WEIRD HISTORY:

GENRE MIXING IN CONTEMPORARY

AMERICAN HISTORICAL FICTION

by

Gunner C. Taylor

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

We live in weird times. Climate disaster, plague, and economic stagnation define our present moment and demand immediate action. But it seems that Americans can't agree on the definitions of the terms of the debate, let alone on how to tackle any of the substantive issues that face our communities, country, and planet. *Weird History: Genre Mixing in Contemporary American Literature* intervenes in this moment of crisis by interrogating how received narratives of American History are made "weird" in contemporary American historical fiction by mixing it with the tropes of popular non-realist genre fiction. This project looks to the economic, political, and cultural contexts of American historical fiction written after 1989 to argue that Weird History is a new genre of fiction that presents readers with fictions that simultaneously lay claim to producing historical knowledge and are explicitly non-realist. In this seeming contradiction, they are able to defamiliarize the past and encourage readers to question what they think they know about American history.

This project engages with pressing scholarly debates on historiography, the genre turn in contemporary American fiction, and the supposed death of postmodernism. It argues that by mixing historical fiction and popular genre fiction, works of Weird History reinvigorate the experimental impulses of the postmodern fiction of the second half of the 20th century while bringing experimental historical fiction to broader audiences. While they aim at producing a popular progressive historical pedagogy, they must compete with the demands of an increasingly consolidated culture industry dominated by brand name Intellectual Property.

The four chapters of this project look at how four popular genres, ghost stories, pulp fiction, alternate history, and science fiction, are mixed with historical fiction to interrogate ideas of American exceptionalism, racial progressivism, and the great man theory of history. Each of these genres provide contemporary authors with new lenses for understanding issues of gender, racial identity, and class in American culture. But this project also argues that genre fiction has always been concerned with these issues and contained an ever-evolving commentary on the genres it works within; in this way genre fiction has always been historical fiction.

INTRODUCTION

"When you try to imagine what tomorrow is going to be like, you can only draw on the legacy of the past" (Hall 50)

The last ten years have borne witness to a very public fight about American history. A fight at times so fierce that the commentariat have begun to grumble over whether or not we are on the verge of a second civil war.[1] This fight is about not just the facts of American history, but when it starts, who gets to tell it, and most importantly what it *means*. This debate has shown us again that history is not just something that is learned in the classroom or uncovered by historians in dusty archives, it is nothing less than the site of a massive cultural struggle over everything from what form our governments should take to what it means to be human. Undoubtedly, we pick up historical knowledge in the conventional ways; from history teachers in the classroom, from museums, or from books and documentaries. But we also constantly absorb it through popular culture, politicians' speeches, and conversation with family and friends. Often this "historical background radiation," only works to confirm what we think we know about the past. This is where history becomes ideology, where it becomes unquestioned "common sense" allowing us to go

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[1] In a discussion published in *The New York Times* titled "Is America Headed for Another Civil War?," Tim Alberta argues that there is a growing violent trend in the United States, "some sort of sectarian violence… local governments, regional governments clashing with federal governments or even, perhaps, at the local level sheriffs refusing to enforce state laws. And potential outgrowth of violence from there" (Bouie et al.). Another piece by Peter T. Colman and published in *Time Magazine* is titled boldly, "The U.S. is Heading Toward a Second Civil War. Here is How We Avoid It." While we should take these titles with a grain of salt in the age of clickbait, they demonstrate that the prospect of a second civil war is becoming increasingly thinkable.

about our daily lives and make decisions without consulting a history textbook to find our place in the world. The goal of this project is to look more closely at how this intermingling of history and ideology happens within the domain of recent historical fiction and more importantly, what historical fiction can do to disrupt it.

One of the fronts of this war over American historiography has been over the role of historical revisionism, or what is incorrectly called Critical Race Theory, in public education.[2] While this public debate was long brewing, a major inciting incident was the publication of *The 1619 Project*, conceived by Nikole Hannah-Jones and the editors of *The New York Times* and launched as an August 2019 special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. The issue's publication was itself the result of a political and cultural firestorm that had been brewing since the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States. *The 1619 Project* was just one component of a national public reckoning with American history, but its dramatic historiographic intervention made it the focus of much conservative ire and public debate. *The 1619 Project*'s intervention was a simple one, arguing that the founding of the United States of America did not happen in 1776 with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but in 1619 with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the British colony of Virginia. While *The 1619 Project* was not the only attempt at a popular intervention into American history, the simplicity of this

[2] Here I am using "historical revisionism" in the technical sense, where it refers to the re-examination of historical orthodoxy.

reframing and the resulting seismic shift in the story of the United States that it promises made it the target of a massive amount of public attention.[3]

The claim that American history should begin with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the then-British colonies runs headlong into the myth of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism refers to the idea that the United States is exceptional in both senses of the word, that it is both unique among nation states for a whole host of (positive) reasons and that it is also a uniquely positive force in world affairs. The mythology of the American Revolution as a popular and democratic revolution goes a long way in propping up continued claims of American exceptionalism. This conception of the Revolution as a bottom-up democratizing force is the keystone of another narrative of American exceptionalism, the idea of constant

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[3] The "mythbusting" historiography of the 1619 Project, and to a certain extent my own project, has become a popular one in the world of non-fiction bestsellers that the book version of *The 1619 Project* joins. Nancy Isenberg's 2016 book *White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America* begins with an introduction titled "Fables We Forget By," that argues "The problem is that popular American history is most commonly told—dramatized—without much reference to the existence of social classes. It as though in separating from Great Britain, the United States somehow magically escaped the bonds of class… by reevaluating the American historical experience in class terms, I expose what is too often ignored about American identity… I also want to make it possible to better appreciate the gnawing contradictions still present in modern American Society" (Isenberg 1–2). Taking a similar approach, Isabel Wilkerson argues in her 2020 bestseller and Oprah's Book Club inductee, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, that race in the United States can be best understood as an unspoken caste system that structures our history and present. She writes in her trademark mixed metaphor style that "Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton, a caste system that is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions" (17). These projects demonstrate the wear in the façade of American exceptionalism and consumerist cynicism aside, a hunger on the part of the public to better understand the United States' present through its history.

(if slow) progress towards racial equality. In this telling, all of American history is a long battle to enact the promises of the Revolution, namely that "All men are created equal." While the ideas of American exceptionalism have long been the subject of critique and are perhaps more besieged today than ever before, they continue to hold sway in popular understandings of American history. Though it is present in American thought of all political stripes, a curdled American exceptionalism is the kernel of the American white nationalism that informed much of Donald Trump's campaign for president in 2016. His campaign slogan, "America First" is American exceptionalism turned into a battle cry and not incidentally an echo of the now mostly forgotten threads of American nativism that run through the twentieth century. This is not to suggest that American exceptionalism is a new or even uniquely conservative phenomenon, Donald Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama was particularly fond of proclaiming the inevitable progression towards racial equality. Obama often evoked in his speeches a quote from nineteenth-century minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker that was made famous by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the most recognizable version runs like this, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."[4] My goal with citing these two examples is not to point fingers, but to establish that these myths have been foundational to almost all public discourse in the United States throughout our nation's history.

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[4] Theodore Parker's original statement was slightly more circumspect, but consistent with King's abridgement: "Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice" (84–85).

I argue that the election of Donald Trump, *The 1619 Project*, and the resulting public firestorm were not the cause of a sea change in American thought, but rather symptoms of the long decline of American economic supremacy since the 1970s that historian Robert Brenner named the long downturn in his sweeping study of the global postwar economy. Brenner argued that the postwar economy could be divided into two periods, a long boom period from the end of the second world war to 1973 and then the long downturn from 1973 to the present.[5] Brenner's analysis has the benefit of consolidating several economic phenomena relevant to this study into a single explanatory scheme. For example, the frame of the long downturn allows us to see that the rise of neoliberalism, accelerated globalization, and the increasing dependance on financial speculation were all forged in the fires of global "falling rates of profit" that were the direct result of the postwar economic policies of the advanced capitalist countries (xxi). Various literary critics have taken up Brenner's framing as a lens for interpreting the cultural production of the last fifty years, particularly in the United States. Dan Sinykin's book, *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Apocalypse*, takes its title from Brenner's concept and argues that "apocalypse," is a "political literary form" through which "the economics of the long downturn worked its way, mediated by deleterious effects, apocalyptic narrative, and neoliberalism, into the most intimate experiences of everyday life, including the fear that there would be no tomorrow" (2,9). Sinykin's analysis, spanning authors from James Baldwin to David Foster Wallace, covers the postwar period to the beginning of the twenty-first century and makes a strong case for Brenner's macroeconomic history as a tool for

[5] Originating in an essay published in 1998 and republished in book form in 2005, the long downturn argument remains remarkably applicable to the present moment.

understanding cultural development and vice versa. Similarly, Jed Esty writes on another of the cultural effects of the long downturn, which he calls "declinism," a name for the stories we tell about the end of American global hegemony. This long twilight of American imperialism, Esty argues, is inevitable. Esty's book seeks to disentangle the historical reality of declining American global hegemony from the cultural trope of declinism and offer a way out by comparing the end of US global hegemony to the long twilight and eventual end of the British empire. Esty's optimistic conclusion is that, "To cede the pretensions of a global hegemony—then or now—is not to regress or decline, except in the minds of those in thrall to superpower nostalgia… the US can move forward while its power wanes" (x). There are striking similarities in the framing of Sinykin and Esty's projects, namely they both seek to put a name to the cultural cognitive dissonance caused by a continued insistence on American exceptionalism and the global economic realities of the last fifty years.

My goal in introducing Brenner's work on the long downturn here is not to understate the importance of recent events like the election of Donald Trump or the publication of *The 1619 Project*. Surely we will be feeling the consequences of the last ten years for the next hundred; but I aim to use them as an introduction to a historiographic intervention of my own. In English departments we study something called contemporary literature (or contemporary film, or contemporary culture, or just "the contemporary"). Beginning in the 1960s the contemporary meant post-1945, more recently it has meant post-1989 or post-9/11. Each of these periodization schemes includes an implicit historiographic argument. The designation post-45 remains broadly popular and has been institutionalized in the titles of college English courses and in field anthologies such as the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*,

the final volume of which covers “Literature since 1945”. For more on this see the “Discussion” portion of *Postmodern|Postwar—and After*, a collection of essays by scholars of the contemporary discussing the periodization debate, where David James writes that the label post-45 is a “convenient fiction,” that allows instructors “to organize the field in ways that are pedagogically tried and tested” and Amy Elias responds that though this framing encourages a US-centric perspective, it might be “institutionally necessary” (Gladstone et al. 38–39).

For the purposes of this study, the contemporary begins in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a convenient shorthand for the beginning of the end of the Cold War. This ending is important because it marks the end of the only competitor to capitalism on the world stage, namely Soviet-style socialism, or as it is sometimes called, actually existing socialism. I have chosen to begin here, and not as I might with the beginning of the long downturn in the 1970s or the beginning of the current resurgence in historical fiction in the 1980s, because I am interested in the convergence of the long downturn and the foreclosure of political possibility epitomized by what Francis Fukuyama infamously called the end of history. The already-disruptive effects of the long downturn, declining global rates of profit, stagflation, and the rise of neoliberalism merged with the brief feeling of victory on the part of global American hegemony after the break-up of the Soviet Union. When the long downturn did not abate and history in fact continued to churn, the result was a combination of cultural malaise and confusion. The American political right responded to this feeling by enabling and co-opting the re-emergence of a crypto-fascist populism, but what has been the response from the moderates or the left of center? Well not surprisingly, they have products you can buy, including new types of

historical fiction. The salient question of this project then is: *what is historical fiction after the end of history?*

My answer to that question is the title of this project, historical fiction after the end of history is Weird History. Weird History is the name I've given to the new and growing genre of texts that incorporate non-realist genre fiction elements into historical fiction as a means of rewriting received narratives of American history. I argue that Weird History is a genre because it demonstrates a set of approaches that are cohering into genre conventions. The most important of these is the incorporation of non-realist genre fiction elements that serve a historiographic function as well as an entertainment one. These genre fiction elements range from ghosts in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to time travelers in Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility* to the imagined Lindbergh presidency in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. This genre sees parentage in both the high postmodernism of the 1960s through the 1980s, the long history of popular genre fiction, and the hyper brand- and IP-conscious culture of the present moment. But Weird History doesn't fully emerge as a genre until the 1990s, when postmodernism became a widely available cultural tool rather than the high literary mode du jour. Weird History is different from the historiographic metafiction of authors like Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and John Barth, in that it earnestly works within popular genres, rather than seeing them as fodder for satire or critiques of the high low culture distinction. Works of Weird History are animated by dual desires, to entertain readers on one hand and to inform them on the other. I argue that these competing impulses and their productive overlap have lead to a wholly new genre of literature. Weird History is a product of the material realities of the late long downturn and a cultural response to those conditions. It attempts to incorporate and

promulgate diverse perspectives, not just in one text as seen in the massive and multivocal novels popular at the height of postmodernism, but across a range of Weird History texts.

I argue that these texts are not just a response to the argument that history has come to an end or Margaret Thatcher's claim that "there is no alternative" to global capitalism, but part of a broad cultural argument for history's continuing and continued relevance in the face of these claims. They represent a recognition that realist historical fiction, invested as it is with all the weight of popular narratives of American history and genre convention, is incapable of rising to the political moment. Weird History presents us with actively ahistorical historical fiction in an attempt to shock us out of those popular ideas. The earnest injection of popular genre tropes into works that maintain literary convictions is both a correction to the perceived elitism and aloofness of high postmodernism and an appeal to a broader readership.[6] While Weird History is certainly not the only form contemporary historical fiction takes, I will argue that it is a representative and instructive example of what historical fiction can be after the revelation that history hasn't and will never end, and how historical fiction can remain a politically and culturally vital project.

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[6] For just one example of the way that genre is posited as a salve for the failings of postmodernism, see Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy's introduction to their special edition of Genre, "Old and New Weird," where they claim that "the weird generates not only a new teratology focused on the tentacle but also the possibility of an unexpected way out of the postmodern impasse of proliferating irony and complacent self-reflexivity" (130). Whether or not this impasse exists in reality is less important than the fact that it is believed to exist by authors, critics, and readers alike. For more on Noys and Murphy's special issue, see below.

When I say ahistorical historical fiction, it is important to point out that I don't mean that works of Weird History are *antihistorical* or argue against the possibility of historical knowledge. Rather the opposite, the authors of the genre turn are explicitly invested in what I am calling a pedagogical impulse, a desire or drive to educate their readers. The injection of ahistorical genre tropes into history is pressed into pedagogical service, being used to see history from new angles and I argue, expose the ideological nature of truisms of history. We can see the dual pedagogical and entertainment impulses play out in the most influential work of American historical fiction of the last century, Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*.[7] In her foreword to the novel, Morrison describes how the historical kernel of the novel came to her from a newspaper clipping about "Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children… rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation." (*Belove*d xvii) But while this archival encounter inspired the novel, Morrison goes on to write that the historical event described in the clipping was "to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues" (xvii). What Morrison describes here is the bread and butter of historical fiction, taking the broad strokes of the historical past and inserting into it fictional characters

[7] I'm purposefully not calling *Beloved* a work of Weird History here as it falls outside of my proposed periodization for this project of post-1989, but it exhibits many if not all of the characteristics of Weird History that I outline below. Perhaps Beloved is best though of as the progenitor of Weird History, a text so influential that it set the stage for everything that came after.

that by dent of representing their inner lives and thoughts are able to bring the past to life in a way that traditionally history can't.

One way to think of Weird History then is as another turn of the screw, when it comes to this fictionalizing process. Continuing her description of the inception of *Beloved*, Morrison writes that "To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape [of slavery] (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts." (xvii) These metaphorical ghosts in the history of slavery become the literal ghost of Beloved in Morrison's novel, the child that Sethe (Morrison's fictionalized Margaret Garner) kills rather than allow to be captured back into slavery. When Beloved the character appears in the novel, she does so first as an unseen haunting presence and later as a fully formed adult woman who joins Sethe's household. In this form, Beloved develops a great appetite, for food, sex, and a place in Sethe's life, but also for stories. Beloved begins to ask Sethe unending questions, questions about things she couldn't possibly know to ask about and "It became a way to feed her… Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling." (69) As Sethe tells these stories, she begins to remember, or "rememory" a phrasing that emphasizes the doubled nature of the act, things about her past she had purposefully forgotten. At first, this is a pleasurable exchange, but as the novel goes on Beloved's appetite grows and strength grows at the expense of Sethe and her family. Finally, the spirit of Beloved is exorcised (at least partially) in a moment of community solidarity. In this ghost story, Morrison is able to explore nuances of the past that have been purposefully forgotten or left out of the historical archive. But this is not an act without dangers or pain, all of which are worked into the character of Beloved and the

negative influence she begins to exude over Sethe's life. Rememory is painful, but necessary. *Beloved* is too nuanced a text to reduce to a simple allegory of historical recovery, but it does give us a glimpse of what the ahistorical (in this case the ghost of Beloved) can do to create new possibilities in historical fiction. One legacy of these new possibilities is Weird History.[8]

The "weird" in Weird History then, refers to both its affiliation with a long tradition of genre fiction and a rebellion against traditional narratives of history. I recognize that this creates an implicit binary where other conventional narratives of history and literary fiction are both rendered normal or normative. In some of the chapters of this project, the weirdness is explicit and paranormal, as in the first chapter which looks at the use of the ghost story by Jesmyn Ward and George Saunders, but in others the weirdness is more subtle. What ties these works together is their deliberate subversion of the normative. We should be cautious anytime we reify the normative, even if only by promulgating its opposite, as we risk naturalizing an entire universe of hegemonic normalcies; racism, sexism, imperialism, ableism, and a whole host of other isms which are receiving unprecedented public scrutiny in addition to the long traditions of critique of these positions that are too numerous to detail here.[9] But, as

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[8] For more on Morrison's work see below in this introduction and for more on *Beloved* in particular, see the first chapter.

[9] Disability studies has been particularly interested in how "normal" is used as a yardstick against which individuals are measured. Tanya Titchkosky writes that, "norms are used to evaluate with reference to group expectations [demonstrating] that the normal is a referential system of sense making and not a natural or pregiven condition of existence" (131). For more on the concept of the normal in relation to disability, see the work of Lennard J. Davis.

discussed above, normative history *does* exist. Calling it out as such could be a first step in expanding our understanding of the past and even what counts as historical.

The genre weirdness in Weird History is related to but not coterminous with the weird in the genre that has been called Weird Fiction. In the last thirty years, Weird Fiction has seen both a renewed amount of attention and a conscious genre resuscitation by authors like Clive Barker, China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer. These two periods of Weird Fiction have been dubbed the Old and New Weird by writers and critics alike, the distinction being popularized with the publication of the anthology *The New Weird* by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer in 2007.[10] As a genre, the weird is notoriously hard to nail down. The Old Weird fiction, or simply "the weird" as a genre unto itself begins with the work of H.P. Lovecraft.[11] While this name now immediately brings to mind extraterrestrial and extradimensional tentacled horrors, the genre commitments of the weird are not simply a mashup of science fiction and fantasy tropes. In simple terms, the genre is concerned with undermining the foundations of knowledge, or "sanity" in the terms of Lovecraft. Lovecraft's unlucky protagonists regularly find themselves driven mad at the end of stories where they are confronted with unspeakable horrors from their past; be they personal, national, or global.[12] In their later collection, *The Weird*, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer helpfully

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[10] This anthology was followed by another collection from the two in 2012 titled simply, *The Weird*. In addition to her work on these volumes, Ann VanderMeer contributed to the weird fiction genre as editor of the fiction magazine, *Weird Tales*, from 2007 to 2011.

[11] For more on Lovecraft, see the discussion of Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* in the second chapter of this dissertation.

[12] Fiona Price has argued that Lovecraft incorporates a "distorted echo of the constitutional anxieties expressed in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century

define weird fiction as existing between "Lovecraftian and Kafkaesque approaches" (xvi). This genre lineage goes some way into explaining the weird's unique traits as a genre, locating it in the polls between Lovecraft's cosmic horror and Kafka's surreal and bureaucratic nightmares. Weird fiction most closely overlaps with Weird History in how it forces readers to question the reality of the text. According to Joe Kennedy, "all weird writing… turns the reader into precisely, a critic" by asking them to interrogate both the epistemological and ontological realities of a given text. For Kennedy these two questions are "whether strange events should be attributed to the 'reality of the story world or the mind of the narrator" and "Is [the reality of the text] supposed to be or even supposed to resemble our own?" (182–83) In this way, the function of Weird Fiction greatly resembles the function of the genre mixing in Weird History that I'll explore below.

Genre's contribution to the weirding of Weird History is twofold. First, genre fiction is *popular* fiction. The vast majority of literature, the stuff that used to fly beneath the notice of literary critics, is genre fiction. In fact, most fiction produced today is explicitly genre fiction. Mark McGurl has argued in his book *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*, that "fiction in the Age of Amazon is genre fiction, a highly gendered and age-differentiated genre system complexly structured by the poles of epic and romance and their characteristic modes of wish fulfilment" (51). Beyond the incredible popularity of genre novels, genre transcends any one cultural form. Though they are necessarily modified, popular genres like mystery, romance,

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gothic and historical fiction." (136) For more on Lovecraft's relationship to historical fiction see Price's essay, "Prosthetic Pasts: H.P. Lovecraft and the Weird Politics of History."

and science fiction all appear in film, television, and podcasts in addition to novels. From this interformal contact, genre incorporates innovations and trends across different media and even creates the possibility of bringing new readers to the novel. This popularity comes with a persistent classist implication that genre fiction is the lowbrow opposite of highbrow literary fiction.[13] Secondly, genres and their trappings exist outside the realm of intellectual property law (in the United States at least). What this means is that unlike specific characters, series, or even writers (who can be signed exclusively to a single publisher) genres can't be legally "owned" by an individual or corporation. I am borrowing an idea here from Rick Altman's writing on film genres and adapting it to literature and cultural production broadly. Altman has argued that "genres can never be fully controlled by a single [movie] studio, whereas individual studios have exclusive access to contract actors, house directors, proprietary characters and patented processes… Following this logic, Hollywood regularly eschews genre

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[13] For just one example of how this idea continues to structure debate even as fewer and fewer people profess believe in it wholeheartedly, see Arthur Krystal's essay for The New Yorker, "It's Genre Fiction, Not that there's Anything Wrong With It!," where he argues against recent reevaluations of genre fiction, writing, "One reads Conrad and James and Joyce not simply for their way with words but for the amount of life felt in their books. Great writers hit us over the head because they… see the world in much the way we do: complicated by surface and subterranean feelings, by ambiguity and misapprehension, and by misalliance of consciousness and perceptions. Writers who want to understand why the heart has reasons that reason cannot know are not going to write horror tales or police procedurals… good commercial fiction is inferior to good literary fiction in the same way that Santa Claus is inferior to Wotan. One brings us fun or frightening gifts, the other requires—and repays—observance." I cite Krystal at some length here because he perfectly encapsulates the argument for maintaining a distinction between genre fiction and literary fiction and is a contemporary of the authors I examine in this study. Krystal maintains this distinction by arguing that genre fiction is definitionally incapable of things like ambiguity or complicated feelings.

logic for production and publicity decisions" (115). What makes genres a bad selling point for Hollywood also makes them available for mixing and remixing without the threat of litigation. Genre also allows contemporary authors to capture some of the consumption and production fervor around existing Intellectual Property; as genres, like IP, are cultural objects in which audiences are already invested, making them appealing to both consumers and the publishing world's corporate overlords. At the same time, this combination of popularity (or even populism) and legal availability gives genre a kernel of radical political possibility. Anyone can write in any genre and genre's mutability allows for infinite reworking in the face of an ever-evolving ideological status quo. The authors of the genre turn and Weird History in particular also risk reifying the classist exclusion of genre fiction from the category of the literary by writing what has been called elevated or literary genre fiction. What makes a work of fiction elevated is hard to nail down but is primarily the effect of paratextual signaling such as marketing and choice of publication venue. Publishing in *The New Yorker* or with Farrar, Straus and Giroux carries with it the weight of the literary, even if the author of the fiction in question aims to write within a popular genre. If Weird History is a celebration of genre fiction it is also an appropriation of it. While the authors of Weird History are almost always laudatory of genre fiction, they also implicitly argue that genre fiction *alone* is not enough, and their own intervention is still required.[14] This never-ending cycle of identification and disavowal animates Weird History and much of our contemporary cultural moment.

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[14] Here Jameson's analysis of the dialogical nature of texts as class antagonism is useful. He builds on Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical text when he writes that "the normal form of the dialogical is essentially an antagonistic one, and the dialogue of class struggle is one in which two opposing discourses fight it out within the general

In the rest of this introduction, I will outline the theoretical underpinnings of this project, beginning with a discussion of Georg Lukács's groundbreaking study, *The Historical Novel*. While it was originally published almost seventy years ago, Lukács's work on historical fiction remains vital to any discussion of the genre. Because of this, I'll return to Lukács throughout this project as one of my central influences and interlocutors. Discussion of Lukács is followed by a look at the innovations of the authors and critics of postmodernism and how that historical context sets the stage for Weird History. Next, I will attempt to provide a definition of genre. My hope is that this attempt at a definition will offer an instructive look at the complexities of genre as well as the unresolved definitional debates around the term. Then I'll look at scholarship on the "genre turn" in contemporary literary culture and criticism, and finally I'll provide an outline of the chapters of this project.

If Weird History is historical fiction after Fukuyama's failed prediction of the end of history, then what was historical fiction *before* that prediction was possible? For the most comprehensive answer to this question, we should look to Lukács's landmark study on the topic, *The Historical Novel*. Lukács's study has in fact been so influential that a systematic theorization of historical fiction has not risen to any level of prominence since its original publication in 1955. Why this might be is something of a mystery. Initially, we might attribute this lack to a dip in popularity of the form, but as historical fiction's popularity continues to rise, the lack is increasingly felt.

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unity of a shared code" (*The Political Unconscious* 84). In this model, the class dynamics of competing genre influences become clearer. This also sheds some light on how both postmodernism and Weird History can both incorporate literary and genre fiction influences and produce different class tenors.

While Lukács's work marks a clear turning point in our understanding of the genre and an important critical lens for my own analysis, it has become deficient as a tool for understanding contemporary historical fiction in the almost seventy years since its publication. A discussion of this deficiency will provide an introduction to my own use of Lukács's work in this project.

The first shortcoming of *The Historical Novel* is not a fault of Lukács work but rather a strength of his method. That strength is that Lukács's analysis is firmly rooted in a historical-materialist argument. For Lukács the capital H, capital N Historical Novel emerged out of the massive cultural shift in Europe following the French Revolution. In Lukács's analysis, the French Revolution ushers in a series of events that make historical thinking, and more specifically historical-materialist thinking, possible for large swaths of Europeans. This change leads to an "artistic flowering of the new, historical conception of reality [that] is concentrated in the novel" as opposed to the drama, the lyric, or any other form (*Historical Novel* 89). Lukács argues that:

> It was the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a mass experience, and moreover, on a European scale… Now if experiences such as these are taking place all over the world, this must enormously strengthen the feeling first that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual" (*Historical Novel* 23).

Taking this sea change in historical thought as the beginning of his study, Lukács tracks the historical novel from after the French Revolution through to the anti-fascist novels published in Germany during Hitler's rise to power. If as Lukács suggests, and nearly all literary critics agree, world-historical events influence the development of culture, then the historical fiction of today calls for a study that attends to the changing global landscape.

In Lukács's stadial historical analysis, we can see his indebtedness to a Hegelian approach to history. While by the time he was writing *The Historical Novel*, Lukács was a self-proclaimed convert to Marxism, the weight of Hegel on his thinking (and of course on Marx's thinking as well) is still felt in *The Historical Novel*.[15] When I describe Lukács historical thinking as stadial, I mean that it depicts history as progressing in "stages." For Hegel, these stages were decided by the collective workings of society or history's "spirit" or perhaps "mind," what he called the world spirit (*weltgeist*). Marx's stadial approach to history replaces the world spirit as driver of historical change with the mode of production, which dictates and is dictated by the economic system of a society, and later, the globe. How these two stadial conceptions of history relate to Lukács's theory of the historical novel should now be apparent, the French Revolution represents a turning point in the type of historical thinking that is

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[15] Lukacs's earlier work makes use of an explicitly Hegelian method. In *The Theory of the Novel*, he argues that the epic and the novel are representative of historical moments in which society was either a whole and unquestioned totality or a fragmented and incoherent mass of perspectives, respectively. In this scheme, the history of art is divided into three categories each represented by a singular artist that captures the mood of the age. The epoch of the epic represented by Homer, a transition period is represented by Dante (whose work has some epic and some novelistic characteristics), and finally the epoch of the novel is initiated by Cervantes. Each of these authors take on a significance similar to that of Scott in *The Historical Novel*. Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* has been the subject of some critical reappraisal in recent years. Robert T. Tally Jr. has argued that Lukács's approach to totality in the essay represents a type of "literary cartography" akin to Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, which I'll discuss below. He writes that in Lukács's view of the novel as representative of an age of shattered totality, "the novel will have as its vocation the projection of an imaginary, perhaps provisional and contingent, totality, since there is no longer one that we can simply assume" (20).

possible.[16] But despite this widespread shift in thinking, Lukács's analysis is dependent on the emergence of singular figures that are able to embody these new possibilities in thought. In *The Historical Novel,* Sir Walter Scott, the prolific English author of historical fiction emerges as the most important figure in the development of the historical novel. Scott in Lukács's analysis is analogous to Hegel's conception of the world-historical individual, who doesn't influence the world spirit, but represents its culmination at a given historical moment and initiates a shift from one stage of history to another.[17]

This centering of singular practitioners leads me to the second shortcoming of Lukács's theory of the historical novel as it concerns this study: that it is deeply invested in a hierarchy between the literary novel and the novel of *mere* entertainment. Here Lukács engages in the kind of cultural elitism that his contemporaries in the Frankfurt School are infamous for.[18] The example of Scott, and a handful of other exemplary figures, hold such pride of place in Lukács's analysis that the vast majority

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[16] For another example of Marxian stadial thinking in Lukács, see this brief gloss of class history from his discussion of Balzac, "the extremely radical transformation of important social groups in the course of historical development (destruction and extinction of the old nobility in the class struggles of the Middle Ages, ousting of the old patrician families in the towns during the early rise of Capitalism, etc.)" (*Historical Novel* 83–84*).*

[17] It is in this way that Hegel's world-historical individual differs from the "great man" of the great man theory of history, who changes the course of history through their individual actions and exceptional nature. For more on the great man theory of history, see Chapter 4.

[18] It is worth noting that the choice of Scott as exemplary figure complicates the notion that Lukács's analysis is simply elitist, as Scott was at the time of Lukács's writing a decidedly secondary figure in the annals of the European novel, considered by many to be a purveyor of mere entertainment himself.

of novelists are reduced to would-be-Scotts, or practitioners of the not-quite-historical novel. And the worst of these not-quite-historical novels become that most contemptible cultural object, "entertainment." To quote one illustrative passage, Lukács writes that "the severance of the present from history creates an historical novel which drops to the level of light entertainment. Its themes are indiscriminate and unrelated and it is full of an adventurous or emptily antiquarian, an exciting or mythical exoticism" (*Historical Novel* 183). In other words, when historical fiction is not properly historical, it is genre fiction. This implied binary between art and entertainment is particularly interesting for the purposes of this study—Many of the practitioners of Weird History see themselves as inheritors of both an artistic tradition and an entertainment one, seeking to create works that fit under both umbrellas. I have sought to see the historical and pedagogical value in entertainment in this study. Where Lukács saw the historical novel and the "light entertainment" novel as a structuring binary opposition, I have sought to examine where the pedagogical and entertainment impulses in historical fiction intertwine: Asking the question, what kinds of histories become possible when the reader is explicitly entertained?

Finally, concerned as it is with the European novel, and even then primarily with the English novel in the figure of Sir Walter Scott, Lukács's work on the historical novel must be heavily augmented if it is to be brought to bear on American cultural production. Surely, there is a strong sense of American culture as the inheritor of European culture, but American culture (if we take the French Revolution as the starting point) has essentially never existed in a world without widespread historical consciousness. When Lukács discusses American literature briefly it is in recognition of James Fenimore Cooper, whom he argues is Scott's "only worthy follower in the

English language" due to his depiction of, "an important theme of Scott, the downfall of gentile society… In America… the colonizing capitalism of France and England destroys physically and morally the gentile society of the Indians which had flourished almost unchanged for thousands of years (*Historical Novel* 64). Americans, even when they are deeply misinformed, see themselves as existing in history. In fact, they often see themselves as history's victorious protagonists.[19] So while Americans living in the supposed end of history might seem similar to a pre-French Revolution European public that doesn't see itself as existing in history at all because they are also discouraged from widespread bottom-up political action, they arrive at this apathy through a very different ideological calculation. In the United States, there is no denying the existence of history, even if only as something that *used* to happen. And in the last two decades as the wins of the postwar boom gave way to never-ending wars in the middle east and the malaise of American decline, even this feeling of the pastness of history has increasingly eroded.

The field of historical fiction, and particularly literary historical fiction, has changed drastically since the publication of *The Historical Novel* in 1955. For the purposes of this project, the most significant developments in the production of historical fiction come out of postmodernism. These developments have come both in the form of artistic techniques developed by postmodernism's practitioners and in the

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[19] We can see evidence for this feeling of American protagonicity everywhere. For example, there is the concept of a global "Pax Americana" in the style of the historical Pax Romana, which is invoked with varying levels of sincerity, the use of "the leader of the free world" as an epithet for the president of the United States or the heightened sense of the United States as a "world police" with the declaration of a global war on terror in the wake of the September 11th attacks.

theoretical insights of its critics. The lull in scholarly interest in historical fiction after Lukács followed by renewed interest spurred by postmodernism reflects a similar decline and rise in the publication and prestige of historical fiction itself. The last forty years or so have seen a resurgence of historical fiction after a long period of dormancy for the genre; and this resurgence shows no sign of slowing down. This phenomenon has been noticed by literary critics and popular culture critics alike. Perry Anderson wrote in 2011 that the historical novel was "a few antique jewels on a huge mound of trash, for some thirty years after the war [World War II]. Then, abruptly, the scene changed… Today, the historical novel has become, at the upper ranges of fiction, more widespread than it was even at the height of its classical period in the early nineteenth century." Using corpus analysis, James F. English has argued that the 1980s mark the best moment for periodization in contemporary Anglophone literature, as this was the moment that anglophone fiction shifted from being largely set in the present, to largely set in the past or near future (407). In 2019, Megan O' Grady observed this phenomenon as well, asking in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, "Why Are We Living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction?" Whether or not the authors discussed in this study are themselves practitioners of postmodernism is up for debate, but it is certain that the majority of them came of age as artists when postmodernism was still the dominant mode of literary fiction, and belong to the cohort that Stephen J. Burn has instructively called the "second-generation postmoderns."[20] As is common with the waxing and waning of literary trends, much of Weird History is positioned by its authors and critics as a reaction against

[20] Philip Roth is the obvious outlier here, living from 1933 to 2018, with his first book published in 1959.

postmodernism. But to say that Weird History is only a repudiation of the so-called sterility, irony, and aloofness of postmodern fiction is only half the story. For as much as Weird History is different from the postmodernism that came before, it is also deeply influenced by the approach to history and historical fiction developed by the authors and critics of postmodern literature.

While Fredric Jameson has not produced a single text focused on historical fiction to rival Lukács's *Historical Novel*, his work consistently treats the problems of realism and historical representation in fiction. Furthermore, Jameson's analysis of postmodernism has been so widely influential that it serves as something of a foundation to all discussion of the topic that has followed. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson writes that, "The literary or aesthetic act… always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow 'reality' to persevere inertly in its own being… It must rather draw the real into its texture… language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext." (81). So literature always contains some aspect of "the Real," but Jameson argues we never have unmediated access to this reality. Furthermore, he argues that history, despite its obvious reality, always and necessarily comes to us in the form of a text. We might take this as a relatively sanguine assessment of the potentials of historical fiction. After all, if the difference between history and literature is one of degree and not of kind, then a hybrid form seems particularly possible and perhaps even particularly promising.

If Jameson is sanguine about the possibility of historical fiction as a representation of the real in *The Political Unconscious*, this optimism has all but evaporated by the time he writes *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late*

Capitalism.[21] For Jameson the core tenets of postmodernism are a superficiality of culture and a "weakening of historicity" (*Postmodernism* 6). Jameson considers E.L. Doctorow to be a paradigmatic author of historical fiction under postmodernism, calling him "the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition… he has had to convey this great theme formally (since the waning of the content is very precisely his subject)" (*Postmodernism* 24–25). What this passage makes clear is that for Jameson the declining possibility of fiction to represent the historical past is directly tied to the decline of the American left. Jameson goes on to argues that one consequence of the weakening of historicity is that the "historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about the past… [cultural production] can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present" (*Postmodernism* 25).[22] In this conception, historical fiction under postmodernism can

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[21] It is important to note that even in *Postmodernism*, Jameson still perceived a potential for political art. He conceived of the possibility of a literary representational technique he calls "cognitive mapping," "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system—will necessarily have to respect this now enormously complex representational dialectic and invent radically new forms in order to do it justice." (*Postmodernism* 54).

[22] There is overlap between Jameson's idea of the failures of historicity under postmodernism and Jean-François Lyotard's conception of postmodernism. For his part, Lyotard defines postmodernism as a rejection of "grand narratives." In his influential essay, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, where he explores the connection between narrative and epistemology, Lyotard builds on semiology in his conception of the postmodern as a radical break from Western Enlightenment ideas, in which the possibility of unifying scientific truth operated as the grand narrative. For Lyotard knowledge of subjects more traditionally seen as mutable, such as politics and morality, are inherently similar to knowledge that is

only achieve a second-order relationship to the past, or put another way, it is always metafictional. No longer able to be about the past, historical fiction can only be about our stories about the past. I agree with Jameson's conception of postmodern historical fiction in its broad strokes, particularly as an analysis of the examples of it that had been produced by the time of *Postmodernism*'s publication in 1991. But in the years since, this very exhaustion has served as the launching pad for a new approach to the genre and not in the direction that Jameson had imagined. Perhaps, just as Jameson argued that Doctorow's work eulogized the waning of the American left, Weird History marks its slow return to vitality, a phenomenon perhaps best and most recently exemplified by Bernie Sanders's galvanizing and insurgent runs for the Democratic nomination for president in 2016 and 2020. David Harvey's analysis of postmodernism starts from a very similar position as Jameson's, emphasizing the disorienting compression of space-time under the post-fordist "flexible accumulation" that dominated the global economy in the second half of the twentieth century. But Harvey has argued that the resulting ephemerality of postmodern culture has perhaps counterintuitively led to "revival of interest in basic institutions (such as the family and community), and the search for historical roots [which] are all signs of a search for more secure moorings and longer-lasting values in a shifting world" (*Condition of Postmodernity* 292). It is this backwards-looking instinct that Weird History responds to, using the formal innovations of postmodernism to reignite the flagging political

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believed to be empirical, most importantly scientific knowledge. The implications of this revelation for both history and literature are profound. If knowledge is a language game then literature itself can be a productive and important field of play in which grand narratives are interrogated.

possibilities of historical narrative. The risk of this approach, which Harvey anticipates, is that "tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche" (*Condition of Postmodernity* 303). Even as Weird History intervenes in historiographic debates, its approach to genre is inherently commoditizing. Weird History sells readers a new sense of importance for their often nostalgic genre attachments. Additionally, any attempt to turn genre fiction towards political goals will run the risk of commodifying those very political goals. This is particularly true in the contemporary fiction market where racial representation is as much a marketing statement as a political one, a phenomenon I discuss in more detail below.[23]

While Jameson might be the most influential interrogator of postmodernism in literary criticism, others have dedicated more thought to depictions of history under the broad umbrella of postmodern literature and culture. Theorists like Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon have argued for the existence of a new postmodern literary movement that sought to reveal and revel in the constructedness of narrative, particularly in the novel. Waugh and Hutcheon see postmodern strategies as both politically informed and containing the possibility of political intervention. Linda

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[23] This commoditization of authentic racialized experience in the form of racialized authors writing from their own experience goes at least as far back as the 1950s with the genre that Mark McGurl has named high cultural pluralism, one part of what he calls a trend in American literature towards "autopoetics," or put simply the writing program's imperative to "write what you know. McGurl writes that "'high cultural pluralism,'… [is] a body of fiction that joins the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice" (*The Program Era* 32).

Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction shows how many of the elements of Weird History were present in even early postmodern art. Hutcheon coined this term to name a subgenre of consciously postmodern fiction that is "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages… its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs… is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 5).[24] This both-and reading, where both history and fiction are revealed to be only narratives has become widespread, if unstated, in contemporary culture as metafiction goes increasingly mainstream. For some critics of postmodernism, this unlocks a terrifying universe of relativity in which nothing can be true or valuable.[25] But for the authors of Weird History, this new instability is productive rather than destructive. As we write and re-write the past, we can see it from new angles and better understand its relevancy to the ever-evolving present.

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[24] Here Hutcheon is building on Patricia Waugh's concept of metafiction. Waugh defines metafiction as a "mode of writing" within the broader trend of postmodernism "which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2).

[25] This claim has been primarily made by right-wing commentators, see for example Jordan Peterson's argument that 'Postmodernism is essentially the claim that (1) since there are an innumerable number of ways in which the world can be interpreted and perceived (and those are tightly associated) then (2) no canonical manner of interpretation can be reliably derived…' An immediate secondary claim (and this is where the Marxism emerges) is something like 'since no canonical manner of interpretation can be reliably derived, all interpretation variants are best interpreted as the struggle for different forms of power'…Postmodernism leaves its practitioners without an ethic." While this reading of postmodernism is likely in bad faith and certainly paired with racist undertones, it has unfortunately influenced public debate over postmodernism and contemporary cultural production.

I argue that Weird History then is not just historiographic metafiction but, coming as it does after the innovations of that genre have gone increasingly mainstream, Weird History is another turn of the screw, a further development of those techniques. That Weird History responds to postmodernism is certainly true, but that is not the only dynamic at play here. When we aim to understand the relationship between contemporary fiction and postmodernism, I propose that the model of neat succession in which one historical-literary period appears to follow the next (after killing it, of course) isn't particularly helpful, especially if we are trying to get away from progressive models of history which stifle change by implying that it happens automatically and only in one direction. The implication of postmodernism, that we have moved past modernism, operates similarly to the implication of "postrace," namely that we have ended racism. As far as models go, I'm rather fond of Jonathan Lethem's explanation of postmodernism's death laid out in his 2011 essay, "Postmodernism as Liberty Valance: Notes on an Execution."[26] In his own postmodern re-writing of a canonical text, Lethem allegorizes the supposed death of postmodernism through the lens of the 1962 John Wayne western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In the film, an upstanding lawman (Ransom Stoddard) is set up by a gunslinging outsider (Tom Doniphon played by John Wayne) to appear to have shot the titular anarchic criminal (Liberty Valance) all in the name of order and justice. In Lethem's allegorical reading of the film, Liberty Valance is postmodernism and he is

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[26] Lethem's explanation of the continued relevance of postmodernism is particularly useful for this project as he belongs to the genre turn cohort of authors that have primarily produced Weird History. Lethem's essay is reprinted in his provocatively titled collection, *The Ecstasy of Influence*.

set up by cultural critics to be killed by a revolving door of "postmodernism-killing" novelists. Lethem's point is two-fold, first authors themselves rarely set out to kill postmodernism and secondly:

> The reason postmodernism doesn't die is that postmodernism isn't the figure in the black hat standing out in the street squaring off against the earnest and law-abiding "realist" novel against which it is being opposed. Postmodernism is the street. Postmodernism is the town. It's where we live, the result of the effects of Liberty Valance's stubborn versatility and appeal (83)

I quote this passage at length not just because it is useful in elucidating postmodernism's stubborn hold on cultural production, but also because as a member of the genre turn cohort himself, Lethem's account is a firsthand explanation of why postmodern methods persist. Literary and cultural movements as pervasive as postmodernism (and modernism before it) do not simply die, they are after all the air we breathe, they are "where we live." They might slowly morph and change until one day we wake up and feel that the composition of the atmosphere has changed irrevocably, but any attempt to nail down the date of this change is quixotic at best. Furthermore, as stated above, the authors of the genre turn for the most part came of age in a world where postmodernism was the dominant cultural mode. While Lethem is speaking primarily to popular critics here, the point stands for literary critics in the academy as well. So in this project, I have largely done away with any attempt to argue whether or not postmodernism or earlier models are still alive and well, rather I have attempted to explore the influence they still hold and how that influence has evolved.

Now we can return to the idea of the long downturn and the question of historical fiction after the disproval of the end of history with a better understanding of

the cultural products it has produced. Racial progressivism and the end of history (or neoliberalism) are complimentary ideologies in the United States, the twin heralds of the impossibility of a better world. Both argue that the hard work is essentially done, history is over, racism is over, and from here on out we must engage in only a series of small tweaks to perfect a system that fundamentally works and benefits all. David Harvey has defined neoliberalism concisely as the ideology which "holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (*Brief History of Neoliberalism* 3).[27] We can see the dominance of this way of thinking in the Clinton administration's third-way liberalism in the wake of the Reagan presidency. In neoliberalism, nominatively democratic privatization of all industry and social functions is the end point of history. This is of course not the only load-bearing myth in American culture. Just as the end of history depends on the myth that the fall of the USSR insured there was "no alternative" to capitalism, racial progressivism depends on the myth that the United States has slowly, but surely worked towards racial equity.

While its rhetorical value should not be understated, the myth of constant racial progressivism in the United States risks promoting inaction at best and entrenching racism at worst. A rough outline of the myth of a dominant current of racial

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[27] Neoliberalism was popularized by the Chicago school of economics, a group of economists based in the University of Chicago who drew on the work of Milton Friedman. These thinkers rejected the social democratic consensus that emerged out of the second World War and which held that capitalism operated best with some restrictions placed on it by national and international bodies in favor of market-based solutions (*Brief History of Neoliberalism* 8–10).

progressivism in the history of the United States is easy to recount. In this story, the founders clearly intended to create a racially progressive and truly democratic society but were unfortunately and through no fault of their own waylaid by the exigencies of their historical moment. This mistake is then resolved first by Lincoln's victory in the Civil War and second by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; Any further action is unnecessary. The lie of constant racial progressivism has always been obvious to some Americans, even as it clouds the vision of others. Scholars and writers of color by dent of their lived experience of American racism have consistently been at the forefront of theorizing how that racism is entrenched in received historical narrative. Toni Morrison, who has had a massive influence on American historical fiction, has argued that American culture and society is structured by an "Africanist presence," "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (*Playing in the Dark* 6–7). Morrison goes on to point out that "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language" (12–13). Writing in 1992, after the success of her novel *Beloved*, Morrison is anticipating and refuting the coming claims of America as a postracial society and her critiques remain just as relevant thirty years later. Postracialism, like racial progressivism, is simply the newest iteration of a pervasive American blindness to racism. Saidiya Hartman's invaluable scholarship has looked at the ways that racist violence is excluded from the historical archive and attempted to rectify that exclusion. In her essay, "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman writes that she is "performing the limits of writing history through the act of narration… The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than

leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past" (13). In her most recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, Hartman practices a "close narration" of the lives of historical black women to create a "narrative written from nowhere" that is informed by the existing archive and its silences (xiii). Hartman's practice of close narration is remarkably similar to the works of Weird History, but it approaches the problems of the archive by moving from the disciplinary practices of history towards fiction rather than the other way around.

How can we bring together a critique of both American exceptionalism and racial progressivism that helps us to move past these failures of historical thinking? Unfortunately, race and class are often pitted against each other as competing critical lenses in academic thought. In this binary schema, Marxist criticism is considered to be a class-based system of analysis that is fundamentally incapable of incorporating race. This reduction of Marxism to a merely class-based analysis is to freeze it in a moment of time that has passed and ignore the pioneering work of Marxist theorists of the last hundred years. Charles W. Mills, whose analysis of white supremacy has been influential on my own thinking in this project, makes a version of this argument when he writes in *The Racial Contract* that:

> [in] the Marxist analysis of the state as an instrument of class power… the liberal-democratic state is supposedly unmasked as the *bourgeois state*, the state of the ruling class. My claim is that the model of the Racial Contract shows us that we need another alternative, another way of theorizing about and critiquing the state: the *racial*, or white supremacist, state, whose function inter alia is to safeguard the polity *as* a white or white-dominated polity (82)

But earlier in that same book, Mills argues that "the economic dimension of the Racial Contract is the *most* salient… There are other benefits accruing from the Racial

Contract… but the bottom line is material advantage" (32–33). The conclusion I think we must draw is that any successful analysis will account for both race *and* class. Vishwas Satgar has argued that Marxism is in fact the school of thought best suited to this task, writing that "in South Africa the lived experience of race is the lived experience of class and the lived experience of class is race. Class and race are inseparable given the racist history of South Africa's capitalist development" (9). Surely, this sentiment is applicable to the United States just as much as South Africa, barring the fact that the United States hasn't even had the benefit of a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The state-promulgated narrative of American history is both a racist and classist history, one part of what Mills calls the "inverted epistemology [of the racial contract]… producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (18). In the United States, the myth of racial egalitarianism props up racial oppression and the myth of economic opportunity props up an ever-increasing class stratification.[28]

In the long downturn, the particular ignorance promoted by the racial contract blocks understanding of the global economic slump. This kind of pervasive and persistent downward trend is simply unthinkable in a progressive model of history.

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[28] Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has influentially named this phenomenon "color-blind racism," a new ideology which "explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics. Whereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks' social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (2). Bonilla-Silva deftly weaves together class and race in this analysis, showing how contemporary American ideology deflects away from any reckoning with the past and present with appeals to "common sense" narratives of American prosperity and opportunity.

The result is a kind of nameless dissatisfaction with existing historical narratives. For the writers of Weird History, the incorporation of non-realist genre influences becomes a tool to escape the bounds of traditional historical narrative and simultaneously revitalize the genre of historical fiction.

The deliberate mixing of genres allows the authors of Weird History to lay bare the constructedness of historical narrative. As discussed above, postmodern critics and authors often pointed out that historical narrative was itself constructed out of language. This constructedness is not negative, but simply a material fact. We can't all read everything in the archive, and even if we could, we would still be missing the parts of history that never made it into the archive. The work of historians is to transform the archive into narrative, but unfortunately this process is often rendered invisible. The genres I examine in this project are recognizable to mass audiences, they come with tropes and rules that audiences expect, we can think of them like scripts that a text might follow. By throwing these expectations in the mix with historical narrative, the scripts become confused. We expect a ghost story to go one way, while we expect the story of the American Civil War to go another way, we don't know what to do when these scripts overlap. When this happens, the constructedness of both historical and genre narratives is thrown into stark relief. Emphasizing this constructedness is a recovery of the political possibility of postmodernism and a harkening back to the heteroglossia that Bakhtin argued was the core characteristic of the novel as a form (263). The realist novel has long been a naturalized form, its combination of genres and forms no longer problematic for readers or seen as untruthful. Postmodernism too has lost much of its political and artistic immediacy as it has simultaneously been reduced to an object of parody and

adopted by corporate media as one strategy among many. Weird History seeks to re-enliven these narrative forms.

Genre's multivalent nature is one of the things that makes Weird History possible. Genre is not just a script that a work of art can follow, but a gesture towards an entire history of cultural production. Authors signal explicitly and implicitly the genre canon that their work belongs to, this means that each instance of a genre contains within it an implicit history of that genre. In this way genre can be used as a tool to locate an individual work of art within the history of a medium; assigning a work of art to a genre is to place it within a historical narrative. Thus, genres of literature become containers for literary history, and by extension all genre fiction is literary "historical" fiction. Historical in the sense that it contains an implicit account (or history) of the genres it is seen to belong within. Writing against genre or genre conventions doesn't exempt authors from the weight of this history either, as others have observed genre as a system is capable of absorbing and incorporating works that break generic convention. Stuart Hall writes that in a structuralist model of cultural change, "Innovation arises only from the observance of social rules and regulations. Of course, sometimes it is the break with the rules that is most significant, but such breaks are themselves understandable as transformations" (70). This description of cultural change is useful in understanding both how genre works and what it offers to the authors of Weird History. The historical weight of genre works as a counterbalance to the culture industry's promulgation of genre as a commodity. Just as these texts shuttle between working within and breaking genre conventions, they also make for productive play in the frisson between genre fiction and literary fiction, they flit between the two poles, testing the limits of this binary understanding.

All of this is well and good, but what actually *is* genre? Genre's mutability and widespread use makes this a particularly hard question to answer. The one word "genre," names categories used in critical analysis, marketing, and consumption. Specific genres might be recognized in one context but not another or used in all three contexts but in different ways. If you ask the average science fiction fan and a literary critic what constitutes the science fiction genre, odds are you'll get different answers. Complicating matters, individual genres are often portable between mediums, but are rarely left unchanged in this transit. At its most basic, genre is a classificatory scheme that helps to distinguish between different types of works within an artistic medium, a system of both affinity and difference. I'm borrowing here from John Frow's argument that, "Genre is, amongst other things, a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organizing things into recognizable classes. In this respect it belongs to a much larger group of classifying activities that permeate every aspect of daily life" (56). Works are grouped under a specific genre umbrella both because they resemble each other, but also because they don't resemble works in other genres. Genre is also historically contingen: genres rise, change, and fall, based on the work that is being published at any given moment. Some genres like detective fiction and science fiction have demonstrated remarkable longevity, while others like the nautical tale or the naturalist novel are essentially museum pieces.

This historical component of genre is one of the characteristics that has drawn me to it for this study, but it also makes it devilishly hard to nail down. Not only has genre as a concept meant different things over time, but individual genres evolve and change over time. Furthermore, new texts are capable of working backwards and

implying generic coherence in hindsight.[29] Similarly, when critics name a new genre they are looking backwards and recontextualizing texts that already exist. Sometimes genres only become visible in hindsight. Mieke Bal provides a useful model for examining genres in historical context in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*. In a discussion of the portability of cultural concepts, she writes that "…the various objects [of study in the humanities] gleaned from the cultural world for closer scrutiny are analysed in view of their existence in culture. This means they are not seen as isolated jewels, but as things always-already engaged, as interlocutors, within the larger culture from which they have emerged" (9). This embeddedness is not just useful for analyzing genre, but in fact necessary. No genre is constituted by a single text, but instead by an ever-evolving constellation of texts. Furthermore, those texts are rarely limited to a single form. Wai Chee Dimock makes a similar argument when she writes that genres are "open sets endlessly dissolved by their openness… fields at once emerging and ephemeral, defined over and over again by new entries" (1379). This non-answer is certainly a frustrating foundation on which to build a study of literature, but the alternatives are no better. One option would be to attempt to name immutable laws of specific genres, essentially considering them to be transhistorical objects. This remains a popular approach to the problem with both readers and writers often setting out to define the rules of a given genre, then determining post facto which works belong or not.[30] While these genre rules are written with varying levels

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[29] For an example of this, see this discussion of Old and New Weird fiction above.

[30] For one example, see science fiction author Stanislaw Lem's 1978 essay, "On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction," where he outlines many rules for the genre, including "it is the premise of SF that anything shown shall in principle be interpretable empirically and rationally. In SF there can be no devils or demons—and

of sincerity, they are simply too rigid to be of any use as tools of analysis. My aim here is not to play the genre policeman, determining which texts belong to a specific genre and which don't. The second option is to dispense with genre entirely, but then we are ignoring one of the very real ways that fiction is created, marketed, and read.

Faced with this problem of definition, theorists often turn to explanatory metaphors in their definitions of genre. These metaphorical explanations are helpful at illuminating various aspects of genre, but it is important to remember that they are heuristics for understanding genre rather than material aspects of it. John Frow has written that "accounts of genre always draw on some other, authoritative realm for their metaphors, conceiving genre as a fact of language, as a sociological fact, as a matter of social etiquette, or as something like the natural organism" (57).[31] I've already discussed genre in terms of rules or scripting, one metaphor for understanding how genre works. Here, I'll briefly discuss two more common metaphors used to discuss genre. These metaphors work both as explicitly explanatory tools, but also crop up casually anytime genre is discussed. Untangling them will help us to see what is at stake in discussions of genre.[32]

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the pattern of occurrences must be verisimilar" (28). For more on the laws or rules of genres, see chapters two and three of this project.

[31] Drawing on an extensive survey of genre criticism, Frow names four dominant metaphors for understanding genre, "as a fact of language, as a sociological fact, as a matter of social etiquette, or as something like the natural organism" (57).

[32] While it is not quite a metaphor or a model for genre, the relatively recently developed technique of "distant reading," bears some mention here. The technique, developed by noted sexual abuser Franco Moretti, takes a computational approach to large bodies of texts (called corpuses), has made advances in our ability to study genres as large bodies of works rather than one at a time. While I am not using distant

The first of these metaphorical explanations of genre is the genealogical or hereditary model, what John Frow calls the biological model. In the genealogical model genres are likened to individual nodes on an expansive family tree or a diagram of species evolution. When we speak of genres as evolving or descending from one another, we are making use of the hereditary model of genre. This model is most useful in that it lays bare the long-term development of genres, demonstrating how new genres emerge, change, and fade away over a long stretch of time. This model allows us to easily grasp the way that genres are historically situated and determined, but risks reifying genres as actors unto themselves. It also elides the ways that genre formation often works *backwards* to create coherence. It is important to remember that genres are *not* biological entities, they don't mate or reproduce, at least not without the imposition of a human being.

If the genealogical model allows us to see how genres evolve over time, then the contract model of genre allows us to see how genre acts as a set of expectations on the part of readers, a contract between the author (or the text) and the reader. This metaphor shows us how genre functions in the reception of literature. By combining multiple genres, Weird History can productively break with reader expectations. Learning history is a specific affective experience that Weird History both evokes and disavows when convenient. Lauren Berlant's work on genre uses the contract model when they argue that

> a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications

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reading techniques in this study, they have allowed for new approaches to the study of genre.

> while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. (4)

What Berlant's definition of genre shows us is genre's capacity for flexibility within the contract model. It also demonstrates how genre can be used as a measuring stick for reader's affective encounters with a text. While my project is not based in affect or reader response theory, this aspect of genre as a way of engaging with and managing reader expectations is present throughout.

What I hope that this failure at a definition of genre illustrates is that no single model of genre effectively captures all of its nuances. Throughout this study I make use of the models and metaphors outlined above, but do not commit to any one model as the ultimate tool for understanding genre. My method in this project is to look for ways that the overlapping of various genres creates new possibilities in both, without creating the perceived unity of a new hybrid genre. For example, in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by Michael Chabon, the titular characters, Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay are authors of superhero comics in mid-twentieth-century New York City.[33] As they work within the tropes of superhero fiction their lives are shaped by those conventions as well. Sometimes this takes the form of incredible events happening within the "real world" of the text, other times this happens in the form of characters beginning to believe in the reality of superhero tropes only to be brought harshly back down to reality when the "rules" of those tropes fail. I argue that this tension between "realist" historical fiction and genre tropes contains both a historiographic argument and prompts readers to read for these historiographic debates, rather than consume historical or genre narratives uncritically.

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[33] For more on *Kavalier & Clay*, see the second chapter.

As I've alluded to above, Weird History is part of a broader literary movement that has been called the genre turn. The genre turn has been used to name both a project in literary criticism to take genre and genre fiction more seriously and a trend among authors of literary fiction to embrace generic trappings in their work.[34] These two instances of the genre turn are not unrelated, rather they are two branches of the same tree. The novels of the genre turn put existing generic conventions to new uses within the broad framework of literary fiction. These works may eschew postmodernism's supposed ironic engagement with popular culture, but they build on its experimentations with popular genre and literary form.[35] The novels of the genre turn take a self-reflexive but earnest approach to popular genres. This earnestness manifests in myriad ways that will be discussed in the chapters of this project, but primarily these authors insist that they are not trying to elevate genres, but work within them. This insistence of belonging within popular genres is opposed by the academy's tendency to elevate its objects of interest to the level of "serious" or "high" culture. As Tim Lanzendörfer has observed, "genre often simply ceases to be when it encounters the academy, or even before, when genre fiction is marketed as literary fiction in an attempt to retain for it the kind of prestige that does not yet come with genre" (2). With this in mind, we might think of the genre turn as a productive tension between

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[34] The genre turn is by no means a strictly American phenomenon, it is observable throughout the Anglophone world and possibly beyond. Some of the non-United States authors of the genre turn that won't be examined in this study include Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

[35] It is worth noting that while postmodernism is often stereotyped as incorporating popular culture with an air of ironic remove, this is at best an oversimplification of postmodernism's affective stance.

two forces in the broader literary culture, on the one hand a desire to treat genre seriously and on the other a desire to elevate certain novels above the purview of genre. Weird History exists within this tension. It is tempting to say one group or another is always on one side of this debate, for example we might argue that authors *always* take genre fiction seriously or critics *always* undervalue it. But in reality, authors, critics, and publishers take up different sides of these debates in different contexts.

When exactly the genre turn began is hard to nail down. One reason for this is that like genres themselves, the genre turn was at least partially constructed in hindsight. It is a shift in the atmosphere, rather than a distinct phenomenon with a start date, Günter Leypoldt captures this feeling well when he writes that "this most recent cluster of genre-mixing novels evidences a shared aesthetic feel we intuitively recognize as part of a new 'thing,' mainly within US and British fiction. Another reason for this ambiguity is that the feeling of a new "thing" that Leypoldt describes is inextricably bound up in the debates over the end of postmodernism discussed above. Andrew Hoberek has characterized postpostmodernism as "putting realism and postmodernism into play as available genres or modes—rather than as, say, the essence of the literary" (502). This is perhaps the best characterization of postmodernism's continued relevance, whether we believe it is living or dead. This transition between postmodernism as a the dominant prestigious literary form to just one genre available did not happen over night, but is visible in the texts I examine in this study. Colson Whitehead's 1999 debut novel *The Intuitionist*, which I explore in chapter 3, is in many senses a transitional text between these two historical moments. When I say that postmodernism is now available as a genre, I mean that it works as a

set of conventions and expectations that can be written with or against. Postmodernism's availability as one genre among many makes the genre turn, and Weird History possible.

I argue that the availability of postmodernism as a genre for experimentation is one of the factors that has led to the recent resurgence in historical fiction. In connecting the genre turn to this resurgence, I am building on the important work that scholars of the genre turn and contemporary literature broadly have already done on the interplay between genre and history that pervades contemporary literary fiction. Theodore Martin argues that it is in fact genre's ability to evolve over time makes it a useful tool for periodizing the contemporary, or "an alternative model for practicing historicism" (7). Mitchum Huehls outlines one thread in contemporary historical fiction that he calls "speculatively generic fiction," which he characterizes against the more epistemologically concerned historiographic metafiction as "interested in the ontological possibilities of the… late-capitalist moment… these texts ask how we can build a world" (144–45). Emily Hyde and Sarah Wasserman have argued that form is key to understanding contemporary fiction, proposing that the contemporary novel in English is "consumed with time itself, and if not with historicity, then perhaps with historiography, with the telling and writing of history… [and] gives its readers a present attuned to the past, and often to the future as well, *through* form" (13). In addition to these interrogations of genre and history, the genre turn has seen a renewed interest in monographs that look to study the uses of single genres in contemporary literature, examples include; *Sean Austin Grattan's Hope Isn't Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature*, Jeremy Rosen's *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace,* and Kathy Knapp's

American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11. These examples show us two things. The first is that genre is once again the object of lively analysis and is being considered more seriously by literary critics today than it has for some time. The second is that the relationship between genre and history is a complex one, ripe for further study.

But it is the explicit mixture of genres by these authors that makes their histories weird. The imposition of narrative structure on history is widely recognized in academic circles to be just that, an imposition, but this academic truism has not yet penetrated the popular imagination. In popular history, the narrative component of history is both obvious and invisible, simply put it is unproblematic. Popular historical fiction, which often seeks to nestle itself into an already generally known narrative of history, risks reinforcing dominant historical narratives. By inserting the tropes of popular genres into their historical fiction, and particularly elements of popular non-realist genre fiction like science fiction or ghost stories, Weird History makes explicit the suturing of the ahistorical content to the historical content of historical fiction that makes all historical fiction possible.

In addition to the genre turn, Weird History intersects with and makes use of the promotion of marginalized voices as a marker of authenticity. The authors of the genre turn, and perhaps more importantly its publishers and reviewers, have embraced the call for "authentic" voices in American fiction and produced a series of texts that often implicitly promise firsthand minority knowledge of historical events. In the case of recent history, this is sometimes possible, but it is often a demand that can't be met. A Black American author will very likely have a different perspective on American slavery than a white one, but no living author can provide a firsthand perspective on it.

This is not to say that the impulse is a negative one. The shift towards this model of "authenticity" in publishing practices, book marketing, and consumer demand is in part a recognition of the fact that traditional histories reinforce prejudice, particularly white supremacy in the United States, by failing to incorporate the voices of the dispossessed. In the face of this, attempts have been made to amplify the work of members of marginalized communities. Genre, despite its often racialized (or even racist) history, is available to authors of all races as a tool. Thus, participation in the genre turn and the making of Weird History is available to wide swaths of people. Weird History's earnest engagement with genre illuminate how genre, in that it exists concurrent with history and evolves over time, has always had historical and archival content. Any time authors read or write genre fiction, they are engaging with an entire history of the genre. We might call this genre knowledge, or media savvy, but at its base it is a way of engaging with (cultural) history. To put it simply, all genre fiction is historical fiction. The possibilities opened by recognizing genre as a trove of historical knowledge are one of the factors contributing to its appeal for the authors of the genre turn.[36]

The four chapters of this project each look at how a specific genre has been used to make history weird. These case studies look at examples of contemporary American novels and how they make use of a genre to open up possibilities in historical narratives. In each instance, the affordances of these genres allow for a different aspect of history to be explored. The cumulative effect of these chapters is an examination of the myths in American history that contemporary American fiction

[36] For more on how the literary history of genres have real historical content and value, see the second chapter.

sees as needing revision, most often they present critiques of racism and American white supremacy, but they also touch on the intertwined problems of classism, American exceptionalism, and the great man theory of history, all of which pervade popular narratives of American history.

In the first chapter, I look at George Saunders' and Jesmyn Ward's use of the ghost story in their novels *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I argue that the ghost story allows both authors to write historical fiction on a much wider timescale than the novel traditionally supports. One of the benefits of historical fiction is the capability of examining the interiority of individuals living through history, but at this timescale the life of those individuals becomes a limiting factor. This chapter argues that the ghosts in these novels allow for the co-existence of individuals throughout history in a narrative present reduced to a flat geography. This solves the narrative problem of novels which attempt to depict long timescales in a genre that is predicated on depicting the lives of individuals. Both novels then use this expanded timescale to look at the longue durée of slavery in American history.[37] The intergenerational harm of slavery becomes visible as characters of different generations are able to interact with each other.

The second chapter of this project looks at pulp fiction in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*. While not traditionally considered a genre, I argue that pulp fiction has cohered into a

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[37] Longue dureé refers to a historiographic method originated by the French Annales School and looks to the "long term's explanatory in history, particularly economic and environmental factors. It's most well-known example is Fernand Braudel's three volume history, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*.

genre for contemporary authors and readers. Chabon and Ruff then use this new sense of pulp as a genre to explore cultural history. By focusing on pulp fiction, what was once seen as the lowest form of cultural production, Chabon and Ruff show us how so-called "low culture" can serve as a historical archive for the experiences and feelings of its creators and readers. Both authors use this pulp archive as a way into discussing the relationship between low cultural production and consumption and race in the mid-twentieth-century United States. In their expanded cultural histories, engagement with the fiction of the past and its production and consumption provides a way into a broader historical knowledge than is possible through traditional historical research.

The third chapter also looks at works that expand the sources of historical knowledge, by examining the uses of alternate history in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*. In both novels, alternate history serves as a tool for exploring the problems of contingency and periodization in discussion of the past. By exploring pasts that could have been, but weren't, both authors are able to tease out how currents of American history buried by narratives of racial progress live on past their supposed end dates. Additionally, this chapter further interrogates periodization as it looks at two works that straddle the perceived cultural divide of pre- and post-9/11 America to argue that the Weird History defies that increasingly common periodization marker.

In the final chapter, I take this discussion of the past into the present and the future by looking at three very recent works that take place in the future. This chapter argues that Weird History can give us tools to better understand how the past creates the future as it applies historiographic techniques to depictions of the near future. This

chapter looks at Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility*, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House*, all of which were published in 2022. The prediction of the future has long been the domain of science fiction authors rather than historians, but by depicting the past and future, combining elements of historical fiction and science fiction, these three books seek to bring together the insights of the two fields. I argue that these novels work as historical fiction of the future, or depictions of a past that is not yet past. That all three of these books were published in the last year is no accident, this chapter seeks to practice a reading of the very contemporary, or more accurately the present moment. All three of these novels touch on current American anxieties around the future, most important among them climate change and continued American decline.

The long downturn in the global economy is arguably the impetus for a general listlessness in global culture, but as its effects multiply and compound they can create an overwhelming mood of despair in anyone paying attention. In this project I have turned to the depictions of history in fiction in the hopes of changing the present. Each of these chapters, in its engagement with a different genre, offers a strategy for breaking the chains of the historical order we find ourselves bound by. We are living through a particularly precarious historical moment, one in which the electorate of the United States seems determined to continually flirt with fascist authoritarianism and the various governments of the world are either unwilling or unable to come together to prevent global warming and the resulting climate catastrophe. Weird History, like this dissertation, is ultimately a project borne of frustration. These novels attest to a deep desire to change how we understand the past and they make use of the tools that our culture has at hand. What is of interest to me is how this frustration has led to a

burst of creativity and new possibilities in historical fiction, the novel, and fiction broadly. Hopefully, this work contributes in some small way to altering our course. The alternative is oblivion.

Chapter 1

STORIES TO PASS ON: GEORGE SAUNDERS'S *LINCOLN IN THE BARDO* AND JESMYN WARD'S *SING UNBURIED SING*

At its best historical fiction offers us something like the opportunity to commune with the dead. It brings the stories of bygone eras into the present in the form of narrative and in the historical novel, it is a living narrative form that still occupies some level of prestige and popularity in our culture. But this appearance is just that, an appearance. One of the values of Weird History is that by mixing genres into new hybrid forms it allows us to critically engage with the genre pleasures of historical fiction and other popular genres. With this in mind, I want to begin with ghost stories. The ghost story may not be a popular novel genre on the level of science fiction or romance with clearly marked shelves in the bookstore, but it is an old and persistent genre. Additionally, a key precursor text to Weird History and one of the most famous texts in twentieth-century fiction, Toni Morrison's 1987 novel Beloved, offers us a way into a discussion of the way the ghost story has been used in Weird History.[38] On the final page of Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* the reader is met with a

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[38] I am building on a long and rich history of critical writing on how Toni Morrison and *Beloved* in particular have impacted historical memory in the United States and beyond. Homi Bhabha has read the novel through a postcolonial lens as a work that "revives the past of slavery and its murderous rituals of possession and self-possession, in order to project a contemporary fable of women's history that is at the same time the narrative of an affective, historic memory of an emergent public sphere of men and women alike" (8). Salamishah Tillet argues that Morrison and other African American writers "claim and reconstruct pivotal figures, events, memories, locations, and experiences from American slavery in order to provide interiority and

repeated and enigmatic exhortation, “It was not a story to pass on… It was not a story to pass on…This is not a story to pass on” (323-324). How are we as readers supposed to interpret these now famous lines? They seem to contradict everything we have just read. At the novel’s close, the spirit of Sethe’s unnamed child that haunts her family has seemingly been exorcised in a moment of community solidarity. We are told that the child, known only as Beloved is “forgotten like a bad dream,” as Sethe and her family are accepted back into the society they have lived adjacent to but apart from for so long. What then doesn’t pass on? Is it that the ghost of Beloved, despite this forgetting, will not pass on? Is it that because of this forgetting the story itself will not be passed on? Both readings seem to be contradicted by the text. The first because Beloved, while she may never haunt her family so destructively, she will also never be wholly gone. We are told that “her footprints come and go,” but “they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there” (*Beloved* 324). And the second reading, that the story will be forgotten and thus not passed on, is contradicted by the very object that we hold in our hands, the novel *Beloved*, a story that Morrison has gone to presumably great lengths to imagine, write, and publish. One thing that this final refrain of Beloved demonstrates is how returning agency to the dead changes our responsibilities in the telling of history. What do we owe to ghosts? And more specifically for this project, what do we owe to America’s ghosts? That Morrison’s ghost story should end on this blurring of agency and disappearance for Beloved’s ghost and the resulting blurring of remembering and forgetting is appropriate for a novel that has come to be regarded as one of the most important in American literature, a modern classic.

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agency for enslaved African Americans and write them into the national narrative” (Tillet 5).

Morrison's novel is a high watermark of both postmodernism and the contemporary American ghost story. Morrison herself is a titan of American fiction and cultural criticism. All American ghost stories published afterwards and all works of Weird History are following in Beloved's disappearing footsteps.

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* follow in these footsteps by creating visions of America's past as haunted by the presence of the wronged dead and their related national traumas. In both novels, which ghosts can and can't pass on in the literal sense, from haunting the living to whatever comes next serves as a potent metaphor for historical memory. The haunting then is a non-realist representation of the persistence of the past in the present, where the trauma of the past is recorded in the lingering body of specters. By telling these haunted histories, making history weird through the addition of ghosts, both Ward and Saunders seek to surface aspects of America's racist past that lie buried beneath normative history. I have chosen to begin this study with their work because it effectively demonstrates the work that Weird History can do in a supposedly "postracial" United States.[39] Both published in 2017, just after the end of Barack Obama's two terms as president of the United States, we can safely assume that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* were primarily conceived and written during Obama's presidency.[40] It is within this context, after the creation of a so-called postracial America in the wake of Obama's 2008 presidential victory that Saunders and Ward turn to ghosts and the unfinished business of American history. Despite

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[39] For more on the myth of a postracial United States see the introduction.

[40] *Lincoln in the Bardo* was published less than a month after Obama on February 14th, 2017 and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was published on September 5th of that same year.

being the focus of much derision, the idea that American society has become postracial remains in many popular conceptions of America. One piece of evidence for this is the vehement denial from both sides of mainstream American politics in the face of allegations of racism. Both parties claim to be the true fighters for racial progress, with the other promoting racism through its policies. For Republicans and centrist Democrats, we have already "moved on" from race while for more progressive Democrats, "moving on" is an ongoing political project. This is not to suggest that there is an equivalence between the left and the right, but simply that racial progressivism is widely seen as a desirable position. In this atmosphere of contested postracialism, the ghost emerges as a figure of the unburied past. Mixing historical fiction with ghost stories makes history weird in a way that allows for Ward and Saunders to explore the ways the past lingers on, even after its "death."

Twenty-first-century American attitudes towards race are tangled up in another contested site of American public life: spirituality. Just as it has been claimed that we are postracial, it has been claimed that we are now postsecular. And just like a postracial society, a postsecular society could be said to be haunted by secularism in a way that its name elides. The ghost then is a useful figure in this domain as well. Popular belief (or nonbelief) in ghosts contains this complicated American relationship to the spiritual in microcosm. According to one recent IPSOS poll, as many as 47% of Americans believe in ghosts ("Less Than Half of Americans Believe Ghosts Are Real"). While I'm not interested in debating the reality of ghosts, clearly for a significant portion of Americans ghosts are an important cultural force. Like many other aspects of American spirituality, ghosts are faith-agnostic, featuring in many spiritual traditions simultaneously. Scholars like John McClure, Amy

Hungerford, and Brian McHale have examined contemporary American literature's participation in and contestation of our supposedly secular culture. In his book, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, McClure argues that postsecular fiction's "ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects" (3). McClure is careful to point out that the postsecular is a distinct movement from the twin phenomenon of increasingly influential religious fundamentalisms. Postsecularism's simultaneous adoption of and skepticism towards religion has made it fertile ground for contemporary American literary fiction, which leans towards postmodern skepticism, cultural pluralism, and progressive politics.

While they indicate opposite cultural trajectories, Postsecularism being the return of religiosity and postrace being the supposed end of racism, both postsecularism and postrace overlap in the multicultural spiritualities that Saunders and Ward create in their novels. In fact, the skepticism surrounding notions of a postracial America points toward a similar reckoning with a supposedly dead aspect of American life. We might more accurately say that we are living in a postpostracial moment or to avoid such a clunky formulation, a post-colorblind one, if only in the sense that the public discourse has finally begun to admit that we were never a colorblind society. Both Ward and Saunders are interested in interrogating the ghosts of these supposedly dead forces in our culture. Thus, the ghost operates on the individual and the cultural-historical level simultaneously, asking both "How do individuals move on?" and "How does our culture move on?" To answer these questions, Ward and Saunders's novels create a nexus of cultural and religious beliefs where ghosts are able to exist simultaneously within multiple traditions, without

making definitive claims about the afterlife. This allows the novels to explore the problems of ghostly life from a syncretic perspective rather than an exclusionary one.

This spiritual multivalence of ghosts has allowed them to take on a genre fluidity as well. The broad fictional possibilities of ghosts make them a particularly useful figure for genre mixing and analysis. While the malevolent ghost might be the most prevalent specter in the popular imagination, the ghosts in both Saunders's and Ward's novels are primarily storytellers. The ghost as a storyteller has always been latent in the ghost trope. Ghosts are in one sense stories themselves, traces of the past that linger in the present. By making the ghosts active tellers of their stories, Saunders and Ward pick up on this characteristic of the ghost and refashion it for their historical moment. The ghost as storyteller expands and reworks the trope of the ghost as remaining tied to the physical world due to some unfinished business. While not always the case, the ghost's unfinished business can lead the haunting presence to become destructive or malicious, either purposefully or inadvertently. At this point, the intervention of the living and a reduction of the ghost's agency becomes necessary. This malice points to the various genre entanglements of the ghost as a character or device. The ghost story is common in genres like horror, the gothic, or the thriller. A unified theory of ghosts in culture is beyond the scope of this project. My goal is rather to take a narrow look at how the ghost is used as a trope in two novels written at a very specific moment in recent American history. That said, the long history of the ghost story deserves some recognition here. So, while ghost stories are common in thriving genres like gothic and horror, they also feature prominently in pre-modern

forms like folklore, mythology, and religion.[41] With this breadth of examples of ghosts, we might more accurately characterize ghosts as a trope or genre building block that transcends any one genre or even culture. This deep history of ghosts exists as a reservoir of cultural meaning that contemporary ghost stories implicitly draw upon. Ward and Saunders both present readers with ghosts that are in some ways unfamiliar, thus their historical fictions make the ghost story weird and inject new life into the genre just as the ghost story makes historical fiction weird.

By refashioning the ghost as a storyteller, these novels allow ghosts to become characters in their own right rather than narrative obstacles that must be overcome. Both novels feature ghosts as prominent characters that narrate their own stories and their experience of the contemporary world they find themselves unable to leave behind. This restoration of narratorial agency to the dead allows for a re-centering of historical narrative away from the living and their necessarily teleological approach to the past. As storytellers, the ghosts in these novels take up the reins of historical narrative for their own ends. Rather than depending on the living to help them achieve peace (or revenge), Saunders and Ward's ghosts seize the means of spiritual fulfilment for themselves. I believe we can place Saunders and Ward's storyteller ghosts within a broader cultural imperative to center the voices of the dispossessed.[42] In this way,

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[41] For an example of the role that ghosts with unfinished business played in the pre-Modern European imagination, see Maik Hildebrandt's essay, "Medieval Ghosts: The Stories of the Monks of Byland. Hildebrandt connects an increase in ghost stories in this period to the development of Purgatory as one of three spaces for the dead in Christian theology, writing that "preachers used tales about encounters with the dead as exemplary stories in their sermons. In most of these tales, the living encounter the souls of the dead from Purgatory, who tell about the pains suffered in this place" (15).

[42] For more on this, see the introduction.

these ghosts operate as ruptures in the fabric of Saunders and Ward's historical fiction. The rambling stories the ghosts tell in these novels take hold of the narratorial function and reorient historical fiction towards the experiences of the dead. Compounding this effect, both authors present their ghosts through heightened literary artifice. These non-realist moments mix with the metafictional residue of postmodernism. While this is just one fictional device, it allows for the introduction of competing perspectives in historical narrative in the form of the living and the dead.

