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**IMAGINING THE NOW:  
THE MAKING OF THE CONTEMPORARY IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL  
SINCE 1945**

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Imagining the Now:

The Making of the Contemporary in the American Novel since 1945

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*Imagining the Now* considers the permeable relation between aesthetic form and the social uses of literature in order to theorize the relation between the American novel and the “now,” which is always and constitutively in the process of unfolding. I define literary contemporaneity as a site of symbolic contestation that, operating both within a text and in its reception, connects a particular literary work to the social, political, and cultural values that structure the present. Literary contemporaneity cannot, for this reason, be divorced the political implications inherent in rhetoric that seeks to describe social or political change by either consigning an event, social formation, or aesthetic object to the past, or affirming its continued relevance to the present. Such temporalizing judgments operate in historically specific contexts, and within particular ideological frameworks. By interrogating how American literature since 1945 resists, discloses, or participates in such rhetoric, we can begin to tell a literary history that makes the idea of the “period” or the “moment” an object of critical and political scrutiny rather than simply the articulation of historical context. I further argue that literary form can itself

generate forms of contemporaneity that are not beholden to conceptions of the present as merely the latest stage on a trajectory of historical unfolding. I do this by looking to moments in which the act of writing, thematically central to all novels under my purview, comes apart from its historical or narrative ground. In the first half of the dissertation, I consider Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). These novels are usually treated as if they belong to separate traditions, but I show that they share a deep investment in the relation between narrative structure and forms of social marginalization. Whereas Ellison ultimately affirms the openness of aesthetic form as a conduit for imagining new forms of sociality, Nabokov positions Humbert's desire for literary immortality as a figure for social and aesthetic stasis. In the second half, I turn to John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). I consider how these formally innovative novels think with and against contemporary racial and aesthetic formations by engaging with the historiography of sixties activism and eighties conservatism that dominate most accounts of the postwar period. Together, these four novels demonstrate how the American novel since 1945 interrogate the cusp between the contemporary and the historical as a site of political and aesthetic struggle.

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## Introduction

The critical fortunes of the contemporary are on the rise. The term is—and is bound to remain—elusive. We are, of course, intimately familiar with the idea of speaking about contemporary this or contemporary that, about X being contemporary with Y, and so on. In this sense, the term refers to a set of relations between persons, objects, and events that are imagined as sharing the “same” time—regardless of *when* that time happened. Such relationships provide fertile ground for theoretical as well as historical inquiry, as in the mapping of the social and economic networks that determine a particular period or aesthetic movement, or in the postcolonial critiques of imperial time. Then there is the contemporary which refers to the conditions of the “now” in a much more general way, and to the condition of historical reflexivity that speaking about the present from within that present entails. The central problem of the contemporary in this sense is that it is still ongoing, which is to say that it has yet to pass into history or become available to historicist methodologies.<sup>1</sup> This version of the contemporary, furthermore, constitutes the medium by which we, as a society, articulate our relation to the past and the future alike.

Conceptually speaking, the paradoxes that define the study of the contemporary are still most astutely articulated in Raymond Williams’ discussion of his most well-known concept: structures of feeling.<sup>2</sup> To Williams, writing in the 1970s, most analyses

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<sup>1</sup> The critic who has written most extensively on this topic is Theodore Martin.

<sup>2</sup> In turning to Williams in this way, I do not mean to downplay more recent work on this topic. When Lauren Berlant describes the present as an affective experience that “makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back,” she is clearly building on a set of problems most influentially articulated by Williams. And in Bruno

of the social present tend to neutralize the inherent dynamism of the social present by reifying what is in fact “forming and formative processes” into “formed wholes,” which is to say as if they were static, as if outside time itself.<sup>3</sup> Structures of feeling, by contrast, refers to “social experiences,” though they have yet to be recognized as such, that exist “in solution.”<sup>4</sup> This compound is an interesting one. In choosing the word “feeling,” Williams means to oppose the more totalizing concepts like “world-view” or “ideology,” and thus emphasize his concern with the variable relation between “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt,” as expressed by the former, and the “systematic beliefs” expressed by the latter. Yet these “feelings” are nevertheless structured, featuring “specific internal relations” that are “at once interlocking and in tension.”<sup>5</sup>

As cultural hypotheses designed to grapple with “elements and their connection in a generation or period,” structures of feeling, in other words, toe the line between abstraction and particularity.<sup>6</sup> Usually, they refer to what Williams, in his taxonomy of the temporal elements that make up the social present, refer to as emergent social formations, which is to say “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kind of relationships” that have yet to be built into social institutions or been otherwise codified in the “official consciousness” of a society.<sup>7</sup> As such, structures of feeling name sites of potential social and cultural change, even though it can often be hard to tell whether they will form part of “some new phase of the dominant culture,” or

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Latour’s actor-network theory, which in seeking to “describe” rather than “explain” eschews appealing to social forces, to cultural and historical logics, we might find a sociological framework that answers to some of the concerns that Williams raises about the study of the present in *Marxism and Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature*, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 123.



if they are “substantially alternative or oppositional to it.”<sup>8</sup> There is, in either case, something paradoxical about it all: “if you can identify a nexus of social relations and experiences as a structure of feeling,” as Mitchum Huehls puts it, “you are either observing a historical configuration that has lost its indeterminate dynamism, or your observation will be imprecise and provisional because structures of feeling actually precede articulation.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, the concept might be said to enact or emphasize the way in which its analytic object, too, is in a constant state of temporal and social reconstitution.

This very tension is built into the nominalization of the familiar adjective “contemporary” to form the vogueish “the contemporary.” What, after all, does the definite article in this description gesture towards if not a synthetic totality?<sup>10</sup> The contemporary, we might say, is a performative fiction of totality, an inherently speculative and heterochronic structure (the present comprises many different temporal processes), as well as an equally speculative appeal to collectivity (the feeling of living at the same “time”).<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, the contemporary might, then, be defined as a meta-temporality that supervenes on other temporalities—aesthetic, historical, economical, technological, geological, natural, biological, generational, and so on—

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Huehls, Mitchum, “Structures of Feeling: Or, How to Do Things (or Not) with Books,” 420.

<sup>10</sup> “The relationship between the characteristics of a novel and the idea of the present as an historical totality is one of the factors which will determine the contemporaneity of contemporary fiction,” Mark Currie argues in *About Time* (2006), “as if the very idea of the contemporary contains within it a double reference, on one hand indicating mere present-ness, and on the other the special power to represent the present.”

<sup>11</sup> Many critics have written on this topic. Peter Osborne, in this vein, argues that the contemporary is a fiction: both in the way in which it “performatively projects a non-existent unity onto the disjunctive relation between coeval times,” and also because of its status as “an ‘idea’ in Kant’s technical sense of the term: its object (the total conjunction of present times) is beyond possible experience.” Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All*. 23, 22. See also Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, as well as Terry Smith.

without being reducible to them. Its relation to any one temporal form is the same as the relation between group psychology and individual psychology: a group is clearly a collection of individuals, but it is not possible to analyze aggregate social behavior in terms of individual actors. And if this is right, we might hypothesize that the contemporary emerges most strongly as an object of theoretical and formal attention at those points where these other temporalities intersect with or break apart from one another.

I approach the contemporary on a number of levels. We might begin by noting that while “works of art ... are, in one sense, explicit and finished forms,” as Williams notes, “the making of art is never itself in the past tense,” meaning that it is “always a formative process, within a specific present.”<sup>12</sup> In this respect, *Imagining the Now* revolves around novels that either directly thematize the process of their composition (or non-composition, as it were), or more implicitly reflect on the social and cultural status of the literary. I focus on this kind of literature, not to rehearse arguments about the artificiality of the fictional, but to emphasize its connection to the world. To do so, I attend to moments where the act of writing comes apart from the its historical or narrative ground, moments of failed synthesis or failed transcendence, moments of failed transposition between the historical and the contemporary, the particular and the universal, and moments where events or relationships cannot be easily contained by historical narrativization. This kind of reading, I want to suggest, pits what Williams calls the “inherent process” (which is made “completed” only in “specifically ‘active’

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<sup>12</sup> Williams. *Marxism and Literature*. 129.

readings”) of a work of art against its status as a circulating commodity, as well as the fiction of a fully formed aesthetic totality.<sup>13</sup>

Literary contemporaneity in a larger sense cannot, at the same time, be divorced from rhetorics of social change, which attempt to demarcate cultural and social logics that are imagined as having governed the past from those that govern the present. This is visible, for instance, in the pervasive idea that we can understand the present by identifying it with that which comes *after* some historical or symbolic break. There is no one singular such logic that exhausts the nature of the contemporary so defined, which must be understood as the result of a multiplicity of judgments that operate in historically specific contexts, and within particular ideological frameworks. The act of periodization may, in this way, be taken as reflecting the social and political contours of the present. I thus consider questions that have to do with historiography broadly, but specifically as they relate to the articulation of historical reflexivity. In addition, I also consider both the mechanism by which a text might be thought to pass from the literary present into the literary past, as well the mechanism by which texts might be imagined as transcending their time and thus entering the temporality of the “classic.” These are not mutually exclusive postures, in part because both imagine the literary object as immured from the passing of time, and so from social and cultural change as such. By interrogating how American literature since 1945 resists, discloses, or participates in temporal rhetorics designed to fix their most troubled objects, we can begin to tell a literary history that makes the idea of the “period” or the “moment” an object of critical scrutiny rather than simply the articulation of historical or aesthetic context.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## Late Modernism and Beyond

*Imagining the Now* considers these questions by turning to how American novels from the last sixty years have framed their relation to the socio-historical circumstances in which they appeared, alongside the social existence of these same novels as objects that are sold, read, taught, sold, debated, and prized. By combining these two perspectives, I ask how aesthetic form responds to, and is shaped by, the social uses of literature. It is only by attending to this oscillation between the literary and the meta-literary, I contend, that we can begin to do justice to the contemporary as something continuously made and remade, as opposed to something we merely discover, describe, or postulate.

The dissertation's four chapters, on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), each revolve around a different trope that refracts questions about the contemporaneity of social, political, and aesthetic formations. In the chapter on *Invisible Man*, I discuss how the narrator's decision to emerge at the end of his narrative constitutes a figure for thinking about a form of contemporaneity that escapes the strictures of historical modes of thought. In the chapter on *Lolita*, I discuss how Humbert's unconcern for anything that exists outside his singular obsession with Lolita becomes a vehicle for the depiction of the casual racism on which postwar American society rests. In the chapter on *Philadelphia Fire*, I consider how Wideman thematizes several unwritten shadow books as a way of confronting the seemingly foreclosed political present in the 1980s. And in the chapter on *Goon Squad*, I consider how Egan leverages intermedial form as a way of reflecting on the

contemporary novel in what we might recognize as our own increasingly mediated moment in time.

This eclectic mix of novels does not seem to lend itself to historical synthesis. In this way, they enact a more general truth about the postwar period more generally, which is that as time has passed, it has become less and less amenable to large-scale historical claims, to meaningful critical synthesis. The formation of the Post45 research collective, for instance, registers the displacement of the epochal model built into discussions about the breaks and continuities between modernism, postmodernism, and what some critics, at least, refer to as “post-postmodernism.” Perhaps most influential in this respect is Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era*, which divvies up postwar literary production into three overlapping fields of aesthetic production: technomodernism (defined by its attention to technicity), high cultural pluralism (defined by its attention to ethnicity), and lower-middle-class modernism (defined by its attention to work). The result of this approach, as well as other critics similarly engaged with questions of institutionality, circulation, and the marketplace, has been a great expansion of the social reference of literary studies.

In situating my own argument, I want to focus on a different periodizing term, which McGurl places at the center of his account of postwar fiction, and which Theodore Martin similarly places at the center of his conception of contemporary literature: reflexive modernity. This concept, initially developed by sociologists Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Scott Lash, describes a modernity that has increasingly grown preoccupied with its own processes of modernization. For McGurl, this suggests that we understand the “metafictional impulse in postwar writing” in terms of its imbrication in “a larger, multivalent social dynamic of self-observation” that spans from the social

sciences and the media to the way postwar individuals and consumers figure themselves as the protagonists of their own life stories.<sup>14</sup> Martin, meanwhile, understands the term as answering a question about the emergence of contemporary literature as a disciplinary field, a development roughly related to the broader emergence of contemporary art and architecture in the decades following the end of the Second World War. The artistic practices that initially coalesced under this label sought to separate themselves from the idea of the modern, which around this time shifted in reference from “now” to “just now” or even “then.”<sup>15</sup> If modernism responded to the vast social, cultural, and technological transformations that we associate with the onset of modernity, Martin subsequently argues, contemporary art responds to the conditions of reflexive modernity broadly speaking, and, more specifically, the conditions of the institutionalization of artistic production outlined by McGurl.<sup>16</sup> On this account, the contemporary denotes a historically specific (and evolving) tension between this “postwar desire for self-reflection,” and “the conceptual limits of reflexive history.”<sup>17</sup>

*Imagining the Now* engages with this tension at three historical junctures. The first revolves around the unlikely pairing of Ellison and Nabokov, both of whom have been described as late modernists (even if their writing is frequently taken as containing proto-postmodern elements as well). The second revolves around Wideman, who is broadly associated with combining a searching engagement with the problem and social

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<sup>14</sup> McGurl, Mark, *The Program Era*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> To make this point, Martin cites Williams speaking in these terms.

<sup>16</sup> “If what you teach under reflexive modernity is how you turn your personal experience into writing,” Martin writes in reference to McGurl’s discussion of the programmatic writing advice to “find your voice,” “then what you study ought to be the very writing that you and others like you have produced.” In this way, it becomes possible “not just to write our experiences but to read that writing as expressive of the broader experience of a shared present.” Martin, Theodore, “The Currency of the Contemporary,” 230.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

efficacy of black writing with postmodern form. The third, finally, revolves around Egan, who is frequently framed as belonging to a new cohort of writers who have internalized poststructural theory and “transcended” postmodernism. I invoke these formations not as substantive aesthetic or historical categories, but as evidence for a certain kind of historicity that though it by no means exhausts the meaning of these works, nevertheless positions them in certain important ways. While the question of whether or not Wideman’s writing exhibits a set of qualities that we might describe as postmodern may not be particularly telling in itself, for example, his relation to the discourses surrounding this term are. It also means that if we could somehow subtract the postmodern from a novel like *Philadelphia Fire*, if only as a thought experiment, we might be able to more clearly see aspects of that novel that are not legible to that critical zeitgeist, and to the political questions it raised for black writers in particular.

For the purposes of this introduction, I want to linger on the question of late modern form at some length, as it provides an important model for thinking about how postwar novels refract modernist aesthetics into a socially inflected field of concerns.<sup>18</sup> Late modernism, to start, constitutes an initial phase of reflexive modernity within the arts. Critics understand the historical reference of the term in diverse ways, however, as shown by recent work on this topic by Frederic Jameson, Tyrus Miller, and Robert Genter. For Jameson, late modernism encodes within it modernism’s quasi-anachronistic

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<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that modernism instantiates its own historically specific version of Williams’ dichotomy between the “finished form” of the literary object and the “inherent process” of its making. First, there is Joseph Frank’s notion of modernist form as “spatial,” which is to say that it creates narrative meaning through the synchronic relationship between elements or motifs that become visible only upon re-reading, as opposed to, say, the diachronic reference of the realist plot, or some other extraliterary logic (whether social, historical, or political). Second, there is the high modernist emphasis on tracking cognitive processes as they unfold, on the level of the sentence, thus treating narrative temporality as a vehicle for thinking about consciousness.

survival in the context of the emergent cultural logic of postmodernity after the Second World War. For Miller, the term names a literary movement in the 1920s and 1930s that sought to deflate modernism's symbolic resources. And for Genter, whose version is most consonant with my project, late modernism points to a shift in the American mid-century from the high modernist emphasis on consciousness and perception (as well as the emphasis on pure or unconstrained self-expression of what he calls "romantic modernism") to a notion of literature as a form of "symbolic action," to use Kenneth Burke's term.

In spite of these substantial conceptual divergences, all three accounts come together in the idea that late modernism would be unthinkable without a concept of some prior modernism. The relation between the two quickly proves more complex than one might first imagine. Jameson, Miller, and Genter all conceive of modernism in terms of a set of norms that sought to privilege the aesthetic as an autonomous realm of artistic expression, and so separate art from the exigencies of daily existence. In the ideal case, such form would immure the narrative from any meaning that it does not generate either on its own, or in virtue of allusion to other literary texts or traditions. Modernist aesthetics, on this somewhat simplified view, revolves chiefly around the aspiration for literature—both the individual work, but also literary *language* as such—to enclose itself within a referential realm of its own devising.<sup>19</sup> But aesthetic autonomy should not, as Andrew Goldstone argues, be understood as the absence of all forms of social, political, or historical entanglement. Autonomy, rather, is always *relative*, and as a historically

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<sup>19</sup> Specialists in modernist literature would surely object to this characterization, which after all constitutes a gross oversimplification of the social, political, and cultural energies channeled by modernist form. My point is by no means that modernism repressed history, though this charged has been leveled, but rather that the late modernists came to view modernist practices in this way.



specific and variable socio-economic relation, the concept has much to teach us about the evolving relationship between literature and world.<sup>20</sup> The embrace of the aesthetic as an end-in-itself in reality thus constitutes not so much an ideological obfuscation that needs to be unmasked as it does a set of hermeneutical protocols, for reading and writing alike, that emerged organically during what we have only retroactively labeled the period of high modernism; they did not exist before. Arguably, one might even say that, as a structure of feeling, modernism is constituted precisely by that emergence.

Late modernism—and this is the true significance of its “lateness”—takes these protocols as one of its objects, reflexively invoking not only the internal contradictions and dilemmas of representation as such, but also those of modernism itself. Because modernism changes the meaning of art on such a deep level, so too must artistic self-reflexivity be renewed, transformed in part *by* modernist practice, while also exerting its influence *on* modernism, now modified by the qualifier “late.” Indeed, the emergence of late modernist reflexivity signifies the moment when modernism began to become visible as a historical formation—or, in Jameson’s terminology, as an “ideology.” Aesthetic autonomy, such as it were, is thus made available to late modernist practitioners not only as a formal aspiration, but also as thematic content. Indeed, for Jameson, late modernism is constituted in a dialectic between form and content that culminates in “the experience of the failure of autonomy to go all the way,” thus signifying what Miller calls “a growing skepticism about modernist sensibility and craft as means of managing the

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<sup>20</sup> On the level of literary institutions, claims to autonomy needs to be understood as a rhetorical strategy, and thus as a form of deliberate positioning in the literary field. From this perspective, autonomy is not simply an “ideological category” that needs to be unmasked, as Peter Bürger has it, but rather an integral aspect of the relationship between literature and world. Autonomy is a fiction. But it is not simply—or at least not always—a manifestation of false consciousness.

turbulent forces of the day.”<sup>21</sup> It is this failure, once it has been made the explicit object of form, that comes to signify a more permeable relation between literature and world.

Ellison and Nabokov’s respective defenses of aesthetic autonomy provides one frame for exploring these questions. More pertinent, though, is the way *Invisible Man* and *Lolita* are both structured around this late modernist problematic, formally as well as thematically. We might, for instance, consider the Invisible Man’s underground abode as a complex figure that intertwines aesthetic autonomy with an escape from white and black society alike. Down there in his hole, the Invisible Man is free to pursue his writing, which is to say the narrative appropriation of the invisibility that deposited him there in the first place. My reading of this novel focuses, however, on his decision to “emerge,” and thus connect the textual temporality of his underground existence to the social temporality of the world aboveground. Nabokov, by contrast, invites us to view Humbert as a brutish perversion of the modernist artist, at once providing a figure for modernist privileging of language as its own order of experience while also debasing this very notion. The key to this reading is the idea that Humbert is not an aesthete who happens to be a pedophile, but that he is a pedophile *because* he sees in some girls an ideal of beauty. The problem, in this respect, is the fact that Lolita is destined to transcend the category through which Humbert initially perceives her, even as he also labors to “immortalize” her through his artistic endeavoring.

*Invisible Man* and *Lolita* might, on this view, be said to stage a profound and ongoing crisis that cuts at the heart of modernist auto-referentiality (in turn related to what McGurl calls “autopoiesis”) by exploring the limit of narrative form to assimilate

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<sup>21</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *A Singular Modernity*, 209; Miller, Tyrus, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars*, 20.

what we might call its “content,” as misleading as such a distinction ultimately is. On Miller’s account, this tension manifests itself in his discussion of the relationship between “discursive mastery” and “figural disruption”—or a “disruptive otherness within discourse”—as two opposed yet nevertheless mutually imbricated tendencies within modernist form and beyond.<sup>22</sup> The trope of invisibility instantiates this tension perfectly, as it is in fact the Invisible Man’s mastery of discursive form that leads to his feeling that his writing must inevitably end, that it cannot go on forever. Humbert’s construction of Lolita as an object of aesthetic contemplation, meanwhile, aligns roughly with the former, while Dolores’s suffering is usually taken to represent the latter. Nabokov’s depiction of American society, as I show, is similarly mediated by this dynamic.

In the second half of the dissertation, I continue tracking this dynamic across the postwar period. *Philadelphia Fire* takes the shape of an individual quest for redemption that includes reflections on modernist form as an aesthetic dead-end. The novel deploys postmodernist tropes, as I have mentioned. These, though, have very little to do with the irreverent self-referentiality and deconstruction that is often ascribed to white postmodernists like Paul Auster, and everything to do with the problem of writing about the social and political conditions of the present. If *Invisible Man* ends in a failure that is also the site of possibility, failure constitutes the very condition of Wideman’s despondent narrative. For the reader, though, the central question is once again how to relate to that failure.

Egan, meanwhile, is a figure of a certain kind of Brooklyn chic that initially seems far removed from the weighty concerns of someone like Wideman. Though

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, Tyrus, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars*, 16. Miller draws on work by Peter Nicholls for this concept, who is in turn drawing on work by Jean-Francois Lyotard.

formally experimental, there is little overlap between the breezy readability of a novel like *A Visit from the Goon Squad*—inspired by *In Search of Lost Time*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Sopranos*—and the abstruseness of a novel like *Philadelphia Fire*. Indeed, in his account of the postwar novel’s relation to irony, Lee Konstantinou describes Egan as representing a new kind of writer who no longer even pretends to care about asserting her autonomy from the market, who exhibits a total lack of self-consciousness about “selling out.”<sup>23</sup> The boogie-man for this story (which strikes me as overly harsh), as for Adam Kelly’s characterization of Egan as a “New Sincerity” writer, is a now-exhausted postmodernism, but also a culturally pervasive “postmodern irony” that has seemingly rendered impossible both sincere commitment and ironic dissent.<sup>24</sup> I argue, however, that the theme of autonomy returns on the level of intermedial form.

### **“Now” and “Then”**

*Invisible Man* and *Lolita* are both clearly anchored in a midcentury moment that in certain obvious ways is no longer our own. Ellison’s novel is, after all, frequently considered the most influential novel about life under Jim Crow. Nabokov, meanwhile, is celebrated for the acuity of his depiction of American culture in the 1950s. *Philadelphia Fire*, though much more recent, is also “old” enough now as to make its subject matter—which was highly current (or at least as current as the temporality of novel writing allows) when it was released—feel more historical than contemporary. Indeed, for many

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<sup>23</sup> Konstantinou, Lee, *Cool Characters*, 261.

<sup>24</sup> Aspiring “postironists” do not, however, seek to “turn back the clock or simply dismantle the ‘environment’ of postmodernism,” in the same way that New Sincerity writers know, having internalized basic poststructuralist insights in college, “that sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation” (8).

readers, Wideman's novel may well be their first exposure to the MOVE bombing. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, finally, is intuitively more "contemporary" than all of the above, based on its publication date alone (even though the temporality of the graduate degree means that it is not as contemporary as I intended it to be a number of years ago). The fact that these assessments are affective rather than critical do not mean that they are wrong; indeed, affective judgments about what constitutes the field of contemporary art goes a long way towards delimiting its historical reference.

Each of these chapters also touch on what Rita Felski calls the "transtemporal resonance" of literature. With this term, Felski means to offer an alternative to some of the limitations of historicist criticism, as well as some new formalist approaches to literature. Traditionally, historicist approaches to literary texts has, she argues, treated historical context as if it were a box: to locate a work of literature within this box is to locate its historical determinants, which the work of literature also comes to illuminate. It can be hard to know which comes first: the box or the work of literature. All we know for certain is that they are conceived as mutually constitutive. We need, Felski exhorts, to develop models for thinking about how art "moves across time."<sup>25</sup> From this point on, she goes on to argue for a conception of the literary text as a nonhuman actor, and for modes of postcritical reading that "can better do justice to the transtemporal liveliness of texts and the coconstitution of texts and readers—without opposing thought to emotion of divorcing intellectual rigor from affective attachment."<sup>26</sup>

The idea of transtemporal resonance might be taken as antithetical if not to the postwar field generally, then certainly to the idea of contemporary literature. The reason

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<sup>25</sup> Felski, Rita, *The Limits of Critique*, 154.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

for this, once again, has to do with how contemporary literature, by definition, “belongs” or “speaks” to the present, and is therefore not historically bounded in the way earlier period fields are. The presence of transtemporal resonances, by contrast, assumes the very historical difference it wishes to at least partially do away with. But it can also, in virtue of that very fact, be leveraged as one possible path for thinking about the constitution of the contemporary.

I consider the idea of transtemporal resonance on two broad levels. First, there is the meta-critical level, which includes reflections on how novels like *Invisible Man*, *Lolita*, and *Philadelphia Fire* have been read and what they signify today, for professional readers and in culture more generally. But the main thrust of my argument in this respect focuses on how these novels anticipate or make the idea of such resonance part of their aesthetic programmes. In Ellison’s case, I thus consider the contemporary in terms of a tension between historicity and universality that, while partially present in the novel, is more fully borne out in its canonization. In Nabokov’s, the defining tension is rather between *Lolita*’s particularity, which the novel insists upon again and again, and the frequent practice, in criticism on the novel, of allegorizing Humbert’s relation to *Lolita*. Both these novels, in this way, makes it possible to think about the contemporary as something that cannot be captured either by logics of summation, by abstraction and synthesis, nor by the potentially endless enumeration of particulars. And in the second half of the dissertation, I consider how Wideman engages with the resonances of the MOVE bombing alongside the relative obscurity of *Philadelphia Fire*, as well Egan’s attempt to think through the mechanism by which an artwork or an event might be taken as crystallizing an era or an epoch. In each case, the contemporary signifies an aspiration

to understand the present, and so functions as a structure of historical self-understanding, while also refers to those elements of the social that elude such specification.

I begin the first chapter by noting a surprising convergence between literary critic Kenneth Warren and neo-conservative pundit Norman Podhoretz's respective attempts to consign *Invisible Man* to the past. Turning to the novel, I argue that the narrator's sense that he "must emerge" at the end of the novel resists such historicizing judgments. By positing the possibility that the textual temporality of the narrator's underground existence and the social temporality that abuts it are linked, the novel affirms that society can be otherwise. The key to this perverse-seeming optimism is not the narrator's sense that America has failed to live up the promises of its founding documents, however, but rather the understudied rhetoric of failure and disarmament that underwrites his attempt to communicate the experiential content of his invisibility to his reader. It would be easy enough to think about invisibility as a figure for that which eludes classification, that which cannot be fixed. Such a view could not, however, account for the narrator's decision to appropriate invisibility and make it the basis for his narrative. Indeed, it is in this light that the concept comes to constitute an irresolvable crux that necessarily leaves the question of *Invisible Man*'s "contemporariness" in a productive state of suspension.

In the second chapter, I consider how *Lolita* inverts the aesthetic openness of Ellison's text by equating artistic mastery with mastery over time. This disavowal of the contemporary produces an at once distant and immersive view of the casual bigotry on which postwar culture rests. How, I ask, do we relate Humbert's insatiable desire to "fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets" to other forms of suffering or structures of oppression—racism and anti-Semitism, most notably—that are registered not only in

the margin of the text's pedophilic gaze, but by virtue of that very marginalization? With Humbert as his avatar, Nabokov renders the pervasive presence of racial and ethnic policing in 1950s America as a space of narrative irresolution. In the moments that touch on racism, for instance, the reader is not sure where to place him or herself. On the one hand, we occupy the usual position of looking at Humbert from the outside—the position, that is, that readers are compelled to maintain strenuously in relation to the novel's engagement with pedophilia. On the other, we are also on the inside, looking with Humbert at the discourses and aesthetic forms that make up the dominant culture's relationship to the legacy of its slave past. These moments model a form of attentiveness that has so far been largely obscured by conventional approaches to this novel, while also contradicting both recent attempts to embed Nabokov more firmly in history as well as Azar Nafisi's attempt to "contemporize" Nabokov's novel in *Reading Lolita in Teheran*—both of which, ironically, treat Humbert's relation to Lolita as an allegory for larger structures of oppression, and so evacuates the mechanism by which Nabokov renders that oppression as a fact of social life.

The chapter on Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* considers the contemporary through the lens of two unwritten "shadow books." The first of these drives the novel's plot, insofar as it can be said to have one, and revolves around protagonist Cudjoe's desire to write the 1985 bombing of MOVE in Philadelphia. We are meant to understand this desire, furthermore, as a fictionalized version of Wideman's own motivations in writing the novel. Both believe that if we can only come to terms with this seemingly irreducible event, we will have learnt something important about ourselves and the society we live in. The second shadow book, by contrast, long-abandoned, and mentioned only in



passing, was to have been about his part in the social activism of the sixties. Most accounts of *Philadelphia Fire* read Cudjoe's apparent failure to write or complete these books as reflecting the compromised position of the black male intellectual, who is figured in the novel as unwittingly complicit in economically driven stratification within both the black community and society writ large. But the implied connection between the fire and the historical memory of the Civil Rights Movement also functions as a site of potentiality. Finally, I argue that the novel, in anticipating how quickly the fire will be forgotten, must today be framed in relation to the emergence of Black Lives Matter.

The fourth chapter, on *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, considers how Egan turns to intermedial form to think about the novel's cultural status of in our increasingly embattled contemporary mediascape. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan's theory about how media becomes the environment that we live and breathe, and therefore do not notice, I consider Egan's depiction of "T'ing," the famous chapter written in PowerPoint, and then the Twitter short story "Black Box" (2012), which constitutes something of an "extension" to *Goon Squad*. By reading the cognitive style of PowerPoint through the lens of a surprisingly touching section in the novel that is composed in this format, for instance, I argue that Egan deftly avoids the pitfalls of simply amplifying what might be seen as the innate propensity of this medium, and thus produce empty corporate satire. At the heart of this chapter stand the relation between a child and her parents, and similar generational themes pervade the novel's engagement with modern technologies more generally. It is in the ensuing gap, whether between an older and a younger person, or between an older and a younger version of the same person, that Egan, by refunctioning Proust, begins to formulate a sense of the potentialities that inhere any particular moment

in time. In the process, she evokes a nostalgia for the form of the novel, which is similarly constantly in the process of mediating between its own past and future.

