, post-9/11 culture remains transfixed on the specters of Atta and his

terrorist sympathizers, the symptom blamed (rather than flaws in the system itself) for the dystopian present.

Of course, simple “alternatives” to the post-9/11 politics of time fails to explain why the manifestly depressing War on Terror continues to itself haunt our imaginations. The issue of national melancholy *Open City* raises not only turns us towards the traumatic past but also ironically opens the horizon of a traumatic future. According to Giorgio Agamben, who here glosses Freud, “melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object” (*Stanzas* 20).<sup>128</sup> More specifically, as Barbara Biesecker argues, this pre-emptive mourning of a future loss feeds the logic of post-9/11 securitization: “Only under the pressure of the tightly controlled hallucination of a loss that is at once certain and indeterminate, both what always already is and what will have been, does it seem reasonable to declare a state of emergency that is indefinitely extended—temporally and spatially” (emphasis in original, “No Time” 155). Locating loss in the fantasmatic future-anterior (the speculative tense of “will-have-been”) has been a central tenet of the War on Terror, in which an imagined apocalyptic consequence of inaction – another “9/11” or a rogue nuclear strike – retroactively posits the necessity of draconian preventative measures in the present. The so-called Bush Doctrine argues that pre-emptive military action, even in the absence of hard evidence, is an imperative for maintaining security. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, first published on 17 September 2002 and later updated in 2006, explains how the administration felt that its duty to,

protect the American people and American interests...obligates the government to anticipate and counter threats, using all elements of national power, before the threats can do grave damage. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. There are few greater threats than a terrorist attack with WMD.

Herein resides the administration’s entrenched politics of futurity, unknowability and action.

This statement also reveals the strange temporality of pre-emption, which must recognize the future as already lost in order to justify present military interventions in

Afghanistan and Iraq and sustain the anticipatory terror of its own vulnerable citizens. Brian Massumi calls this temporal paradox the “future birth of affective fact” in which, through the affective manipulations of the terror alert system and other technologies, the security state “snatches certainty from the jaws of uncertainty” in ways that are not just reactive but ultimately productive for those in power:

Pre-emption does not prevent, it effects. It induces the event, in effect. Rather than acting on the present to avoid an occurrence in the future, pre-emption brings the future into the present. It makes present the future consequences of an eventuality that may or may not occur, indifferent to its actual occurrence. The event’s consequences precede it, as if it had already occurred. Its event remains virtual – future-past – but is real and present in its effects. The present reality of its effects means that it can be responded to pragmatically all the while remaining virtual. (“Future Birth” 8)

The dematerialization of warfare – or its virtual character – is an effective tool used to justify the need for increased security at home, where the danger becomes an omnipresent yet near undetectable one—a constant source of potential trauma. “Traumatism,” Derrida contends, “is produced by the future, by the to come, by the threat of the worst to come, rather than by aggression that is ‘over and done with,’” including the threat of invisible attacks: biological, chemical, or technological (Borradori 97).<sup>129</sup> As Judith Butler notes, “state power restructures temporality itself, since the problem of terrorism is no longer a historically or geographically limited problem: it is limitless and without end, and this means that the state of emergency is potentially limitless and without end, and that the prospect of an exercise of state power in its lawlessness structures the future indefinitely” (*Precarious Life* 65). The paradoxical temporal dynamics of pre-emption foreclose the possibilities for different futures which are not either rigorously state controlled and therefore “safe,” or a radical negation of the known and therefore “apocalyptic.”<sup>130</sup>

Such thinking has even begun to permeate psychoanalytic discourses, despite their disagreement regarding the apocalyptic’s utility as a model for critique. “When it becomes a dominant or accentuated mode of thought,” Dominick LaCapra argues, “a postapocalyptic orientation tends to create what I term a sense of enlightened disempowerment—a kind of elaborately theorized fatalism, or, at best, a tragic sense

often associated with inchoate, endless desire for unheard-of change or the totally 'beyond,' which may itself not get beyond aimless agitation, blank utopianism or blind hope" (*History in Transit* 8). We might identify the condition LaCapra describes with what Walter Benjamin and Wendy Brown call "left wing melancholy," or what Jodi Dean sees as indicative of the fact that the true believers of conservative hegemony are the downtrodden leftists who continually acquiesce to its seemingly intractable dominance (*Neoliberal Fantasies* 1).<sup>131</sup> In contrast, Slavoj Žižek contends in his aptly titled *Living in the End Times* that an apocalyptic critical orientation is one of the only ways to overcome the gap between "knowledge and belief" which plagues readings of impending ecological catastrophe, for instance (328): we must accept that if current conditions extend forward, then the future is already lost; only then can we reinsert counter-factual potentials into the present through a proper act which rearranges the coordinates leading to an undesirable future (*Tragedy Farce* 151). Indeed, recent theoretical interventions have adapted this apocalyptic orientation, including Lee Edelman, whose book bears the provocative title of *No Future*, and (Retort member) T.J. Clark, who recently wrote a controversial essay in *New Left Review*, titled "For a Left with No Future."<sup>132</sup> This shift indicates the critical belief in the future wanes in light of current global crises, continuing a growing skepticism towards modern progressive teleologies, both capitalist and Marxist alike.

Post-apocalyptic literature after 9/11 does little to resolve this dispute in the context of the current challenges inherent to the perpetual state of emergency. Novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* imagine the United States "after the fall" (to borrow Richard Gray's phrase) and for the most part serve a diagnostic function which, aside from the utopian compensation of family affection, sees a bleak future emerging, respectively defined by blood thirsty violence and endless civil war. Although viable critical dystopias (in Thomas Moylan's formulation) their prescience as heuristics seems limited to the undesirable outcome without formulating a plausible counter-factual imagination.<sup>133</sup>

Indeed, science fiction films after September 11 also draw audiences to the brink of a utopian break with the dismal, dark realities they project in their narrative displacements of the present War on Terror, but prove structurally unable to entirely

reimagine the future. Take, for instance, director Alphonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* (2006), in which Theo Faron (Clive Owen), an emotionally detached bureaucrat in a near future authoritarian London, assumes responsibility for conveying Kee (Clare-Hope Askitey) and her baby – the first one born after more than seventeen years of global infertility – away from England. As Lee Edelman argues, and as I have examined in *A Gate at the Stairs*, children are privileged figures for futurity. Here, Kee's baby assumes the entire symbolic weight of human hope in the film, reinforced through Theo's instructions to bring her to the so-called "Human Project." Yet, when Theo succeeds, rowing his tiny boat away from the chaos back on shore and towards the obscure "Human Project" ship, the film simply ends, leaving the identity of those on this mysterious vessel and their intentions opaque. It is as if this encounter reaches a structural limit figured as a formal one: the horizon on which the ship appears also marks an imaginative boundary demarcating the narrative space of the dystopian film from some impossible to figure spatial and temporal beyond of a better, more "human" future other than the extended War on Terror.

*Children of Men* exemplifies what Fredric Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* identifies as a common issue of utopian narratives: formal relations of closure, inversion and exclusion suggest that what in them reveals the most to us "is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus" (xiii). Utopian narrative, in other words, formally figures our own failures to imagine and can thus "serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment [meaning] therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). Thus, the end of *Children of Men* confronts us with our own ideological limits, the inability to think our situation differently and thus move forward before another future hope dims on an otherwise dystopian horizon.<sup>134</sup> What can post-9/11 literature contribute to the imagination of utopian difference, and must such a project necessarily disavow a critical approach to the dystopian present?

Thus far, *Fantasies of Oblivion* has discussed how narratives after 11 September 2001 reframe the attacks through the disavowed ideological fantasies which mediate them. These literary re-framings remain largely silent regarding emergent yet foreclosed utopian counter-impulses that potentially disrupt the entrenched status quo, a gap that I

argue Thomas Pynchon addresses in his post-9/11 novels. In these novels, we find protagonists struggling with the limits of our ideological imagination and a symbolic order ossified through the imperatives for global “security.” Pynchon’s work has turned towards mapping counter-histories, counter-geographies, and counter-aesthetics that trace, however fleetingly, narrow cracks in the edifices of national, economic and military power where some betrayed, unnamed utopian impulse persists beyond the margins of the thinkable, latent yet not currently translated into a viable politics.

Despite the disparate time periods in which they are set, registering these utopian moments and the processes of foreclosure that obscure them unites Pynchon’s recent fiction – *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) – into a coherent critique of the American ideological project, framing the nation’s history as a betrayal of what Doc Sportello, one of Pynchon’s protagonists, terms “this little parenthesis of light” (*Inherent Vice* 254), a moment of imaginative possibility out of step with historical time and thus inevitably reclaimed by the darkness of the repressive state security apparatus and the unchecked greed of free market capitalism. Through historical displacement and ironic indirection, Pynchon’s texts recover these moments of possibility, these interruptions to the rigid, grammatical unfolding of history, which open on to tiny asides that interrupt the frictionless, linear flow of time before being swallowed up again by its forward momentum. In this way, his texts align with the “weak messianic power” Walter Benjamin attributes to the work of the historical materialist who recognizes that the “past carries with it a secret index of redemption” (*SW: V4* 390). “Historical materialism,” Benjamin could have written in reference to Pynchon, “wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger...of becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (*SW: V4* 391). If history has never ceased to tell the story of those ruling classes, then Pynchon seeks to suspend their progressive narrative and its dangerous implications for the future, to “brush history against the grain” (*SW: V4* 392) and thus redeem those utopian moments for the present, noting both the repetition of their attempted erasure and the potential for their recovery within a transforming global context in which we might think of every moment as taking place in the indeterminate “life between two deaths,” or of what Benjamin termed “dialectics at a standstill.”

Recalling the dramatic irony deployed in *The Suffering Channel* and “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” Pynchon’s latest novel, *Bleeding Edge*, is explicitly set in the historical moment immediately before and immediately after 11 September 2001, placing it on a blurry border between when the dot-com boom went bust – emblematic of the already deflated dreams of the “end of history” – and the terrorist attacks that this project argues would inaugurate a new symbolic order. Due to these topical references (Pynchon hasn’t written a book set in its own present since 1991’s *Vineland*), early commentators almost universally acknowledge this work as his “9/11 novel,” although do not frequently enough recognize its affinities with 2006’s expansive *Against the Day*, which retells the history of another forgotten “War on Terror” – the conspiracy between the democratic state and capitalist industrialists in the battle against left-wing radicalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – through a sepia-washed dime novel pastiche: time travel, teleportation, vengeful cowboys, union agitators, detectives, paranormal mysteries and ageless aeronauts compete for space in the globe-spanning, nearly 1100 page novel.<sup>135</sup> Michael Chabon argues in his commentary on *Bleeding Edge* that it is only through temporal displacements and figurative distortions in *Against the Day* that Pynchon manages to capture the hyperbolic excessiveness of 9/11, in the form of the “full Pynchon treatment”: an H.P. Lovecraft-esque creature attacking early twentieth-century New York City (“The Crying of September 11”).<sup>136</sup> In contrast, he contends *Bleeding Edge*’s description of the event seems inadequate and pedestrian, consisting of “mostly the details we have already long since been provided, in the language we have come to expect” (“Crying”).<sup>137</sup> If, as Chabon claims, Pynchon’s prose fails at the pivotal moment of the terrorist attacks, this supposed failure only enhances the inherent strangeness of the moments both before and after the event, in which, had 11 September 2001 not so emphatically intervened into history, the future could have moved in any number of different directions.

Pynchon’s text recovers the missed historical opportunity – the pre-9/11 “little parenthesis of light” – as it stages the struggle over control of rapidly transforming internet technology in the ruins of the dot-com boom. *Bleeding Edge* follows Maxine Tarnow, disbarred account-auditor turned private detective, hired to investigate a mysterious technology billionaire named Gabriel Ice, who may or may not be using a defunct internet start-up to funnel money to jihadists. During her investigation, Maxine



stumbles across “DeepArcher,” a deep-web “bleeding edge” program that enables its users to collaborate in inventing new digital worlds. If Pynchon punts on his description of the paradigmatic “event,” then he reserves his most poetic prose for Maxine’s exploration of DeepArcher, which tests the “bleeding edge” between reality and imagination, figuration and abstraction. Initially fascinated by the vistas of “continuous curves, the rendering, modeling, and shadows, blending and blur” (75), Maxine finds that “going deeper, you approach the border country on the edge of the navigable, the region of no information” until you are “gazing into a void incalculably fertile with invisible links” (358-9).

*Bleeding Edge* bears a striking resemblance to William Gibson’s earlier *Pattern Recognition*, which also features a female detective untangling an internet mystery similar to the one surrounding DeepArcher. Notable as the first Gibson novel set in the present, *Pattern Recognition* explicitly locates itself within the post-9/11 world, as Casey Pollard, a free-lance cool-hunter consultant with a visceral intuition for emergent consumer desire, chases the origins of the transfixing “footage,” a periodically updated online series of video clips boasting a dedicated fan subculture, for her suspicious employer, Hubertus Bigend of Blue Ant enterprises. In “Fear and Loathing in Globalization,” Fredric Jameson contends that the footage, “makes *Pattern Recognition* over into something like [Ernst] Bloch’s conception of the art inside itself like a black hole, a future indeterminacy suddenly shimmering in the present, the absent Utopian sublime suddenly opening up like a wormhole within the empty everyday” (110).<sup>138</sup> DeepArcher is precisely this sort of opening, a wormhole into another form of thinking that may even leave behind the novel form. As Wegner argues, “new media productions like the footage have displaced the novel as the privileged artistic form for the fostering of [subcultural] communities” – they become the “site of the collective production of meaning” with a “deep kinship with the classic achievements of literary modernism” (“Recognizing the Patterns” 191). Like Gibson, Pynchon cannot adequately define this emerging utopian form within his novel, but he can trace the contours of a utopian counter-fiction persisting on the margins of the existing historical narrative.

As Jonathan Lethem, who arguably treads similar territory in his recent novel *Chronic City* (2009), notes, “Pynchon has consistently invoked these sorts of quasi-

mystical values of yearning: spaces outside space, and times outside time. DeepArcher is his latest” (“Pynchonopolis”). In fact, DeepArcher could be read as drawn from the same imaginative sandbox of utopian longing through which Pynchon sifts in *Against the Day*. Although *Against the Day* offers one of Pynchon’s most well-resolved narratives – the goal of the three Traverse brothers (Kit, Frank and Reef) to assassinate Scarsdale Vibe, the wealthy industrialist who murdered their anarchist father, Webb Traverse, comes to fruition, albeit by a different set of hands – the nodal organization of the novel forces readers to seek meaning through forming constellations that cut across any number of utopian figures. Potential nodes for these constellations include the recurrent figures of light, Iceland Spar, Bi-location and the Sfinciuno Itinerary, each of which suggest the dialectical struggle between forces of utopian liberation and those of ideological containment. At stake in these figures in the mythical paradise of Shambhala, a precursor to DeepArcher that all of the characters seek but ultimately fail to reach. As one character muses, “For me, Shambhala, you see, turned to be not a goal but an absence. Not the discovery of a place but the act of leaving the futureless place where I was” (*Against the Day* 975). Despite these failures to reach and thus represent utopia, which remains narratively foreclosed – like *Children of Men’s* “Human Project” – just beyond an imaginative boundary, it functions as the “little parenthesis of light” in *Against the Day* that provides a negative heuristic through which to read not only the present but the present-pasts as yet un-reckoned. Light in this case figures imagination itself, bent by crystals of Iceland Spar to reveal latent possibilities for exploration, hidden on secret maps and itineraries, enabling readers, in a version of bi-location, to occupy multiple spaces and times at once: present, past and future become a readable archive with potential to illuminate our current War on Terror as part of an ongoing narrative of struggle between opposing forces otherwise obscured by the seeming imperatives of global “security.” Thus Pynchon’s utopian figures share some affinity with the “untimely” work of ideological critique Wendy Brown advocates.

Such critique acts as a decryption device that can translate utopian dreams back into legible forms. Since “the author of the Itinerary imagined the Earth not only as a three-dimensional sphere but, beyond that, as an imaginary surface, the optical arrangements for whose eventual projection on the two-dimensional page proved to be quite queer indeed,” the professor character explains. As a result of this extra dimension

– which one might align with a concealed utopian, imaginative impulse in excess of the ordinary – deciphering the map to Shambhala necessitates a special de-encryption device. “So we have a sort of anamorphoscope,” the professor continues, “more properly no doubt a paramorphoscope because it reveals worlds which are set to the side of the one we have taken, until now, to be the only world given us” (249). The optical illusion of anamorphic distortion, in which the representation of an object only appears “correct” when viewed from a certain vantage point, of course plays a central role in Lacanian theories of visual culture. For instance, drawing on Lacan’s insights from his Eleventh Seminar, Žižek proposes that the “point of anamorphosis in a picture” describes the “element that, when viewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours” (*Looking Awry* 90). Here, reading visual culture resonates with the psychoanalytic apprehension of the unconscious, a method which approximates Pynchon’s paramorphoscope: like psychoanalytic discourse, it opens up a gap in the given (day), a parallel universe that is in tension with the forces of social control, running against the day and against the grain, inscribed as an absence within history and within the novel itself. Like one might say of *Against the Day*, the Sficiuno Itinerary is “one of these paramorphic distortions, meant to be redeemed from the invisible with the aid of one peculiar configuration of lenses and mirrors, whose exact specifications were known only to the cartographer and the otherwise hopelessly insane artisans who produced it” (*AD* 249). Pynchon functions as both “cartographer” and “insane artisan” of utopian fantasy, leaving readers to decide on the right configuration of “lenses and mirrors” through which to read his hyperbolic narrative.