While unfinished business and even the ghost as a storyteller might seem to present ghosts as single individuals who can only change the world by interacting with the living, both novels expand the agency of the dead by imagining their ghost characters as members of a community of the undead. The simultaneous and overlapping communities of the living and the dead create the possibility for transtemporal identification and solidarity. This allows these texts to move beyond simply excavating the racism of the United States's national past, but also begin to imagine a future that acknowledges and lives with that past. In this way, these novels share a sense of the ghostly that Derrida develops in *Specters of Marx*. For better or worse, cultural scholarship on ghosts must attempt to come to terms with Derrida's work in *Specters*. The book constitutes Derrida's long-awaited attempt to reconcile his concept of deconstruction with the Marxist tradition. While a synthesis of these two threads in philosophy remains elusive to Derrida, his concept of hauntology has proven useful to cultural critics. Derrida defines hauntology as a Marxist and moral imperative to live with the past, calling for "respect for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born… some responsibility, beyond all living present" (xviii). Derrida's use of the haunting as

something between metaphor and reality is a common one in recent cultural criticism on the subject of ghosts. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen succinctly summarize the dialectical relationship between the literal ghost and the metaphorical ghost in the introduction to their collection *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, writing that "these two types of ghosts do not represent totally distinct cultural phenomena, but constantly feed into each other, so that [for example]… the recent use of the ghost or specter as a designation for social outcasts… can be seen to impact on the current portrayal of many non-figurative ghosts as impotent and ineffectual victims rather than powerful aggressors" (x). This reciprocity between the literal and the figurative ghost demonstrates the fluidity of ghosts as a genre trope.[43] The rich history and mutability of the ghost and the ghost story allow Ward and Saunders to put them to new uses in their novels while playing on established cultural tropes. Ward and Saunders's ghosts then are both familiar and strange, destabilizing how the past interacts with the present both within the text and within the literary tradition.

This chapter will look at how the ghost story can open up possibilities for historical fiction by playing on the concept of "moving on." The literal ghosts in Saunders's and Ward's novels allow us to imagine a much more complicated and reciprocal relationship between the past and the present, the archive and its readers.

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[43] While this chapter looks at the use of literal ghosts in historical fiction, the multitude of works that focus on the cultural role of the ghost as metaphor have been indispensable in thinking through the questions of ghostly agency that I discuss below. For examples, see Esther Pereen's *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* or Avery F. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination.*

The first of these possibilities is that wider swaths of historical time become available for representation in the mode of the novel. Traditionally, the novel has been seen as best equipped to depict individuals, due to its unique ability to depict individual interiority and voice. This creates problems when the goal is to depict the way that the past lingers on in the present.[44] The ghost allows for the past to exist as individuals in the present and thus ironically for the historical past to "live" again in the narrative of a novel. But this is not simply a matter of plucking consciousness out of the past and placing it in the narrative present. The presence of ghosts in the landscapes of these novels creates a hybrid historical-present space, wherein the ghostly traces of the past are not just marks upon a surface, but agents unto themselves. One way to conceive of this is as history flattened from a timeline to a geography, where the past continues to exist as features of that geography. As discussed in the introduction, Fredric Jameson has argued that historical fiction has been emptied of political content and the past reduced to a series of popular media tropes. Historical fiction, he writes,

> can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which at once becomes 'pop history')… we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach. (*Postmodernism* 25)

In other words, historical moments and even whole periods accrete popular tropes and conventions of representation until they begin to function something like genres themselves. There is perhaps no better example of this than the Western, a genre that has become almost coterminous with a period of American history in the popular

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[44] For more on how Weird History makes visible the web of connections between the past, present, and the future see chapter four.

historical imagination. Jameson's use of the word condemned here is interesting, as if to say that in the present we are consigned to a hell of simulacra and disconnection from the past, made into ghosts ourselves.

Jameson offers cognitive mapping as one possible way to create a new political aesthetics in the age of postmodernism, writing that cognitive mapping would "enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentatble totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (*Postmodernism* 51). George Saunders and Jesmyn Ward are writing in a cultural landscape that has evolved significantly since Jameson posited the possibility of cognitive mapping in *Postmodernism*. It is in this new cultural landscape that Weird History emerges. Andrew Hoberek has argued that postpostmodernism is marked by the availability of both modernism and postmodernism to contemporary writers as genres unto themselves rather than as the dominant high culture form of the day. Both Ward and Saunders make use of this availability of postmodernism to create novels that are formally innovative and engage with postmodern tropes while maintaining a commercial quality that postmodernism at its height has been accused of eschewing. When the ghosts of these novels comingle with the living they flatten temporality to a matter of geography. The past and present coexist in the same space and their interaction becomes legible as interactions between characters rather than the more abstract influence that the past usually holds over the present. While this does not precisely fit Jameson's definition of cognitive mapping, I would argue it is one possible instantiation of Jameson's proposal for a "non-mimetic" representation of the American past. Both novels make use of the possibilities that the ghost story makes

available to Weird History and show us visions of American history that while not strictly "realist," are making real historiographic interventions.

Though *Lincoln in the Bardo* is George Saunders's first published novel, it represents only the latest work in a long fiction-writing career. Saunders is one of the few American authors who has been able to make a career as a short story writer. The short story form has allowed Saunders to consistently experiment with genre and literary form. His fictions often include speculative elements, taking place in worlds like our own, but slightly different. His works are often set in near future or alternate present dystopias, where the ways that capital controls our lives are exaggerated for emphasis. Saunders's work most often appears in prestigious literary publications, such as *McSweeney's* and *The New Yorker*, providing evidence that the supposed separation between what have been called high and low culture genres is weaker than has been assumed. One thing that this tells us is that the line between genre fiction and literary fiction is blurry and no longer defined only by high vs. low genres, or even formally conservative vs. formally experimental texts, but also by literary institutions and coteries. At the risk of oversimplification, literary fiction is as much a private club as it is a genre.

In *Lincoln in the Bardo,* Saunders successfully maintains this tension between supposedly high and low elements over the course of an entire novel. Saunders's juxtaposition of the serious and the irreverent has characterized both his fiction and non-fiction writing and is characteristic of his approach to topics of cultural importance. In this context, the decision to re-contextualize the figure of Abraham Lincoln as a man living amongst the nation's irreverent dead allows Saunders to approach a pivotal moment in American history from a different perspective. The

action of the novel takes place over the course of only a handful of days as Lincoln's youngest son, William Wallace Lincoln or Willie, succumbs to typhoid fever and is interred temporarily in the Oak Hill Cemetery Chapel. After his interment, Willie awakens as a ghost in the Oak Hill Cemetery to find that he is the newest member of a community of ghosts that reside in the cemetery, seemingly bound to their physical remains and able to manifest themselves to each other at night. Notably it is not all residents of the cemetery who continue to hold onto the material plane, but only those who have some unfinished business on Earth. Or more accurately, those spirits that are unable to accept that they have in fact died. Willie's death comes at a low point in Lincoln's presidential career, as less than one year into the Civil War the North appears to be on its heels in the fight against the fledgling Confederacy and Lincoln is seen as the President that oversaw the dissolution of the Union rather than its savior.

The "bardo" of the novel's title most commonly refers to the concept of an intermediate state between life and death that exists in some sects of Buddhism. The concept would perhaps be most recognizable to Western readers as the subject of a group of Buddhist texts published in the West under the title *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.[45] In the *Book of the Dead,* individuals are presented at the moment of death with the opportunity to come to terms with "the dawning of the profound state of consciousness called the clear light… If one is able to recognize the clear light as reality, one is immediately liberated from rebirth" (Buswell and Lopez 98). The bardo and Buddhism itself are not discussed explicitly anywhere within the text, but it is

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[45] According to the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, the phrase "bar do" translates in Tibetan to "'between two'; often translated as 'intermediate state'" (Buswell and Lopez 98).

clear that Saunders's vision of an afterlife where one must confront the reality of their death before they can move on is informed by the concept. When characters in the novel do move on, their ghostly forms explode into light and sound, a process described by the characters as a "matterlightblooming phenomenon" (Saunders 96). This process of coming to terms with reality is reminiscent of the confrontation with the "clear light" described above, but it is not exactly the same. Just as he adapts concepts from Buddhism, Saunders adapts concepts from Christianity as well. Each night the ghosts are encouraged by a procession of otherworldly figures to accept their fate and move on, for the Reverend Everly Thomas these figures appear as angels, but they also appear in a "different guise" to each of the cemetery's residents, appearing usually as an object of the deceased's desire. This fluidity invites speculation as to the "reality" of the afterlife within Saunders's novel, but I would argue that the fluidity is itself the point. There is perhaps some underlying "reality" of the afterlife in the novel, but we only have access to it from the perspective of the characters in the novel. Their understanding, like ours, is always culturally mediated.

Lincoln in the Bardo's chapters fall into one of two categories, both of which play with the prose conventions of the novel form. In the first category are the chapters of the novel that take place outside of the cemetery, generally these chapters provide context and depict Lincoln's life and presidency around the time of his son Willie's death. These chapters are collages of excerpts from a whole host of texts including histories, private letters contemporary to the events of the novel, children's books, and memoirs. Many, but not all of Saunders's sources for these chapters are first-hand accounts of Lincoln's time in the white house; some were written years after the events in question and after the hagiography of Lincoln had been cemented in the

American historical consciousness and others are roughly contemporary to the events depicted in the novel. By constructing much of the historical setting of the novel through this collage of sources, Saunders lays bare the machinery of historical fiction. Traditionally, the author of the historical novel seeks to create the illusion of a stable and coherent historical past as a setting for their text. In this model, the author brings together research, imaginative reconstruction, personal recollection, or some combination of these to inform their depiction of the historical past. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, these sources are quoted directly, bringing Saunders's role as historical bricoleur into stark relief. This is not to suggest that Saunders achieves some as yet unknown objective in his historical representation, rather the opposite. The selection of quotations and their juxtaposition serves to highlight the malleability of the historical archive.

In one illustrative chapter, Saunders brings together a host of sources that briefly describe Lincoln's face. This passages describe Lincoln as everything from "the homeliest man I ever saw" to "the handsomest man I ever saw in my life" (Saunders 199, 200). Driving home the mutability of human and historical memory, Saunders quotes a litany of sources on a point of seeming factual immutability, the color of Abraham Lincoln's eyes. In a succession of short quotes, Lincoln's eyes are described alternately as "dark grey… gray-brown… bluish-brown… blueish-gray… [and] blue…" (Saunders 196–97). This juxtaposition of recollections effectively demonstrates the contradictions of the archive. But it does more than this, it provides a counterpoint to the chapters of the novel that are narrated by Saunders's imagined ghosts. The ghosts, wholly imagined, are in one sense free from the vagaries of

historical misremembering. In this way, their agency is greater than that of the historical personages whose writings Saunders has mined.

The other sections of the novel, which make up the majority of the its word count, give us access to the interior monologues of the residents of the cemetery. Each of these chapters shifts perspectives multiple times, sometimes each character giving only a brief line or a paragraphs-long monologue. It is in these chapters that the novel's plot plays out. On first blush, these sections of the novel appear to be made up of dialogue written in the style of a play. They have the formal appearance of a script, with each character's name appearing below their chunk of narration. But as the novel goes on, it becomes clear that these sections are not only dialogue, but a mixture of spoken dialogue, internal monologue, and a transcription of feeling. This mixture of narrational styles gives the impression that for the ghosts of Saunders's novel the distinction between external and internal dialogue has begun to disappear. At times the ghosts in the novel find themselves repeating their stories ad nauseum, seemingly unable to stop. Their spectral bodies shift with their emotional states and reactions to outside stimulus, demonstrating a breakdown between outer and inner life similar to the one taking place in their narration.

The juxtaposition of ghostly narration with excerpts from histories and historical sources allows us to see both of the novel's narratorial styles differently. It is striking that the two modes of the novel meld together to form one seamless narrative. One effect of this is that the historical sources cited are revealed to be themselves stories told by or about the dead. By revealing the way that historical narrative, either in history-writing or historical fiction-writing is made up of found materials, novel

shows us that the work of the historian and the historical fiction writer are not as dissimilar as believers in an objective historical truth might like to believe.

There is perhaps no better figure for discussing the mutability of the historical past through narrative than Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln has become totemic in American culture and history: both dominant political parties trace their lineage to his influence, his name adorns countless streets and schools, and his visage graces two massive and popular national monuments and two denominations of the US dollar. This reputation is unsurprising, not only did Lincoln serve as president during the country's only civil war, ultimately defeating the Confederacy and restoring the Union, he has also historically been credited with emancipating the enslaved people of this country, ending chattel slavery as it had existed for hundreds of years, and earning him the sobriquet "The Great Emancipator." Lincoln's assassination, the national trauma of the event and the resulting turmoil, have only solidified Lincoln as a figure of historical fascination. Through this legacy, Lincoln has achieved a metonymic status in United States history, standing in for the nation itself in our national imagination. In this context, Saunders's choice of Lincoln for the titular character of his first novel signals an interest in commenting on the entirety of the American democratic project. But it also risks the devolution of the novel into cliché. After all, what is left to say about Abraham Lincoln?

In the face of so much hagiography, it is tempting to look for anti-hagiography, a work that shows the "real" truth of Lincoln must be one that reveals him to have been in reality nothing but a vile racist who only ended slavery on a technicality and as a desperate measure in the face of a losing war. But even this anti-hagiography has become cliché, as it has existed as a current of thought as long if not longer than the

hagiography of Lincoln. Revisionist historians have long sought to disentangle Lincoln the historically-extant man from Lincoln the myth. The picture that has emerged from this reevaluation of Lincoln is one of a man who was opposed to slavery on principle, but believed that there was simply no legal way to end slavery under the constitution. Eventually Lincoln came to a hard-line position that slavery should be strictly disallowed from expanding into the new Western states entering the Union. This stance would carry him to securing the Republican Party's first presidential nomination and ultimately the presidency in 1861. Historian Eric Foner has summarized Lincoln's political career as "a search for a reconciliation of means and ends, and an attempt to identify a viable mode of antislavery action in a political and constitutional system that erected seemingly impregnable barriers to effective steps towards abolition… If Lincoln achieved greatness, he grew into it" (xxi). It is this ambiguity around Lincoln that the novel works to reintroduce to our understanding of the man.

The depiction of Abraham Lincoln in the novel shies away from neither Lincoln's admirable qualities nor his many faults, but the novel manages to deftly sidestep rehashing old debates over Lincoln's true beliefs. Partially it does this by depicting only a single night of Lincoln's presidency, but more importantly it achieves this by putting the spotlight on the ghosts themselves. When we see Lincoln in the novel it is through either the lens of the historical sources that the novel quotes or the fictional ghosts that Saunders imagines, the effect of this is that the depiction and interpretation of Lincoln becomes a subject of the novel, rather than Lincoln himself taking center stage. Lincoln becomes less "real" to the novel than its ghostly protagonists. This disrupts not just our sense of temporality, Lincoln co-exists with the

past of the nation, but also makes a subtle argument against the great man theory of history that is so prevalent in popular historical narratives. This de-centering of Lincoln places the novel on more compelling and productive historiographic territory than simply praising or condemning him. We see Lincoln as the confluence of a multitude of influences rather than a single heroic figure. Throughout the novel Lincoln is possessed by various ghosts that attempt to exert agency upon him, a potent metaphor for the way the lives of the dead weigh upon the living and a compelling reading of Lincoln, who is now himself a ghost animated by the spirits of his various interpreters.

So, while the death of Lincoln's son Willie provides the impetus for the novel, Lincoln himself is only a secondary character in the plot. The actual action of the novel concerns the ghostly residents of the cemetery banding together to save Willie's soul from eternal torment on Earth. While the ghosts of the novel are in denial about their own mortality, they have seen that children who linger on after death become monstrous. Presenting the ghosts themselves as the protagonists of the novel upends our expectations of agency in the ghost story. This inversion of our expectations of agency is bolstered by how embodied the ghosts of the novel are. They may no longer occupy a physical body, but their spectral forms reflect their internal states. While this process is beyond their control and often unpleasant, it demonstrates a unity of internal and external life that is unmatched by the living. For the ghosts in Saunders's novel their new bodies are literally transformed by the trauma of their deaths. Their old physical bodies are suddenly alien to them, devoid of all life.

The novel's three ghostly protagonists–Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins III, and the reverend Everly Thomas–demonstrate this postmortem transformation of physical

form. Each of them manifests themselves as a reflection of the trauma that keeps them bound to the material world. Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins are both unable to comprehend that they are in fact dead, lingering on the material plane due to unfulfilled romantic desire, while Reverend Thomas stays behind out of a fear, having witnessed a surreal postmortem vision of judgement that he believes found him wanting and damned. When we are introduced to these three men, they have already been together for some time and have banded together in their grief. Their supernatural and intergenerational friendship is the central pillar of the ghostly community that forms over the course of the novel. Their unwillingness to pass on forms the backbone of their relationship, but it also arrests their spiritual development and twists their physical manifestations.

In fact, this interplay between personal tragedy and the comic absurdity of physical life opens the novel. Willie Lincoln arrives in the cemetery just in time to hear Hans Vollman recount the story of his death, a story that ends with Vollman describing how he wept "in that way that we have" after death and "pooped a bit while fresh, in my sick-box, out of rage" (6). Punctuating the drama of a ghost recounting the story of his death with a poop joke sets the tone for the novel's handling of the afterlife. This is not to say that the novel treats its subject with a lack of gravity, but acknowledgement of the absurd comedy of living and dying in a physical body goes hand-in-hand with the book's reverence for the dead. Vollman is further described by Willie (through evocative caesura) as manifesting nude with his "Member swollen to the size of Could not take my eyes off" (28).[46] Vollman's exaggerated

[46] In quoting *Lincoln in the Bardo*, I have inserted spaces to capture the blanks present in the original text.

physical appearance is the result of his preoccupation with his marriage that will remain forever unconsummated. For Saunders's ghosts death is no escape from the vulgar physicality of life, it is rather an intensification of it. Willie describes his own corpse as "Something… untoward below us… It had the face of a worm/A worm, I say! A worm the size of a boy Wearing my suit/Horrors." (Saunders 34). Again, the focus of the ghost story is inverted, as the ghost becomes the emotionally complex and horrified subject while the physical world becomes the object of unknowable horror.

When we first encounter them, the novels' three protagonists seem to be very different, they lived at different times, they died in different ways and at different ages, and they find themselves lingering after death for different reasons. Furthermore, as a form particularly suited to depicting the interiority of individuals, the novel does not encourage questioning why any specific individual is chosen to be the protagonist. The "protagonicity" of the protagonist is self-evident, it is lent to them and reinforced by the novel's focus on them. Thus, *Lincoln in the Bardo*'s centering of its three protagonists obscures the ways in which they are all alike, namely they are three relatively well-off white men. The whiteness of the novel's central cast is obvious, it is easy to imagine that men of their stature who received burials in a prestigious cemetery at this point in the country's history would have been white, but the racial implications of this are brought into stark relief by the late addition of Black characters to the novel. Unsurprsingly, the Oak Hill Cemetery was a segregated site. Established in 1849, the Oak Hill Cemetery effectively replaced the nearby and racially mixed Mt. Zion & Female Union Band Cemetery for wealthy White residents of the area ("Death of a Cemetery"). The Oak Hill Cemetery's fence is its de facto

racial boundary line, but for the white ghosts who reside in the Oak Hill Cemetery it has become a barrier that they believe they are incapable of crossing. The literal geography of the cemetery then comes to represent a psychic geography of the country. In the first half of the novel, we know that the ghosts who reside in the Oak Hill Cemetery are unable to leave its grounds. As readers, we have no reason to question that this is not just a belief, but a "physical law" for the ghosts. The novel performs this sleight-of-hand by taking advantage of the genre rules of the ghost story. In fiction, ghosts are traditionally defined by their limited agency, they can only haunt specific places or people and they can only react with the living in specific circumscribed ways, but the rules they must adhere to vary from work to work. In this way ghosts are a synecdoche for all facets of genre fiction, readers expect them to follow a set of rules, but each individual genre text is allowed some leeway to rewrite those rules. Here Saunders uses the formal conventions of the novel and genre fiction to set up and then expose reader expectations. I argue that by expanding the racial politics of the novel in this way, the novel encourages readers to interrogate their own relationship to unseen or unremarked upon racial dynamics, particularly in historical narrative. This shift encourages us to ask why some characters (or historical figures) are made into protagonists, while others are kept to the background or left out entirely.

This play with genre expectations allows the novel to drastically expand its historical imagination with the introduction of Black characters. The effect of this expanded scope is that the second half of the novel acts as an implicit commentary on the representational limits of the novel up to this point. Suddenly the whiteness of the central characters is revealed to be not just narrative happenstance, but a reflection of the racial dynamics of the cemetery and the society that built it. Similarly, the trauma

that binds the white characters to the physical world is informed by their race and social status. This does not trivialize their plots and emotional lives, but it places them in a broader historical context, allowing us to see them in a new light. What was formerly presented as the impartial narrative space of the novel is revealed to instead have been a historically situated white space. The Black characters in the novel follow similar rules of physical embodiment as the white characters, but with drastically different results. Where Vollman and Bevins are mourning the loss of potential love, the Black characters in the novel bear the physical and spiritual scars of their bondage and torture at the hands of white enslavers.

The novel's representation of the racial and class dynamics of the cemetery is not as simple as well-off white characters at odds with formerly enslaved Black characters. The formerly enslaved ghosts that appear in the novel represent the lowest rung of a strictly enforced hierarchy. Whether or not they actively seek to enforce this hierarchy, the white characters in the novel find themselves accomplices to it. Race first enters the novel in the form of the racist rantings of an enslaver, the Lieutenant Cecil Stone. When he appears, he bursts onto the scene of the novel ranting about his erstwhile power as a young man, which was inextricably bound to his rape and subjugation of the people he enslaved. Stone's objectification of those he oppresses is not just conscious, but a source of great pleasure, he brags that "many was the time I pounded my Lust out in the Night to good result… pounding my SHARDS whom I called SHARDS, for they were, indeed, dark as Night, like unto so many SHARDS OF COAL, which did give me abundant Heat" (Saunders 82). Stone's rantings about "shards" appear several times in the novel, Black people reduced to a natural resource, a reminder of the blatant instrumentalization of Black life in this period of American

history. As he rehearses his crimes, Reverend Thomas describes its effect on his physical form, which "would be swept upward into an elongate, vertical body-coiffe. His body-volume remaining constant, this increase in height would render him quite thin… tall as the tallest of our pines" (83). In this physical manifestation of Stone's psychology, he is stretched thinner and thinner as he grows taller, reduced to something inhuman as he maintains through his monologuing the dual institutions of slavery and white supremacy. Vollman and Bevins find Stone's ranting unpleasant, particularly with the young Willie Lincoln within earshot, but they are inured to its presence. Stone's vile racist invective is merely a fact of life.

The presence of Black characters in the ghostly ecology of the cemetery is first hinted at just after Stone's appearance. We learn from Vollman that the cemetery is not just haunted by those interred within its bounds, but also by the Barons, a white married couple that had been buried "in an unmarked disreputable common sick-pit just beyond the dreaded iron fence, the only white people therein, thrown in with several members of the dark race" (Saunders 87). The Barons are incredibly coarse in demeanor and are treated as another annoyance in the lives of the novel's protagonists. This creates an equivalence in the novel between the racist rantings of Stone and the uncouth behavior of the Barons. The effect of this is that the primary voice of the novel is the non-slave owning white upper-class propriety of Vollman, Bevins, and Thomas. From this perspective, it becomes clear that what is most off-putting about Stone and the Barons is that they make visible the gross inequities present in the cemetery, and thus all of American society at the time. I would argue that Saunders's choice to center this aspect of antebellum America at the time he is writing *Lincoln in the Bardo* can be read as a critique of the myth of a postrace America. In postrace

America and the antebellum America of the novel, "polite" American society is less concerned with ending inequity than it is with not being *reminded* of it.

It is in this context that Black Americans finally make an appearance in the novel, not simply as a reminder of inequity, but as a fully human and spiritual force that disrupts the trajectory of the novel. As Black characters appear for the first time this late in the novel, a reader would be forgiven for thinking that Saunders had simply chosen not to represent Black characters at all. This decision would make some sense in a literary landscape that, as Mark McGurl has demonstrated, places an outsized emphasis on authors that represent their authentic experience in their work. American fiction concerned with race exists most often within a genre that McGurl calls high cultural pluralism, a genre in which every voice is represented by authors that can inhabit it themselves. Not coincidentally, white authors don't write high cultural pluralism, but instead are non-raced subjects that produce what McGurl calls Technomodernism or Lower-Middle-Class Modernism.[47] Whiteness in this system is figured as "a paradoxically ethnic non-ethnicity" (McGurl 63). Saunders is writing in a period after that discussed in McGurl's *Program Era*, but one that is still clearly feeling its influence. For American authors of the twenty-first century, historical fiction must address race if it is to be, in fact, historical. Beyond this, any work of fiction that aspires to political or social commentary without addressing race would be

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[47] For more on McGurl's three genres of American modernist fiction see the introduction to *The Program Era* (McGurl 37–69). According to McGurl, "High cultural pluralism enacts a layering of positively marked differences… The high cultural pluralist writer is additionally called upon to speak from the point of view of one or another hyphenated population, synthesizing the particularity of ethnic—or analogously marked—voice with the elevated idiom of literary modernism (McGurl 57).

incomplete at best. I argue that historical fiction complicates the representational schema of high cultural pluralism, by requiring the representation of characters with no "authentic" representatives in contemporary society. We might say that historical fiction "problematizes" the possibility of authentic representation, showing that all representation is at least partially constructed through narrative.

Lincoln in the Bardo's polyphonic (but entirely) white perspective up to this point seems to be a solution to the problem of racial representation by a white author. Saunders is able to represent multiple white perspectives and address the horrors of slavery through the white supremacist rantings of Lieutenant Stone. The late inclusion of Black characters disrupts this representational scheme. This disruption of the novel's racial dynamic is mirrored by the ease with which the novel's Black characters break the "rules" of the afterlife that the white characters in the novel had previously stated as material facts. It is the Black characters in the novel that are not held back by the seemingly supernatural power that keeps the white residents of the cemetery bound within its wrought iron fence. The boundary is revealed to be created and policed by the cemetery's white residents, rather than a fact of the world. As pointed out above, when we read narratives of the supernatural, we expect rules to be established regarding their behavior, when the racial segregation of the cemetery is introduced, this expectation might lead readers to believe it is a fact of the world rather than a belief of the characters. In this way, genre rules resemble ideology. This upheaval of reader expectations, enhanced by genre reading habits, demonstrates one way that genre can be used as a tool to work on rework existing historical narrative. By breaking genre rules, Saunders renders them legible to readers. I argue that his approach to historical dogma works similarly.

The Black characters in the novel ultimately help Willie to see the necessity of passing on. They work in concert with the white ghosts of the cemetery as they come together for this goal. This represents a glimmer of racial utopian possibility in Saunders's afterlife, but it is hard fought and fleeting. *Lincoln in the Bardo* ends with the decision of Thomas Havens, one of the Black ghosts, to stay with Lincoln. Havens occupies Lincoln and rides with him out of the cemetery and back to the White House and the war effort, showing again that it was always possible to break the genre rules of the novel. On its surface, this is a subtle, but vital, adjustment to the Lincoln myth. Rather than the "Great Emancipator" that we encounter already carved out of marble and immutable, Lincoln becomes instead a man whose position on slavery evolved over time.[48] Havens describes Lincoln as someone who "in examining his aversion [to Black people] had somewhat, already, eroded it. He was an open book. An opening book" (Saunders 312). The literary metaphor here is telling, at his moment of possession by an outside consciousness, he can be "read" by Havens. Havens works like the author of historical fiction on Lincoln, finding within him something that doesn't make into the historical record, his internal thought. We might see Havens's act as a refusal to pass on, but it is perhaps more accurately described as passing on in another way. Like those who moved on through the matterlightblooming phenomenon, Havens has transcended his connection to his deceased physical body. While many of the other ghosts in the cemetery have belatedly shuffled off their postmortal coil, Havens has similarly transcended to a new state of being. While possessing Lincoln,

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[48] This rendering of Lincoln is in line with current historiography on Lincoln and his presidency. For more on Lincoln's personal politics on slavery see Eric Foner's book, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*.

Havens attempts to impart him with the experiences of the other formerly enslaved people that he shared the pit with, stressing:

> all the things that they had endured, thinking, Sir, if you are as powerful as I feel that you are, and as inclined toward us as you seem to be, endeavor to *do* something for us, so that we might do something for ourselves. We are ready, sir; are angry, are capable, our hopes are coiled up so tight as to be deadly, or holy: turn us loose, sir, let us at it, let us show what we can do. (312)

There's a powerful redirection of agency here away from Lincoln and towards the Black population of the United States. This appears to be a fictionalization (and weirding) of Lincoln's apparent "evolution" on race over the course of his political career. Foner describes this change in Lincoln's thinking as one that happened through "Lincoln's encounters with talented, politically active black men and women seemed to soften the prejudices with which he had grown up" (257). By writing a Weird History of a real, but rather abstract historical phenomenon, the novel takes this reassignment of agency even further than Foner is able to in his traditional history of Lincoln's relationship to slavery.

In its conclusion, *Lincoln in the Bardo* points us towards the broader geography of the United States through Havens's reclamation of agency, his haunting unfurls a map of the United States. By ending on Lincoln at this moment in his career and in the war, the novel returns some of the sense of unknowability of the future that has been lost when these events are simply recounted as history. That said, Havens's work is still not done 150 years and many presidents later and ending the story here risks reifying the postracial myth. Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which centers on the way that the carceral state has impacted three generations of one family

in coastal Mississippi, recounts a much grander history of the ways that slavery and its legacies continue to haunt the American present.

Jesmyn Ward's haunted road novel published in the same year, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was published in the same year as Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* and presents another Weird History of race, racism, and incarceration in the United States in the wake of slavery. If in *Lincoln in the Bardo* Saunders seeks to move on from the limits of a white authorial perspective in a "postracial" United States, Jesmyn Ward approaches a similar topic from a different viewpoint. Ward writes her Weird History through the intersection of her own Black, Native, Creole, and Southern identities. While the differences (or lack thereof) between regional Southern United States authors and national authors is beyond the scope of this chapter, I aim to bring together Ward's and Saunders's use of the ghost story in contemporary American fiction to show that they both engage in a national conversation about the extent to which we are capable of "moving on" from the ghosts of the past.[49] Where Saunders's novel depicts an allegory of the national mood during a low point in the Civil War, Ward brings the perspective of historical fiction to the near-present as she looks at the decades-long effects of incarceration on multiple generations of a single family.

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[49] While I'll be focusing on Ward's depictions of race in a national rather than regional context, Ward's status as a torchbearer for Southern writers is undeniable. Her work has been explored as part of a wave of new regional Southern fiction by scholars like Michael P. Bibler and Christopher W. Clark. In their essay "'Saving the Life That is Your Own': Southern Women Writers' Great Migrations," Keira V. Williams and Natalie Nelson explore Jesmyn Ward how Jesmyn Ward's life has been characterized by a series of exoduses and returns to the American South, writing that she is "perhaps the foremost southern writer of this century" (116).

Sing, Unburied, Sing is the third entry in a loose trilogy of novels that take place in a setting that intertwines real historical events with Ward's lightly fictionalized version of the geography of the American South centering on the fictional coastal Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage. This interconnected fictional universe has drawn countless comparisons between Ward and Faulkner, which is surely one of the factors that contributes to Ward's persistent reputation as a Southern author.[50] While the comparison to Faulkner risks flattening Ward's fiction to a second coming of American regionalism, the comparison does help to illuminate Ward's use of the past in her fiction. Readers of Ward's fiction might be surprised to find her work analyzed in a project on historical fiction. All three of her novels take place in a recognizable present that is not dissimilar to what David Foster Wallace sardonically named the "Platonic Always," the pseudo-timeless present of much contemporary literary fiction (167). But if we scratch the surface of Ward's fictions we can see that actually take place in highly specific historical moments. In fact, the plots of both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and its lauded 2011 predecessor Salvage the Bones are precipitated by widely publicized historical events, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Hurricane Katrina, respectively.

The effect of this historical-situatedness is that Ward's fictions fight back against the notion that any story can take place in what David Foster Wallace calls the "Platonic Always" of contemporary fiction. Furthermore, it reveals the idea of an

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[50] This comparison comes up so often in interviews with Ward that it has become a recognized cliché, in an interview with Ward, Danille K. Taylor begins by pointing this out and reframing Ward's work in relation to Black authors stating, "You've been asked about the influence of William Faulkner on your work but I'd like for you to discuss the influence of African American writers on your writing." (267)

unchanging and universally recognizable present is an anti-historical impulse that reifies the status quo of the cultural moment in which it is produced. While Wallace saw the preference for the "Platonic Always" as a hallmark of a generational divide, it is also the revanchist position of those cultural figures that see the great books curriculum as a bulwark of Western civilization, i.e. whiteness. Rather than occupying an undefined literary present, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* could be said to most accurately exist in the ascendant subgenre of historical fiction that Alexander Manshel has dubbed the recent historical novel.[51] Manshel argues that recent historical fiction, is characterized by how it occupies "a historiographical middle distance between event and period, specific date and stylized decade: after Kent State, but before 'the Seventies'" (*Rise of the Recent Historical Novel*). Neither nostalgic, nor ironic in the vein of postmodernism, he argues that the recent historical novel is concerned with capturing a historical moment in which "catastrophe accumulates and fades almost instantly." While Manshel is certainly correct to point out that this new strain of historical fiction represents a shift away from some of the concerns of high postmodernism, I would argue that it also represents an evolution of postmodern techniques. The comparable uses of the ghost story to connect the past and the present in Ward's recent historical novels and Saunders's novel of the Civil War United States shows that genre play connects a broad swath of contemporary American historical fiction.

The ghostly figures in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* serve to connect the novel's present with various pasts. As in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the ghosts in Ward's novel

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[51] Manshel specifically cites *Salvage the Bones* as an example in his essay on the recent historical novel.

create a historical flattening in which the past and the present can exist simultaneously. But unlike Saunders's novel, the dead and living characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are given equal narratorial weight. The novel has three perspective characters, first switching each chapter between the first person perspective of its two living protagonists, Jojo and his young mother Leonie, before adding a third perspective character Richie, a young boy who died decades ago as a prisoner at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, or Parchman Farm as it is called by characters in the novel. Parchman Farm, or rather the American carceral state and the intergenerational trauma that it continues to inflict, operates as the narrative center of the novel. This concern with the carceral state and how it picks up where slavery left off in the United States's history of coerced labor places the novel within a broad canon of literature that Marc Lamont Hill calls "confinement literature." Hill's work brings together works concerned with slavery, political imprisonment, and "personal confinement" with the goal of creating an abolitionist canon that can be "a site of possibility for reimagining the role, purpose, and function of prisons in our society" (19). Hill's goals are actually very similar to those of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as both work to bring together disparate aspects of American confinement. Hill's work is explicitly pedagogical, but Ward's texts carries with it the implicit pedagogical function of all historical fiction.

Despite its main action only taking place over the course of a handful of days, the scope of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is massive. It explores three generations of a Black family in Southern Mississippi and touches on the longue durée of their ancestors,

beginning with the middle passage.[52] The plot of the novel follows thirteen-year-old Jojo, his younger sister Kayla, and their estranged addict mother Leonie as they travel from their home in Bois Sauvage to Parchman and back to bring home Jojo and Kayla's father Michael, who has just begun his parole. Leonie is haunted by the ghost of her brother Given, who was murdered by Michael's cousin in an act of racist hatred and jealousy. Interwoven with this story, first from Jojo's memory of stories told to him by his grandfather River or Pop, and later from Richie himself, is the story of Pop and Richie's time together at Parchman. When Jojo and company pick up Michael from Parchman, they also pick up Richie's ghost whose spirit has been unable to move on after his untimely death at Parchman. When Richie and Pop were both inmates at Parchman, Pop was forced to hunt him down with dogs as he escaped from the prison, ultimately finding and killing him out of mercy before he could be found and tortured as punishment for his escape. Richie's incarceration, first when he was alive and then later as a ghost bound to the grounds of Parchman, serves as an echo in two temporal directions of the horrors of slavery. First the techniques of enslavement and forced labor recur in Richie's own experience of incarceration and second, the trauma of killing Richie echoes through Pop's life and the lives of his children and grandchildren.

The addition of ghosts to the multigenerational historical novel allows Ward to effectively juggle between the novel's epic temporal scope and constrained plot action. The action of the novel takes place over a handful of days, but the ghosts of long dead characters are able to appear, narrate their experiences, and act upon the

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[52] For another example of the multigenerational family saga in Weird History, see the discussion of Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* in chapter four.

living. Ward uses this flattened temporality to stage explicit confrontations between the dead and the living in her novel. While the novel juggles between perspective characters, Jojo is its effective protagonist. He represents both the legacy of his family's relationship to the supernatural and the ways in which that relationship has been disrupted by intergenerational trauma. The supernatural elements of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are syncretic, and reflect the cultural identities of its characters. Jojo's maternal grandmother and Pop's wife, Philomene or Mam, is the holder of supernatural knowledge in the text. She works as a healer, developing poultices and healing teas for members of the community, and as a dispenser of religious and supernatural knowledge, two roles that she sees as deeply connected. Mam's religious practice is syncretic and inclusive. When Leonie shares with Mam that she is able to intuitively understand the healing properties of herbs as though they are speaking to her, Mam prays to "the Mothers, to Mami Wata and to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, that [Leonie] would live long enough to see whatever it was [she] was meant to see'"(*Sing, Unburied, Sing* 38). In Mam's religious practice, personal supernatural experience and Christian and African diasporic religious figures come together to form a syncretic whole. Mam has attempted to pass this knowledge and practice on to her daughter Leonie and her grandson Jojo, but Leonie rejected her teaching out of a teenage rebellion that led to her relationship with Michael and culminated in her pregnancy with Jojo. By the time Leonie and Jojo were ready to listen, Mam was too sick with cancer to pass on the bulk of her experience. This breakdown of intergenerational transmission of knowledge is one of the themes that runs throughout the novel. Mam was able to pass on her supernatural gifts to her children and grandchildren, all of whom contact the spirits of nature and the dead in different ways,

but the aspects of these skills that must be taught rather than inherited have only been passed on partially. Again, the question of what gets "passed on" holds multiple meanings. There is a connection to be drawn here between the inheritance of history and the inheritance of a narrative for understanding and living with that history.

The problem of what does and doesn't get passed on in the United States is one that recurs throughout Ward's work. Specifically, cultural syncretism and racial identity in the South has been a topic of both Ward's fiction and non-fiction writing. In an essay written for the collection she edited on race published in the wake of Trayvon Martin's shooting, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race,* Ward explores her own complicated racial and cultural identity. The short essay centers on Ward and her parents using a mail order DNA test to find out more about the parts of her family history that elude archival records, namely her non-white ancestry. Ward writes that:

> it was discomfiting to find that my ancestry was 40 percent European… For a few days after I received my results I looked into the mirror and didn't know how to understand myself. I tried to understand my heritage through my features, to assign each one a place, but I couldn't (*The Fire This Time* 93–94).

Ward concludes the essay by reconciling her new knowledge of her racial heritage with a single Black identity, writing "I remembered that people of color from my region of the United States can choose to embrace all aspects of their ancestry… while also choosing to war in one armor, that of black Americans" (94). The DNA test operates as an imperfect surrogate archive for Ward and her family, filling in the family history that was erased or simply never recorded in an official capacity. I quote Ward's essay at length here not because I think that it explains every aspect of her fiction, but rather to show that both her non-fictional and fictional writing seek to

work through the problem of relating a complex local history to a broader national history of race that all too often dramatically oversimplifies or works explicitly to forget that history.

This history plays out at the level of the plot of the novel, but it also plays out through the novel's complex symbolic economy. In this system of representation, supernatural and religious encounters operate both literally and symbolically. All of nature plays a role in the novel's symbolic economy, with humans, animals, and water all taking on major roles. The symbolic weight of many of the novels supernatural elements might suggest in a different work that the supernatural exists on *only* a symbolic level, but as a work of historical fiction, Ward is able to entertain both options simultaneously. This is another example of McClure's "weakened" religiosity, but it finds that "weakness" not in a new more spiritually inclusive liberalism, but in the spiritual traditions of people of color. To give just one example, Mami Wata appears in the text as one of the religious figures that Mam prays to and as an element of the novel's symbolic use of water throughout. Richie refers to passing on to the afterlife as "cross[ing] the waters" and joining "The song… A great record. The lives. Of the living. Of those beyond… Beyond the waters" (*Sing, Unburied, Sing* 281). The journey to the afterlife here is figured as an echo or even a reversal of the Middle Passage. The "great record" is reminiscent of the way that Mam and her children experience the voices of spirits, but it is also a symbol of history. When Richie first encounters Jojo, he remarks that "There are so many stories I could tell him. The story of me and Parchman, as River told it, is a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased. I could patch those holes" (137). Despite this feeling of an incomplete record that he can fill in, Richie finds himself

unable to bridge that gap, unable to reach out to Jojo and later, unable to pass on to the afterlife.