### Ellison's Emergence

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* provides an ideal case study for thinking about literary contemporaneity. To begin, we might note that Ellison was deeply invested in artistic practice and literary form as a way of confronting his historical moment, even as he also resisted any attempt to subordinate art to politics. Today, his novel is considered if not the most compelling then certainly the most influential account of black experience in Jim Crow America.<sup>1</sup> The defining characteristic of *Invisible Man* in the twenty-first century is not so much what it can tell us about the past, however, but rather a tension between historical specificity and a claim to universality that while partially present in the novel itself, is more fully borne out in its canonization as a Great American Novel.<sup>2</sup> It is worth asking, to put this differently, how the utterance "I am an invisible man" can turn into something like novelist Charles Johnson's claim, in defense of Ellison's novel against the neoconservative pundit Norman Podhoretz's attempt to declare the novel "dated," that we are all "to some degree ... ineffable and invisible to each other."<sup>3</sup> What, if anything, is lost in this reformulation?

At the end of this chapter, I will turn to these questions by looking at Johnson and Podhoretz's exchange alongside Kenneth Warren's work on Ellison in *So Black and Blue*

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<sup>1</sup> Pulitzer-winning historian Leon F. Litwack illustrates this by beginning his history of black Southerners during Jim Crow by stating that "Nowhere is the paradox of black life in the United States more graphically revealed than in Ralph Ellison's portrayal of the black odyssey in *Invisible Man*" (xi). While many of these paradoxes remain unresolved, Litwack nevertheless places Ellison's novel firmly within a historical register of signification. "No historian," he concludes after his discussion of Ellison's novel, "could have improved on the scene" (xii). In literary criticism, Timothy Parrish makes use of Litwack's historical work to recover something about *Invisible Man* itself. "Litwack's rhetorical strategy," he writes, "is not to speak for his subjects, or to presume to have mastered their story, but instead to let his subjects tell their own stories. Ellison's hero speaks for himself, but Litwack's work provides the context that shows what a difficult and unlikely act his speaking truly was" (109). For more on this topic, see also Eric Sundquist's *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Lawrence Buell's *The Dream of the Great American Novel*.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, "Novel Genius," 20.

(2003). The premise of this monograph is the notion that we should precisely *not* treat Ellison as a fount of general wisdom to be consulted in accordance with our critical desires at any given moment, but rather exclusively in terms of the historical moment in which he himself wrote. For *Invisible Man*, which Warren at one point in his introduction likens to a patient that has perhaps been kept “too long on life support,” this means that we should be mindful in our critical practice to try to “understand” rather than “revitalize” the structure of feeling that once animated the novel.<sup>4</sup> The point, ultimately, is that we must be open to letting go of critical attachments to political and aesthetic models from the past if we are to be able to respond adequately to the conditions of the present. This line of thought reaches its logical conclusion in the notorious *What Was African American Literature?* (2010), in which Warren essentially pulls the plug on African American literature by declaring that it should be understood as a post-Reconstruction phenomenon specifically tied to the social world of Jim Crow.

There is, I will suggest, something about *Invisible Man* that resists the trajectory of Warren’s argument across these two monographs, ensuring that he cannot fully escape the contemporaneity of what Ellison himself described as his “most willful, most self-generating novel.”<sup>5</sup> This contemporaneity, which is not so much produced by periodizing judgments as it emerges in the encounter with literary form, constitutes the central topic of what is to follow. Here, too, the concept-metaphor of invisibility is crucial, though in its rhetorical rather than in its diagnostic dimension. The Invisible Man does not, after all, write *about* invisibility as much as he writes from *within* it. Like Raymond Williams’s structures of feeling, still the theoretically most astute attempt to think about the

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<sup>4</sup> Warren, *So Black and Blue*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, xxiii.

methodological challenges of analyzing the social present, this uniquely literary version of invisibility cannot but exist “on the very edge of semantic availability.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, both concepts resist the reification of experience by emphasizing the ways in which their “referents”—though this term is hardly adequate—are always in a state of social and temporal reconstitution.

*Invisible Man* provides a figure for this dynamic in the narrator’s assertion at the very end of the novel that he “must emerge.”<sup>7</sup> Ellison himself argues that that this decision was a necessary consequence of the self-knowledge that his protagonist acquired over the course of writing his memoirs.<sup>8</sup> But it also, and more importantly, constitutes a rupture in the very fabric of the text that formally counteracts the socio-historical “pattern of ... certainties” associated in the narrative with a static and naturalized conception of racial hierarchy, and ascribed in this moment to an external “you” that at least partially implicates the reader in the same (581). The narrator’s emergence thus provides a hinge between the textual temporality of his underground existence and the social temporality that abuts it. It is an event that is necessitated by the narrative, but which the narrative by the very logic of this necessity cannot itself contain. As such, it offers the possibility that these two temporalities may be linked, and that this linkage might begin produce forms of recognition more attuned to the “chaos” that underwrites all certainty.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581. Henceforth cited parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup> In “The Art of Fiction,” Ellison describes his novel as structured around “a series of reversals” that, taken together, constitute the quest of his narrator to “assert and achieve his own humanity.” Last in this series, we find the text’s epilogue, which, as “the most final reversal of all,” Ellison argues to be a “necessary statement.” “In the epilogue,” Ellison explains, “the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself. The hero comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it. He could not stay down there” (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 220).

To approach Ellison's novel from this perspective means that we have to modify our relationship both to longstanding critical emphasis on themes like self-definition and self-discovery, and to more recent approaches that consider the novel as a relentless deconstruction of identity as such. Neither can fully account for the Invisible Man's emergence, which is underwritten by a series of reflexive and critically understudied moments in the epilogue that revolve around his sense that he has failed to communicate the experiential content of his invisibility to his reader, and that his writing has thus constituted a form of disarmament.<sup>9</sup> It is important, as queer theorist Judith Halberstam argues, be open to understanding failure both "as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline," as well as "a form of critique" in itself.<sup>10</sup> But we also need to recognize that such claims to resistance ultimately fit better with invisibility as it is initially framed than they do with the deflationary rhetoric at the end of the narrative. To consider the arc of Ellison's novel, we must instead read the narrator's declared failure as the formal manifestation of a contradiction that is at once textual and historical: textual, because the novel builds into itself the seeds of its own failure; and historical, because these seeds derive from the status of its narrator as a black man living in Jim Crow America. The epilogue, on this view, constitutes a formal/temporal "break," to use terminology from the novel, that is ultimately derived from the very nature of the Invisible Man's narrative project.

I have already indicated the importance of distinguishing between the contemporary as a product of periodizing judgments, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>9</sup> For two traditional, psychologizing accounts, see Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil* and Valerie Smith's *Self-discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. For a deconstructive analysis of the novel, see Kevin Bell's *Ashes Taken for Fire*.

<sup>10</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

contemporary as an encounter with form, on the other. To read *Invisible Man* through the narrator's emergence allows us to respond to discussion about what we might now call the "contemporariness" of Ellison's novel, if only to distinguish it from the literary contemporaneity that the novel itself makes possible. Ellison's point is that we cannot always think of ourselves as agents of history, as the social present always exceeds the limits of historical form that is so frequently imposed upon it. The resulting sense of the contemporary is not self-assured, but rather open to the contingent interpenetration of different modes of temporalities, modeled on an openness to failure and a willingness to disarm one's presumptions about the world. The Invisible Man's emergence does not, then, pose the question of what happens to him after the end of his narrative as much as it affirms that society can be otherwise. This hope, we would do well to bring with us into the present.

# 1

Ellison was highly attuned to the ways in which history constitutes a form of power in the present. Throughout his career, in both his fiction and in essays and interviews, he worked tirelessly to reveal how "Negro America" had "always been integral to white American culture and knowledge."<sup>11</sup> This account of American history recognizes the inestimable importance of what Ellison fondly calls "the Negro" to the very essence of what America is and has been—and, as he believed even more firmly: what it can be. To say that history is a construction that can and should be contested does not, however, address the question of contemporaneity as such. To do so, we must develop a critical

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<sup>11</sup> Nadel, "The Integrated Literary Tradition," 144. See also Nadel's *Invisible Criticism*.

language that might at least begin to describe that which by definition has yet to pass into history. This story must consider history not simply as a site of symbolic struggle, but as a more diffuse structure of thought that shapes our encounter with that which is by definition still ongoing. The problem, that is to say, does not simply revolve around how we describe a past that is imagined as leading up to the present, but how we describe the interrelation between the structures that determine the former in respect to the structures that determine the latter.

*Invisible Man* aligns historical conceptions of the present, or the idea that the present constitutes the latest stage on the trajectory of historical unfolding, with the circumscription of social possibility. Throughout the novel, the Invisible Man is again and again conscripted into regimes of visibility that promise social and historical agency. Generally associated with institutions, each of these embed Ellison's narrator within modes of perception and understanding that cannot transcend the telic boundaries of the regime in question. The college's ideology of racial uplift and the Brotherhood's "science of history," most pertinently, both present themselves as a kind of "destiny"—whether for "the race" or for "the people"—that is also posited as the narrator's only avenue of self-fulfillment (311). I will have more to say on this matter later. For now, it is enough to note that each inscribes a historical totality onto the social present that legitimates itself in the name of historical progress, while being in fact both socially and politically regressive.

The college's treatment of Trueblood provides one example of this logic. A sharecropper who lives close to the college, Trueblood used to be paraded out in front of "special white guests ... to sing what the officials called 'their primitive spirituals'" (47).



During these moments, Trueblood is enlisted to perform a racial “authenticity” designed to confirm the college’s donors’ pre-conceived ideas about the nature of their philanthropic subjects. The “earthy harmonies,” meanwhile, are embarrassing to the Invisible Man and his peers (47). This practice ends when Trueblood impregnates his own daughter, a “disgrace upon the black community” that transforms “what on the part of the school officials had been an attitude of contempt blunted by tolerance” into an attitude of “contempt sharpened by hate” (46, 47). In a moment of reflection, the narrator notes how he “didn’t understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the ‘peasants,’ during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down” (47). There is no longer a place for Trueblood within the politics of respectability—which is really a politics of visibility—that underwrites the college’s program of racial uplift, so effectively internalized by the Invisible Man during his time as a student. Living in the “slave-quarter section,” Trueblood is seen as an atavistic remnant of a shameful past that can form no part of either the present or the future of the race (102).<sup>12</sup>

This is ostensibly why Dr. Bledsoe is so enraged after the Invisible Man accidentally brings Mr. Norton, one of the college’s benefactors, to Trueblood’s cabin. “Your poor judgment has caused this school incalculable damage,” he tells him (140). But as this scene unfolds, it becomes clear that what is at stake is not so much the question of “uplifting the race,” but rather the preservation of a status quo that enables

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<sup>12</sup> The narrator demonstrates that he has transcended this sentiment when he writes that “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed” (15).

Dr. Bledsoe to wield power at the cost of performing obeisance in front of men such as Mr. Norton, on whom his position ultimately depends (140). It is a “nasty deal,” Dr. Bledsoe explains: “But you listen to me. I didn’t make it, and I know that I can’t change it. But I’ve made my place in it and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am” (143). The historical logic that underwrites the ideology of racial uplift is thus revealed to be an agent of social stasis, masquerading as a narrative about progress.

A similar mechanism can be discerned in the novel’s engagement with the Brotherhood’s vanguard ethos. Take, for instance, the impromptu speech about dispossession that the Invisible Man delivers early in the novel, when he chances upon an “old couple” in the process of being evicted from their Harlem apartment (270). Subsequent to his escape from the scene, the narrator is approached by Jack, who, impressed by the narrator’s ability to engage the crowd, wants to recruit him to the Brotherhood. In their conversation, Jack tells his incredulous interlocutor that he had been “watching a death” (290). “It’s sad, yes,” he explains. “But they’re already dead, defunct. History has passed them by. Unfortunate, but there’s nothing to do about them. They’re like dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway” (291). “But I *like* them,” the Invisible Man protests. “I like them, they reminded me of folks I know down South. It’s taken me a long time to feel it, but they’re folks just like me, except that I’ve been to school a few years” (291). Jack responds by accusing the Invisible Man of retrogressive sentimentality. “You’re not like them,” he asserts. “Perhaps you were, but that’s all past, dead. You might not recognize it just now, but that part of you is dead! You have not

completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new" (291). For Jack, the future can only come into being or "emerge"—a word that signifies quite differently here compared to how the Invisible Man uses it later—if the past is completely disavowed.<sup>13</sup>

It is against such narrow and instrumental conceptions of the relation between past, present, and future that Ellison explores forms of agency and being outside ideologically sanctioned forms of visibility, and indeed "outside of history," to use one of the novel's most striking expressions. This perspective is valuable insofar as it attends to those aspects of social reality that have been rendered invisible by the dominant historical narratives that so frequently determine our relation to it. In this sense, Ellison might be said to adhere to Jacques Rancière's definition of literature as "a certain way of intervening in the sharing of the perceptible that defines the world we live in: the way in which the world is visible for us, and in which what is visible can be put into words, and the capacities and incapacities that reveal themselves accordingly."<sup>14</sup> But to simply equate the invisible with the contemporary would mean to re-inscribe onto the social present another binary logic that similarly cannot account for its inherent temporal dynamism. Such an account relies on a structuralist abstraction in which the elements that make up the social are taken as perfectly synchronic—even if they are impossible to fully enumerate or describe. For Williams, this is the moment when the temporality of the instant collapses into the analytical grammar of "the habitual past tense," which treats

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph R. Winters argues that the Brotherhood instantiates a view of historical progress that "often functions in public discourse to downplay tensions, conflicts, and contradictions in the present for the sake of a more unified and harmonious image of the future" (6). This becomes especially apparent in the scene in which Brother Tarp bequeaths to Ellison's narrator the link he wore during the nineteen years he spent as a chain gang prisoner.

<sup>14</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 7.

society and its various processes as finished.<sup>15</sup> To avoid this dead-end, invisibility must be conceived as inherently mutable, and as holding within it an emergent potentiality that cannot be the object of social analysis in any traditional sense.

In the narrative progression of *Invisible Man*, which chronologically precedes the narrator's own theorization of his condition in the prologue and epilogue, the relation between invisibility and mutability come to its head with the appearance of Rinehart. Emerging into the consciousness of Ellison's protagonist precisely when he himself desires to disappear, Rinehart is a supreme figure of anonymity simply because he means something different to everyone. Donning a pair of dark glasses and a hat, the Invisible Man is repeatedly mistaken for this mysterious figure, whose full name, Bliss Proteus, further underscores his reflexively euphoric relation to protean malleability, to the "vast seething, hot world of fluidity" he represents (498). Because he lacks a historically grounded identity, Rinehart can be said to exist only in the present. Could he truly "be all of them," the Invisible Man asks: "Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend?" In its breathless heaping of identities, unbroken by any pause or punctuation, this sentence syntactically enacts the fluid laterality the novel associates with Rinehart (498).

On the one hand, the Invisible Man is deeply fascinated by the possibilities that Rinehart represents. On the other, he is apprehensive. "I was both depressed and fascinated," he writes. "I wanted to know Rinehart and yet, I thought, I'm upset because I know I don't have to know him, that simply becoming aware of his existence, being mistaken for him, is enough to convince me that Rinehart is real. It couldn't be, but it is.

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128.

And it can be, is, simply because it's unknown" (498). Rinehart thus conjoins possibility ("can be") with actuality ("is") through the modality of the "unknown," which comes to refer both to the mental state of not knowing, and the objective state of not being known. In this way, Rinehart refers to an internal psychological process ("I know I don't have to know him") as well as an indelible feature of social reality. After the Invisible Man has been mistaken for Rinehart, he visits Brother Hambro, the organization's theorist. Feeling within him a "deep change," he reflects that "[i]t was as though my discovery of Rinehart had opened a gulf between us" (501). In terms of the narrator's involvement with the Brotherhood, this is the beginning of the end, even as his first intuition remains to "search out the proper political classification" and let "the whole thing ... roll off me like drops of water rolling off Jack's glass eye" (498). But the possibility of Rinehart's unknowability is unthinkable from the Brotherhood's perspective. Because he cannot be made solid, Rinehart haunts the remainder of the narrative as the antithesis to historical or rigidly identitarian modes of thought.

In the end, the Invisible Man comes to reject the existential models provided to him by both the Brotherhood and Rinehart. He declares as much when he asserts that he wants for himself neither "the freedom of a Rinehart, the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run" (575). The ultimate figure for this rejection, however, is the form of *Invisible Man* itself. It might seem as if the Invisible Man affirms something like the potentialities of radical fluidity when he claims that "my world has become one of infinite possibilities"—a statement that is usually read as either ironic, naive, or both (575). But it is not a coincidence that Ellison aligns his protagonist's realization of being invisible with an exuberant sense of vitality: "I myself," the Invisible Man reflects early

in the novel, “did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility” (7). This sense of being “alive” is thus not connected to invisibility as such. It emerges, rather, in the act of its apprehension, which in turn cannot be separated from its consequent appropriation as the basis for his narrative. “Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos,” the Invisible Man writes (576). Rinehart embodies this “chaos.” The Brotherhood pretends it does not exist. The Invisible Man, as we will see, confronts it.

## 2

Within the structural logic of *Invisible Man*, the narrator’s emergence signifies a simultaneous textual and existential crisis. This crisis, as I have indicated, revolves primarily around the narrator’s sense that he has failed, and that his writing has therefore constituted a form of disarmament. Both these feelings ultimately derive from the narrator’s attempt to narrate experiences that by their very nature elude narrative structuration. “So why do I write,” the narrator asks himself in the epilogue,

torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled “file and forget,” and I can neither file nor forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency. Why should I be the one to dream this nightmare? Why should I be dedicated and set aside—yes, if not to at least tell a few people about it? There seems to be no escape. Here I’ve set out to throw my anger into the world’s face, but now that I’ve tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I’m drawn upward again. So that even before I finish I’ve failed (maybe my anger is too heavy; perhaps, being a talker, I’ve used too many words). But I’ve failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness. (579-580)

The Invisible Man initially claims that he has “failed” because he finds himself unable to render the experiential state that first compelled him to write. While there is “no escape

from writing,” the “very act” that was meant to communicate his anger and bitterness has turned out instead to diffuse and partially negate these feelings. The specific form of invisibility that compelled the Invisible Man to write is, in other words, no longer accessible to him. It can be neither fully present, nor fully past. Yet as the Invisible Man’s reversal of the “file and forget” cliché indicates, his writing does not emanate from an already constituted subjectivity as from those “certain ideas” that refuse to “forget” him, and that “keep filing away” at his lethargy. The narrator’s perceived failure thus articulates a dialectical relationship between his extra-textual, pre-writing self, and the unstable narrative ‘I’ wrought *by* the torturous process of writing.

This ‘I’ is the grammatical subject of the sentence stating that “in spite of myself I’ve learned some things.” There are a number of such reflexive displacements throughout the novel, each of which insist that there is a crucial difference between the ‘I’ as a locus of subjectivity, and the reflexive “self” that is at once produced by ideology even as it is also the object of self-knowledge.<sup>16</sup> This grammatical structure returns as the narrator’s rhetoric of failure gives way to a more pointed rhetoric of disarmament. “So now having tried to put it down,” the Invisible Man affirms again, “I have disarmed myself in the process” (580). This moment certainly runs counter to the prologue’s description of the narrator’s “hibernation” as “covert preparation for overt action” (13). But it is also possible to understand it as the shedding of the ideologies that sustained him in the past, like the college’s racial uplift or the Brotherhood’s class struggle, as well as those ideologies he instinctively rejected, like Ras’s black nationalism, without

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<sup>16</sup> One example of this is the narrator’s early declaration that “I was looking for myself” when he reflects on the various contradictory selves imposed on him in his pre-invisible days (15). This setup then leads to the claim that “I am nobody but myself,” which the narrator contends is knowledge that everyone else “appears to have been born with” (15).

necessarily replacing them with a new structure of historical self-understanding. To be disarmed in this manner is, we might say, to be open to productive failures that do not depend on the often illusory promises of historical agency, or the idea of historically grounded subjectivity as such.

An earlier appearance of the concept in the novel complicates this reading. After the Invisible Man spots Tod Clifton on the street selling Sambo dolls, he wonders why Clifton would choose to “disarm himself” by leaving the Brotherhood, “the only organization offering him a chance to ‘define’ himself” (438). At this point of the narrative, the Invisible Man is still devoutly committed to the cause, and he cannot fathom why Clifton would “give up his voice” and “plunge outside of history” in this way—and to peddle a symbol of his oppression, no less (439). To have a “voice” in the Brotherhood, as the Invisible Man knows only too well, means subsuming your individuality entirely to the inscrutable interests of the organization.<sup>17</sup> But the Invisible Man always felt a kinship with Clifton, a fellow black youth, on terms that the Brotherhood would not and could not admit. After Clifton is shot and the Invisible Man delivers his eulogy, he instinctively refuses the instrumentalizing rhetoric that would politicize his friend’s death on terms that ultimately had nothing to do with the life he lived. “It wasn’t the way I wanted it to go,” the narrator remarks, thinking about his precarious position in the ranks of the Brotherhood and feeling increasingly desperate: “it wasn’t political” (457). Instead of seeking to organize or shape the emotion of the crowd, the Invisible Man emphasizes the absolute senselessness of Clifton’s death by repeating his name over and over again. Clifton was “unarmed,” the narrator eulogizes, literally

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<sup>17</sup> The most obvious example here is the fact that the Brotherhood insists that the narrator give up his old name.



because he carried no weapon, but figuratively because he has rejected the Brotherhood and everything that it represents (457).

Ellison positions the Invisible Man's narrative appropriation of invisibility as both a response and an alternative to Clifton's seemingly nihilistic embrace of the Sambo stereotype, in the same way that it also constitutes both a response and an alternative to his grandfather's advice that he should "overcome 'em with yeses" (16).<sup>18</sup> In this respect, one could imagine writing as an act of constant reinvention, unshackled from any and all social demands in general, and from white society in particular. The return of the "old fascination with playing a role" belies such a reading. This moment might at first appear defeatist, as suggested by the deflationary rhetoric that surrounds it. This, certainly, was how Addison Gayle and his fellow black nationalists viewed it during the heyday of the Black Arts Movement.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note, though, that Ellison's narrator is at this point no longer blinded by the personal ambition that was once tied to what he refers to as "the ... public self that spoke for the Brotherhood," or for that matter to his future as he envisioned it when he was still at the college (380). "I believed in hard work and progress and action," the narrator explains in the epilogue, "but now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times" (576). Broadly consonant with the narrator's sense of having been disarmed, this stance does not, however, reflect an

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<sup>18</sup> Clifton's performance when selling Sambo dolls on the street foregrounds what Sianne Ngai calls the "animatedness" of the racialized subject as "overemotional" and "unusually receptive to external control" (91).

<sup>19</sup> With his decision to emerge and thus return to (white) society, Gayle argued in 1975, Ellison's narrator he "chooses death over life, opts for non-creativity in favor of creativity, chooses the path of individualism instead of [the path of] racial unity" (212).

apolitical indifference as much as a desire towards forms of reciprocity that move beyond the regimes of visibility that otherwise determine most social interactions.

The most important moment in the epilogue in this respect comes when the narrator connects his sense of having in some sense “failed” with what he perceives as his inability to communicate the nature of his historical predicament. “You won’t believe in my invisibility,” he exhorts,

and you’ll fail to see how any principle that applies to you could apply to me. You’ll fail to see it even though death waits for both of us if you don’t. Nevertheless, the very disarmament has brought me to a decision. The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath. There’s a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring—I hope of spring. But don’t let me trick you, there *is* a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stench of death. (580)

It is true that this moment is broadly aligned with what Fred Moten calls the epilogue’s

“frightened attempt to retreat into the etiolated metaphysics of America.”<sup>20</sup> But the

rhetoric of second person address here does not simply ask whether or not it is possible

“to affirm the principle the country was built on and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence,” as the Invisible Man does elsewhere in the epilogue (574).

Instead, it poses two questions that strike at the very heart *Invisible Man*’s engagement

with invisibility. The first of these concerns what it would mean to “believe” in the

Invisible Man’s “invisibility.” The second concerns the logic by which the Invisible

Man’s ascription of non-belief to his imagined reader feeds into his sense of having been disarmed, and his subsequent decision to emerge. The word “Nevertheless” constitutes an important pivot in this respect, suggesting as it does that the “very disarmament” that

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<sup>20</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 68.

brings the narrator to his decision to “shake off the old skin and come up for breath” consists precisely in the imagined reader’s failure to “believe” or “see.”

In this way, the novel draws our attention back to the meaning of its first sentence: the boldly assertive “I am an invisible man” (3). Brimming with defiance, this speech-act functions at first as an empty signifier that carries no meaning except for the force of its own absolute conviction. But it also constitutes the always already culminating insight of the narrative that is to come. “The end,” as Ellison’s narrator puts it, “was in the beginning” (571). The key to this seeming paradox lies in distinguishing between invisibility as a social diagnosis, and invisibility as constitutively tied to a very peculiar kind of identity claim. In the former, the narrator defines invisibility in terms of “a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact” (3). In the latter, invisibility names a mode of perception and understanding that though partially derived from this interpellated subject position also far transcends it.

To understand the complex interrelation between these two senses of invisibility, we might consider the narrator’s eruption into violence in the prologue. “One night,” the narrator tells us, “I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name” (4). Singled out for insult and degradation based solely on the color of his skin, the Invisible Man reacts immediately, and demands an apology. “Apologize! Apologize!” he yells, butting and battering the man until “his lips were frothy with blood” (4). The man refuses, and the Invisible Man descends further into his state of frenzied outrage, until he reaches a point where he is prepared to slit the man’s throat. At this moment, however, it occurs to him that “the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking

nightmare!” (4). For a brief moment, it appears as if the Invisible Man’s sleepwalking imagery suggests that the blond man is not personally responsible for his insult. But even if the man is not the sole architect of this nightmare, he nevertheless one of its dreamers—and this is not, as the Invisible Man makes clear, without its consequences. Ellison’s narrator then locates the source of the violence in this scene squarely inside this nightmare, and in the racist stereotype that the blond man’s insult projects onto him. One might, indeed, argue that the Invisible Man’s ultimate restraint constitutes the scene’s chief expression of agency.

Later in the prologue, the Invisible Man returns to this encounter in the context of a series of further reflections on the nature of his invisibility. This too is a moment of second person address where Ellison’s narrator imputes on his imagined reader a specific attitude towards the narrative material he has just relayed. “I can hear you say,” the Invisible Man writes,

“What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!” And you’re right. I leap to agree with you. I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement. Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder—I? I don’t think so, and I refuse it. I won’t buy it. You can’t give it to me. *He* bumped *me*, *he* insulted *me*. Shouldn’t he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my “danger potential”? (14)

As a social condition, invisibility is produced by willful and systematic non-recognition, operating through a number of social, political, and cultural mechanisms—embodied here in the racist stereotype of the unnamed insult—that work in concert to eradicate or render invisible the fundamental humanity of the person of color. The Invisible Man helps the

reader understand how his “danger potential” is derived from invisibility in this sense, and that the object of his violence is his own frustration with a world that refuses to recognize his fundamental humanity. The labeling of his encounter with the blond man in a newspaper as a “mugging” further demonstrates this point, if in a public register of signification (5). This description defuses the Invisible Man’s violence by making it legible on terms that are socially admissible. Robbery, after all, is easily denounced, and can, at least in theory, be policed.<sup>21</sup> Invisibility, by contrast, can only be denied—and is, in fact, constituted *by* that very denial.

By claiming that he was in fact “truly irresponsible” not because he attacked the man, but because he “was a coward” and did not kill him, Ellison’s narrator turns the presumed logic of his imagined interlocutor on its head. It is useful, in this respect, to compare the Invisible Man’s claim that irresponsibility is a constitutive part of his invisibility with his later belief that he must end his hibernation precisely because there might be a chance “that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). The novel does not and cannot, as I have argued, specify what such a role might entail, even if there does appear to be a connection to the claim that “dreamers and sleepwalkers” alike must all “pay the price,” and that “the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all” (14). Yet it is not clear where this “responsibility” is to be located, or exactly what it entails. “I’m not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying mea culpa,” the narrator writes in the epilogue. “The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness

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<sup>21</sup> The thematic is explored at length by Richard Wright in *The Outsider*, a novel that in many ways parallels *Invisible Man*.

and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me” (572).

One aspect of this indeterminacy might be traced to the difference between “social responsibility” and “social equality” (30-31). By invoking these two terms, I am alluding to the content of the speech that the Invisible Man delivers in front of his hometown’s “leading white citizens” early on in the novel. The narrator stages this scene by noting that his invitation to speak constituted “a triumph for our whole community,” and that he at the time “visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington”—and the speech is, indeed, about how “humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress” (17-18). At this point in the narrative, Washington symbolizes not only the pinnacle of African American achievement, but also the outer edge of its possibility—as it does too, in a different way, when Jack mentions him in his attempt to recruit the Invisible Man to the Brotherhood. The retroactive irony inherent in the visual register that the Invisible Man uses to describe this aspiration undercuts it, however, as does Ellison’s deft construction of the narrator’s double-voiced Washingtonian speech that follows.

It is not surprising, then, that most important moment of this speech comes when the Invisible Man diverges from his Washingtonian script. This occurs when Ellison’s protagonist uses the phrase “social responsibility,” with the uproarious audience yelling at him to repeat it. Recall that, at this point in time, the Invisible Man is soaked in sweat and blood after having been forced to fight in the Battle Royale. And the spectacle is indeed absurd—but not for the reason that the white men suppose: it is absurd because it captures “social responsibility” as a euphemism for a system of racial control that operates on a principle of white paternalistic degradation. The main figure for the

reproduction of this system is the scholarship to the college that the Invisible Man is awarded at the end of his speech. Before that, however, he yells out “social equality”—a phrase that he had often seen “denounced in newspaper editorials,” and that he had heard debated in private—instead of “social responsibility.” The atmosphere in the room turns hostile. At this moment, the Invisible Man’s speech teeters on the edge of failure. Swallowing blood, he assures his listeners that he made a mistake, and is told in return that the town’s big shots “mean to do right by you, but you’ve got to know your place at all times.” After this, Ellison’s protagonist pushes through the remainder of his carefully crafted speech, and finishes to thunderous applause. “Keep developing as you are,” he is told, “and some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people.”<sup>62</sup>

Minimally, “social equality” might be taken as entailing the idea that there are principles that apply to everyone equally and without prejudice, and that people as well as institutions should recognize this as a basic fact that structures every subsequent social relation. On most readings of the novel, this is what the imagined reader will “fail to see it even though death waits for both of us if you don’t.”<sup>22</sup> That failure, though, is precisely what leads the Invisible Man to his conclusion that he might have a “socially responsible role to play,” and that he therefore has to emerge.