*Bleeding Edge* presents those readers with a familiar oscillation between utopian desire and ideological containment: does DeepArcher open a space for an as yet unimaginable society, or will it simply serve to further reproduce the status-quo? If the author is a literary cartographer of the imagination and the novel is a map used to locate the non-historical point of utopian longing in the past, then both engage in an unresolved struggle against the dominant forces of their “day.” In *Wired* magazine, Jason Tanz contends that *Bleeding Edge*’s “real accomplishment is to claim the last decade as Pynchon territory, a continuation of the same tensions — between freedom and captivity, momentum and entropy, meaning and chaos — through which he has framed the last

half-century” (“Prophet of the Post-Snowden Era”). Like “the footage” in Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, DeepArcher exemplifies these forces engaged in struggle over the foreclosed utopian impulses of technology and their ideological betrayals. Whereas Justin, DeepArcher’s original programmer, observes it is supposed to be a “timeless” and “history-free” refuge, the project nonetheless quickly degenerates into “politics, markets, expeditions, asskicking” (*Bleeding Edge* 373). Whereas screams for “Internet freedom” get louder and louder, another character observes, “the game is fixed, and it won’t end till the Internet—the real one, the dream, the promise—is destroyed” (432). The forces of state and capital, we learn, are waiting “to claim jump it in the name of an indexed world” (476). It’s hard not to see these pronouncements as about more than a purely *technological* utopianism, primarily because of the historical openness of the moment Pynchon’s narrative describes, when it was clear the dream or promise of the dot-com boom – metonymic for the dream of historical transcendence in the long nineties and the end of history – collapsed just as the dream of DeepArcher does.

DeepArcher’s status as a utopian counter-fantasy is distinct from today’s corporate boosters of technological utopianism, who celebrate the Internet as an open, democratic space for engaged “user participation.” Whereas this technology has undoubtedly produced new forms of community, unqualified celebration of it denies, as Jodi Dean observes, the problems of political economy. She argues there is nothing inherently “progressive” or “leftist” about technology and to think otherwise is little more than a neoliberal fantasy because, “contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance” which serve corporate capitalism and state control (*Blog Theory* 3-4). In contrast, *Bleeding Edge*’s utopian figure is the retroactive product of its betrayal by these forces, occupying a non-historical place cut short by the “moment of danger” following 9/11. After the events, Maxine’s father reminds her that the utopian promise of the Internet is now an inescapable “web of surveillance” (the implications of which we’ve already traced in Amis’ short story) which, although it calls itself “freedom” is actually “based on control,” just as its forgotten Cold War architects in the U.S. Defense Department always intended (420). This statement captures the emergent structure of feeling towards the ongoing legacies of the War on Terror and the further entrenchment of the security state. According to Michiko Kakutani, “In many ways, Mr. Pynchon’s New York City, circa

2001, is a dark mirror of America today: anxious about government surveillance and tracking by the Internet giants, a world in which not just the paranoids, but regular people, too, worry that their 'every click, every cursor movement' is being tracked by unseen forces that know what they want before they do" ("A Calamity"). Following 9/11, the novel acknowledges these betrayals of the collective utopian fantasy, which were enabled, we are told, by the installation of a "back door" program amongst the commotion that allowed myriads of unwelcome guests into DeepArcher, who colonize it with commerce and surveillance, imposing abstract, geometric order on its raw imaginative possibilities (*Bleeding Edge* 355).

The utopian dreams of DeepArcher are now little more than residual by-products relegated to the trash heap of history Benjamin's angel surveys as the winds of progress propel him forward into an uncertain future. *Bleeding Edge* figures this trash heap when Maxine tours the landfill soon to be made famous as the gathering place for the material wreckage of the fallen World Trade Center complex. Maxine feels the spectacle of "waste disposal" encapsulates "everything the city has rejected so it can keep on pretending to be itself" (166). She acknowledges that the dump contains everything she "has ever thrown away [which] is up in there someplace, multiplied by everybody in the city she knows, multiplied by everyone she doesn't know, since 1948, before she was even born, and what she thought was lost out of her life has only entered a collective history... suddenly denied the comfort of absolute zero" (166-7). As in *The Suffering Channel*, *Bleeding Edge* explores disavowal through the recovery of waste products located between consciousness and oblivion, which Maxine associates with DeepArcher:

This little island reminds her of something, and it takes her a minute to see what. As if you could reach into the looming and prophetic landfill, that perfect negative of the city in its seething foul incoherence, and find a set of invisible links to click on and be crossfaded at last to unexpected refuge, a piece of the ancient estuary exempt from what happened, what has gone on happening, to the rest of us... DeepArcher also has developers after it. Whatever migratory visitors are still down there trusting in its inviolability will some morning all too soon be rudely surprised by the whispering descent of corporate Web crawlers itching to index and corrupt another patch of sanctuary for their own far-from-selfless ends. (167)

Maxine thus sees the “development” of DeepArcher as symptomatic of a cultural dominant bent on the gentrification of both the physical and imaginary worlds. Here, the policies of New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who would rise to national prominence as “America’s mayor” after 9/11, exemplify the problem. He oversees the “Disneyfication” of the city, Times Square in particular, stuffing it full of sterile “multiplexes, malls and big box stores,” which cause it to resemble a “born again imitation of...the American heartland” (51). As a consequence of these corporate-friendly policies, the city is fading into “yup indifference” as buildings are demolished “into the landfill of failing memory” (266-7). Maxine sees the parallels between these processes of disavowal and giant piles of garbage in front of her. In both Giuliani’s remaking of the city and the rewriting of historical and cultural memory, “any message is corrupted, fragmented, lost” (210). Just like Julius is *Open City*, Maxine, an auditor-detective, struggles to restore the broken links before Giuliani, along with the powerful corporate and political interests he represents, buries the lost, unrealized past, “Grading it, capping it, sealing and covering it all up and turning it into a park, another family-friendly yup resource” (167).

Conspiracy narratives are nothing new to Pynchon, whose sprawling works are replete with the myriads of hidden connections that Maxine struggles to make before they are paved over like the historical detritus of the landfill. The turn towards conspiracy narratives in the post-9/11 work of Gibson and Pynchon does not point to unique attributes of the War on Terror, but instead suggests an intensification of representational trends already dominant in the aesthetics of postmodern culture struggling, in Fredric Jameson’s estimation, “to think the world system as such” (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 4). For this reason, Jameson identifies conspiratorial narrative as a privileged form of “cognitive mapping,” or “a form which unconsciously seeks to grasp or represent the social totality as a whole in what necessarily must be a proto-cognitive fashion” (36). Rather than simply chart the paths of particular individuals, the attempts to map the transnational terrorist network in *Bleeding Edge* or Gibson’s recent trilogy of texts (just like every attempt to map of criminal networks in television shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad*) ends up as a provisional cognitive mapping of late capitalism in its sublime, conspiratorial complexity. The War on Terror – its opaque networks of surveillance, black-sites, private contractors and security agencies – implies

the overwhelming difficulty of grasping the emerging dynamics of the post-9/11 world, and its networks moving fluidly between the security state, corporate data collection and advertising.<sup>139</sup>

There is, however, a dark underside to the conspiratorial quest, which occupies the bleeding edge between concerted intellectual labor and psychosis. Maxine's experiences in DeepArcher and a number of other virtual spaces suggest any caesura in the linear unfolding of history is fraught with both utopian longing for a meaning that can be made whole outside the constraints of the given day and a paranoid shadow world projecting coherence where none necessarily exists. *Bleeding Edge* is acutely aware that these sides are sometimes difficult if not impossible to distinguish, a problem which September 11 would only exacerbate. On the one hand, it acknowledges the fantasies of un-alienated creative potential that animates DeepArcher, up to and including undoing 9/11, which blurred the distinctions between a material and virtual world. The World Trade Center, Maxine observes, was "pure geometry" and the terrorist attacks "blew it to pixels" (446), whereas, in DeepArcher, "there's something waiting out there, latent, maybe it's geometric, maybe begging like geometry to be contradicted in some equally terrible way, maybe a sacred city in pixels waiting to be reassembled, as if disasters could be run in reverse, the towers rise out of black ruin, the bits and pieces and lives, no matter how finely vaporized, become whole again" (446). Indeed, Maxine's children, in a manner reminiscent of the scale model Julius encounters in the Queens Art Museum, locate an internet file that enables them to resurrect pre-9/11 New York City exactly as it was, Twin Towers and all (428). The restorative utopian impulse of DeepArcher is of course contradicted by the abundant material wreckage of the World Trade Center complex that would soon find its way to the Staten Island landfill, where history would be sorted, elevating certain links while burying others. The text's meandering focus during Maxine's shaggy-dog quest uncovers some of these buried connections, and in doing so recovers otherwise lost-to-history aspects of an era thought to be defined by a single, horrifying event. Technological utopianism, neoliberal economics, millennial angst, urban and cultural gentrification, and postmodern cultural exhaustion each inform the event in Pynchon's novel, rendering a more robust account of the cultural moment, including its dreams and betrayals.

On the other hand, despite the necessity of this work, its approach flirts, like the protagonist of Jess Walter's *The Zero*, with more paranoid conspiracy theories arising from the wreckage of symbolic meaning. "There has to be a world off the books," the novel proposes (*Bleeding Edge* 179). While the nation needs a simple storyline of heroes and villains, March (a lefty internet blogger) echoes DeLillo's assertion that there must be a "counter-narrative" (321). Whether that counter-narrative turns into paranoid "Truther" ravings about "false flag" operations and 9/11 as an "inside job," or one concentrating on the structural conspiracies of neoliberal capitalism and state security that relegate the lost future into oblivion, is not certain, but it is a danger of paranoid art necessitated by paranoid times. Lethem argues,

While everyday paranoiacs believe the worst questions have monstrously simple answers, paranoid art knows the more terrifying (and inevitable) discoveries are further questions. Paranoid art traffics in interpretation, and beckons interpretation from its audience; it distrusts even itself, and so becomes the urgent opposite of complacent art. ("Pynchonopolis")

The future of post-9/11 literary criticism will need to partake in the untimely temporalities Pynchon's novels highlight, in which a historical analysis of moments of emergence and the forces of social control that curtail them is coordinated with a search for new moments of emergence that exploit weaknesses in the dominant ideological common-sense, fissures traced against the given day. The emerging post-9/11 cultural archive, borrowing the language of Susan Buck-Morss, exists at the "historical convergence of two ruptures," one, the "moment of economic, military or ecological crisis" and the other, a "rupture in collective imagination" ("The Second Time as Farce" 77). We have already surveyed the convergence of these ruptures in the work of Wallace, Moore, Amis and Cole. Pynchon's late career work sets the stage for further research into the other futures foreclosed within the social and historical conditions that shaped the dystopian responses to 11 September 2001. "In Pynchon's view," Lethem argues, "modernity's systems of liberation and enlightenment — railway and post, the Internet, etc. — perpetually collapse into capitalism's Black Iron Prison of enclosure, monopoly and surveillance. The rolling frontier (or bleeding edge) of this collapse is where we persistently and helplessly live... For Pynchon, history is a nightmare within which we must become lucid dreamers" ("Pynchonopolis"). Like Maxine, we are staring back at a pile on unsorted historical debris, looking for the imaginative links while history



is sanitized, paved-over and forgotten. Untimely critique not only must intervene into the material conditions of the present but also must encourage scholars, like “lucid dreamers,” to track mutations in the nightmarish fantasy realm of terror and the utopian realm of liberation through their histories; they must actively restructure our relationships to those conditions, looking for the “little parenthesis of light” which is an unacknowledged past, present and future beyond the “dismal perimeter centred on Ground-Zero” and thus beyond the edges of oblivion.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For Jameson's definition of the "absent cause," see his discussion of Louis Althusser in *The Political Unconscious*, in which he proposes that the mode of production is an "absent cause, since it is nowhere empirically present as an element, it is not part of the whole or one of the levels, but rather the entire system of *relationships* among those levels" (36). *Fantasies of Oblivion* attempts to move the discussion of 11 September 2001 towards acknowledging the place of the event in an entire social system.
- <sup>2</sup> I use "residual" in Williams' sense: "The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation" (*Marxism and Literature* 122).
- <sup>3</sup> DeLillo's assessment does not amount to an uncritical presentism. In his fine grained analysis of the essay, Marco Abel argues that the author "temporarily defers the proliferation of judgments based on hasty answers to the questions of what... might have partially produced the conditions for 9/11" in order to ask "how the event works and what it does... [which] creates a suspenseful rhythm that might slow down the rapid speed of judgment" ("Rhetoric of Seeing" 1237). Rather than escape responsibility for judgment, Abel reads this formal, thematic and ethical move in the essay as "a stance of suspension [that] puts the capacity to perceive at stake" (1237). What matters for DeLillo, Abel claims, is not so much accurate representation of the event as it is how our modes of seeing and understanding are implicated in it.

<sup>4</sup> So, whereas the American state, media and culture at large framed the shocking, unprecedented scale of the 9/11 attacks as a definitive event that ruptured historical consciousness, even a cursory glance at recent American history proves that similar events, for instance, had disturbed the nation for the better part of a decade. Indeed, the historical record indicates terrorism had infiltrated public consciousness to an extraordinary degree just prior to the World Trade Center collapse. Even the choice of target on 9/11 echoes the first World Trade Center bombing on 26 February 1993, in which a group of Arab terrorists detonated a truck bomb in the basement of the complex, causing only minor structural damage but killing six people and injuring over one thousand others. Moreover, a series of controversial government insurrections – first the August 1992 stand-off at Ruby Ridge in northern Idaho and then the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas – would spawn a number of right-wing terrorists, including Timothy McVeigh and his co-conspirators, who would explode a fertilizer bomb in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. Authorities frantically searched for the so-called “UnaBomber,” eventually apprehending mathematician Ted Kaczynski, responsible for the mail-bombing deaths of three people. Overseas, incidents such as the 1997 embassy bombings in the East African cities of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and the attacks on the USS Cole navy ship off the coast of Yemen on 12 October 2000, foreshadowed the destructive plans and international reach of al-Qaeda. Even this brief historical sketch indicates that the 11 September 2001 attacks did not emerge into a vacuum. Rather, it points to the pervasiveness of terrorism in the public imagination prior to the events and thus their place in a longer historical narrative and passion for the real.

<sup>5</sup> “[The] present condition of politics does not make sense unless it is approached from a dual perspective – seen as a struggle for crude, material dominance, but also (threaded into that struggle) as a battle for the control of appearances.” (*Afflicted Powers* 31)

<sup>6</sup> See Kaufmann’s article “The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo’s ‘In the Ruins of the Future’, ‘Baader Meinhoff’, and *Falling Man*.”

<sup>7</sup> See her *Trauma: A Genealogy*.

<sup>8</sup> One symptom of the tendency to reduce the tragedy to personal suffering alone has been what Lisa Bond calls “testimony criticism.” In her critique of American Studies since September 11, Bond identifies the popularity of a “form of theory that draws upon the author’s own experiences as its principle frame of reference” (“Compromised Critique” 748). Citing the work of scholars in the *Trauma at Home* anthology, such as E. Ann Kaplan and Marianne Hirsch, she argues that “one of the chief problems with this personalized discourse is that its prioritization of individual experience empties theoretical reflection of all contextualizing historicity” (749). For her part, Kaplan appears to prefer examining the impact of the attacks on those situated near the actual disaster site. Similarly, Marianne Hirsch’s response emphasizes her own act of witnessing and the co-witnessing of others strolling around Lower Manhattan in the wake of the disaster. In doing so, both make valuable contributions to the archive of personal and collective suffering as well as to the understanding of the aesthetics of trauma, but their testimonies unwittingly participate in the reduction of other potential avenues for identification. In the case of events like 9/11 dominated by compulsive witnessing, the obligatory giving “voice” can itself function as a means of narrowing the scope of our analysis, a point David Harvey, amongst others, has made regarding the culture of grief located in New York City (“Cracks” 59). Or we might see how, as Wendy Brown contends in *Edgework*, compulsive confession empties private life into the public domain, rendering the political as strictly personal and thus leaving out broader historical and global views (85).

<sup>9</sup> Contradiction: *Falling Man* (2007) came out after *Terrorist* (2006)!

<sup>10</sup> David Simpson sees the slippage between personal and national grief at work in the *New York Times* series, “Portraits of Grief,” which commemorated each individual that died as a result of the attacks: “The component of particularity belonging to the obituary was a nationalized and nationalist one, so that the cumulative effect of reading one after another seemed to come from an editorial interest rather than from any ‘unrecountable complexity’: an interest in the projection of an all-American wholeness of spirit and a national state of health and happiness, and, inevitably, of capitalist neoliberal health and happiness” (*Commemoration* 46).

<sup>11</sup> “But we have to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving, how they sometimes operate in tandem with a prohibition on the public grieving of others’ lives, and how this differential allocation of grief serves the de-realizing aims of military violence” (*Precarious Life* 37).

<sup>12</sup> In the case of post-9/11 America, this imagined community looks more and more white, policing and expelling racialized bodies, even as the country undergoes dramatic demographic shifts which challenge the national ideologies of race. “The response to terror,” Sarah Ahmed argues, “becomes a way to strengthen the bonds of nation and the global community of free nations: the wound of terror requires ‘sticking together’ (adherence as coherence)” (“Affective Economies” 133), whereas the other comes to be imagined as a threat to the national object of love and its imagined guarantees of wealth, status and security (117).