When Richie's ghost first enters the novel, he is still bound to the place of his death, the yard around the Parchman prison complex. Kayla is the first to see Richie, seeing him as a bird in the Parchman fields. Alternatively, Jojo sees the ghostly figures of "men bent at the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground" (*Sing, Unburied, Sing* 125). The ghost-image of the laborers, like so much of the haunting in Ward's novel is multivalent. The image of the murder of crows evokes the specter of unjust death and the connections between human and animal life in Ward's work. Richie is literally among the "birds," but the image is also evocative of the long history of plantation slavery in the South. The metaphorical and the literal overlap in this ghostly image and throughout the novel. Richie takes the arrival of Jojo and his family as an opportunity to finally leave the grounds of the prison, and the novel shifts to his perspective for the first time. Richie's first chapter recounts his experience of his death and the afterlife, where he is given the opportunity by a spirit that appears sometimes as a snake and sometimes as a scaly black bird to move on, but decides instead to stay behind and remember. This decision is prompted by Richie's memory of Pop:

> I remembered the man's name: River Red. And then I fell, dove into the dirt, and it parted like a wave. I burrowed in tight. Needing to be held by the dark hand of the earth. To be blind to the men above. To memory. It came anyway. I was no more and then I was again. (136)

I use the word decision here, but whose agency is being exerted in this moment is unclear. The bird spirit is reminiscent of several religious traditions, but its exact motives are vague. Like the "angels" in Saunders's novel, it seems to be invested in

insuring that Richie can "move on," but the presence of his traumatic memories keep Richie bound to the earth "where I was worked" (136). Richie becomes a feature of the landscape where he was imprisoned and ultimately killed.

What exactly is binding Richie to the realm of the living is unclear and so is his ultimate fate. The genre conventions of the ghost story suggest that he must "move on," perhaps with the help of Jojo and Kayla, but the novel ultimately forecloses this possibility. Just as in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the expectations created by genre are first fed and then subverted. When Jojo and his family arrive, Richie is awoken by the spirit bird and encouraged to travel with them, joining the road trip at the center of the novel. At the novel's close, Richie has followed Jojo back to Mam and Pop's house, but as Pop doesn't have the gift of awareness of spirits, there is no confrontation between the two men. Instead, the novel shifts focus to Mam as she dies. In the novel's penultimate chapter, Leonie finds herself performing a ritual, not to exorcise Richie, but to ensure the peaceful passage of Mam to the next life. Mam specifically recruits Leonie for this task, despite the fact that she has not internalized the knowledge that Mam attempted to pass down to her. As Mam is dying, she knows that Leonie's imperfect memory will have to do. The ritual at the end of Mam's life acts as a kind of pre-emptive exorcism, the goal is to prevent the creation of another ghost rather than to help the ghosts that already haunt us.

For his part, Richie ends the novel still unable to move on. He instead joins a community of ghosts that have taken up residence in a tree outside of Mam and Pap's house whose "branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves" (*Sing, Unburied, Sing* 282). That the ghosts have taken up residence in a tree is resonant with a long history of lynching in the United

States. Thousands of such trees must exist, unwitting homes of the ghosts of America's colonial violence. This ending reframes Richie's haunting. Perhaps, it suggests, there was never a possibility for Richie to move on. Perhaps, some events are simply too traumatic, some ghosts too stuck in history.

Even if such a thing were desirable, what the last five years have made abundantly clear is that the United States is not ready to "pass on" from its past. Indeed, the desire to leave the past in the past has been revealed as a regressive desire to forget the tragedies that have shaped our present. What both of these novels show is that history is always haunting us, whether we are willing to acknowledge that history or not. The prospect of any single individual moving on is determined in these novels by their personal histories, but also by their context in the history of the United States. That history is something that must be passed on as well. So, the work of passing on history that these novels do is done in the writing, and perhaps more importantly, in the reading. It is in this way that the novels seek to make their small additions to the broad tapestry of American historiography and history pedagogy.

That Ward and Saunders's novels both end on an inversion of reader expectations towards the work that must still be done is surely no accident. Ward and Saunders are not seeking merely to inform or educate, but to spur on action. These novels were written at a time of great social upheaval and renewed activism, a time that we are still living through. This puts them in line with recent schools of historiographic thought that recognize that history is always situated, always written in a specific time and place. Weird History seeks not just to have an effect on how we understand history, but to change the fate of those who are still living. In the next chapter, I'll turn to two novels that also examine the continued role of race and racism

in the United States, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*. Where *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* made history weird through the introduction of ghosts that flattened traditional temporalities, Chabon and Ruff's novels seek to re-examine the role of pulp fiction in the cultural history of the United States, both for its writers and its readers, to show that the supposedly "low" genre production of the past can teach us about history in the present that aren't available through traditional archival sources.

Chapter 2

PRESTIGE PULP: MICHAEL CHABON AND MATT RUFF'S HISTORICAL FAN FICTIONS

In the last chapter, I looked at two novels that create Weird History by mixing the longstanding genre impulse of the ghost story with contemporary historical fiction. In this chapter I look at two novels that mix historical fiction with both the tropes of pulp fiction and the cultural history of its writing and reception, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*. I argue that these novels purposefully turn to one of the "lowest" avenues of American cultural production, pulp publishing, to show that genre fiction at every level of prestige is always historical fiction in the sense that it offers readers in our contemporary moment an opportunity to read for the historical evolution of genre and how genre fiction responds to the historical moment in which it was written. Additionally, genre fiction is always metafictional in that it contains residues of the genre work that came before it, and when it is read after the moment of its original publication, the weight of the genre work that followed. The combined result of this is that genre fiction and its cultural history contain an alternate, or weird, archive of the past.

The midcentury United States that both novels explore is a formative moment in contemporary histories of the country and almost one hundred years later, we are still living in its legacy. The entrance of the United States into the Second World War on December 7th, 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor is perhaps the singularly

most decisive moment in the history of the 20th century. It is certainly a moment that looms large in the American historical imagination. Despite the inflammatory political battle over whether to enter the war prior to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attack made an American entrance all but inevitable. This feeling of inevitability has only grown in the decades since. The United States's role in the war, its decisive presence on the morally right side of the Allied nations, is a cornerstone of American history. While the war caused untold death and destruction, including the deaths of many American soldiers, fighting never reached American shores. The great social upheaval on the American Homefront and the general disarray of a war-torn Europe gave the United States an unprecedented opportunity to reinvent itself and take the mantle of world power away from a Europe left in tatters. Capturing this mood of national possibility, David M. Kennedy writes that:

> "Americans had been fortunate in the war, singularly fortunate in a world that inflicted unspeakable punishments on so many millions of others. But good fortune could be the father of innocence, and the world the war was making would be no place for the innocent, no matter how much of it they seemed poised to inherit" (797).

America's simultaneous moral victory and global economic ascendancy set the stage for the instantiation of American exceptionalism that persists to this day. The legacy of this victory is a curdled nationalism that the two works I examine in this chapter seek to deconstruct.

Just as America was taking the lead role on the world stage, the pulpwood magazine was taking its final bow. For almost three decades, the pulps were the undisputed kings of popular literature with the most popular titles reaching distribution numbers of one hundred thousand copies a month and beyond at their height in the 1920s (Reynolds 200). These magazines often featured titles that baldly advertised the

genre of content within like *Detective Story Magazine*, *Spicy Mystery Stories*, or *Weird Tales*. In addition to their openly generic offerings, they were unabashedly populist, they promised explosive plots, suave heroes, and snarling villains in the price range of a nickel to a quarter. Offering a wide range of formats, from short stories to serialized novels, the pulps put a deluge of fiction into the hands a relatively new sector of the American reading public, the working class. This makes the pulps a rich vein for cultural criticism. On their surface they are apolitical genre stories, looking to provide a little disposable escapism at a cheap price. But their splashy surfaces belie a hidden depth. Written at a clip by authors paid by the word, the pulps thrive on stereotypical plots and stock characters, providing a window into the genre expectations of midcentury Americans. When a reader cracked an issue of *Detective Story Magazine*, they were hoping to find just that, detective stories. What that meant exactly might change over the course of a magazine's publication, but the genre promise is clear to readers. This chapter looks at two works that explore the productive tension between the escapist offerings of the pulps and the turbulent political and social milieu of the midcentury United States that birthed them. Re-working the canon of pulp publishing allows these novels to re-examine the metanarrative of an ascendant United States in the midcentury. Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* are two novels that participate in the genre I'm calling new pulp, a group of work's published in the afterlife of the original pulpwood magazines that recycle and reshape pulp aesthetics.

While the original pulpwood magazines were home to a host of different genres, new pulp reimagines this material as a nostalgic whole. This new pulp genre reinforces and recirculates pulp's characteristics long after the death of pulpwood

magazines. New pulps are often written by a generation of authors that encountered them first or secondhand and are part of the white male audience that the pulps originally catered to. These new works run the gamut from loving homage to mocking parody, but they all work to keep the pulp alive in the popular imagination. See for example Stephen King's new novels written for the pulp reprint imprint Hard Case Crime, Charles Bukowski's *Pulp*, or perhaps most importantly, Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film, *Pulp Fiction*. But just as they re-circulate pulp sensibilities, these works also nostalgically imagine it as a coherent cultural object, the category of pulp becoming a palimpsest of the original magazines themselves and their various re-interpretations since the 1950s. When Stephen King, arguably the most influential contemporary American writer and definitely at times the most profitable, writes a new self-declared pulp novel, he creates new pulp readers as the category is reinforced for those who encountered it originally.[53] While some of the works under the broad new pulp umbrella do seek to emulate pulp genres in tone, style, and content, here I will focus on how new pulps weave pulp sensibilities into historical fiction to create a new hybrid sensibility. These works are weird histories that use pulp as an entry point to inserting popular cultural history back into broader narratives of American history. Looking to how these works use pulp to interrogate historical narrative will give us a

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[53] Angela S. Allan has argued that throughout his career Stephen King has used genre as a refuge from his status as a literary celebrity, writing that he "paradoxically embraces accusations of genre as corporate form—by imagining genre itself as an alternative, independent corporation he might work for, driven by different goals than those of his publishers" (12). In this light, we can see that Stephen King's relationship to genre is less dissimilar to the authors of the genre turn than one might assume. Both King and the generally more prestigious authors of the genre turn seek to contribute to an idea of genre fiction beyond a crass commercialism.

better grasp of the political and historiographic possibilities offered by genre in contemporary fiction after postmodernism and allow us to think through how literary history is constructed within fiction itself.

Re-writing the legacy of the pulps is a double-edged sword. While the idea of a nationally-circulated fiction magazine catering to a working-class audience might strike a modern-day reader as almost utopian, for all their populist appeal the pulps were marketed almost exclusively to white working-class men.[54] This is not to say that the pulps weren't read by other groups, they were after all readily available to any reader with access to a newsstand, but the pulps actively addressed themselves to a white male readership. When other audiences were attracted, it was often only by accident. In his book *Black Pulp: Genre Fiction in the Shadow of Jim Crow*, Brooks

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[54] Romance pulps are the obvious exception that proves this rule. As Quentin Reynolds writes in his history of the prolific pulp publisher Street & Smith, which boasted a number of romance titles, *Love Story Magazine* catered to an audience "that straight old-fashioned romance… [and became] the most valuable Street & Smith property (it even prospered during the depression years of the early 1930s)"(198–99). In her essay "Birth of the Girlie Pulps," Beau Collier details how "spicy" or "girlie" pulps evolved from thin excuses to get smut past censors under the cover of art, like *Artists and Models Magazine*, into magazines that were edited and written primarily by women and featured "romantic screwball comedies… while letter columns indicate, at least partly, a female readership." The popularity of Romance or girlie pulps simultaneously demonstrates an audience for fiction that didn't cater exclusively to men and the dominance of male interests in the market. The only genre of pulpwood magazines that catered to women were romance or "love" books, while men could choose from a plethora of options. Erin A. Smith demonstrates in her book *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* that the perception of pulpwood magazine readers as primarily white, male, and working class, was read by their contemporary reading public and their publishers. She writes that, "Although Harold Hersey, a publisher of pulps, claimed that his readers came from all walks of life, he conceded that the majority were probably office or factory girls, soldiers, sailors, miners, dockworkers, ranchers, and others who worked with their hands… Hersey reported that the largest volume of sales was in the Midwest" (Smith 23).

E. Hefner tracks how the pulps were so thoroughly segregated that pulp fiction by and for Black Americans was forced to seek alternative routes of publication, finding a home in the pages of Black newspapers like the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. As Hefner explains, even during the explosion of pulpwood magazines, "the only pulp magazine to engage significantly with African American representation was Harlem Stories, which survived for two issues in 1932… [but] Even Harlem Stories, a magazine seemingly devoted to depictions of African American life framed its subject matter from a white point of view" (*Black Pulp* 3).[55] This initial appeal to a white male readership lives on in the new pulp genre as it remains dominated by white male authors, even as some of them seek to use the genre to question tired historical tropes.

What *Kavalier & Clay* and *Lovecraft Country* share is an implicit argument that pulp fiction, and by extension all genre fiction, is historical fiction. By that I mean that they encourage readers to view genre fiction as a constantly churning historical archive, always incorporating the feelings of the time in which it was written and the

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[55] In his book *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground*, Kinohi Nishikawa tracks the development of what he calls "black pulp" through the history of publisher Holloway House. As it transitions from publishing white genre fare to "pulp fiction by black readers… By 1973, they [the white owners of Holloway House] had effectively turned Holloway House into a publisher of black-oriented fare, phasing out most of its white-authored pulp while releasing scores of books by authors who, rather than appeal to the white gaze, wrote crime, action, and adventure novels for men like themselves" (Nishikawa 5). The timeline here is telling, Nishikawa is using "pulp" here in the broader sense, referring to magazines and paperback books published after the death knell of pulpwood publishing. Nishikawa's use of the term serves as an example of the broad umbrella of "pulp" in today's culture and just how long it took for a publishing industry dominated by white men and white readers to cater to Black Americans.

rich history of the genre that it exists within. For Chabon, Superman is not just an escapist fantasy, but specifically an escapist fantasy created by young Jews in the late 1930s facing the particular impotency of bystanders in the face of Hitler's takeover of Germany. And in addition to this, Superman contains within him the history of Adventure pulp and newspaper strip heroes that came before him. Each instance of genre fiction is synecdoche, every thread is also the entire tapestry. This dual contextualization of pulp within a media and national history appears in both novels and it shows the dedication of these works to expanding the notions of what genre fiction can do. In addition to making arguments about specific texts and histories, these novels teach a way of reading genre fiction as history.

Disposable in its very materiality, pulp fiction makes great fertilizer for Chabon and Ruff's broader genre reclamation projects. There are many reasons for this. First, as Brooks E. Hefner has argued, pulp magazines faced with a booming market and ever-increasing marketplace competition, were sites of generic experimentation. Pulpwood magazines "refined and created genres in a way that radically altered the history of American genre" ("Pulp Magazines" 436). Hefner tracks the development of genre in pulp magazines from the all-genre publications of the early 1920s to an extreme generic specificity that developed by the end of the decade.[56] So while pulpwood magazines are best known for single genre publications,

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[56] Hefner tracks one famous example, *Black Mask*, which began its life as a multi-genre publication, then transitioned to all detective fiction, and ultimately became the home of exclusively hardboiled detective fiction, a genre that began its life between *Black Mask*'s covers ("Pulp Magazines" 442). David Earle follows publisher Street & Smith's output from just four genre magazines in the 20s to a much wider array of more specific genre offerings as "the magazines adapted to changing reading trends and the public's craving for specific types of fiction." (202)

the pulpwood magazine actually began its life as a genre melting pot not entirely dissimilar from the connotation that pulp fiction holds today. Secondly, pulp fiction still stands as the ultimate example of all that is maligned in "popular" fiction. If genre fiction is low-rent and populist, then we could think of pulp fiction as genre fiction concentrate. Combining the populist sensibility and overlooked historical importance of the pulps, Chabon and Ruff are able to take a highbrow approach to lowbrow culture, writing new works that take genre fictions seriously, but aren't seeking to merely imitate them. These new works weave together earnest homage and cultural-historical analysis into new hybrid literary histories.

In this new literary history, the role of the author and reader are recast as fans, blurring the line between cultural producer and consumer. The fan is no longer only a consumer, but a caretaker of cultural knowledge just like their favorite authors. Michael Chabon makes a compelling figurehead for this movement, a position he has gone to great lengths to cultivate for himself both inside and outside of his fiction. Chabon opens his collection of essays on literature, *Maps and Legends*, with a lengthy epigraph quoting Herman Melville's account of beginning to see himself as a member of a "fraternity" of whalers as he researched the topic for *Moby-Dick*. Chabon attributes this quote to "—Herman Melville, on the writing of fan fiction" (*Maps and Legends*).[57] This half tongue-in-cheek attribution is demonstrative of Chabon's particular blend of allegiance to both "high" and "low" cultural artifacts, calling

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[57] Epigraphs that blur the line between high and low culture are in fact something of a calling card for Chabon, Shakespeare, Borges, and Ishmael Reed have all appeared as epigraphs to Chabon's fiction. *Kavalier & Clay* has two epigraphs, one from Nathaniel Hawthorne and the other from Will Eisner.

Moby-Dick fan fiction is not just a flattening of the cultural hierarchy, but a re-writing of literary history that claims Melville's enthusiasm for his subject as a precursor to today's fannish enthusiasm, while simultaneously claiming membership in the rarefied club of "Great American Novelists." In the collection's opening essay, Chabon further blurs the line between prestige author and fan when he argues that:

> In spite of the continuing disdain or neglect in which most of the 'nonliterary' genres are held… many if not most of the most-interesting writers of the past seventy-five years or so have like [the mythical figure of the] Trickster, found themselves drawn inexorably, to the borderlands [between genres]… These great writers have not written science fiction or fantasy, horror or westerns… But they have drawn immense power from and provided considerable pleasure for readers through play, through the peculiar commingling of mockery and tribute, invocation and analysis, considered rejection and passionate embrace (*Maps and Legends* 24–25).

Published in 2008, after the runaway success of Kavalier & Clay in 2005, this essay implicitly places the novel within a genealogy of prestigious authors that play along the borders of genre. Ruff's work also exists in this new middle ground between genre fiction and literature, the unattributed "About the Author" section in *Lovecraft Country*'s backmatter describes Ruff as "follow[ing] his inspiration wherever it led him, Ruff gradually acquired a reputation as someone who—to the delight of his readers, and the chagrin of his publicists—never wrote in the same genre twice" ("P.S." 2). Here Ruff's "unmarketability" is made into a selling point, he does not merely write in one genre, but can produce fiction in multiple. This signals that he is above traditional genre fare, but still recognizably writes within those genres. The similarity of language in publisher's copy on Ruff and Chabon's own musings is striking and shows how this cohort of authors has cohered into a recognizable (and marketable) group.

In this new model of fandom, the fan is a kind of amateur archivist, the keeper of prodigious cultural knowledge that can be tapped to productive ends. Both Chabon and Ruff position themselves as fans of the genres that they write within. This signaling occurs both inside and outside of the text, a performance of genre knowledge that shows them to be members of fan communities. This vision of the fan is something of a mix of transhistorical identification, Chabon and Ruff look back at the fans of genre fiction and see themselves, and also an attempt to fill in the gaps when it comes to the history of pulp fiction. In this chapter, I'll look at how both rewrite American history and literary history from this perspective. In *Kavalier & Clay*, the narrator often speaks from the position of media historian, taking on the tone and style of a popular history. Chabon's novel is interested in the slow evolution of generic forms, tracing how those forms converge in the figures of his fictionalized versions of the founding fathers of the American comic book industry. *Kavalier & Clay*'s history takes on some of the genealogical and documentary approach that has come to animate contemporary internet fan culture. Chabon's characters find themselves unwittingly mirroring the pulp plots that they create, making a case for the intertwined nature of cultural production and historical situatedness.

In *Lovecraft Country*, Matt Ruff brings a much more critical approach to the cultural objects at the center of his Weird History. Lovecraft Country takes a position that we might call ideology critique as it unveils the horror of racism at the heart of genre fiction and consequently, American culture. *Lovecraft Country*'s selection of H.P. Lovecraft as the titular character is a shot across the bow of the canon of weird fiction that the novel both lovingly draws from and critiques through revision. Lovecraft's short stories often turn on the dramatic revelation of unspeakable horror:

his protagonists encounter horrifying geometry, unknowable colors, and dark genealogical secrets. It is no coincidence then that Lovecraft would become the subject of another such horrifying revelation for contemporary readers. Lovecraft's deep-seated racism permeates his biography and lurks just below the surface of his fiction. The racist subtext of Lovecraft's work has been obscured by time but is glaringly obvious once readers know to look for it. It is this perversely pleasurably mirroring that Ruff exploits by dubbing the United States of America "Lovecraft Country" in the title of his novel.

Both novels are set in the waning years of the pulpwood magazine and center on individuals that were left out of the implied audience of the pulpwood magazines, a perspective that allows them to look backwards at the heyday of the pulps through the eyes of their characters. David Earle cites the onset of World War II as a rough date for the end of the pulpwood magazine's dominance with "paper shortages, the rise of comic books, film, and soon paperbacks and television all aided in their demise" (201). The main plot of Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* begins in 1939, a time when pulp publishing is still active, but around a decade after the height of the pulpwood magazines in the 20s and 30s. *Kavalier & Clay* ends in 1954 just as many pulpwood magazines were finally ceasing publication after years of declining sales. Chabon's novel depicts pulp publishing as a central element of the New York City cultural scene that would give rise to comic books. Chabon's method of constructing a pulp canon is kaleidoscopic and recursive. The novel incorporates pulp sensibilities at the level of theme and plot: the characters in the novel read, write, and adapt the pulps over the course of their careers, and the narrator of the novel expounds upon pulp history to readers directly. This creates a somewhat dizzying dialectic between cultural

production and the world that births it and is then changed by its influence. For Chabon comic books provide insight into the young male Jewish strivers that blazed a trail in early comic books after being shut out of more traditional publishing and artistic venues, but also the entirety of the mid-twentieth-century United States.

Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* picks up where *Kavalier & Clay* leaves off, taking place in 1954 and centering on the Black community in Chicago. Ruff's characters are primarily science fiction fans rather than Chabon's fan authors, but the intrusion of genre logic into their lives is much more pronounced. The horrors of white supremacy in Ruff's novel are revealed to be literal monsters and dark sorcerers, but like Chabon's characters, Ruff's protagonists navigate the world he creates with a savvy combination of genre knowledge and knowledge of the racist structures that support American society. Both novels then use the pulps to make the twentieth-century United States weird, and call into question the narratives of World War II as a "good war" and the booming postwar culture as a highpoint in the country's history. I argue that one effect of these books is to force a recognition that even traditionally denigrated cultural objects work as archives of American history. It is in this sense that all genre fiction is *historical* fiction, not that it fits that genre label for its original readers, but it contains within it the cultural history of genre and the broader history of the cultural moment that produced it. The pulps, despite their implied white audience, are not raceless objects. And neither is the American genre fiction that descends from them. These novels work to recover that history by re-writing the very genre tropes and conventions that make it up.

Despite my focus in this chapter on how Chabon's novel represents an outgrowth of postmodernism and is structured reflectively, a surface reading of the

novel might suggest that it is a fairly straightforward work of historical fiction, adhering quite closely to the model laid out by Lukács in *The Historical Novel.* The plot follows the titular cousins Sammy Clay (née Klayman) and Joe Kavalier from their meeting in 1939 through their fruitful comics partnership to their ultimate reunion and parting of ways in the early 1950s. Sammy is a second-generation Jewish immigrant from Prague, the son of Ethel Klayman who came to the United States as a child with her mother. Joe is an immigrant himself, a descendant of Sammy's Prague relatives who escaped the Nazi-occupation alone, leaving behind his parents and a younger brother. The juxtaposition of these two figures allows Chabon to interrogate two perspectives vital to American Jewish culture in the 1940s, that of the second-generation fully assimilated Jew in Sammy and the European Jew and recent Immigrant in Joe. The interaction and juxtaposition of these two perspectives gives the novel fertile ground to explore the subtleties of the Jewish American experience before, during, and after the Second World War. Importantly, Joe and Sammy are not analogues of the most famous founding fathers of comic books, such as Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, the notoriously jilted creators of Superman, or Stan Lee, who would become the symbolic figurehead of Marvel Comics. Instead, they are Chabon's fictional additions to the legions of imitators who cropped up in the wake of Superman's incredible success. In the grand tradition of historical fiction, being almost-but-not-quite-historical lends the characters a bit of reality and it lends the novel a bit of fictional cover. Historians will never know the inner lives of historical personages, but the novelist can invent as they please, filling historical gaps to create satisfying wholes. Where the novel transcends traditional historical fiction is in its blurring of the boundaries between the real and explicitly fantastical. Chabon does not

just reconstruct the Golden Age of comics but depicts a world where the lines between the creator and the created begin to bleed and run together.

This reflexivity repeats and builds throughout the novel, fueling a dialectic that serves both a historiographic and a plot function. As Joe and Sammy's success in the comic book business grows, a growth that is predicated on ever higher levels of production, their individual plots overlap, simmer, and intensify. This pattern leads to catastrophe for both cousins, a resulting narrative break, and finally a renewed sense of possibility and futurity at the novel's close. In this chapter I'll explore how this recursive reflection between the reality of the novel and the media its characters create make a historiographic argument that complicates our understanding of mid-century America as a Golden Age, a term used throughout the book that Chabon borrows from the popular periodization of comic book history.[58] While Chabon is not an ideologue pushing a specific agenda, his history of the 40s and 50s shows us that this Golden Age in American culture, if it ever existed at all, was fleeting, temporary, and built on exploitation. Published in 2000, the novel takes a firmly anti-war and anti-violence stance, in a way that seems both to typify the hope and possibility of a pre-9/11 United States and prefigure the eventual liberal response to the war on terror after the jingoistic dust had settled. This makes *Kavalier & Clay* a somewhat odd example of what Brian McHale, pulling on work by Phillip Wegner, has called the interregnum period in American literature, which he dates from 1989 to 2001. For McHale this

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[58] Jean Paul Gaubillet defines the "golden age of comics" in material terms, writing that "The studios experienced their golden age during the first fifteen years of the comic book industry, where the publishers privileged quantity to the detriment of quality" (116).

period is marked by "the monstrous and sublime experience of alternativity and multidirectionality of the in-between years" as the end of the Cold War allowed for the thinking of new possibilities (157).[59] This simultaneous quaintness and prescience extends to Chabon's choice of subject matter, *Kavalier & Clay* predates the superhero boom in American cinema by a full two years and the Marvel Cinematic Universe by eight. Sitting as it does on the precipice of a sea change in American culture, *Kavalier & Clay* is particularly fruitful case study in the continuities between the Interregnum and post-9/11 US.

I am certainly not the first to point out Kavalier & Clay's reflexive structure. Marc Singer has argued that the comic-book novel, which he sees cohering as a genre in the wake of *Kavalier & Clay's* success, plays with reflexive language in the intersection between comic books as objects and the novel. According to Singer, Chabon "argues that [comic books] house a valuable but overlooked mode of representation, demonstrating the limits of metaphor and metonymy, but finding another figurative possibility in hypostasis," which he defines as "the embodiment of a concept as a material substance or being" (287, 284). Hillary Chute has identified a similar dynamic, writing that *Kavalier & Clay* in its narration of "comic book stories intradiagetically" demonstrates a "self-awareness of framing and discursivity…. That itself frames the "real world" goings-on of Chabon's wartime New York City" (272). John Joseph Hess has gone as far as arguing that reflexivity has been Chabon's primary mode of engagement with popular culture throughout his career, writing that

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[59] McHale himself cites Chabon, as one of many second-generation postmodernists, with Kavalier & Clay one of many "ambitious novels of the nineties… [that] exhibit a debt to Pynchon" (138–39).

his 2008 novel *Telegraph Avenue* offers, "hope for the construction of a 'utopia' of shared interests… [threatened by] 'self-reflexive and hermetic' universes of personal vision" (34). What connects these observations is a recognition of Chabon's particular dialectic between pop culture objects and the "real worlds" of his fiction–his fiction flits back and forth between genre and realist logics in a way that leaves neither generic register unchanged.

Discussion of reflexivity inevitably summons the twin specters of metafiction and postmodernism. *Kavalier & Clay* is without a doubt metafictional. Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction is built on a foundation of reflexivity, "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). But to what extent is Chabon's novel postmodern? Chabon's own allegiance remains contested, he has most often been claimed as one of the figures who will lead us to whatever comes after postmodernism. In his non-fiction writings, Chabon performs a healthy skepticism towards postmodernism on the rare occasions that it comes up by name in his work. He prefers to talk about media and culture in less academic language. The word "postmodern" and its variations only appear four times in *Maps and Legends* and each time Chabon goes to some length to distance himself from it. He opens the collection by noting with disappointment that "Intelligent people… must handle the things that entertain them with the gloves of irony and postmodern tongs" (*Maps and Legends* 13). While Chabon's conception of postmodernism is perfectly serviceable if your goal is to write musings on popular culture that can be understood by general audiences, it does leave out some of the nuances that I am hoping to resuscitate in this project. So, Chabon clearly rejects the

perceived ironic and elitist inflections of high postmodernism, but he seems perfectly happy to make use of its technical innovations and techniques for his own purposes. This attitude has been a defining one for the authors of the genre turn, they simultaneously disavow postmodernism and popularize it for wider audiences. Postmodernism might be passé, but its weird approach to genre and narrative possibility remains useful. At its height postmodernism was interested in interrogating the boundaries between high and low genres, an interrogation that set the stage for Chabon and the other authors of the genre turn.

One aspect of Chabon's novel that raises it above an act of fannish devotion to early comic books and the milieu of their creators, is its dedication to depicting the production process of early comic books, particularly the aspects of that process that lie beyond the solitary genius model that permeates so much popular work on cultural production. Chabon depicts this process as being deeply embedded within myriad contexts, cultural, social, and financial. Like Chabon himself, the titular characters of Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay are fans of comic books, movies, the pulps, etc and again like Chabon, their fandom often manifests as what we might call popular cultural criticism. Their own work is built on a foundation of artistic influences that Chabon goes to great length to catalogue, this cataloguing acting as fannish credentialling for the novel and its author. For some readers Chabon's citational practice will be educational, for others, it is a demonstration of expertise that proves he can be trusted to treat his subject matter with care. Thus, Joe and Sammy's fannishness aligns them with not just the author, but with readers as well, creating a line of historical continuity between contemporary fan culture and the fan culture that birthed the comic book as a form, genre, and industry. In our introduction to Sammy at

the novel's outset one of the first facts we learn about him is that he is not just a reader of the pulps, but a collector, "He had tracked down and read every biweekly issue of *The Shadow*… and he was well on his way to amassing complete runs of *The Avenger* and *Doc Savage*" (*Kavalier and Clay* 4). This passage demonstrates Chabon's approach to bibliography, which he dispenses throughout the novel and often in long lists.[60] By emphasizing comic book's pioneers as fans first, the novel makes an implicit argument that culture perpetuates itself through reflexive acts of fandom and fan creation. Fans are at the center of Chabon's cultural universe.

While Joe and Sammy are indeed depicted as wunderkinds, preternaturally talented and prone to flights of artistic imagining and innovation, their talent can only become a tangible object through the pulp publishing machine. While the novel takes pleasure in depicting individual genius, it also shows us how that talent is always serving at the whim of a publishing industry that seeks to exclude artists from the profits of their efforts at every turn. The world of publishing that Joe and Sammy finagle their way into is one that Chabon depicts as being dominated by the pursuit of profit. The process by which the Escapist comes to print is an example of how individual talent is mediated by the profit motive under capitalism. While the idea to produce a new comic book hero to capitalize on Superman's success is originally Sammy's, he looks to his boss, Sheldon Anapol, the owner of an order-by-mail novelties company that advertises in the pages of pulp magazines. Anapol in turn

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[60] See the longer list of Sammy's influences, the list of Joe's artistic influences that appears later in the novel, giving a brief description of several key figures in comics art, or the accounting of early female superheroes around the creation of Joe and Sammy's character Luna Moth (*Kavalier and Clay* 8–9, 176, 277-278).

brings in his brother-in-law, Jack Ashkenazy the owner of a smalltime pulp publishing house and Ashkenazy's editor, George Deasey, a once-ambitious writer now consigned to a life publishing pseudonymously from inside the pulp machine. Anapol and Ashkenazy come to be the owners of what is eventually called Empire Comics, and by extension the owners of all the characters created by Joe and Sammy and any resulting profits. The way that Empire Comics comes into existence, equal parts artistic and cultural genius, unlikely financial backers, nepotism, and pulp fiction fandom, demonstrates the way that Chabon is able to illustrate material conditions through the condensation of historical trends into fictional characters. There is also more than a small piece of critique of capitalism and material history in Chabon's depictions of this period. The injustice of Sammy and Joe's skills largely fueling the fortunes of men who were simply lucky enough to be the right financiers at the right time runs through the novel. While this might seem to be a particularly navel-gazing complaint, one very successful author bemoaning the abuses of other fictional authors of his own creation at the hands of an unjust publishing industry, we can just as easily analogize the exploitation of Joe and Sammy to the way that all work under capitalism is at the whims of profit-driven capitalists.

The novel works to ground this critique in the factual history of the period. The introduction of the Escapist is preceded by a lengthy exegesis from the novel's narratorial voice on the material history of the comic book up to that point. These moments of authorial and historical intervention into the plot of the novel are frequent and work to create the complex narratorial voice of the novel, which is sometimes presenting readers with the straightforwardly novelistic, sometimes straightforwardly historical or documentary, and sometimes narrating the comic book output of Joe and

Sammy, but always playing around the borders and blurring the lines between these three registers. In his account of the origins of the comic book superhero, Chabon outlines the very historical facts (and his reading of those facts) that inspired the novel. This interlude begins with a discussion of the materiality of the early comic book:

> "In 1939, the early comic book, like the beavers and cockroaches of prehistory, was larger and, in its cumbersome way, more splendid than its modern descendant. It aspired to the dimensions of a slick magazine and to the thickness of a pulp, offering sixty-four pages… for its ideal price of one thin dime" (*Kavalier and Clay* 74).

The density of information that Chabon manages to pack into even short passages on the history of the form is remarkable, here we learn the size and length of early comics, the literary milieu in which they exist (notably, somewhere between slick magazine and pulp), and the price of an issue. The price of the early comic book opens this brief history and also concludes it, with Chabon writing,

> Superman was born in the pages of a comic book, where he thrived, and after this miraculous parturition, the form finally began to emerge from its transitional funk, and to articulate a purpose for itself in the marketplace of ten-cent-dreams… Comic books were Kid Stuff, pure and true, and they arrived at precisely the moment when the kids of America began, after ten years of terrible hardship, to find their pockets burdened with the occasional superfluous dime. (77–78)

Here again, the material is dense, we get some media history of the comic book as a form, the comic book's success is contextualized in the broader economic context of a United States slowly emerging from the Great Depression, and finally some content analysis of the early comic book as "Kid Stuff," all of which will come into play later in the novel. What this passage illustrates is the novel's commitment to grounding its more fantastical and genre elements within a true material history. The reference to Superman is a particularly useful touchpoint here as the character is widely familiar to most audiences and provides a concrete point of reality for even those readers most

unaware of comic book history. Labelling the comic book a "ten-cent-dream" places it simultaneously within the context of the pulp imagination and the economic realities of its publication and consumption, a tightrope the novel continues to walk.

The economic context surrounding the early comic book is not just evident in its consumption and in the motivations of Joe and Sammy's publishers, but it is also woven through metaphor into Joe's experience of the United States. When Joe meets his love interest, fellow artist and daughter of an eccentric Surrealism-enthusiast and aristocrat, Rosa Saks, her eyes are described as "an indeterminate color between champagne and the green of a dollar" (*Kavalier and Clay* 238-239). And later, when with Rosa's help he secures his brother's safe passage out of Nazi-occupied Prague using his comic book earnings, the novel tells us that "the sky was shining like a nickel and the air was filled with the smell of sugared nuts. He bought a bag, and it was hot in the hip pocket of his twelve-dollar suit" (264). In these moments, when the American dream seems to be an achievable reality for Joe, the power of money seems to be limitless. Money is not just a way to influence the world, but its only constituent element. This belief in an unfettered American dream reaches its fever pitch the moment after Joe and Sammy have successfully pitched a superhero comic book to Sammy's employers, an experience which:

> conformed so closely to Joe's movie-derived notions of life in America that if an airplane were now to land on Twenty-fifth street and disgorge a dozen bathing-suit-clad Fairies of Democracy come to award him the presidency of General Motors, a contract with Warner Bros., and a penthouse on Fifth Avenue… he would have greeted this, too, with the same dreamlike unsurprise. (90–91)

For Joe, there is a sense of pulpish unreality to his American experience, his success in comic books building a fantasia which he is ultimately rudely awakened from.

Waffling between belief in the utility of his success to save his remaining family from the Nazi occupation of Prague and a sense of futility as money continues to be unable to secure their salvation will define Joe's arc in the novel until his brother's death finally drives him to abandon the life he has built in the United States and enroll in the Navy in a doomed quest for revenge.

Production extends beyond the material realm in the novel through the incursion of the generic elements of the comic book into the generally realist historical past that the novel depicts. This incursion literalizes Joe and Sammy as producers and world builders as their artistic work shapes the world around them. One of the most evident ways this plays out in the novel is through the depiction and metafictional play around the long-standing comic book tradition of the origin story. As the writer of the pair, the origin story is one of Sammy's specialties, he is particularly adept at lending the team's characters a human element that the earliest superhero comics were often deficient in. As Sammy puts it, "'How? is not the question. What? Is not the question… The question is *why*" (*Kavalier and Clay* 94). How to best determine the origin (or Why?) of a historical event is a much messier business and has been at the center of many a historiographic debate. As readers of histories, novels, or comic books, we always start on page one, lending these texts a strict linearity and causality that rarely cleanly aligns with historical reality. The problem of where to begin a history though, is one of the key ways that the storytelling of fiction differs from the storytelling of history. For a historian to treat any subject truly in full is like Carl Sagan's joke that "if you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe." The perceived causes of any historical event could always be traced back further or explored in greater depth. While this might seem to be an overly

academic problem, where a history begins can drastically alter how the actors and events it seeks to illustrate are perceived. In novels and comic books, the question of where to begin is perhaps equally vexing, but it is a question of how best to portray imagined events rather than freighted with the weight of depicting the historical. In *Kavalier & Clay*, metafictional play with the formal structure of the origin story allows the novel to interrogate the historiographic problem of origins.

> The origin story has long been a defining feature of the superhero genre, and in its perpetual cycle of rewriting and revision, a ritualistic practice that seeks to update old characters as it introduces them to new audiences. The permeability of the "reality" of *Kavalier and Clay* and the comic book universe created by Joe and Sammy is best demonstrated by the figure of the golem, who stalks through the novel in various guises, the Golem of Prague, Frankenstein, Superman, and of course the Escapist himself. Since the Golem has already appeared so often in so many different mediums it is no surprise that Chabon with his penchant for citational flourishes would be drawn to the figure. Including the Golem in *Kavalier & Clay* and making nods to the way the Golem has been used throughout popular culture, not only engages with Jewish tradition, but makes an implicit argument for a kernel of Jewishness in much of the cultural production of the last 400 years.[61] The narrator of the novel does not stray away from commenting on this history in the manner of the cultural historian, stating: "In literature and folklore, the significance and fascination of golems—from Rabbi Loew's to Victor von Frankenstein's—lay in their soullessness, in their tireless human strength, in their metaphorical human ambition, and in the frightening ease with which they passed beyond the control of their horrified and admiring creators" (*Kavalier and Clay* 582).

This passage of narration is indicative of the novel's narrative voice, it's willingness to self-theorize without pretension and offer readers a glimpse behind the curtain at the cultural history Chabon is playing with. The metaphoric connection between the

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[61] For a study of the Golem see Elizabeth Roberts Baer's *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction.*

Jewish comic book creators of the Golden Age and the legendary Rabbi that brought the Golem into the world is one that Chabon makes constant use of and thus the legend deserves at least a short retelling here. In Jewish folklore, the Golem is a humanoid being crafted from mud or clay and brought to life by magical means, usually by the inscription of a Hebrew word on its forehead, a repetition by man of the creation of Adam. So, from its beginnings the golem legend is one of repeated creation, of artistic thievery. In the most well-known version of the tale, the Golem is brought to life by the Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel in 16th century Prague to defend the Jewish residents of the city from anti-semitic attacks before turning violent and ultimately de-animated by the Rabbi. As a being who is literally written into life, the Golem acts as an especially rich metaphor for Jewish comic book creators. The invocation of the Golem endows the creative act with a mystical quality while placing it within the realm of Jewish tradition.