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<sup>62</sup> In the symbolic fabric of the text, these papers later become the “feeble torches” by means of which the Invisible Man tries to make his way out of the underground space into which he falls during the Harlem riot (568). In addition to this, there is Mr. Norton’s sense that *his* destiny is tied up with that the campus—a belief for which he is mocked by the vet at the Golden Day, and which the narrator brings up again when he, in the epilogue, describes running into Mr. Norton on the subway.

<sup>22</sup> The imagery of death returns soon after this moment when the narrator contemplates the “stench” of the world outside his hole as he prepares to emerge from his textual hibernation, describing it as a “smell either of death or of spring” (572).

The seeming reversibility between responsibility and irresponsibility thus helps explain why the narrator's opening statement cannot figure as the object of belief in any straightforward sense. The real reader who encounters Ellison's words is not, of course, identical to the Invisible Man's imagined one. It is even possible to say that the very act of separating ourselves from this interpellated reader is to insist on a more expansive world than the one the narrator can imagine. Yet it is nevertheless the case that if the reader is to "see" the Invisible Man, he or she would have to recognize that he is, in fact, invisible. We can, to be sure, observe this dynamic in his encounter with the blond man, where the source of his invisibility is clearly external. The same does not hold true for the assertion "I am an invisible man," which in its insistent presentness refuses such critical distance. We cannot recognize this statement as true without rupturing the coherence of its structuring concept, if only from within the present tense of that particular communicative context. This does not mean that the Invisible Man is suddenly "visible," as imagining such a possibility would depend on an overly reductive interpretation of the relationship between visibility and invisibility. Neither does it preclude the Invisible Man from being invisible at other times or in other social contexts. It does, however, constitute a point of connection between narrator and reader, even if that connection does not yield stable subject positions for either. It is one thing to read the concept of invisibility as encoding certain truths about the structure of society. It is quite another to consider it as a structure of mediation.

Most critical accounts of invisibility focus on a series of suggestive remarks in the novel's prologue. Invisibility, Ellison's narrator explains there, makes possible a "slightly different sense of time" where one is "never quite on the beat" (8). One might consider



the “beat” here to be that of musical performance. But in this particular context, it also appears to signify something like the unrelenting “beat” of historical time. On this view, history is the “content” of time, which is but an empty husk without it. The effect is a tyrannical injunction for synchronicity that constitutes a wholesale sublimation of time to history. Ellison’s narrator, by contrast, comes to see that time is not an “imperceptible flowing,” but rather made up of “nodes” where time either “stands still” or “leaps ahead.” Invisibility, he continues, allows one to “slip into the breaks and look around” (8). Syncopated and improvisatory, the ensuing sense of time is, as many critics have argued, modelled above all on jazz and other black vernacular forms.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than extending these particular arguments, I want to close by suggesting that the narrator’s emergence constitutes a formal rendering of precisely one such “break.” There is something perversely hopeful about it, in spite of everything that has come before, and in spite of everything one might expect is to follow. It is no coincidence that the trajectory of Ellison’s novel takes us from that bold sentence that opens the novel to the rhetorical appeal at its close, the much cited “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581). Moving from a declarative “I” marked by social exclusion to an interrogative “you” that imagines the possibility of a new, more inclusive, form of sociality, *Invisible Man* constitutes what Robert Genter has called “a mode of symbolic action,” or “a deliberate attempt to use aesthetic form to challenge the choice of lens through which individuals made sense of the world around them and to persuade them that the visions offered by the artist were not merely more poetic but possibly more

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<sup>23</sup> Critics writing on this aspect of *Invisible Man* are too enumerable to mention. For an exemplary and recent engagement with this topic, however, see Alexander Weheliye’s *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

liberating.”<sup>24</sup> This “you” is not, however, the “you” of any one reader, whether real or imagined. Instead, it functions as a figure for a social potentiality that emerges, like the Invisible Man himself, only at the limit of narrative form.

The social and cultural status of blackness is deeply implicated in this process. On an elemental level, the narrator’s invisibility follows from the fact that he is a black man living in America. When events of the narrative deposit the novel’s protagonist in the hole inside which he makes his residence, he vows to “stay ... until ... chased out,” and to use his time there to “try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet” (571). This underground space is not, however, simply an imagined space—however surreal—inside which writing takes place as a matter of narrative fact, but also a symbolic space that represents and explores the discursive conditions of that act of writing. “Before ... I lived in the darkness into which I was chased,” the narrator writes in the prologue, “but now I see. I’ve illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa” (13). Blackness does, in other words, constitute one aspect of the narrator’s invisibility. But the novel insists that the opposite is true, too, that invisibility is also an aspect of his blackness. Neither term is privileged over the other.

*Invisible Man*’s anti-essentialism is perhaps exemplified most immediately, however, in the “Blackness of Blackness” sermon that the narrator experiences in a reefer-induced vision in the prologue. In a series of paradoxical oppositions, “blackness” is here posited as an unstable signifier: it both “is” and “aint”; it “will git you” and “it won’t”; it “will make you” or “it will un-make you” (9-10). Throughout the novel, Ellison intertwines this instability with the rhetorical instability that follows from the

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<sup>24</sup> Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*, 4.

narrator's "compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white" (14). In the end, we can only approach this desire through the Invisible Man's sense of vulnerability at the naked absurdity of it all. To recognize the affective logic behind the narrator's rhetoric of failure is itself a form of disarmament. In *Invisible Man*, failure might thus be taken as articulating the potential transformation of the circumstances that makes the attempt necessary. This is why the Invisible Man has to fail. But it is also why that failure, because it signifies that which is in the process of emerging but has yet to fully emerge, can be reconfigured as a site of possibility.

### 3

*Invisible Man* has, since its publication, accrued a great deal of symbolic capital by mediating debates about race and literature more generally. Ellison's widely publicized argument with Irving Howe regarding the protest tradition in African American literature constitutes one episode in this history; his tenuous relation with the Black Arts Movement another. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to say that the novel's reception history itself registers the changing attitudes in American society during the now sixty-something years since its publication. And today, it seems as if we believe "that Ellison can do everything for us: fictionalize, historicize, and theorize," as Jonathan Arac puts it in a critical genealogy written on the occasion of the novel's fiftieth anniversary.<sup>25</sup> It is against this pervasiveness that Kenneth Warren in *So Black and Blue* turns his eye, through the lens of Ellison and his critics, to what he calls the cultural turn in black politics. By attending to the symbolic meaning of literature, Warren launches a complex

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<sup>25</sup> Arac, "Toward a Critical Genealogy of the U.S. Discourse of Identity: *Invisible Man* after Fifty Years," 200.

argument about the relation between literary value and social change, which, as I will show shares a number of structural features with Ellison's attempt to hold open the present.

We might begin, however, by briefly considering *What Was African American Literature?*, which has spawned a great deal of critical conversation about the relation between the literary past and the literary present. The fundamental premise of this monograph is the notion that all literature written during by African American authors during the period of Jim Crow was either "instrumental" or "indexical," which is to say either written explicitly "to achieve some social end," or taken as a proxy for "the status or the nature of the race as a whole," regardless of its author's intentions.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on Auerbach, Warren argues that historical contexts produce "a shared set of assumptions about what ought to be represented." But as these "contexts themselves undergo change, those representational and rhetorical strategies that at their peak served to enable authors and critics to disclose various 'truths' about their society can begin to atrophy and become conventionalized so that they no longer enable literary texts to come to terms with social change but operate instead as practices of evasion."<sup>27</sup> For Warren, African American literature thus constitutes "a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of a literary practice responsive to conditions that, by and large, no longer obtain."<sup>28</sup>

While Warren's rhetoric of pastness is in many ways opposed to Ellison's temporality of emergence, it important to emphasize that his analytic object is not only

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<sup>26</sup> Warren, *What Was African American Literature?*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 9.

literary history.<sup>29</sup> He also conceives of his periodizing judgment as an intervention into how we think about contemporary social reality. In this respect, Warren turns against rhetoric that asserts substantive continuity between current racial inequality and Jim Crow-style segregation. Because it implicitly imagines political identity as if it were a transhistorical property, such a model “misunderstands both the nature of the previous regime and the defining elements of the current one.”<sup>30</sup> Warren’s argument is not that we are “post-race,” as he is sometimes read.<sup>17</sup> He does, however, believe that activism that seeks to eradicate racism solely by seeking social equality under the current system is not only not good enough, but itself subsumed under a broadly neoliberal agenda and therefore complicit in reproducing forms of inequality and injustice that are endemic to late capitalism. This is the source of Warren’s explosive indictment of contemporary scholarship in African American studies, which he argues to be nostalgically bound to now-calcified structures of feeling, to long since inert forms of identity politics.

It is helpful to contrast this strong demarcation between literary past and present with Rita Felski’s call for a renewed attention to the social use of literature, and what she calls literature’s “transtemporal resonance.”<sup>31</sup> Literary criticism, Felski argues, can be divided into two general approaches. It is true, of course, that formalism and historicism

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<sup>29</sup> Such rhetorics are operant throughout culture. One salient example of this is the Voting Right Act, or the signal achievement of Civil Rights Movement that bookends the historical period that Warren argues to lend coherence to African American literature as a response to legally codified segregation, is currently in abeyance following a recent Supreme Court ruling. The case in question is *Shelby County v. Holder*, in which a politically polarized court ruled 5-to-4 that the formula by which it is decided what states need to seek federal preclearance for changes to their election laws is unconstitutional because it is, in a word, “dated.” Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John G. Roberts argued that “[o]ur country has changed,” and that “while any racial discrimination in voting is too much, Congress must ensure that the legislation it passes to remedy that problem speaks to current conditions” (24). The dissent, meanwhile, argued that the very case against §5 of the Act testifies to its ongoing effectiveness.

<sup>30</sup> Warren, *What Was African American Literature?*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> For a good overview on Warren’s intervention into the politics of identity and its relation to the work of Walter Benn Michaels, see Michael Miller’s review essay “Post Post-Identity.”

<sup>31</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 178,

shade into one another in actual critical practice, if only because form is itself historical. But conceptually speaking, the difference is clear enough. If the former treats the literary object as self-contained aesthetic entities, the latter considers the ways in which texts are imbricated in the historical context in which they first appeared. Neither can account for how works of art resonate across time. “We cannot close our eyes to the historicity of art works,” Felski writes, “and yet we sorely need alternatives to seeing them as transcendently timeless on the one hand and imprisoned in their moment of origin on the other.”<sup>32</sup> From this point, Felski proceeds to offer a critique of historicism, which on her view “serves as the equivalent of cultural relativism, quarantining difference, denying relatedness, and suspending—or less kindly, evading—the question of why past texts matter and how they speak to us now.”<sup>33</sup> For Warren, by contrast, historicism is the answer, not the problem.

Warren has rightly been criticized for his reductive treatment of the literary dimension of the works he considers, and for an equally reductive periodizing logic with regard to both literary and socio-political history (and, I would add, for overstating the case for “coherence” as a factor of adjudication). Critics do not, however, generally acknowledge the connection between *What Was African American Literature?* and *So Black and Blue*. In a key rhetorical moment in this monograph, Warren asks whether “[t]aking seriously Ellison’s democratic hopes may be to imagine a world in which *Invisible Man* no longer speaks immediately to us or for us as a way of investigating contemporary American identity.”<sup>34</sup> There is a lot to be said about this sentence, which

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Warren, *So Black and Blue*, 23.

rhetorically inverts the famous appeal at the close of Ellison's novel. On the one hand, it seems almost perverse to suggest that the possibility of the Invisible Man speaking "for us or to us" might itself signify the latest frontier of the symbolic stranglehold of the past on the present. It is, for instance, not exactly clear who this pronoun is supposed to refer to, or, for that matter, what the difference between the "to" and the "for" is in this context. Yet this injunction to imagine an America where race no longer determines visibility is nevertheless remarkable for its quintessentially Ellisonian intermingling of hope and failure. Inside both of these rhetorical situations, the act of looking forward is inextricably bound to the act of retrospection.

Warren does not, of course, believe that Ellison's "democratic ideals" have been fully realized in the few short years that separate *What Was African American Literature?* from *So Black and Blue*. The rhetoric of pastness that supports the central argumentative thrust of the former signifies a blockage of the imaginative mode that animates the latter, as its relationship to the contemporary is marked by a suffocating ontology of temporal closure as opposed to the temporal potentialities of an ontology of emergence. As indicated by the phrase "to imagine," and other phrases like it, the language of *So Black and Blue* still relies on projecting a future wished-for state as part of struggles that take place in the present. "For as we work to even the odds created by a Jim Crow past," Warren concludes, "we are working, no matter what we tell ourselves, to make Ellison's novel more a story of the world that was, and less an account of the world that still is. Success here just might be a bad thing for *Invisible Man*, but such a success would be a marvelous thing, indeed."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Warren, *So Black and Blue*, 108.

One way of getting at the issues that are beginning to take shape here is by considering the neoconservative pundit Norman Podhoretz's twisted version of Warren's argument in "What Happened to Ralph Ellison."<sup>36</sup> The gist of this 1999 article from Podhoretz's own *Commentary* is, as I mentioned briefly in the introduction, the claim that Ellison's novel has grown "dated."<sup>37</sup> The argument that follows asserts, in effect, that African Americans are no longer invisible. "If the way of life growing out of their oppressed condition was once dismissed as nothing but a stigma and hence demanded to be brought into view with the undeniable force of conviction about its richness that lay behind the picture painted by *Invisible Man*," Podhoretz continues, "this way of life has now become a national obsession at which no one ever stops looking and about which no one ever stops talking."<sup>38</sup> Statements like these, as Warren notes in a footnote in *So Black and Blue*, "tells us much more about Podhoretz's politics and prejudices than about *Invisible Man* and its current literary reputation."<sup>39</sup> But they also demonstrate how the meaning of literature resides just as much in the symbolic uses to which it is put as in what is actually there, in the text.

This can be seen, for instance, in Podhoretz's sense that Ellison's novel contains "hardly a trace ... of the one aspect of that way of life which has done more in the years since the book was published to affect race relations in this country: black violence and criminality, the fear of which has spread even among the most sympathetic white

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that Ellison and Podhoretz have quite the history. When Ellison referred to Podhoretz and his staff at *Commentary* as "new apologists for segregation" in a 1967 interview, an adversarial back-and-forth followed (*Collected Essays* 744). For more on this exchange, see Glenn Anthony Harris's work on the history of Black-Jewish relations (84-87). For more on Podhoretz, see Nathan Abrams and Thomas Jeffers.

<sup>37</sup> Podhoretz, "What Happened to Ralph Ellison?," 56.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 56-57.

<sup>39</sup> Warren, *So Black and Blue*, 112.



liberals.”<sup>40</sup> It does, he admits, contain “hustlers and pimps and tricksters and con artists.”<sup>41</sup> But these characters are “ingenious and admirably resourceful,” when they should, according to Podhoretz, be “menacing or dangerous.”<sup>42</sup> We know, however, that black criminality has in reality not produced white fear as much as white fear is responsible for the myth of its genetic pervasiveness. It is therefore clear that these comments are designed to stoke the fire of racial fear and resentment rather than demonstrate, through an actual reading, some form of insight into the presumably mutable meaning of *Invisible Man*. This is what that Michel Foucault had in mind when he calls visibility “a trap,” and indeed the kind of visibility that in *Invisible Man* is inextricable from invisibility.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, Podhoretz’s bad faith attempt to proclaim Ellison’s novel to be “dated” thus serves only as evidence for its ongoing relevance.

The political intentions underlying Warren and Podhoretz’s work could not be more different. Both authors do, however, deploy rhetorics of pastness that consign or at least imagine consigning Ellison’s novel to the past. Neither is able to fully do so. In Warren’s case, this is because he is too good a reader of Ellison. He cannot help but inhabit *Invisible Man*, even when it is not the primary object of his analysis, and so internalize in his own argument the paradoxes that surround Ellison’s attempt to communicate the experiential reality of invisibility. Podhoretz, by contrast, wields the novel as if were a weapon. In the process, he reenacts the very logic of making-invisible that the text seeks to arrest through the narrator’s emergence.

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<sup>40</sup> Podhoretz, “What Happened to Ralph Ellison?,” 57.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

At stake, ultimately, is what it means for a work of literature to endure over time—or, to be more specific, the relation between literature and social change. For Podhoretz, a truly great novel provides access to “never-changing human realities,” even if—and perhaps especially if—“the social conditions of the world being portrayed, and the attitudes that underlay and supported them ... are dead and gone.”<sup>44</sup> *Invisible Man* does not, in his opinion, “survive this acid test of greatness.”<sup>45</sup> Warren, by contrast, explicitly positions himself against such universalizing rhetoric by asking how the kind of literature that “imagines for itself the career of the classic”—and in spite of the occasional false modesty to the contrary, Ellison surely did imagine his novel in these terms—may nevertheless be bound by and to its own moment.<sup>46</sup> If *Invisible Man* remains relevant today, Warren argues, we should not take this as a sign that its meaning has transcended the historical circumstances of its setting, but rather as indicating “a broader social and political failure that keeps us mired in the racial commonsense of the twentieth century.”<sup>47</sup> The “timelessness” that is conventionally ascribed to enduring or “classic” works of literature can, from this perspective, be taken as the mark of an active “anti-contemporaneity.”

Critics writing about *Invisible Man* have often registered a vague incredulity at the quickness of this novel’s canonization. Writing for *Phylon* on the occasion of the

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<sup>44</sup> Podhoretz, “What Happened to Ralph Ellison?,” 57.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Warren, *So Black and Blue*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 13. The most sustained rejoinder to Warren’s view on Ellison can be found in the work of Timothy Parrish, who in *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* sets out to “restore the urgency and ongoing vitality of Ellison’s career” (6). One of Parrish’s premises in this respect is that the critical reception of *Invisible Man* has in fact “never adequately escaped the Jim Crow origins of its response” (8). See also Adam Bradley.

novel's twentieth anniversary, for instance, William Walling reflects on the literary reputation of Ellison's novel. "Traditionally," he writes,

twenty years has not been regarded as much of a test for the staying power of a work of literature. Horace advised a century as the ideal minimum; and Dr. Johnson, almost 1800 years later, could do no better than concur. But if twenty years fails to carry Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* even to the first quarter-pole in the arduous endurance test for becoming a traditional "classic," the two decades which have passed since the novel's appearance surely have served to consolidate its position as the most significant work of American fiction in the postwar era.<sup>48</sup>

The subtext here is not hard to make out: if *Invisible Man* is not yet a "traditional 'classic,'" that is merely for technical reasons. Using the rhetoric that Walling invokes here, one might say that *Invisible Man* seems to compress the temporality of the classic as it is conventionally understood. Robert O'Meally registers the same phenomenon in even stronger terms in a 1988 book of essays on Ellison: "Published a mere thirty-five years ago," O'Meally writes, "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* shares with older classic works the odd quality of seeming to have been in place for much longer, if not forever."<sup>49</sup>

This self-consciousness in regard to the ever-increasing distance between the critical "now" and the novel's date of publication—marked in the criticism by the invocation of various anniversaries: *Invisible Man* at twenty; at thirty-five; at fifty—registers an ongoing anxiety about temporal logic that underwrites *Invisible Man*'s contemporary and future existence. As Walling notes, one of the main criteria of a classic has traditionally been "staying power." In these terms, it is possible to read that "odd quality" that O'Meally refers to—that is to say, the novel's quality of seeming "to have been in place for much longer" than it actually has—as a rhetoric that imposes temporal

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<sup>48</sup> Walling, "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "It Goes A Long Way Back, Some Twenty Years," 4.

<sup>49</sup> O'Meally. 1.

distance as a way of registering the way in which history seems to have operated at an accelerated pace since the appearance of Ellison's novel. In 1955, for instance, he argues that as "many of the important issues are rapidly fading away," *Invisible Man* is "not an important novel," and that if the novel lasts, "it will be simply because there are things going on in its depths that are of more permanent interest than on its surface."<sup>50</sup>

Ellison was, of course, invested in art as an expression of universality—but always through the particular, by means of which literature may function as "a study in comparative humanity" that allows for "universal identification." In this respect, it is not hard to see how his thematization of invisibility mediates between the inviolable "specificity of the particular experience and the particular character" and the idea that the task of literature "is to remind us of our common humanity and the cost of that humanity."<sup>51</sup> Nor is it surprising that novelist Charles Johnson, in a response to Podhoretz, chooses to meet the charge of "datedness" precisely by affirming Ellison's universality. "Ellison's thesis is universal," declares Johnson, because while it is true that "some Blacks may be more 'visible' today," other minorities are not, and can too "make a case for being 'invisible' men and women of contemporary America."<sup>52</sup> But saying this is not saying enough, and the novel itself goes far beyond the rigidities of such identity politics. We are, Johnson continues, all "to some degree ... ineffable and invisible to each

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<sup>50</sup> Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 217.

<sup>51</sup> Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 539-540.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, "Novel Genius," 20. Johnson lists the following minorities as examples: "Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders, new African immigrants to America, Native Americans, and especially Muslim Americans before September 11th" (20). These quotations are all from an article that appeared in *The New Crisis* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Invisible Man*. This text is largely adapted from a response Johnson submitted to *Commentary*, after having been cited without attribution in Podhoretz's article as one of the novels "admirers" (56). "They, as easily as Blacks 50 years ago," he continues, "can make a case for being 'invisible' men and women in contemporary America: indeed, well might they argue that 'on the lower frequencies' *Invisible Man*, in part, speaks for them" (20). The response first appeared in *Commentary*. It was later reworked into an article on Ellison in *Crisis*. I draw my citations from the latter.

other,” each of us “blind to each other’s open-ended being,” and all of us “victims of the other’s attempts (from the Left and Right and Center) to define and categorize us, to use us as Ellison’s Dr. Bledsoe, the Brotherhood and Ras attempt to shape *Invisible Man*’s protagonist as they think best.”<sup>53</sup>

Such a defense of Ellison’s novel makes perfect sense. But it also evokes a darker aspect of the perceived universality that, together with his modernist proclivities, underwrites Ellison’s canonization as an American author of the highest rank and influence. Numerous critics have remarked on this process. Lawrence Jackson, for instance, asserts that following its publication, “*Invisible Man* moved from a tool designed to expose a distinctive kind of Negro humanity and to stimulate the conscience of white America into a novel that commented obliquely on politics and stressed chiefly individuality and self-definition.”<sup>54</sup> Now, this might be putting matters somewhat crudely, especially given Ellison’s keen sense that literature constitutes a form of cultural agency that cannot be reduced to politics in quite this way. But it is nevertheless an open—and complicated—question whether the reduction of the novel to such platitudes do not, in fact, at once obscure and demonstrate some of the ways in which society is still “mired” in issues that are irrevocably tied shaping influence of race, whether in accordance to a Jim Crow racial logic, or some later form of racialized control.

Given this complication, one might argue that Johnson’s emphasis invisibility’s applicability to essentially all human interaction is structurally analogous to the indignant reframing of the powerful “Black Lives Matter” into the vacuous “All Lives Matter.” But

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson, “Ralph Ellison’s Politics of Integration,” 173. Ellison, as Parrish puts it, came to be seen not so much “as a black writer advancing the cause of blacks through literature,” but rather “as the black author who had transcended his blackness” (8). For more on this topic, see also John Wright.

Johnson is much too attentive to the epistemological problems that Ellison raises in his novel to completely miss the point in this way. What Podhoretz ultimately fails to understand, he argues, is the fact that “every disclosure that renders something visible simultaneously brings about a concealment that renders something else invisible.”<sup>55</sup> The politics of visibility is thus not a zero-sum game, but rather an algebraic equation where the value and meaning of X is always in flux. From this perspective, it becomes clear, too, that the novel’s interpretation of invisibility has very little to do with the historic variation in respect to whom the concept may be said to apply, but is rather tied to the paradoxes that perpetually surround its rhetorical articulation. It is not, that is to say, a concept that denotes as much as it unsettles itself. To pay attention to this aspect of *Invisible Man*—to the way in which the novel reflexively responds to the discursive pressures it exerts on itself—is to short-circuit the question of how to judge the novel’s “contemporariness” in favor for a more nuanced accounting of how contemporaneity operates within it, on both a formal and conceptual level.

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, “Novel Genius,” 19-20.

### Nabokov's Unconcern

Vladimir Nabokov and Ralph Ellison might on the surface appear an unlikely pairing. It is true, of course, that both were deeply committed to craft, and to the idea that literature should never be instrumentalized to social or political agendas. With Nabokov, we are nevertheless far from Ellison's conception of writing as a means of "confronting reality" by abstracting patterns from the "flow and fury of existence."<sup>1</sup> "I've no general ideas to exploit," Nabokov asserts instead: "I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions," explaining that the artist creates his own world "by the very act of shedding the age he lives in."<sup>2</sup> But the difference between a novel like *Lolita* and a novel like *Invisible Man* is not as vast as one might imagine. Both, to be sure, constitute enduring and celebrated renditions of postwar American society. Nabokov's depiction of the America of the immediate postwar period has entered our shared imagination of what that time was like, chronicling as it does a burgeoning consumer culture in the context of the economic prosperity that followed the end of the Second World War just as much as *Invisible Man* has come to stand in for black experience during Jim Crow. And both famously relies on second-person address in order to dramatize their encounters with an imagined readership, and so imagine writing as an inherently social or communicative act.

But because *Lolita* is written from the perspective of perpetrator rather than invisible victim, Nabokov's novel might be said to invert Ellison's: whereas *Invisible Man* focuses on the inscription of social pathologies on an emblematic individual, *Lolita*

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<sup>1</sup> Ellison. *Collected Essays*. 761.

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*. 16.

focuses on the pathological perpetrator's singular relationship to his victim. Both novels are concerned with the relationship of writing to violence, suffering, and marginalization—but they hold these interests in vastly different ways. If writing in *Invisible Man* articulates a structure of feeling that aspires towards a different future it cannot yet imagine itself, writing in *Lolita* appears to provide form only to a private obsession. This is why *Invisible Man* ends by affirming the openness of aesthetic form as a conduit for imagining new forms of sociality by rejecting the idea that art can or should constitute a fully autonomous, self-sustaining space. *Lolita*, by contrast, ends with a self-satisfied Humbert seeking to transcend time altogether. “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art,” Humbert writes in the novel's second-to-last sentence. “And this,” he concludes, “is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.”<sup>3</sup>

Even in this equation of artistic mastery with mastery over time, though tempered by Humbert's pronouncement he is “unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her,” there is an essential appeal to the social form of the novel (283). Rather than contingency, however, we are faced with a morally crippling stasis, and with the unpalatable idea that if Humbert has sought to have Lolita “live in the minds of later generations,” then the reader has just helped him achieve his goal (309).

To see this, we need look no further than those famous first sentences that so clearly delight in their poetic cadence, in the parallelism of their images, and in the

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<sup>3</sup> Nabokov. *Lolita*. 309. Henceforth cited parenthetically.



sensuousness of language itself: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (9). Whether the reader is experiencing the novel for the first time or not, these sentences are at once foreboding and seductive: foreboding because they encapsulate the reduction of a person to the sensuous matter of three eroticized syllables, but still seductive in its invitation for the reader to perform that very reduction. “Lo. Lee. Ta.” Who, really, can resist enunciating the word, slowly and deliberately, if only in order to confirm that the tongue does indeed take a “trip of three steps down the palate” before it lands, with a tap, on the teeth? And who does not feel a sense of complicity afterward, as if the pleasure of that dancing tongue is somehow illicit?

Or take Humbert’s equally famous proclamation, following the furtive orgasm he experiences after a playful Dolores climbs onto his lap in Ramsdale, that Lolita has been “safely solipsized” (60). This claim refers at once to the retroactive affirmation of his belief that he had managed to steal “the honey of spasm without impairing the morals of a minor,” and to the feeling, anchored in the present of writing, that his literary depiction—which spans paragraph upon paragraph of rich, cinematic description, chronicling in precise and evocative terms the movement of bodies, limbs, and objects—has so wholly assimilated the event it describes that it has become a carnal experience in its own right (62). For the reader, it is one of the most intensely uncomfortable moments in the novel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Because it has to contend with a material reality that cannot be so easily separated into separate planes of consciousness, Humbert’s description of the first time he and Lolita has sex is, by comparison, strangely anticlimactic. Lolita, Humbert tells us, “was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid’s life and mine” (134). Once the possibility of this distinction disappears, Humbert turns to a language of empty abstraction that stands in stark contrast to the euphoric energy that animated his earlier description. “I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery,” he announces a

*Lolita*'s narrative temporality might be said to oscillate between the sensuousness of literary style in the "now" of reading or writing, which reaches back to recover the singularity of some moment that is nevertheless irretrievably lost, and its imagined endurance throughout time in some literary—or, as Humbert suggests in imagining an even darker timeline, biological—"forever." In this respect, the central crux of the matter, as well as the source of the novel's self-serving sense of dramatic unfolding, has to do with the fact that *Lolita* was always destined to transcend the category through which Humbert initially perceived her. Had this not been true, there would be no manuscript, no novel. In the beginning of the novel, Humbert describes how the status of being a nymphet is by necessity a temporary one, as it applies only to a certain subset of girls of a certain age who reside and play on an "intangible island of entranced time" which exists largely apart from "the spatial world of synchronous phenomena" that organizes more customary forms of social interaction (17). This is the reason, too, why he is so insistent that his reader sees the boundaries between the age of "'nine' and 'fourteen'" as "the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks" that surrounds this "enchanted island" rather than in terms of the temporal existence of any one girl (16). The poetic metaphor invokes a sense of timelessness that is tied not to the apprehension of any particular nymphet, but to the persistence of the category itself through time. All nymphets are always in the process of shedding their demoniac nature simply by growing older. But *Lolita* is not simply a nymphet among others in that she becomes in *Lolita* not only an object of Humbert's desire, but the very condition of his existence: "what is most singular is that she, *this*

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little bit later, "but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love" (135).