- <sup>13</sup> There is remarkable consistency to positions taken in favor of engaging otherness. Gray, dissatisfied with the domestic turn of post-9/11 novels, advocates for a literature of “hybridity” and open borders as the solution because, he claims, only a literature “subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them, West and East, Christian and Muslim” gets it “right” (*After the Fall* 17). Versluys argues that “In embracing the viewpoint of the Other (including the terrorist, the ultimate Other), novelists employ an ethics that gainsays binary thinking” (*Out of the Blue* 17). Mishra contends because “most 9/11 fictions seem unable to acknowledge political and ideological belief as a social and emotional reality in the world” they fundamentally fail to shed light on foreign terrorists (“End of Innocence”). Banita conceives of narrative ethics as “the attempt to encapsulate and safeguard a sense of empathetic identity constantly torn between individual insecurity and the interpersonal imperative of engaging with Otherness” (*Plotting Justice* 12). Randall, in his remarks on Martin Amis, contends that the author – like so many other post-9/11 authors – cannot engage fully with the otherness of the hijackers, but instead falls back on familiar narrative tropes that do nothing to enrich Atta’s voice or explain his motivations (*Literature of Terror* 50).
- <sup>14</sup> I take the title of this section from the Wilco song “Ashes of American Flags,” which appears on their album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, an influential musical deconstruction of alt-country Americana that although recorded prior to 9/11, garnered considerable critical esteem for the band after the attacks. If the fetishization of alt-country during the 1990s had turned the music of country figures like Johnny Cash into what Jon Smith calls “songs that move hipsters to tears” (*Find Purple America* 29-50), *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* provides a playful, reflexive commentary on the artificiality of alt-country myths of melancholy authenticity that pivots, unknowingly, on the events of 11 September 2001 when the state would revive these alt-fantasies in the hegemonic context of the War on Terror. Also—it’s a pretty great record: songs that move hipsters to dance, or at least to nod their heads.
- <sup>15</sup> Ash figure prominently in the American fantasies of September 11, both as the material detritus of the WTC attacks and as a metaphor linking this material detritus to the loss of stable national narratives. Several critics have begun to untangle its implications. In *Liberty Street*, filmmaker Peter Josyph, recalling his walks through the devastated city scape after the attacks, reminds more distant spectators of ash’s materiality, which combines building materials, office supplies and human remains into an ambiguous, malodorous detritus that reached beyond the visual to infuse every aspect of the devastated space: “Aggressive, pernicious, it attached itself to you, penetrating the fibers of your clothing, the pores of your skin, the ways into your lungs and heart” (13). In “Rubble as Archive,” Patricia Yeager maps the trajectory of the rubble from detritus of a catastrophe to sacred, transcendent artifact of the event. Building on Yeager’s insights, Laura Tanner’s article “Holding On to 9/11” proposes that “the absence of identifiable objects or bodies limited the possibility of tactile engagement with the landscape” for rescuers, museum exhibits and other commemorative practices eventually elevated detritus into an archive of destruction in what, for the majority, was otherwise a largely *virtual* event (65-6). These commentaries suggest literary scholars should pay special attention to the appearance of ash in post-9/11 fiction because of its materially and metaphorically freighted significations.

<sup>16</sup> Drawing on the classic formulations of Edmund Burke and Jacques Lacan, Terry Eagleton frames the sublime as an ambivalent state which is “perilous, shattering, ravishing, traumatic, excessive, exhilarating, dwarfing, astonishing, uncontrollable, overwhelming, boundless, obscure, terrifying, enthralling and uplifting” (*Holy Terror* 44). Judging by the both positive and negative reactions Eagleton describes, the sublime creates a tension. Whereas it confronts us with the limits of our mortality, it also “allows us vicariously to indulge our fantasies of immortality, flouting our own finitude and playing a titillating ‘can’t catch me’ game with death” (44). The key is maintaining a safe distance. For Edmund Burke, this distance involves the triumph of reason over terror: we know the sublime thing cannot hurt us, and this removal from harm produces a negative pleasure he terms “delight,” which is more intense than even the pleasure derived from aesthetic beauty (*Four Letters* 87). Post-9/11 texts, such as Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Ken Kalfus’ *A Disorder Peculiar to this Country*, each capture their characters’ delight in their distance from the destruction of the World Trade Center, which, slightly removed from their immediate experience, becomes a site of fantasy and wish-fulfillment rather than horror and disgust. In Hamid’s novel, we learn of the protagonist, Changez – a young Pakistani immigrant rapidly ascending the corporate ladder of a Wall Street brokerage house – who, recalling 9/11, admits “I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased... I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (*Reluctant* 72). In Kalfus’ narrative, soon-to-be divorced Joyce, imagining her almost-ex-husband trapped in the collapsing towers, “felt something erupt inside her, something warm, very much like, yes it was, a pang of pleasure, so intense it was nearly like the appeasement of hunger” (*Disorder* 3). In both examples, the removal of 9/11 from a horrible reality, and its subsequent relocation in the realm of fantasy, enables the characters to delight in terror rather than recoil from it.

<sup>17</sup> My methodology thus entails enacting what Hal Foster calls a “parallax shift” on 11 September 2001, or an “apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer” which enables a retroactive recoding of those events through “temporalities of anticipation and reconstruction” disavowed in the fetish of traumatic rupture (*Return of the Real* xii). However, I give this parallax shift an additional Žižekian twist because I see it as already present as a formal impasse in the literary object itself, which sustains 11 September as an absent reference point even though each text troubles the ideological meanings that normally establish the sublime, over-proximate centrality of the event. In *Living in the Endtimes* Žižek explains this twist on the parallax shift in terms of architecture: “The parallax gap is... not just a matter of shifting perspective (from one standpoint, a building looks a certain way—if I move a little bit, it looks different); things get interesting when we notice that the gap is inscribed into the ‘real’ building itself—as if the building, in its very material existence, bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives” (244-5). In other words, I approach texts as if they are already formally thinking the contradictions of the post-9/11 moment in which the sacralisation of national victimhood, the elevation of national innocence and the naming of the World Trade Center site as hallowed ground come into conflict with other histories, spatialities and affects. These texts register the struggles of the social and political unconscious over the event in a time dominated by an overwhelming but false sense of historical closure.

<sup>18</sup> Moving the accent in this way necessitates acknowledging the inadequacy of analytical models that see these oblique references as little more than adding an element of verisimilitude to contemporary fiction. For instance, Kristiaan Versluys contends that many texts approach 9/11 “only tangentially and indirectly, as part of a larger plot,” because to include the event, even just as an element of setting, produces a “reality effect” in so far as “it has to be there on the margins... for the novel to claim authenticity and to occupy a recognizable position in time” (184-5). Versluys makes a compelling case for the ongoing relevance of 9/11 as a historical marker, but his argument fails to account for the vanishing act such texts perform, in which traumatic witnessing gives way to the depiction of 11 September 2001 as a relay for a multitude of historical, affective and spatial perceptions that move beyond the function of the events as a mere narrative backdrop. Instead, I prefer to think of September 11 as an event which haunts the narratives analyzed in this project, flickering as a symbolically unsettling spectral presence at their peripheries, at once real and unreal. “The event called September 11 or 9/11 was real as death,” Marc Redfield argues, “but its traumatic force seems nonetheless inseparable from a certain ghostliness, not just because it did more than literal damage (that would be true of any event of cultural trauma) but because the symbolic damage done itself seems spectral—not unreal by any means, but not simply ‘real’ either” (*Rhetoric of Terror* 15).

<sup>19</sup> For Jacques Lacan’s reading of this myth as a reflection of the dialectic of truth and appearance, see *Seminar XI*, 111-2.

<sup>20</sup> See Arundhati Roy’s “Algebra of Infinite Justice” (in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*), Susan Sontag’s “9-11-01” (in *At the Same Time*), and Sunera Thobani’s controversial speech, which was reprinted in the *Vancouver Sun* (03 October 2001). We can look at the furor over Sontag’s statements as an example. In the months following September 11, 2001, neoconservatives began to openly rhapsodize about the necessity of empire and the exceptional circumstances that justified torture, but the liberal left also largely failed to speak out against these discourses and in some cases actively worked against those attempting to do so. For instance, the conservative invective against Sontag’s controversial article for *The New Yorker* had its own liberal supporters. In her brief response to the attacks, Sontag violated the emerging injunction for unreflective patriotism when she posed the question of whether these were not attacks on “civilization,” as the Bush administration claimed, but rather “an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions” (*At the Same Time* 105). Whereas this question drew the ire of many, some of its detractors might seem surprising. Take the example of cultural critic Greil Marcus, who, in the pages of New York paper *First of the Month*, named Sontag culpable (alongside Noam Chomsky) for her refusal to respect the inadequacy of her analytic language to the sublimity of the event, claiming she “wrote to close questions, not to open them” (“Nothing New Under the Sun”). As Eric Lott notes, Marcus freights his rejection of contextualizing this event in relation to other atrocities with a knee-jerk liberal-anti-communism, particularly evident when Marcus admits, “I instantly found myself on the far side of a great divide, in another country from the one we had... inhabited a second before, one in which I imagined that my [friends were] not, and didn’t want to be” (qtd. in Lott *Disappearing* 186). Noting the “Russian formalism dressed up as political critique,” Lott takes Marcus to task for what he sees as the “liberal-nationalist sense that the left is unpatriotic and even un-American” (*Disappearing* 186). With friends like these, who needs enemies?

<sup>22</sup> If terrorism – an old political tactic – is the paradigmatic instance of the “passion for the real,” then why restrict ourselves to the twentieth century? Critics such as Terry Eagleton, Marc Redfield, Frank Lentricchia and Jodi MacAuliffe have each seen this passion as the heart of Romantic aesthetic ideology since the late eighteenth century, in which artists more frequently conceived of themselves as revolutionaries of consciousness positioned against the mass banalities of the modern. Accordingly, these authors sought an art that might disturb the imaginative torpor of the crowd through acts of aesthetic violence that defamiliarized the given day. As Lentricchia and MacAuliffe argue in *Crimes of Art & Terror*, this artistic respect for terrorism – which culminated in avant garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s controversial declaration that September 11 was the “greatest work of art in the whole cosmos” – is a theme one might trace through the otherwise disparate works of William Wordsworth, the Unabomber and Don DeLillo. Their texts voice (although do not always endorse) the desire to directly intervene into reality through a violent act. While for Ted Kaczynski this desire translated into actual acts of terror, for others it meant overturning consciousness by closing the gap between art and the world, trading the artistic realm of reflections for the “real thing.” “Aesthetic revolutionaries historically waged polemical war on behalf of the authentic,” Lentricchia and MacAuliffe contend, “which they habitually define as an overcoming of precisely traditional art’s once-removed character” (8). Referring to developments in performance art, they identify a “wish to communicate not about the real but to communicate the real itself” (13). The Romantic model is one of the artist as Lucifer – a transgressor and criminal not unlike the terrorist in his desires to rupture consciousness, albeit the artist does so through shock and originality rather than literal violence.

<sup>23</sup> In *Cloning Terror*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that since the attacks were both material – they caused a horrifyingly huge loss of life and destruction of property – and symbolic – “designed as the production of a spectacular image calculated to traumatize a whole society” (12-3) – we “must attend to the ways in which imagination surges ahead of the real, anticipating and predicting it, or those moments of lag when the trauma of the real produces a set of symbolic and imaginary symptoms, screen memories, repetitious behavior, and strange forms of acting out” (13). Critics such as Jean Baudrillard, Claire Kahane, Susannah Radstone, Phillip Wegner and Slavoj Žižek working, to varying degrees, with elements of psychoanalytic theory, have already begun to examine this blending of reality and imagination on 9/11 both as the culmination of pre-existing ideological investments in destruction and as the catalyst for the solidification of a new symbolic order after the attacks.



<sup>24</sup> Following 9/11, media commentators were quick to declare the turn towards a more somber cultural landscape based on harsh truths rather than postmodern ironic distance. *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter claimed ‘I think it’s the end of the age of irony’ (*Inside.com* 17 September 2001). Time columnist Roger Rosenblatt also declared “the end of the age of irony” allegedly promoted by intellectuals, journalists and cultural producers, who he accused of “insist[ing] that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously” and that “detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life.” For James P. Pinkerton, Republican party activist and *Newsday* columnist, 9/11 was a “crushing defeat for irony, cynicism, and hipness” – a day that supposedly taught us the importance of belief and where the victors are “sincerity, patriotism and earnestness.” These wide-spread reactions seemed to signal an emergent structure of feeling based in the return to sincerity and belief – indicative of the pervasive “passion for the real” – after an era of hip, cynical irony, epitomized by television shows like *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*. A decade later *New York Times* literary critic Michiko Kakutani argues that arts and entertainment after 9/11 are no less ironic, derivative and escapist than before it (“Outdone by Reality”). Although Kakutani grossly underestimates the depth of post-9/11 culture and the productive rupture in critique that responds to the rupture in a felt sense of historical continuity inaugurated by the attacks, her article nonetheless points to the messiness of periodizing culture following a major event. By now, we know that the declaration of an end to the age of irony was misguided exaggeration born of a desire for moral clarity amidst the tumultuous and confusing aftermath of the terrorist attacks. In fact, institutions of irony such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, *The Onion* and *Saturday Night Live* still ruthlessly satire the events and figures of a very dark period, maintaining irony as a tool for prying open the exaggerated certainties and threats of the state and media during the War on Terror. Yet, for *New York* magazine contributor Michael Hirschorn, considering what he sees as the overwhelming seriousness of post-9/11 culture, Rosenblatt was at least partially correct about the end of irony, which he claims produced a peculiarly earnest millennial generation whose irony seems confined to an exploding digital culture (“Irony, the end of”). In any case, the problem with the supposed end of irony is how easily it dovetails with antipathy towards critical distance and thus intellectualism in general, rather than its opposition to a dominant style of television program.

<sup>25</sup> Arguing that fantasy serves as a driving force in how we conceptualize the real brushes against the grain of the prevailing post-ideological discourse, which opposes transparency, sincerity, realism, truth and authenticity to fiction, desire and hyperbole. The prevalence of this discourse, I argue, becomes both a thematic and formal concern of post-9/11 fiction. For instance, the fantasy of accessing some spontaneous, unmediated experience of the world promotes an aesthetics of reality evident in the skyrocketing popularity of “Reality” television following 9/11. As one character in *Bleeding Edge* argues, this trend is connected to the declared “end of irony” after the attacks: “As if somehow irony... as practiced by a giggling mincing fifth column, actually brought on the events of 11 September, by keeping the country insufficiently serious— weakening its grip on ‘reality.’ So all kinds of make-believe—forget the delusional state the country’s in already—must suffer as well. Everything has to be literal now” (335).

<sup>26</sup> The post-9/11 “reality” fetish is an attempt to rescue ideological belief in American strength and omniscience from the jaws of material defeat. It responds to a more widespread contemporary crisis of belief which entails eroding trust in symbolic institutions such as the media, government and business. Alternately called by Lacanian theorists the “crisis of symbolic investiture” (Eric Santner) or the “decline in symbolic efficiency” (Slavoj Žižek, Jodi Dean), the situation problematizes the status of sincerity: how can we believe that others believe what they say they believe? What if the other through which we relay our belief doesn’t really believe at all? Can anyone sincerely believe anymore anyway? Recent scholarship on sincerity generally acknowledges that the notion of it as an expression of the inner self or as an ethical substance – a conjunction of what Lionel Trilling calls external “avowal” with inner “feeling” (*Sincerity and Authenticity* 9) and Harold Read similarly refers to as the correspondence between “style” and personal “passion” (*Cult of Sincerity* 15) – is outdated, particularly in contemporary postmodernism. According to Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Val and Carel Smith, editors of an anthology titled *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, contemporary theory, through its decentering of the subject, demonstrates that “the bond between subjectivity and sincerity, however naturalized it has become, is not natural” and thus, challenging the traditional view, they suggest that “there is no inner self that manifests itself bodily through performance, and as a consequence, the inner self cannot be witnessed” (4). Yet, they observe how “sincerity” nonetheless remains an important contemporary attachment, which requires critical self-reflection on its performative, dialogic and ultimately social constitution, and points to how strategic avowal does not necessarily lead to the revelation of truth so much as it achieves an effect of truth. The exemplary performances of sincerity from American politicians such as Ronald Reagan, George W Bush and Bill Clinton in particular draws the critical attention of Jill Bennet, Boris Groys and Brian Massumi, who each examine how these performances mobilize the spectacle of avowal in order to maintain the politicians’ respective images as trustworthy leaders. As Jill Bennett articulates, in these cases “sincerity” actually fails to “cohere with individual of psychological motives, and so undermines a model of sincerity predicated on correspondence” (*Practical Aesthetics* 129). Instead, these insistent performances of sincerity from political figures such as Bush and Tony Blair, all too self-conscious about a perceived gap between motive and avowal in an environment of enhanced suspicion during the war on terror, rely on rhetoric, gesture and media to achieve their desired sincerity effects (129). In other words, sincerity is no longer thought to reside in the correspondence of inner self with external manifestations, but is instead produced dialogically through strategic language and practices of avowal: who is “really” feeling it or meaning it – as if there could be either outside of language – is impossible to assess.

<sup>27</sup> Susannah Radstone argues that much of trauma theory is complicit with the effacement of the unconscious, and thus accentuates temporalities of shock and recovery but fails to think historically: “For trauma theory, it is the unanticipated, unimagined quality of certain events that renders them so shocking. The mind has not prepared itself for an event that traumatizes—it has not been able to shield itself in advance. Yet... in the case of September 11, U.S. culture had anticipated events of this nature: indeed, not only had the movies anticipated such events but filmmakers had made movies based on similar occurrences” (“War of the Fathers” 119).