The Golem of Prague itself makes an appearance in the novel as Joe is smuggled out of Nazi-occupied Prague with the Golem in a coffin. By providing a means for Joe's escape from Prague, the Golem enacts its mission of protecting the Jews of Prague and sets the plot of the novel into motion. The Golem also becomes symbolically entangled with Joe's life as he embarks on a doomed quest to save his remaining family from the Nazi war machine. When Joe is first tasked with drawing a superhero, he reflexively draws the Golem, instinctively recognizing that "To me, this Superman is… maybe… only an American Golem" (*Kavalier and Clay* 86). Whether or not Jerry Siegel or Joe Schuster were consciously inspired by the Golem when they created Superman is impossible to know, but many since have pointed out the

similarities and the general "Jewishness," of Superman as a character.[62] This dramatization of how biography influences artistic production allows Chabon to concisely make the case for the Jewish character of the superhero genre. The Golem's origin is itself an origin story for comic books, with Joe's act of creation standing in for broad historical circumstance. Throughout the rest of the novel, this model of the artist's biography influencing their work will be inverted and repeated.

Aside from depicting the origins of its fictional characters, the novel also includes chapters that depict the comic book narratives that Joe and Sammy create. In these chapters the narrative of the pair's fictional comic books is transmuted into novelistic prose, creating hybrid narrative objects nestled within the novel. The first of these chapters, recounting the origin story of The Escapist, follows just after the cousins have cracked the gimmick (a superpowered escape artist, inspired by Joe's time as a magician-in-training in Prague) for the character, but find themselves at a loss for the "why." The Escapist's origin story is a somewhat disorienting insertion into the text, coming with no warning in the style of every chapter that came before it. As readers, we are confronted with this shift in narrative tone, style, and content and also made to recognize that the story of The Escapist is constructed of the same material of that of Joe and Sammy. The fictional remediation of The Escapist's origin story then, fills the narrative gap where the process of creating it would be. At the end

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[62] For a history of the use of the Golem in Marvel Comics, both as a character itself and an inspiration for other characters, see Robert G. Weiner's essay, "Marvel Comics and the Golem Legend." For Weiner, the use and re-use of the Golem in contemporary comics strengthens the strong ties between Judaism and the comic book medium writing that it represents the "continuing tradition of Jewish folklore and allegory, albeit in a new form—one with a strong Jewish history (72).

of the chapter, after The Escapist has taken on his new heroic mantle, his world bleeds into the world of Joe and Sammy. The voice of The Escapist and his comrades in their secret underground base

> carries up through the complicated antique ductwork of the grand old theater… until it emerges through a grate in the sidewalk, where it can be heard clearly by a couple of young men who are walking past, their collars raised against the cold October night, dreaming their elaborate dream, wishing their wish, teasing their Golem into life. (*Kavalier and Clay* 134)

This metafictional flourish shows us the world of the pulps literally running off the page into the world of pulp creators, as Joe and Sammy talk their fictional world into creation, they also re-create the world around them. In this way, Chabon depicts even the creation of supposedly low art with all the passion and ingenuity of its creators. Chabon's work here is a fictionalized origin story of superheroes themselves, one that emphasizes how they emerge out of a historical specificity that can be recovered by readers.

By blurring the lines between the creator and the created, *Kavalier & Clay* builds an affective textual universe in which the feelings and motivations behind the creation of media have the power to shape the "real" world of the novel. This process where the act of writing brings things to life, reflects the function of Jewish mysticism in the Golem legend. The historiographic implications of this are manifold, first Chabon is reclaiming the Jewish history of comic books as a medium and the superhero genre in particular. While this is a point that has been made continuously and would be known to many comic book fans already, it remains elusively separate

from the popular perception of comic books.[63] Beyond this simple act of reclamation though, the novel also establishes a model of reading cultural objects broadly, and pulp fiction in particular, as historical documents.

How do you tackle the enormity of the Second World War, or as historians are increasingly understanding it, the second half of the decades long World War that consumed three decades of the twentieth century, and its impact on American culture and identity? For my purposes, I will only briefly outline the war's reputation as one of the founding myths of the contemporary United States as it exists today, ranking at least as important as the American Revolution and the nation's founding. Studs Terkel, the prolific and revered oral historian, went so far as to name his book on the subject, "*The Good War*."[64] Terkel quotes one former American admiral on the lasting impact of the war on the American psyche:

> "'World War II has warped our view of how we look at things today. We see things in terms of that war, which in a sense was a good war. But the twisted memory of it encourages the men of my generation to be willing, almost eager, to use military force anywhere in the world'" (13).

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[63] Perhaps the legal status of massively popular comic book superheroes, owned wholly by big name corporations such as Marvel or DC and almost never by the actual creators of the characters contributes to this need for a constant reminder of the Jewish history of comics.

[64] Published in 1984 and compiled from his extensive interviews with people that lived through the Second World War, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II*, opens with Stud Terkel's explanation of his choice of title, "The title of this book was suggested by Herbert Mitgang,… is a phrase that has been frequently voiced by men of his and my generation to distinguish that war from other wars, declared and undeclared. Question marks have been added, not as a matter of caprice editorial comment, but simply because the adjective "good" mated to the noun "war" is so incongruous."

What this quote so succinctly captures is that the idea of the Second World War as a "good war," and even the possibility of a "good war," has been a shaping influence on 'Americans's understanding of our place in the world. It is remembered as a moment when Americans were unabashedly the good guys, the "greatest generation," a national high we've been seeking to return to ever since.

So what does *Kavalier & Clay* offer us to complicate this national mythology? What does the novel's cultural historiography offer that traditional histories don't? One answer to that question is that *Kavalier & Clay* teaches us to read popular culture, including the pulps and superhero comics, as an affective (rather than factual) archive of the Second World War and postwar America. The pulp output of Sammy and Joe records their genius and their joy in the act of creation, but it also records their frustration. The sources of this frustration are many, both cousins are chafing under their exploitation by the legal owners of their characters, Joe in particular is frustrated by his impotence in the face of the Holocaust, while Sammy grapples with the connections between his art and his repressed homosexuality. This frustration with the pulp as a perceived artistic backwater is present throughout the novel. Joe and Sammy's long-time editor, George Deasey, note his last name's rhyme with *sleazy*, is a rough man of secretly solid character beaten down by a career of writing for pulps despite higher literary ambitions. Deasey can be counted on for his consistently low opinion of the American reading public, he simultaneously provides the perspective of a veteran pulp publishing insider and pulp's harshest critic. Deasey's attitude of reverent disgust, the artist turned machine, reflects the competing impulses that animate the production of populist entertainment. Between Deasey's cynicism, Sammy's belief in and ultimate disillusionment with the American dream, and Joe's

search for meaning in his art, we are presented with a spectrum of options for understanding the complex relationship between art and artist beyond the revered solitary genius. That these three perspectives all unite in any given issue of Empire Comics demonstrate the complexity of artistic intention.

Their frustration builds to both Sammy and Joe confronting the ways in which their personalities are sublimated into their art. Joe's escalating sense of futility and the resulting escalated violence against Nazi stand-ins (and later actual Nazis) leads him to an almost-deadly confrontation with a mentally unstable American Nazi sympathizer and ultimately enlisting in the United States Air Force after the United States joins the war in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Sammy and Rosa marry in the wake of Joe absconding to the military, the discovery of Rosa's unplanned pregnancy with his child, and Sammy's experience of homophobic sexual assault at the hands of FBI agents. Thus, Sammy and Rosa's marriage is portrayed as both a place of refuge, shielding them from the tragedies they have faced, but also a stumbling block to a true reckoning with those tragedies. The newly-married couple leaves New York City for the safety of the suburbs, becoming an ironic model of the typical nuclear American family of the 1950s. If we take this as a picture of Americanness, Sammy and Rosa's family shows that the shift to suburban prosperity for white middle-class Americans was not purely a sign of postwar American affluence but rooted in the unspoken trauma and violence that both lingered from the second World War and lurked under the surface of American life. For Joe's part, the war is not the martial outlet for his frustrations that he hoped it would be. Rather than a trip to the combat-heavy front lines with opportunities for heroic and patriotic revenge, he is unceremoniously deposited on an Antarctic research station, part of a

crew that is nominally monitoring the region for Nazi activity. Joe's exile mirrors that of Sammy and Rosa's, all three characters find themselves isolated, America's entry into the "good war" only exacerbating their existing frustrations.

Joe's time in Antarctica marks a break in the novel's normal flow of historical time. Up to this point, the novel proceeds linearly and straightforwardly through historical time, touching upon the milestones of Joe and Sammy's careers. Joe's military service in Antarctica receives its own section in the novel, hermetically sealed off from the other characters and their various plots, Joe's isolation is represented both narratively and formally. After this section ends, the novel picks up over ten years later. The intervening time is a narrative void. In addition to this isolation from the rest of the novel, this section is by far its most divergent from historical reality. In its surreal and metaphorically-weighted depiction of the horrors of war, Joe's service in the Air Force resembles the adventures of his final comic book creation before enlisting, Luna Moth, a winged sorceress whose psychedelic adventures are more inspired by Joe's connection to surrealism by way of Rosa and her father than Sammy's fruitful mining of the pulps.[65] The narrative voice of the novel anticipates and discounts a simple allegorical reading of Luna Moth's battles with supernatural creatures,

> it was easy enough to see such plots as allegories of paranoia, invasion, and world war, and Joe's work here as a continuation of the internecine

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[65] Like all of Sammy and Joe's fictional comic book heroes, Luna Moth is an analogue and amalgamation of various existing comic book characters that were roughly contemporaneous of the two men's careers. If The Escapist is reminiscent of Captain America, Superman, and The Shadow, Luna Moth is a combination of the pinup and erotica tinges of early Wonder Woman and the psychedelic experimentalism of Doctor Strange.

> conflict of Radio and Triumph [the comic book homes of the duo's other heroes]… [Rosa] could see Joe, in each new issue contending with the conventions and clichés of Sammy's more than usually literate stories, working his way toward a breakthrough in his art. (*Kavalier and Clay* 318–19)

If Joe's art was reaching a culmination in his work on Luna Moth, his personal quest for revenge hits a complete dead end after he joins the Air Force. This episode of his life is not one of heroics, but futility and ultimately tragedy. Deposited on an Antarctic base, Joe lives through the death of all but one of his fellow soldiers on the base and in the ensuing loneliness throws himself into a doomed quest to confront the German presence on the continent, a single scientist. After ironically succeeding in this mission despite realizing just after it is too late that he has no desire to kill another man, Joe finds himself broken by his actions. Here the novel operates as allegory, Joe's search for revenge sends him to a cold, dark, and lonely place and drives him away from everyone he loves.

Despite this debunking of the second world war as a "good war" and the postwar period as a time of universal American progress and prosperity, *Kavalier & Clay* ends on a hopeful note, albeit one that is shaded by the irony of our contemporary perspective. At the novel's close, Joe has finally been united with his family, in the form of his cousin Sammy, his would-be-fiancée Rosa, and his unknowingly abandoned son, after a decade of self-imposed exile following the tragic end of his military career. The end of the novel presents readers with two figures of the future for Joe and Sammy, and by extension comic books, Jewish-Americans, and the country. The first is Joe's son Tommy, named for the brother he lost to the Holocaust by way of America's arcane immigration and refugee bureaucracy and raised by Sammy and Rosa. And the second is Joe's magnum opus, a deeply personal comic book about the Jews of Prague composed in Joe's year's of self-imposed exile.

These two signs of hope for the future come into clarity when Joe returns to the lives of Sammy, Rosa, and Tommy in a dramatic moment of leakage between the comic book world Joe created and his reality prompted by his reunion with his son.

Through his literal and adoptive parentage, Tommy represents the shared influence of Sammy, Rosa, and Joe and is thus a synthesis of their shared history together and a potent symbol of the possibility of the future. His personality shows aspects of all three of his parents, he is precocious and shy, deeply embedded in the worlds of both comic books and stage magic, and not unexpectedly, prone to escapist flights of fancy. Tommy represents a Jewish-American lineage that ultimately leads to Chabon himself. In a literary market that prizes, or perhaps fetishizes, the first-hand experiences of minorities as the building blocks of what Mark McGurl calls high cultural pluralism, Chabon has drawn a connection to the Holocaust and the Golden Age of American comics not just through his lived experience as a Jewish-American, but also through the experiences of his father, who was born in 1938 in New York City only a handful of years before Tommy (Thomas). Chabon directly cites his father's influence on *Kavalier & Clay* (but not his connection to Tommy) in an essay reflecting on the origins of the novel.[66] Tommy's synthesis of his three parents strengths ultimately leads to Joe's return from exile. It is discovered that Joe has been

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[66] Chabon's autobiography, even more those of others who make a living telling stories, must be taken with a grain of salt. He has developed a reputation for playfully fictionalizing his own past in a way that has occasionally gotten him into trouble. For one example, see his pseudo-autobiographical essay "Golems I have known, or, Why My Elder Son's Middle Name is Napoleon" collected in *Maps and Legends*. The collected version of the essay includes a postscript explaining that is at least partially made up, with Chabon explaining that "I elected to put on kind of a demonstration… I wanted to try to show an audience just how tangled the interrelationship [between lies and stories] can be" (*Maps and Legends* 217).

composing a new type of graphic novel, one that is less commercial and seeks to expunge some of the trauma of the last decade of his life not through a comic book war fought by men in tights, but by depicting the lives of the Jews of Prague in a deeply personal project. While Joe sees this project as a purely personal act of catharsis, the novel ends with Sammy prodding him to make the book commercially available, and possibly re-ignite their partnership. This is a logical conclusion for a novelist who hopes to craft meaningful work that is also a commercial product, the novel ultimately argues for its own existence.

Chabon argues for a fandom that looks back at objects of fannish love with a critical eye, not just as sources of pleasure or mystical artifacts, but also as historically-situated objects that can take us closer to the lived experience of the past. This perspective necessarily complicates seeing any period in history as a "Golden Age," even when that period gave birth to treasured cultural objects. We can see this new approach to fandom in many of Chabon's post-*Kavalier & Clay* works, from the discussions of blaxploitation cinema and the works of Quentin Tarantino in *Telegraph Avenue* to the narrator of *Moonglow*'s mother briefly working as a Vampira-esque movie of the week host in the 1950s. This aspect of Chabon's work only grows more relevant as we live in a cultural landscape increasingly dominated by the "franchise," which is a type of reverence for and repackaging of the cultural products of the past. Chabon's intervention is to use these feelings of fannish love as the opening up of a critical examination of their relationship to the material reality of the past that led to their production in the first place. Seeking to understand this material history not just helps us to know these cultural objects better but offers a window into changing the public's understanding of the metanarrative of American history. Ironically, Chabon's

critical approach to fandom has become something of a personal brand, his critique of fandom becoming a selling point for his work.

Similar to Chabon, Matt Ruff works to establish a personal connection to the subjects of his historical fiction in *Lovecraft Country*. But as a white American author depicting Black Americans, Ruff goes further to develop and justify his approach. In the brief acknowledgement section that follows *Lovecraft Country*, Matt Ruff explains that the novel first emerged out of conversations with Joseph Scantlebury, a man long associated with NGOs that work on racial equity in the United States, and James Turner, the founding Director of the Africana Studies & Research Center at Cornell University, but was more recently influenced by "Shame," a 2006 essay by Pam Noles on the "peculiar difficulties of being a black science fiction fan" (273). Ruff's decision as a white American author to cite two prominent Black Americans as influences on his novel grounds his work in his personal contact with Black thinkers. We can contrast this to Chabon's grounding of *Kavalier & Clay* with his father's experience growing up in New York. Both authors are responding to a cultural pressure to establish a personal relationship to their historical material, Chabon draws a family (or origin story) connection, but Ruff is unable to do so as a white American. Instead, he creates an alternative, rooting the novel in his personal relationships and reading habits. Ruff's reference to Pam Noles's essay is particularly telling as it uses genre to build a bridge between Ruff and Black genre fans. The shared experience with beloved cultural objects gives Ruff access to the frustration of Black genre fans, or as Noles dubs them, "fans of pigment." These citations betray some anxiety in the novel's paratext. Ruff's encounter with Noles's essay alerts him to the phenomenon that Toni Morrison has called the "Africanist presence" in American literature, the

structuring shadow of American identity, "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify… a disabling virus within literary discourse… a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (*Playing in the Dark* 6–7). As Ruff tells it, this revelation heavily shaped *Lovecraft Country*. One attempt to rectify, or more pessimistically, to profit from this structuring of American literature has been called "high cultural pluralism" by Mark McGurl. The genre is perpetuated by a publishing industry "[fascinated] with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice" (*The Program Era* 33). Ruff is not Black and thus his novel About Race and featuring Black characters is automatically suspect in a literary culture that fetishizes "authentic" experience. While Matt Ruff is a white American author, he positions himself and many of the characters in his novels as fans. Chabon is able to claim a familial and fan connection to the events he writes about, while Ruff makes a claim based on fan identity, his experience as a fan of science fiction becomes the authentic experience at the center of the novel. This shared community of fandom attempts to bridge the gap between Ruff and his characters, at least enough to satisfy his publishers and readers.

Structurally, the novel reflects these professed roots in fandom. It is comprised of a series of interconnected episodes, each of which draws upon different science fiction texts or subgenres as the starting point for a story about race in 1950s America. We can assume that this episodic structure is at least in part due to the novel's origin in a TV pitch, an interesting example of the already-remediated nature of many of today's cultural products, but it also gives the text something of the feel of an old sci-fi

pulp magazine or genre anthology. One effect of these overlapping stories is that the novel functions as a survey of the generic moves available to science fiction, making it particularly fruitful ground for a genre-based analysis. Additionally, unlike a pure anthology, the stories of *Lovecraft Country* come together in a final episode that brings many of the characters and story threads together. This ultimate episode can be read as a summation of everything that came before, and thus everything that the science fiction genre makes it possible to say about race. This generic synthesis is of particular interest to this project, as it zooms out, not just lampooning or subverting individual works or genres, but thinking through the science fiction genre as a totality and how that totality weaves through history and historical narrative. If genre (typified by Lovecraft) acts as one structuring force in the novel, then the other is the racial geography of the United States, the *Country* of the novel's title. As Ruff states in his afterword, this aspect of the novel was inspired by Victor H. Green's *Negro Motorist Book*, a fictionalized version of which is central to the plot of the novel.[67] The concept of the *Motorist Book*, or Ruff's stand-in *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*, allows the novel to explore the geography of the United States, and its characters' relationships to that geography. It works in conjunction with the many science fiction texts that appear in the book, a guide to the physical space of the country as opposed to the science fiction's guide to the imaginary space of the country.

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[67] *Lovecraft Country* predates the 2018 Best Picture-winning film *Green Book*, by two years and the similarities are striking. *Green Book*, which as it's poster will tell you is "inspired by a true friendship," tells the saccharine story of a white Italian and Black American travelling through the deep South together with the help of the titular tome. Both works were created by white authors (in the case of *Green Book*, the film's director, Peter Farrelly) and both use genre as a lens with which to view America's racist past, with *Green Book* using road trip and odd couple tropes rather than science fiction ones.

As much as the novel has a central character, that character is the recalcitrant Korean War veteran and adamant science fiction fan, Atticus Freeman. The novel begins and ends with Atticus and his relationship with his father and each of the novel's episodes orbit around the duo's plot and symbolic weight. If Atticus is the young and occasionally optimistic Black fan of science fiction, his father George represents the old guard, a canny reader of American racism and the ways that it manifests in even seemingly innocuous cultural objects like science fiction pulps. Their disagreements over the possibility of American progress on race (and everything else) led to their estrangement established in the opening of the novel. *Lovecraft Country* proceeds to attempt to find some middle ground between these two poles of Black life in the form of an inevitable reconciliation and begrudging respect between the two estranged men. If this reads like a slightly ham-fisted approach to the realities of race in America in the 1950s, then that's because it is, the novel does not attempt a high literary air. Its ambitions are more grounded, it seeks to create a loving tribute to a genre and simultaneously critique that genre's complicity in American racism. This dual valence marks the novel as Weird History, it intertwines serious genre and historiographic goals, asking readers to engage more deeply with the text even as it fulfills generic pleasures.

The conflict between science fiction and grounded racialized geography as structures of thinking plays out again and again in the novel. The opening scene of the novel finds Atticus crossing over the border of Kentucky and Indiana as he roadtrips from Florida to Chicago with a copy of the *Safe Negro Travel Guide* by his side and a trunk laden with science fiction paperbacks. Crossing into Indiana, Atticus breathes a sigh of relief as he "bade Jim Crow farewell with a raised middle finger" (*Lovecraft*

Country 2). But the safety of the North is soon revealed to be conditional at best. Atticus experiences both poles of possibility for a Black science fiction fan that the novel imagines, the joy at discovering unexpected community when a Black tow-truck driver turns out to be a fellow fan and the threat of racist violence and policing of cultural boundaries when a white police officer pulls him over and interprets the books as a sign that Atticus is driving a stolen car. In this moment, the policing of genre lines is made terrifyingly literal. Atticus escapes the incident unscathed, but it acts as a brutal reminder of the reality of white supremacy, as much for Atticus as for the reader of the novel. That the reader might need such a reminder is one of the assumptions that the novel seems to be operating under. Like much historical fiction, *Lovecraft Country* seeks to find a balance between educating and entertaining its audience. The novel assumes that its readers need to be educated on the fact that racism existed throughout the mid-century United States and not just the Jim Crow South that Atticus salutes. I argue that these clues tell us that the assumed reader is a science fiction fan interested in knowing about race and racism, but mostly ignorant of its history. At the risk of putting too fine a point on it, the book assumes a white reader.

Each episode in the novel works as a commentary on a specific science fiction text or subgenre. In this way the novel presents readers with a canon of science fiction that resembles Atticus's trunkful of books. The novel imagines science fiction as something that readers carry around with them, baggage that should be critically, if lovingly, unpacked and examined. The interpretive possibility of the genre is demonstrated as it is read by both Black and white characters. For the novel's Black characters, science fiction can be a source of empowerment, either as a temporary escape or a way to look towards possible futures, but for its white characters it

represents a comfortable canon of works by white authors that bake racist ideology into the worlds of their texts. This is demonstrated with force when Atticus comes face to face with the library of the white supremacist cult of magicians that serve as the novel's antagonists. He finds "authors and titles he knew, some seemingly wildly out of place in these surroundings… The lowest shelf was Lovecraft Country: Algernon Blackwood, Robert Bloch, August Derleth… and the man himself" (*Lovecraft Country* 65). Here the fannish list returns, but with a grim overtone in this new setting. Atticus finds that Lovecraft Country is not just a place of personal escape for himself, but a canon of works put to different uses by different readers. Why these titles fit on a white supremacist bookshelf is something that Atticus (and readers) are educated on over the course of the novel.

The titular Lovecraft Country then is not just the works of Lovecraft himself, but the whole canon that he stands in for. Of all the episodes in the novel, only a couple deal directly with Lovecraft staples. Matt Ruff appears to be less interested in playing with Lovecraft's style or mythos than he is in using Lovecraft as the central figure of the novel's approach to the history of racism in American science fiction. In one illustrative episode, a Black Lovecraft fan excitedly compares *The Book of Names*, a magic book sought by the novel's antagonists, to Lovecraft's Necronomicon, "'a book of black magic… Written by the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred,'" only for another man to quip back at him, "'The stuttering Arab, more like… Abd means 'servant' and al is 'the' so Abd al al-Hazred would be 'servant of the-the Hazred" (*Lovecraft Country* 156).[68] There's a distinctly fannish pedantry to this scene, one imagines the

[68] The Necronomicon and Abdul Alhazred appeared first in Lovecraft's short stories "The Hound" and "The Nameless City" respectively and recur throughout his oeuvre. They've become defining objects in the greater Lovecraft mythos.

characters (or perhaps Ruff himself) stopping to address the reader directly and disabuse her of any romantic notions about Lovecraft or his fiction.[69]

There's a slippage here between the absurdity of Lovecraft's mistakes and the "reality" of Ruff's novel. Of course, the Necronomicon is fake and its author might have been in the words of one of Ruff's characters, "'A white guy from Rhode Island trying to be funny'," but in the world of the novel *The Book of Names* is very real and a source of great power (*Lovecraft Country* 156). *Lovecraft Country* fictionalizes the reciprocal relationship at work between reality, history, and fiction. It is no accident that books are so important in the novel, their cultural power is literalized as a power to remake the world through magic. One character goes so far as to describe his family's told and re-told history as "his first exposure to pulp fiction—which was not to say they were fantasy, only that they were more 'inspired by actual events'" (150). Here the novel tells us how to read pulp fiction (and *Lovecraft Country* itself) as history. Pulp and genre tropes are not just literary conceits, but a particular instantiation of narrative tropes that can just as easily appear in passed down family lore as they do musty paperbacks. The novel suggests then, that we can read all stories with an eye for narrative constructedness.

The Book of Names drives the novel's overarching plot as it is sought by the Order of the Ancient Dawn, a cult of white magic users that dominate American

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[69] In fact, The H.P. Lovecraft Wiki hosted by the site Fandom contains a very similar discussion of Alhazred's name, stating "Abdul Alhazred is not an Arabic name. The more proper Arabic form might be Abd al-Hazred or simply Abdul Hazred, although these are still anomalous, as Hazred is not one of the 99 Names of God. In Arabic texts, his name has appeared as Abdullah al-Ḥaẓrad (عبدالله الحظرد)" ("Abdul Alhazred").

politics and culture behind the scenes, and the Ancient Dawn's inner circle, the Sons of Adam. The Sons of Adam see themselves as the inheritors of a magical tradition that began with the biblical Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis. Here Ruff gives an old fantasy trope, the mystical power of the true name, a Christian spin. Despite their magic powers and cultish tendencies the Sons of Adam are depicted as banal white men, their leader Samuel Braithwhite described as looking like, "a banker after hours, or maybe an inventor in the Edison mold" and "like a Harvard professor who'd misplaced his mortarboard" (*Lovecraft Country* 83, 100). That an evil wizard should look like merely a banker or a Harvard professor is no accident, Ruff is drawing a connection between the levers of power in his novel and the levers of power in the world that we know. Real evil exists in Ruff's novel, but it wears a business suit rather than a wizard's robe.

The book's depiction of the banality of evil does not end with the aesthetics of the Sons of Adam. After the first episode of the novel, the central figure in the Sons of Adam, and the novel's main antagonist is Caleb Braithwhite, the young scion of this tradition. Braithwhite is a "reformer" who takes power by killing his father and his father's generation. Braithwhite makes the case that the brotherhood of sorcerers, and by extension the white supremacist project, can continue with some token incorporation of Black people. I argue that Braithwhite can be read as a personification of certain currents of the New South ideology, a supposedly progressive approach that sought to end segregation less out of altruism than to keep Black Americans engaged and invested in the American project, an integrationist paternalism. We can read this as a distrust for surface level historical change, and perhaps even the changing face of the American government as one political party and

then the other takes power. Here the chronology of American racism is allegorized in the leadership of the Sons of Adam, first the explicit racism of the father, and after that the subtler integrationist racism of the son.

The antagonists of the novel demonstrate the interweaving of American history and genre tropes. As evidenced by their name, the Ancient Dawn and the Sons of Adam draw their power from an interpretive claim on the origins of the world. Just as in *Kavalier & Clay*, the problem of origins is important to *Lovecraft Country*. The Sons of Adam see their relationship to Adam as a source of power. The founder of the order, and the distant relative of Caleb Braithwhite, Titus Braithwhite was compelled to action in 1795, out of a horror that "the age of kings was… just giving way to the age of common man" (*Lovecraft Country* 86). So, the Braithwhites claim a tradition that dates back to the founding of the country, but one that began out of a fear of the egalitarian possibility of that founding. The implication of an ideological battle between egalitarianism and elitism is a common understanding of American history. While this may not be a revolutionary attitude, it works against the even more popular notion of an unblemished American founding that reveres the founding fathers as gods among men.

This dualistic battle over origins is also another of the novel's allusions to Lovecraft. While not as obvious as references to the Necronomicon or otherworldly monsters, the persistent fear of mixed-race individuals throughout Lovecraft's oeuvre exists in *Lovecraft Country* as well, but turned on its head. Rather than white characters fearing secret Black ancestors, the Black characters in Lovecraft Country face the lived reality of the history of rape and sexual assault under slavery. Throughout the novel this history runs like an undercurrent. Atticus is first drawn into

Caleb Braithwhite's plot through the history of rape in his own family, as he discovers that he is descended on his mother's side from a woman who escaped enslavement at the hands of Titus Braithwhite. This lineage makes Atticus and Caleb distant cousins and confers upon Atticus an inheritance of magical power. Where in Lovecraft's work the revelation of racialized ancestors is the ultimate horror, for Atticus it comes to be a source of power. The core of the disagreement between Caleb and his father boils down to how to make use of Atticus's inherent magical power. Caleb's father thinks it must be taken by force, while Caleb is more interested in appeasing Atticus in the hopes of using him as a pawn. What neither man expect is that Atticus would be capable of using that power for himself. He is able to see through the machinations of both men and seizes on his lineage as a source of power to be wielded against them.

The novel concludes with a final episode that brings together the many disparate threads of the earlier episodes to a final assault on Braithwhite and his acolytes. In this action-packed conclusion where our heroes put to use the magical knowledge that they have obtained in their interactions with Braithwhite, the novel most closely resembles the TV show that it began its life as a pitch for. Ultimately, Atticus and his compatriots turn one of Braithwhite's spells against him, insuring that he will never again be able to make use of the dark arts that he devoted his life to studying. The novel's end risks stretching its historiographic argument to the breaking point. How are we to interpret the use of the generic triumph of good over evil in a novel that works to comment on the ongoing abuses of racism in the United States? The novel provides one answer in Braithwhite's final threat that there are "other lodges all over America, "They know about you and they'll be coming for you, but not like I did. They won't think of you as family, or even as a person, and they won't

leave you alone until they get what they want" (*Lovecraft Country* 365). Atticus and his friends have not dismantled the system of racism that spiderwebs the country. Atticus replies, after laughing uproariously, "'What is it that you're trying to scare me with? You think I don't know what I country I live in? I know. We all do. We always have. You're the one who doesn't understand'"(366). Here, Atticus demonstrates that he has achieved a synthesis of his own genre knowledge and his father's knowledge of the racist structures of the United States. In this synthesis, a better world is possible, but only through a fight that must be continually renewed. Here the novel seems to argue that the fight for racial justice in the United States functions something like genre fiction, a fight that must be renewed over and over again with variation. The act of reading, even for fans of low prestige genres like pulp can be enlisted in this fight, but only if readers are willing to read for history as both Ruff and Chabon argue they must.

We might call this a hopeful defeatism, the battle can never be fully won, but is always worth fighting. I argue that in this conclusion the novel addresses Black and white American readers simultaneously. For Black readers, Ruff is acknowledging a struggle that they have faced all their lives, as they like Atticus would already have an implicit understanding of the racism inherent in the United States. For the implied white audience that I discussed above, the novel hammers home its message that racism is not confined to a single time or place, but is ever present. It lives in our country's geography, both physical and imagined. One of those places, is in the pages of pulp fiction and its genre descendants. In the novel's afterword, where Ruff discusses how he came to understand the experience of Black fans of science fiction better through Noles's essay, Ruff puts himself within this camp of white readers that

must be educated. So, while it is tempting to compare Ruff's novel to fiction by Black American authors and find it wanting for nuance, it is perhaps more accurate to compare Ruff's novel to the millions of less notable genre novels that are still published every year and implicitly target white Americans. Ruff's use of these genre tools for the purposes of rewriting American history is thus an act of auto-critique, that sets *Lovecraft Country* apart as Weird History.

Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* show us that reading for genre is always reading for history. And that history in the United States is always a history of race. Both novels draw our attention to parts of midcentury American history that are left out of popular narratives of the period. By arguing that the lowest of all cultural production, the often sleazy and forgotten pulpwood magazines, Chabon and Ruff engage with the totality of genre fiction. Not just because the pulps were a hotbed of genre experimentation whose effects we are still feeling in our culture, but also because if the pulps contain kernels of historical truth, so too do all cultural objects. In *Kavalier & Clay*, Chabon's depiction of Joe and Sammy's comic book war offers an escape from the triumphalist narrative of the Second World War that casts the United States as noble world-saving protagonist. In its place, Chabon pays attention to the complexities of Jewish life in midcentury United States. His characters navigating unprecedented times with the help of pulp precedent. In *Lovecraft Country* Matt Ruff centers the experiences of Black American fans of science fiction in the 1950s to show a side of Black life other than the oft-depicted images of the Civil Rights Era that have become ubiquitous in American popular culture and public life. Ruff's characters are ordinary Americans thrust into extraordinary circumstances who find a way to confront those

circumstances through genre savvy. This allows Ruff to model a genre knowledge that is embedded within the world rather than an escape from it. In the next chapter, I'll turn to Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Colson Whitehead's *The Intutionist,* two novels that engage with the history of race and racism in the United States by presenting readers with alternate histories of the United States of America. In these Weird Histories, depictions of the past as it wasn't continuing the thread of authors interrogating the imperative ethnic minority American writers face to write from a place of "authenticity" that runs throughout this study.

Chapter 3

ALTERED AMERICAS: ETHNIC IDENTITY IN PASTS THAT WEREN'T

In the last two decades there has been a massive explosion of alternate Americas on offer. If you want to explore a world where the Axis powers won the second World War or the Underground Railroad was a literal railroad that could take you to many "states" of racial possibility or white supremacists are wizards in league with extraterrestrial horrors, you can turn to a TV adaptation of a genre novel.[70] These visions of histories that didn't quite happen exist under the capacious banner of alternate history fiction. It's no accident that these examples are all adaptations of novels, the novel as a form is particularly suited to the telling of alternate history stories, which often seek to live in alternate pasts and watch history progress differently than we know it did. But they also offer distinct genre pleasures, emerging out of science fiction's pulpy past. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* have comfortably made the transition from literary fiction to prestige tv, but the transmogrification of works like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* from popular genre fiction to high-brow television dramas signals a broad popular interest in what was once a niche subgenre on the pulpier side of science fiction. It should come as no

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[70] Here I'm referencing Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*. For more on *Lovecraft Country* see the previous chapter.

surprise that this boom in production has coinceded with renewed scholarly attention to the genre.

In the past two chapters, I've looked at Weird Histories that mix historical fiction with ghost stories and pulp fiction, now I'm turning to fictions that that hang their hat on breaking with known history. Alternate histories, or extended counterfactual narratives, imagine the past and the present as it might be if certain key events had gone differently. Put simply, these narratives ask us "What if?" Scholars have posited multiple reasons for this new focus on a longstanding tradition. One possibility is that while counterfactual thinking seems to be a staple of historical thinking, the alternate history novel has only recently cohered as a distinct and marketable genre. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson argues that 1995 "is the birth year of the alternate history novel as a genre," while recognizing that "the counterfactual… has been pursued in print since Classical Greece" (63). [71] While the recent spate of adaptations signal both a popular interest and a market viability, alternate historical thinking in an expansive sense has long featured in popular American culture, with Sinclair Lewis's 1953 novel of the rise of a fascist dictator in the United States, *It Can't Happen Here* being an early example.[72] Noting the recent popularity of the

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[71] Catherine Gallagher dates this transition somewhat later, writing that "the counterfactual-history mode spread from science-fiction genres (where it had existed since the 1950s) to the mainstream novel in the first decade of this century" (1).

[72] Alternate histories have also been popular in TV and film, examples include the massively popular 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, offers a smaller scale take on the genre with its depiction of the ripple effects of a single seemingly ordinary man having never been born, and the widely influential original Star Trek series which aired from 1966 to 1969 starting a decades long tradition of alternate history plots in the franchise.

genre, a growing body of scholarship has worked to understand the generic characteristics of the alternate history novel and provide an accounting for its history and emergence as a popular form.

This chapter looks at two novels published just as the twentieth century was ending and the twenty-first century began, Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* and Colson Whitehead's 1999 debut novel *The Intuitionist*. Published within five years of each other, but by two very different authors at two very different points in their career, both of these novels incorporate genre tropes into prestige interrogations of the supposed racial progressivism at the heart of the United States's national identity offering a compelling case study of early Weird History as it is becoming a distinct genre that can exist outside of postmodernism. On the surface, Roth and Whitehead represent two different approaches to genre fiction, informed by their respective generations, but when we look deeper we can see many striking similarities between the two authors. When *The Plot Against America* was published in 2004, Roth was an elder statesman of American letters and no longer the oft-debated firebrand of his early career. Roth first gained attention with his 1959 National Book Award-winning novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*, which launched a career that spanned 51 years. The combination of *Goodbye, Columbus* and the publication of his fourth novel *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969 solidified Roth's reputation as the leading voice of Jewish American literature. Roth's representation of Jewish Americans was heavily criticized, often from within the Jewish American communities he was writing about.[73] Throughout this career, Roth's fiction was often

[73] For more on Roth's tendentious reception by other Jewish-Americans see Timothy Parrish's essay "Roth and Ethnic Identity" and Alan Cooper's 1996 book length treatment of the subject, *Philip Roth and the Jews*.

explicitly concerned with Jewish-American identity even as it was ambivalent towards it. Timothy Parrish summarizes this duality succinctly when he writes that in Roth's fiction, Roth's

> "American identity is a consequence of his ethnic identity but also that his ethnic identity is a consequence of his American identity… Roth portrays the inevitable possibilities allowed for and the restrictions imposed by a diverse multicultural American society" (127).

Roth performs this exploration most often through a postmodernism-infused and satire-tinged social realism that only rarely dips into the tropes of popular genres.

Alternatively, *The Intuitionist* published just five years earlier in 1999 was Colson Whitehead's first novel, beginning a lauded career marked by a consistent commitment to experimentation with popular genres. Where Roth was often in tension with the Jewish-American community, Colson Whitehead has consistently been lauded by those inside and outside of the Black American community as a voice for Black Americans. The most notable example of Whitehead's experimentation with genre and the high point of his cultural prestige (so far) is his later alternate history novel *The Underground Railroad*, which was published in 2016 to rave reviews and would go on to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, a place in Oprah's book club, and a prestigious limited series adaptation from Amazon Studios created and directed by Academy Award winner Barry Jenkins. While *The Intuitionist* is not typically understood as an alternate history novel, this chapter argues that naming it as such allows us to see the ways in which it evokes a similar sense of unease with received historical narrative, creating a fictional past that is both familiar and strange. Both Roth and Whitehead make use of genre conventions to depict protagonists facing crises of racial identity. In both novels, the lead characters are confronted with the ways their own ethnic identity is forced upon them, often in the face of their own

ambivalence towards that identity. The backdrop for this is an altered America, where the seeming certainties of the past have become hard to nail down. For Roth, the autobiographical and social realist aspects of *The Plot Against America* argue for the plausibility of the novel's alternate past. For Whitehead, the competing elements of alternate history, detective, and utopian fiction compete as interpretive lenses for understanding the past.

Released in 1999 and 2004 respectively, *The Intuitionist* and *The Plot Against America* straddle the divide between a pre-and post-9/11 America, but they are both reactions to the third way liberalism of the Clinton years. As much as Roth's *Plot Against America* is a jeremiad against the Bush II administration, that administration isn't possible without the disintegration of the American left that preceded it. It goes without saying that the devastation of the September 11th attacks and the ongoing "war on terror" mark a clear break in American culture, a break that has become one of several popular period breaks in literary criticism. But like any period break, "post-9/11" belies long term continuities. Brian McHale has argued that 1989-2001 constitutes an "interregnum" period which was characterized by "in-betweenness, volatility, multidirectionality and a bubble economy [in which] postmodernism, seemed, if anything, to come into its own" (126). For McHale alternate history is just one manifestation of the "ontological plurality and alternativity" of this period, through which "speculative fiction entertained thought-experiments involving future or alternative world orders *without America*" (127–28). One thing that reading these novels together demonstrates is that many of the concerns that animate discussions of contemporary literature and have been argued to set it apart from postmodernism can in fact be located earlier. Despite straddling this perceived divide and their different

positions in their authors' careers, these novels both contributed to the expansion of alternate history from the territory of genre fiction to the domain of prestige literature and popular culture broadly. This transition was facilitated by a waning of postmodernism, the moment that Andrew Hoberek characterizes as "putting realism and postmodernism into play as available genres or modes," the defining feature of literary fiction and the adoption of its techniques throughout a much wider range of cultural production (502). This exchange was reciprocal, as postmodernism went mainstream, the authors of the genre turn were taking popular genres more seriously. As discussed in the introduction, these authors of literary fiction saw themselves less as mining popular culture and more as creators of popular culture that engaged with it on its own terms.