Lolita, *my* Lolita,” Humbert writes in his secret Ramsdale journal, “has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita” (44-45).<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that the incessant singularity of Humbert’s desire was always a pathway for the cultivation of much more expansive set of concerns about the social fabric of America. In this way, I approach *Lolita*’s through those narrative details that appear to have very little bearing on the tension between literary form and the theme of pedophilia that has animated so much of the novel’s critical history. In so doing, I relate the Humbert’s insatiable desire to “fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” to other forms of suffering or structures of oppression—racism and anti-Semitism chief among them—that are registered not only *in* the margin of the text’s pedophilic gaze, but *by virtue of* that very marginalization (134).

Nabokov, of course, frequently professed his disdain for literature that demonstrates what he refers to as “overconcern with class or race.”<sup>6</sup> But in *Lolita*, he allows what we perhaps might call “unconcern” do the work that we normally associate with art that approach social divisions by affirming the experiential reality of

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<sup>5</sup> Humbert knows while Lolita will not be “forever Lolita,” she might yet be “Lolita forever”—a chiasmus that strikes at the very heart of the novel’s engagement with temporality. “The word ‘forever,’” Humbert explains, “referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood” (65). It is important to remember, though, that Humbert’s own sense of the purpose of his writing shifts during the fifty-six or so days during which he claims to have composed his manuscript. When he begins to reflect on his narrative towards its end, Humbert states that though he thought that he “would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul,” he has since come to realize that he “could not parade living Lolita” (308). The former attitude is in evidence throughout the first half of *Lolita* in particular, where Humbert frequently addresses an imagined jury as if he was defending himself in court; the latter centers on the idea that even if Humbert “may use parts of this memoir in hermetic sessions, ... publication is to be deferred” until such a point in time “when Lolita is no longer alive” (308). The connection between this deferment and his aspiration for literary immortality is established already some twenty pages earlier, when Humbert describes Lolita as his “American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this”—such, at any rate, Humbert concludes sardonically, is “the formal agreement with the so-called authorities” (280). But it is clinched in the image of Humbert’s “story” as a corpse, with “bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood, and beautiful bright-green flies” (308). For all its vibrancy, Humbert realizes that there is also something deadening about his aesthetic.

<sup>6</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 101.

marginalized categories. With this phrase, I mean to invoke Richard Rorty's observation that Humbert is entirely unconcerned with anything that does not either relate to or express this obsession, and that his most pronounced character flaw is a profound incuriosity about other people's thoughts or feelings.<sup>7</sup> In the narrative, this indifference at once reveals and provides a figure for a larger-scale cultural indifference that, while registered most immediately in the inability of the novel's characters to imagine something untoward in Humbert's relationship to Dolores, extends far beyond this thematic.

As a formal trope, "unconcern" does not, then, suggest that Nabokov was apathetic to social issues, irrespectively of his own remarks on this matter. On the contrary: his disavowal is strategic, and with Humbert as his avatar, he is able to simultaneously assimilate and reject the discourses pervasive presence of racial and ethnic policing that define the socio-historical spaces of postwar American society. It is, indeed, Humbert's aesthetic sensibilities, which links literary posterity with the perpetuation of the aesthetic violence by means of which Humbert transforms the child Dolly into the nymphet Lolita, that allows for the novel's attunement to the naturalization of social hierarchy in certain aesthetic forms or social conventions.

Interwoven with this argument is a series of reflections on the convergence between recent attempts to locate Nabokov's writing more firmly within historical contexts than has hitherto been the case, and Azar Nafisi's attempt to interpret *Lolita*

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<sup>7</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. It is true that Humbert's aesthetic imagination is at the very least an indirect *cause* of suffering, and that it *constitutes* a form of violence. But neither that violence nor the ensuing suffering is its ultimate object in a sadistic sense. Instead, Humbert, who "always preferred the mental hygiene of noninterference" which he only in retrospect is able to identify as his "habit and method," effectively ignores the suffering he causes (287). The harm that Humbert inflicts on Lolita is not calculated, but rather the product of a supreme indifference.

from the perspective of modern Iran in *Reading Lolita in Teheran* (2003). Both, as I demonstrate, are ineluctably drawn towards scaling Humbert's relationship to Lolita to the level of those "general ideas" that Nabokov himself so despised. Such a critical method is familiar to all of us, and surely unavoidable lest we want worship some quasi-mysterious tingle of the spine instead.<sup>8</sup> It remains true, nevertheless, that in locating *Lolita* in history in this way, these critics actually evacuate the novel's primary mechanism for engaging with its then-contemporary setting. And in making the case for its contemporaneity to herself and her students, Nafisi similarly short-circuits the tension between history and aesthetics that animates the novel. The intersection between the two, ironically, is a pervasive ahistoricism that is present both the social world Humbert describes, and in his mode of relating to it.

Namwali Serpell argues that the publication of *Lolita* marks the historical moment when ambiguity became "an unquestioned index of ethical value," and that Nabokov's novel "beautifully illustrates how an intense, structured uncertainty can refract—rather than merely reflect—an ethical disturbance. I am more interested, however, in moments and methods of readings that explicitly resists ethical judgments. By triangulating the novel's relation to the present (conceived both as the social present that embeds the unfolding plot, and the present of reading), to history (conceived on thematic as well as literary-historical grounds), and timelessness (conceived as the rejection of the present and history alike), I argue that the Nabokov offers as an alternative to the permanence of Humbert's imagined "forever" in the cultivation of a form of attention that makes it

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the "telltale tingle between the shoulder blades, see Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* (64). The famous "aesthetic bliss" which Nabokov talks about in the afterword to *Lolita*, and which he seems to share with Humbert, expresses a similar sentiment that has, of course, been discussed at great length in the secondary literature on that novel (314).

possible to discern the contours that both separates and conjoins social and aesthetic form as structures of power.

# 1

Readers and critics of *Lolita* who have taken seriously the novel's sense of place have traditionally ended up emphasizing structural features that lend themselves to allegorical or quasi-allegorical readings. John Haegert's attentive reading of the novel as codifying within it an enduring conflict in American history between the real and the ideal—or between commercialism and transcendentalism—constitutes an exemplary instance. At first, Humbert's relationship to Lolita represents “the cultured European imagination trying to transfigure the as-yet-unfinished, though potentially beautiful American object.”<sup>9</sup> Here, America figures simply as a kind of raw material for European sensibility, even as “Humbert's fervid desire for the eternal nymphet” might also be thought of as taking place in the lineage of “the many quests for some imperishable ideal embodied in Poe and Hawthorne and, indeed, in much subsequent American fiction.”<sup>10</sup> By the end of the novel, however, America—the symbolic transposition from Lolita, who escapes from Humbert's clutches on Independence Day, as “potentially beautiful American object” to America herself is important, and symptomatic—is “no longer seen as a nubile nymphet in need of European refinement, but as an estimable independent spirit requiring (and deserving) a national identity of her own.”<sup>11</sup> Frederic Jameson adds to this that it is, in his opinion, impossible to make sense of the “unrepeatable” *Lolita* without assimilating it to the form of a world-historical allegory, produced in the clash

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<sup>9</sup> Haegert. “Artist in Exile: The Americanization of Humbert Humbert.” 789.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 777.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 779-80.

between “a world-weary and overcultured ... Europe,” personified by Humbert, and a “brash and vulgar United States” personified by Lolita.<sup>12</sup> For Jameson, this distinction is made all the more suggestive given the marginalization of Europe on the world stage following the Second World War, and the cultural ascension of the United States and its mass culture in the postwar period.

More recent criticism seeking to expand our frame of reference for understanding *Lolita* to include socio-historical or political perspectives has, by contrast, done so by attempting to locate historical resonances *within* the novel. In the world of Nabokov studies, this critical turn remains relatively small. In part, this is the case because of how the three major paradigms that have structured most criticism on Nabokov have allowed very little conceptual space for the consideration of historical issues or perspectives. The first of these, inspired by Nabokov’s own remarks, considers his novels as self-contained aesthetic objects. Turning away from the perceived gratuitousness of such an approach, the second asserts instead the primacy of ethics to our understanding of Nabokov’s art. The third and most idiosyncratic, finally, centers on Nabokov’s metaphysics: what Nabokov himself refers to in *Speak, Memory* as “the free world of timelessness,” or what Vladimir Alexandrov calls “Nabokov’s Otherworld.”<sup>13</sup> In calling these approaches critical paradigms, I do not mean to suggest that they do not overlap. My point, rather, is that each names a heuristic priority that determines how Nabokov’s fiction is to be approached. The dearth of historical perspectives on *Lolita* might, additionally, be related

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<sup>12</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 201.

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 20; Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld*. This summary is indebted to Will Norman’s *The Texture of Time*, which argues that is that Nabokov’s fiction and autobiography stage a tension between the desire to achieve the texture of time and the menacing presence of history which frustrates that dream” (1-2).

to the fact that these readings rely on are allotted a relative small amount of narrative space and attention. This does not, however, preclude the notion that the self-referential insularity of most Nabokov criticism re-enacts a problem that the novel itself is posing by consigning this content to the periphery of the narrative.

Let us consider two examples. In her reading of the novel's "Holocaust subtext," Susan Mizruchi suggests that Humbert "recalls aspects of Nazi methodology and doctrine," and that the 1946 to 1949 Nuremberg trials constitute an important parallel to Humbert's complicated sense of his own culpability.<sup>14</sup> While careful to not offer "a direct analogy between Humbert's predation and Nazi War crimes," Mizruchi nevertheless argues that this "historical perspective ... might actually magnify Humbert's offense by highlighting what the crime itself, and his attempt to mediate and obscure its presentation, has in common with these horrific collectivized crimes."<sup>15</sup> Such a reading, she contends, begins to offer a corrective to the novel's own pre-occupation with the "all-time of literary allusion and the no-time of scientific classification."<sup>16</sup> And for Steven Belletto, who reads "Humbert's aesthetic" as explicitly shaped by the legacy of American slavery, "*Lolita* ... has something new to tell us about the ways contemporaneous racial categories were erected, as slyly as Humbert's twisted yet seductive invention of the nymphet."<sup>17</sup> Both constitute "aesthetic categories" that dissemble their own status as a form of power or as a mode of subjugation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mizruchi, "Lolita in History," 638.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 631.

<sup>17</sup> Belletto, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Belletto, 6.



Both Belletto and Mizruchi thus transpose the aesthetic violence that Humbert inflicts on Lolita into a historical register of signification. To the extent that Humbert refuses or is unable to treat Dolores like a real person, one might indeed say that his relationship to Lolita instantiates a miniature version of the dehumanizing ideologies that made slavery and the Holocaust possible. The analogy falters, however, in that racism and anti-Semitism are comprehensible as such only at the level of the social. There are, of course, specific acts, individuals, or institutions that *are* racist or anti-Semitic—there are plenty on display in *Lolita*. But the force of this classification, insofar as it refers to socially constructed stereotypes and biases that perform unthought, ideological work, ultimately derives from the fact that they form but a small part of a larger structure of oppression. Persons are conflated with the categories through which they are perceived, and are treated not as individuals, but simply as specimens.

There is, to put matters differently, something *ordinary* about racism and anti-Semitism as structures of social organization that the comparison to Humbert partially belies. In his lectures on *Ulysses*, Nabokov stresses how “vicious or conventional prejudice animates most of the people whom Bloom meets in the course of his dangerous day.”<sup>19</sup> This “prejudice,” which is “vicious” *because* it is “conventional,” is monolithic in the sense that the people Bloom encounters are not figured as agents in respect to the beliefs they hold; they are, instead, “animated” by them and so reduced, from this perspective, to a cipher for structures that exist far in excess of individual psychology.

What would happen, though, if we considered the details that appear to lend themselves to political readings in such a way as to retain their marginalized status in the

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<sup>19</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 316.

narrative? In his afterword to the American edition of the novel, Nabokov refers to those moments in the narrative that will be skimmed or otherwise not be noticed by the reader who is too predisposed to read the novel merely a scandalous expose of illicit desire as the “nerves of the novel,” or “the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted” (316). The most famous example in this respect is surely the scene with the Kasbeam barber, which by Nabokov’s own admission cost him “a month of work” (316). What is important about this passage, and others like it, is how it demonstrates a universe of life and death that exists beyond the perimeter of Humbert’s consciousness. The fact that the barber has never ceased mourning his dead son does not mean anything to Humbert, and is registered in the narrative only as a belated realization, accompanied by no empathy or any kind of other reaction. In terms of Humbert’s narrative logic, this sequence serves a dramatic function only insofar as it provides Lolita with the opportunity to conspire with Quilty. In terms of Nabokov’s emplotment of the book as an artifact that is not determined solely its writer-protagonist, it does more than that. In fact, moments like this one become “nerves” precisely because of their structurally subordinated position in the unfolding narrative.

It is in light of this narrative dynamic that Nabokov’s engagement with race and anti-Semitism—each of which constitute blockages in social life that the text touches upon only in passing—must ultimately be understood. The seemingly irrepressible emergence of such discrimination in the margin of the narrative speaks to its centrality in the social fabric of postwar America. The casual enforcement of social boundaries imagined around social or ethnic lines are visible everywhere, but never brought forward as an object of narrative attention. In this way, Nabokov transfers to the reader the

responsibility of cultivating an attentiveness that does not so much read the text against the grain of Humbert's intention as it encourages lateral engagement with narrative detail. From this perspective, *Lolita* helps us see how Humbert's aesthetic constitutes not only a form of power, exerted on the raw material of the girl-child Dolores, but also a generative form of narrative excess.

It is true, of course, that we cannot clearly demarcate Humbert's desire for Lolita from the social and historical circumstances in which it has materialized and which gives it its specific shape. His view of America and its mass culture is irrevocably tied to his figuration of Lolita, who prefers "the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge" to the "wonderland" that he offers, as an "ideal consumer" (148, 166). The social and cultural spaces through which Humbert moves appear sinister in the novel purely on account of the fact that they constitute the backdrop for a story about pedophilia and rape. Every social interaction that the novel chronicles is for this reason imbued either with an instrumental purpose in respect to Humbert's ambition to possess Lolita, or else with the paranoia that the true nature of their relationship might be discovered.

One might focus here on how deftly Humbert manages the social scripts and expectations that determine most social encounters in the novel. Take, for instance, the way in which John Farlow's questions about the fate of Dolores following the untimely death of Charlotte are immediately deflected by his wife Jean, since it seems to her quite obvious that Humbert is the real father—a "fact" insinuated by Humbert in the announcement placed in the local paper following his marriage, and then propagated by small-town gossip. In the paragraph that follows, Humbert describes himself as a "distraught father," as if the narration occupies here, if only for a brief moment, the third-

person perspective of an impartial observer. “So artistically did I impersonate the calm of ultimate despair, the hush before some crazy outburst,” Humbert reflects (referring both to his performance at the moment, and to the impersonality of the language that describes it), “that the perfect Farlows removed me to their house” (101). Humbert knows full well that the suggestion of a secret filial bond (which stands in contrast to his unwillingness to ever “find out quite exactly what the legal situation was” and thus codify his relationship to Lolita in the eyes of the law) will foreclose questions and scrutiny because it places him within the conventions of a scandalous-yet-romantic narrative—indeed, a cultural fantasy, of sorts—that he may have encouraged, but that is not of his own making (149).

I want to begin, however, by considering the larger cultural logic that emerges in Humbert’s depictions of the social and cultural spaces through which he travels. It is often noted that Humbert’s exilic imagination provides him with an outsider perspective on American society. Some of the novel’s most celebrated descriptions of the sprawling reality of roadside America begins with Humbert’s reflections on how his perception of “the average lowland North-American countryside” was at first mediated (as he realizes with a “with a shock of amused recognition”) by “those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries, and which fascinated a drowsy child at bed time with the rustic green views they depicted—opaque curly trees, a barn, cattle, a brook, the dull white of vague orchards in bloom, and perhaps a stone fence or hills of greenish gouache” (152). The vision presented by these “oilcloths,” this “paradox of pictorial thought,” is idyllic, and seemingly timeless in its troping of pastoral convention. But once Humbert comes to know America first-hand, these “elementary rusticities become stranger and stranger,”

yielding instead to “a slow suffusion of inutile loveliness, a low sun in a platinum haze with a warm, peeled-peach tinge pervading the upper edge of a two-dimensional, dove-gray cloud fusing with the distant amorous mist” (152).

The reference to the “two-dimensional” plane of pictorial representation suggests that we have not exactly exited the realm of the aesthetic, even if Humbert is no longer a passive recipient of ready-made images. In the sentences that follow, Humbert invokes Claude Lorraine and El Greco, both renowned for their highly distinctive approach landscape painting. Humbert draws on the resources of art history here to demonstrate his own erudition, and to elevate the landscapes he is describing by suggesting that they instantiate some aesthetic ideal or other. And indeed, this chapter as a whole strikes an impressionistic tone that is contrasted specifically with what Humbert takes as Lolita’s deficient vision in respect to the “inutile loveliness” that, in his estimation, surrounds them: Lolita, Humbert writes, “had no eye for scenery,” and “she furiously resented my calling her attention to this or that enchanting detail of landscape; which I myself learned to discern only after being exposed for quite a time to the delicate beauty ever present in the margin of our undeserving journey” (152). There is, in this moment, little sense or acknowledgement that the source of Lolita’s resentment derives from the power dynamic of their relationship rather than some inability to appreciate “beauty.”

The symptomatology of distraction that follows is explicitly contrasted to the slowness of Humbert’s enchantment with the American landscape, and stands in stark contrast to these excursions into high-brow lyricism. Humbert begins this part of the novel by reminding his reader that “the general circuit” he has already outlined was “far from being an indolent *partie de plaisir*,” but rather “a hard, twisted, teleological growth,

whose sole *raison d'être* (these French clichés are symptomatic) was to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss" (154). From here, Humbert proceeds to catalog the various "sunny nothings" that constituted points of interest during his and Lolita's improvised itinerary—"itemize[d]" by Humbert "mainly to prove to my judges that I did everything in my power to give my Lolita a really good time," and introduced by positivistic phrases like "We inspected," "We inspected further," and "Moreover, we inspected" (155, 156, 163). It is telling, too, that in this part of the text, Lolita herself is rotated into the narrative's margin, emerging primarily in exuberant comments about her age in relationship to the admission policy at the various places Humbert enumerates.

The amount of references in this part of the novel is particularly overwhelming, and no reading could ever account for it all. Even Alfred Appel, the otherwise so diligent annotator of *Lolita*, notes that he will not gloss "H.H.'s observations of 'local color' (Nabokov's phrase)" in this part of the novel "unless they are particularly colorful or obscure" (390-91). The annotations that follow frequently include words to the effect of "not invented" (referring to the "ghost town" of Shakespeare, New Mexico), or "it exists" (referring to a wine barrel-shaped church at a winery in California) (390). It is as if we have to be assured of the referential reality of an America that in Humbert's seemingly indiscriminate listing of sights and sundries is unveiled as a campy spectacle, at once entrancing and repellent. Above all, there is an exhilarating embrace of artificiality, as in the Indiana zoo "where a large troop of monkeys lived on a concrete replica of Christopher Columbus' flagship" ("the zoo exists," writes Appel, and the monkeys on the ship are still its "most popular attraction"), in an Arkansas "natural cave ... converted

into a café,” in a Louisiana “replica of the Grotto of Lourdes,” or even in a “present log cabin boldly simulating the past log cabin where Lincoln was born” (151, 155, 192).

Taken together, we are in these pages presented with a seemingly endless expanse of American kitsch that encodes within it a sprawling present with little sense of historical density. The flattening of distinctions enacts what we might now think of as an incipient postmodern sensibility, located both in the culture of distraction that Humbert describes, as well as in the frantic style in which he renders it. History has become a simulacrum (a favorite word of Humbert’s) that no longer extends into the past in any substantive manner, but that is now wholly subtended across an infinite present.

It is not surprising that it all turns into a vision of homogeneity, effacing a particularity that while it makes the description what it is, in the end does not much matter. Nor should it come as a surprise that the journey ultimately amounts to very little, with Humbert catching himself thinking, “today,” at the time of writing, that “our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old ties, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep” (175-176). What endures is the very thing that Humbert sought to suppress, or the reality from which he tries to distract both himself and Lolita. But it is also a synthetic judgment that retrospectively—and from a perspective of feigned moral insight, as Humbert always knew what he is only now giving expression—collapses, reduces, and firmly subordinates the sprawl of the chronicled impressions to the drama of the Humbert-Lolita plot, thus establishing again the narrative’s center of gravity.

## 2

This is not to say that history is not present at all in these pages, or elsewhere in *Lolita*. But when it is invoked, it often appears as yet another instance of the Americana that Lolita ostensibly adores, and that Humbert claims to shun. To start, we might identify a series of references to the institution of slavery and its legacy throughout this very part of the novel. Humbert's parenthetical reactions to a guidebook entry on tap-dancing "pickanninies" on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, for instance, seems to demonstrate an ironic distance to the idle amusement of institutionalized racism and its representative aesthetic and transactional forms (156).<sup>20</sup> Yet it is also important to keep in mind that they appear in the novel merely as another element in Humbert's parataxis of distraction. On a stylistic level, there is nothing to differentiate between, say, "Relics of the cotton era" or "Ante-bellum homes with iron-trellis balconies and hand-worked stairs, the kind down which movie ladies with sun-kissed shoulders run in rich Technicolor, holding up the fronts of their flounced skirts with both little hands in that special way, and the devoted Negress shaking her head on the upper landing," on the one hand, and "A collection of a local lady's homemade sculptures, closed on a miserable Monday morning," on the other (156, 157). In terms of the rollicking logic of this part of the novel, each loses the power to sustain itself as an object of interest at the very instant that it has been invoked.

The same does not hold true for readers who are more attuned to the obscured histories of oppression present in such artifacts. Nor do I mean to suggest that these

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<sup>20</sup> For Belletto, this moment represents Humbert's ambivalent relationship to the institutionalized racism "betokened by those pickaninnies forever tap-dancing in a semi-authoritative representation of New Orleans" (1).



references are not significant: Nabokov himself encourages and indeed demands consummate attention to detail. My point, rather, is that from within the logic of the text, they do not signify beyond the sentences in which they appear. They do not connect in any substantive manner to some larger structure of meaning. In part, one might ascribe this lack of historical consciousness to Humbert himself. And at this point in the narrative, he does inhabit an uncritical temporality of endless consumption that leaves no space for thought or reflection. “Voraciously we consumed those highways,” Humbert writes early in his description of their travels, recalling his equally voracious consumption of Lolita’s body (152). As a cultural touchstone, the stereotype of the “devoted Negress” invokes the legacy of slavery in the present by implicitly working to maintain the symbolic connection between the black body and servility. Humbert has not been in the United States for that long, yet he intuitively reaches for this stock image, mediated by “Technicolor” films, when faced with what he recognizes as the quintessential antebellum home. It is precisely—and paradoxically—by evacuating a long and ongoing history of suffering, that is, that these aesthetic formations and categories may form part of the novel’s sense of the American present. Because he is supremely uninterested in the spectacle of American roadside tourism except as a way of managing Lolita’s mood, Humbert describes them without passing judgment, but also without seeking to uncover their larger social and cultural significance. What remains, then, is a sense of oppressive pervasiveness.

Humbert’s attitudes towards race are, however, more complex than one might initially suppose. Among the novel’s small cast of black characters, we find Louise, Charlotte’s “Negro maid,” and Leslie Thomson, “old Miss Opposite’s gardener and

chauffeur, a very amiable and athletic Negro” (38, 73). Each is identified, first and foremost, with their position as servants and as exotic “others.” When John Farlow remarks that he once saw Leslie “taking a dip ‘in the ebony’” at Hourglass Lake, his quip demonstrates a culturally pervasive fascination with black bodies (82). Humbert’s surprisingly sensitive and humanizing response is to comment on the coldness of the water, which presumably would be the same for anyone. This remark is in turn followed by “logical doomed dear” Charlotte explaining to Humbert that he is missing “the point”: “He is subnormal, you see” (75-76, 82). The connection between the aestheticized image of the “ebony” body and the status of being “subnormal” is plainly visible, and it suffuses the suburban community of Ramsdale to its very core. But it is given expression in these terms precisely because Humbert actively refuses to understand the racializing implications of John’s initial remark, and because of his silent rejection of Charlotte’s “logic.”<sup>21</sup>

The idea that Humbert might be something of a humanist obviously sits unwell with his treatment of Lolita. But this exchange is ultimately not about values. Instead, it pivots on Humbert’s sense of his own distinction, which is produced precisely by rhetoric designed to separate him from the American characters with whom he interacts. Charlotte, who “with her blind faith in the wisdom of her church and book club” is throughout the novel relentlessly parodied as emblematic of a feminized and repressed American middle class existence, constitutes an excellent example (75). At one point, Humbert relates how Charlotte desired that he “resuscitate all my loves so that she might

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<sup>21</sup> The passage concludes with Charlotte expressing “a very definite feeling that our Louise is in love with that moron,” and pronouncing, soon thereafter, her “ambitious dream” to “get hold of a real trained servant maid like that German girl that the Talbots spoke of; and have her live in the house” (82).

make me insult them, and trample upon them, and revoke them apostately and totally, thus destroying my past” (79). In response, he tells her about Valeria (“who was of course a scream”), and he invents or embellishes other affairs or mistresses—all for “Charlotte’s morbid delectation” (79). “Never in my life,” Humbert continues,

had I confessed so much or received so many confessions. The sincerity and artlessness with which she discussed what she called her “love-life,” from first necking to connubial catch-as-catch-can, were, ethically, in striking contrast with my glib compositions, but technically the two sets were congeneric since both were affected by the same stuff (soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes) upon which I drew for my characters and she for her mode of expression. (80)

That Charlotte’s “sincerity and artlessness” should be contrasted with Humbert’s “glib compositions” as “technically ... congeneric” demonstrates the falsity of Humbert’s position, and the insincerity of his art. Both “sets” are “affected by the same stuff,” but whereas Charlotte is helplessly immersed in the discourses of “soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes” that constitute “her mode of expression,” Humbert merely draws on them for his “characters.”

This sequence thus constitutes yet another example of how Humbert instrumentalizes social interaction, and it demonstrates how “Humbert” is just as much a fantasy to Charlotte as Lolita is to Humbert. The description of Charlotte is ungenerous, cutting—but it is also funny. To laugh with Humbert, however, would mean to be complicit in his artfully constructed superiority over Charlotte, his sense that it is only by belittling her that he can elevate himself. It also follows, however, that Charlotte is a “logical doomed dear” precisely because she cannot assert any kind of meaningful distance from these cultural materials, which though they may appear trivial, are thoroughly intertwined with her views on race.

Yet Humbert too is immersed in the same American culture for which he so frequently expresses disdain. Critics have usually considered this theme in terms of the tension that the novel stages between Humbert's rarified aestheticism and the rampant consumerism that is everywhere in evidence in the social and cultural environments that it describes, and associated most closely with *Lolita*.<sup>22</sup> A similar dynamic plays out in respect to the novel's engagement with race. Humbert may affirm Leslie's humanity against the ingrained prejudices of the Ramsdale community. At other points in the narrative, however, he appears rather to affirm the symbolic order and the reductive categorizations on which everyday racism rests.

Take the "hunchbacked and hoary Negro in a uniform of sorts" who receives Humbert and Lolita when they arrive at the Enchanted Hunters, and later carries their bags to their room (117). At one point, Humbert mentally refers to this member of the hotel staff as "Uncle Tom" (118). This is, of course, another stereotype of subservient meekness that seems to further emphasize the ways in which Humbert have internalized the American racism. It is tricky, though, throughout this passage, to ascertain whether Humbert is satirizing American racial hierarchy and its reliance on stock characters, or if he himself subscribes to the white supremacist ideology that undergirds it. When they arrive at the room, Humbert is eager to get rid of "cray fish Tom with the bags—a *non sequitur* that seems more parodic than sincere (119). "I was tempted to place a five-dollar

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<sup>22</sup> While Humbert seeks to stand apart from the "images of normalcy provided by advertising, mass culture, and applied social science" that shape the identity of the novel's American characters, Dana Brand argues, his aestheticism ultimately comes to "degenerate into a version of the consumerism against which it served as a shield" (14-15). The pivot in this transformation is the fact that Lolita too becomes an object of consumption that does not and cannot leave Humbert's desire sated. "Over and over again," writes Rachel Bowlby, "the language of consumption, which on the surface is spurned as obviously inferior to the traditions of great literature, seems to take over the poetic force of the novel as though against the grain of the narrator's own intentions" (172).

bill in that sepia palm,” he writes, “but thought the largesse might be misconstrued, so I placed a quarter” (119).

It is true that the synecdochic image of the wanting “sepia palm” ultimately confirms that Humbert’s relationship with “Tom” cannot exceed the limits of the conventions of their respective social positions, and the aesthetic forms that symbolically maintains them. Yet matters are complicated by how, exactly, Humbert’s imagined “largesse” is to be “misconstrued,” and where this temptation for undue generosity comes from in the first place. We know that he does not want to draw attention to himself, which explains why he ends up tipping a quarter (and then another one, before “Tom” withdraws) rather than a five. Had he given five dollars, the amount might have suggested that he was soliciting sexual favors, or, though this is perhaps less likely, as offering a judgment on deeply ingrained economic injustices. To me, it seems as if Humbert’s excitement for the night that is now so imminent spills over into the thought of the munificent tip. But this is only speculation: the passage as a whole provides us with no answers, and so functions in the text as a moment of narrative irresolution.

Across these various invocations of race and racism, the reader is thus not sure where to place him or herself. On the one hand, we occupy the usual position of looking *at* Humbert from the outside—the position, that is, that readers are compelled work so strenuously to maintain vis-à-vis the novel’s engagement with the theme of pedophilia. On the other, we are also on the inside, looking *with* Humbert at the discourses and aesthetic forms that make up or represents dominant culture’s relationship to the legacy of the slave past. And taken together, they are irreconcilable too if our goal is to ascribe a coherent system of values to Humbert. Instead, they align with Humbert’s insistence on

distance as a condition for his own sense of aesthetic distinction. While this aspect of the narrative is usually tied to his sense of himself as “an artist and a madman” particularly attuned to the existence of nymphets, it also operates in relationship to a theme like race (17). At various points, this distinction requires both the assimilation and the rejection of racist discourse. Humbert’s views on these matters, if he even has them, are ultimately of little importance. What matters is how he becomes a vehicle for a specific kind of attention which, because its ultimate object is always elsewhere, is able to roam uninterestedly and irresolutely across the fabric of social organization.