<sup>28</sup> At first, these allusions might appear to long time readers of the author's work as out of place. Of course, Wallace's unexpected suicide in 2008 points to his long, well documented history of mental health issues. And, unsurprisingly, some of his fiction looks skeptically on the institution of psychotherapy. In short works such as "The Depressed Person" and "Good Old Neon," as well as in significant sections of his recent posthumous work *The Pale King*, Wallace's protagonists see their therapists as either hopelessly deluded, unknowingly suffering from the same sorts of psychological problems afflicting the patients they are supposed to treat, or unsympathetic careerists, more concerned with publishing case studies than with healing the sick. Yet, *TSC* reveals the limitations of biographical readings that frame Wallace's literary contributions as reflections of his health struggles, showing them to be over invested in the intentional fallacy. Indeed, the novella's unexpected formal turn to psychoanalytic motifs, read through several little remarked continuities in Wallace's journalism, suggests that these motifs instead construct space for a productive reader, a space which undermines the authority of Wallace's biography as a master-key unlocking the secrets of his fiction. Here we should read Wallace's work as Wallace reads the stories of Borges: "They are designed primarily as metaphysical arguments; they are dense, self-enclosed, with their own deviant logics. Above all, they are meant to be impersonal, to transcend individual consciousness... into the general memory of the species and even transcend the fame of their creator" (*Both Flesh and Not* 288). Even in the afterglow of Wallace's prolific but all-too-short career, "the stories so completely transcend their motive cause that the biographical facts become, in the deepest and most literal way, irrelevant" (294). From this alternative vantage point, we need a better understanding of how these bizarre conceits in Wallace's novella function, before judging their appropriateness to his own life.

<sup>29</sup> Wallace's own novel *Infinite Jest* (1997) explores the intersections of terrorism and obscene enjoyment through its depiction of a Quebequois terrorist cell chasing "The Entertainment," a tape so excessively pleasurable that it permanently stupefies anyone who views it. Whereas the spectacle of terrorism moves into a dominant position after September 11, the work these 1990s authors points to long gestating unconscious tendencies and libidinal investments in terrorism as the dark underside of the culture of simulation. Rather than coming from some radical position outside of this culture, these texts suggest that terrorist violence is an unconscious anxiety subtending the post-Cold War era.

<sup>30</sup> For instance in the recent collection *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Josh Roiland discusses how Wallace's signature use of footnotes in his journalism disturbs the obliviousness of daily life; Heather Houser argues that aesthetic forms of disgust in *Infinite Jest* "produce feelings that enhance and audience's awareness of 'hopelessly shitty' social and material conditions" (118); finally, Lee Konstantinou claims that, by Wallace's own criteria, the same novel may "constitute outright aggression against his readers" (101). Most recently, Mary K. Holland in *Succeeding Postmodernism* has articulated a shift in Wallace's fiction towards "the real, the thing, and presence, and away from sign, word and absence upon which earlier postmodern fiction fixated" (7). These voices indicate that Wallace criticism, motivated by the darker tone of late career collections such as *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*, increasingly turns towards less therapeutic frameworks of analysis in their attempts to define Wallace's literary contributions.

- <sup>31</sup> Wallace previously elaborates on the “corporate smile” in his essay titled “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again.” In a footnote, he explains, “You know this smile – the strenuous contraction of circumoral fascia w/ incomplete zygomatic involvement – the smile that doesn’t quite reach the smiler’s eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler’s own interests by pretending to like the smilee” (*Supposedly* 289 fn.40). Above he describes the “soul effect” of this smile on him: “since it offers a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill’s spirit, it messes with our heads and eventually starts up our defenses in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill” (289). Essentially, Wallace argues that the “corporate smile” produces an uncanny affect on the receiver and it makes sense that he might tie it in to an underlying creepiness in *The Suffering Channel*.
- <sup>32</sup> Brint’s “strange fixed smile” recalls how all sudden grotesque facial expression somehow look “Lynchian” when held “for several moments longer than the circumstances could even possibly warrant” (162-3). Like Brint, it is “just held there, fixed and grotesque, until it starts to signify about seventeen different things at once” (163).
- <sup>33</sup> We might add a third “strange smile” to this list: the disturbing kitsch painting of a clown’s head made out of vegetables which irks Skip Atwater’s stay in a budget hotel room, the description of which Wallace intercuts with Atwater’s reflections on Brint’s creepy smile: “There was something essentially soul killing about the print of the vegetable head clown that had made Atwater want to turn it to the wall” (*TSC* 313-4). The use of “soul killing” here resonates with its use in the description of Brint Moltke’s smile’s “soul effects” earlier (248).
- <sup>34</sup> The both comical yet disturbing central premise of *The Suffering Channel* invites comparisons to the grotesque figures Wallace so admires in the work of Franz Kafka. If the shit artworks and the attempts to frame them as media commodities are meant to be funny, then that humor might most closely approximate Wallace’s comments on Kafka’s “funniness.” Complaining about his students’ inability to grasp Kafka’s idiosyncratic humor, Wallace contends, “his humor is actually sort of unsubtle—or rather anti-subtle” and predicated on “some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical” (“Kafka” *Consider* 63). Citing examples such as Gregor Samsa’s transformation into a “bug” in *The Metamorphosis*, he argues that “some of our most profound collective intuitions seem to be expressible only as figures of speech” (63). His essay next draws attention to the disgusting register, entreating us to consider, “what is really being expressed when we refer to someone as *creepy* or *gross* or say that he is forced to *take shit* as part of his job” (emphasis in original 63). Moltke seems to unite all three of the italicized terms and perhaps his own shit sculptures express precisely the sort of anti-subtle “radical literalization of truths” Wallace associates with Kafka. When the novella speaks aesthetically about excrement, when we are expected to accept Brint’s automated production of the artworks, when characters seem not only repulsed but also curiously transfixed by the art and the artist, we are supposed to laugh, but this laughter should also touch on the truth of human suffering and its unexpected transfigurations within late capitalism, the limits of which would be tested on September 11 and in the War on Terror. Responsibility for the figuration of unconscious truths rests on the comically grotesque and its capacity to access a level of libidinal understanding straight-forward description misses: “What Kafka’s stories have... is a grotesque, gorgeous, and thoroughly modern complexity, an ambivalence that becomes the multivalent Both/And logic of the, quote, ‘unconscious’” (*Consider* 64).

- <sup>35</sup> Mary Douglas explains the allegorical potentials of the body in *Purity and Danger*. “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body” (115). Moreover, the capacity of Brint Moltke to figure limits also recalls Susan Stewart’s contention in *On Longing* regarding the body: “The body presents the paradox of contained and container at once. Thus our attention is continually focused upon the boundaries or limits of the body; known from an exterior, the limits of the body as object; known from an interior, the limits of its physical extension into space” (144).
- <sup>36</sup> Pure speculation: “Manderley” is also the name of the ruined country manor featured in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940). Since this film also happens to be about a woman haunted by a sinister presence within a house, the intern’s name could be a little joke.
- <sup>37</sup> In his essays from this period, Wallace shows that the figure of the bathroom had some currency in his aesthetics. Indeed, toilets often figure prominently in moments where he wants to suggest the attempt to conceal some disturbing truth fails. Take for instance his essay on John McCain’s 2000 presidential campaign, “Up, Simba.” Already having labeled McCain’s famous campaign bus the “Bullshit Express,” Wallace ends an extended consideration of the disingenuous interaction of the candidate with the press with an anecdote about the vehicle’s hazardous lavatory door. According to Wallace, any adult male using the onboard facilities is likely if not certain to accidentally trigger the button that opens the door, thus risking exposure to the entire press corps, who will “smile and call out ‘Welcome to National Politics!’ as the new guy stabs frantically at the button” (*Consider* 180). The interjection of this anecdote at this moment reaches beyond arbitrary observation and speaks to McCain’s own evident fear of political exposure. McCain must keep the bullshit in its proper place, so to speak. In several moments like the one above, Wallace appears to continue this discourse in *TSC*.
- <sup>38</sup> As Claude LaPort observes in his *History of Shit*, the purification of the city in France occurred through a 1539 edict forbidding the disposal of liquid and solid human wastes by throwing them outside of the individual home: “First and foremost, we witness the domestication of waste, as a result of which the subject sees the object assigned its ‘true’ place; that is to say, to his home, in domus... in the private sphere” (28). Laurel Manderley’s dream suggests the threat of violating this prohibition by making the socially private a matter of public knowledge beyond the confines of the “bathroom door.”
- <sup>39</sup> It is worth noting Wallace’s recorded distaste for the Bush administration, which in part hinges on the insincerity of its populist self-identification: “The truth—as I see it—is that the previous seven years and four months of the Bush Administration have been such an unmitigated horror show of rapacity, hubris, incompetence, mendacity, corruption, cynicism, and contempt for the electorate that it’s very difficult to imagine how a self-identified Republican [John McCain, in this case] could try to position himself as a populist” (Wallace “Just Asking” 159).

<sup>40</sup> In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace notes that Duchamp's toilet sculpture (the urinal) is the exemplary case of introducing the disavowed excremental function into the gallery. He calls this move "dirty realism" or "an attempt to reveal that categories we divide into superior/arty and inferior/vulgar are in fact so interdependent as to be coextensive" (*Supposedly* 42). He contrasts this "dirty realism" with the use of "Low" references in "High literary fiction," which operate primarily as a mimesis of mass cultural vapidness (42-3).

<sup>41</sup> These examples are drawn primarily from those discussed in Hal Foster's chapter on excremental art in *The Return of the Real*.

<sup>42</sup> This passage bears remarkable resemblance to one in William Ian Miller's book, *The Anatomy of Disgust*: "With the possible exception of earwax, which must simply be removed upon the knowledge of its presence, other dangerous bodily excreta are benign if in their proper place inside the body. Saliva in the mouth, snot in the nose, blood in veins, feces in colon, urine in the bladder are basically not present, being safely where they belong as long as attention is not called to them. The magical transformation... happens once any of these substances leaves its natural domain..." (97)

<sup>43</sup> Scholars have viewed the provocations of disgust with both hope and suspicion, understanding it either, like Sianne Ngai and Sara Ahmed (with qualifications), as potentially politically productive, or, like Hal Foster and Slavoj Žižek, as entirely counter-productive. Affect theorists see disgust as a potentially politicized orientation towards the object world. For instance, the “Afterword” to Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* frames disgust as a viable political alternative to the academic enthusiasm for “desire” because, whereas desire is “associated with a polysemous fluidity starkly opposed to and privileged over semantic fixation” and thus “seems especially consonant with critical or aesthetic pluralism” (343), disgust’s unequivocal rejection of an object, in contrast, “would seem incompatible with pluralism, and with the ethic of indiscriminate tolerance that subtends it, in ways that *desire* is not” (emphasis in original, 345). However, at best, Ngai observes, “disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as it diagnoses it powerfully” (353). Although, like Ngai, Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* acknowledges that “The feeling of being disgusted may... be an element in a politics that seeks to challenge ‘what is’,” she also questions whether it can stand alone: “the limits of disgust as an affective response might be that disgust does not allow one the time to digest that which one designates as a ‘bad thing’ [and thus] requires more time for digestion” (99). Other scholars see far less robust political possibilities in disgust than Ngai and Ahmed. For example, Lacanian inflected readings of excremental art see it as reinforcing the status quo, either as a futile provocation of authority (which Hal Foster terms the “artifice of abjection”), or in its obfuscation of the material and libidinal context which imbues the disgusting object with its traumatic status. According to Foster, the presumption of scatological art to test the limits of symbolic difference through regression into disgusting infantile perversion is “at best a neurotic plea for punishment, at worst... a paranoid demand for order” (*Return of the Real* 159). In other words, Foster claims, excremental art inadvertently remains invested in prompting reactions from the very paternal authority it claims to attack, in so far as “this pose is assumed by contemporary artists and writers almost too eager to talk dirty in the museum, almost too eager to be tweaked by Hilton Kramer or spanked by Jesse Helms” (159). Similarly, Žižek questions the political efficacy of excremental art movement: “in it, the real does not return primarily in the guise of the shocking brutal intrusion of excremental objects, mutilated corpses, shit and so on” (*Enjoy!* 255). The production of the “real” as the “obscene excremental object out of place,” Žižek argues, “is a mere fetish whose fascinating/capitavting presence masks the unbearable structural real... of the social antagonism” (256).

<sup>44</sup> Answering a question regarding the “dystopian future” he charts for reality TV in the story, Wallace’s reveals how his own opinions on its conceptual slippery slope parallel those of Corliss: “to the extent that I understand reality TV, it has a certain logic, and it’s not hard to take that kind of logic to its extreme... But the question is how far we go? The inhibition of shame on the part both of the contestants and on the part of the people who put together the show—at some point people have figured out that even if viewers are sneering or talking about in what poor taste stuff is, they’re still watching, and that the key is to get people to watch, and that that’s what’s renumerative. Once we lost the shame hobble, only time will tell how far we’ll go” (Wallace “To the Best” 132). To some extent, both Brint’s artworks and the Suffering Channel reach the end point of this dissipating shame in the production of entertainment.

<sup>45</sup> In *Idols of the Market*, Sven Lütticken proposes that rather than conceive of the conflict in terms of a false visual and anti-visual binary, we ought to consider terrorism and counter-terrorism as two sides of what he calls the “fundamentalist spectacle,” a concept which frames contemporary terrorism and the War on Terror as two mutually reinforcing terms engaged in a struggle internal to spectacular society. Similarly, Boris Groys, argues in “The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror” that this struggle occurs through the attempts of both sides to instrumentalize powerful and iconic images for political means (56). Finally, the Retort collective, self-declared inheritors of Debord’s insights, contend in *Afflicted Powers* that the “present condition of politics does not make sense unless it is approached from a dual perspective – seen as a struggle for crude, material dominance, but also (threaded into that struggle) as a battle for the control of appearances” (31).

<sup>46</sup> Wallace never had much to say about the internet, but much of his critique of television – fragmentation, atomization, vulgarization – is easily extended towards critique of this medium as well.



<sup>47</sup> Contrary to the tendency in postmodern fiction to ironically disavow psychoanalysis (think, for instance, of Pynchon's "Dr. Hilarious" in *The Crying of Lot 49*), Wallace's narrative construction through its figurative grammar in *The Suffering Channel* relies on at least a provisional notion of sincerity. Of course, Wallace stands as the dominant figure in the New Sincerity literary movement of the 1990s – also including Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem and other authors closely associated with *McSweeney's* magazine – for which his often-cited 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Culture" serves as a sort of manifesto.<sup>47</sup> In this extended critique of postmodern irony and its commodified status within television culture, Wallace suggests sincerity as one possible trajectory out of his era's chronic hip, sophisticated and shallow postmodern fatigue, a sincerity, or the "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction," that will "risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the '*Oh how banal!*'" (emphasis in original, 81). Unfortunately, while it seems clear what Wallace intends to write against, it is not so clear what it would mean to write with more sincerity in a late capitalist landscape where cynical distancing and ironic detachment dominates. Successful Wallace criticism proves equally skeptical towards the notion of sincerity as a correspondence between avowal and inner feeling. While one possible reading of Wallace's sincerity might focus on his representation of narcissism – or his struggle to present some true inner essence of the self – Adam Kelly more persuasively argues that Wallace does not naively intend to return to the intentional fallacy in which art expresses the essence of the artist. Rather, Kelly claims, for Wallace the "possibility of sincerity depends upon its becoming dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the other to bring it into play" (*Consider DFW* 141). Similarly, moonlighting film critic A.O. Scott doubts the author endorses the "single-entendre principles" he says he does. In his then career spanning essay on Wallace's works for *The New York Times Review of Books*, Scott proposes that Wallace is "less anti-ironic than (forgive me) meta-ironic. That is, his gambit is to turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth" ("Panic"). In both cases, Wallace's "sincerity" is an intersubjective, performative and thus ultimately social process which does not articulate a return to the first term of "sincerity" which "irony" means to negate, but instead enacts a negation of the negation, preserving, canceling and transforming irony through an awareness of itself and its limitations.

<sup>48</sup> In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace references Jameson's essay from *New Left Review*, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in his work (*Supposedly* 65 n.28): "What began as a mood of the avant-garde has surged into mass culture".

<sup>49</sup> Although these images do not provide a means of cognitively mapping the “underside” Jameson mentions, other details point towards this broader global reality as the absent Real for which these images are a superstructural expression. For one, the Suffering Channel is underwritten by a “venture capital subsidiary” named “O Verily Productions,” the synonyms of which – oh “really,” oh “actually,” or oh “for sure” – suggest a comedic riff on the aesthetics of shock used for programming the television station and their connection to corporate capitalism. We are also told that the channel “was in the late stages of acquisition by AOL Time Warner” in a deal with “Eckleschafft-Bod” (290) (coincidentally also the parent company of *Style* magazine [244]).<sup>49</sup> These allusions to corporate media ownership immediately precede the narrative depiction of a confidential memo describing the financials of the station along with an extended list of image fragments playing on the disclosed tape of the channel’s programming (289-292). This list, which includes bombing, genocide, rape, torture and other examples of human anguish in a variety of locations and at a variety of scales, suggests an association between these endless loops and the corporate entities mentioned prior to their description. Indeed, the narrative ties the portrayal of human suffering to the broader business of media spectacle through Atwater’s recollection of Corliss’s previous venture “All Ads All the Time Channel,” which used the same looping form as the Suffering Channel to show nothing but classic advertising, with some new ads unsuccessfully spliced in to fool viewers into seeing them as aesthetic objects rather than as plays for their money (289). The Suffering Channel works through a similar logic because of its transformation of personal and global suffering into aestheticized spectacles for mass consumption. Tellingly, another of Corliss’s fantasies involves “imagining the faces of everyone he had loved, hated, feared, known or even ever seen all assembling and accreting as pixels into a pointillist image of a single great all devouring eye whose pupil was Corliss’s own” (272). In this example, the individual “I” of the viewer merges with the collective eye of the television screen to form one all-consuming voyeuristic super-entity for which suffering is just another aesthetic pleasure. Although the narrative alludes to them, these broader relations remain largely inconsequential for the characters transfixed by the sickness of these two channels.

<sup>50</sup> Although I have no proof yet, I am suspicious Wallace was reading Žižek’s *Plague of Fantasies*. It might be a good reason to go to Austin, Texas at some point (SXSW...) and check out his archive, although a cursory internet search hasn’t turned up any proof Wallace had the book or any other similar one. Žižek cites Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* as the source for his example, but there is no evidence Wallace was familiar with this book either.