In this chapter, I make what has become a common distinction between the alternate history novel, which I discuss as a genre, and the counterfactual more broadly, which I characterize as a mode of thought or imaginative space. In her comprehensive study of what she calls the "counterfactual imagination," Catherine Gallagher delineates several forms of counterfactual thinking, defining the alternate history novel specifically as a work which "invents not only alternative-historical trajectories, but also fictional characters. Combining with various novelistic generic forms… allow[s] for the illusion of a more complete alternative reality" (3). Gallagher's distinction is notable for how closely it resembles Lukács's definition of the historical novel. The comparison is useful as it shows that the alternate history novel is already a mixed generic form, one that depends upon the techniques of historical fiction, which it combines with the impulse towards counterfactuals with pre-existing novelistic genres and techniques. Echoing Lukács again, Gallagher argues

that one of the key characteristics of alternate history fiction is that it makes national histories "the central dramas… [they] stride into the foreground and take on character functions, the dynamic interactions between the communal and the individual are far more fundamental than they are in normal novels" (14). One way to understand the alternate history novel is as an intensification of the techniques of historical fiction by introducing not just fictional characters into historical milieus but also alternate national trajectories, the alternate history novel further levels the narrative playing field between the nation and the individual. This allows for drastic reworkings of existing historiography and encourages readers to investigate the boundaries between fact and fiction. By making history itself mutable, these novels can explore the role that the individual plays in the drama of historical narrative formation and how we understand ourselves in relation to it.

Traditionally, alternate history novels have been located under two generic umbrellas, science fiction and speculative fiction. These labels often appear together in writing on the genre, but they represent different approaches to the problem of genre taxonomy. Speculative fiction is a label that has been preferred by literary critics for its descriptive and analytical potential. Casting a wide net, the label speculative fiction allows critics to emphasize the connections between a wide range of non-realist genres, science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, weird fiction, horror, etc. By using this label, critics make the argument that these genres share a set of thematic concerns. Speculative fiction makes use of prominent non-realist elements, often in a way that allows us to make connections between the world that is and the speculative worlds of the text. While speculative fiction has been a useful designation for scholars and has made some headway in recent years, it has yet to become popular in broader cultures

of reading.[74] Science fiction has the benefit of being a widely and publicly recognized genre, but its popular perception as the domain of spaceships and aliens makes it an uneasy home for the alternate history genre. Alternate history fits some definitions of science fiction, particularly those preferred by scholars, but it lacks the stereotypical hallmarks of the genre. Alternate history fiction does not take place in the future, it is often earthbound, and it often does not feature societies marked by scientific or technological advancements different from those of our own reality.[75] Perhaps more importantly, alternate history does not always provide a concrete historical or scientific explanation for the change in the timeline. Despite this, aligning alternate history novels with science fiction highlights its development into a popular form by authors of science fiction writing primarily for science fiction publishing imprints and other popular science fiction media. It also works to explain the genre's interest in possible human societal formations, a staple of the science fiction genre.

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[74] For example, both Amazon and Barnes & Noble have "Science Fiction and Fantasy" categories on their website, but neither has a separate category for speculative fiction. According to Google Books's Ngram Viewer, the phrase "science fiction" has appeared in print an order of magnitude more often than "speculative fiction," representing .00034% of "bigrams" in 2019, opposed to speculative fiction's .000013%, a rough demonstration of its greater cultural cache.

[75] There are notable exceptions to all of these generalizations, particularly in the alternate history fiction written by authors that mostly publish science fiction such as William Gibson, Stephen Baxter, and Harry Turtledove. Turtledove provides an interesting case study as he is possibly the first and only "Alternate History Author," having made a name for himself in the genre and working in it almost exclusively. Turtledove's novels alternatively make use of science fiction and fantasy conceits with his most famous novel featuring time travelling South Africans aiding the Confederacy in the Civil War and another series imagining a Second World War fought not with tanks and guns, but dragons and sorcerers.

So why did alternate history appeal to both Roth and Whitehead at roughly the same moment in American history? Why would Roth turn to it so late in his career just as Whitehead is making use of it in his literary debut? I argue that the answer to that question lies in the converging histories of postmodern and "minority" or "ethnic" literatures in the United States. Of course, despite critical perceptions, these two groupings of authors have always overlapped, and many individual texts could easily fit under both umbrellas. While fiction by those belonging to minority American ethnic groups does not easily fit in the label postcolonial, Sara Upstone has argued that the difference between postcolonial and postmodern literature "may have become a matter of reading practice rather than textual content" (264). In fact, just as both novels serve as examples of the rise of Weird Fiction, they also serve as late examples of what Mark McGurl calls "high cultural pluralism" in his magisterial account of postwar American literary culture, *The Program Era*. McGurl defines high cultural pluralism, which he argues emerges in the 1960s and has solidified by the 1980s, as "a body of fiction that joins the high literary values of modernism with the experience of cultural difference and authenticity of the ethnic voice" (*The Program Era* 32). Roth and Whitehead's novels are written at a time when the novels McGurl calls high cultural pluralism have already been acknowledged as classics for decades and the cultural climate in the United States has changed dramatically.[76] Observing a very similar phenomenon to Weird History, Ramón Saldivár has called this fiction "historical fantasy." Arguing that the work by novelists like Junot Diáz represents an attempt to explore a post-race America (post-race here meaning the current cultural

[76] In fact, in McGurl's chapter on high cultural pluralism, his first example of the genre is Philip Roth's 1969 novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*.

milieu in which "race remains a central question, but one no longer defined exclusively in shades of black or white, in the exact manner we once imagined" ("Historical Fantasy" 575). He goes on to write that these works "represent the postrace attempt to explain aesthetically, in the formal terms of novelistic irony, why race in the twenty-first century still matters… as a real effect of imaginary patterns of behavior" (595).

While past scholarship on alternate history has focused on its function as either allegory for the present or interrogation of the conditions of historical knowledge, this chapter seeks to examine how alternate history novels make an intervention into popular historiography. I argue that through their use of alternate history these novels critique narratives of racial progressivism through their depictions of protagonists experiencing crises in their ethnic identity. The protagonists of these novels interrogate how they relate to American society and history, unaware that the history that they occupy is at all alternate. I argue that the intellectual frisson caused by this disjuncture is central to the pedagogical function of these novels, which exists alongside their aesthetic and entertainment goals. I argue that one pedagogical goal of Roth and Whitehead's novels is to destabilize triumphalist narratives of racial progressivism in the 20th century United States. This narrative of racial progressivism is central to Americans's teleological tendency towards exceptionalism, which while certainly waning, still undergirds much of American public discourse and national identity. We can see it best in the superlatives that persist stubbornly in the United States's public discourse. The idea that the United States is somehow the best or freest

country in the world is as stifling of historical thought and political dissent as Leibniz's pronouncement that we are living in the "best of all possible worlds."[77]

The crises of identity depicted in these novels are complicated by the various genre tropes that Roth and Whitehead introduce to their novels beyond alternate history and historical fiction. Both authors complicate the relationship between the past as it happened and their alternate pasts. As a genre, the alternate history novel is relatively devoid of ties to specific themes or settings, making it a particularly flexible framework into which multiple generic valences can be incorporated. *The Intuitionist* and *The Plot Against America* both make use of this framework to reimagine defining moments of the popular narrative of racial progressivism in 20th century America just as it transitions into the 21st. Roth's *Plot Against America* shows us an alternate US that never enters World War II on the side of the allies and Whitehead explodes the Civil Rights Era into its constitutive historical pieces showing us that it is not simply a moment of national triumph. In this chapter I will first examine *The Plot Against America* and then turn to *The Intuitionist*, while this reverses the order in which the novels were published, I believe that it will be instructive to examine a novel which more closely follows the generic conventions of the alternate history novel before transitioning to one that subverts those conventions. Additionally, discussing the novels in this order has the benefit of following their internal chronologies, beginning with Roth's alternate World War II followed by Whitehead's alternate Civil Rights Era. Together these novels show us how the ethnic identities of those living in the past are always more complicated than triumphalist narratives of the past would lead us to

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[77] In a 2021 YouGov poll of 11,000 US adults, the majority responded that they believe that the US is the "greatest nation on Earth," by 50%, with just 31% responding in the negative." (Ballard)

believe, giving us a better understanding of the role that ethnic identity plays in Weird History.

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, published during the fever pitch of nationalism and jingoism that was the first term of Bush II, imagines a world in which Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his bid for a third term, resulting in an isolationist United States that stays out of the second World War through diplomatic "understandings" with Hitler's Germany and Hirohito's Japan. The threat of racist violence in the form of pogroms against the Jewish population of the United States hangs over the novel, before erupting into violence in its bloody conclusion. By imagining a United States that never enters the war, opting instead to engage in its own brand of folksy fascism, Roth tackles well-trod counterfactual territory from a different angle. The proliferation of counterfactuals by historians and fiction writers alike that center on Nazi Germany has come to define counterfactual thought. The prospect of an Axis victory and what future this might lead to has captured the counterfactual imagination. There are multiple reasons for this. First, the defeat of the Axis is a clearly delineated and impactful "event" in history. Wars provide a series of relatively discrete historical events, with the overarching conflicts and individual battles having the binary outcome of "winners" and "losers." World War II has received sustained attention from military historians, a subdiscipline of history which draws considerable public interest and has a robust history of counterfactual thinking. Finally, there is a morbid fascination that hangs around the horror of the second World War, Nazi Germany, and Hitler himself. In the introduction to his speculative essay "How Hitler Could Have Won the War," the military historian John Keegan sums up this fascination while touching on several of

the factors that have made WWII such fertile ground for counterfactual thinkers. He writes that:

> Adolf Hitler may be the perfect example of how an individual with a genius for the main chance can—through determination close to madness, and more than a little luck—alter history… None of those around him had the same evil charisma. The conditions he fed on may have been largely unavoidable but the Nazi revolution he created and led was not… Hitler's mind was a virtual Pandora's box of what ifs. (295)

For Keegan, Hitler is singular both in historical significance and evil, almost a supernatural force, and thus had a singular impact on the outcome of the war. Roth's invention of an American Hitler, wearing the mask of the historical Lindbergh, shifts the counterfactual imagination back to the homefront and risks reifying the Great Man Theory of history.[78]

Any history of the second World War, alternate or otherwise must acknowledge the outsized role Hitler and Nazis play in the popular understanding of the period. For evidence of the centrality of the Hitler and the Nazis to the counterfactual imagination we need look no further than the book covers of prominent counterfactual works by both historians and writers of fiction. One edition of Niall Ferguson's collection of essays, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, depicts a collage of Hitler alongside Franz Ferdinand and JFK; *The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century*, a collection edited by Harry Turtledove and Martin H. Greenberg, synthesizes the most popular subjects of alternate history fiction with its depiction of Hitler wearing a Confederate flag armband and Abraham Lincoln

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[78] For more on the Great Man Theory of History see the introduction and the fourth chapter.

standing in front of the flag of the Soviet Union. Taking a related approach, many covers of Philip K. Dick's influential alternate history novel *The Man in the High Castle* show a United States divided, with one half draped in the flag of Nazi Germany and the other with the flag of Imperial Japan, even the cover of *The Plot Against America* depicts a swastika superimposed over a stamp featuring the landscape of Yosemite, reveling in the shocking juxtaposition of americana and the Nazi symbol.[79] These covers demonstrate the centrality of both Hitler and the fascist aesthetics of Nazi Germany to the marketing of alternate history. Hitler, it seems, sells books.

Roth's novel stages an intervention in this tradition of counterfactuals that reimagine the second world war by discarding their fetishization of an invading fascist other in the form of Nazism and imagining instead a homegrown American fascism. The horrors of Roth's alternate 1940s America are spearheaded by Lindbergh's isolationist administration and its affinity for Nazi Germany, but they are shown to emerge naturally from a historically extant culture of racism-infused American exceptionalism of which Lindbergh is merely the expression. The sense of the plausibility of this alternate America is achieved through the novel's depiction of the documentary evidence of the world both before and after the world of the novel diverges from our own. In this section I will explore how the collision between the documentary approach Roth takes to historiography and the novel's central coming-

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[79] This image is taken from a striking scene in the novel, where the young stamp-collecting Philip experiences a nightmare featuring this image. Sarah Wasserman has argued that depicting this piece of imagined material culture on the cover of the novel "makes Philip's nightmare 'real,' turning the novel that the reader holds into an ersatz stamp album… [this] is one more way that the novel troubles easy distinctions between counterfactual and factual history" (105).

of-age narrative problematizes the centrality of ethnic identity in contemporary American historical fiction. By making the protagonist of the novel a version of himself at eight years old, Roth plays into the persistent readings of his work as autobiographical. The novel insists on its historical plausibility, a plausibility that clashes with our knowledge that this *isn't* what happened to Roth or his family. This collision of autobiography and counterfactual result in a work that defamiliarizes both what readers have come to expect from Roth's fiction and the alternate history genre. Philip's attempts to abandon his own Jewishness resonate with Roth's own ambivalence towards being read as a Jewish-American Novelist, just as they clash with the novel's commitment to depicting the realities of American antisemitism. This aura of plausibility is created by Roth's engagement with the historical writing on the period and the constant attempts by his characters to place themselves within their alternate present through an understanding of real American history. That Roth and his family can locate the Lindbergh presidency within their internal narratives of American history points towards the novel's intervention into American historiography. A Lindbergh presidency didn't happen, but the possibility of one is latent in America's past. The antisemitism in the novel is perpetrated not by invading German Nazis, but by the white Americans that in our timeline would come to be known as the Greatest Generation.

This tension between arguing for the realities of antisemitism by depicting eruptions of it that didn't happen has led to criticism of the politics of the novel. Writing in 2006, Walter Benn Michaels makes a scathing critique of the novel, arguing that its most harrowing depictions of antisemitism "were a standard feature of American life at least from 1896 (when Plessy legalized segregation) until the early

1960s. But, of course, it happened to black people, almost never to Jews" (289). He elaborates that this is not so much an act of historical theft, but part of a neoliberal project in which racism must be eradicated, but class and poverty are not just unavoidable but righteous. He writes:

> properly understood, Roth's anti-Semitism is not a replacement for anti-black prejudice but a placeholder for prejudice of all kinds—anti-black, anti-gay, anti-Latino, anti-whatever. The point of a novel like *The Plot Against America*—the point of calling it the plot against America—is that it's not just Jews but the very idea of America that's the target of anti-Semites, that anti-Semitism is a kind of anti-Americanism. What this means is the complete identification of America with neoliberalism… in other words, that the world we want is a world where (unlike Dr. Miller and unlike Mr. Roth) we are allowed to do what we can afford to do. (298)

I agree with Michaels's critique, it is a trenchant reminder that the mass published novel, despite its political ambitions, exists to serve a market function. That *The Plot Against America*'s antiracism is so explicitly pedagogical, even going so far as to include a timeline of real historical events and suggestions for further reading as supplementary material, show how Weird History necessitates a slightly different approach to Roth's interrogation of his own Jewish-American identity than he has previously taken. At the risk of devolving into apologia, I argue that the obviousness of the novel's antiracism can also be read as railing against the very social situation of its publication, in which Roth must always write a novel that is both Jewish-American and about himself.

The autobiographical aspect of *The Plot Against America* is of course an amplification of a tendency that has run throughout Roth's entire oeuvre. As has often been pointed out, Roth's work consistently subverts the dichotomy of autobiography and fiction. Exploring this trend in his work, Hana Wirth-Nesher writes that Roth's

writing is marked by "an aura of scandal as Jewish-American readers have insisted on reading his satires as autobiographical works" (159). While this scandal declined as Roth became an increasingly established fixture in the landscape of American fiction, the alleged anti-Semitism of Roth's work would continue to shape the reception of his fiction. Many of Roth's most prominent novels, including *The Ghost Writer* and *American Pastoral*, dramatize the act of writing fiction through their depiction of Roth's writer-protagonist Nathan Zuckerman. Like Roth, Zuckerman weaves his past into his novels, blurring the line between Roth and Zuckerman. *The Plot Against America* was preceded by Roth's American trilogy of novels published from 1997 to 2000 all of which feature metafictional frame narratives in which Zuckerman interviews prominent Newark residents that become the basis for his fiction.[80] Where the Zuckerman of the American trilogy operates in a nostalgic mode, mining his past for material for his fiction, the Philip Roth of *The Plot Against America* is much less self-assured and even less coded. Philip's anxiety about placing himself in an America in crisis set the stage for the novel's interrogation of American history just as they raise the specter of Roth's own discontent with his place in history.

In alternate history fiction, there is a tendency towards a narrative tension between the top-level narrative of the (altered) history and the more traditionally novelistic character-driven plot. At least some of the pleasure of alternate history fiction is seeing how the drama of nations might have played out differently, which can distract from or even minimize the lives of individual characters. *The Plot Against America* solves this narrative problem by depicting the Lindbergh presidency through

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[80] The American Trilogy consists of *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000).

the Roth family's encounters with their community and the media. Thus, the novel's plot plays out at three connected levels of society. The first is that of the nation, or the Lindbergh administration and how it shapes and is shaped by the national mood. The second is that of the Weequahic Jewish community in Newark, New Jersey which the Roth family calls home. And the third, which constitutes the majority of its plot, follows a fictionalized version of Philip Roth's own family. The Roth family of the novel is a family alive to the never-ending process of historical narrative creation out of lived experience. Philip's father, Herman, is an avid consumer of the news, which he uses to locate himself and his family in American society. Herman makes this explicit when he tells his sons that, "'History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark. Even here on Summit Avenue. Even what happens in his house to an ordinary man—that'll be history too someday" (*Plot Against America* 180). There's some irony here as this both is and isn't true, Roth's family does go on to make history, but it does so by dent of Roth's own celebrity status. The novel itself does some work to raise the experiences of individual Jewish Americans to the level of history, but it must do so through the contrivance of alternate history and the introduction of an antisemitic Lindbergh administration.

We see the lives of the Roth family and their community, before, during, and after the Lindbergh presidency, which becomes increasingly overt in its antisemitism, before ending abruptly with Lindbergh's mysterious disappearance and the timeline of the novel returning to a state that roughly resembles that of our own. After his election, Lindbergh's overt antisemitism quickly gives way to a more covert series of programs that seek to "integrate" Jewish Americans into American culture. All of this is witnessed by Philip, whose naivete and disorientation during the Lindbergh years

works in concert with the reader's unfamiliarity with the novel's alternate history. This metafictional depiction of the author makes literal the autobiographical assumptions that are made about Roth's work and ethnic minority American literature in general. It encourages readers to compare Roth's lived reality with the reality of the novel. While this kind of ironic juxtaposition is the bread and butter of counterfactual narrative, Roth's metafictional approach heightens this tendency of the genre while putting it towards notably postmodern ends. Roth's decision to use a fictionalized version of himself in the novel destabilizes our understanding of Roth the author and Philip the character, it encourages readers to constantly question the line between the fact and fiction of Roth's life. Additionally, it evokes the genre, social, and geographic territory explored by Roth's other fiction. So as readers we are prompted to not just compare Roth the author with Philip the character, but also Roth the author of satire and social realism with Roth the author of alternate history. *The Plot Against America* has at its center a typical alternate history conceit, but Roth's use of himself and his family as characters means that the constructedness of his alternate world and even his function as an author is in constant tension with the novel's genre pleasures. The effect of this layering of meaning and irony is that what on its surface is a realist depiction of an alternate past is constantly raising the specter of a metafictional reading.

Just as the novel tells us definitively that its protagonist is *Philip Roth* rather than a thinly veiled stand-in like Zuckerman, it also curtails any speculation about the cause of the change in the historical past. The nexus point is one of the defining characteristics of the alternate history novel, it refers to a specific altered event responsible for history changing course; *The Plot Against America* establishes its nexus point early and explicitly. In the alternate timeline of the novel, the Republican

Party's nomination of Lindbergh for the presidency is the moment the novel's timeline diverges from our own. The novel begins with a brief introduction to the Roth family pre-1940 that ends abruptly with the single sentence paragraph, "Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed" (*Plot Against America* 5). By diagetically marking the divergence from the real timeline explicitly, the novel encourages readers to compare the true historical timeline to that of the novel. The nexus point becomes an anchor in the novel as its action weaves back and forth seamlessly between the world as it was pre-nexus and the Lindbergh timeline. This sustained depiction of events before the nexus point marks *The Plot Against America* as unique among alternate history novels, for which the pre-nexus timeline is of little narrative interest and serves mostly as backdrop for an alternate world. With Roth himself as the novel's protagonist, the segments of the novel that take place before Lindbergh's nomination are (at least in theory) realist depictions of Roth's own past, the juxtaposition of these autobiographical sections with the alternate history of the novel demonstrate the possibility of Roth's alternate timeline and the genre heterogeneity of the alternate history novel. The Roth family's attempts to integrate the Lindbergh presidency into their understanding of history and their own lives illustrate the ways that the course of history becomes natural and inevitable, and how that process can break down.

Where most alternate history novels emphasize a discontinuity between the world before and after the nexus point, *The Plot Against America* instead focuses on the continuity between Lindbergh's and Roosevelt's Americas. One way that the novel establishes this continuity is by grounding its alternate past in documentary evidence and engagement with the historical record, creating an aura of historical accuracy. The

most obvious way that Roth makes the case for the historical accuracy of his alternate timeline is through a lengthy postscript that "is intended as a reference for readers interested in tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" (*Plot Against America* 364). Roth's brief introduction frames the pedagogical function of the postscript, inviting readers to "track" the interplay between historical fact and imagining in the text and do further research of their own. The postscript provides an extensive bibliography of historical works consulted, a timeline of major figures in the novel, and two excerpts, one from a speech given by Lindbergh and the other from A. Scott Berg's biography of Lindbergh. The inclusion of this postscript is made more notable by its uniqueness, despite Roth's frequent forays into historical fiction he does not include a postscript or discussion of sources in any of his other novels. We might interpret this simply as an abundance of caution around changing the historical record for fictional purposes, but it also clothes the novel in the paratexts of history, creating a generically hybrid work that encourages a pedagogical reading of its historical content.

The pedagogical approach that the novel takes to history extends beyond the cover of the novel as Roth worked to establish the novel's relationship to the writing of historians in interviews as well. When asked about the origins of the novel, Roth often repeated a story that drove home its emergence from his reading of history. In one interview he recounts the story in some detail stating,

> I happened to be reading Arthur Schlesinger's autobiography… and at one point in discussing the 1940 elections, he said that there were members of the right wing of the Republican Party, the isolated--the very strong isolationist wing, who'd wanted to run Lindbergh for president, but Lindbergh was never a candidate. That's all he said and went on. But the line leaped out at me and I made a note in the margin saying, `What if they had?' And as fate would have it, a couple days

> later, I happened to have lunch with Arthur. And I said, `You know, tell me about that.' But there wasn't much more to tell other than what there was in the book. And in a month or so when I had finished the project I was working on and was looking for a new book to write, I went back to this and I immediately got started on it. It was an immediate spark plug for me. (*Roth Discusses His New Book*)[81]

While this account of the origin of the novel is too tidy to be completely believable, especially coming from an author promoting a novel that fabricates his own past, it is perhaps more telling because of its air of embellishment.[82] In the anecdote, Roth narrates how he has positioned himself as a novelist depicting the historical past. First, he places the origin of *The Plot Against America* in an encounter with the work of a historian, and not just any historian, but one of the preeminent voices on midcentury America. *The Plot Against America* begins life as marginalia in Schlesinger's work and then develops through a conversation between the historian and the novelist. Despite the novel's alternate history conceit, this is a fairly traditional understanding of the historical novelist as writing in conversation with historians.

Roth's narration of the origins of the novel at a moment of his own reading of a history is fitting as it works as an extratextual extension of the novel's interest in how historical narrative is crafted by individuals. The Roth family of *The Plot Against America* is constantly using encounters with the news media to locate themselves within American society. With Philip's father Herman Roth's steady news diet as an example, all members of the Roth family are avid consumers of newspapers, radio

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[81] The autobiography that Roth references here is Schlesinger's *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*.

[82] Compare Roth's depiction of his fiction's origins with Chabon's interest in origin stories in chapter 2. Both authors show a willingness to make the origins of their fiction into coherent stories unto themselves.

broadcasts, and the local Newsreel Theater. These interactions with the news media allow the novel to incorporate the national narrative diagetically, both readers and the Roth family encounter the news together. In listening to the radio or going to the Newsreel Theater the Roth family experiences the news communally. By centering the novel on a family that cannot escape their context, the novel doubles the relationship between history and those living in the present. The Roth family, like readers, cannot witness history firsthand, they can only experience history through the traces that it leaves behind. Their media objects are our archival objects. The novel itself becomes a kind of meta-archive, staging the moment of historical narrative formation. History-making becomes the experience of life itself, rather than something that happens in hindsight. The effect is to emphasize not just the constructedness of historical narrative, but to elevate that construction to a central human experience.

The construction of historical narrative is personified in Shepsie Tirschwell, a friend of Herman Roth and the editor at the local newsreel theater. Not coincidentally, Shepsie's family is one of the first Jewish families from Newark to flee Lindbergh's United States for asylum in Canada. Shepsie's hours of editing newsreel footage shapes his response to the Lindbergh administration, "he was convinced by all the raw unedited film he'd been watching… that the secret side of the pact reached in Iceland between Lindbergh and Hitler in 1941 provided for… America's president to establish the 'American Fascist New Order'" (*Plot Against America* 194). As an editor of newsreel footage, Shepsie demonstrates how individuals must craft their understanding of history and the world from heterogenous found materials. It is tempting to think of Shepsie's access to the "raw" footage as unmediated information, but even the footage he works with provides an incomplete view of the world,

capturing only those moments where cameramen were present and shot from the fixed perspective of the camera. Shepsie's decision to flee to Canada with his family is based on the narrative that he assembles from his work at the Newsreel Theater.

This process, by which the raw events of the past are transmuted into narrative, is repeated throughout the novel, and it shows how historical narrative emerges almost immediately from current events. Historical narratives don't just describe or recount the past, they interpret it and shape our memories. Philip's description of the evolving media narrative following Lindbergh's election demonstrates this process,

> on the morning after the election disbelief prevailed… by the day after that everybody seemed to understand everything, and the radio commentators and the news columnists made it sound as if Roosevelt's defeat had been preordained… what Charles A. Lindbergh represented was normalcy raised to heroic proportions, a decent man… who had resoundingly demonstrated to the entire planet the courage to take charge and the fortitude to shape history… (*Plot Against America* 53)

This passage demonstrates the novel's simultaneous dedication to understated metafictional play and realist (alternate) historical fiction, the unreality of the alternate past actually works to reinforce the novel's historical argument. In these moments, the pedagogical function of the novel merges with its use of postmodern techniques, specifically historiographic metafiction. We are encouraged not just to see the constructedness of history, but to interrogate our own received narratives of the past for moments of historical narrative construction.

The Roth family's encounters with news media are used to bridge the gap between their lives and the events unfolding at the national level. In the penultimate section of the novel, as the antisemitic mood of the nation is rising to a fever pitch, there is a narrative break from the Roth family and their experiences. This interlude in the novel is presented as an excerpt "Drawn from the Archives of Newark's Newsreel

Theater" and is structured as a timeline of the final days of the Lindbergh administration and the chaos that results from its abrupt end with his disappearance on October 7th, 1942 (*Plot Against America* 301). The prose of this interlude mimics the construction of a newsreel film, presenting a series of images, speeches, and excerpts from radio broadcasts and newspapers, the documentary past intruding into the text of the novel. In this section the tension between the personal and the national erupts, breaking the narrative cohesion of the two levels. The timeline of events presented does away with both the Roth family and the conventions of narrative history, demonstrating the failure of both narrative history and the historical novel to represent the breakdown of liberal society. The novel's narrative cohesion is replaced by a day-by-day timeline of events, a form of historical representation more akin to the chronicle than narrative history. Where historical narrative makes an argument for the causality and historical importance of various events, the chronicle is under no such illusions. It is less a narrative than a list of events, just one damn thing after another.[83] The absence of the Roth family in this timeline suggests the total subsumption of the individual into the breathlessly paced national tragedy.

These depictions of the national mood are interwoven with Philip's increasing sense of crisis around his Jewish-American identity. The narrative voice in the novel is Philip at some point in the future looking back on the events of the Lindbergh presidency, thus as readers we have access to both the young Philip's interiority and

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[83] According to Hayden White, the chronicle "presents events in the order of their occurrence and cannot, therefore, offer the kind of meaning that a narratologically governed account can be said to provide. Second… the account does not so much conclude as simply terminate" (White 17).

his more mature reflections on those events simultaneously. Like many elements of the novel, the narrative voice blurs the line between Philip the character and Roth the author. Throughout the novel, Lindbergh's election and the effects wrought by his administration trigger questions from the young Philip Roth about his place in his family and America. Most often Philip responds to the Lindbergh administration with disbelief and twice with attempts to run away from home, disavowing his family and Jewishness. When Philip's cousin Alvin returns home from his failed stint in the Canadian military having lost his leg below the knee in a botched encounter with a German soldier, Philip witnesses his father in tears over Alvin's condition, "It was the first time I saw my father cry. A childhood milestone… A new life began for me. I'd watched my father fall apart and I would never return to the same childhood" (*Plot Against America* 113). Echoing the earlier language describing Lindbergh's nomination, this episode demonstrates how a national event, in this case Lindbergh's staunch isolationism, leads to familial tragedy for the Roth family. Philip's understanding of his father is irrevocably changed when he witnesses his grief. The chain of causality here is long, Philip responding to his father responding to Alvin responding to Lindbergh. Here we are offered an alternative to the onslaught of history in the form of the news, even if the results are equally horrifying. These moments, deeply personal and emotional, are examples of things left out of the archive.

The cumulative effect of the Lindbergh president on young Philip is an existential threat to his identity. Each member of Philip's family offers competing responses to the Lindbergh administration that provide positive and negative examples for Philip to follow. Witnessing his parents facing the crises of the Lindbergh administration changes Philip's understanding of them and thus himself. Philip's

parents loom large in the novel, Timothy Parrish has gone as far as calling the novel Roth "offering his work as the living memory of the Jews who created him and the history that has enabled him to write their story" (140). The Herman and Bess Roth of the novel are representatives of a burgeoning Jewish-American middle class in Newark, New Jersey. The children of immigrants, Philip's parents emerge from the Great Depression with their aspirations to middle class pinned to Herman's job as an insurance salesman with Metropolitan Life. Herman sees himself as a "manly provider" for his family, shaping his son's views with his proud and outspoken patriotism that is built on a foundation of respect for FDR, Bess's quiet homemaking is no less influential (*Plot Against America* 8). For Herman and Bess Roth, the American dream seems to be in reach. At the opening of the novel, Philip's parents are his rock, unchanging and firmly embedded in their community and through it, their country.

Tellingly, the first cracks in the Roths' vision of their citizenship predate Lindbergh's nomination by the Republican Party. When Herman is offered a promotion to assistant manager at Metropolitan Life's Union location, the Roth family comes face to face with the roiling anti-Semitism that lurks just under the surface of American life. While the promotion appears to be another step on the ladder to middle class contentment, Bess, who grew up in an Irish Catholic neighborhood, realizes that moving to Union would mean that her children "would be obliged to re-live her own circumscribed youth as a neighborhood outsider" (*Plot Against America* 9). In Union, the Roths encounter a lively beer garden that, with its implication of a German-American Bund presence in the town, finally convinces Herman not to accept the

promotion.[84] Despite Herman's optimism, the Roths are forced to choose between living among other Jewish Americans and economic advancement. While Lindbergh's nomination may have been the moment that "everything changed," Roth roots this change in the novel's depiction of the real and well-documented history of American antisemitism. This false choice is darkly mirrored later in the novel, when the Roths are given the "opportunity" to relocate to Kentucky through a program ran by Lindbergh's "Office of American Absorption," an offer which Herman can only decline by quitting his job. This doubling reveals the historiographic logic of Roth's alternate history, Roth doesn't invent whole cloth a fascist America. Instead, he builds one from materials found in the real historical record. The weirdness created here then is the revelation that Roth's supposedly alternate history lay lurking within our own.

Philip finds himself torn between his father's fierce opposition to Lindbergh and his brother's growing hero worship of him, facilitated by his involvement with the Lindbergh administration's Office of American Absorption. Through "Just Folks," an OAA program that seeks to introduce "city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life,'" Philip's brother Sandy leaves home in the Summer of 1941 to live on the Mawhinney farm in Kentucky (*Plot Against America* 84). This experience solidifies Sandy's infatuation with Lindbergh. Faced with these extremes within his own family and frightened by the growing possibility of pogroms encouraged by the Lindbergh

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[84] The German-American Bund was, essentially, an American Nazi Party and thus staunchly anti-interventionist (D. M. Kennedy 471). Whether or not this encounter with the Bund is fictionalized, Roth is drawing on the Bund's very real presence in New Jersey. The Bund's history in New Jersey has been extensively documented by historian Warren Grover, who calls Newark "the center of a battle that pitted the Nazi Movement and its supporters against those who believed in freedom and democracy" (1).

administration, Philip finds himself unable to reconcile his identity as both Jewish and American. Sandy's encounter with the Mawhinney's, the "Christian… great overpowering majority… who ran America and would always run it" sparks in Philip his own quest to understand Christian America (93–94). This manifests as a habit of surreptitiously following Christian men home from work at the prompting of a friend from school. On one of these sojourns, Philip encounters the "culmination of our quest—Jesus Christ" in the form of a misidentified Christmas tree topper,

> who by their reasoning was everything and who by my reasoning had fucked everything up: because if it weren't for Christians there wouldn't be anti-Semitism, and if it weren't for anti-Semitism there wouldn't be Hitler, and if it weren't for Hitler Lindbergh would never president, and if Lindbergh weren't president (120).

This passage demonstrates Philip's attempt to craft a historical narrative that will help him make sense of his world. Contrasted with, but not wholly contradictory to, the earlier assessment of the Mawhinneys as members of the Christians who "ran America," Philip's history of Christianity from Christ to Lindbergh demonstrates the difficulty of crafting a Jewish-American identity in a United States that elides its theocratic tendencies. The exact emotional valence of Roth's use of himself as a character is opaque. Are we to understand these moments as autobiographical? I argue that these moments of identity crisis are at least somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Philip's suffering is caused by Roth's writing of the novel. The expectation of American ethnic fiction to be transparently autobiographical necessitates the torment of the author's younger self.

Philip's ongoing identity crisis culminates in two attempts to run away from home and thus abandon his Jewish identity. Philip's attempts to escape his homelife are attempts to remove himself from the historical context he is embedded in and craft

a new one, he wants "nothing to do with history. I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible. I wanted to be an orphan" (*Plot Against America* 233). In Roth's alternate history, the threat of antisemitic violence is brought to the forefront, teased out of the background of the historical record. This radical act of re-fashioning is an attempt to follow through on the racist promise of Lindbergh's Office of American Absorption, to become American by disavowing his family and taking up residence at the local Catholic orphanage. Philip and his brother's attempts to escape their Jewishness push on the boundaries of the Jewish identity that Roth explores in the novel, the narrator describes his parents and their community's Jewishness as "what they couldn't get rid of… Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American. It was as it was, in the nature of things… they never manifested the slightest desire to change it or deny it, regardless of the consequences" (220). What the novel ultimately demonstrates is the co-constitutive nature of individual, community, and national history. Philip the character and Roth the author are both unable to extricate themselves from history.

At the novel's close, Lindbergh has disappeared, Roosevelt has been elected to a third term in office, and history has seemingly been set back on the "correct" track. I argue that this reversion to a historical mean can be read metafictionally. With the novel concluded, history as it actually happened resumes incredibly quickly, almost as if by magic. Roth's generic intervention into American history and his own biography intertwine and shape the historical possibilities in historical fiction. The use of alternate history allows the novel to re-shape the grand sweep of the nation's past to highlight the parts of the past that are only footnotes to history as it actually was. By imagining a fascist presidency, Roth restores the real possibility of American fascism

that existed in the early twentieth-century United States and threatens to boil over in this century. By mining his own biography and writing a coming-of-age narrative for a life he didn't lead, Roth demonstrates an ambivalence towards the imperative of the market for minorities to mine their own lives in the creation of their fiction.

Roth's *The Plot Against America* shows us a luridly vivid documentarian approach to an alternate United States, punctuated by Philip's crisis of ethnic identity. In Roth's vision of a Lindbergh presidency, the real history of the United States is made weird as what is and isn't possible is revealed to be a thinner line than we might have assumed. In Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* the documentarian exactitude of Roth's novel has been replaced by a temporal uncertainty, but the crisis of ethnic identity at its center bears remarkable similarities. Where Roth's novel brings down the triumphalism around the second World War, Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* performs a similar operation for the victories of racial progress achieved in the Civil Rights era. Published in 1999, *The Intuitionist* is a genre-bending novel that takes place in an alternate New York City unmoored in time, one that simultaneously evokes booming postwar America and the social upheaval of the Civil Rights Era. Where *The Plot Against America* makes its nexus point explicit, offering a clear demarcation between its "real" and "alternate" history, *The Intuitionist* offers no concrete explanation for how or when its America slipped into a timeline different from our own. In fact, the novel gives no concrete markers of historicity at all, the exact time it takes place in is never revealed. By refusing to answer this central question, the novel encourages the reader to play the role of detective as it offers a series of clues, but it ultimately forces them to reckon with uncertainty. This reading experience mirrors the experience of the novel's protagonist Lila Mae as she first takes

up the role of the detective and later abandons it opting instead to see the world through the lens of utopian thinking. As protagonists, both Philip and Lila Mae question their ethnic identities in a way that mirrors the way both novels question received historical narrative. For both characters, the genre mixing at the level of the novel reinforces their feelings of uncertainty around their own identities. Where Philip the character and Roth the novelist both attempt to escape their ethnic identity and historical context and craft a new autobiography, Lila Mae is fashioned as the protagonist of a series of genres in her attempts to understand the role that she plays in history.

Making his literary debut in the late 90s, Colson Whitehead's massive success and critical evaluation has led to him becoming something of a totem of the end of postmodernism and the coming of the next big thing. But his work has not always been read in this way. Most notably, Madhu Dubey opens her influential 2003 book on black literary postmodernism, *Signs and Cities*, with a brief reading of *The Intuitionist*, because the novel "so vividly captures the nexus of texts and cities that form the subject of my study… novels [that] actively contribute to the wider currents of postmodern culture" (2). It is no stretch of the imagination to see *The Intuitionist* as a postmodern novel, even if you think it is the last of a dying breed. The novel fits to a tee what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, as it mixes various generic impulses in service of intervening in how we understand the past through textual constructs. But *The Intuitionist* also marks the beginning of the genre turn, as it demonstrates Whitehead's and his cohort's ambivalence towards the distinction between high and low literature that earlier postmodern artists depended on even as they transgressed this supposed boundary. Whitehead has often discussed his approach

to genre, making this ambivalence clear. In a 2007 interview, Whitehead states that he doesn't

> see a distinction between the use of fantasy in, say, horror novels, and the use of fantastic elements in magical realism, the absurdity of Beckett, the surrealism of Invisible Man. The tweaked reality is a tool, and whether you use it for a 'low culture purpose or a 'high culture' purpose is up to you. (Whitehead and Selzer 393)

Whitehead's attitude here is typical of the authors of the genre turn's shift away from distinctions between high and low culture and I argue represents an evolution of the postmodern project rather than its end. The generic impulses in Whitehead's work operate on a level playing field, he is equally inspired by works like Ellison's *Invisible Man* and a contemporary literary culture that owes more to internet fan communities than prestigious cultural gatekeepers.