### 3

Though Nabokov did proclaim himself to be “strongly antisegregationist” in American politics, his investment in anti-Semitism was ultimately the more long-standing and more foundational one.<sup>23</sup> Nabokov’s commitment to tolerance more generally might, in this respect, be considered a heritage from his liberal father, who was an outspoken critic of anti-Semitism in pre-revolutionary Russia.<sup>24</sup> Both in Russia and in exile, Nabokov met and befriended many Jews—a great deal of whom were instrumental not only to his career, but also to his very survival.<sup>25</sup> Most important, however, was his marriage in 1925 to Véra Slonim, with whom he escaped Germany in 1937, and then

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*. 98.

<sup>24</sup> Dana Dragunoiu has demonstrated Nabokov’s silent debt to the pre-revolutionary Russian liberalism. After the February Revolution that deposed Tsar Nicholas II, Nabokov’s father, Vladimir Dmitrievich, was made secretary of the Provisional Government, which consisted of a coalition of liberals and socialists working for political reform. After the Bolshevik Revolution in October that same year, V. N. had to flee the country with his family. Dragunoiu notes that Nabokov’s self-declared indifference to social and political matters may seem weird given the historical pedigree of his family name. But is it not an “insoluble paradox” (12). Indeed, Nabokov’s disavowal of sociopolitical content need to be understood, she suggests, as a direct consequence of his profound commitment “to the liberal principles that he inherited from his father” (12).

<sup>25</sup>For more on this topic, see Brian Boyd’s *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* and Maxim Shrayer’s “Jewish Questions in Nabokov’s Art and Life.”

again France in 1940, just prior to the Nazi invasion. Taken together, these personal and historical convergences resulted in a deep sensitivity to anti-Semitic remarks and behavior, on ample display in the small-town America of the 1940s and 1950s that Nabokov came to know so well through his travels, and present too, to his great consternation, in casual remarks made by some of his peers and colleagues at Cornell.<sup>26</sup>

To the extent that it describes both a literal and symbolic encounter with American society and social conventions, it should therefore come as no surprise that *Lolita* is particularly attuned to the presence of anti-Semitism. Yet it is also true, as Andrea Pfizer observes, that neither the word “Jew” nor the word “Jewish” appear at any point of Humbert’s narrative—a fact that distinguishes it from the majority of Nabokov’s other novels. “This would not be particularly remarkable,” Pfizer continues, except for the fact that “Humbert and other characters manage to find a spectacular number of ways *not* to use these terms.”<sup>27</sup> What Appel refers to as the novel’s “anti-Semitism theme” is thus also submerged in seemingly minor and inconsequential details. But if anything, this becomes a metaphor of how these structures of social organization work in concert with a politics of respectability that seeks to obscure the prejudices it encodes.

The major point of distinction in Nabokov’s treatment of anti-Semitism vis-à-vis his treatment of racism is the fact that Humbert, a “salad of racial genes,” is throughout the narrative frequently perceived to be potentially Jewish (9). There is Quilty thinking that Humbert might be a “German refugee” when he arrives at Pavor Manor, taking care to remind him that this “is a Gentile’s house, you know” (297). The implication is, of course, that Humbert is not welcome. There is sensitive Jean Farlow interrupting her

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<sup>26</sup> For an in-depth account, see Brian Boyd’s *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*.

<sup>27</sup> Pfizer. *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov*.

husband on the cusp on an anti-Semitic remark in Humbert's presence (79). And then there is Charlotte, who suspects that Humbert has in his family "a certain strange strain," and announces to him prior to their marriage that she would commit suicide "if she ever found out that I did not believe in Our Christian God" (74-75).

The novel's most concrete engagement with anti-Semitism takes place follows this pattern, though in the form of the discriminatory practices that Humbert encounters on the road. There is, for instance, the "*soi-distant* 'high-class' resort in a Midwestern state" that becomes suspicious of Humbert's accent and asks about his background (147). Here, Humbert's scare quotes clearly communicate that such behavior is not particularly "high-class" at all. The most well-known example occurs, however, when Humbert approaches the check-in counter at The Enchanted Hunters. "There a bald porcine old man," Humbert writes,

examined my features with a polite smile, then leisurely produced my (garbled) telegram, wrestled with some dark doubts, turned his head to look at the clock, and finally said he was very sorry, he had held the room with the twin beds till half past six, and now it was gone. A religious convention, he said, had clashed with a flower show in Briceland, and—"The name," I said coldly, "is not Humberg and not Humbug, but Herbert, I mean Humbert, and any room will do, just put in a cot for my little daughter. She is ten and very tired." (117-118)

These "dark doubts" refer to whether or not Humbert is, in fact, Jewish, as the garbled name on the telegram might suggest—although it should be noted that many surnames that sound Jewish to Americans are simply German names, and that the fact that these surnames are common among American Jews does not mean that the surname



itself indicates Jewish heritage.<sup>28</sup> As for his telegraphic communiqué, Humbert considers his “droll mistake” a “telepathic echo” of his “hesitations” as to how he should present himself and Lolita (109). The passage, at any rate, proceeds to track a cognitive process that culminates in the decision that a room is not to be offered. Humbert acts quickly—and “coldly”—in attempting to correct this impression, the man’s doubts are ultimately dispelled not by his insistence that he is neither a “Humberg” or a “Humbug,” but by the “blossom-like vision” of Lolita squatting to play with a dog belonging to “an ancient lady swathed in violet veils” (118). Arrangements are made for a room, with neither Humbert nor Nabokov reflecting further on the exchange. There are more pressing matters to attend to, with Humbert’s attention firmly set on the opportunities he imagines the night will afford him.

Later in the narrative, Humbert reflects on The Enchanted Hunter’s note paper, which declares it to be located “NEAR CHURCHES,” and that it allows “NO DOGS” (261). Critics have long noted that the first of these two phrases functioned at the time as a coded signal that Jews were not welcome, following the banning of more directly discriminatory language.<sup>29</sup> The second phrase might similarly be taken as shorthand for segregationist sentiments, as it had traditionally appeared in combination with phrases such as “No Coloreds” or “No Jews.” Humbert, on his part, chooses to make light of it all, wondering if “a hunter, whether enchanted or otherwise, would not need a pointer more than a pew,” and joking that perhaps that dog that Lolita played with years ago (it is with a “spasm of pain” that Humbert recalls this “scene,” which he describes as “worthy

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<sup>28</sup> A similar point might be made about the surname “Flashman,” which appears to derive from the Jewish Fleischman—though there is no sense in the text if the name has been Americanized, if Humbert’s transcription is wrong, or if there is simply no connection at all.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Pfizer or Boyd.

of a great artist”) had been baptized (261). Behind this facetiousness, there remains a sense of gravity. Indeed, Humbert’s literal interpretation the phrase is explicitly opposed to its conventional or implicit social meaning, which becomes, as it were, the butt of his joke.

Even when Humbert is directly involved in anti-Semitic behavior, he thus labors to stay aloof. The possibility that he might be a Jew—so titillating to Pfizer, in particular, whose reading spawned numerous secondary articles in popular magazines—remains simply that. But this is surely no mistake. Humbert neither rejects nor affirms the label. The narrative irresolution that surrounds this question is not one of ethical uncertainty, however, as it is not possible to ascribe any ethical significance to the answer. One can look at this from two perspectives. Whether not Humbert is a Jew makes, on the one hand, very little difference in respect to his actions and observations. He is flustered at *The Enchanted Hunters* because not because he feels personally insulted, but because he wants to get on with it. On the other, it also seems clear that he believes that it *should* make no difference, that there is something farcical about it all. This belief, which we might, once again, describe as a broadly humanist position, can never quite come into focus. But even as it clashes with Humbert’s indifference, it is also shaped by it.

There are points, though, where Humbert appears more directly attuned to the plight of individual Jews—unusual, certainly, given his otherwise so limited capacity for any kind of empathy. He feels sorry for Lolita’s classmate Irving Flashman. This surname appears to derive from the Jewish Fleischman, but there is, once again, no sense in the text if the name has been Americanized, if Humbert’s transcription is wrong (though this seems unlikely, given the punctilious nature of the list he is reconstructing),

or if there is simply no connection at all. Outside the text, Nabokov does confirm that Irving is a Jew. “Poor Irving, he is the only Jew among all those Gentiles,” Nabokov tells his annotator, before proclaiming that “Humbert identifies with the persecuted” (363). The other classmates Humbert singles out are all ascribed some quality or other. These are, more often than not, rather unflattering, or at least condescending: Duncan, for instance, is a “foul-smelling clown,” Viola has “blackheads” and “a bouncing bust,” Ralph “bullies and steals,” and so on (57). Irving, the last in this enumeration, exists solely in terms of the pity Humbert expresses for him. He is, in this way, reduced to his ethnic identity, which is also made equivalent to something like Ginny’s “lagging leg” (57).

A similar sentiment appears to underwrite his description of Eva Rosen as a “displaced little person from France”—a remark that, in the historical context of the novel, suggests that she has escaped Nazi persecution (190). The act of taking notice of this fate does not, perhaps, signify concern as such. But it does indicate at least a general awareness of the Holocaust, which appears in the novel most conspicuously in the shocking and seemingly out-of-place dream-image of “the brown wigs of tragic old women who had just been gassed” (254). It soon becomes clear, however, that Humbert’s primary interest in Eva derives from the fact that she too exhibits “some of the basic elements of nymphet charm, such as a perfect pubescent figure and lingering eyes and high cheekbones” (165). When Lolita drops Eva as a friend for unspecified reasons, Humbert thus laments that he did not have sufficient time “to enjoy in my modest way her fragrant presence in the Humbert household” (190).

Mizruchi suggests that Lolita stops seeing Eva because their respective situations are “too close for comfort.”<sup>30</sup> At first, this reading would appear to suggest that Lolita has become aware that Eva too has become the object of Humbert’s predatory gaze, and that she ceases to bring her to the house not only because it reminds her of her own plight, but to protect Eva from Humbert. The claim is, however, much larger than this, and proceeds from a critical methodology that again focuses on structural analogy: when Humbert declares, a little bit later, that he has initiated or exposed Lolita to “a world of total evil,” Mizruchi takes this to mean that that he has thus forced her, “in a manner similar to Eva’s implied experience, to ‘know’ things that children, morally speaking, should never be forced to know.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, Mizruchi it abstracts to the level of generic “evil” what in actual fact are two very different sets of experiences, neither of which we actually know that much about, in order to further propagate the flawed comparison between Humbert’s aestheticism and Nazi ideology.

We are thus brought back to the question of reading, and to the implicit positioning of the critic as the ultimate arbiter of meaning. Nabokov, as I have mentioned, frequently professed his preference for the appreciation of narrative texture as an end-in-itself (as “aesthetic bliss,” to cite the afterword to *Lolita*) over critical judgments that produce second-order claims about the social or historical “meaning” of a text. Because of this, he has been labelled as being “against interpretation,” if this term is understood in terms of the heuristic work of synthesizing information, establishing connections, and discerning structures—in short, the kind of stuff normally associated

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<sup>30</sup> Mizruchi, “Lolita in History,” 636.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 637.

with literary criticism writ large.<sup>32</sup> The frequency with which critics tend to allegorize if not the novel as a whole, then at least Humbert's relationship to Lolita, is nevertheless striking. Haegert and Jameson, for instance, work hard in isolating the features of the text that lend themselves to the allegorical schemas they impose on it. And as much as Belletto and Mizruchi seek to develop new ways of understanding the novel by attending to often-overlooked narrative details, their treatment of Humbert's aesthetic violence also ends up essentially re-centering the novel on their respective topics. Because of the centrality of Humbert's aesthetic construction of "another, fanciful Lolita," the comparison—however imperfect—to these other forms of marginalization seems inevitable, as any reading that does not account for it in some way comes to be seen as inadequate (62).

There is, however, a symbolic linkage between the ahistorical quality of the American culture Humbert describes and cannot but at least partially inhabit, and the aesthetic violence by means of which he seeks to negate Lolita's temporal existence. But the connection is not one of straightforward analogy. Humbert's aspirations for literary immortality, rather, assures that these encounters with the social forms and conventions that cement American social hierarchies remain clearly in the margin of the narrative as objects of passing rather than enduring attention. We need to recognize, in other words, that Humbert serves a more complex narrative function than is commonly supposed, and that he is a more complex character than we are normally ready to acknowledge. This complexity should not be understood in psychological terms, but rather as emerging in those moments of narrative irresolution that I have discussed.

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<sup>32</sup> For a brief history of this idea as it applies to Nabokov's own views, as well as to those of his critics, see Leland de la Durantaye's *Style is Matter* (116-117).

## 4

Another way of approaching Humbert's wished-for immortality is to consider the fate of *Lolita* in the sixty or so years since its publication. Few other characters from American literature have achieved the kind of cultural iconicity that *Lolita* has. Yet the *Lolita* of contemporary mass culture is, as many observers have noted, a far cry from the *Lolita* that Nabokov wrote about—a fact evidenced perhaps most strongly by *Merriam-Webster's* definition of her name, now turned into a common noun, as “a precociously seductive girl.”<sup>33</sup> In the public imaginary, *Lolita* exists as she appears on the poster to Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film adaptation, in which Sue Lyons peers at the viewer over the top of her heart-shaped sunglasses while her painted lips suggestively close around a red lollipop. The result is an archetype of youthful desirability that has increasingly come to define certain echelons of contemporary culture. Artists like Britney Spears, Katy Perry, and Miley Cyrus tap into what Ira Wells calls the “*Lolita* myth” through the performance of a precocity that was never native to Nabokov's little girl, but rather projected onto her by her rapist. “The American public imagination,” Wells argues, “has accepted Humbert's definition of the nymphet while strenuously muffling the pedophilic exertions involved in the creation of the myth.”<sup>34</sup> Ironically, in order for *Lolita* to exist as Humbert imagines her, he must himself be written out of the historical record of how she came to be.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Not every dictionary is so blasé about this definition. *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, frames its definition explicitly in reference to Nabokov's novel. The *Merriam-Webster* definition remains, however, symptomatic of how the word operates more broadly. “In sad testimony to the power of Humbert's rhetoric, however—or to the moral lethargy of Nabokov's readers—our cultural formulations about the nymphet often leave out what the novel poignantly evokes: the plight of the victimized child,” writes Ellen Pifer (14).

<sup>34</sup> Wells. “Forgetting *Lolita*: How Nabokov's Victim Became an American Fantasy.” n.p.

<sup>35</sup> If anything, the novel “disturbs us more than ever” today, as Charles McGrath observes in an article commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of *Lolita's* initial publication in France, “because pedophilia has

There is something very powerful about the suggestion that *Lolita* today functions as a counter-text to its own cultural afterlife.<sup>36</sup> Nabokov, after all, is committed to punctuating rather than perpetuating collective fantasies, to the “the sway accorded to a seemingly incongruous detail over a seemingly dominant generalization.”<sup>37</sup> Yet it also suggests that Nabokov’s novel might be said to straddle past and present, determined both by the cultural logic from whence it emerged, *and* the cultural logic from whence we read, now. In the former case, it is possible to discern in criticism on the novel a subtle but unmistakably defensive posture, responding ultimately to “Hurricane Lolita” and the charges of obscenity that surrounded the novel’s initial publication. It is in part because of this controversy that Nabokov’s aesthetics has come to be viewed as inextricable from the ethical imperative to attend seriously to the suffering that Humbert so callously ignores.<sup>38</sup> In the latter, the novel becomes a wedge that allows for critical commentary on contemporary hyper-sexualization of the adolescent body, referred to by one commentator as “The Lolita Effect.”<sup>39</sup> In both, Nabokov’s novel is explicitly related to

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moved from the murky, seldom-visited basement of our collective consciousness to the forefront of our moral awareness” (n.p.). Yet we are also committed to the idea that Humbert is not simply a pedophile who also happens to be an artist; he is a pedophile in large part *because* he sees in some young girls an ideal of beauty that he then comes to desire. To the extent that this ideal is derived from the literary trope of the idealized woman, it becomes impossible to entirely separate literary history and the history of the aesthetic from the sexual violence that Humbert inflicts on Lolita.

<sup>36</sup> This is perhaps most immediately obvious in Graham Vickers’ *Chasing Lolita*, which bears the telling subtitle “How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov’s Little Girl All Over Again.” It is telling too, that Vickers account, which traces the cultural refashioning of Lolita across film, theatre, tabloid news stories, and more, begins with a chapter titled “The Real Life of Dolores Haze: Just the Facts.” Lolita has been “corrupted,” and the historical record must be righted, the indignant Vickers suggests.

<sup>37</sup> Nabokov. *Lectures on Literature*. 374.

<sup>38</sup> Early readers and critics of *Lolita* frequently admitted to being convinced that Humbert did indeed experience a “moral apotheosis,” to use the term planted in the novel’s fictional foreword (5). More recent critics have, in contrast, been largely determined to not be so “seduced” by Humbert’s artful rhetoric.

<sup>39</sup> Durham. *The Lolita Effect*. The tension between hyper-sexualization of young girls and increased awareness of pedophilia recently came to its head with the release of the music video to the notoriously fame-averse recording artist Sia’s song “Elastic Heart.” The video features 12-year-old dance prodigy Maddie Zeigler performing an interpretative dance with the famously eccentric Hollywood actor Shia LaBeouf inside a circular cage, each covered in dirt and wearing only skin-colored underwear. Throughout the song, the two performers alternate between violent aggression and tender affection, expressed both by

social factors that are external to it, but which nevertheless and unavoidably shapes its cultural significance.

In a striking convergence, these contexts impel readings that pit Humbert's aesthetic construction of "Lolita" against what is imagined as the independent existence of the girl-child Dolores. These recuperative readings, as Eric Naiman argues, "have to construct the character themselves or attack the constructions of others" in such a way that they cannot help but "emulate Humbert, creating Lolita in a way that inevitably makes her reflect their own anxieties and desires."<sup>40</sup> And these "anxieties and desires" cannot but derive, at least in part, from or in relation to the reigning social and cultural zeitgeist.

I want to conclude by turning to Azar Nafisi's best-selling "memoir in books" *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, which though it professes to defend the autonomy of literature also strongly implicates the reading of literature with reflections on the contemporary moment. The central conceit of this book is to combine readings of Western classics, anchored in a surreptitious reading group Nafisi ran in the 90s, with descriptions of her

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their bodies in motion and by exaggerated facial expressions, as they chase, wrestle, and embrace one another. It immediately caused uproar among some viewers who felt it to be "disgusting" and "pedophilic." It did not take long before the controversy—described by at least one commentator as pop music's own "Lolita moment"—was splashed all over tabloid news sites. Feeling compelled to respond, Sia took to Twitter to explain that while she had expected some "pedophilia cries," her "intention was to create some emotional content, not to upset anybody." "Elastic Heart" is emotionally intense in a way that we do not, perhaps, expect from the genre. But it is not so easy to pinpoint the exact source of the anxiety it so clearly provokes. In one of the more measured responses, Barbara Ellen wonders if it is possible for "a grown man and a young girl [to] produce art with edge and beauty of any kind without a squalid sexual subtext instantly being read into it" (n.p.). The controversy surrounding Sia's video is for Ellen inextricable from her sense that "pedophilia, once so grotesquely secretive, is now seen everywhere and in the most kneejerk fashion." It is, of course, a good thing that there is an increased awareness of pedophilia, as this translates to a culture where it is more likely that children are believed and protected. Yet in Ellen's estimation, there is nothing particularly sexual about the artsy "Elastic Heart," which she instead considers to have been "found to be offensive because of sanctioned hysteria, rather than anything happening on screen." Sia should not, for this reason, "have been badgered into an apology."

<sup>40</sup> Naiman. Nabokov, *Perversely*. 149.



own relation to Iran and its recent history. “We lived,” she explains early on, “in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent—namely ideology” (25). To affirm and celebrate aesthetic autonomy becomes, in this context, a political act.

The secret reading of *Lolita* in Tehran is, for these reasons, figured as an act of political transgression. For Nafisi, though, Nabokov’s novel does not simply signify artistic freedom, which would in turn translate to freedom more generally. It also becomes an allegory about and against totalitarianism, and hence an impassioned defense of liberal self-determination. “The desperate truth of *Lolita*’s story,” Nafisi writes, “is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual’s life by another*” (33). In the argument that follow, Nafisi is torn between the imperative to attend to *Lolita*’s suffering, and this abstraction, which allows for the suggestion her and her students’ lives have also been “confiscated,” though by a repressive political regime. And as much as she attempts to foreclose the idea that they thus are “like” *Lolita* in some substantial way, with Humbert representing Ayatollah Khomeini, her account of the novel’s significance abounds with such allegorical equivalences.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this idea frames the entire book. “There, in that living room,” Nafisi writes when first describing her reading circle, “we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings: and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like *Lolita* we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like *Lolita*, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a

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<sup>41</sup> “I want to emphasize once more that *we* were *not* *Lolita*. The Ayatollah was *not* Humbert and this republic was *not* what Humbert called his principedom by the sea. *Lolita* was *not* a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives.” 35.

little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearances, growing our nails, falling in love and listening to forbidden music” (24-25).<sup>42</sup>

In her introductory remarks, Nafisi asserts that she cannot write about *Lolita* without also writing about Tehran. In her mind, the two define each other. “This, then,” she writes, “is the story of *Lolita* in Tehran, how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov’s novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*” (6). Apart from replicating Humbert’s language of possession, this passage describes the structural principle that undergirds Nafisi’s narrative in respect to every novel that she includes, each of which becomes an aperture for observations about Iranian history and society. Critics writing about her book frequently affirms the undeniable truth of the fact that meaning varies a great deal depending on where and who you are. Yet it nevertheless true that *Lolita* can only become “about” or “relevant” to life in the Iranian Republic in the terms imagined by Nafisi if it is distilled into a series of abstract principles that might as well apply to anyone, even if they apply to Nafisi and her students in a historically specific way. It is a model of reading that depends on a series of partial identifications that are ultimately anchored in the reader’s own present.

As much as Nabokov surely agrees with Nafisi in her opposition towards totalitarianism, he would likely abhor her reading of his novel precisely *because* it subordinates it to an overarching claim about the political efficacy of literature—not to

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<sup>42</sup> At the same time, when she asks the reader to imagine her and her students, she also invokes Humbert’s appeal to the same effect. “Against the tyranny of time and politics,” she writes, imagine us the way we sometimes didn’t dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us” (6).

mention his deep-seated hatred for the frequently feminized idea of the “book club.”

“There is nothing intrinsically wrong with reading Nabokov as he would wish not to have been read,” writes Naiman in a series of remarks on this dynamic, “and such a position might be appropriate for a book that proudly sports its transgressive intent.” The moral certitude that undergirds Nafisi’s book, however, derives in part through a simplification of Iran’s political history, and an uncritical celebration of Western values that at one point trivializes “freedom” by rhetorically aligning it with “ice cream” (338). Naiman suggests that literary relevance on these terms might be inversely proportional to literary value, and that Nafisi’s political allegorization is comforting rather than shocking.<sup>43</sup> The moments of narrative irresolution that I have traced in *Lolita* are, by contrast, neither of these things. Instead, they make possible a relationship to the social world that embeds the novel that is not determined by the act of passing judgment—an activity that Humbert places front and center of his narrative from the very beginning. While there are clear limitations to this approach, it presents one figure for how one might approach the dynamic, unfolding space of social contemporaneity.

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<sup>43</sup> He further suggests that Nabokov might be a troubling ally in the “project to immure literature within the context of politics,” as “strong writers may have more in common with political dictators than with those dictators’ victims” (136).

### Wideman's Unwritten

In this chapter, I turn to John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* (1990).

Broadly speaking, this novel revolves around protagonist Cudjoe's desire—but seeming inability—to write about the 1985 police bombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia, and the destruction it wrought on a predominantly black middleclass neighborhood. This “unwritten” text, as I will refer to it, functions in Wideman's novel as a spectral presence that provides a very different model for thinking about the relation between writing and the contemporary world compared to either Ellison's emergence or Nabokov's unconcern. Unlike *Lolita*, which in essence ends in with the self-referential declaration “this is all there is,” there is no one dominant narrative trajectory in Wideman's novel that allows for the indifference that characterizes Nabokov's engagement with the social world of postwar America. As for *Invisible Man*, perhaps the more pertinent comparison, we might recall that the transformative failure of writing to communicate the experiential content of invisibility *produces* an inflection point that gestures towards forms of recognition that operate outside the historical logic by means of which social possibility is normally circumscribed. Cudjoe's failure to write about the fire is, by contrast, usually read as reflecting the compromised position of the black male intellectual, who is figured in the novel as unwittingly complicit in the maintenance of economically driven stratification within both the black community and society writ large. Wideman, as James Kyung-Jin Lee puts it, “turns Cudjoe's journey not into a *bildung* for new capacities for struggle, but into a search whose path already returns to the character's own implication in the resigned, guilt-ridden vocabulary of failure.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, James Kyung-Jin, *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism*. 141.

The idea of the unwritten is related to what Kevin Young calls the “shadow book.” Generally speaking, shadow books are and have been especially pertinent to African American writers, for whom they appear “too much like the life denied him or her, the black literature denied existence.”<sup>2</sup> In his ensuing taxonomy, Young distinguishes between three different kinds of shadow books: the book that “fail[s] to be written” on account of historical and biographical circumstances, the suggestion within a text of a “book that’s a shadow of the one we do have,” and the book “that could have been or have been,” but is now lost.<sup>3</sup> The first shadow book “threatens all writers, either from death or despair or difficulty.”<sup>4</sup> The second revolves around an out-of-reach and secret meaning that nevertheless “represents a willingness to recognize the unfinished, process-based quality of life and art, even taking pleasure in the incompleteness of being.”<sup>5</sup> Suppressed by “memory, time, accident, and the more active forms of oppression,” the third, finally, is in “some crucial ways ... the book that blackness writes every day.”<sup>6</sup> Haunting writer and reader alike, the shadow book, in all three of these permutations, signifies both what was, what could have been, and what might yet be.

Cudjoe’s unwritten book about the fire constitutes an amalgamation of the first two categories of shadow books outlined by Young. Critics have, however, generally failed to fully account for the relation between this shadow book about the fire, and another shadow book that is prominently featured in the novel. To the extent that the bombing brings Cudjoe home after some ten years in self-exile on a Greek island, the

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<sup>2</sup> Young, Kevin, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11, 12, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 14.

first of these undoubtedly constitutes the novel's structural centerpiece. Later, however, we learn that this book is strongly connected to a book about Cudjoe's activist work in the 60s, which he was working on prior to leaving Philadelphia. Unwritten or incomplete, but in either case inaccessible, these two books reflect Cudjoe's struggle with his blackness and manhood. But the novel allows for no easy separation between these autobiographical elements—where the shadow book indicates a kind of psychological blockage—and Wideman's ambition to use his fiction to think about “what's happening to us,” as he puts it in one interview from around the time of *Philadelphia Fire*'s publication.<sup>7</sup> There is, indeed, a sense that the implied connection the fire and the memory of the Civil Rights Movement functions as a site of potentiality that goes far beyond Cudjoe himself. To hold out the possibility of a different, more expansive, reading of the novel's unwritten, that is to say, means to understand it as a complex and ethically ambiguous space of contingency rather than simply a figure for a foreclosed social present.

It might seem perverse to speak about *Philadelphia Fire* in these terms. In the all-too familiar world that Wideman depicts, the forces of neoliberal capitalism are, after all, so firmly entrenched in the way power is wielded—never mind who is, nominally, in charge—that it becomes hard to imagine any kind of meaningful social change. Yet it is precisely these conditions that the unwritten throws into relief. On a very elemental level, one might say that the social present has yet to be “written,” in the sense that the operation of writing must always insert a certain distance between itself and the object of representation, unless it simply refers to itself. This is, once again, the paradox that

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<sup>7</sup> Rowell, Charles H, “An Interview with John Edgar Wideman.” 58.

animates Raymond Williams's work on structures of feeling. The unwritten, by contrast, establishes a structure of internal difference at the very heart of Wideman's novel. As such, it does not simply function as a symbol for failure, but also—and at the same time—as a symbol for the aspiration for something else, something that cannot be articulated from within the frame of *Philadelphia Fire* itself.

This is the true horizon of what Madhu Dubey calls the novel's "fractured form," which she argues to be "neither politically functional nor gratifying in a purely aesthetic sense."<sup>8</sup> In an edited volume, Keith Byerman cites Wideman's vaunted difficulty as a writer as a reason for his relative obscurity compared to some of his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> And *Philadelphia Fire* does, certainly, present a challenge to its readers—especially as the novel begins to break apart into a series of disparate textual fragments that appear to refuse any attempt at analytic synthesis, and as new perspectives and narrative voices, like the homeless J.B., are introduced. In unsettling the boundary between author, narrator, and protagonist, Wideman utilizes some of the tropes that are commonly associated with postmodernism. But these metafictional gestures are not, in this instance, primarily designed to draw attention to the artifice of fiction, or anything like that. Instead, this aspect of the novel highlights some of the issues that the attempt to write about the present entails. On this view, something like the contemporary can only emerge in the fissures that at once separates and brings together something like Cudjoe's unwritten book about the fire, and Wideman's novel about that book.

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<sup>8</sup> Dubey, Madhu, "Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*. 593.

<sup>9</sup> Byerman, Keith, "Wideman's Career and Critical Reception." x.