<sup>51</sup> Examples from popular culture prove numerous. For instance, Žižek analyzes similar instances of this excremental re-emergence in his writing on Hollywood cinema, focusing on the two touchstones of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and Francis Ford Coppola’s partial re-make, *The Conversation* (1974). In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (1992), he observes that the key clue linking Marion to the Bates Motel appears out of the toilet (a somewhat scandalous scene to film at the time), and in *The Conversation*, the spectacle of torrents of blood overflowing the toilet rim repeats Hitchcock’s scene in an even more disturbing register. Far from a simple homage, Žižek sees in the repetition of this motif a fundamental truth regarding the futility of human disavowal (234-239).

<sup>52</sup> Žižek uses the case of the Titanic disaster to illustrate this dialectic between shock and unconscious fantasy: “the sinking of the Titanic had a traumatic effect, it was a shock, ‘the impossible happened’, the unsinkable ship had sunk; but the point is that precisely as a shock, this sinking arrived at its proper time – ‘the time was waiting for it’: even before it actually happened, there was already a place opened, reserved for it in the fantasy space” (*Sublime Object* 69). Pointing to detailed accounts that foretold the sinking of a large ocean-liner like the Titanic, and describing the symbolic over-determination of the ship as an emblem for modern technology, historical progress and stable class distinctions, Žižek highlights the “ideological meaning” prepared for this event in which it served as a “condensed, metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of European civilization itself” (70). While cultural fantasies of death once provided pleasure, they also occurred at a safe distance from everyday life, and the intrusion of those fantasies into reality produced the traumatizing effects because the object of fantasy came *too close*.

<sup>53</sup> The word “shit” in Wallace’s discourse can signify either the disposability of most mass entertainment or a disturbing anxiety related to his interactions with others, and its ambiguity sheds some light on how the reactions to the unorthodox artworks in “The Suffering Channel” vacillate between pleasure and uneasiness. “I’m someone who can’t even own a TV anymore,” Wallace confesses in an interview with Anne Marie Donahue, “because I’ll just sit there slack-jawed and consume enormous amounts of what is, in terms of art, absolute shit. But it’s very pleasurable shit” (“Winces” 70). Wallace’s statement contrasts with what he claims television enables Americans to avoid, Americans who are “not willing to undergo the stress and awkwardness and potential *shit* of dealing with real people” (emphasis in original, Lipsky 85). The story dramatizes how Moltke’s shit artworks are suspended in the tension between these two opposed poles of disposable entertainment and disturbing connection with authentic human suffering.

<sup>54</sup> Please note that page numbers refer to the extended version of Wallace’s essay that he includes in his non-fiction collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*.

<sup>55</sup> Wallace’s obsessive footnoting is either an attempt to sanitize his text of excremental excesses, or to use those excesses as a tool for disrupting passive consumption of them.

<sup>56</sup> Two additional remarks on this passage: First, whether intended or not, this scene has some association with the sequence of *Psycho* in which Norman Bates sinks the car containing the evidence of Marion’s murder (including her body) into the mud pit behind the Bates Motel, another figure for a toilet that swallows the obscene but cannot keep it from reemerging. As Žižek argues, “The very last shot of *Psycho*, in which we see Marion’s car being pulled out of the swamp, is thus a kind of Hitchcockian equivalent to the blood reemerging out of the toilet sink—in short, the swamp is another in the series of the entrance points to the preontological netherworld” (*Enjoy!* 236-7). Second, although Wallace despised John Updike, this treatment of excess as attractive resonates with Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), in which guidance counselor Jack Levy shows a similar penchant for obese women. Indeed, the entire issue of fat, excess and disgust deserves further exploration in studies of post-9/11 literature.

<sup>57</sup> In another example of *TSC*'s "sincere Freudianism," the narrative implies that Atwater's attraction to Amber Moltke is closely connected to desire for his mother. Recalling a dream to himself he observes, "A person who tended to have very little conscious recall of his own dreams, Atwater today could remember only the previous two nights' sensation of being somehow immersed in another human being, of having that person surround him like water or air. It did not exactly take an advanced clinical degree to interpret this dream. At most, Skip Atwater's mother had been only three fifths to two thirds the size of Amber Moltke, although if you considered Mrs. Atwater's size as it would appear to a small child, much of the disparity then vanished" (312). Here, Atwater perhaps describes the all engulfing desire of the mother prior to the intervention of the symbolic order that provides breathing room between her desire and that of her child. It could also describe the overwhelming complexity of the system itself which defies attempts at critical distance.

<sup>58</sup> See Gray's "Open Doors" and Rothberg's "Failure of Imagination" respectively.

<sup>59</sup> In *American Pastoral* (1997), Philip Roth estranges terrorism from his contemporary context by placing it into conversation with longstanding national fantasies of domestic purity and innocence. It follows Seymour "Swede" Levov, a third generation Jewish immigrant graced with conventional good looks, legendary athletic ability and business acumen, whose perfect life crumbles when his daughter joins the Weather Underground movement of the 1970s and bombs a local post-office, ostensibly in protest of Vietnam, but just as likely as repudiation of her bourgeois father. Here, Levov's own struggles to make sense of his daughter's actions allegorize the symptomatic function of terrorism in fantasies of American innocence.

<sup>61</sup> The identification of home with homeland seems like a curious recirculation of a term closely associated with Nazism and its ideologies of organic community, especially when considered in light of American exceptionalist discourses. "Homeland... conveys a sense of native origins, of birthplace and birthright... common bloodlines, ancient ancestry, and notions of racial and ethnic homogeneity," Kaplan observes, but, "these meanings, bounded and self-enclosed, represent a departure from traditional images of American nationhood as boundless and mobile" (86). Kaplan argues that this conceptual shift appeals to a nostalgic longing for lost origins that are not only never coming back but also never really existed in the first place: "the homeland as national aspiration is its connection to the discourse of diaspora and exile, to a sense of loss, longing, and nostalgia, [...] a place you came from—no matter how long ago—and long for but cannot ever really return to" (89). As this analysis suggests, the national rhetoric of homeland following September 11 demonstrates how, as Ali Behdad argues, such nativism is a constitutive – albeit disavowed – component of American national identity (*Forgetful Nation* 115).

<sup>62</sup> As Smith writes: "There was little that was automatically national in the scale of these attacks, however. Both targets were certainly on U.S. soil but it was the *World Trade Center* and the Pentagon that were targeted, not the Statue of Liberty, Disney World, or Hollywood, which are arguably much more resonant symbols of American identity. September 11 was an attack on global economic and military power, which, in recent years, resides disproportionately in the United States, and the silences amid the discursive hysteria suggests angst involved in nationalizing this event" ("Scales" 99).

<sup>63</sup> Also quoted in Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* (168).

<sup>64</sup> Despite the seeming suddenness of this longing, restorative nostalgia for the home and family has historically played a central role in socially conservative fantasies of an ideal, pre-lapsarian past which can nonetheless be regained; these fantasies are evident, for example, in President Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" political campaign, which, amongst economic turmoil, drew on images of suburban America before the political upheavals of the 1960s and the accompanying policies of the Great Society. Here, nostalgia functions as the ideological supplement to neoliberalism's increasing shift of responsibility on to individuals, redefining America in terms of the domestic affect. Drawing from the same tropes, President George W. Bush also presented the home as the privileged site of social reproduction with the "ownership society," through which he proposed that the ability to purchase a family dwelling is at the core of national citizenship and the realization of the American dream. "We're creating...an ownership society in this country," Bush proclaimed, "where more Americans than ever will be able to open up their door where they live and say, welcome to my house, welcome to my piece of property." Promoting a narrow definition of citizenship that echoes Reagan (and "third-way" Democrat, Clinton), these valorizations of the home reflect the long term centrality of the family to our political fantasies of the nation-state that would be exploited after 9/11 to ideologically manufacture a version of the nation conducive to the War on Terror.

<sup>65</sup> No doubt, Tassie's narrative voice has been influenced by the same alienated conditions that Wallace's characters inhabit. Her characterization might have something to do with Moore's own peripheral interests. In addition to her roles as a fiction author and creative-writing instructor in Madison, Wisconsin, she frequently contributes commentaries on popular serialized television dramas such as *Friday Night Lights*, *The Wire* and *Homeland* for the *New York Review of Books*, and Tassie's unique focalization of post-September 11 America suggests the narrator's immersion in televisual culture through her translation of the events into codes of romantic melodrama.

<sup>66</sup> See Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>67</sup> I use this designation in the very specific sense inspired by Jon Smith's *Finding Purple America*. In the book, Smith defines the "purple state" as one that "substantively denotes hybridity and temporal ambivalence, and methodologically denotes a consequent impatience with disciplinary ideologies, still surprisingly strong, or national and regional exceptionalism and purity" (123). I argue that Tassie occupies a similar ambivalent regional space.

<sup>68</sup> Rather than obscuring discontinuity, some recent examples of American fiction, through their allegorical restaging of America at war with itself, attempt to overcome this disavowal of political tensions – enacted through assertions of domestic unity against external threats – and instead capture a nation in virtual dissolution. Countering the ideological tendency towards homogenization, for instance, *Man in the Dark* returns not to September 11 but to the after-effects of the disputed 2000 presidential election – in which Republican candidate George W. Bush ascended to the presidency despite technically losing the election to his Democratic challenger, former Vice President Al Gore – figuring the antagonism between “red” and “blue” state America as an ongoing civil war dreamed by the story’s author-narrator: “an imaginary war on home ground, America cracking apart, the noble experiment finally dead” (49). In a similar vein, Cormac McCarthy’s brutally sparse post-apocalyptic genre exercise *The Road* (2006) depicts a southern United States dominated by roving bands of cannibals competing over the scarce remaining resources, leaving the anonymous narrator and his son under constant threat of violence as they move towards warmer climates. Rather than a unified nation, the protagonist lays out his “tattered oilcompany roadmap” which is now “just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly” (42), figuring a national imaginary in disarray.

<sup>69</sup> In order to achieve some distance from the homogenizing restorative domestic fantasy, one might stop to consider, like Auster, how the moment immediately preceding September 11, 2001 reveals precisely the sorts of political conflicts this ideological fantasy of a univocal nation – which began long before the attacks – obscure. Intense divisions in Washington dominated the half decade prior to 9/11, whether the bitter partisanship epitomized by not only the Republican lead impeachment trial of Democratic President Bill Clinton, but, most importantly, the contested results of Florida balloting in the 2000 presidential election between former Texas governor George W. Bush and former Vice President Al Gore. According to Jodi Dean, this second example proves essential to understanding the fantasy of political unity because it marks the most recent example of American left-wing melancholy in which the, “true believers in the Republican message were leftists and Democrats” (*Neoliberal Fantasies* 1):

For many of us on the American left, the election of 2000 indicated less a divided populace than it did the consolidation of conservative hegemony. We read George W. Bush’s assumption of the presidency as exposing the underlying truth of the country, despite the fact Al Gore won the popular vote and the election’s outcome resided with the Supreme Court. A Bush presidency seemed inevitable, almost foreordained. Trapped in what appeared as one enormous red state and overlooking the pervasive blue and purple, we wallowed in our misery. That over half the voters did not want Bush somehow seemed unimportant... We turned a split election into the fact, the victory, of conservatism. (1)

Although exaggerating the capitulation of left-wing groups to conservative policy following the election, Dean persuasively diagnoses the melancholic structure of feeling that would convince Gore not to pursue a recount in Florida although it could (and eventually did) prove him the election's true victor. Her more salient point, however, is how quickly political divisions – albeit in this case not so radical ones – can be disavowed through the rhetoric of crisis (in this case a constitutional one: the document stipulates that a new president must be elected within a certain amount of time). No doubt Bush would rely on the September 11, another crisis, to come to his political rescue, using it to silence critics of neoconservative empire and its attendant fantasies of total domestic unity, strength and security. Within these conditions, antagonistic responses to the state and market become increasingly difficult to articulate without threat of being labeled as anti-patriotic.

<sup>70</sup> This moment produces a potentially satirical comment on the centrality of surveillance in post-9/11 culture, an issue which informs the darker satire of the terrorist mind in “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” the focus of Chapter 3.

<sup>71</sup> In *Disorder*, Joy relates how her younger co-workers had engaged these sorts of men in “terror sex” (22) and claims she masturbates to the thought of firemen (31). In *Bleeding Edge*, the narrator satires the sexual mania for police officers (334) even as Maxine enters a degrading sexual relationship with an ex-military neoliberal enforcer named Windust. In *The Good Life*, Corrine's younger sister constantly lusts after firemen.

<sup>72</sup> Although Anker cites more canonical examples such as *Windows on the World*, *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the exemplary instance of this allegorical impulse is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in which an anonymous father and son travel across a barren post-apocalyptic landscape populated with roving bands of cannibals. Here, as in the other examples, the father's precarious masculinity encounters an environment permeated with the omnipresent threat of violence and the resulting impossibility of reproducing the world through the domestic idyll, despite the valiant efforts of the strong masculine protector.

<sup>73</sup> Anker and I agree that *A Gate at the Stairs* sidesteps the trend towards masculine narratives of restoration.

<sup>74</sup> The “gate” of the title functions as a metaphor used to describe Tassie's mobility between worlds, yet it also accretes a number of sometimes contradictory functions as well. Even while this recurrent figure emphasizes how Tassie stands at a threshold marking one world and another, it also acts as a barrier separating her from passing through, as well as a point of transition through which she can move back and forth independently. Tassie thereby experiences a complex relationship to home irreducible to the stasis of national nostalgia.

<sup>75</sup> In her book *Literature After Feminism*, Rita Felski identifies a tension within feminist reactions to literary “Mother-Daughter Plots,” which in this case will help illuminate her ambivalence in the novel. Felski argues that whereas the “story of feminism was often a story of movement away from the mother, of a defiant search for autonomy and independence,” there is also a “contradictory impulse within feminism, an intense desire to reclaim motherhood as the symbolic center of woman-centered culture” (118). She sees this tension as speaking to the ambivalence of female identity in relation to the maternal figure, a feature which differentiates it from the “dramatic break or separation from the point of origin” common in narratives of masculine identity (118). “Whereas sons can only express a masculine identity by separating from their mother and identify themselves against her,” she writes, “daughters develop a sense of self-in-relation that is based on continuity with the mother” (118). As a result, the “story of female development” does not “follow purposeful path away from the mother, but constantly circles back to her in avowal of affiliation and indebtedness” (118). *A Gate at the Stairs* codes this ambivalence into the relationship between Tassie and her employer, and defacto mother figure in the story, Sarah. Whereas Tassie actively distances herself from her own stereotypical stay-at-home mother, her employer occupies a more central position in the novel’s plot as an adoptive mother, not only of little Mary-Emma, but also of Tassie herself, creating an unexpected form of debt and affiliation. Adoption, as Tassie remarks, is primarily about “women switching places” (89).

<sup>76</sup> As Laurie Langbauer and Rita Felski contend, the temporalities of reproduction, repetition and stasis have long been associated with women and domesticity. See Langbauer’s “The City, the Everyday and Boredom” and Felski’s “The Invention of Everyday Life.” Langbauer notes how maternity figures “as the source for the generation of series,” one of the privileged temporalities of everyday life (82). Felski similarly claims that women have often been regarded as the “quintessential representatives and victims of the quotidian” and its reproductive logics (17). Moore’s construction of Tassie breaks with the feminized (re)production of a series through domesticity.



<sup>77</sup> The obliviousness manifests in the humorous encounter between Tassie and her boyfriend, Reynaldo, when he reveals, much to her – and probably readers’ – surprise, that he’s a jihadist. Indeed, nothing about this intrusion of post-9/11 terrorist panic makes much sense. After dating Reynaldo for several months, Tassie detects no indication that her ostensibly Brazillian boyfriend is in fact part of a terrorist sleeper cell. When she confronts him for an explanation, he simply offers a series of vague statements, like how he laments the “spiritual mistakes” of the United States (191), and plainly tautological ones, such as when claims jihad is not wrong because, “[it] is the wrong things that are the wrong things” (206). Perhaps referring to this obtuseness, Tassie comically refers to Reynaldo as like “Gertrude Stein in a burka” (210). This sudden change in his language leads her to exclaim, “What’s happened to your voice? You’re speaking without contractions. How can you be from New Jersey?” (206). All of a sudden, a character which Tassie thinks she knows intimately becomes a two-dimensional caricature of a senseless Muslim terrorist. Reynaldo even offers a motivation for his actions derived straight from the most cartoonish cultural clichés. He explains how he was recruited when, because of September 11, his skin color precluded him from working in New York City (192). However ludicrous the motivation, he now trains in Wisconsin (of all places) for an unspecified jihadist mission abroad. The fact this revelation corresponds to their break-up suggests the impossibility of reconciling the national terrorist plot with Tassie’s personal life. Reynaldo’s revelation occurs as if out of another world, one composed through logics irreconcilably alien to this regional portion of the United States, removed almost entirely from the tragedy in New York City on September 11, 2001. Tassie and Reynaldo talk around the contours of the conventional post-9/11 terrorist plot, popularized through television shows such as Fox’s *24*, and as a result cannot seem to communicate at all. Instead, their conversation points to impasses and silences.