In the popular historical imagination, promulgated in public school history curricula and the speeches of politicians, the Civil Rights Era is a triumphant moment in American history, when Black Americans fought valiantly for their now eponymous "Civil Rights" a time personified by Martin Luther King Jr., who is portrayed as an American martyr. In an essay on what she calls "the good protest," Historian Glenda Gilmore has written that this "classical phase" of the Civil Rights Movement lasted from

> "the Montgomery bus boycott in December 1955 and continued until Martin Luther King Jr.'s death in April 1968… [and] as American like to remember it, simply sought to end legal segregation of the public sphere, which most people now agree was undemocratic." (197-198)

But this popular conception elides the lived reality of Postwar America. Glinda Gilmore goes on to say that this "simplified myth of the 'good protest' and others like it do the country a disservice, implying that it was a relatively easy to win total victory

over racism and also producing a national amnesia of the much longer struggle." (198) In this convenient narrative even the perpetrators of racist violence are rendered as somehow non-American, or worse, they become heroes of a sort, for without oppressors who would Black Americans have to overcome? Jonathan W. Gray has discussed how this attitude continues a tradition of "American innocence," that was born in the Reconstruction era United States and props up narratives of American exceptionalism by deflecting responsibility away from white Americans (5). As Christina Sharpe has argued, "many people, across race, like to consign [personal and institutional racism] to the pre-Brown v. Board of Education United States [but it remains] the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects" (3). Sharpe goes on to write that for Black Americans, "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present." (9) Here again, the history of slavery appears as a ghostly presence in American history, haunting the present. Whitehead's mixed temporality disrupts historical linearity in a manner not dissimilar to the ghosts of Saunders's and Ward's novels explored in chapter one. The popular conception of the Civil Rights era launders American history by shifting the mantle of protagonist from the white Americans of the Greatest Generation to the Black Americans who fought for racial justice. Through this narratorial trick, the abstract national character of America can be comprised of the heroic qualities of both groups, while racism becomes the failing of individuals, aberrations on the road to progress. By unsettling this timeline, Whitehead replicates the recurrence and entanglement of the past that Sharpe describes.

The Intuitionist eschews the familiar imagery of the civil rights movement. It depicts no marches or civil disobedience and even the heroism of its protagonist Lila

Mae Watson is often misguided. Instead of these scenes of resistance, the novel is centered on Lila Mae's more mundane struggles, as she tries to make a life for herself as the first Black woman elevator inspector in a world where the Department of Elevator Inspectors is the dominant cultural mover, exerting massive influence on the politics, economics, and culture of the city. In addition to being the first Black woman in her field, Lila Mae is an adherent of Intuitionism, a reformist faction in the industry, which appears to be more accepting of racial diversity. While Lila Mae is clearly analogous to Civil Rights activists who fought for racial integration, she sees herself less as a freedom fighter and more as a career woman, preferring to keep her head down and stay out of trouble. The irony here is palpable, Lila Mae is caught up in her work in the rapidly progressing field of literal uplift (elevators,) but has no time to consider her own implication in the racial politics that surround her. This ultimately proves impossible as Lila Mae finds herself imbricated in a plot revolving around the catastrophic failure of a brand-new elevator just after she performs its inaugural inspection. Faced with the prospect of an investigation into the elevator's failure and her possible implication in its sabotage, Lila Mae goes on the lam and attempts to discover on her own the cause of the elevator's failure. As Lila Mae plays detective, she has a series of revelations about the elevator inspection industry that ultimately lead her to taking up a new kind of work at the end of the novel, as she dedicates herself to reimagining and continuing the utopian project of Intuitionism, which promises to someday usher in the "Second Elevation," a cultural turning point, which will reinvent the city in some as yet unknown way.

The Intuitionist is something of a genre Rorschach test, the mix of genres that make up the novel have made it fertile ground for literary critics, with various scholars

bringing different generic impulses in the novel to the forefront of their analysis.[85] In this section, I will argue that the disparate generic valences in the novel must be understood together as it is their overlap and competition that informs the novel's intervention in American history. While I am by no means the first to recognize *The Intuitionist* shares qualities with alternate history fiction, pairing it with *The Plot Against America* draws attention to the way that both novels depend upon an alternate history of the United States as a foundation for genre mixing. First, I will explore how the novel makes use of the tropes of the alternate history novel before examining how the tropes of detective and utopian fiction allow the novel to question the role of the individual in history. While its lack of a nexus point and its uncertain place in any recognizable timeline set it apart from what is traditionally considered alternate history fiction, I argue that it exists in conversation with other alternate history novels. Recent scholarship has expanded what counts as alternate history fiction, or falls under the broader umbrella of the counterfactual.[86] The "tweaked reality" of the novel presents

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[85] For example, Ramón Saldívar typifies the genre soup readings of the novel when he calls it "*Afrofuturism*, or simply *black speculative fiction*… part urban thriller, part alternate history, part fantasy meditation on race, technology and imagination" (7-8). Sean Austin Grattan, whose argument I engage with below, has explored the novel's depiction of "utopian potential… to reconsider the place of solitude within utopian discourse" (100). Alexander Manshel has convincingly read the novel an "academic satire: a campus novel and archival thriller shaped by Whitehead's years at Harvard and the canon wars that shaped them" ("Colson Whitehead's History of the United States" 6). Michael Bérubé calls the novel "a wry postmodern noir in the… mode of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster" (163).

[86] Charles Miller has argued for the presence of counterfactuals in the fictions of Charles Dickens, examining how his novels make use of "counterfactual lives each character is pointedly not living" (118). Paul K. Saint-Amour has looked outside of the literary to argue that "the study of alternate-history narratives has also begun to call attention to the broader counterfactual energies of the law."

readers with a mixed temporality, some historical events and personages are familiar, while others are strange and unfamiliar. The New York City that the novel depicts is certainly one that never quite existed, dominated as it is by a massively powerful guild of elevator inspectors that is implicated in both politics and organized crime. This mixed temporality allows the novel to juxtapose elements of the present and the past, marking its kinship with the more science fictional aspects of a work like Ellison's *Invisible Man* or the jumbled temporal markers of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. Whitehead's consciousness of his own place within a racialized literary tradition that values ethnic minority writers for their "authentic voices" over their technical abilities stands in stark contrast to Lila Mae's attempts to live divorced from racial politics in the novel itself.

It appears on the surface that the most notable difference between the past of *The Intuitionist* and the historical past is the institutions at play. As noted above, the New York of the novel is dominated culturally and politically by the Elevator Inspectors Guild which runs the city's Department of Elevator Inspectors and holds an exclusive contract with the government to provide the elevator inspections for the city's quickly multiplying high rises. The chair of the Guild is a recognizable enough public figure that he is paid for his endorsement of the United Elevator Co., appearing in one ad "twenty feet tall on a billboard," seen by Lila Mae as she drives to the Department's headquarters at the opening of the novel (Whitehead 14). The chair's larger-than-life visage looms over the city and the novel, a demonstration of the interconnectedness of politics, labor, and the corporate world that dominates both the world of *The Intuitionist* and our neoliberal present. While the department and its influence are unfamiliar to readers, its control of the city through an embeddedness in

all aspects of life are not. The plot of the novel follows Lila Mae as she investigates the spontaneous and catastrophic failure of an elevator that she inspected at the new and as yet unopened Fanny Briggs Memorial Building. Fearing that the elevator was rigged to fail, and that the crime will be pinned on her, Lila Mae goes on the lam from her job and attempts to solve the case herself. Lila Mae's investigation takes place against the backdrop of an election for a new Guild chair between the sitting chair, a member of the conservative and traditionalist Empiricist faction and his competitor in the more liberal Intuitionist faction.

At first Lila Mae believes that the Empiricists have conspired with the city's mafia in a bid to discredit her, a prominent Intuitionist in the department and the first Black woman elevator inspector, and by association all of Intuitionism. But by the novel's end, it is revealed that both factions are in bed with competing elevator manufacturers who aren't seeking to discredit the work of the founder of Intuitionism, but to profit from it. The novel plays upon our instinct to read its central conflict in terms of our current political landscape, with two parties locked in eternal ideological conflict, one progressive and the other conservative, but the novel subverts this reading, both parties are in fact fronts for the interests of capital, their ideological differences a sideshow to their true interests. While we could point to a long history of corruption in unions and government workers, *The Intuitionist* is particularly interested in the capacity for the market under neoliberalism to consume all other aspects of public life, which can be read in terms of the publishing industry's incorporation of ethnic difference as a marketing tactic. By transposing the concerns of neoliberalism onto the past, Whitehead makes both the contemporary and the past of the Civil Rights era strange, drawing attention to the influence of neoliberalism on

contemporary life and its roots in the nation's past. Cause and effect become mixed and weird in Whitehead's vision of midcentury America.

As a protagonist, Lila Mae is a far cry from the heroic figures that often take center stage in fictions of the Civil Rights era, representing instead the disaffected worker typical of neoliberalism. Her role as an integrator at the racially segregated Department is not a political statement, but merely an inconvenient aspect of a job that takes center stage in her life. Harvey observes this tendency for neoliberalism to incorporate activist energy when he writes that, "Any political movement that holds individual freedoms to be sacrosanct is vulnerable to incorporation into the neoliberal fold" (*Brief History of Neoliberalism* 41). For Lila Mae, the desire for freedom from racist violence and oppression has slowly morphed into a desire for the freedom to do her job, this leaves her vulnerable to being used as a pawn by her employer. Her apartment is sparse and cramped, described as containing few personal possessions and bearing "the studied appearance of habitation. She is trying to convince other people that she lives there, but the impression instead is that of slowly moving out" (Whitehead 29). Lila Mae's apartment contains the bare necessities for the reproduction of her labor power, a reduction of life facilitated not by direct capitalist exploitation, but her voluntary dedication to her career.

Despite this commitment to her job, Lila Mae is not politically ignorant, she is in fact a canny reader of politics and recognizes that she is being used as a prop in political posturing by the Guild chair. When Lila Mae is assigned the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building, which is named for a fictional enslaved woman who "taught herself to read" and wrote an account of her escape and journey to freedom, Lila Mae recognizes that this is an act of appeasement in a city "with an increasingly vocal

colored population" and a Mayor that is "not stupid" (Whitehead 12). In the figure of Fanny Briggs, Whitehead dramatizes the creation of a national past that incorporates and dissipates the activist energy of the Civil Rights movement. Furthermore, Whitehead incorporates the tropes of the slave narrative in Fanny Briggs's story. In the universe of the novel, Fanny Briggs is herself a celebrated ethnic "voice," a station she achieved by teaching herself to read and write. The lobby of the Fanny Briggs building features an incomplete mural that depicts a typical progress narrative of American history. It features the sale of the island of Manhattan to Native Americans, which Lila Mae glosses as "the first of many dubious transactions in the city's history," this is followed by the American Revolution which marks the end of the incomplete mural, "The painter seemed to be making it up as he went along… the colonists pulling down the statue of King George III… It's always nice when a good mob comes together" (47–48). This narrative of American progress and the building which contains it is a potent intertext (perhaps more accurately an intra-text) in the novel. This diagetic commentary on a historical narrative is similar to the Newsreel Theater section of *The Plot Against America* described above, but strikingly Lila Mae is able to comment on the narrative rather than being erased by it like the fictionalized Roth family. By rendering historical narrative as a constructed object, both novels highlight its mutability. Lila Mae's reaction to the scene of the American Revolution allows readers insight into her politics, sympathetic to the Civil Rights movement but detached, while demonstrating the role that the building itself plays in integrating a sanitized version of the Civil Rights narrative into public history. In the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building an enslaved woman's struggle for freedom and thus the Civil Rights movement is equated with the American Revolution. It is no accident that

highlighting Fanny Briggs allows for a focus on tenacious individuals overcoming adversity that obfuscates the source of racial violence. Lila Mae recognizes this political project and is skeptical of it, but is not moved to action, instead understanding the mural in terms of her work, noting "They didn't have elevators yet. That's why the scenes look so flat to Lila Mae: the city is dimensionless" (Whitehead 47).

For much of the novel, Lila Mae acts as a detective, in particular she resembles the down-on-their-luck detective protagonists of hard-boiled or noir detective fiction. The assumption of this character function at first reads as evidence of Lila Mae's increased agency in the text, but this perception is itself revealed to be illusory. The novel uses the tropes and language of hard-boiled detective fiction, notably a gangster antagonist evocatively named Johnny Shush, his pair of thugs that pursue Lila Mae throughout the text, and shifting allegiances. As a genre, alternate history fiction does not dictate a plot structure and thus often depends on additional generic structures to provide one. Detective fiction has proved a popular plot structure for alternate history fiction with Robert Harris's *Fatherland* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* as examples. One possible reason for this common genre combination is that the figure of the detective provides a novel with a diagetic reason to explore and interrogate an alternate history setting and how "evidence," historical or criminal, is assembled to create a narrative. As a character, the detective is concerned with revealing the truth and facilitating justice, two characteristics that allow for a work to explore societal ills and imagine what justice might look like. When Lila Mae dedicates herself to uncovering the truth behind the incident at the Fanny Briggs building she does not transcend her dedication to work, but shifts the focus of that work from her job as an elevator inspector to that of the justice-seeking detective.

While this development sees Lila Mae realize that she must stop her work as an elevator inspector to right a societal wrong, she finds herself unable to unravel the conspiracy at the novel's heart, her hunches are wrong and the central mystery is ultimately an illusion. The revelation that the failure of the Fanny Briggs elevator was in fact an act of random chance is the final demonstration of many that Lila Mae's work as a detective, like her work as an elevator inspector, will not lead to justice.

Lila Mae's failure as a detective breaks the "rules" of traditional detective fiction and marks the novel as belonging to a tradition of postmodern detective fiction. Quoting William Gibson, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney argues that postmodern detective fiction is characterized by a "shift from the earlier stories' positivistic detection to the sense… that all one can hope for in response to mystery is 'an illusion to meaningfulness'" (164). Beyond this failure to "solve" the mystery of the elevator failure, Lila Mae finds herself embroiled in the same racist logics that drive the system she is investigating. She comes to suspect that the only other Black elevator inspector in the city, an older man called Pompey, is a willing pawn of the Guild chair and sabotaged the Fanny Briggs elevator at his behest. Despite their similar situations, Lila Mae and Pompey's relationship is extremely strained due to Lila Mae's perception of him as subservient to his white coworkers and bosses. When Lila Mae confronts Pompey and accuses him, she finds herself unwittingly using racist language in an exchange that bears an uncomfortable resonance for contemporary readers: "'I'm really tired of people telling me lies. I'm through kidding with you people.' ''You people'? And just what people would that be?'" (Whitehead 193). Lila Mae ignores evidence that she has misread Pompey, when she sees his strong relationships with his family and community, "she pushes the image aside. She has business with the man"

(191). Lila Mae's desire to "solve the case" has exacerbated her internalized racism against Pompey. She has reduced her confrontation with Pompey to "business" in her mind, applying the same logic of detachment from the politics of her work that she practiced as an employee of the Department. She is forced to confront that Pompey did not in fact sabotage the Fanny Briggs elevator and has only been cleaning up after the shoddy workmanship of mafia elevator repairmen at the behest of the Guild chair. Pompey's decision is one that is at least somewhat coerced, motivated by his economic hardship and the racist power structure of the Department of Elevators and American society. Lila Mae's single-minded determination blinded her to the reality of Pompey's situation.

The same instincts that cause Lila Mae to distrust Pompey lead her to fall for Raymond Coombs, a representative of the Arbo Elevator Company who appears to Lila Mae claiming to be Natchez, a Southern Black man looking for the lost final text of his uncle and the founder of Intuitionism, James Fulton. It is revealed to Lila Mae that Fulton kept his race a secret to the world as he lived passing for white. This alternate history of Intuitionism is one that Lila Mae is inclined to believe as an adept practitioner of Intuitionism and a Black Southerner herself. Coombs's pessimistic pragmatism is typified by the presence of a framed photograph of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in his opulent office on an upper floor of the Arbo Elevator Company headquarters. When Lila Mae expresses surprise that Arbo "lets" Coombs display "a head shot of the famous reverend," he responds that "'My employers allow me a certain latitude,'…'I do my job and that's all they care about" (Whitehead 248). Lila Mae describes King as only "the famous reverend… The man who is so loud down South," an example of her characteristic use of ambivalent language to describe the

civil rights movement (248). Despite the obliqueness of the reference, King is imminently recognizable and a stark reminder of the text's engagement with the Civil Rights movement. Coombs has achieved a complete compartmentalization of his politics from his work, representing a possible endpoint for Lila Mae's own ambivalence towards politics. Coombs's attitude is also striking in its resemblance to politics under neoliberalism, and the conditions of the publication of *The Intuitionist* itself. displaying the same presentism seen in Pompey's response to Lila Mae's use of "you people." This strategic presentism in what is ostensibly Civil Rights era America allows the novel to contrast contemporary perceptions of the Civil Rights era as a triumphant moment in American history with the political disaffection and complacency encouraged by neoliberalism. Coombs is revealed to have been something like a competing author figure (or revisionist historian) in the text, having constructed the story that Lila Mae follows as she assumes the mantle of detective.

If Coombs's simultaneous reverence for King and willingness to enact and profit from an oppressive corporate agenda demonstrates the capacity for neoliberalism to incorporate and dissipate utopian energy, the ending of the novel somewhat ambiguously recuperates utopian potential under capitalism. That *The Intuitionist* engages in utopian impulses is not an original observation. Sean Austin Grattan has argued that the novel engages with a positive affective impulse in contemporary literature that seeks to challenge the perceived inescapability of neoliberalism (105). At the close of the novel, Lila Mae has discovered that Intuitionism, the school of thought she has dedicated herself to, began as a dark joke on the part of its founder James Fulton. Lila Mae realizes that Fulton's work was not a

genuine utopian project, but the result of his disaffection as a Black man trapped in the prison of passing for white. She muses that:

> "There was no way he believed in transcendence… There was no hope for him as a colored man because the white world will not let a colored man rise, and there was no hope for him as a white man because it was a lie. He secretes his venom into the pages of a book" (Whitehead 240).

Passing for Fulton is revealed to be a trap of his own construction, his Blackness is revealed to be something he can't get rid of even as he passes to all the world. Comparing the operation of Blackness in *The Intuitionist* to Jewishness in *The Plot Against America* is instructive here. Both novels feature characters attempting to escape their ethnic identity, but with drastically different results. Fulton achieves this escape, only to find himself trapped by that escape for the rest of his life. Ethnic identity makes both books possible, or perhaps necessary, even as it constricts the possibilities available to their authors. The book that Lila Mae describes here is the first volume of Fulton's two-volume masterwork *Theoretical Elevators,* the founding document of Intuitionism, which posits a utopian world brought about by an as yet unimagined innovation in elevator design. The text of the fictional *Theoretical Elevators*, like the story of Fanny Briggs, intrudes upon Lila Mae's narrative throughout the novel injecting Fulton's utopian thought into the detective plot. For much of the novel, Lila Mae believes that a public exposure of Fulton's race and the release of Fulton's unfinished third volume could induce a radical change in society. At the end of the novel, Coombs espouses his belief that Fulton's race ultimately doesn't matter, "His color doesn't matter once it gets to that level. The level of commerce. They can put Fulton into one of those colored history calendars… it doesn't change the fact that there's money to be made from his invention" (Whitehead 250). Coombs simultaneously represents race with consumerism in the form of the

"colored history calendar" and portrays capitalist exploitation of Fulton's labor as inevitable. This proliferation of racialized authors raises the specter of a metafictional reading, similar to Roth's use of a fictionalized version of himself and his family.

The novel ends with Lila Mae rejecting her previous political ambivalence and her job at the Department to take up Fulton's utopian project. Grattan argues that Lila Mae's seeming retreat from society at the novel's close represents an advocacy for the "utopian potential of solitude" (100). While I agree that the novel is interested in the political possibility of Lila Mae's strategic retreat, I want to propose that this retreat allows her to focus on practicing a specifically utopian work, a type of labor different from her job at the Department and her "detective work" which sought to enact justice by exposing a hidden plot of corruption. The novel ends with Lila Mae sitting down to write her version of Fulton's third volume, a fusion of his notes on the project and her own interpretation, "She returns to the work. She will make the necessary adjustments. It will come. She is never wrong. It is her intuition" (Whitehead 255). There's a connection to be drawn here between Lila Mae's third volume of Theoretical Elevators and Joe Kavalier's graphic novel at the close of Kavalier & Clay. Both projects reclaim work as an activity that can exist outside of the marketplace, a compelling object of imagination within two commercial works. Both Whitehead and Chabon end their text on the ambiguous possibilities latent in the written work, evincing a belief in the power of narrative at the close of their novels. Lila Mae's utopian work is a rejection of the neoliberal injunction to let the market and productivity dominate all aspects of life. Rather than the imagined "Second Elevation," the utopian promise of Fulton's first two volumes and the endpoint of Intuitionism, Lila Mae instead embraces utopianism as a project that each generation

must work towards, making it their own. Lila Mae realizes that "Intuitionism is communication. Communication with what is not-you" (241). We could read this line as a commitment to communication with an object-world, as the practice of Intuitionism is to intuit the mechanics of an elevator, but we could also read it as a commitment to intergenerational dialogue. A dialogue that Lila Mae takes up as she sets out to write a version of Fulton's third volume shaped by her own experience. The work of utopia is an intergenerational collaboration that must necessarily exist outside of capitalism.

How we are supposed to react as readers to Lila Mae's transformation into an author at the close of The Intuitionist is unclear. Lila has committed herself to a political project, but we last see her locking herself away to write in solitude. We know that authorship for Fanny Briggs ultimately meant total subsumption into a state-promulgated narrative of racial progressivism and for Fulton, it meant an embittered life of passing, where everyone has read his work, but no one knows what it meant to him. In both novels, Roth and Whitehead demonstrate a dissatisfaction with received historical knowledge, but also with the authorial box they find themselves placed in as racialized American authors. In the face of this dissatisfaction, they turn to alternate history, which carries with it the possibility of imagining the past differently. But for both novels alternate history is more of a question than it is an answer. For Roth it is a tool to dive back into his own personal past and manifest the terror of American anti-Semitism in a more concrete form than it ever took in reality, turning an undercurrent in our nation's past into a tidal wave. The fictionalized Philip Roth of *The Plot Against America* then spends the novel trying to escape an alternate reality of the author Philip Roth's construction. Philip attempts to destroy his own

identity, and thus write a new biography for himself, but this is revealed to be an impossible project. In *The Intuitionist*, Colson Whitehead depicts a New York City that never quite was, but evokes aspects of the Civil Rights era United States and the neoliberal present of the late 1990s simultaneously. In this alternate New York, Lila Mae attempts to exist outside of history before taking on the mantle of the detective to expose the criminal injustices at its heart and finally turns to an intergenerational utopianism that must be continuously renewed by each successive generation. Finally, Lila Mae becomes an author, occupying the same position as Whitehead himself, but only after the position of author is thoroughly called into question by the events of the novel. Authorship for Lila Mae, like for Whitehead, is to resign oneself to being interpolated as an ethnic voice.

What this shows us is that Weird History might be a response to the current historical and cultural moment, but it is not an escape from it. This might be the best encapsulation of Weird History's difference from the genre fiction that it seeks to incorporate, the escapist thrill of genre fiction is constantly being commented upon and questioned by Weird History even as it is used as a selling point for it. In the next chapter, I will look to another instance of Weird History, depictions of the future that commit themselves to placing it within a historiographic argument. Like the works discussed in this chapter, these works incorporate elements of science fiction and historical fiction, but project history forward rather than back into the past. These future histories offer theories of what is the actual driver of historical change at a moment of great and multiplying crises, the present.

Chapter 4

THE ENTANGLED FUTURE: HISTORICIZING WHAT COMES NEXT

The mass audience print novel is an odd venue for timely predictions of the future. Due to the vagaries of the publishing industry, even a finished novel can take months to come to market. In the past three chapters, I've looked at how the mixing of popular non-realist genres with historical fiction allows the past to be presented in new ways. The implicit goal of my project has been to explore how imagining the past differently and outside of received national myth might ultimately create the possibility of a better future. This chapter takes up this thread explicitly, examining three novels published in 2022 that seek to incorporate depictions of the future into the genre framework of historical fiction. To do so, they imagine the future through a series of genre impulses, including utopia, dystopia, and post-apocalyptic, but I will argue that they primarily engage with the future through the tropes of science fiction.[87] That these books should be looking to the future at this time is unsurprising since they were published at a moment when the ongoing "polycrisis" of climate change met the new global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both events have led to dramatic

[87] Utopia, dystopia, and post-apocalyptic fiction are all related to science fiction, but notably not the same as science fiction. All four genres could fall under the broad label of speculative fiction, which I discuss in greater length in chapter three. But in this chapter, as in chapter three, I think teasing out the competing genre impulses at play is valuable.

reimaginings of how the future for not just individual nations, but for the entirety of the human race might look.

What this chapter seeks to do is to place these novels within a genre framework that includes their relationship to both the high literary genres, like the short-story cycle or the network novel, and the mass-market genre of science fiction. The historical novel, as discussed earlier, straddles the two poles, living in both worlds simultaneously. I argue that it is the interplay between these genre impulses that makes these future histories into Weird History. What this combination of genre impulses allows these texts to do is weave weird non-linear chronologies, that demonstrated the interconnectedness of past, present, and future in a way that linear narrative struggles to depict. This interconnectedness also demonstrates the contingency of the future, each text imagines a future that might be, but as residents of the present we can see how those futures might still be changed. While it would be a stretch to consider absolutely every text that takes place in the future science fiction, I argue that we underestimate the extent to which our predictions of the future, particularly in fiction, are built on a foundation of popular science fiction. For many Americans the future is still simultaneously *Star Trek* and *Brave New World*. But the novels discussed in this chapter sit uneasily within a popular science fiction canon. I argue that the primary reason for this is that these texts are just as committed to depicting the past and present as they are the future. The equal weight given to depicting temporal settings that have and haven't happened yet makes these novels not just literary-tinged approaches to science fiction, but a mixing of the genres of science

fiction and historical fiction. This mixing is less surprising than it may at first seem. Science fiction, like historical fiction, has at least since the 1960s kept some measure of literary prestige. Mark McGurl has cited works like Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren* and the oeuvre of J.G. Ballard to argue that science fiction "long in advance of the recent genre turn… made what can only be described as a 'literary turn'" (*Everything and Less* 169). After this turn, science fiction also established some prestige as an object of academic study with the first issue of the journal of *Science Fiction Studies* published in 1971. This carving out of a literary space within science fiction set may have paved the way for the genre turn but has also continued as a tradition in its own right. Authors like Kim Stanley Robinson and Neal Stephenson are firmly science fiction authors, in the sense that they rarely write outside of that genre but have increasingly turned to the kinds of near-future social problems that animate the novels discussed in this chapter.[88]

This specific mix of genres contributes to the popular historiography that I've explored throughout this project by allowing for a focus on what is the *actual* engine of historical change. Science fiction tropes are not exactly non-realist in the same sense that ghosts, alternate histories, and Lovecraftian horrors are, but by projecting into the future they are applying historical thinking to events that actually haven't

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[88] See for example Kim Stanley Robinson's widely praised near-future 2022 novel *The Ministry for the Future* which takes as its central problem the fact that neoliberalism seems terminally ill-equipped to deal with climate change. The protagonists of *The Ministry for the Future* spend the novel attempting to restart history, by either government action or climate terrorism.

happened yet. As a result, these novels engage with the science fiction tropes that have shaped how we understand the future in addition to the effects our historical narratives have on our predictions of the future. I argue that these two modes of prediction are actually more connected than we might assume. While novels that take place in the historical past are able to bypass the question of how history happened by focusing on the particulars of what happened, texts that take place in the future have no such luxury.[89] One of the social technologies that these novels narrativize in their depiction of the past, present, and future, is the network. Fredric Jameson has famously argued that one possibility for political art after postmodernism is the creation of what he calls "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (*Postmodernism* 54).[90] Patrick Jagoda has explored a related concept that he calls, a "network imaginary… the complex of material infrastructures and metaphorical figures that inform our experience with and our thinking about the contemporary social world" (3). For Jagoda, the network imaginary is particularly important for understanding our contemporary moment, dominated as it is by social networks, global capital, and the havoc wrought on global environmental systems by

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[89] The outlier here is of course alternate history, a subgenre of science fiction that I discuss in chapter 3. Alternate histories must always come to terms with how the alternate pasts they present come to be, even when they deny a logical explanation for the alterations to the past that they imagine.

[90] For more on Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping and how it relates to Weird History see the introduction.

climate change. While the novels I examine in this chapter each imagine the complex networks of human agency that create history differently, they all gesture towards the complex globally connected nature of contemporary society. The networks they depict though are not just spatial, but temporally dispersed as well. This added dimension plays out at the level of plot and form, demonstrating the unpredictable nature of historical causality.

One of the ways that these novels come to terms with networked human agency is through their critiques of the continuing prevalence of the great man theory of history that I've discussed in earlier chapters. While they are often critical of it, the great man theory is a hard force to counteract when depicting the future in a novel, a medium so bound up in the personalities and inner lives of individuals. As discussed in the introduction, even Lukács sees great men of history as central to the historical novel, even if only as the embodiment of the spirit of their times rather than the actual instigators of change who should appear at the margins of the historical novel. One force counterbalancing the dabbling of these novels in the great man theory is that they all depict the often-random networks of human connection that exist both transnationally and transtemporally. Just as the ghost stories examined in the first chapter allowed for extending the timescale of historical fiction, so too do the transtemporal networks staked out by these novels. By weaving a narrative out of heterogenous time; past, present, and future; and global spatial networks, these novels work to show the future as the result of past agencies and dispersed global agencies. Science fiction scholar Darko Suvin has famously builds on Brecht's sense of fiction

as estrangement to define science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement," which he describes as "see[ing] the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to *cognitive* glance… [science fiction] is organized by extrapolating the variable and future-bearing elements from the empirical environment" (372, 375). While I am skeptical of such a fixed definition of any genre, especially one that depends so heavily on empiricism, Suvin's definition remains helpful as a pervasive *expectation* placed on science fiction. Suvin's emphasis on science fiction's understanding of possible societal formations through cognition is reminiscent of Lukács's definition of the historical novel. Where Lukács saw the French Revolution as a world-historical shift that made historical thinking, and thus the historical novel, possible, Suvin hangs science fiction on the Enlightenment ideal of scientific objectivity.[91] It also helps us separate the impulse towards science fiction from other genres that typically take place in a future setting, such as utopia. Dystopia, or post-apocalyptic fiction, all of which depend on a radical break with the present.

These works also deal with another more obvious implication of the great man theory, namely that the individuals singled out as the movers and shakers of history are so often male. There is a long tradition of feminist revisionist history that has sought to rectify this problem of the historical imagination, but it remains persistent in the public school classroom and the popular press history. Two of the texts I discuss in

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[91] For more on this, see my discussion of Lukács's *The Historical Novel* in the introduction.

this chapter, Egan's *The Candy House* and Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, confront the great man theory of history head on in the figure of its most recent avatar, the almost invariably male tech CEO/genius.

As all three of the novels examined in this chapter engage in at least some way with the ongoing climate crisis, it is important to note that these novels are not dystopian or post-apocalyptic, or at least not *just* those things. Additionally, they are not utopian, they do not imagine future societies that have fully succumb to or transcended beyond the problems of the present. It has often been remarked upon the extent that dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction have come to dominate the popular fiction landscape of the contemporary moment. Writing on the current post-apocalyptic trend, Theodore Martin has argued that in these works "what changes… is less significant than what stays the same… The secretly entwined logics of survival and work afford us a glimpse not of a postcapitalist future but a contemporary moment shaped by constant yet precarious labor" (162). Similarly Eva Horn describes what she calls the "apocalyptic fantasy…the future as a radical disruption with regard to the present, something we can hardly anticipate or prevent" (5–6). Horn and Martin's arguments are helpful here in their demonstration of what Weird Histories of the future share with post-apocalyptic narratives, an interest in the processes of historical change, and what they don't, Weird Histories of the future bring our attention more explicitly to this continuity as they combine historical fiction and science fiction to depict the historical processes that lead to their possible futures.

In the mold of some post-apocalyptic or dystopian fiction, these novels all to varying degrees engage with the idea that the course of future history is unalterably set. Given the dire predictions of climate scientists and more recently epidemiologists, this is a natural impulse for an author-prognosticator. But these novels are more interesting for their depictions of how life might continue after the inevitable apocalypse. While a deep engagement with climate change through the invaluable lens of the environmental humanities is outside the scope of this project, I hope that I can pose some interesting questions for further interlocuters of the overlap between popular historiography and climate fiction, or "cli-fi." Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has argued that the first generation of cli-fi writers in the 2000s "sought not only to create something of lasting value or to 'bear witness' but to agitate and inspire apathetic and complicit readers" ("Climate Change Fiction" 309).[92] The works I discuss here take this further by showing how our present creates the future. While the previous chapters of this project have read contemporary American fiction through a national lens, looking at myths and tropes of a specifically United States history, the problem of climate change forces us to think on a larger scale. Christian Moraru has argued for "planetarism" as a successor to postmodernism, the trend of "increasingly fashioning human expressivity and comprehension worldwide, the emerging 'single unit' of cultural discourse and analysis, of world writing and world reading" (493). It

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[92] For more on cli-fi and its use of a global activist lens, see Ursula K. Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

is now clear that facing the future and the problems of understanding the past will be a global endeavor, if we aim to prevent, or even mitigate, the crisis of climate change.

Confronting climate change from the position of a flagging American empire is a particularly thorny problem, as Americans are increasingly encouraged to turn to nationalism and jingoism in the face of decline. As discussed in the introduction, we are living in what Robert Brenner has called the long downturn, the second half of his bipartite historiography of the global postwar economy. Brenner argued that following the long postwar boom was a period of decline marked by global "falling rates of profit" (xxi). Jed Esty has examined a resulting phenomenon, specific to the decline of US empire in the face of the long downturn, that he calls "declinism," a term he uses to refer not to the reality of the decline of American imperial power, but the narratives we tell ourselves about that decline. These stories prevent us from confronting the problems of the present head on and the novels discussed in this chapter present different ways of thinking historically about the future that might offer a way out of this trap. From climate change to global health to rising political polarization, the arguments for pessimism seem to grow daily.

Writing in an earlier moment of political crisis, German metahistorian Reinhart Koselleck's work on crisis provides a useful grounding for the discussion of future-historical possibility that follows. In his first book *Crisis and Critique*, published in the early years of the Cold War and following quickly on the heels of the devastation of the second World War, Koselleck argued that in the course of the Enlightenment the morality and politics were separated in the replacement of the absolutist state by

bourgeoisie government. Koselleck argues that the implications of this were wide ranging, but the most important for the purposes of this project was the creation of a constant of crisis that bourgeoisie politics was incapable of addressing and which historians justified by displacing political crisis into the realm of a future utopia. Koselleck summarizes this as such, "History is now experienced in historico-philosophical terms… it can supply the 'authentic' interpretation, of history as a process of moral laws – that is the historico-philosophical reinsurance by which the bourgeoisie anticipated the end of the crisis" (159). Fredric Jameson has similarly critiqued the role that utopia plays in contemporary discourse, arguing that there are:

> two distinct lines of descendancy from More's inaugural text: the one intent on the realization of the Utopian program, the other an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in… liberal reforms and commercial pipedreams, the deceptive yet tempting swindles of reforms and commercial pipedreams, the deceptive yet tempting swindles of the here and now, where Utopia serves as the mere lure and bait for ideology. (*Archaeologies of the Future* 3)

While they are diagnosing different ideological traps under the banner of utopia, Koselleck and Jameson are in agreement on the threat posed by false promises of societal transformation.[93] We are still living with the consequences of this deferral of

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[93] It has become cliché at this point to point out that utopia is a dead genre, but this ignores the way that it survives in our culture, even if only as what we might call a genre residue rather than a genre unto itself. Sean Austin Grattan argues that a "utopian impulse" remains detectable in contemporary literature, where utopia lives on as "a critical methodology—an examination of what is missing from any given world… a question of affect because affect, at root, is an examination of what fosters the movement, circulation, and transmission of feelings that alter, expand, or shrink a body's capacity to act" (27).

the solutions to political crisis to some imagined future moment, namely the imagined future utopia.

There's a productive tension here between Koselleck's ideas of crisis and the deferral of utopia and the conventions of the genres of science fiction, utopia, and dystopia. All three of these genres have become muddled together in the popular imagination of the future, part of the work of this chapter has been to work to disentangle them from each other in my reading of these three novels. Clearly, Koselleck's concept of utopia is different from the original utopia of Thomas Moore or the later future-located utopias such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.[94] Additionally, it seems plausible that Koselleck would be critical of science fiction and historical fiction, with their dabbling in Enlightenment ideas. The question then, is do the future histories of Weird History offer us a way out of this trap? At the very least, they provide us with a more concrete approach to the future, a way of viewing what comes next not as a deferred political project, but as an extension of what has come before and what we do in the present. In what follows I'll look at the novels in order of the weight that they give to the historiography of the future, starting with Emily St. John Mandel's novel, *The Sea of Tranquility*, which is the most dependent on the tropes of the science fiction genre to establish a sense of futurity. Then I'll move on to Jennifer Egan's sequel-continuation of her 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *The Candy House*, which depicts a network of human agency and historical context as

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[94] Fredric Jameson has argued that More's *Utopia* is only legible in its mixing of existing generic impulses. He writes, "even a no-place must be put together out of already existing representations. Indeed the act of combination and the raw materials thereby combined themselves constitute the ideological message" (*Archaeologies of the Future* 24).

found materials out of which we must construct the future. And finally, I'll turn to Vauhini Vara's ambitious debut novel *The Immortal King Rao*, which presents a globally- and temporally-networked history of a future corporatocratic world government from its beginnings in twentieth century India to its development into a tech company and finally ending with the climate action freedom fighters attempting to stop it in the mid-twenty first century. While these novels all depict the future, their mixing of genres to accomplish this depiction marks them as Weird History.

Sea of Tranquility, Emily St. John Mandel's 2022 novel, first appears to be weaving a complex tapestry of human interaction across five centuries, inflected by the influence of a shadowy time-travel research and regulatory body founded on the moon in the twenty-second century. But as the novel goes on, its focus increasingly narrows to focus on how the lives of a single brother and sister who work for the agency have created and ultimately resolve the temporal puzzle at the novel's center. While this might seem to suggest that the novel is practicing a novelistic version of institutional history (as opposed to Egan and Vara's novels which I argue are analogs of social history and history of capitalism, respectively), we only ever glimpse the powerful institutions at the heart of *Sea of Tranquility* obliquely. These institutions are reduced to Manichean superpowers fighting in the background of human affairs as the human drama of the novel plays out in the foreground. In this way, Mandel's novel, more than the other two novels examined in this chapter, uses science fiction tropes to establish a vision of the future as a background for a small human drama first and a historiographic understanding of that future second. The time travel that is revealed to be structural to the novel's temporal universe, makes its history weird, while arguing for the role of transtemporal agency in our own history. *Sea of Tranquility* works as a

kind of meta-sequel to Mandel's 2014 breakout hit novel *Station Eleven*. Where *Station Eleven* imagines a global flu pandemic that wipes out most of humanity and modernity in one fell swoop, *Sea of Tranquility* imagines a series of Covid-19 adjacent pandemics that alter but never end humanity or modernity. Where *Station Eleven* depicted the discontinuity of the post-apocalypse, *Sea of Tranquility* is much more invested in the ways that the past, present, and future are interconnected.

The human drama of *Sea of Tranquility* takes the form of a science fiction puzzle box that plays out over the course of almost 500 years. The plot concerns a series of characters who all encounter a spacetime anomaly in the same location in Canada that manifests as a brief vision of what is ultimately revealed to be an airship port in the twenty-fifth century. The structure of the novel is something like that of a temporal pyramid, the plot first jumping forward in time and then moving backwards through each of the plots a second time. What connects these moments in time is finally revealed to be the life of a 25th century moon man, Gaspery and his time travel-studying physicist sister, Zooey. Through a series of unlikely coincidences, Gaspery finds himself working as an investigator for the Time Institute, a top-secret government time travel facility on the moon and also the employer of his sister. The Institute has caught wind of the temporal anomaly and the mysterious higher ups at the organization are worried that it is evidence of a fringe theory that all of reality is merely a computer simulation. By the novel's end, Gaspery has betrayed the Time Institute by interfering with the past and discovered that the anomaly is in fact caused by him meeting him meeting his future self over the course of his investigation. What at first appears to be a random network of humanity across time and space as seen in *Rao* and *Candy House* is revealed to have Gaspery as a central node. Time is revealed

to be a closed loop, Gaspery always already traveled back in time and made the decision to alter the past. In the final moments of the novel, an aging Gaspery is rescued from his Institute-enforced exile and imprisonment by Zooey, who is now working with a mysterious second time travel organization. While the closed time loop is a standard science fiction genre trope, the ideological suggestion is concerning, if time is a crystalline unchangeable object, what possibility is there for historical change?