Let us, therefore, return to the fire, which after all constitutes the novel's occasion.<sup>10</sup> "The events in Philadelphia in 1985," Wideman tells Charles Rowell in a 1990 interview in *Callaloo* that I have already cited in the above,

the MOVE massacre, really began in 1978 when a bunch of MOVE people were arrested and put in jail forever for allegedly killing a policeman. The concerted, ruthless campaign of a city government—ironically, a city government under the control of a black mayor—to destroy difference is one of the most important public events that I've observed. It was particularly important because it was buried. A whole city is afflicted by amnesia. In the press it got a little play for a while, but then it was forgotten. And I think that, maybe in the same sense that you can see the universe in a blade of grass, if we look at certain events long enough and hard enough through the lens of fiction, maybe we can learn more of what we need to know. If we don't try, if we don't fight for the little light there is, then we're going to suffer.<sup>11</sup>

There is a palpable urgency in Wideman's language here, speaking to his sense that it is important that we try to learn something from this "ruthless campaign ... to destroy difference." What is most important about it all, however, is how quickly it was "buried." This comment dovetails with a series of later remarks where Wideman decries the fact that in contemporary society, there seems to exist "no time" to ask questions, "no time" to "bring up the past" in order to reconsider it, and "no time for people whose lives present a different agenda" than the one defined by the dominant culture.<sup>12</sup> One might, indeed, describe this culture as one defined by a more generalized "no-time," a cognate to what Fredric Jameson calls the "perpetual present" of late capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Wideman's

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<sup>10</sup> Even as the novel is, as Wideman puts it, "a book about many things" rather than "a piece of investigative journalism about MOVE." TuSmith, Bonnie, ed., *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Rowell, Charles H, "An Interview with John Edgar Wideman." 58.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. For an account on the relation between Jameson's thought and Wideman's fiction, see Susan Pearsall's "'Narratives of Self' and the Abdication of Authority in Wideman's 'Philadelphia Fire.'"



catalyst for writing *Philadelphia Fire*, and the formal problem at the heart of this novel, is thus not so much the fire itself as it is the city as a space “afflicted by amnesia.”<sup>14</sup>

At the heart of this issue stand the question of what the formation of historical memory can tell us about our own present, about the culture that is doing the “remembering.” Here, one might perhaps briefly compare *Philadelphia Fire* to both *Beloved*, which Toni Morrison famously describes as an exploration of the “unwritten interior life” of the enslaved, as well as to James Baldwin’s attempt to outline a hypothetical novel in one of his lectures.<sup>15</sup> Speaking epistemologically, one might describe Morrison’s novel as an imaginative recovery of experiences that reflect both the violent and dehumanizing nature of slavery as an institution, and the systematic erasures that define its archive and transmission into the present. Formally, however, the novel culminates in a mode of anticipation for the future reclamation of what is, in fact, its own narrative content. (The unwritten, in other words, can function as a basis for Morrison’s narrative only through insisting on the very temporal disjunction between past and present that she is usually thought to collapse.) Baldwin’s imaginary novel, on the other hand, which is to be about “the people or some of the people with whom I grew up,” is not only “unwritten,” but probably “unwritable,” too.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, this notion derives from Baldwin’s desire to not “impose” his authorial will on the people he writes about as if to “to tell them or the reader what principle their lives illustrate,” but rather to examine them in order to discover what they “mean.”<sup>17</sup> This means, in effect, that “the social

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<sup>14</sup> Rowell, Charles H, “An Interview with John Edgar Wideman.” 58.

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, Toni, “The Site of Memory.” In *Inventing the Truth*, edited by Russell Baker and William Knowlton Zinsser, 83–102. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Baldwin, James, “Notes on a Hypothetical Novel.” 222, 224.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

realities with which these people, the people I remember, whether they knew it or not, were really contending can't be left out of the novel without falsifying their experience."<sup>18</sup>

Though they are sensitive to different issues, as well as different possibilities, both Morrison and Baldwin express a desire to inhabit the past, and in the process "recover" a meaning that is can only truly acquire in retrospect. In *Philadelphia Fire*, by contrast, the unwritten figures not so much along a modality of historical recovery as it constitutes a haunting presence that itself wrests open perspectives on a still-unfolding present. It is, to put things differently, about the *condition* of social amnesia, insofar as this concept provides a metaphor not only for an unwillingness or inability to face the past, but also an unwillingness to face the conditions of the present. This is not, however, to say that the novel devolves into ideology critique. Wideman speaks approvingly of Margot Harry's *Attention MOVE: This is America* (1987), which he describes as putting "the MOVE tragedy in the proper perspective as an instance of the state's intolerance for difference and its awesome repressive powers."<sup>19</sup> In his own novel, however, he seeks rather to use the affordances of fiction to produce something that cannot quite be distilled into claims like these. And in this respect, it is impossible to separate the formal trope of the unwritten from Wideman's desire to "learn more of what we need to know."

# 1

*Philadelphia Fire* begins on the Greek island Mykonos, where Philadelphia-born Cudjoe, the character in the novel that comes the closest to a traditional protagonist, has

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>19</sup> Harry, Margot, *Attention, MOVE! This Is America!* Blurb.

spent the last decade or so working as a bartender. While it takes a while for the reasons for Cudjoe's self-chosen exile to become apparent, it does not take long before we find out that he considers himself as having failed both his "white" ex-wife and his "half-white" kids, whom he has not seen at all since his divorce.<sup>20</sup> His "betrayal," as he puts it, was "double": both "about blackness and about being a man" (9-10). Much later, we learn that though he would "read about what was happening over here," Cudjoe has, for all intents and purposes, cut himself off from his former life. On the island, he is a "spectator" who watches his "country kill itself" while he waits for his "old life to disappear" (87).

In the very beginning of the novel, this background has not yet been established. Instead we follow along with Cudjoe on what turns out to be his last day on the island. The city where he grew up, the city where he once had made a life for himself is, however, quite present in these pages. The "Day-Glo blue-and-gray crisscrossed Greek sky" reminds Cudjoe of playing basketball "back home in the streets of West Philly" (4). In the morning before he heads to the mainland to catch his transatlantic flight, he has one last—the last among many, the novel suggests—sexual encounter, the emptiness of which is contrasted to the tender care that he provided for his grandmother in her final days (6). And he thinks back, too, to a snow globe that he remembers from his grandmother's cupboard. This "crystal ball," as it is first introduced, comes to represent his hermetically sealed off past (5). It is now, however, "long gone," and Cudjoe "can't recall the first time he missed it" (5).

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<sup>20</sup> Wideman, John Edgar, *Philadelphia Fire*. 9. Henceforth cited parenthetically.

Connecting Cudjoe's severed past to his future, this quasi-prefatory material closes with a proleptic image that contains the novel's first mention—however oblique—of the MOVE tragedy, as well as an explanation for his impending return to Philadelphia. In it, we observe Cudjoe “asleep with a book spread-eagled on his lap, the book he wishes he was writing, the story he crossed an ocean to find. Story of a fire and a lost boy that brought him home” (7). This vision of tranquil-yet-unsettled domesticity constitutes a rather roundabout way of introducing Cudjoe's ambition, and deeply felt desire, to write about the fire. But whatever book is “spread-eagled on his lap,” it is precisely not the one he “wishes he was writing.” We know from very early on, that is to say, that Cudjoe will not finish this book. Instead, it persists from, this point on, as a spectral presence that signifies both some sort of psychological blockage on Cudjoe's part, and, from the perspective of Wideman's novel, a structure of internal difference.

If *Philadelphia Fire* substitutes for Cudjoe's unwritten novel while also insisting that the two are not the same, one of the novel's chief challenges becomes the question of how to negotiate the relation between them. Because he constitutes a shadow presence in the novel, the “lost boy,” whose name we soon find out is Simba, provides a figure for this narrative problematic. Simba, indeed, haunts Cudjoe in a similar way to how the book he apparently cannot write haunts Wideman's novel. As such, Simba is central both to Cudjoe's sense of why he returns “home,” and to the structure of *Philadelphia Fire* as a whole. “The boy who is the only survivor of the holocaust on Osage Avenue,” the narrator writes a page or so later in an attempt to explain his significance to Cudjoe,

the child who is brother, son, a limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine. He must find the child to be whole again. Cudjoe can't account for the force drawing him to the story nor why he indulges a fantasy of identification with the boy who escaped the massacre. He

knows he must find him. He knows the ache of absence, the phantom presence of pain that tricks him into reaching down again and again to stroke the emptiness. He's stopped asking why. His identification with the boy persists like a discredited rumor. Like Hitler's escape from the bunker. Like the Second Coming. (8-9)

The figuration of Simba as a "limb" connects him to Cudjoe as a bodily extension that seemingly collapses the large distances—both geographically and in terms of socio-economic class—that separate the two. In this sense, the boy might be said to represent a sublimated sense of guilt, referring at once to Cudjoe's feeling that he has betrayed both his race and his family. Yet the narrator is clear that it is all a "fantasy of identification" that appears, as the paragraph unfolds, increasingly indulgent. Prior to learning about the fire in a magazine, there was no apparent connection between the two. Persisting "like a discredited rumor," the force of the Cudjoe's "identification with the boy" therefore appears almost perverse, as indicated by the absurd juxtaposition of similes that follow. Having stopped "asking why," Cudjoe is simply driven by a "phantom presence of pain" that he cannot vanquish, and seems in some ways more attached to the condition of loss or "ache of absence" itself—which Cudjoe apparently already "knows," presumably due to his separation from friends and family—than the idea that the boy might be found.

In an interview, Wideman suggests that Cudjoe's quest to locate Simba is really one of self-discovery, and that if he had been able to find him, he would have in actual fact have discovered some new "aspect of himself."<sup>21</sup> "That's what most of us find when we set out on some kind of quest," Wideman continues:

We're projecting a loss or a need or an emptiness in ourselves and we're looking for it out there somewhere when, in fact, the most profitable journey is inside. We need people outside of us to trigger, to affect, and to change us—transform us. But I think Cudjoe would have found just what

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<sup>21</sup> TuSmith, Bonnie, ed., *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, 109.

he was looking for and then the real fireworks would have started. Simba Munto, the survivor, would have been much more than Cudjoe bargained for. That in itself would have required Cudjoe to become a different person than the person he set out to be.<sup>22</sup>

Then, in response to a follow-up question, Wideman asserts that Cudjoe *did*, in a way, find Simba. “The book found him,” he explains, before expressing hope that Cudjoe, by the end of the novel, will have “incorporated that part of Simba which is most important: that is, Simba’s ability to survive, and his determination to do things his way.”<sup>23</sup>

There is something at once powerful and reactionary about such a narrative of triumphant self-realization. To begin, we may note that the ascription of these very qualities, to the extent that they idealize Simba as a symbol for a certain kind of resistance, *depend* on his absence from the narrative. But we might also say that on this interpretation, the question of the meaning of the fire turns out to be all about Cudjoe himself, and his personal development as a character. Of course, in distinguishing between the book and Cudjoe, Wideman is affirming once again the structure of internal difference between *Philadelphia Fire* and Cudjoe’s unwritten book about the fire. If Cudjoe had truly found “what he was looking for,” he would not be suffering from writer’s block, which in turn would mean that Wideman’s novel would lose its defining structural feature. “What would he say to Simba if he ever found him,” Cudjoe wonders at one point in the novel (92). The answer, if we take Wideman at his word, is nothing at all.

*Philadelphia Fire* at once resists and embraces Cudjoe’s importance to the story. This can be seen, for instance, in Wideman’s engagement with the city as a kind of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

character in itself, or in Wideman's decision to focalize some of the later parts of the narrative through the perspective of the homeless man J.B..<sup>24</sup> But it is most readily apparent in the formally abrasive second part of the novel. Poorly received by most reviewers at the time, this section begins with what the novel has up until this point withheld: a relatively straightforward, if brief, account of the fire and the circumstances surrounding it. Among other things, we learn here that "a bomb was dropped from a state police helicopter" on "the besieged row house on Osage Avenue," that "ensuing fire destroyed fifty-three houses," and that eleven people—"six adults and five children"—were ultimately killed in "the assault that commenced with they refused to obey a police order to leave their home" (97). It is also the only moment in the entire novel that addresses the legal aftermath of the crisis in any way whatsoever. In the same disinterested prose that characterizes the passage as a whole, we learn—or are reminded, as it were—that following the fire, a grand jury determined "that no criminal charges should be brought against the public officials who planned and perpetrated the assault" (97).

If this orientation seems to ground the narrative in the event in a more direct way than has been the case so far, this feeling is soon taken away from the reader in the vertigo-inducing sequence of textual fragments that follow. Up until this point, the novel has mostly followed Cudjoe. Now, however, the narrative expands to include a vast range of materials that resists analytic synthesis, to include a number of first-person passages that seem to be about of written from the perspective of Wideman himself, around the time he is working on *Philadelphia Fire*. In one fragment, for instance, we observe this

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the anthropomorphizing of the city, see Carden, Mary Paniccia. "'If the City Is a Man': Founders and Fathers, Cities and Sons in John Edgar Wideman's 'Philadelphia Fire.'"

“Wideman” learning about “the Philadelphia fire” one Monday night when channel-surfing, believing at first that the images he comes across to be from a “Third World shantytown where there’s no water, no machines to extinguish the fire” (100). In another, he is working on completing the proofs of *Reuben*, the novel Wideman published in 1987. Another still contains a letter ostensibly sent to him by a member of MOVE who is anxious that Wideman does not blindly accept the “propaganda” bandied around about the organization when writing about it (124). Each of these emphasize the process of *Philadelphia Fire*’s composition, as well as Wideman’s investment in the fire as a figure for contemporary society that cannot be extricated from the idea of writing about it.

The most prominent and pathos-laden through line among these autobiographical materials comprises a series of quasi-voyeuristic fragments that touch on Wideman’s relationship to his incarcerated son, who was sentenced to life in prison after stabbing a camp-mate in his sleep in a motel room at only sixteen years of age. In the first of these, the narrator is speaking to his son on the phone, “silence rushing to fill the void words couldn’t” after the short call ends (99). In another, perhaps even more anguished one, he reflects on to “[t]he unmitigated cruelty of the legal system” in refusing to take seriously the son’s mental health issues. “The state,” the narrator writes, “chooses to believe that my son’s illness is not real and thus accepts no responsibility for treatment” (116). And the section ends with a letter addressed *to* the imprisoned son that, though it acknowledges father and son to be “different,” also affirms that they are “not separate” (150).

Something similar might be said about the relation between “Wideman” and Cudjoe (and indeed between *Philadelphia Fire* and Cudjoe’s unwritten book about the



fire), who at one point is described as an “airy other floating into the shape of my story” (122). “Why am I him when I tell certain parts,” the narrator asks. “Why am I hiding from myself? Is he a mirror or a black hole?” These questions might broadly be characterized as metafictional in that they muddle the boundary between fiction and reality. But they also draw our attention to the very premise of Wideman’s novel, which is that fiction has the capacity to provide forms of insight that would otherwise remain unavailable to us, precisely by intersecting the personal and what one might perhaps call the historical on the level of the apparent disintegration of the narrative as such. If the novel previously gave the impression of going—or wanting to go—*somewhere*, it has now entirely stalled. And in this particular moment, it is just as much about Wideman’s relationship to his son as it is about the fire. In *Philadelphia Fire*, each comes to function as a conduit for the other.

Here, too, an unwritten asserts its presence in the narrative. “Will I ever try to write my son’s story,” asks “Wideman” in one fragment about midway through the section. “Not dealing with it,” he continues, “may be causing the forgetfulness that I’m experiencing” (115). One might argue that the narrator does tell this story. But *Philadelphia Fire* is clearly not doing for Wideman’s son what *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) did for his brother, or what *Fatheralong* (1994) did for his father. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that these moments in the narrative provide only the shadow of this story, flickering before us as if cast from the light of a flame starved for oxygen. Perhaps this is the crux of it all. Perhaps the shadow is all that remains, at least until a new source of illumination can be located—a prospect that appears quite unlikely in the novel. From this perspective, one might say that the purpose of this particular unwritten is

to at once honor and combat the “forgetfulness” that Wideman’s narrator ascribes to himself in this particular passage, but which appears elsewhere in the novel as a culturally pervasive phenomenon that applies, if in a slightly different way, to the fire too. The point is not to attempt to recover or preserve for posterity what is or might be or have once been forgotten. Laudable as such attempts are, they generally insist on a retroactive perspective. Instead, Wideman seeks to harness the “now” of writing, with all that it implies, to speak to the social and psychological dynamics that underwrite these processes in the first place.

With this in mind, let us return to Cudjoe’s quest to find Simba, and so too to his desire to write about the fire. The novel’s Philadelphia section begins with Cudjoe interviewing one Margaret Jones, a former member of MOVE who left the organization before the fire. She is, the narrator writes, “as close to the boy as he’s come after weeks of questions, hanging around, false leads and no leads, his growing awareness of getting what he deserved as he was frowned at and turned away time after time” (7). But Margaret is not so much speaking *to* him as she is “permitting him to overhear what she told the machine” that Cudjoe is using to record their conversation, and which frames this initial section as he plays it back to himself. “Polite, accommodating to a degree, she also maintained her distance,” the narrator writes. “Five thousand miles of it, plus or minus an inch. The precise space between Cudjoe’s island and West Philly. Somehow she knew he’d been away, exactly how long, exactly how far, and that distance bothered her, she held it against him, served it back to him in her cool reserve, seemed unable to ever forgive it” (9). Rather than a source of information, the tape functions in the narrative as a record of Cudjoe’s alienation from the community in which he once lived.

Margaret nevertheless speaks a great deal, telling Cudjoe about herself, about how she came to be involved with MOVE, and about the fire. Though she does, in the end, put her own children ahead of King, Wideman's fictional counterpart to MOVE's leader John Africa, she is nevertheless still infatuated with him and his ideas. Her ambivalence, discussed at length by other critics, is registered most clearly in her acknowledgment that "though he did it wrong, he was right" (14). Things were "spoized to get better," she tells Cudjoe (14). "Don't have to squat in the weeds and wipe my behind with a leaf. Running water inside my house and in the supermarket I can buy thirty kinds of soda pop, twelve different colors of toilet paper. But that ain't what I call progress. Do You? King knew it wasn't. King just told the truth" (14). As for the aftermath of the bombing, Margaret considers society to be in an even more "sorry-assed" state "today," compared to when she initially joined the organization (19). "Nobody cares," she continues. "The whole city seen the flames, smelled the smoke, counted the body bags. Whole world knows children murdered here. But it's quiet as a grave, ain't it? Not a mumbling word. People gone back to making a living. Making some rich man richer" (19). In this bleak vision of contemporary consumer society, "making a living," "[m]aking some rich man richer," and an amnesiac relation to even the very recent past become inextricable from one another.

To what extent can narrative respond to these conditions? To the extent that Cudjoe is also disturbed with what he calls "the silence," or what the novel later refers to as the "official silence," he and Margaret appear to be united in their concern for the "disremembering" of the fire, to use a Morrisonian term (19, 114). Yet because of their respective positions, they approach this issue from seemingly opposite ends. This

becomes clear when the conversation turns back to Simba, or “Simmie” (17). Margaret might know someone who might, in turn, know where the boy is. But first, she wants to know why Cudjoe wants to find him. Cudjoe responds that he needs to “hear his story” for the book he wants to write (19). “About the fire,” Cudjoe explains. “What caused it. Who was responsible. What it means” (19). Margaret is not having it. “Don’t need no book,” she retorts. “Anybody wants to know what it means, bring them through here. Tell them these bombed streets used to be full of people’s homes. Tell them babies’ bones mixed up in this ash they smell” (19).

On Margaret’s experiential model, there can be no substitute for going to the place where it happened. Anything that might go in a book—questions, say, about causation and responsibility—are beside the point, not because they are unimportant as such, but because they have very little to do with “what it means.” On this view, the “meaning” of the fire resides not so much in any kind of larger narrative that might be constructed around it, but rather in the immediate and visceral *feeling* of loss itself. This loss includes the literal loss of lives, as well as the loss of life in a more metaphorical sense, as exemplified by the baby-bone ashes that covers the now-vacant lots of what used to be “people’s homes,” and the way in which the once-vibrant neighborhood no longer features either “old people on their stoops” or “children playing in the street” (19). While it is possible to “learn” about such changes to the character of a neighborhood, their meaning is anchored in the experiential reality of the community they most immediately impact and has transformed.

In fact, the very desire to write about the disaster and thus “do something about the silence,” becomes for Margaret further proof that Cudjoe does not and cannot

understand. Cudjoe does cast himself as an outsider throughout the narrative, suggesting that there is something clarifying about this position. At one point, for instance, the narrator writes that he “decides he will think of himself as a reporter covering a story in a foreign country,” and that he therefor can see things that the “natives” cannot (45). There is a tension in the novel, then, between Cudjoe’s “fantasy of identification” and the distance that he feels between himself and the once-so familiar Philadelphia. As a rejoinder to Margaret, he nevertheless thinks to himself that he should tell her, the next time they meet, that he “could smell the smoke five thousand miles away,” that he could “[h]ear kids screaming,” and that “[w]e are all trapped in the terrible jaws of something shaking the life out of us” (22). Cudjoe wants desperately, that is, to imagine the fire on terms that far transcend the local that is Margaret’s chief concern, and indeed, lived reality.

This is why he turns—why he *has* to turn—to writing. Cudjoe’s description of his book to Margaret cannot, however, be viewed programmatically. His imagined connection to Simba, and his sense that he needs to find “the child to be whole again,” belies the disinterested analytic posture that characterizes such work. There is every reason to be remain skeptical of this telos. Instead, one might consider the ways in which the novel is rather about the process of becoming—to include the “becoming-text” of *Philadelphia Fire* itself. “I’m stuck with you as I’m stuck with myself,” “Wideman” writes in a gut-wrenching letter to his son. “If I draw a line around who I am,” he continues, “who I can be, you are inside the circle. I have no choice. Don’t want a choice” (150). It is hard to imagine something similar as holding true insofar as Cudjoe’s relation to Simba is concerned. This is nevertheless the challenge that the novel poses in

juxtaposing these two tragedies. In his outline to Margaret of the book he wishes to write, Cudjoe appears at first to want to draw a line around the event by establishing causation, by assigning responsibility. But as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that this description rather functions as a kind of placeholder language for something that he is still searching for—and indeed, something that he cannot ever find.

## 2

As the novel proceeds, it becomes increasingly clear that Wideman seeks to align his own and Cudjoe's desire to write about the fire, and the "forgetfulness" that surrounds it, with a larger set of social and political concerns that revolve around the historical memory of the Civil Rights Movement, and the imbrication of contemporary black political leadership with the forces of neoliberalism (Cudjoe's "terrible jaws"). To "forget" the fire, the novel suggests, is tantamount to repressing crucial social and political energies, and thus acquiesce to a new status quo where the only thing that truly matters is money and power—which, on this schema, become one and the same. In effect, the novel asks its readers to consider how the way the Movement is remembered reflects back on the present, as well as the relation between the act of remembrance and forms of agencies that now seem entirely foreclosed. It does so, however, without pretending to return to a moment of political possibility that is now irretrievably in the past.

The relation between the MOVE tragedy and racial politics first emerges fairly early on in the novel. When Cudjoe shoots some hoops at a basketball court after his second meeting with Margaret, the informal discussion among the ballplayers soon turns to the city's black mayor, and his role in the bombing and its aftermath. "The mayor

don't run the city," someone proclaims, "the city runs him" (41). The personification of the city as an impersonal force at once absolves and indicts the mayor for his role in the disaster. Though the mayor "goofed," conditions are "so fucked up in this city whoever's in the mayor's chair bound to fuck up" (41). Yet the fact that the mayor is black *does* matter. "Them slick dudes own the mayor are grinning from ear to ear cause if it had been a white boy dropped the bomb, bloods would have took to the street and the whole city nothing but a cinder now" (41). When someone else mentions that a commission has been appointed to investigate how and why events unfolded the way they did, the response is similarly cynical: "Hey, bro. Commissioners all members of the same club. Thick as thieves. Downtown chimps all eating out of the same bowl. They come in where I work. Smiling and grinning and falling over each other to pay when I bring the check. You think they going to hand one of their own? Watch." For the ballplayers, whose cynicism reflects the period's rapidly deteriorating racial relations, the black mayor is not so much a political figure as a political figurehead.

The novel's most concentrated exploration of these issues occurs when Cudjoe meets his old university friend Timbo, who is now working as the "cultural attaché" to the mayor. "Timbo had class," Cudjoe reflects while taking a shower the morning of their meeting, "if class means expensive tastes, the cunning and luck to satisfy them" (72). And they do indeed meet at an expensive downtown restaurant, quite possibly the same one where the ballplayer works. As he waits for his friend to arrive, Cudjoe thinks to himself that there is "no way he will let Timbo jive his way out of paying" (74). There was no need to worry. Their meal, Timbo announces, is on the mayor: "After all, my

friend, you are a writer, ain't you? Distinguished Negro Intellectual. Shit yeah. We got a budget for that. Ain't that many of youall. We can afford it" (74).

In the conversation that follows, Timbo speaks freely. He once felt that Philadelphia had the potential to become a "showcase city" for black governance. "This city gon be Camelot, right? Our black Camelot. We're in the driver's seat, watch us go world." Yet Timbo does not know what, if anything, has actually changed—except for the fact that he and Cudjoe, and a select few other "experiments" like them who too were afforded the opportunity to go to school and so break into the middle-class, are now "eating higher off the hog" (77). In particular, Timbo paints a bleak picture of a destructive dialectic between urban redevelopment—which for Philadelphia housing activists in the 70s "came to symbolize the misapplication of public funds for private gain"—and urban decay.<sup>25</sup> "Area like this University City," Timbo tells Cudjoe, "wasn't nothing but a gleam in a planner's eye a few years ago. Look at it now. Look at what it's gonna be. Can't argue with progress. At the same time over in the north and in the west where people from here forced to move, what's growing is garbage dumps"—a point poignantly reenacted during the meal in Cudjoe's increasing consciousness of the large socio-economical footprint of the meal itself (79). The city, with its enormous and intensifying structures of inequality, is divided between the have and the have-nots. "Big money making bigger money" (79). Everyone else gets left behind.

Timbo is a curious figure in all of this. On the one hand, he clearly relishes his own relative privilege, however temporary it may be: "Election's coming. Goodies might be all gone tomorrow. Get it while it's hot" (76). On the other, he is also quite convinced

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<sup>25</sup> Feffer, Andrew, "The Land Belongs to the People: Reframing Urban Protest in Post-Sixties Philadelphia." 71.



that the entire system is morally bankrupt, and on the verge of collapsing. “What’s the mayor gon do when the city starts cracking and pieces break off the edges and disappear,” he asks. “It’s thin ice, man. Damn thin ice and we’re all dancing on it. We all gon fall through if the shit starts to go” (80). Then, in responding to Cudjoe’s query as to what the mayor, in fact, does intend to do, he goes on a long harangue about political agency:

Do? What a mayor always does. Grin and lie and shake hands and cut ribbons on new shopping centers. What else he spozed to do? This mess been here long before he was elected and he’ll be dead and in his grave before it changes. If it ever changes. You and me. We happened to come along at a time when it seemed things might change. We thought we was big and bad enough to make the world different. That’s our problem, believing things spozed to change for the better. Mayor’s not like that. He’s older, wiser. Not dewy-eyed like we was, but not bent down like our daddies, neither. He’s in between. Korea’s his war. A police action. He’s realistic about power and politics and deals and compromise and doing his jig inside the system. He ain’t about change. He’s about hanging on long enough so some who ain’t never tasted pie can have a bite before the whole shebang turns rotten. A simple, devious, practical man. A nice guy. Hey. He’s my boss. Love the nigger. Treats me better than any white boy would. (80-81)

Timbo’s comments demarcate the Civil Rights Movement as a time of “dewy-eyed” optimism that squares poorly with the novel’s bleak account of contemporary Philadelphia politics. For Timbo and Cudjoe, who came of age just as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, it seemed at one point as if the future might be very different from the past. Their “war,” is Vietnam—a watershed moment in the history of US activism and integral to the emergence of what appeared at the time as a viable counter-culture. The mayor, by contrast, “ain’t about change.” Older than Timbo and Cudjoe but younger than their “bent down ... daddies,” he knows how to operate “inside the system,” fully aware—and this this is the source of his insinuated establishment

appeal—that he is not there to change the direction of the ship, but simply—and at most—shuffle the deck chairs. He does what any mayor would do—grins, lies, shakes hands, cuts ribbons—but he does it while black. It is true that he treats Timbo “better than any white boy would.” But his nihilistic sense of “hanging on long enough so some who ain’t never tasted pie can have a bite before the whole shebang turns rotten” is hardly a basis for racial solidarity.

Indeed, in acceding to the forces of capital, the mayor is in fact abetting a process where race as a structure of identification in a personally and politically affirmative sense is beginning to disappear. Margaret, for instance, connects what she perceives as her children’s inability to imagine a future that is in any way substantially different from her present with a lack of racial identity. “Only thing they ever expect to be is you. Working like you for some white man or black man don’t make no difference cause all they pay you is nigger wages, enough to keep you guessing, keep you hungry, keep you scared, keep you coming back” (14-15). This sense of foreclosed futurity stands in stark contrast to how Margaret once thought that things might be different, and is connected in the novel to her sense that her children “don’t even know” what color they are. All they know is that they are destined to be paid “nigger wages.”

The relation between the social energies of the 60s and the political disillusionment of 80s is, as we soon learn, also the indirect topic of Cudjoe’s book. “Why did we believe we could turn this country around,” he asks Timbo, who answers, “Cause we wanted more than we had and that seemed the way” (82). From this statement, Cudjoe pivots to his real reason for seeking Timbo out. “I’m writing about the fire,” he tells him. “About the fire, but about us too. About believing we could take over. Build a

better world” (82). On this cue, Timbo delivers his version of the fate of the Civil Rights Movement, in his now-characteristic intermixture of bombast and cynicism. “We did take over, didn’t we,” he begins. “We were righteous. Couldn’t nothing stop us. But our own damn selves. They let us strut around like we owned the Johnson. We was superbad. On the tube. In the movies” (82). An unspecified “they,” meanwhile, “just let us *be* for a while. Let us boogie around till we got bored with our ownselves and wasn’t nothing to do but creep in the back door and tiptoe up the stairs into our old rooms and give up the keys” (82-83). The war in Asia, music, dope—all become “shit to play with” while the “grown-ups” resumed the business of “running the world” (83)

Cudjoe’s sense of the connection between the fire and his own activist past is more complicated, and tied more explicitly to the thematic of the unwritten. A few pages later, when he finally gets a chance to speak at some length, Cudjoe first tells Timbo about his life after leaving Philadelphia following the breakup of his marriage, and the death of the man who had encouraged him to write. He talks about finding his island after bumming around the world for a year, staying because it was “beautiful” and because he “wasn’t required to do a damn thing” (87). He works as a barkeep during the day, and sometimes, at night, he writes “bullshit poems and unfinished essays,” and letters to his ex-wife and his sons that he never sends (87). On the island, Cudjoe exists as if outside of history, even if he also appears to crave to connect again to those he has abandoned. There is something impotent about it all. Though it is also true that Cudjoe’s attempt to write about the fire is perhaps no less impotent.

More to the point from the perspective of the novel’s engagement with the Civil Rights Movement is the revelation that Cudjoe also never finished what he refers to as

“the novel about us” (87). Initially hinted at in the flurry of questions Timbo poses to Cudjoe at the beginning of the night (“Tell me bout you. Is the novel finished?”), this novel was to have been about “that time in their lives”—the “Vietnam War, civil rights, marches and protests”—that Timbo earlier “dealt with ... in five minutes,” making it seem incredible to Cudjoe now that he had once “thought it would fill novels” (75, 83).