<sup>78</sup> Literary scholars agree that the treatment of terrorist “otherness” is one of the most fraught problems with which contemporary authors contend in their fiction: on the one hand, many writers want to avoid reproducing the simplistic “us and them” rhetoric of the Bush administration, but, on the other, hesitate before reducing the alien strangeness of the violent, mass-murdering terrorist with an empathetic, understanding portrayal. Yet, the field disagrees regarding what tactics authors use to negotiate this tension and its aftermath. Many of these readings see this negotiation as failed. For instance, scholars such as Pankaj Mishra, Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg see the domestic turn of post-9/11 literature (which we examined in the previous chapter) as inadequate for addressing the terrorist other, displacing vital discussions of geopolitics through escape into national trauma, personal victimization and convenient racial caricature. Similarly, Elizabeth Anker claims that post-9/11 texts either evade race (*Falling Man*), or sanitize it (*Netherland*), or reinscribe promising explorations of racial otherness within standard post-9/11 anxieties over precarious masculinity (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) (“Allegories” 468-9). However, other readings emphasize the limited success and latent political possibilities of how post-9/11 texts have thus far portrayed otherness. According to Versluys, for instance, post-9/11 fiction engages in strategies of “triangulation” which explores the “limits of tolerance and posits the problem of how to behave toward those who are intolerant of one’s tolerance” (*Out of the Blue* 152).

- <sup>79</sup> Injecting analysis of literary form into this field answers its own calls for mapping the disavowed conceptions of interconnected systems. Theorists such as Bigo, for instance, recognize the key place fiction occupies in surveillance practices. “The will to control time and space, present and future, here and there, has an effect that goes beyond antiterrorist policies,” he contends: “it creates a powerful mixture of fiction and reality, of virtual and actual, which merge boundaries and introduce fiction into reality for profiling as well as in de-realizing the violence of the state and of the clandestine organizations” (“Security” 62).
- <sup>80</sup> The clip is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiPe1OiKQuk>. For a deconstruction of Rumsfeld’s famously slippery phrase, see Errol Morris’ documentary film, *The Unknown Known* (2014).
- <sup>81</sup> Although attentive to how Amis’ narrative produces a fantasy of Atta that oscillates between difference and identity, criticism on “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” misses the implications of this ambivalence for surveillance. Thus, rather than analyze its broader social importance within post-9/11 security networks (which occupy a similar position of uncertainty), they are concerned primarily with issues of imaginary (dis)identification. For instance, seeing the portrayal of Atta as negative, Richard Gray argues that although “Scrupulously attentive to the minutiae of his subject’s life, Amis nevertheless transforms Muhammed [sic] into a bigot and a monster” (*After the Fall* 175), but he misses the complexity of Atta’s characterization. Whereas, as we shall see, Amis’ essays regarding his disgust with Islamism corroborate the writer’s potential aversion to portraying a mass-murderer like Atta positively, his short story proves more ambiguous, whether or not intentionally, in the treatment of its subject than Gray indicates. The more careful readings of Kristiaan Versluys and Martin Randall each note that while Amis undoubtedly draws on his criticism of Islamic figures such as Sayyid Qutb in his depiction of Atta – who for Amis similarly hates joy, sex, and even life itself in his adherence to the non-ideology of death – the resulting portrait actually destabilizes the intended distinction between the Western self and the terrorist other. According to Versluys, although the narrative certainly “dehumanizes” Atta, its attention to his suffering within his boring purgatory means he is “partly rehumanized in surprising ways” that generate sympathy for him and thus complicate the heavy-handed thesis of Amis’ non-fiction (*Out of the Blue* 160). Similarly, for Randall, Amis satirical portrayal of Atta, rather than reinforcing his unfathomable difference, actually aligns the character’s “self-hatred, spiritual ennui and sexual confusion” (*9/11 and the Literature of Terror* 52) with any number of analogous white male protagonists from the Amis’ previous work (46).
- <sup>83</sup> Or, as Žižek articulates it, “Beneath the opposition between ‘liberal’ and ‘fundamentalist’ societies, ‘McWorld versus Jihad’, there is the embarrassing third term: countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, deeply conservative monarchies but American economic allies, fully integrated in Western capitalism... they stand for the point at which the USA is forced explicitly to acknowledge the primacy of economy over democracy – that is, the secondary and manipulative character of legitimizing international interventions – by claiming to protect democracy and human rights” (*WTDR* 42-3).

<sup>84</sup> It is worth noting that Amis has explicitly rejected this sort of categorization for both his peers and himself: “Secular fanaticism, secular hatred—these equivalences are fictions. The humanist pitbulls Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, I am confident, have very few affinities with Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The key point, is that secularism contains no warrant for action. One can afford to be crude about this. When Islamists crash passenger planes into buildings, or hack off the heads of hostages, they shout, ‘God is great!’ When secularists do that kind of thing, what do they shout?” (SP 191-2).

<sup>85</sup> Although no such characters exist in Amis’ story, the opposition of Western values to the militant desire of terrorists to impose boring abstraction on non-believers collapses when one considers the equally pervasive presence of bored Westerners in narratives of terror. Take the exemplary case of the French protagonist in Michel Houellebecq’s *Platform*, Michel Renault, who complains about the ennui of modern European life, both in terms of labor and commodities: “Who could possibly have proposed the idea that France was the country of *debauchery* and *libertinage*? France was a sinister country, utterly sinister and bureaucratic” (emphasis in original, 45). Recalling his career in a bank, Michel laments the seeming ephemerality of work in a post-industrial service economy: “What had I produced in the forty years of my existence? To tell the truth, not very much. I had managed information, facilitated access to it, and disseminated it” (63). To compound his portrait of contemporary boredom, Renault, an avid reader of genre fiction, complains about the comforting yet formulaic plots of modern thrillers, such as *The Firm* (37, 53-4, 66), and he dismisses a museum commemorating Allied prisoners of war which, because it “radiated a profound monotony,” reminds him of, in another dig at what he views as the dialectical twin of aesthetic banality, a “modern art installation” (43). Renault seeks refuge from this boredom in sex tourism, eventually causing his path to cross with Muslim extremists, counter-posing his hopeless condition with death and traumatic violence. *Platform* locates boredom as an epidemic of the modern world through this juxtaposition and in doing so flips around Amis’ critique by constructing this state as symptomatic of dynamics internal rather than opposed to the Western society terrorists attack.

<sup>86</sup> Other post-9/11 texts similarly queer terrorist bodies. For instance, the title character of *Pygmy* anally rapes a bully and a different bully refers to Ahmad in *Terrorist* as a “queer” and “faggot” for insulting his girlfriend’s religion (Updike 16). However, Amis also returns to the topic of the queer Arab terrorist body in his other post-9/11 short story, “In the Palace at the End.” The narrative is told from the perspective of a body double for a fictional Middle Eastern dictator named Nadir, who draws countless assassins away from their intended target, necessitating a steadfast “fetish of verisimilitude” in order to maintain his resemblance to the increasingly battle-worn leader (*SP* 45). Accordingly, each in the army of doubles serves as the “proxy or prosthesis” of Nadir, including in his long term impotence (43). They enact this impotence through simulated acts of masculine sexual prowess which all too often fail to produce genuine orgasms in the endless series of beautiful women forced into the task of not faking it (and thus, essentially, put in the paradoxical position of being commanded to enjoy) (39). In the showers, the remaining twenty doubles, in their attempts to approximate Nadir’s bodily injuries, “all look red and raw, like a convocation of colossal penises” (40). Judging from the strange rituals of the Recreation wing, this image of shared virility suggests a queer form of reproduction in which Nadir produces replicas of himself through the non-sexual means of resemblance, enforced through shared suffering and infliction of violence on one another. The doubling and repetition evident in the story align these figures with the reproduction of terrorism through a proliferation of copies and simulacra of their acts of violence, which extend to the veiling and thus abstracting of terrorist bodies into a common, indistinguishable collectivity. The successive leaders are themselves serialized as Nadir the Next, indicating he is always one after another and before another, replaceable with a newer model when the time comes and thus ultimately without an individual personality.

<sup>87</sup> Through its depiction of his repressed sexual desires and their stirring during the hijacking on American 11, the uncomfortable thrill of vicariously experiencing terrorism that Wallace associates with transfigurations within the culture industries is instead displaced on to the queered terrorist. The narrative presents Atta as excessive through his association of sexuality with mass murder, signaling the attribution of queer excess to the Muslim male body even as depicting his mind as deficient through boredom. When preparing himself for the “opening of female flesh” once he cuts the “throat of the stewardess,” Atta recalls a fantasy of another stewardess on another flight. In this fantasy, he acknowledges that “here was the dark female in her most swinishly luxurious form: tall, long necked, herself streamlined and aerodynamic, with hair like a billboard for a chocolate sundae, and all that flesh, damp and glowing as if from fever or lust” (162). Despite this overtly sexualized description, Atta admonishes the men who cannot take their eyes off of her, vowing he “would never forget the face of the stewardess—the face of cloudless entitlement—and how badly he wanted to hurt it” (162). In this passage, Atta’s repressed sexual desire – constituted through his relation to the desiring gazes of other men – crosses with his desire to punish “infidels,” figuring the spectacle of the female body as the screen for the projection of Atta’s hostility towards the sexualized, pleasurable, image-saturated world of the West. As Jasbir Puar observes in *Terrorist Assemblages*, terrorist masculinities are often treated as “failed” or “perverse” (xxii) in so far as “queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist; the terrorist does not appear as such without the concurrent entrance of perversion, deviance” (xxiv). The coincidence of sexuality and violence Atta’s thoughts imply depict this sort of queer masculinity, which the narrative underscores as Atta, in vague reference to his easing constipation, complains that his “loins, between them, were contriving for him something very close to the sensations of anal rape” (“Last Days” 162). Thus, whereas the narrative others the terrorist mind through the stigma of boredom, it also others the terrorist body through the stigma of a queer sexuality. Terrorists, as Puar argues, “are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body—homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness, and disease” (Puar xxii). In Atta’s case, these pathologies estrange him from normative visions of sexuality, figuring him as a deviant whose desire intermingles pleasure with death in his act of suicide mass-murder.

<sup>88</sup> Whereas Fredric Jameson derived the term “strategies of containment” from the geopolitical structures of the Cold War, in which the capitalist West struggled to “contain” the spread of communism throughout the Third World, today the phrase, as I use it, takes on a different resonance in the “cellular” conception of a globalized society, or what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the “age of biotechnological production.” Today’s “strategies of containment” are enriched by the complex cultural association since 9/11 of terrorism – a geopolitical issue – with bodies through biological metaphors. Jacques Derrida, for instance, framed the emerging era of terrorism in terms of an “autoimmunity disorder” of the West through which the state encounters the consequences of its own interventions into Middle Eastern conflicts, such as in Afghanistan against Soviet aggression, which elevated both the Taliban and Osama bin Laden into formidable enemies through American military advice, funding and training. By way of global terrorism, the “figure of the foundation of law (the US),” Derrida claims, is “exposed as the object of aggression in an attack that comes as if from inside,” because the terrorist uses “American knowledge and technology against it” (qtd. in Borradori 95). Linking Derrida’s biological metaphor to discourses of image reproduction, W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Cloning Terror* examines the intersections of anxieties regarding cloning and terrorism, both of which “personify twin anxieties about the production and destruction of living images” (67). “The clone incarnates the horror of the biological simulacrum,” Mitchell writes, “the uncontrolled proliferation of organisms associated with cancers, viruses, plagues, and autoimmune disorders. The terrorist is the figure of iconoclasm and the destruction of living images, literally in the form of human bodies, metaphorically in the destruction of monuments” (67). Like the clone, the terrorist figure also threatens the social body as a virus proliferating out of control within it, attacking its host. Terrorism does so by generating images of violence and destruction which bypass “natural” processes of reproduction – represented through the metaphor of motherhood in *A Gate at the Stairs* – influenced by the state. If terrorism multiplies and spreads through the social body as terrifying images, similar to viruses or cancerous “cells,” then the state must find a way to contain and treat the infection. The critical recourse to bodily metaphors of contagion indicates the future of terrorism is potentially non-visual, producing anxiety through the impossibility of detecting the threat before it is too late to save the social organism.

<sup>89</sup> Two cinematic treatments of terrorism, one set in 1980s Northern Ireland and a remake set in a contemporary U.S. high school, call attention to this dual abstraction of terrorists and victims. The first is a forty minute television film produced by Danny Boyle and directed by Alan Clarke for the BBC in 1989 titled *Elephant*. The film, ostensibly about Northern Irish terrorism, forgoes melodrama and sociopolitical analysis to depict the conflict as an endless cycle of violence within everyday urban life. Rather than create a narrative of clear cause and effect, its surveillance aesthetic features a series of sadistic non-narrative loops, in which mute, nameless, faceless assassins pursue anonymous victims (it makes no mention of religious or political affiliation) through a blank post-industrial landscape, the perspectival lines of which inevitably converge at moments of sudden violence, precipitating quick cuts and then resetting the cycle. Whereas critics such as Richard Kirkland see this refusal of context as reproducing the spectacle of terrorism, the aesthetics of abstraction it embraces actually estranges that spectacle, accentuating it through over-identification with the de-realization of terrorists and their victims. In the 2003 wake of the Columbine school shooting, director Gus van Sant remade *Elephant*, retaining many of the aesthetic decisions made by Boyle and Clarke, but staging the loops within an American high school. Although more easily assimilated to the denouncement of reciprocal violence than treated as an examination of abstraction, the results prove equally as estranging in this new context. In these two films, the abstracting force of terrorism – embodied by Atta in Amis' short story, also caught in cycles of never-ending repetition and duration – becomes visually readable.

<sup>90</sup> See especially Lacan's discussions of Antigone in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>91</sup> For more on the temporal paradoxes in the *Terminator* franchise, see Phillip Wegner's "I'll be Back: Repetitions and Revisions in the *Terminator* films" from his *Life Between Two Deaths*: 60-84.

<sup>92</sup> As Winfried Pauleit observes, surveillance is not just oriented towards reconstructing the past, but predicting the future as well. Its "production of images is directed towards the 'future perfect.' It is a conception of images that functions via a time loop that is otherwise only familiar to us from science fiction stories" ("Video Surveillance" 469). Pauleit's formulation (along with the work of Brian Massumi) has obvious implications in the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive action that I examine in more detail in this project's conclusion.

<sup>93</sup> For more on the ideological functions of this film, see Wegner, "'The Dead are Our Redeemers': Culture, Belief, and *United 93*".

<sup>94</sup> Of course, as Žižek notes, there is something amiss in this false concreteness. He critiques the cultural fixation on the sublime "immediacy" of the spectacular events, evident in post-9/11 Hollywood films like *World Trade Center* and *United 93*. In an online essay, Žižek contends that these symptomatic films are "abstract in their very 'concreteness,'" insofar as the "function of their down-to-earth depiction of concrete individuals struggling for life is not just to avoid cheap commercial spectacle, but to obliterate the historical context" ("Five Years After").

<sup>95</sup> Beyond a simple aesthetic resemblance, the subject matter of New York City architecture further reinforces the connection between *Empire* and *The Disintegration Loops*. As Mark Kingwell observes in *Nearest Thing to Heaven*, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11 has led to a revival in the symbolic status of the Empire State Building, over which the towers loomed for nearly thirty years (ix). One might then say that interest in Warhol's *Empire* occurs with a similar retrospective glance back from the vantage point of the September 11 image-event on which Basinski's project comments. For instance, Joshua Simon notes in his discussion of the aesthetics in terrorist suicide videos, that *Empire*, when viewed from our current vantage point, bears "prophetic significance" ("Thoughts" 46). He bases this conclusion on the idea that the limitless duration and continuity of video, its status as "non-event, non-narrative [and] non-viewers," prefigures the videos of destruction on September 11 (45). In repeating Warhol's methods for creating boredom, Basinski draws an implicit parallel between the prophetic significance of *Empire's* use of technology and the aftermath of destruction he captures in his own use of it following the terrorist attacks. In *Idols of the Market*, Sven Lütticken raises another excellent example of the connection between the time of empire and terrorism. He discusses the installation *Greenwich Degree Zero* by Rod Dickinson and Tom McCarthy which "consists of doctored elements—printed matter, a film—which purportedly substantiate the anarchist bombing of Greenwich Observatory on February 15, 1894" (183). Greenwich Observatory, Lütticken observes, was the visible manifestation of an invisible and abstract system, home to the Prime Meridian from which all the ships of the British Empire would take their bearings (183). Much like the World Trade Center, it was the center of global commerce from which the market radiated as a grid outwards. "The looped film, a static shot, suggests grim Debordian time," he argues, "an industrial version of eternal return" that speaks to our own historical moment even as it revises a previous one (183).

<sup>96</sup> Again, however, a non-religious explanation of this looping redirects our attention draws us back to the importance of media in the culture of terrorism. Drawing attention to the temporal structures of video in the story suggests the vital connection between the tactics of contemporary Islamic terrorism and virtual technologies. Contrary to Amis, who emphasizes the backwards and regressive impulses of Islamism, other critics have observed the importance of the new media to the activities of al-Qaida and affiliated organizations across the Islamic world. "Islamic Jihad and al-Qaida," Retort contends, "cannot take all the credit for this, but radical Islam has contributed, in its tactical use of the likes of al-Jazeera and the virtual world, to the creation of a profound sense of collective suffering" (*Afflicted Powers* 154). Besides providing opportunities for flexible organization, coordination and connectivity across geographic borders, the virtual realm of spectacle allows for the rapid circulation of anti-Western propaganda: "Fatwas are routinely issued as grainy video-recordings; CDs circulate widely, and websites parade the vanguard leadership exhorting the faithful; the grisly beheadings are webcast" (158).

<sup>97</sup> Atta tells Ziad, a fellow hijacker he does not much care for, that the imam gave him a crystal vial full of holy water that will protect him against purgatory. Ziad is not so lucky: "Your hell will burn with jet fuel for eternity. And eternity never ends, Ziad—it never even begins" (160). As Randall notes, there is something highly ironic about Atta's feigned belief in the holy water, which we learn does not really come from a crystal vial, but a bottle of ordinary Volvic water (9/11 50).



<sup>98</sup> For a similar reading of John Updike's narratives of terrorism, see Colgan, John-Paul. "‘This Godless Democracy’: Terrorism, Multiculturalism and American Self-Criticism in John Updike."