The Time Institute (and its even more mysterious rival) work as a genre-informed stand in for institutionalism broadly, as it seeks to stop Gaspery's (and all) interference with the past in a desperate and constant fight for self-preservation. This self-preservation instinct has shifted to become the main focus of the organization, as one character puts it:

> "they only go back and undo the damage [to history] if the damage affects the Time Institute… What you have to understand is that bureaucracy is an organism, and the prime goal of every organism is self-protection. Bureaucracy exists to protect itself." (Mandel 150–51)

Here we can see the pedagogical didacticism of the novel, and the message when taken at face value is remarkably libertarian. Gaspery is cast as the plucky individual in the face of the unknowable bureaucracy. Soon after signing on, he realizes that he is unable to resist interfering in the past and does so at great risk to himself. But if we read bureaucracy here as a stand-in for those that would reduce history to an unchanging story about the past, rather than an evolving tool for understanding what action is required in the present, then we can see the novel's politics in a new light. When he is caught saving the life of novelist Olive Llewelyn from a pandemic in the

twenty-third century, Gaspery is framed by the Institute for a murder in the barbaric twenty-first-century United States.

Gaspery's incarceration in our current day prison industrial complex, which has presumably been eliminated in his own time, develops the novel's critique of institutions beyond their overwhelming self-preservation instinct. In sending Gaspery back to this specific moment, the Institute is in fact perpetuating the injustices of the past in service of its own ends.[95] The very institution that is tasked with ensuring the past remains stagnant is revealed to be invested in using that stagnant past to its own ends. This is a compelling account of the persistence of injustice across time and an example of how Mandel uses her interwoven temporalities to unsettle our understanding of historical progress. The advanced nature of the Time Travel Institute is in fact what makes them capable of mining the past for regressive carceral solutions. The novel suggests that when institutions seek out methods of self-preservation they are more likely to reach for the tried and true carceral technologies of the past. In this way, the novel paints technologically innovative institutions as not just self-interested, but regressive as well.

Before going any further, we must address the metafictional elements of *Sea of Tranquility*. In fact, it is hard to do any reading of *Sea of Tranquility* without placing it in the context of Mandel's career, specifically the publication and reception of her 2014 novel *Station Eleven*. The reason for this is that a significant chunk of the novel, one of its nested segments, is concerned with the fate of an author remarkably similar to Mandel herself. Olive Llewellyn is the perspective character for the section of *Sea*

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[95] For more on novels that use non-realist temporalities to represent the prison-industrial complex of the United States, see the first chapter.

of Tranquility that takes place in the 23rd century and she is a moon native on the press tour for a novel that depicts a pandemic, much like *Station Eleven*. Olive and Emily St. John Mandel's careers both experienced meteoric rises in the years after the publication of their breakout novels due in part to the prominent adaptations that their novels receive. Where Olive departs from Mandel is that *Sea of Tranquility* was released over a year into a world changing pandemic, while Olive is living blissfully unaware that another pandemic is about to begin.

Olive's pandemic plot represents the most sustained attempt to reckon with the Covid-19 pandemic of the three novels I examine in this chapter. She is one of the targets of Gaspery's mission as she happened to experience the temporal anomaly firsthand as a child and wrote the experience into her novel. That Gaspery breaks with the Institute first to save Olive from her pandemic is telling, read through this lens the Institute is less a commentary on institutions broadly and more a condemnation of the actions of world governments in the face of Covid-19, just as Gaspery's incarceration in the twenty-first century represents a critique of the prison-industrial complex. This condemnation is made explicit in excerpts from Llewellyn's novel that work as an metafictional intertext in *Sea of Tranquility*. One passage reads:

> "We knew it was coming and we didn't quite believe it, so we prepared in low-key, unobtrusive ways… in those early weeks we were vague about our fears because saying the word pandemic might bend the pandemic towards us" (Mandel 120).

The metafictional play at work here breaks down the walls between our reality and the reality of the text, making both strange and uncertain. Olive is the author of a pandemic novel that is released just before a pandemic, just as Mandel's earlier novel, *Station Eleven* was a post-apocalyptic novel in which the apocalypse was triggered by

a new plague that killed 90% of the world's human population and was published just before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The novel's interest in Covid-19, and pandemics broadly, might go towards explaining its allergy towards science fiction tropes. At every turn, Mandel engages with and then renounces the genre trappings of science fiction. This goes at least part way to show us what the novel considers to be the driver of human history. Despite the many problems facing our own time, namely a rising tide of fascism and the compounding crises of global warming, the humans of Mandel's novel are able to achieve great technological marvels that play out as only a backdrop to the novel's other interests. In the 23rd century, humanity has built not one, but three colonies on the moon complete with wildlife, parks, and civilian populations. It has also begun construction on the government time travel facility that will employ Gaspery in 200 years.[96] We get occasional glimpses of what material conditions coalesced as this came to be, but these are only ever snippets. We learn for example that,

> The first moon colony was built on the silent flatlands of the Sea of Tranquility… There was substantial interest in immigration to the colony. Earth was so crowded by then, and such swaths of it had been rendered uninhabitable by flooding or heat. The colony's architects had set aside space for substantial residential development, which sold out quickly. (Mandel 106).

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[96] In a move characteristic of the novel's disinterest in science fiction tropes, we first learn this because the novelist protagonist of this section of the novel is married to the man designing the top secret facility. This disinterest is reflected on metafictionally through the lens of Mandel's stand-in character in the novel, who at one point falls asleep while a taxi driver describes "a book she wanted to write… some kind of sci-fi/fantasy epic, the modern world except with wizards, demons, and talking rats." (Mandel 75) In another moment of metafictional play, Olive remarks that she has, "never been interested in auto-fiction," a genre which has apparently survived for 200 years after its brief moment of relevancy in our present (98).

This historical account of the future feels improbable, but not exactly impossible. What it seems to suggest is that a gleaming golden age science fiction future will inevitably arrive, even if it does so on a longer time scale and with more rough spots than previously expected. Climate change and class tensions are reduced to mere speedbumps here. Adding to the vagueness of Mandel's timeline is that exactly which government is at play on the moon or in control of the time travel institute is never outright stated. We learn, for example, that the "Republic of Texas" is a political entity in Olive's twenty-third century, but this is a detail devoid of any context, despite the massive sociopolitical consequences that it implies. For all intents and purposes, Mandel's twenty-third and even twenty-fifth centuries look very much like our own.

Ah, but maybe the absurdity is the point. Perhaps the "future" of the novel is not a prediction at all, but a generic "other" space where concerns about the present can be projected. At times Mandel's future reads like the joke-riddled 2015 depicted in another time travel text, 1989's *Back to the Future Part II,* which predicted AI-based Ronald Reagan waiters and flying cars. That said, this discounts the extent to which depictions of the future are taken seriously by readers to say that Mandel's future is *merely* a joke. After all, how many times have you heard someone bemoan the present's lack of hoverboards? Additionally, Mandel does not set her novel in an alternate present or some kind of disjointed timeline but attaches it to very precise dates. Whether or not Sea of Tranquility recognizes it, the claim of science fiction to represent *the* future gives it a weight in the popular historical imagination. Even fictions that engage with science fictional futures at some remove carry with them the weight of prediction.

Perhaps we should read the novel as both predictive and figurative then. A call for individuals to reckon with and learn from the tragedy of the pandemic (and climate change and colonialism and the prison industrial complex) or we are doomed to see them play out in the future over and over again. There's a disconnect then between this idea and Gaspery as protagonist. The novel seems simultaneously to demand individuals step up and fight for what's right when presented with the opportunity but can't imagine a sense of justice beyond individual heroism. When Olive Llewelyn contemplates why we are drawn to apocalyptic fiction, she muses, "Our anxiety is warranted, and it's not unreasonable to suggest that we might channel that anxiety into fiction, but the problem with that theory is, our anxiety is nothing new. When have we ever believed that the world wasn't ending?" (Mandel 188–89) This seems to be the novel's final word on what we owe our fellow man in the face of historical tragedy. Not exactly nothing, but action with a healthy dose of skepticism. We might say that the novel is positing the insignificant man theory of history, in two ways. First, Gaspery is ultimately rescued by his more competent and intelligent sister. The gender commentary here is rather surface level, but revisionist, both of great man theories of history and the gender politics of science fiction, nevertheless. Gaspery's sister Zooey is revealed to be the actor working behind-the-scenes to ensure not only that Gaspery's acts of heroism are possible, but that his ultimate fate is freedom rather than imprisonment for said heroism. Secondly, the novel's insignificant man theory posits a system wherein small actors in the form of both Gaspery and Zooey are called to fight against evil institutions indefinitely. The fixed time loop of the novel suggests that this fight is doomed to fail, or at least repeat indefinitely, but necessary nevertheless. This

is an understandable reaction to the moment in which *Sea of Tranquility* was written, but ultimately dissatisfying as a theory of history or political action.

Where Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility* ultimately reveals that it hinges on the actions of just two individuals dispersed throughout time, Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* maintains its dedication to depicting networked human agency throughout. One of the ways that *Candy House* achieves this effect is through its form, which unlike *Tranquility*'s nested chapters, does not create a narrative hierarchy among its connected characters. *Candy House* is unique among the novels that I've looked at for this study in that it's a sequel to, or perhaps more accurately a continuation of, Egan's 2011 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. I say continuation here because the connection between the novels is a loose one. Major characters from *Goon Squad* appear as minor ones in *Candy House* and vice versa. Both novels take the form of a series of interconnected short stories that jump back and forth over a wide swath of time, from the recent past to the near future; and both novels develop narrative cohesion through the ever-expanding network of connections between their characters. In this way, *Candy House* is less a novel that's a sequel to another novel than an expansion of *Goon Squad's* project. This is simultaneously an example of Egan's interest in formally-innovative prose fiction and a capitulation to contemporary pop culture's insistence on the IPification of all artistic effort; or put more reprehensibly "content creation." Egan's sequel-continuation manages to retain the prestige of the standalone literary novel, while capitalizing on the popularity (and profitibality) of the infinitely serialized IP. The result is a Weird History in which the two novels nest within each other across the decade that separates their publication, bringing the temporal network of their narratives into our own experience of them as textual

objects. Thus, the novel represents an interesting moment where the overlap of trends in corporate media and interests of an experimental author create new possibilities in the novel. Nicholas Brown has argued that the form of *Goon Squad* (which Candy House continues) evidences "the sharpest discontinuity between short story and novel… [this] disjunction between short story and novel is mapped onto the distinction between art and commodity artwork" (104–05). Brown is skeptical of the novel's capability to be about much beyond this disjunction, writing that the novel's thematic concerns are "hidden just deep enough for adults to find them easily" (105). I don't dispute this reading, but I argue that by continuing the project of *Goon Squad*, Egan simultaneously creates an easily marketed art-commodity, but also deepens *Goon Squad*'s themes in *Candy House*.

One place we see this is in the seriality of *Candy House* as a follow-up to *Goon Squad*. Both *Candy House* and *Goon Squad* are interested in the passage of time and the ownership of creative works. In *Goon Squad* this manifests in the novel's characters involvement with the music industry. For these characters, brushes with fame and celebrity culture crystallize their concerns about aging and irrelevance.[97] All of these concerns are overlaid on the several decades that the novel takes as its setting, jumping back and forth along a timeline of roughly the 1980s to just after the novel's publication in 2010. In this context, a fear (or acceptance) of aging intermingles with the changing landscape of the United States in this period, especially the unreality of the country post-9/11. The novel's dispersed temporality is made more

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[97] The novel's title comes from the mouth of an aging and forgotten rockstar pitching his publicist on the idea of a final "suicide tour," "Time's a goon right? Isn't that the expression?" (*Goon Squad* 127).

pronounced by the fact that many of its constituent chapters appeared first as stand-alone short fiction, with the earliest published story appearing in 1999.[98] Taking this into account, *Goon Squad* and *Candy House* are the most visible instances of what has been a twenty-three year long narrative experiment by Egan.

Goon Squad and *Candy House* are not just novels that are interested in the passage of time, but they have been written and published over a longer passage of time than the average commercial stand-alone novel. Thus, the passage of time and the resulting shifts in history and popular culture are incorporated into the project of the texts. Here I've decided to focus on *Candy House*, which both extends the publication timeline of Egan's project and pushes the narrative even further into a speculative future. *Goon Squad* provides an interesting case study in popular historiography in and of itself, but the way that *Candy House* expands the concerns of Egan's project makes it particularly valuable for my study. *Candy House* not only depicts a speculative future, but as its thematic interests shift away from the music industry and towards social media and media broadly, it becomes more concerned with how that future takes shape. The productive tension between the popular consumer object and the formally innovative art object in *Candy House* means that it is not just a work of Weird History but is itself theorizing the cultural and commercial trends that have led to Weird History's emergence.

If *Goon Squad* coheres around the music careers of its perspective characters, *Candy House* is focused on the changing landscape of American public life under

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[98] In fact, eight of the novel's thirteen chapters were published as stand-alone short fiction. By contrast, only one of *Candy House*'s chapters appeared in a previous publication.

Egan's increasingly speculative vision of social media. But technological change is only one of several possible answers that the novel proposes for what drives history. The most obvious moment of speculation is Egan's introduction of the company Mandala and its various products. Mandala, run by the central character of one of the novel's short stories and obvious Steve Jobs analog Bix Bouton, sells the "Mandala Cube" and "Own Your Unconscious," a product and service respectively that allow individuals to upload their memories and consciousnesses to the cloud. These consciousnesses are then stitched together to create "Collective Consciousness," an unplanned technological leap (or in the words of pop tech reporting, a "singularity") that ends up changing the world unalterably. "Collective Consciousness" allows its users to tap into the memories (or "grey grabs") of every individual who has used it before, to relive those memories, search for information, or for any other reason that might strike their fancy; the only cost to use this technology is to upload your own memories to its database.

This transition of concerns is not merely a shift in Egan's interests, but one that is dramatized within the novel itself. Melora, the central character of another of the novel's short stories and the daughter and protégé of a music producer who appeared in *Goon Squad*, frets over the changing tides of the music industry as the internet makes piracy easy and accessible to the masses, "Nothing is free!, Only children expect otherwise, even as myths and fairy tales warn us… Never trust a candy house! It was only a matter of time before someone made them pay for what they thought they were giving away for free" (*Candy House* 125). The titular candy house, just like the "goon squad" of the previous novel, becomes the novel's central metaphor. The internet is figured as an illusory promise, suckering in consumers all over the globe,

who are in turn represented as the over-trusting children of fairy tales. The point is not simply that the internet is a trap, but that its promises are only an enticing surface, belieing an unknowable current of technological development that operates semi-independently of human concerns. Ironically, in searching for a way to save the dying music industry, Melora (one of the novel's many perspective characters) licenses her mother Miranda Kline's anthropological research to Mandala. And it is Kline's work that ultimately becomes the basis of the algorithmic tech that launches Bix Bouton to tech stardom and makes the Mandala Cube possible.[99]

This is quite the ball of connections to unravel, but it gives a glimpse of how Egan's novel builds a network of characters and propels its plot forward even as it constantly doubles back in time. But rather than just an innovative plotting technique, we can glean from this outline several possible implied drivers of historical change. The most obvious, and the one least endorsed by the novel, is the great man theory of history. Just as Gaspery's heroism is only made possible by Zooey's interventions in *Sea of Tranquility*, Egan introduces a "great man" character, who is revealed to be equal parts salesman and front for the ideas of a smarter, but less recognized woman. In this version, Bix Bouton himself is the prime mover in (at least part) of history. Bouton is both the novel's stand-in for the "tech innovator" that now seems ever present in our society, from Jobs to Zuckerberg to Musk. Bouton's company Mandala first rose to prominence by using Miranda Kline's work to develop a series of algorithms that digested and categorized human behavior in such a way that the infinite torrent of metadata created by social media could be monetized, presumably in

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[99] Miranda Kline is a returning character from Goon Squad, where she has her own perspective chapter.

the form of targeted advertising (*Candy House* 161). Mandala's next stage of corporate dominance comes with its development of the Mandala Cube and its attendant services outlined above. What makes the Steve Jobs comparison particularly useful is that Bouton is not himself an inventor of new technologies, but a master packager and salesman. The Mandala Cube itself demonstrates this as it takes the form of "one cubic foot of sparkling material that looks like it was mined from the moon" (152). The future promised by the product is the productive of technological change, but it is at least partly marketing spin. Bouton is a PR genius rather than a technology one.

We might read Bouton then as an indictment of the great man theory. He creates nothing, only repackaging the innovations of others and making them marketable products. Supporting this thesis is the fact that when Bouton later in life seeks to share with his family his moment of innovation that lead to the Mandala Cube, he shows them what he calls the "Anti-Vision: that bleak blank vista that had harried and tormented him" (*Candy House* 322). For Bouton, the Anti-Vision represents a missing memory from his life that he seeks to recover, but we could just as easily read the phrasing "Anti-Vision" as an indictment of Bouton's entire project, he is a man possessed of nothing, his ultimate vision just a blank emptiness. Following this logic, we might say that Miranda Kline is the true genius behind the empty Bix Bouton. It is, after all, her academic work that made his spectacular career possible. And this is a satisfying and recognizable narrative, the great man of history is revealed to be a thief having stolen his work from an unrecognized woman. But we could take this revisionist analysis one step further: Miranda Kline's academic breakthroughs are the result of her ethnography of an isolated tribe living in the Brazilian rainforest.

With this in mind, we might read this moment through a postcolonial lens as just another westerner extracting value from the global south. I argue that the cultural accessibility of these narratives and their juxtaposition within the text is meant to suggest the inadequacy of all such simple heuristics for understanding the movement of history.

So if not the great man theory or some other heuristic, then what drives history in the novel? *Candy House* might not be invested in the great man theory, but that doesn't mean it isn't interested in the actions of individuals. In the novel, individuals can have an impact on history, but that impact is always tempered by the ineffable randomness of a collective as large and complicated as global (or at least American) society. This networked agency and randomness is reinforced by the structure of the novel. The network of individuals here seems to be the point. I argue that this is a liberal humanist approach to the problem of what drives history, albeit one that is complicated by its interconnections along temporal as well as spatial lines. The novel shows us that individual actions *do* matter, even if anticipating their exact results is ultimately impossible in the ungainly tangle of history. While *Candy House* is more committed to showing human agency as dispersed both temporally and spatially than *Sea of Tranquility,* it ultimately falls back on the moral choices of individuals as a driver of history. These choices reverberate backwards and forwards in time, a non-supernatural instance of the ghostly agencies explored in the first chapter of this dissertation.

The internet and its manifestation in Mandala's technology aren't the only candy house in the novel. The candy house also works as a metaphor for other sites of cultural production, notably the sculptural art of Sasha Blake, a character returning

from *Goon Squad*. When we last saw Sasha in *Goon Squad*, she had managed to put an end to a lifetime of kleptomania and transmute that energy into a burgeoning career in art and a stable family life in California. When we catch up with her in *Candy House*, we see her through the eyes of her estranged cousin Miles who is going through a midlife crisis and jealous of Sasha's seemingly miraculous second act. Sasha's art, which in *Goon Squad* consisted of collages of household objects, has bloomed into a globally known outsider art project in which she incorporates discarded plastic ephemera into a massive sculptural object that occupies a swath of California Desert. The sculpture evolves constantly as pieces of it are "melted… down to create compressed bricks that had been displayed and sold, along with aerial photos of that same plastic in sculptural form, at art galleries" (*Candy House* 49). These colorful plastic bricks, dispersed throughout the world in the hands of galleries and private collectors, represent a much less threatening candy house and a vision of the future that exists simultaneously with Egan's speculative vision of social media. Sasha's art, just like Bouton's tech innovations, offers a story of the future for sale. This story provokes positive feelings but is not a replacement for political action.

Throughout this project, works of historical narrative depicted within historical fiction have proved to be a fruitful site of analysis and Sasha's art project is similarly rich.[100] As repurposed plastic spread across the desert, Sasha's work is immediately evocative of the human impact on the Earth and what is for readers a climate catastrophe that has only just begun. While Sasha's story and the story of her cousin in

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[100] For examples, see the mural of American history in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and the newsreel theater in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, both of which I looked at in chapter two.

Candy House are both clearly redemptive, the chapter ends with Miles asking the reader "to recall the narrative power of redemption stories. America loves a sinner" (72). But the meaning of Sasha's art is less obvious. One possible reading is that the art is redemptive as well, representing our capacity to move beyond materialism and imagine futures in which we exist in greater harmony with our environment. We learn for example that Sasha works with a "collective" to create the work and that "Monitors gauge the breakdown of the plastics with surface swabs to make sure they don't leak" (64) . But in addition to this environmentally conscious veneer, we learn that the sculpture has accrued prestige in an art world dominated by the concerns of capital and visited by "art collectors… [and] the hardy rich—the types who climb Kilimanjaro" (65). So, is the sculpture political commentary or is it a plaything for the idle rich or is it merely trash in the desert, with the added twist that ultimately performing the very pollution it seeks to critique? It certainly evokes Benjamin's famous image of the catastrophic wreck of human activity observed helplessly by the angel of history. The novel seems to be ambivalent, suggesting all three readings, but endorsing none. I argue that Sasha's art asks us to reflect on the project of the novel and climate fiction broadly. Egan's novel is not so cynical as to suggest that commercial art is meaningless, it is after all like so many of the works analyzed in this study a work of commercial art that argues for the importance of commercial art. But it does suggest that art alone, be it commercial or otherwise, is not enough.

Another way of reading Sasha's work is as historical allegory. Egan's use of dramatic irony structures her depiction of the future. Often, we see Egan's characters on the precipice of dramatic change, both personal and historical, but they are unable to predict what is coming next. Similarly, the future is composed of building blocks

from the past, but the shape they will take is always unknown. Bix Bouton's greatest innovation is a side effect of what he saw as his life's work, the effects that it created in society were beyond the scope of the project and his imagining. Sasha's anti-social kleptomania paved the way for her career as an artist. Just as her kleptomania is refashioned as the beginning of an art career, the objects that she collects become refashioned as she transforms them into art. This transformation is possible through the interaction of a complex network of human agency, objects, and global capitalism. A complex network whose effects are best seen in hindsight is rendered visible in the novel's form. This depiction of networked agency is one model of historical change, wherein individuals, their actions, and their environment are constantly combining and re-combining to create unexpected outcomes. In this reading, both Sasha and Egan's art are materials that could be used to build the future, but exactly how remains unknown.

We see these themes of recycling and the reinvention of the past as the future in the novel's final two chapters. As the novel's furthest foray into the future and its ending, these chapters are particularly instructive for our purposes here. Both chapters indulge the novel's metafictional impulse to comment on its own narrative, as in the quip about the "narrative power of redemption stories" (*Candy House* 72). In the first of these chapters, we meet Gregory Bouton, the son of Bix and a fledgling novelist. In the wake of his father's death, Gregory finds himself bedridden and unable to write. This paralysis relates in no small part to "Gregory's belief that Own Your Unconscious posed an existential threat to fiction" (313). Through a series of unlikely coincidences, Gregory volunteers to deliver an order of "vintage weed… from back in the day when marijuana was leafy and harsh and full of seeds, but delivered a high that

was the weed equivalent of vinyl" to his former creative writing professor (305). The weed in question is a recycled piece of the past, as it just happens to be the exact strain smoked by characters in the novel almost a century earlier. This too is a network of historical agencies; fathers and sons, drug dealers and their clients all coming together in an unpredictable constellation. At the close of this chapter, Gregory experiences an epiphany in the form of a coming blizzard that reminds him of his father's moment of "anti-vision" that inspired Own Your Unconscious. He realizes that "The Anti-Vision had never been an absence—the opposite! It was a density of whirling particles. His father just hadn't gotten close enough… [Gregory] was feeling the collective without any machinery at all. And its stories, infinite and particular would be his to tell" (323). Just as the weed recurs, taking on new meaning under different circumstances, so too does Bouton's "anti-vision," the epiphany that led to an ever more online populous is now reinforcing the necessity and singularity of fiction.

The novel seems to suggest two powerful forces at play in the creation of the future. First, an unpredictable recycling, where the raw materials of the past and the actions of individuals are always transforming through a complex network into the future. Secondly, that recycling is given shape by the constructive power of narrative, which both informs how we understand the past and what we imagine to be possible in future. In the novel's final chapter, this commitment to the power of narrative is reiterated as a life story is told in only seven pages. We follow Ames Hollander from a fateful childhood baseball game in 1991 to a first career as an assassin working for Private Military Corporation and a second act as an underground remover of "weevils," brain implants that allow individuals to access the web mentally (or be accessed from the web), and finally to his death in a nursing home in the near future.

Ames's second career as a weevil remover is part of a societal movement away from social media in 2035, the furthest future the novel depicts, in this future "Social media was dead, everyone agreed; self-representations were inherently narcissistic or propagandic or both, and grossly inauthentic" (*Candy House* 308). All of this is presented by an unnamed narrator using Bouton's tech to review these moments, but what this narrator ultimately decides is that, "knowing everything is too much like knowing nothing; without a story it's all just *information*" (333). Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that a novelist ultimately decides that the power of human storytelling is needed to make the past intelligible, but the road Egan takes to get there is still worth examining. The novel's argument for the cyclical nature of culture combines with its form, a web of interconnected narratives that jump back and forth in time, to show us a vision of the movement of history where the future is always deeply entangled with the past. This model of history is best understood through the combined lenses of historical fiction and science fiction. By compounding the two genres insights and representative techniques, Egan is able to craft a Weird History that depicts the temporal entanglement of historical narrative. This combination of genre elements and the estrangement from received narratives of history that it creates offers one possible solution to Koselleck's argument that the politics of modernity forecloses addressing the constant crisis that it creates. Past, present, and future are always being shaped and re-shaped by each other. This process is unpredictable, but perhaps this unpredictability could allow for political possibility and ultimately, building a better world.

Where Jennifer Egan's *Candy House* shows us an entangled future by depicting a large web of characters connected across space and time, Vauhini Vara's

The Immortal King Rao achieves a similar end by depicting the many historical events that converge in the life of a single influential man, the titular King Rao. *Candy House*'s Bix Bouton was just one figure among many in Egan's novel, but his tech company went on to impact the future of that novel in ways that he couldn't imagine. In *The Immortal King Rao,* that dynamic is expanded to the entire novel as Rao's tech company Coconut massively remakes the world in its image. Despite this focus on Rao, the novel could perhaps be most accurately described as a generational saga, we see Rao's life from the moment his mother met his father in India in 1951 to his daughter's death at the hands of the new world government he helped to create some time in the middle of the twenty-first century. The title here is ironic, Immortal being an appellation given to King Rao by his detractors in the face of his long life, which is notable, but nowhere near immortality; King turns out to be Rao's given name rather than a title; and finally, Rao is a common surname in India derived from a historical title used by Indian royalty. Thus, from our first encounter with its title, we are given a taste of the novel's biting satire. The satirical edge here is used to cut down the concept of the great man of history described above, but as the novel goes on, we will see that it also takes aim at the possibility of progress or protest under capitalism broadly. King Rao is revealed to be just a brand, a stand-in for the empty "innovation" offered by capitalism that distracts from the possibility of true progress in society.

The Immortal King Rao is narrated by Athena Rao, the daughter of King Rao, who finds herself imprisoned and awaiting judgement by the King Rao designed "algorithm" that administers the near future's new world government. Through a series of privatizations and consolidations, all human beings on Earth have become "Shareholders," rather than citizens, of this new government. The plot of the novel

follows three interwoven threads, King Rao's childhood in an upwardly mobile Dalit family in India, his career in the tech industry in the United States, and finally the experiences of his late-in-life daughter Athena with a near-future resistance movement. Athena herself, as her name suggests, is a product of Rao's hubris and drive. Her birth is the product of frozen embryos from Rao's deceased ex-wife, a surrogate pregnancy, and Rao's need for a newborn human test subject for his final technological innovation, a biochip that installs itself in the human brain and allows for seamless connection to the internet over Wi-Fi. Urgency is added to these proceedings by Athena's imprisonment and the increasing threat of what is called "Hothouse Earth" in the novel but will be immediately recognizable to readers as global warming. In Athena's present, much like our own, the effects of global warming continue to be largely ignored by global powers.

King's last innovation, which he dubs Harmonica, impedes not just upon Athena's bodily autonomy, but upon the text of the novel as well. Athena's experience of Harmonica is as a stream of information that she can tap into and out of at will any time she is within range of Wi-Fi. One way that this manifests in the prose of the novel is as a series of digressive historical narratives. Very early in the novel, as the circumstances leading up to King's birth in India are set in motion, we get this passage,

> What Radha wouldn't have realized—but I can't help but remark upon—is that Pears had been selling its soaps across the British Empire for a long time. In 1899, at the height of British colonialism, one advertisement had read, 'The first step towards lightening The White Man's Burden…' (Vara 6)

The passage goes on following the history of the Pears soap brand up to its appearance in Rao's small Indian village in 1951. The soap appears in the novel when Radha,

Rao's mother, steals it from a shop, covetous of the packaged consumer good. The passage quoted above serves to place the narrative within a broad historical context, but it also demonstrates the associative logic of Athena's brain augmented by Harmonica. Harmonica, or more simply the internet, makes possible in an instant a glimpse at the wide-ranging web of capitalism, colonialism, and history. Harmonica comes from Rao and is perhaps even another attempt to extend his life as it bridges his consciousness with Athena's, but it also makes possible a new way of thinking. I argue that in its depictions of Harmonica the novel is presenting us with a model of how to read it. Though it does not work at the incredible speed of Harmonica, Vara's novel offers an alternative way of looking at the world. Additionally, by dent of happening at the relatively slow speed of the novel, we are able to have this experience without being subsumed by it in the way Athena is threatened to by subsumed by Rao's consciousness. This threat is reminiscent of Koselleck's argument that the political decisions made in the past foreclose political change in the present. Each of these three novels seeks in its own way to intervene in this foreclosure of possibility by using intertwining past, present, and future temporalities to argue for the necessity of action in the present.

Vara, like Egan, presses the spectral figure of Steve Jobs into service, this time as the model of Rao's early tech career. But where Bouton played only a minor role in *Candy House*, here Rao takes center stage and assumes many more of the specific details of Jobs's career in the tech industry, albeit grafted onto to the story of an Indian immigrant to the United States and with a drastically different conclusion. Rao, like Jobs, enters the early home computer market as a wunderkind selling a consumer-friendly product named after a fruit (in Rao's case, the Coconut) and made in a garage,

he then takes this product to mainstream success with the Coconut II, and ultimately becomes the internationally recognized head of a lifestyle brand as Coconut expands the range of products and services that it offers.

The choice of Jobs as character inspiration in both *Rao* and *Candy House* points to his usefulness as a historical personage, specifically when it comes to interrogating the great man theory of history. Vara even addresses the obviousness of this social commentary, having Rao himself proclaim that he doesn't "buy in to the notion of individual genius. The narrative of human progress is one of collective achievement, and that notion is at the core of what we're trying to do at Coconut" (Vara 189). In both novels, Jobs simultaneously represents the tech CEO, the inventor (or perhaps more accurately "innovator"), and celebrity. The question of whether or not Jobs-types actually influence history or are merely flashy salesmen provides both Vara and Egan with material to explore. While this middle phase of Rao's career resembles that of Steve Jobs, Vara appends it on both ends with invented material. Thus, Rao is able to represent two generations of the American tech celebrity and the social-climbing Indian immigrant. This allows for almost a century of trends in global capitalism to cohere in a single individual. It is meaningful then that this person is styled as "King," and ultimately creates the conditions for capital to more explicitly take the reins of history. Athena then, who is the creation of Rao and rebels against him like her mythical namesake, represents the contested legacy of that global capitalism. The choice of the mythological namesake here provides further evidence of Rao's inflated sense of importance and also the novel's deflation of the great man figure.

> The novel's depiction of capitalism is deeply rooted in a theoretical and historical understanding of the issues at hand. Vara's novel presents

readers with a historical Janus face as it is both written with an eye towards up-to-the-minute relevancy and the longue dureé of capitalism, history, and technology. The scope of the novel is at times so wide that it verges on the territory of that beast of fiction, what Stefano Ercolino named the maximalist novel.[101] The novel's up-to-the-minute relevancy shows itself in smaller ways, such as Vara's prose descriptions of memes to references to the Trump presidency, here referred to as "the earlier standard for presidential egregiousness, the forty-fifth" and shown to be a precursor to the US president that hands over most of the government to Rao (271). Vara's novel also wears its theoretical interests on its sleeve, beginning with two epigraphs, one from Thomas Piketty's 2019 book *Capital and Ideology*, and a second from The Zhuangzi, the classic work of Daoist philosophy dating from fifth Century BCE China.[102] Piketty is a particularly enlightening choice as his now two book economic history project, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and its follow-up *Capital and Ideology* represent a massive undertaking to evaluate the role of capitalism in modern global society through both a wide ranging archive of data from empirical and cultural sources. Perhaps most telling, Vara cites Herodotus by name, the Greek writer widely recognized as the progenitor of history as we know it (360).[103] We can attribute this theoretical and historical grounding in part to Vara's career as a technology writer for the *Wall Street Journal* in the years before the

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[101] For Ercolino, the maximalist novel was one genre of the postmodern novel and perhaps best typified by Thomas Pynchon's 1973 postmodern juggernaut *Gravity's Rainbow*. Ercolino outlines ten characteristics of the maximalist novel, but the most salient for my purposes are length, encyclopedic mode, and completeness. He argues that "The length of the maximalist novels is not a neutral material fact but something more. It is both a possibility and a potent attraction; a possibility… tied to their epic, totalizing ambition" (19).

[102] Piketty is one of the rare economists who has broken into the realm of popular knowledge and remains a controversial figure in the field. I argue this overlap between technical knowledge and popular consumption represents one of the goals of Vara's novel.

[103] Herodotus was bestowed the title "The Father of History" by Cicero for his work on *(The) Histories*, which in their detailed and somewhat impartial account of the cultures of the ancient world has been cited as a starting point for the western historical tradition.

> publication of *The Immortal King Rao*. According to the novel's "Acknowledgements" section, it was written over the course of twelve years, a period that overlaps with Vara's work at The Wall Street Journal and "is informed by [her] years as a technology reporter [there]" (371–372). Vara's wide theoretical readings manifest often in the novel. In addition to the references to Piketty and Herodotus, King Rao's increasingly radicalized primary school teacher at one point gives a short doctrinaire Marxist history of the bourgeoisie in India and Europe: "In Europe at some point, at the end of the Middle Ages, this arrangement began to disintegrate as some workers repositioned themselves as merchant middlemen and earned their way into a better economic position, lodged between the rich and the poor—the bourgeoisie" (257).

Here we can see how the novel incorporates theoretical debates and technical knowledge into both its text and paratext. While this is occasionally clunky, it works to create a hybrid form that is relatively unique. I argue that these moments of hybridity demonstrate the political and pedagogical goals of the novel, which are more expansive and ambitious than those of Mandel or Egan.

The novel's critique of capitalism comes to a head in its depictions of the near-future, where all of society is governed by The Algorithm, which is in reality only a thinly-veiled dictatorship of capital. Rather than money, Shareholders earn "Social Capital" for their labor and a whole host of other activities, as you might expect, the consumption of goods and "influence" on social media are worth more Social Capital than public political dissent. The Algorithm is a particularly pointed example of what Fredric Jameson, building on the work of Marc Bloch, has called the Utopian impulse and that I've outlined above. Jameson's description of the utopian impulse, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, so closely resembles a description of the type of invention that the Algorithm promotes to solve climate change that one would be forgiven for thinking Vara might have been inspired by Jameson's text when she writes:

> King Rao invented it… the kind that's never actually going to happen, but that doesn't matter, because its value comes entirely from the illusion of it. You draw a beautiful picture of the invention and post it on Social and let it multiply, and after a while the question of whether the invention exists… doesn't matter any more. The invention has succeeded in its goal, which is to let all the world's Shareholders live under the pretense that they can keep spoiling the planet with no consequences." (245)

In this passage, part of a jeremiad from the leader of a band of political radicals, the ideological component of capitalist "innovation" is laid shockingly bare. That function is namely to be a limiting factor on social unrest, the promise of a technological solution that is always just on the horizon. Here we can see the fulfillment of analogizing Rao to Jobs, what he offers is an empty idea, or in the parlance of capital a "lifestyle," one that is disastrously incapable of confronting the problems of climate change.

While the novel certainly seems supportive of this conclusion, it also chides these near-future radicals. At their moment of radical break with society, their leader declares, "What we're doing tonight is historic!... We're making it known that we reject any system that places commercial value on our consciousness!" (Vara 156–57) And when we meet them they have established a network of small island societies that at first seem utopian. But it is quickly revealed that these radicals, or Exes (short for ex-shareholder), exist at the largesse of the Algorithm, which offered them total immunity for the crime of protesting shareholder rule if they agree to a total quarantine from the rest of global society. In its depiction of these neutralized radicals, and Athena's failed attempts to revive their movement, the novel is at its most didactic. I argue that the lesson here is to intervene while we still have the chance. A lesson that is presented by the verging on direct pedagogical address of the reader.

The Algorithm ultimately takes on the role of history-maker in the face of this failed revolution. Just as capitalism has proven to be remarkably efficient in incorporating, and ultimately defusing, dissent, The Algorithm's offer of independence for the exes is revealed to be a poisoned chalice. Not only does their banishment take them off the global stage, it also ensures their eventual extinction at the hands of the rising sea level. Athena's arrival at the exes encampment prompts them to realize this. The Exes de facto leader makes the case for a return to out and out warfare with the Algorithm in these terms, "You talk about waiting three, four, five generations for Shareholders to see what's happening? The Shareholders will be extinct by then. So will we" (Vara 245). In these moments, the novel seems to be slipping into direct address of the reader, making a case for immediate action in the face of climate change.

Whether or not the Exes rise to this occasion is never revealed. The novel ends with Athena's death and dissection at the hands of the shareholder government, presumably an attempt to learn more about the effects of Harmonica. Her life is ended as it began, as an experiment on behalf of corporate capital. Again, the novel seems to dip into direct address, asking readers if they will step up where Athena failed. Whether or not the kind of thinking that Athena's Harmonica makes possible will be revolutionary or not, is left to the reader. In this final moment, the novel threatens to break the bonds of both the historical fiction and science fiction genres. What the mixing of historical fiction and science fiction in these three novels shows is that both genres implicitly depend on models of rational inquiry, into past societal formations and alternative societal formations respectively. The unfortunate reality of this is that both genres tend towards arguing for the impossibility of a true historical break that

Koselleck argues is required to address the constant and multiplying crises of modernity.

I argue that Weird History takes on this cultural instinct towards inaction and at its best attempts to fight against it. Taken together, these three novels show that there is a wide range of possible futures that can be imagined through the lens of the genre turn. Where the genre turn becomes Weird History is in the deliberate mixing of science fiction and historical fiction in these novels. Traditional histories and the historical novel can gesture towards the future, but they can never depict it without introducing new genre registers. While the tradition of science fiction runs like a bright red thread through these depictions of the future, that tradition is put to a wide range of uses throughout these three novels. I argue that it is at its most valuable when it intertwines the future, past, and present to create new temporally heterogenous Weird Histories. These novels allow us to see agency as entwined and contingent across time as well as space. Just as the first three chapters of this project demonstrate that Weird History allows for the rethinking of the historical novel, this chapter takes that analysis even further, arguing that Weird History can serve as a jumping off point for reimagining a future that in our current moment seems destined for disaster.

That said, what vision of the future does reading these novels together leave us with? First, it seems fair to say that these novels haven't transcended the novel form's dependence on inhabiting the perspectives of individuals. Even as these texts are skeptical of the role of the individual in history, they struggle not to reify the importance of the individual formally. Mandel's novel despite its experimental form, seems hellbent on reifying the science fiction genre protagonist in the form of Gaspery, even as it questions whether or not he is capable of any agency at all. Egan's

Candy House is perhaps most successful in its depiction of a network of human interactions across time and space, but it is also the least interested in determining what exactly drives history or how we might grab the wheel. Vara's novel makes strides towards a novelistic form that speaks towards the tangled web of historical narrative and capitalism, but whether or not its didacticism will influence readers remains to be seen.

None of these novels seem set to put prognosticators, or historians for that matter, out of business. They present to readers a buffet of options for what might drive history forward, often within a single text. This proliferation of options on offer is another way that Weird History remains, despite its political ambitions, to be a genre tied to popular consumption. I am personally skeptical that a commercial art object can incite political revolution. But these texts, the latest entries in the Weird History genre, do offer us important lessons moving forward. First, there is radical possibility in the global-temporal networks that these novels depict. It is fitting that at the end of this project, I am forced to come to terms with the fact that by narrowing my object of analysis to fiction published in the United States of America I have myself engaged in a type of American exceptionalism. These novels show us that the networks of contemporary society, be they the ever-growing technological networks represented by the internet, the large language models which have awakened in the time since I began this project, or the vast network of ecological changes wrought by climate change, are always global networks. In this global turn, Weird History finds another kind of mixing, a global cultural mixing. If we are lucky, recognition of these vast global networks and the opportunities of solidarity they offer will lead to radical

political change the world over. As I said in my introduction, the alternative is oblivion.

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