“Too bad,” Timbo responds. The conversation continues:

But I can tell you something about it. You were one of the stars.  
 Would have been some book, then.  
 Maybe what I’m writing about the fire will make up for the other one.  
 You’re in it too.  
 Oh yeah. You ain’t intending to get me fired, are you? Or strung up?  
 I need help. The boy who survived is the key. I have to find him.  
 Write your sixties novel. Make old Timbo a literary hero. Let me play the  
 part in the movies. Forget the fire. Play with fire you know what happens.  
 You’ll get burnt like the rest of us. Tell the story about trying to change  
 the world. Fire ain’t going nowhere. Be right here when you get back from  
 Hollywood. (87-88)

This “sixties novel” constitutes *Philadelphia Fire*’s second major instance of an “unwritten.” While the Wideman never explicitly makes the connection, it is reasonable to assume that Cudjoe worked on it before his self-imposed exile. In one sequence in the novel, Cudjoe reminisces about travelling hundreds of miles to bring a manuscript to his (white) mentor Sam. “He must answer to Sam,” the narrator explains, “because Sam’s his twin, his cut buddy and drinking pardner, voice of his conscience, stage manager of his art, Sam in the wings silently paring his fingernails. Didn’t Sam teach him how to be capable of anything? Technique, technique, my bucko, is truth” (64). This devotion to technique-as-truth, however, appears to have yielded Cudjoe only grief: though we never find out what Sam thought about the manuscript, we do learn that the book, which was to

be dedicated to Cudjoe's wife Caroline as "payback for what it cost them both," is "orphaned" following the breakup of their marriage, and the dissolution of their family (69).<sup>26</sup>

The other aspect of Cudjoe's life around this time revolved around his job as a teacher, which very much is tied up with his activism. Connecting the two, in particular, is his attempt to stage "authentically revised version" of *The Tempest* (which the novel dubs "Willy's con"). A "gift to the community where he's been teaching for four years," "this production ... staged by Cudjoe in the late 1960s, outdoors, in a park in West Philly," is, the narrator assures us, the "central event" of the text, "the bounty and hub about all else written about the fire" (132). Except to note that Cudjoe envisions it as a way to "unteach" the discursive legacy of the Western tradition and so instill agency and pride in his students, there is no need to discuss the details of this postcolonial take on Shakespeare's play further (131).<sup>27</sup> It is, however, important to note that, due to inclement weather, the play is never performed, and that Cudjoe soon thereafter quits teaching to go to grad school. "I've always felt guilty about deserting them," he tells an unidentified interlocutor in a fragment in the novel's second part. "When I was teaching," he continues, "every day I'd go home with a sad feeling, a guilty feeling, knowing I should have done so much more. And that's what kept me coming back. It's also what finally drove me away. Running, talking to myself. Tail between my legs" (149-150).

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<sup>26</sup> This sequence of events reflects extremely poorly on Cudjoe's character. We are told, for instance, that following the divorce, he "removed himself absolutely from their lives. All or nothing is how he explained it to himself, to her. Left it to her to explain to the kids" (69).

<sup>27</sup> Many critics have written on Wideman's use of *The Tempest*. See, for instance, James Coleman, who describes Shakespeare's play as signifying a "persuasive white myth of blackness" (109).

The idea that the book “about the fire” might “make up for the other one” thus speaks to a quest for personal redemption that cannot succeed on the terms Cudjoe desires. Yet it also allows the novel to harness the fact that Cudjoe, upon his return to Philadelphia, feels “a generation behind, lost in time” (117). The source of this feeling of belatedness cannot be easily traced, though it is clear that any accounting for it would have to include both systemic (the state of inner city public schools) and personal (Cudjoe’s decision to abandon his children following his divorce) factors. Cudjoe, it seems, is prone towards abandoning the things that he ostensibly cares deeply about. Upon coming back to Philadelphia, for instance, it is confusing to Cudjoe that the students he once taught are now grown up, and that the kids he sees on the street might very well be theirs. Their future—their present, that is—seems certain to him now in a way that it did not before. “His kids,” the narrator writes, “have disappeared into a hole in the mountainside. Cleaning somebody’s house. Washing dishes. Janitors. Cooks. Prisoners. Sanitation workers. Housekeepers. Doing all that invisible shit” (117). And this, in a sense, is the trajectory from someone like Ellison to someone like Wideman: where there was once “invisibility” (how you are seen), which allows for a certain critical distance, there is now “invisible shit” (the labor you do), which admits nothing of the sort.

That Cudjoe is unable to muster anything but the bleakest pessimism about the state of contemporary society is made evident much earlier in the narrative, when he meets O.T., the younger brother of his former friend Darnell. Known to Cudjoe at that time as “Skeets,” O.T. tells him that Darnell is now in “the slam” after getting into “the dope shit” (36). O.T., meanwhile, is working on getting back into school after having

dropped out the first time around, when he was on some form of scholarship. “I’m a get myself together,” he tells Cudjoe. “Make something of myself” (37). For Cudjoe, O.T. is “Darnell Thompson all over again” (37). The ten years that has passed appear incredible to him, and though he is clearly surprised, at first, that Darnell ended up in prison (“Yeah. Surprised everybody,” O.T. tells him), he cannot help but to express skepticism in regards to O.T.’s future: “Did anything get better instead of worse? Why couldn’t he believe Darnell’s brother? Why did he hear ice cracking as O.T. spoke of his plans? Why did he see Darnell’s rusty hand wrapped around his brother’s dragging him down?” (38)

### 3

In the standard narrative about postwar America, the progressive activism of the 1960s gives way to a recrudescence of conservative ideology (the so-called “white backlash”) in the 1980s. And surely, there is something to this. Yet it is important that the distillation of these decades into bearers of cultural symbolism is in itself the work of ideology. This is especially evident in the implicit suggestion that one cultural logic must necessarily, and sequentially, take the place of another. Such rhetoric is not always misguided, even if it is often adjacent to the insidious narratives of progress that literary critics so often—and rightfully—critique. We must, however, think critically about those culturally privileged generalizations that constitute not only the matter of historical explanation, but has also come to functions as lenses that shape our understanding of past and present alike. In this sense, we might say that the 60s, in particular, exist (alongside

the 50s) in the American cultural imagination today largely as filtered *through* the social, economic, and political transformations associated with the 80s.<sup>28</sup>

To understand how *Philadelphia Fire* engages with questions such as these, one might consider how Cudjoe's exchange with Timbo registers what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls the culturally "dominant narrative" of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>29</sup> Chronicling "a short civil rights movement that begins with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, proceeds through public protests, and culminates with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965," the "defining figure" of this story is Martin Luther King Jr., "frozen in 1963, proclaiming 'I have a dream' during the march on the Mall."<sup>30</sup> Lost to history, meanwhile, is a different King—"the democratic socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers' strike"—who saw the movement not simply in terms of the hope that "children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," but in terms of an ambition to fundamentally and radically restructure the economic substructure of contemporary society.<sup>31</sup> This ambition, Hall goes on to argue, must be understood in terms of a "long civil rights movement," a yet unfinished project with roots in a suppressed affinity between in black radicalism and twentieth century laborite activism.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For one argument to this effect, see Sirota, David, *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now—Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything*.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." 1234. See also Metress, Christopher, "Making Civil Rights Harder: Literature, Memory, and the Black Freedom Struggle."

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Hall's work has indubitably been immensely influential in launching a new paradigm for thinking about Civil Rights. For an overview, see John Salmond's review essay on this topic. Steven Lawson's "Long



In her essay, Hall focuses on how the historical meaning of the Civil Rights Movement “was distorted and reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains.”<sup>33</sup> This, in effect, is the historical arc that culminates with the election of Reagan on the back of a thinly veiled racism that channeled resentment against blacks towards his own anti-government agenda. The new neoconservative rhetoric readily assimilated the language and legacy of civil rights in the sense that it fully affirmed the principle of formal equality before the law, which now comes to be viewed as the movement’s “singular objective,” and as “the principle for which King and the *Brown* decision, in particular, stood.”<sup>34</sup> “By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives,” Hall writes, this “master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement.”<sup>35</sup> It “elevates” it because it allows it, neatly confined to the past, to be construed “as a triumphant moment in a larger American progress narrative.” Yet it also “diminishes” it because this very elevation produces an erasure of the movement’s revolutionary dimension, which in turn prevents “one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time.”<sup>36</sup>

*Philadelphia Fire* engages with this dynamic in complex ways. As Timbo imagines it, Cudjoe’s “sixties novel” is an easily digestible feel-good story.<sup>37</sup> In contrast

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Origins of the Short Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968,” which argues that the short Civil Rights Movement was a distinctive and transformative time, and should be studied as such, is particularly noteworthy in offering an alternative perspective (that nevertheless acknowledges the important work that has been done in the Long Civil Rights Movement framework).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 1235.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 1237.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 1234.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Here, one might consider Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the culture industry operates under capitalism as a form of ideological domination at the service of the preservation of the status quo.

to the book “about the fire” which might get him “fired,” this book allows Timbo to think of himself as a “literary hero”—a desire that itself demonstrates that he is anything but. To this, one might also add that the very idea of a “hero” in this context feeds the gendered fantasy of a triumphant vanquishing of historical injustice. “Let me play the part in the movies,” Timbo tells Cudjoe, as if to emphasize the difference between this now-cinematic imaginary, which we have already seen in his own description of the movement, and whatever “part” he played in real life. Indeed, the idea that the story of Civil Rights is fit for Hollywood adaptation crucially depends on the retroactive sanctioning of the movement, which precisely depends on sublimating it to the nostalgia of “slogans and T-shirts and funny haircuts,” devoid of any and all political energy (83).

We do not, of course, know what Cudjoe would want this novel to say or do, even if it seems fairly safe to say that his vision back when is different from what Timbo articulates at this particular moment. Timbo’s point, once again, is that one might as well partake in the spoils since real change is impossible anyway. Of course, if Cudjoe, has thus far managed to avoid Timbo’s taint of complicity, it is only because of his own personal failings as a father and community figure, because he “copped the education and ran” (81). “How you gon convince somebody democracy’s good or socialism or communism or King and his nouveau Rousseau or whatever the fuckism, how you gon preach the morality of one system over another system when all anybody concerned about is the goodies the system delivers to their door,” Timbo asks. “Answer’s always yes. Yes, I’ll take the money. Don’t care how much blood’s on it. Don’t care if it’s my blood. Yours. I wasn’t the one responsible. I’d prefer clean money but till clean drops

down from heaven this will do. Yes. I'll take it. Somebody will take it. Mize well be me. Money's money. None of it's clean" (84).

The question of the legacy of the (long) Civil Rights Movement is also threaded through the novel's second, metafictional part. Among the various materials in this section is a conversation between the narrator and a "former colleague at the University of Philadelphia." It is worth noting that Wideman himself was a professor of English at Penn between 1966 and 1974. Though it is initially framed by a shared interest in the fire, the conversation soon turns to The School of Social Work, where the narrator's "old friend" once worked. This department, according to the narrator, "was traditionally a hands-on operation, pragmatic, problem oriented, a direct link to city agencies and institutions" (111). Judged to be insufficiently "cost-effective," it is, however, "dismantled," leaving the friend out of his job. "A commission whose announced goals were academic but whose actual agendas were political and economic," the narrator writes, "declared that the University's responsibility was international, not local, theory a higher priority than practice, research and publication worthier measures of success than ministering to the immediate needs of the dispossessed urban proletariat surrounding the island of University" (111-112).

Speaking more broadly, the neoliberalization—terms like "cost-effective" is bandied around more than once—of the University is connected in the novel to the urban redevelopment of "University City," and the "progress" it represents for Timbo. It is these economic developments that make the University an "island"—and it is hard here to not think both about *The Tempest* and Mykonos—rather than an integral part of the city. As one case in point of what its critics call the "Penntrification" of West Philly, one

might to the fate of Black Bottom, a poor but close-knit black community once located precisely in the area now known as University City. Because Black Bottom had been labeled a redevelopment zone as early as the 1950s, a consortium of West Philly universities was able to seize the land in question through a combination of legal but shady strategies that culminated in the use of eminent domain.<sup>38</sup> “With universities just a hop skip down the way what we’re trying to create here is our little version of Athens, you dig,” Timbo tells Cudjoe. “Modern urban living in the midst of certified culture” (78). Yet it is all, at the same time, an artfully constructed illusion, as indicated by the return of the language of the cinema in the description of students “running around on the set looking good and smart and prosperous like ain’t nothing wrong with the world” (78).

But let us return to the fate of the School of Social Work, which the narrator imagines not only as a streamlining of the University, but as a racially motivated retrenchment that operates not only materially but also symbolically. “It was generally understood,” the narrator continues, “that the committee’s charge was to lay to rest once and for all, for anyone still confused in the late seventies, certain misconceptions about a university’s role that had arisen in the sixties” (111-112). The analysis that follows casts the committee’s work as part and parcel with the general political climate at the time:

Of course a university has the privilege of undergoing periodic identity crises, and yes, financial retrenchment was necessary when it became clear that the wartime boom of the sixties couldn’t last forever, that the University could not attempt to be all things to all people, that its survival as a viable institution demanded clarification of purpose, that it should concentrate on doing well what it had traditionally done best. But should all the above mean simply serving a powerful, legitimizing elite? Fiscal responsibility became a battle cry, the license to cut back, turn back, cut down. The forces at work in the University acted as icily, pragmatically as

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<sup>38</sup> For more, see Rogozinski, Jackie and Strom, Elizabeth.

the federal government. Hunker down. Clarify priorities. Whose University is it, after all? Whom is it meant to serve? Which constituencies laying claims on its resources were qualified petitioners? Who could the University afford to ignore? (112-113)

The whole process demonstrates to the narrator how ostensibly “neat, clean means ... can be trotted out to accomplish the most vicious ends” (113). If the “ax” has to fall somewhere, it is better that it does so “systematically, according to a master plan designed to maximize profit derivable from losses”—and if, in the process of implementing the committee’s various “time-tables, conclusions, proposals, directives,” it just so happens that black individuals suffers more than any other group, this should not be taken either “personally or racially” (113). The whole process—and here again, fate of “the University” is aligned with the fate of “the country”—is, after all, “about ensuring the best deal for everyone, in the long run” (113).

There is a connection between the exclusionary nature of this “everyone,” and the rhetorical work it performs—here ironized—in hiding the persistence of racial harm, and the continued ascription of impersonal force to entities like “the University,” “the city,” or “the country.” There seems to be no space for resistance. True, the decision to close The School of Social Work is met with some initial opposition (as was the redevelopment of the Black Bottom neighborhood). Letters are written. Black grad students go on strike. There is an attempt to organize and bring together black faculty, the scant black student body, and other black individuals working at the institution in some capacity. Unable to stand up to “the blithe, gray weather of the University,” however, these “minor storms” soon peter out. “In a year or so very few people seemed to miss what was lost,” the narrator writes, and fewer still “remembered ... the wholesale sacking of what had constituted the largest enclave of black professionals on campus” (118).

As much as this development clearly aggrieves Wideman, he also uses his fiction to complicate what appears here as an unequivocal force for good. When Cudjoe first tells her about his plan to write about the fire and his quest to find Simba, Margaret immediately assumes self-interest. “You mean you’ll just do your thing and forget Simmie,” she tells Cudjoe. “Write your book and gone. Just like the social workers and those busybodies from the University. They been studying us for years. Reports on top of reports. A whole basement full of files in the building where I work. We’re famous” (20). From this perspective, it turns out that research the narrator lauds later in the novel might not, in fact, accomplish very much at all. It is hard to know exactly how much stock to put in Margaret’s embittered comments. They do, however, signal the schism that separates someone like the narrator’s friend and those he studies. All the advantages, it seems, accrue to the ethnographer or the sociologist, who can leverage his or her work for professional advancement and prestige while very little actually changes on the ground. Penn, in particular, is notorious for the large number of dissertations and books produced by going down the street to the “ghetto”—including, to be sure, some very distinguished work. This dynamic, however, only accentuates the already tense relation between the “island” of the University, and the neighborhoods that surround it.

In both of these arcs, Wideman’s strategy is thus not so much about capturing the social energies of a lost revolutionary moment as assessing their dissipation either into politically reductive forms of nostalgia, or into a more general indifference to the politics of remembrance. In his depiction of 80s Philadelphia, the dominant Civil Rights narrative is inextricable from a certain version of upward mobility that proves unable to address, and may in fact further entrench, more deeply seated structural injustices that are at once

historical but also continually reproduced on the level of the political economy. As Cudjoe frames it, his desire to write about the fire is, at least in part, motivated by a desire to somehow make amends for his past. It is not surprising that this should fail, bound up as it is in a model of black leadership that brokers extant power relations rather than seeking a fundamental restructuring of society. But the very possibility of a connection between the fire and the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement nevertheless becomes a site of potentiality, if only because it offers a means of reframing both.

#### 4

One of the most striking aspects of *Philadelphia Fire*'s third and final section is the way in which the previously looming presence of Simba appears to largely disappear. At a number of point in the narrative up to this point, the narrator has made it clear that "Cudjoe's business concerns survivors" (48). The novel ends, however, with a sequence revolving around a memorial service dedicated to those who perished in the fire on Osage Avenue. This shift takes us from Cudjoe's quest for redemption to a ritual of public remembrance in which he is merely an observer or participant. In these pages, Wideman uses the symbolic weight of the narrative's Philadelphia location as a conduit to the more distant past, even as the focus on the ceremony also constitutes a moment of narrative transitivity that looks forward. To read Wideman's novel today means to assess both these trajectories, which is to say to both inhabit the scene itself, in its complex layering of temporalities, while also imagining its relation to our present moment.

When Cudjoe arrives at Independence Square, the location of the service, he finds it "nearly empty," even though the ceremony is set to begin within the hour. At this point

in the narrative, Cudjoe is unwittingly transported into the to a Fourth of July rally in 1805 (190). Prior to 1805, residents from all racial and economic backgrounds gathered on the square to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence—or, as Wideman’s narrator puts it, “the nation’s liberation from British tyranny” (190). This year, however, the city’s contingent of free blacks, “dressed in their Sunday best, toting picnic baskets and jugs for this annual day of feasting, speeches, fireworks and merrymaking,” is driven away from their “customary place at the rear of the crowd” by an angry mob of white citizens. “Cudjoe sees them,” writes the narrator, the present tense indicating his immersion in the unfolding scene, “haul-assing in their old-fashioned clothes, brass-knuckled shoes, hoopskirts, bustles, aprons, bonnets, cutaway coats, tricornered hats, wigs, stockings, tripping over crackling good pieces of chicken they’d fried, straw-covered bottles of wine, panicked, fleeing, clutching the hands of their children who are dressed just like the adults” (190).

The evocative details that populate this complex-yet-effortless sentence appear incongruous in comparison to most other parts of Wideman’s frequently abrasive novel. There is an immersive quality to these lyrical sentences, to put it differently, that is absent in the novel’s approach to its own setting in general, and to the question of how and what Cudjoe (and Wideman) writes about the bombing, in particular. And ironically, perhaps, this moment also describes what is one of the novel’s most affirmative moments of black community. The contrast to Cudjoe’s sense of alienation is stark. Yet the scene that unfolds before him at this moment is also marked by tenuousness, and by a paradox that best recalls Fredrick Douglass’s famous speech on the meaning of the fourth of July to the enslaved. The blacks on the square may be nominally free (the result of a gradual



abolition law passed by the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1780), but relegated to the back of the crowd, they are not truly part of the celebration.

It is as if the desire to remember and memorialize the very recent past functions as a conduit for events that are temporally much more distant, but in this moment equally if not more present. Unlike someone like Ellison, however, Wideman never invokes the difference between the nation's stated ideals, enshrined in its founding documents, and racism that permeates every part of its history. Such a narrative turn seems to not only too easy, but also, given the novel's general sense of contemporary society, absurdly optimistic—perhaps even more so after the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement that ended *de jure* segregation. In the mythos of Civil Rights, as told or appropriated by the neoconservative politics that are shaping the city at this time, there is no longer a divide like the one so clearly demonstrated by the visual staging of the historical scene at the square. Indeed, this becomes even more clear a little bit later, where the present-day presence of an “insta-cam helicopter ... high above the action” becomes a conduit for re-imagining the mob once again, but now from a technologically mediated aerial perspective whereby “the throng” appears “like the cross section of a fancy piece of chocolate candy, gooey white inside a dark rim” before it bursts, like a balloon, the center melting, spreading (194).

The initial passage describing this scene ends with the declaration that the square is now “cleared.” Though this adjective might initially be taken to refer to the 1805 episode, the narrative immediately pivots to a present by means of a description of the currently empty platform, “festooned with bunting, banners, mikes, wires,” that has been set up in preparation for the memorial (190). Here too, the square is generally devoid of

people. “A few stragglers here and there whose presence is a sign of greater absence,” the narrator continues, “the square more abandoned, more desolate because they wander purposelessly, as if lost, as if something must be wrong with them that keeps them in the deserted square when everybody else is someplace else.” At first, Cudjoe believes that something must have happened that he “should know about, but doesn’t” (190). It is the only way the absence of people, which he feels as deeply as anything else in the novel, makes any sense at all to him. “So here he is,” the narrator writes, “expecting lots of people to be gathered and instead of a crowd greeting him, hiding him, confirming his reason for arriving, here he is out in the open with a couple of other fools” (191). The idea that such a crowd, however affirmative its presence, should serve as a way of “hiding” also problematizes the idea of what the act of remembrance should or could be about. The comfort of the sense that the bombing is an important event that should be remembered, that should be memorialized, is denied Cudjoe here, who feels “exposed, out of place, out of sync”—a sentence that makes literal the exposure to spatial and temporal dislocation that is everywhere present in this part of the novel (191).

Retreating from the square following his ghostly vision, Cudjoe entertains the fantasy—indeed, this is another “fantasy of identification” of sorts—that he might perhaps be able to “recruit a crowd for the memorial service” (192-193). In his mind, he appeals to the people he observes on the street: “Hey fellas. It’s about youall. Listen, brothers. If they offed them people on Osage yesterday just might be you today. Or tomorrow” (193). Ultimately, however, he “leads no parade back to the square,” the entirety of his interior monologue turning out to have been for his own benefit. The narrator continues:

This is the ho-hum hour when the city empties itself. Regular as a tide. Everybody who has a home splits for home. Good-bye. Good-bye. Why should they stop today. For a microphone, some black crepe paper, a semicircle of chairs on a platform (193-194).

Though Wideman uses empathetic punctuation only sparsely throughout *Philadelphia Fire*, this passage exhibits a particularly striking affective flatness. “Why should they stop,” the narrator appears to wonder. But the lack of a question mark indicates that there is no real curiosity here, with the sentence ultimately appearing more resigned than inquiring. It is as if there is nothing that can truly upend the tide-like quality of daily life in the city, with bodies moving from home to work, and back again. And the sentence that follows is more deflationary still. Rather than affirming the act of remembrance as a political, spiritual, or even existential exercise, it instead reduces the service to its enabling material conditions, which appear by themselves as wholly inadequate to the task.

Indeed, throughout the pages that follow, Cudjoe is hyper-aware of the logistics involved in the ceremony (194). Once he has arrived back at the square, someone does a sound check while “a pasty-faced woman” offers him a candle (194). After lingering for a moment on the physical appearance of the candles (each “wears a pale paper cup impaled on its shaft”), Cudjoe reflects that it must have been someone’s job to estimate attendance and order the appropriate number of candles for the rally. “That number, a hope, a wish,” the narrator continues, “that number minus the few candles Cudjoe saw people holding ... would leave stacks of boxes unopened, surplus candles, cups, matches” (195). It is as if the true record of the event consists in these unused items. Cudjoe and the narrator both seem to assume that no-one could have expected attendance to be as scarce as it ended up being. To do so would be tantamount to insulting the dead.

“Why wasn’t the entire city mourning,” the narrator asks. “Where was the mayor and his official delegation from City Hall? The governor? The president? A dog hit by a bus would draw a bigger crowd” (195). When the first speaker “explain[s] to those in attendance why the whole city should be gathered there,” part of the pathos comes from the fact that had this come to pass, society would be so different that it is questionable whether the bombing would have occurred in the first place. Indeed, the significance of the act of remembrance in the context of the novel emerges precisely in relation to those who are not there, or those who do not or cannot, as it were, care enough to deviate from the numbing routine of everyday life.

It is clear that Wideman wants to believe that the memorial service has transformative rather than simply diagnostic potential. The heavily featured props do, however, become a point of connection for the assembled few, even as they also come across as contrived and artificial. The challenge in reading the scene consists in weighing these elements against each other without privileging one over the other. In the beginning of the ceremony, Cudjoe occupies something of an in-between position: “lean[ing] against a fountain,” he is “[n]ot quite part of the meager gathering in front of the temporary stage, not exactly part of the busy indifference of the city behind him” (194). When people begin to light their candles, however, he “edges around the fountain’s rim, closer to others in the audience so that his candle can be touched” (196). The crowd comes together: someone shares his light with Cudjoe, who in turn helps someone else light his. The resultant “shivery points of fire” seem to promise, however temporarily, what basically amounts to a community (196).

As the ceremony winds down, Cudjoe just wants to get away. Once again, his attention turns to logistics. “Will the candles be collected and saved for another day, to commemorate another massacre,” he wonders. Or will they simply be “recycled next year,” when the time comes to memorialize the fire again? The novel does not provide an answer to this question, though one can safely presume whatever remains of the candles that were actually used to be destined for the trash. The effect is to deflate what might otherwise be taken as a semi-transcendent experience. Yet this point of emphasis also adds an important perspective. To attend to the trappings of remembrance is, in fact, a way of remembering the present. As important as it might be to honor the past, to honor the dead, it is also important to remember how easily we forget.

*Philadelphia Fire* does, however, end what at first appears as another ghostly vision. “Cudjoe,” begins the novel’s very last paragraph, “hears footsteps behind him. A mob howling his name. Screaming for blood. Words come to him, cool him, stop him in his tracks. He’d known them all his life. *Never again. Never again.* He turns to face whatever is rumbling over the stones of Independence Square” (199). According to Tracie Church Guzzio, this scene signifies that Cudjoe is now “ready to confront history no matter how painful,” that he will no longer “run away from who he is or from his past” (187).<sup>39</sup> It is not, however, actually clear whether he is facing the future or the past here. And the overall effect of these final sentences is ultimately not so much one of empowerment but disempowerment. Cudjoe’s words, whether or not he has “known them all his life,” ring hollow. He is, after all, only one man, and though *Philadelphia Fire* is largely told through his quest to locate Simba, the novel is not about him. His chief

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<sup>39</sup> Guzzio, Tracy Church, “‘All My Father’s Texts’: John Edgar Wideman’s Historical Vision in *Philadelphia Fire*, *The Cattle Killing*, and *Fatheralong*.” 187.

function, rather, is to function as a figure at once distant and immediate, to mediate the seductiveness of the quasi-mythological narrative of redemption—whether personal or national. Cudjoe cannot write his book about the fire and remain true to its social and cultural significance. And neither can Wideman. Not truly. This is not a failure. Or, it is not *simply* a failure.

## 5

In 2015, journalist Gene Demby at NPR's *Code Switch* published a story on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the MOVE bombing. In it, Demby asks a number of people about how they remember that day, to include a number of residents in the immediate neighborhood (where many of the rebuilt houses are now boarded up), MOVE member Ramona Africa (who survived the fire), and his own mother (who watched the fire live on television from their home some twenty minutes away from Osage Avenue). In his introductory remarks, Demby begins by describing the bombing as “a cataclysm for my hometown, a part of the collective memories of Philadelphians of a certain age.”<sup>40</sup> Though he was only four years at the time, and so has no memories of the actual day, Derby would learn bits and pieces of the story as he grew up. A little bit later, he goes on to state that he “started revisiting the story of MOVE in earnest” following the emergence of race and policing as a regular feature in the news. “Almost every chord from that larger metastory—the mutual distrust between the police and black communities, the militarization of local law enforcement agencies, incidents of police brutality—seemed to

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<sup>40</sup> Demby, Gene, “I’m from Philly. 30 Years Later, I’m Still Trying to Make Sense of the MOVE Bombing.” n.p.

resonate in the particular story of the bombing,” Derby continues. “But in the case of MOVE, the volume was turned way up.”<sup>41</sup>

Some five days later, Derby posted a follow-up to his initial article titled “Why Have So Many People Never Heard of the MOVE Bombing?” This piece begins by noting that the staff at NPR had been surprised at the deluge of responses from readers who had apparently never heard about the bombing. At first, Derby speculates that the reasons for this might be either regional or generational. Using largely anecdotal evidence, he dismisses both of these possibilities—not because they are necessarily bogus, but because they cannot fully explain what appears to him now as a remarkable gap in the collective memory of the United States. “What gives,” Derby asks. “It seems incredible that so many people had never heard about the time American law enforcement bombed U.S. citizens on U.S. soil, which, on top of the deaths, left dozens of bystanders’ homes destroyed in an uncontrolled fire that the police commissioner told firefighters not to put out right away. The details are so extreme, so over-the-top. How have we forgotten this?”<sup>42</sup>

In what follows, Derby interviews sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici, who wrote a book about MOVE in the early 90s and whose general research interests revolve around militant fringe groups who end up in some sort of government standoff. Wagner-Pacifici suggests that there are two broad reasons for why the MOVE conflict’s relative obscurity. The first has to do with ideology. MOVE itself is and was hard to place within the political spectrum, and it has no clear affinities to other groups or movements. The name of the organization, for instance, appears to be an acronym, but actually stands for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Demby, Gene. “Why Have So Many People Never Heard of the MOVE Bombing?” n.p.

nothing in particular. MOVE, one might say, fits neither within mainstream politics nor its central oppositional frameworks.<sup>43</sup> The second has to do with the local nature of the confrontation. Because it did not involve any federal agencies, the political implications of the bombing were largely contained, with local politicians only all too eager to move on.

Derby is surely right to point out, however, that the recent attention directed at the disproportionate police brutality directed at minority populations provides an always already belated context for remembering the MOVE bombing. Honoring the same thirtieth anniversary as Derby, Mumia Abu-Jamal, the journalist that before his imprisonment for the murder of a police officer—a crime he and his supporters contend that he did not commit—frequently reported on MOVE, recorded the following missive:

May 13th at 30, why should we care what happened on May 13th, 1985? I mean, seriously, that was 30 years ago, a long time ago, way back when. Know what I mean? Most people won't say that, but they think that. Why, indeed? I'll tell you why. Because what happened then is a harbinger of what's happening now all across America. I don't mean bombing people—not yet, that is. I mean the visceral hatreds and violent contempt once held for MOVE is now visited upon average people, not just radicals and revolutionaries like MOVE. In May 1985, police officials justified the vicious attacks on MOVE children by saying they, too, were combatants. In Ferguson, Missouri, as police and National Guard confronted citizens, guess how cops described them in their own files. "Enemies." Enemy combatants, anyone? Then look at 12-year-old Tamir Rice of Cleveland. Boys, men, girls, women—it doesn't matter. When many people stood in silence, or worse, in bitter acquiescence, to the bombing, shooting and carnage of May 13, 1985, upon MOVE, they opened the door to the ugliness of today's police terrorism from coast to coast. There is a direct line from then to now. May 13, 1985, led to the eerie robocop present. If it had been justly and widely condemned then, there would be no now, no Ferguson, no South Carolina, no Los Angeles, no Baltimore. The barbaric police bombing of May 13, 1985, and the whitewash of the murders of 11

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<sup>43</sup> For more on the MOVE tragedy, see Wagner-Pacifici's *Discourse and Destruction*.