<sup>99</sup> In some ways, this identification with Atta is unsurprising. As *The 9/11 Commission Report* details, Atta appears to have been the most Westernized of the hijackers prior to the attacks. Indeed, one of the reasons the al-Qaeda leadership selected Atta to spearhead their operations in the United States is because he could most fluidly move between the terrorist network and the American culture. Unlike many of the others assigned to the task, Atta was well educated and able to blend into Western society. He had a degree in engineering (from Cairo University) and worked in the professional class as an urban planner (also in Cairo) prior to immigrating to Hamburg in order to continue his studies (221). "In school," the 9/11 Commission reports, "Atta came across as very intelligent and reasonably pleasant, with an excellent command of the German language" (222). Moreover, friends during his initial days in Germany "remember him as convivial and 'a regular guy,' wearing Western clothes and occasionally renting cars for trips to Berlin, France, and the Netherlands" (224). Although Atta increasingly became "abrasive", "dogmatic" and "intolerant of dissent" as he assumed greater control of the 9/11 operation (222), perhaps the true fascination with him originates in his uncanny resemblance to a fully assimilated Westerner, whose irksome sameness figures on a smaller scale the fear of other potential terrorists lurking undetected amongst the general population.

<sup>100</sup> For instance, Kevin D. Haggerty calls for the retiring the panopticon trope in favor of models more amenable to the analysis of the less easily located gazes in Deleuzian "surveillance assemblages," which exist across multiple institutions and technologies rather than a single government entity: "The multiplication of the sites of surveillance ruptures the unidirectional nature of the gaze, transforming surveillance from a dynamic of the microscope to one where knowledge and images of unexpected intensity and assorted distortions cascade from viewer to viewer and across institutions, emerging in unpredictable configurations and combinations, while undermining the neat distinction between watchers and watched through a proliferation of criss-crossing, overlapping and intersecting scrutiny" ("Tear Down" 29). In place of the panoptic paradigm, Haggerty advocates for studies of governmentality that attend to the "particularities" as well as "rationalities" and "technologies" of specific and contingent governmental surveillance projects (40). Like Haggerty, Lyon advocates for a new approach, but advises that to jettison scrutiny of vertical authority entirely in order to replace it with a horizontal, rhizomic model, potentially misses how the former draws upon the latter in renewed exercises of sovereign exception, particularly after September 11. "After 9/11," he claims, "the surveillance state shows itself to be stronger than ever, even though it now uses the dispersed systems and devices of surveillance *society*" (emphasis in original, *After* 37). Thus, while minding the tension, we ought to understand the horizontal surveillance tactics of everyday life as increasingly integrated into the vertical security monitoring programs of the American state after September 11.

<sup>101</sup> Julius' mobility recalls Tassie's circulation between representative spaces of regional Wisconsin in *A Gate at the Stairs*, albeit adapted to urban settings, and poses similar problems of narrative focalization as Moore's novel. Like Tassie, Julius significantly narrows the scope of our vision, serving as a partial, incomplete lenses through which to map post-9/11 America. *Open City's* use of free indirect discourse moves Julius' mind to the center of readers' attention, making it difficult to separate what Julius thinks from what he sees or hears.

<sup>102</sup> For instance, *Netherland* narrates the friendship of two such immigrants, one named Hans, a Dutch born financial analyst who immigrated to New York City with his British wife, and another named Chuck Ramkissoon, who immigrated to the city from Trinidad to pursue his dream of making cricket into an American national sport. Neither ends up successful because of the move: Hans gets separated when his wife becomes disillusioned with his political indifference amongst the upheavals after 9/11, and Chuck ends up murdered due to the organized crime activities he's using to fund the purchase of a cricket field. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* details the experiences of Changez, a Pakistani immigrant whose dreams of the status and success of a career in finance ends up radically altering his perspective on American global practices. By the conclusion of the narrative, it becomes apparent that the highly intelligent Changez might have joined the extremist movement as a means of resisting the U.S. economic imperialism in which he once actively participated. These characters' respective pursuits of the American dream, in other words, come up short; thus, their narratives indict the United States for the moral failures that contradict national fantasies of tolerance and opportunity.

<sup>103</sup> Attuned to the tense atmosphere in a line to an immigration office, Julius, a declared lover of classical music, notes how the "official fear of terrorism played along, like a bass figure, to the private fear of being found wanting by an immigration officer once they got upstairs" (218). What this immigration line demonstrates is how the post-9/11 War on Terror structures public institutional practices deciding inclusion and exclusion from the nation, but it also suggests how those practices have long been part of the terror felt by racialized bodies that do not control their own appearance within those practices. For instance, although people of Arab descent would absorb the ferocity of racial repudiation after September 11, African American history and culture has long suffered from fetishistic disavowal within the national imaginary, both "formative and denied" within what Anne Anlin Cheng defines as a "melancholic" American literary corpus because "of what [that corpus] excludes but cannot forget" (*Melancholy of Race* 12). Citing Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Cheng argues that the loss of the racial other in the white melancholia of the nation manifests as a sort of incomplete erasure: "teetering between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space" (16). Julius seems to occupy this "negative space" of racial invisibility – yet another blind spot – within a country dominated by the white versus black narrative of slavery, but he nonetheless recognizes the resonance of this central trauma in current events. For example, when he witnesses the end of an anti-Iraq War rally, he not only registers the parallels with 1960s "draft riots" but also experiences a startling vision: "in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head to toe in black, reflecting no light" (75). Even after Julius resolves that this sudden eruption of slavery's visibility into this context is nothing more than an illusion, it maintains its historical truth as a reminder of America's complicity with avoidable human suffering that speaks to then contemporary geopolitical conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- <sup>104</sup> The mugging incident itself doubles several times during the narrative as a recurrent pain in Julius' hand, which is injured in the attack, connects him to the pain of others. His hand again hurts when he picks up a stone from a forgotten slave burial ground in Lower Manhattan (222), when he imagines striking his muggers (229), and immediately following Moji's accusations of sexual assault (246). Yet, as in much of the novel, Julius learns to forget the pain, in this case once he has surgery on his hand and settles into his private medical practice far removed from these former concerns (247). This eventual oblivion unsettles Moji's parting admonishment of Julius that "Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them" (245).
- <sup>105</sup> Also, it is ironic because two months after the publication of *Open City*, Cole reports he suffered a sudden onset blindness, which, although temporary, could not help but resonate with his novel. See his article "Blind Spot."
- <sup>106</sup> Cole expresses his admiration for Sebald in particular. See "W.G. Sebald's Poetry of the Disregarded." Cole's appreciation of Sebald's work could just as easily serve as a rubric for reading Julius' sense of solitude, exile and walking. Take for instance Cole's opening description of Sebald's style: "Throughout his career, W. G. Sebald wrote poems that were strikingly similar to his prose. His tone, in both genres, was always understated but possessed of a mournful grandeur. To this he added a willful blurring of literary boundaries and, in fact, almost all his writing, and not just the poetry and prose, comprised history, memoir, biography, autobiography, art criticism, scholarly arcana, and invention."
- <sup>107</sup> Although unremarked by Julius, another possible reference could be Walter Benjamin's formulation of the "optical unconscious" in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in which he claims that visual technologies such as the photograph or movie camera can reveal a "vast and unsuspected field of action" going on beneath everyday appearances (*SW*: V3, XVI, 117).
- <sup>108</sup> Images of the panorama are available on the Queens Art Museum website: <http://www.queensmuseum.org/exhibitions/visitpanorama>. It reports that the current model reflects the appearance of the city in 1992 and the World Trade Center towers will be replaced once construction is complete on the new buildings located at the site. In a fitting connection between abstract representation of the city and commercial real estate, "The Queens Museum of Art has a program giving you the opportunity to 'purchase' NYC real estate on The Panorama of the City of New York for as low as \$50."

<sup>109</sup> In this exploration of vertical or overhead vision and its construction of subjectivity, *Open City* echoes Michel de Certeau's famous description of the city from the vantage point of the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In his chapter on "Walking in the City," de Certeau describes the panorama of the city visible from its then tallest point, surveyed from a position similar to the one Julius occupies in relation to the scale model in the museum, where the "elevation transfigures him into a voyeur" and "puts him at a distance" which then "transforms the bewitching world... into a 'text' the lies before one's eyes... [and thus] allows one to read it" from the remove of a transcendent consciousness (92). "The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan," de Certeau argues, "continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, make the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text" (92). Like *Open City*, de Certeau compares this overhead view of the city as inert representation with everyday life in the city, on the same ground Julius walks. He proposes that "Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only the upper limit, outlining itself against the visible" (93). Julius, crossing the street level of New York City, excavates the strangeness of urban space invisible from the god-like perspective located above it.

<sup>110</sup> The location of the model outside of the lived historical time of post-9/11 America not only recalls restorative fantasies discussed in chapter two, but also resonates (looking ahead) with Ziggy and Otis in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*, children who use the internet to find files depicting "a version of NYC as it was before 11 September 2001... rendered in a benevolently lighted palette taken from old-school color processes like the ones you find on picture postcards from another day" (428). Like Julius' scale model, the files evidence a suspension of historical time: "Somebody, somewhere in the world, enjoying that mysterious exemption from time which produces most internet content, has been patiently coding together these vehicles and streets, this city that can never be" (428).

<sup>111</sup> "The souvenirs at Ground Zero, like many of the objects sold at the gift shop of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, can engage with history only in very limited ways. They are objects that focus on loss and memory through narratives of redemption that inevitably collapse history into simple narratives. The focus of such objects is invariably not the why of such events or the complexities of history so much as it is about producing feelings of comfort" (Sturken *Tourists of History* 217).

<sup>112</sup> The new found attachment to the towers – which many had considered an eye-sore upon their initial construction – has something to do with the media’s decision (following public outcry) to substitute images of the burning and collapsing buildings in place of more disturbing images of falling bodies. This substitution partially explains the close cultural association which developed between the images of the Towers and the suffering of victims. As Mark Wigley observes, President Bush frequently repeated expressions such as “wounded buildings”; “victimized buildings”; “tortured structures”; “death of the towers” that suggest the country grieve for buildings as they do for people, accentuated by the fact the buildings share the same space as victims’ faces in makeshift memorials on the site (“Insecurity” 72). Whereas, before 9/11, “The Twin Towers were a pure, uninhabited image floating above the city, an image forever above the horizon, in some kind of sublime excess, defying our capacity to understand it” (82), Wigley argues, after the events, these once anti-historical examples of the “generic post-war corporate office tower” (75) personify both national strength and the grief of its violent contradiction. In light of this close association between damaged buildings and damaged bodies, which were tragically combined in the buildings’ collapses, history dissipates into oblivion.

<sup>113</sup> Despite the attempts to close the wound of 9/11, the World Trade Center site remains a space where history is contested. On 21 May 2014, the National September 11 Memorial Museum opened to the public at foot of the fallen towers. Housed in an 110,000 square feet exhibition space designed by the Davis Brody Bond architectural agency, the combination of historical contextualization, dedications to the victims of the attacks and displays of artifacts from the site is the latest development in a longer, highly contentious process of memorialization that began soon after the 11 September 2001 attacks. One conflict involved the family members of victims, who wanted to dedicate the space to mourning, and the commercial interests of lease owner on the space, Larry Silverstein, who along with some residents, businesses and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, wanted to at least partially reintegrate the site into the overlapping rhythms of capitalism and everyday urban life. “Lower Manhattan,” Sharon Zukin writes, “is now a site of conflict between two hostile regimes: the regimes of money and the regimes of memory” (“Our World Trade Center” 14). However, even the “regime of memory” remains contested, split between the specificity of individual victims’ suffering and the urban, national and international scales of the event. In particular, David Simpson fears that nationalist symbolism, which frames the victims as heroic sacrifices in the war against the America’s enemies, threatens to assimilate the tragedy into the reproduction of ideological myths. Simpson sites the blunt symbolic equivalences in Daniel Libeskind’s original design for the World Trade Center site as cause for concern, with its jagged 1,776 feet tall skyscraper, eventually redesigned by David Childs and named the “Freedom Tower,” a glassy exclamation point rising from the grounds of tragedy to soar above Manhattan, a conceit that Simpson claims succumbs to the “demand that remembering the dead be conjoined with the evocation of an upbeat future” (*Commemoration* 75). What these and other conflicts ought to make clear about the World Trade Center site is how the space, rather than passively reflecting universal mourning, actually relays, manages and produces any number of competing personal, political and economic desires. In other words, urban space is where history, affect and meaning are struggled over.

<sup>114</sup> “All verbal commemorations and material monuments... put in place what they claim is already there, and in doing so preempt the possibilities for alternative acts of memory,” Simpson argues: “This is one reason why the design of monuments is so keenly contested” (*Commemoration* 31). Amy Waldman’s 2011 “what if?” novel *The Submission* opens with the deliberations of a jury charged with selecting the design for a memorial at the World Trade Center site that illustrate the connections between mourning, melancholy and the production of space. The two finalists, drawn from the anonymous submissions of various architects, reflect two aspects of the commemorative project. Claire, the juror who represents the families of victims, favors the concept of a “walled, square garden guided by rigorous geometry” with a “raised pavilion meant for contemplation” at its center and surrounded by a “white perimeter wall, eighteen feet high” with the victims “listed on the wall’s interior” (4). In contrast to this geometric yet organic haven, Ariana, a New York City artist, advocates for a much harsher aesthetic they refer to as “The Void,” which would be a “towering black granite rectangle, some twelve stories high, centered in a huge oval pool, [that] came off in the drawings as a great gash against the sky” (5). These designs illustrate the contradictory desires to put the past to rest – represented by the garden – and the desire to keep the historical wound open. The novel ruthlessly satires Ariana, who seems to be hopelessly oblivious to the therapeutic purposes of a memorial, but the ultimately rejected design that she defends better approximates the necropolis on which the new site will be built, the “void” Spiegelman captures on the cover of *In the Shadow of No Towers* that defies attempts at imposing closure or enacting erasure.

<sup>115</sup> The media controversy surrounding the so-called “falling man” images and their replacement with images of the collapsing World Trade Center towers illustrates the attenuation of September 11’s full impact through the act of fetishistic substitution. Local spectators frequently reported the horror of seeing desperate occupants of the towers, trapped in the floors above the burning crater opened in the buildings by the airliners, leaping to their deaths, some of whom were captured by photographers recording the unfolding events. One such photographer, Richard Drew, took a particularly compelling series of pictures of one man’s decent. The most aesthetically arresting of these images – in which the falling body appears to parallel the vertical lines of the then still standing towers – originally appeared in *The New York Times*, but was later censored in response to accusations that it disrespects the dead and aestheticizes their demise. Since then, these images have assumed an underground life, a single Google image search away, illustrated by the computer savvy child protagonist of Foer’s novel, Oskar, who assumes censored images of falling bodies are of his own deceased father (and later uses the image of a body falling in reverse to represent him). Like Foer, other authors and artists have turned to this ubiquitous yet unacknowledged horror of the attacks in their confrontations with public disavowal through what Barabara Zelizer calls “about to die” images. Take for instance performance artist Kerry Skarbakka, who in 2005 conducted a series of jumps from Chicago buildings to challenge the prohibition on representation of falling bodies after 9/11, and Don DeLillo, who in *Falling Man* shapes Skarbakka’s stunt into an allegory for the national unwillingness to confront its collective vulnerability to death. Or, consider Eric Fischal, whose *Tumbling Woman* sculpture, depicting a falling figure in mid-descent, temporarily adorned the entrance to Rockefeller plaza, only to be removed after succumbing to vitriolic public outrage. Even the AMC television drama *Madmen*, set in nineteen-sixties Manhattan, and thus temporally far removed from the contemporary moment, uses an image of a silhouette male figure falling against the vertical background of skyscrapers. The repetition of images points to what Zeligzer calls the “as if” function of near death photographs, in which the arrested instant promotes the fantasies of spectators who seek to fill in the narrative gaps the singularity of the image evokes. In the case of “falling man” images, as Elizabeth Anker observes, these fantasies register everything from the anxieties regarding masculine weakness to the prevailing sense of decline in national influence. The mechanism of disavowal enabled these fantasies of hide in plain sight, becoming a powerful dimension of stories emerging from September 11.

<sup>116</sup> Cities have always been a nexus of military and non-military violence, a tradition that continues during the War on Terror. “The great geopolitical contests of cultural change, ethnic conflict, and diasporic social mixing; of economic reregulation and liberalization; of militarization, informatization, resource exploitation, and ecological change are,” Stephen Graham argues, “to a growing extent, boiling down to often violent conflicts in the key strategic sites of our age: contemporary cities” (*Cities, War, Terrorism* 4). Terrorism of non-government actors and the emergency state is also a contest over “spaces, symbols, meanings, support systems, or power structures of cities and urban places” (*CWT* 8). Especially since the September 11 attacks, the notion of an “open city” begins to appear antiquated, if ever having existed at all, a fantasy that sustains the belief in exemption from history and its violence. When Julius refers to New York City as an “open city” then, it necessarily comes with a certain irony. The Wall Street area had been bombed by anarchists in 1920; in 1993 the first attempt to topple the World Trade Center (this time with a fertilizer bomb in the basement) failed; and, of course, al-Qaeda succeeded in triggering its collapse in 2001. These sorts of assaults have made New York City an increased focus of the American national security apparatus and its urban militarization.

<sup>117</sup> In “The Limits of Empathy,” Jill Bennett tacitly concurs with Butler, arguing that while empathy with the suffering of the victims, families and rescuers associated with the World Trade Center ought to be endorsed, such identification can become “dependent on maintaining a sense of the victims as ‘like us’ to enable us to imagine ourselves in their place” and can in doing so exclude identification with the suffering of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers (among others) (134).

<sup>118</sup> These descriptions recall both the history of Freudian psychoanalysis and Walter Benjamin’s idiosyncratic cultural materialism in *The Arcades Project*. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud offered a topographical model for the unconscious (perhaps inspired, like Julius, by archaeological discourse) that figured consciousness as the layers of cities built up, over time, above older substrates. Yet he emphasizes how, contrary to the annihilation of the historical trace that this process implies, “in mental life nothing which has been formed can perish,” because, “everything is somehow preserved” and “in suitable circumstances... it can once more be brought to light” (725). The convolute of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* dealing with the underworlds of Paris mobilizes Freud’s intuitions about the mind within a cultural materialist excavation of collective memory. “Our waking existence,” Benjamin argues, “is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld—a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise” (*AP* [C1a2], 84). Thresholds – particularly the Paris Metro stations – serve as significant contact points for Benjamin, where realities converge. In his discussion of contemporary underworlds, Julius grasps at a similar intuition that crossing such thresholds will lead into the unthought histories of the city.

<sup>119</sup> He links it more directly with Trinity when he points out that Herman Melville, author of *Moby-Dick*, a narrative about hunting a white whale, or a “magnum opus on an albino Leviathan,” was a sometimes parishioner (51).



<sup>120</sup> Recent controversies over the so-called “Ground-Zero Mosque” and the discovery of an eighteenth-century slave ship a few blocks from the WTC site testify to the ideological repudiation of history still at work in the space of Lower Manhattan. Although neither controversy pertains to the specific space of the World Trade Center site, both indicate how it nonetheless exerts a gravitational force drawing competing discourses towards its center. Not soon after the somewhat muted commemoration for the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, a controversy erupted over plans to build Park51, an Islamic community center, several blocks from the former WTC site. While this complex would have only featured Muslim prayer space as a small part of its overall function, and would have been located two blocks from the former WTC site, opponents almost instantly labeled it as the “Ground-Zero Mosque,” attributing intentions to mock the September 11 tragedy and thus postponing its construction indefinitely. Viewing the proximity of Islam to the WTC site is somewhat ironic in light of the history of that space. As Andrew Ross observes, prior to the construction of the towers this site was already a “world trade center,” comprised of a series of ethnic neighborhoods populated with Arab immigrants (“Odor” 123). The combined powers of the Port Authority, the Rockefeller brothers and big finance displaced these people and demolished the neighborhood: the site had always been multiethnic rather than the hallowed white space it became. In the second example, the remains of an eighteenth-century slave ship were unearthed near Ground Zero, prompting left-wing activists to note that Lower Manhattan was a burial ground for 20,000 slaves, many of them Muslims (Quraishi). Although the excavated burial ground – reminiscent of Julius’ own encounter – stops a block from the disaster site, they are convinced there is no reason why it could not extend a little further. Obviously, there is some ironic symbolism at stake. What if the World Trade Center – treated as an ethnically purified space – was actually built on a slave burial ground?

<sup>121</sup> Cole believes his book to ultimately be more about Obama than Bush: “It’s an Obama book, certainly. I was delighted, and astonished, to hear recently that he was reading it. It’s a book about a new kind of American reality, one that takes diversity for granted. It doesn’t celebrate diversity, actually, it just says: this is how we live now. You don’t bring in a gay character as a way of commenting on gay issues. You have one there because he’s real, and that’s his life, no less so than your life is yours. Julius is a mixed-race American, with a deceased African father; he’s highly articulate, at home in ambiguities, Columbia-affiliated, and negotiating his identity on the streets of New York. Thinking through that litany, it’s fair to say Julius might have more in common with Obama than with me. And I was tempted to have Julius, somewhere in the book, catch a glimpse of the senator from Illinois on a TV screen. I really thought about it. But it seemed too heavy a touch, and I left it out” (“Palimpsest City”).

<sup>122</sup> Here, Julius crosses paths with T.W. Adorno, who responded to the criticism of him from terrorist radicals in 1970s Germany with an impassioned defense of withdrawal from the immediate injunction to act, which he sees as little more than the obverse of what he calls “administered society” and the paralysis of the political left. His essay “Resignation,” Adorno argues, “It is hardly a wonder that the ideal of direct action and propaganda glorifying the deed have been resurrected, on the heels of the willing integration of formerly progressive organizations that... manifest the character of that against which they were once directed” (201). For Adorno, the call to sacrifice thinking in favor of action – or violent “pseudo-activity” that instrumentalizes autonomous thought as anger – constitutes the true “resignation” (202). *Open City* presents Julius is equally as similarly weary of elevating action over thought.

<sup>123</sup> “What it means to be a professional historian of art,” according to Cole, “is to be able to write twenty pages about one painting and somehow keep it interesting, and that influences absolutely every other thing I do, my photography as well as my writing.” (“Pitch Forward”). Cole’s remarks also shed some light on an episode in which Julius revels in the silence of an empty art gallery exhibiting the work of Dutch portrait painter John Brewster and perhaps suggests the price of abstraction from the outside world:

The gallery was quiet and calm and, save for the guard who stood in the corner, I was the only person there. This heightened the feeling of quietness I got from almost all portraits. The stillness of the people depicted was certainly part of it, as was the somber color palette of each panel, but there was something more, something harder to define: an air of hermeticism. Each of the portraits was a sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter. This was the truest of Brewster’s many portraits of children, all of them self-possessed in their infantile bodies, and often with whimsical elements in their outfits, but with the faces, without exception, serious, even more serious than those of the adults, a gravity all out of keeping with their tender ages. Each child stood in a doll-like pose, and was brought to life by an incisive gaze. The effect was unsettling. (*Open City* 37)

The passage seems to corroborate Cole’s assertion that “[b]ecause everything comes filtered through the fundamental insight of studying paintings for a living... if you spend enough time with a still image, it can be drawn out, it has things to say to you” (“Pitch Forward”). Julius’ quiet consideration of Brewster’s child paintings has enabled him to arrive at the punctum in the shared seriousness of their expressions, an insight which proves “unsettling.” Yet his comments on the “hermeticism” of the portraits, generating a “sealed away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter” might rebound on to Julius, whose life consists primarily of chance encounters and who refuses any form of social affiliation because it threatens to pull him out of his own solipsistic position as observer and passer of judgment. Like the lens of a camera, Julius’ developed ability to focus on foreground detail can wash out the rest of the picture, forcing him into perpetual isolation even as, in Barthes terms, the detail “pricks” him with its incongruous elements.

<sup>124</sup> The video can be found here: <http://vimeo.com/37119711>

<sup>125</sup> Cole’s critique of this contemporary “white man’s burden” echoes Slavoj Žižek’s argument against so-called “ethical capitalism,” in which charitable contributions to the welfare of others, while laudable, enables First World countries to deny their own complicity in generating the very problems they report trying to solve. This relief of liberal guilt manifests both at the highest levels of capitalism in the charitable work of Bill Gates but also the “coffee ethic” promoted by Starbucks, where everyday consumers are expected to pay a little extra to participate in alleviating the ills of global capitalism on local coffee producers, reducing activism to consumer choice. Neither aim at challenging the hegemony of capitalism over these Third World countries, leveraged through resource extraction, debt and structural adjustment, for instance. See *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 51-65.

<sup>126</sup> See Žižek's *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 146; See also Agamben's *Stanzas*, 20.

<sup>127</sup> See Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, particularly the chapter titled "Infinite Detention," 50-100.

<sup>128</sup> Building off of Agamben, Žižek argues, "the only way to possess an object which we never had, which was lost from the very outset, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost" (*Totalitarianism* 146). His comments speak to discourses of the future in the War on Terror: if we never actually possessed the utopian future promised as the end of history, then the post-9/11 world is the melancholic attachment to that utopian promise which manifests as the assumed loss of the future to terrorism and the state of emergency.

<sup>129</sup> Several post-9/11 cinematic adaptations of Phillip K. Dick's work testify to this pervasive cultural and political anxiety regarding the traumatism of this future *to come* and the consequent need to prevent it. In order of descending quality, director Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), which imagines a near-future Washington DC free of murder thanks to the work of a tripartite oracle that systematically disavows the flaws in its supposed prescience; John Woo's *Paycheck* (2003), in which a character unknowingly reverse engineers a government future-viewing device for a nefarious employer; and *Next* (2007), in which a Las Vegas magician with powers of foresight (Nicholas Cage, naturally) is enlisted to stop a terrorist nuclear strike, all stage the association between security measures and the calculability of future possibility as virtual *certainty* of impending trauma, and fantasize a scenario of security, surveillance and state action in which the inevitable future to come will paradoxically *never actually occur*. In other words, the nebulous, indefinite temporality of preventative war and detention – terrorists *have not* but *will have always already have* – only fuels further securitization.

<sup>130</sup> Recent history shows these terms are dialectically linked in an ongoing ideological struggle over the direction of the future. They acquire greater legibility within the thwarted utopian project of neoliberalism and Francis Fukuyama's "end of history," which, after the fall of Soviet communism in 1989, supposedly named the end of historical antagonism and thus signalled the inevitable triumph of free market ideology and liberal democratic governance around the globe. The September 11 attacks introduced a stutter into the temporal continuity of this fantasy, although not a fatal one. Naomi Klein's popular *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* argues that neoliberalism thrives on crisis conditions, like those created by 9/11, using them as a pretext for economic restructuring. Similarly, the recent work of Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore contends that the "contradictory and uneven character" of neoliberalism "is deeply constitutive rather than merely contingent" ("Reanimating Neoliberalism" 180): its "contradictions, externalities and recoils," rather than weakening a mythical, stable neoliberal order, actually aid in a messier process of neoliberalization continuously adapted to local circumstances and historical contingencies (179). Thus far, 9/11 intensifies what Peck and Adam Tickell call "roll-out neoliberalism," which entails, "new modes of 'social' and penal-policy making, concerned specifically with the aggressive reregulation, disciplining, and containment of those marginalized or dispossessed by the neoliberalism of the 1980s" ("Neoliberalizing" 389 cited in Derksen 21). Raising this context does not dispute that average citizens are in fact vulnerable to the brutality of terrorism, and are therefore unsafe, but to spotlight how the rhetoric of impending apocalypse also reinforces the militarization of neoliberal processes, which reach their apotheosis, as Neil Smith observes, in structural adjustments imposed on a newly conquered Iraq (*Endgame of Globalization* 12).

<sup>131</sup> See Walter Benjamin's "Left Wing Melancholy" and Wendy's Brown's "Resisting Left Wing Melancholy."

<sup>132</sup> For a positive review of Clark's recent turn, see the final chapter Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times*, titled "Acceptance." For a devastating critique of his position, see the response of Susan Watkins in *NLR*, titled "Presentism?"

<sup>133</sup> In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan, following Lyman Tower Sargent, defines the "critical dystopia" as "a textual mutation that self reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things and also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration" (xv).

<sup>134</sup> For those horrified with the creeping authoritarianism, militarism, ignorance and general mean-spiritedness of the official war on terrorism, moments of reprieve have been rare. When they appeared at all, whether in popular culture, media, everyday life or public politics, at their best these moments disrupted the illusion of unity and consensus, however briefly. Starting small, one might point, for example, to comedian Stephan Colbert, who at the height of the Bush Presidency and anti-terror hysteria, used his spot as master of ceremonies for the White House correspondent's dinner as an opportunity to satirically nullify neoconservative talking points from within the persona of their preferred brand of media pundit. Or, thinking larger, one might recognize the widespread anti-Iraq war protests which, as the Retort collective argues, presents an opportunity for realigning the coordinates of our periodization schemes, displacing 9/11 as the master-signifier of the period with an exercise of global solidarity. Or, one could cite more recent events such as Obama's then-miraculous political victory that (for however excruciatingly brief a time) slightly shifted the inertia of political conversation by suggesting a future beyond the War on Terror, if not ultimately delivering on that utopian promise. As Slavoj Žižek argues, when cynics dismiss Obama as just the kinder face of Bush-era policies, they miss a key dimension of his victory. It is "a sign in which the memory of the long past of slavery and the struggle for its abolition reverberates; an event which now demonstrates a change; a hope for future achievements" which "widens our freedom and thereby the scope of our decisions" ("Why the Cynics are Wrong").

<sup>135</sup> In recent years, both literary scholars and authors have returned to a relatively forgotten period in world history which might be thought of as the first global “War on Terror.” In *America’s Culture of Terrorism* (2004), Jeffrey Clymer, for instance, argues that multiple parallels emerge between the ideological coordinates of the current conflict and anxieties surrounding labor anarchism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, particularly in the simultaneous rise of terrorism alongside the development of American industrial capitalism. Analyzing the period spanning from the Haymarket Bombing of 1886 until the bomb detonated on Wall Street as retaliation against JP Morgan in 1920, he cites a number of texts in the American literary archive — such as Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* — that respond to these anxieties. “The figure of the terrorist,” Clymer argues, “took shape in these narratives as a site where the railing problems of nationalism, immigration, class strife, and the legitimacy of violence were reified, narrated and fought over” (54). Imaginative returns to this period, through their leap into the past, extend this narrative fight into the present. The temporal displacement of the post-9/11 world into the period roughly spanning between the Paris Commune of 1871 and the beginning of the First World War in 1914 — arguably the height of anarchist provocation and state suppression of its political radicalism — sets the stage for Alex Butterworth’s *The World That Never Was* (2010), a heavily researched (although partially fictionalized) account of the period as seen through the eyes of a few key figures (Kropotnik, Bakunin, etc.) travelling between a few key locations across the globe (Paris, London, Zurich, New York City, St. Petersburg and even Siberia—several times). More explicitly fictional accounts include Dennis Lehane’s *The Given Day* (2008), the story of Danny, a strike breaking Irish cop in early twentieth century Chicago, who in his infiltration of the local labor movement maintains his disgust towards anarchist violence even while learning respect for the plight of workers within industrial capitalism, and Thomas Pynchon’s massive *Against the Day* (2006), which approaches the topic through a pastiche of the popular dime novel genres from this period, touching on Westerns, Science Fiction, Detective Fiction and the anarchist novels Clymer analyzes, using them as emblems of the utopian imagination betrayed within the conditions of labor exploitation and private enclosure. All four of these texts give us a sense of a shared historical context which potentially estranges the apparent immediacy of the current political, economic, social and military predicament.

<sup>136</sup> See *Against the Day*: “Fire and blood were about to roll like fate upon the complacent multitudes. Just at the peak of the evening rush-hour, electric power failed everywhere throughout the city, and as the gas mains began to ignite and the thousand local winds, distinct at every street-corner, to confound prediction, cobblestones erupted skyward, to descend blocks away in seldom observed yet beautiful patterns. All attempts to counter-attack or even to avoid the Figure would be defeated. Later, fire alarms would go unanswered and the firemen on the front lines find themselves too soon without reinforcement, or the hope of any. The noise would be horrific and unrelenting, as it grew clear even to the willfully careless that there was no refuge” (152).

<sup>137</sup> Chabon cites the following *Bleeding Edge* passage as paradigmatic of Pynchon's lackluster portrayal of the events: "Flatbeds carrying hydraulic cranes and track loaders and other heavy equipment go thundering downtown in convoys day and night. Fighter planes roar overhead, helicopters hang battering the air for hours close above the rooftops, sirens are constant 24/7. Every firehouse in the city lost somebody on 11 September, and every day people in the neighborhoods leave flowers and home-cooked meals out in front of each one. Corporate ex-tenants of the Trade Center hold elaborate memorial services for those who didn't make it out in time, featuring bagpipers and Marine honor guards. Child choirs from churches and schools around town are booked weeks in advance for solemn performances at 'Ground Zero,' with 'America the Beautiful' and 'Amazing Grace' being musical boilerplate at these events. The atrocity site, which one would have expected to become sacred or at least inspire a little respect, swiftly becomes occasion instead for open-ended sagas of wheeling and dealing, bickering and badmouthing over its future as real estate, all dutifully celebrated as "news" in the Newspaper of Record" (328).

<sup>138</sup> In contrast, Lauren Berlant's "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event" contends that the novel "is about alternative presents, interrupting what there is and world-making in the just now, the thick space of the present moment that keeps being reiterated, not as a utopian ahistoricism, an immanent future, or the negation of the capitalist, commodified present" (856). These two arguments stage a broader conflict between positions on utopia from Marxism and affect theory respectively that potentially illuminate one another. On the one hand, Berlant correctly identifies the pessimism within Jameson's claim that "unlike the footage, Gibson's novel gives us homeopathy rather than antidote" because it fails to challenge the world of consumption within which it unfolds ("Fear" 114). However, she incorrectly associates this negative utopianism with "negation" and in her own emphasis on the present as a "zone of action in a transitioning space" (856) evades the vexing problem of history. The series of *Against the Day*, *Vineland*, *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* offers a corrective to this conflict by tracing the repeated ideological enclosure of utopian impulses throughout American history, emphasizing the present as a field of utopian action constantly under threat of becoming the tool of power, as it has so often done before. These texts coordinate the temporalities of historical utopian failures which persist in their very non-being as part of the existing order – parentheses of light – waiting, in the sense of Benjamin's "weak messianism," for their redemption, through the politics of the present.

<sup>139</sup> In Gibson's texts, Blue Ant founder Humbertus Bigend, an independently wealthy businessman with unimagined autonomy and insatiable curiosity, straddles the conspiratorial, the corporate and the military in his search for the "next big thing." Humbertus first sends cool-hunter Casey Pollard in *Pattern Recognition* and then cult-musician-turned-journalist Hollis Henry in *Spook Country* and *Zero History* on quests to discover cutting edge cultural phenomena which has yet to break into popular consciousness, but his business in brand management often brings these protagonists into contact with shadowy conspiratorial worlds of corporate espionage, arms dealing and mafia. As Bigend muses, "Intelligence, Hollis is advertising turned inside out... Secrets...are the very root of cool" (*Spook Country* 108). *Bleeding Edge's* villain, internet tycoon Gabriel Ice, correlates with Bigend insofar as his business dealings blur the lines between his successful internet technology companies and networks for funding al-Qaeda militants prior to 9/11.

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