MOVE men, women and children opened a door that still has not been closed. We are today living with those consequences. From imprisoned nation, this is Mumia Abu-Jamal.<sup>44</sup>

Describing the bombing of the MOVE house as a “harbinger of what’s happening now all across America,” what is most striking about Abu-Jamal’s recording is the counterfactual claim that had the bombing “been justly and widely condemned then, there would be no now, no Ferguson, no South Carolina, no Los Angeles, no Baltimore.” In this context, each of these locations metonymically stand for a victim of a police shooting: Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Ezell Ford, Freddie Gray. The effect is to emphasize how these ostensibly neutral ostensible geographical referents may function to invoke histories of violence and oppression, so that every time the place they refer to is invoked, we remember.

Had there been a “Philadelphia,” Abu-Jamal suggests, history could have turned out otherwise. He thus affirms, with the benefit of hindsight, what Wideman sensed already in the late 80s, but could not put into words. One might say, too, that the “something other” that the novel’s unwritten reaches towards is something like Black Lives Matter, the movement that though he never mentions it by name, permeates every syllable Abu-Jamal utters. If *Philadelphia Fire* is suspicious of black elites, it can nevertheless imagine no real alternative. Black Lives Matter activists, by contrast, consciously resist the idea of the charismatic leader who guides his—and it is always a man—people into the future, opting instead for a “leaderful” organizational structure. They look back to the Civil Rights Movement for inspiration, but also to “unwrite” the legacy of the dominant narrative. Black Lives Matter, this is to say, connects, however

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<sup>44</sup> Mumia, Abu-Jamal, “May 13th at Thirty.” n.p.

indirectly, what Abu-Jamal refers to as the “silence” or “bitter acquiescence” that characterized most people’s response to the bombing, and “the ugliness of today’s police terrorism from coast to coast.”

In Abu-Jamal’s telling, the MOVE bombing takes on a quasi-mythic quality, having “opened a door that still has not been closed.” Through the unwritten, *Philadelphia Fire* performs its own inability to “close the book,” so to speak—and not only on the fire. The emergence of Black Live Matter, does, in a limited way, allow us to close the book on Wideman’s novel. This is not to say that this movement will necessary be successful, or that it represents the most ideal form of activism imaginable in contemporary society. Such assessments are impossible to make. Yet by its very nature, Black Lives Matter locates itself in the “unwritten” space of the future, whereas the unwritten for Wideman signifies primarily as a failure of vision that is ultimately grounded in the present, and in the individual, yet universalized, subject. To the extent that we still live neoliberal society that is configured a great deal like the one we read about in *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe’s perplexity is still ours.

### Egan's Intermediality

In this chapter, I turn to the question of how the contemporary novel relates to our increasingly frantic mediascape. In so doing, I move much closer to the present, to Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), as well as her Twitter short story "Black Box" (2012). Thematically and formally, both of these texts situate themselves in-between old and new media, both as a way of reinvigorating the novel, but also as a way of framing it as an object of nostalgia. I draw out this tension by reading Egan, as well as her positioning in the twenty-first century literary marketplace, in relation to two theoretical frameworks. The first of these, Marshall McLuhan's theory of new media, speaks directly to the social, cultural, and technological changes that Egan chronicles. The second, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel, helps us think about how the novel might be said to respond to these far-reaching transformations.

"The effects of technology," writes McLuhan in his classic *Understanding New Media*, do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance."<sup>1</sup> Technology, in other words, prosthetically augments the way in which we process, and thus understand, the world. Elsewhere, McLuhan compares our immersion in the technologized environment that surrounds us to the submersion of fish in water. "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water," he writes, "since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in."<sup>2</sup> Given this, it is only the "serious

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<sup>1</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding New Media*. 18.

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *War and Peace in the Global Village*. 175.

artist,” an “expert” particularly attuned to “changes in sense perception,” who is able to “encounter technology with impunity.”<sup>3</sup>

Egan has frequently positioned herself as a writer concerned with new technology, even as she also asserts that she herself is not a great enthusiast of technological innovation in the context of her personal life. In interviews, for instance, she frequently makes a point of mentioning that she does all her writing by longhand—a fact that adds a certain mystique to what otherwise appears as fairly tech-savvy narratives. In a keynote at the 2012 NeMLA Convention, Egan expanded on these themes by means of a series of reflections on the future of the novel. The story she tells is, in some respects, a familiar one. “Writing novels have never been easy,” Egan begins,

and there’s no question that we are up against more competition and distraction than ever before. We’re going to need to use all of the tools at our disposal to do work that continues to be relevant and engaging at this moment. And I think now is an excellent time to remember the novel’s swaggering and curious and eclectic beginnings, and its ability to absorb everything it comes into contact with. As a citizen and a parent, and mostly a 49-year-old crank, I am threatened—deeply threatened—by the power and ubiquity of Facebook and Twitter and YouTube, and even old-fashioned television—even as I enjoyed it. But as a writer, I’m always asking myself, how can I harness these tools, and bend them to my purpose, which is to write fiction that feels fresh, and tells stories that might be off-limits to me otherwise. What have these tools made possible that wasn’t possible before. I believe, very strongly, that there are pleasures to be had in reading books, in whatever form, that cannot be approached by other media. And as long as that’s true—as long as we do our job and make sure that that’s true—I firmly believe that the novel will continue to thrive.<sup>4</sup>

Egan’s remarks about the novel’s “beginnings”—in her talk, she speaks at some length about Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*—indicates that it is perhaps no longer as

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<sup>3</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding New Media*. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Egan, Jennifer. “Experimentation in Fiction: Notes from a Reluctant Practitioner.” n.p.

“swaggering and curious and eclectic” as it once was. The remark that follows, however, directly recalls Bakhtin’s elevation of the novel because of its capacity to absorb different genres and linguistic formations to produce new realities and new ways of seeing. “The novel,” Bakhtin argues, “is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding.”<sup>5</sup> In comparison to older aesthetic forms like the epic, which is essentially complete and always takes place in a mythological past, the novel is “contemporary,” in a manner of speaking, because it names “a zone of contact with the present in all its openness.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, that other great theorist of the novel from around this time, György Lukács, similarly argues that the novel “excludes completeness,” and that it, as opposed to those “other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in process of becoming.”<sup>7</sup>

It is easy enough to see how the three novels that I have covered in my previous chapters constitute examples of Bakhtin’s dialogical form. To mention the most obvious ones, there we have the fusion of modernist and vernacular form in *Invisible Man*, the tension between European distinction and American mass culture in *Lolita*, and the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the academy and the street in *Philadelphia Fire*. It might be said, too, that while the question of the developing media systems that dominate so many accounts of the latter half of the twentieth century have not been a major concern of mine so far, there some traces. Take the cinematic gaze that mediates Humbert’s impressions of America and shapes his construction of *Lolita*, for instance, or

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<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 72-73.

Wideman's invocation of cable news reporting about the bombing of MOVE. More important, perhaps, is how each of these novels put pressure on the "zone of contact" between novel and world: Ellison's emergence, Nabokov's unconcern, and Wideman's unwritten. In each, the point is not to synthesize some new, privileged view of contemporary reality. Far from it. What matters, rather, is the energy that is produced in the encounter between these ostensibly disparate temporalities.

In this chapter, the central trope for thinking about the novel as a vehicle for contemporaneity is intermediality.<sup>8</sup> While critics from both media studies and literary studies have defined this term in many different ways, I take it as broadly referring to a defamiliarizing structure of relation between different media as it occurs within the formal structure of a particular work of art. More specifically, I discuss how Egan positions herself in respect to three different media. I begin by discussing what she, in the ironically titled chapter "Pure Language," refers to as T'ing—a form of communication that closely resembles texting or instant messaging. I then turn to Egan's famous PowerPoint chapter, which was invariably mentioned in every review, interview, and public appearance from around the time of the novel's release. The source of the fascination might be said to derive from the instinctive incommensurability between the form of novelistic storytelling and the often-ridiculed form of the PowerPoint presentation. Finally, I turn to "Black Box," which raises questions about the relation between literature and media even more strongly, while also constituting something of a "sequel" or "extension" to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

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<sup>8</sup> In a helpful survey, Irena Rajewsky argues that broadly speaking, intermediality might be taken either as a critical category, or as a critical lens. In terms of more narrow definitions as they pertain to the literary, the term usually refers either to medial transposition, media combination, or intermedial reference.

In each of these cases, we need to attend to both the technological possibilities a particular medium provides, as well as the social practices in which it figures. One critic who is very much attuned to the complexities that arises from the interplay between technology and society is Lisa Gitelman, who defines media as “socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.”<sup>9</sup> As Gitelman is aware, this definition makes the demarcation of what constitutes a particular medium amorphous, as the these “protocols” implies the inclusion of “a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus.”<sup>10</sup> This means that the social history of a medium is imbricated with its history as a technology for representation, in a double dialectic that denies either of its constituting poles dialectical primacy. While we could attempt to articulate the effects or possibilities of a medium purely in formal or technological terms, in other words, such an analysis would ignore the social context inside which these effects gain purchase, and inside which mediation occurs. Yet, it would be equally impossible to analyze a medium only in terms of its social epistemologies, as these are crucially connected to the technology by means of which “content” is mediated.

Such considerations must ultimately bring us back to the “technology” of the novel itself, to include the conventions that guide our sense of what a novel is or can be. There is, to be sure, an inherent conservatism in Egan’s statement that there are “pleasure

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<sup>9</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New*. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

to be had in reading books ... that cannot be approached by other media”—a conservatism that is, it seems, further entrenched in her sense of herself as a “reluctant practitioner” of experimental fiction.<sup>11</sup> This point of view does not, on the one hand, mesh particularly well with the more radical critical statements on digital literature (or “the digital” as such), which, in the words of Alan Kirby, represents “a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social, and multiple authorship.”<sup>12</sup> Egan is much too committed to traditional conceptions of literature as craft. Yet this attitude is also, and on the other hand, very much in tune with the time, seeing how fiction in the last few decades have moved away towards the integration of key elements of a now-exhausted postmodernism with characters who largely feel like real people, with actual social worlds and institutions.

And these are, indeed, largely the terms upon which Egan’s novel was received. “If Jennifer Egan is our reward for living through the self-conscious gimmicks and ironic claptrap of postmodernism, then it was all worthwhile,” writes Rob Charles in *The Washington Post*, before proclaiming that Egan uses the “stylistic and formal shenanigans” customarily associated with postmodernism “to produce a deeply humane story about growing up and growing old in a culture corroded by technology and marketing.” In *The New York Review of Books*, similarly, Cathleen Schine describes the novel as “a moving humanistic saga, an enormous nineteenth-century-style epic brilliantly disguised as ironic postmodern pastiche.” The invocation of the “nineteenth-century-style epic” here might seem curious, lest it is taken simply as the ambition for to

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<sup>11</sup> As indicated by the title of Egan’s NeMLA talk.

<sup>12</sup> Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism*. 1. For a good discussion of this turn in literary criticism, see Wilkie, Rob.



represent or evoke a depth of feeling that is entirely foreign to postmodern machinations. If the novel indeed is “disguised” in this way, that very fact itself repudiates postmodernism’s constitutive attention to artifice, and what Frederic Jameson calls the “waning of affect” under the conditions of late capitalism. “With great openness of spirit, fluency, and a comic vision that balances her sharp eye for the tragic,” Schine continues, “Egan has employed every playful device of the postmodern novel with such warmth and sensitivity that the genre is transcended completely.”

Experimentation in contemporary fiction is, then, positioned as both potentially indulgent yet also absolutely necessary. As a “49-year-old crank,” Egan strikes a middle ground in that while she does to some extent “absorb” T’ing, PowerPoint, and Twitter, all three also remain alien presences. Nor is it a coincidence in this respect that Egan connects her own middle-age, and reading Proust in her 40s, in particular, to her artistic preoccupation with the passing of time. The modernist impulse to recover a past that cannot possibly be recovered is not simply reflected in the novel’s thematization of nostalgia, but in the making of the novel itself, as a cultural form, a potential object of nostalgic contemplation. Egan does not, exactly, condone such a view, and it is certainly antithetical to anything Bakhtin might have to say. She does, however, seek to harness the fact that the novel, as a form, is most attuned to the current moment when it faces up to the conditions of its own relative marginalization. And in an increasingly mediated society, it can only do so by turning precisely to the question of mediation.

# 1

For most characters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, nostalgia appears as an inevitable reaction to both social and cultural change broadly construed, as well as the

process of growing old. Most immediately, these concerns are reflected in the novel's engagement with music and the music industry from somewhere around the early 1980s to somewhere around the early 2000s. To trace this theme, we might begin by considering Bennie's belief that the digitization of music production, occurring alongside the corporatization of the industry, has erased any trace "muddiness," or "the sense of actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual room" (22). In this new, now fully administered society, there is no room for the creativity and oppositional energies that the novel broadly associates with punk. Over the course of the novel, Bennie, in short, becomes nostalgic in a business where nostalgia means that you are done for.<sup>13</sup> And Egan too, is to some degree nostalgic, as evidenced by the fact that she describes her book as "a wistful homage," written in a "twilight moment," to a form of artistic endeavoring that is becoming commercially less and less viable due to changes in consumption patterns that are in fact wrought by technological change.

Egan combines this nostalgia with experimental literary form. Adopting the dying form of the concept album, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is divided into an "A" and a "B" side, and comprises thirteen linked chapters (or "tracks"). The idea, roughly, is that reading the novel should emulate the experience of listening to a record album, where no one song sounds exactly like any other. The assumption here is, of course, that other novels treat chapters as stylistically uniform "containers" for the unfolding narrative. While some novels do this, most do not—and this includes most novels that we consider conventionally "realist." Egan's novel, in either case, is explicitly propelled by difference, on a formal-generic level as well as in respect to the changing life

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<sup>13</sup> "Nostalgia was the end—everyone knew that," Bennie muses at one point when reflecting on how his mentor, Lou Kline, had declared that "rock and roll had peaked at Monterey Pop" (37).

circumstances of the handful of characters that recur throughout the narrative. Each chapter is told through the perspective of a different protagonist, each deploys different formal or generic tropes, and each adopts a (relatively speaking) unique style or tone. There are chapters written in the first, the second, and the third person. Some are focalized through the knowledge and experience of specific characters, others narrated by omniscient narrators. One reproduces a fictional celebrity profile, while also self-consciously lampooning the generic conventions of this form. Another is repeatedly interrupted by information about the long-term fate of its characters, in a sense trapping them in the future rather than the past. Combined with the way each chapter also jumps forward and backward across time, one effect of this multiplicity is to highlight contingency and disjuncture rather than continuity and chronology—even as the premise of each chapter as a self-contained unit, consistent with a set of themes but with variations in genre, style, and voice also lends the novel a different sense of unity.

There is, to be sure, something exhilarating about “attempting to summarize the action of a narrative that feels as freely flung as a bag of trash down a country gully,” as Will Blythe puts it in one review.<sup>14</sup> And to do so, he continues, is to grasp something fundamental about the novel’s attempt to draw as “wide a circumference” as possible while maintaining some semblance of “coherence and momentum.” It is not, however, altogether clear how one should approach this task. One might try to arrange the materials that make up the novel’s story world chronologically. Or, one might try to capture the interconnections between the chapters diachronically, as they unfold in narrative time. Egan’s “network aesthetic” does, in either case, lends itself to various

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<sup>14</sup> Blythe, Will. “Book Review.” n.p.

forms of visual representation. A quick Google search reveals the existence of great many such graphs, mostly outlining the relationships between the novel's cast of characters. These are both clarifying and compelling. But they are also limiting precisely because they insist on a synchronicity that ultimately flattens the novel's engagement with the effects of time.<sup>15</sup> And this experience cannot be reduced to some simple narrative of how a person or a society or a culture gets from "A to B," to invoke another of the novel's chapters.

Yet structurally, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* again and again interrogates exactly this question. The novel is, after all, largely premised on meeting certain characters, only to later encounter them again under radically different formal, biographical, and historical conditions. The idea of going from "A" to "B" might be taken as implying a causal emplotment of events. Incidentally, this is the logic of the realist novel, which unfolds for its readers precisely such a narrative. Of course, writers are also concerned with the reverse direction, which is to say how we can, from the position of "B," recover or experience some version of "A" once again. This is the Proustian problematic that Egan refunctions in terms of her engagement with intermedial form, as well as with technology more generally. The form of her novel, in other words, and its formal heterogeneity, becomes one of its strongest claims to contemporaneity, if only because this term signifies a similar heterogeneity of temporal and social relations.

Before I turn to these matters, I want to briefly look at "A to B" to consider one particular way in which Egan takes up and reconfigures the theme of nostalgia. One part

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<sup>15</sup> One partial exception to this is Filip Zembowicz's interactive map of the novel, which contains a slider that allows the user to navigate the novel page-by-page and so watch the network of connections between characters grow as the novel unfolds.

of this chapter focuses on a musician named Bosco, the guitarist of a successful band called The Conduits whom Bennie signed early in his career as a music industry executive. Once a “scrawny, stovepipe-panted practitioner of a late-eighties sound somewhere between punk and ska, a hive of redheaded mania who had made Iggy Pop look indolent on stage,” the Bosco we meet in this chapter is “obese, alcoholic, and cancer-ridden.” With this juxtaposition, Egan is playing with the idea of punk or punk rock as representing a form of youthful rebelliousness that was always imagined as antithetical to both the mainstream, and to very idea of growing old. As such, Bosco ties into the novel’s engagement with what Gerard Moorey calls “rock ideology,” which he defines as “a system of distinctions and stratifications whereby popular music is classified and argued over in terms of its cultural value and authenticity.”<sup>16</sup> While we do not know much about Bosco’s music, we do know that Bennie feels that it is or was “real,” as opposed to the corporatized music he is producing after having sold his label to a multinational corporation.

There is a larger political argument hovering in the background here, which is the idea that opposition to the social order is all well and good when attached to the idea of youth, where it can be neutralized as youthful indiscretion and therefore isolated in the past (or what is imagined as becoming the past). Sustained opposition to dominant society, by contrast, is to be discouraged. Pierre Bourdieu similarly considers age divisions as socially constructed categories that reflect power differentials holding between the old (read: conservative) and the young (read: radical). There is a reason why

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<sup>16</sup> Moorey, Gerard. “Aging, Death, and Revival: Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels.” 65.

the aging rock star is such a cliché, and why reunion tours might appear, to the cynical observer, at least, as quasi-pathetic cash-grabs leveraging a nostalgia which the music itself rejects (or at least rejected). “I hope I die before I get old,” exclaims Roger Daltrey in “My Generation”—a line that cannot be sung unironically beyond a certain age. But perhaps it was always ironic? It is no coincidence, in either case, that Egan is writing about these questions at a time when this ideology itself has grown “old.”

We first meet Bosco when Stephanie, Bennie’s wife at the time and the focal point of the chapter, visits him to talk about his new album. Because he now has “corporate bosses,” Bennie is not allowed to spend any money on Bosco beyond defraying production and distribution costs. Out of a sense of loyalty, he pays Stephanie “to act as his publicist and booking agent.” (Stephanie works for PR maverick La Doll, whom we will meet later.) Not that this meant much, as Bosco had been “too sick to do much of anything for the last two albums, and his lassitude had been roughly matched by the world’s indifference toward him.” Bosco, though, has an idea: he wants to make a “comeback”:

“The album’s called *A to B*, right?” Bosco said. “And that’s the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about? Let’s not pretend it didn’t happen.”

Stephanie was too startled to respond.

“I want interviews, features, you name it,” Bosco went on. “Fill up my life with that shit. Let’s document every fucking humiliation. This is reality, right? You don’t look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you’ve had half your guts removed. Time’s a goon, right? Isn’t that the expression?” (127)

Stephanie is flabbergasted. “The bottom line is, no one cares that your life has gone to hell,” Stephanie tells Bosco after having first tried a politer approach. “It’s a joke that you think this is interesting. If you were still a rock star, it might be, but you aren’t a rock

star—you're a relic" (127). That, of course, is exactly the point. Bosco's idea is to go on a national tour, "doing all the same stuff onstage" that he used to do. "I'm going to move like I moved before," he explains, "only more so" (128). The idea, in other words, is for Bosco to do a bunch of press about the fact that he is "an ailing and decrepit shadow of [his] former self," and then perform as if he still *was* that self. "Bingo," Bosco replies.

Stephanie sees some issues, however. First among these is "the fact that Bosco wasn't remotely capable of performing in his old manner, and that trying to do so would kill him—probably sooner rather than later" (129). This is, however, precisely the point: "We know the outcome, but we don't know when, or where, or who will be there when it finally happens. It's a Suicide Tour." Bosco knows that he cannot be who he used to be, that the past is irrecoverable. But if he dies trying, there is a sense in which the difference between "A" and "B" is negated, that he reclaims his youth at the moment of death. And this conception would, in theory at least, make his performance one of defiance. What is proposed, after all, is an experience of past and present, brought together in the anticipation of a foreclosed future. It is about connecting to something that feels real, and "it doesn't get any realer than this." Ironically, though, that realness seems to derive chiefly from the spectacle of it all.

## 2

"Pure Language," the novel's final chapter, expands on these concerns by explicitly relating the power of music to speak to the "now" to an increasingly mediated society. The chapter opens with Bennie trying to persuade a character named Alex to help him "create 'authentic' word of mouth" for an upcoming concert featuring one Scotty Hausmann (315). Alex agrees, if somewhat reluctantly, and later links up with Lulu,

Bennie's (new) assistant, to work out the details. The plan, basically, involves Alex selecting fifty "parrots," from his list of 15,895 "friends," to feign enthusiasm and so drum up excitement for Scotty's performance. It works, to the degree that Alex's wife Rebecca, from whom he is hiding his involvement, independently suggests that they should attend. The concert turns out to be a great success, with the crowd feeling that Scotty and his slide guitar touched something deep inside of them. The chapter then ends with Bennie and Alex walking the streets of New York in a euphoric daze while thinking about Sasha, who was once Bennie's assistant, and with whom Alex, as chronicled in the novel's first chapter, went on a date in his early days in New York.

Setting the stage for all of this is a world in which a great deal of human interaction happens through so-called T'ing, which, as I mentioned earlier, basically refers to texting or instant messaging. In the novel, this form of communication is most closely associated with Lulu, whom the narrator describes as "a living embodiment of the new 'handset employee': paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent" (317). Egan's near-future is also a world in which a generation of so-called "pointers," or preverbal children armed with smartphone-like devices loaded with their parents' credit card information, have "not only revived a dead industry," but also come to function as "the arbiters of musical success" (313). Indeed, at one point in the chapter, Alex, the father of a toddler, remarks on "how easily baby talk fitted itself into the crawl space of a T" (327). Both, Egan suggests, are purely literal. The difference, of course, is that while "baby talk" is a developmental stage on the path to language acquisition, "the crawl space of a T" refers to a set of technological and social conditions for communication.



That this new communicative frontier is, to some degree, opposed to the analogue world of face-to-face communication becomes clear in Alex and Lulu's conversation about the ethics of Bennie's marketing plan. This conversation stalls as Lulu grows tired of "talking." "There are so many ways to go wrong," she tells Alex. "All we've got are metaphors, and they're never exactly right. You can't ever just *Say. The. Thing*" (321). At this juncture, the two instead get down to business by turning to their handsets, without having even begun to hash out their philosophical differences. "That was easy," Alex tells Lulu after sending her a list of names with notes. "I know," she responds. "It's pure—no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgments" (317).

Lulu and Alex ultimately disagree about the nature of subjectivity. To Lulu, it does not matter why one holds a certain belief—even if that reason is money. "Look," Lulu tells an indignant Alex at one point, "if I believe, I believe. Who are you to judge my reasons?" (320) Alex, meanwhile, is concerned about whether or not there is a correspondence between what one actually feels, and what one publicly avows.<sup>17</sup> This, incidentally, is why Bennie describes him as a "purist," and therefore "perfect" for the job at hand (310). Of course, the very fact that Alex agrees to help Bennie immediately undermines this claim. As one of the potential reasons for why he had "caved to Bennie ... without a fight," Alex reflects that he had, in a sense, already "sold himself" (and "at the very point in his life when he'd felt most subversive," too), in that "every byte of information he'd posted online (favorite color, vegetable, sexual position was stored in the databases of multinationals" (316). Ultimately, though, he decides that he does not

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<sup>17</sup> For a fuller discussion of the question of sincerity, see Adam Kelly.

really care to analyze his intentions—a decision that cuts at the very heart of the matter, since it undercuts the ideal of transparency that underwrites Alex’s alleged purity.<sup>18</sup>

It is important, in other words, that the feigned enthusiasm for Scotty’s concert should appear sincere, in part because this is a condition of the scheme’s success, but also because this appearance inoculates the “parrots” from feeling the full weight of their complicity. When Alex joins the throng of people who are all headed to the concert, he nevertheless experiences a “surge of disbelief, followed by a rush of ownership and power” (330). Soon, though, he feels queasy, because he cannot quite take pride in this accomplishment, and fearful, because he does not even know if Scotty is a good performer. A “self-administered poultice ... in the form of a brain-T” follows, affirming once again how the structure of what we might call “T-thinking” evacuates the capacity of language to reflect on moral issues (330). Or, at any rate, what the reader, with Alex, take to be moral issues—Lulu, on her part, treats concerns such as these merely as evidence of “calcified morality” (320).

Scotty represents something different altogether. In his first appearance in the novel, he and Bennie are members of the same band, The Flaming Dildos, in the early 1980s in San Francisco. Back then, they fancied the same girl. From this point on, however, their lives move in vastly different directions. This is made abundantly clear when (a divorced) Scotty appears again as the narrator of “X’s and O’s,” which begins with him finding out that Bennie is now a big-shot record producer. Scotty, meanwhile, works as a janitor in a neighborhood school during the school year, and collects litter in a

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<sup>18</sup> This then becomes the context for his realization that the kind of people who might go along with Bennie’s plan are people just like him: people who at some point “had stopped being themselves without realizing it” (317).

park located near the Williamsburg Bridge during summers. “I felt no shame whatsoever in these activities,” Scotty tells the reader, “because I understood what almost no one else seemed to grasp: that there was only an infinitesimal difference, a difference so small that it barely existed except as a figment of the human imagination, between working in a tall green glass building on Park Avenue and collecting litter in a park. In fact, there may have been no difference at all” (93).

It is easy to be sympathetic to Scotty’s attitude here while also recognizing that it constitutes a defensive mechanism. It is still worthwhile, however, to briefly consider how his beliefs in this matter further the novel’s engagement with the nature of contemporary subjectivity, especially in its relation to symbolic capital and economic inequality. In Scotty’s mind, “human beings are *information processing machines*, reading X’s and O’s, and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call ‘experience’” (96). Therefore, he should he should be able to emulate these experiences, as long as he can access and imaginatively shape information to do so.<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, one possible definition of art, though applied here as an existential principle. As a way of testing this “theory,” Scotty spends a night loitering outside the New York Public Library during a heart benefit gala. As he is standing there, he tries hard to convince himself that “there was no difference between being ‘inside’ and being ‘outside,’ that it all came down to X’s and O’s that could be acquired in any number of different ways” (97). It does not take long, though, before he becomes overwhelmed by physical pain and so has to acknowledge that he is not, in fact, on the “inside,” and that “one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that is unique and

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<sup>19</sup> As examples of potential sources for this information, Scotty lists the cable TV he watches at night as he eats his string beans, and the magazines he browses, for hours and hours at a time, at Hudson News

special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out” (98). By fetishizing his own exclusion, Scotty had fallen under an inversion of that “delusion,” and so come to believe that there is something “unique and special” about his subject position, too—the very premise, that is, that his theory was supposed to contest.

In “X’s and O’s,” Bennie politely dismisses Scotty, who comes to see him at his office.<sup>20</sup> In “Pure Language,” he has sought him out with the intention of making him into a star. By all accounts, he succeeds. When, after a bit of a backstage kerfuffle, Scotty finally goes on stage, he begins by playing songs Bennie had already circulated among the pointers. They are ecstatic. The adults too, though, are “intrigued, attuned to double meanings and hidden layers, which were easy to find.” These songs, in other words, are precisely not literal, thus reversing the direction of the chapter’s comparison between T’ing and baby talk. At this point, the narrator speculates that

it may be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock. Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar. Whatever the reason, a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the center of the crowd and rolled out toward its edges, where it crashed against buildings and water wall and rolled back at Scotty with redoubled force, lifting him off his stool, onto his feet (the roadies quickly adjusting the microphones), exploding the quavering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before and unleashing something strong, charismatic, and fierce. Anyone who was there that day will tell you the concert really started when Scotty stood up. That’s when he began singing the songs he’d been writing for years underground, songs no one had ever heard, or anything like them—“Eyes in My Head,” “X’s and O’s,” “Who’s Watching Hardest”—ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew

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<sup>20</sup> When he finally gets to see him, Scotty has the following four realizations: “(1) Bennie and I weren’t friends anymore, and we never would be. (2) He was looking to get rid of me as quickly as possible with the least amount of hassle. (3) I already knew that would happen. I’d known it before I arrived. (4) It was the reason I had come to see him” (100-101).

just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched.

Following the references to the Human Be-In, Monterey Pop, and Woodstock, critics writing about this passage generally focus on the relation between authenticity and reification. The most extended account belongs to Wolfgang Funk, who argues that “Scotty’s concert ... epitomizes a deep-seated longing for authentic expression,” while also providing “evidence for authenticity’s inevitable inability to signify in and by itself.”<sup>21</sup> Funk’s point, essentially, is that whatever “authenticity” Scotty communicates immediately becomes “entangled with regimes of symbolic representation,” and thus also available to “appropriation and exploitation.”<sup>22</sup> In the terms of the novel, this is the tension between what Bennie calls “reach,” a marketing term, and the primal—but evanescent—immediacy that he ascribes to “music” (312).<sup>23</sup>

If the crowd had, as it were, bought into the hype, reality nevertheless seems to transcend even their wildest imagination. It is hard to ascertain, though, whether the concert is ultimately about Scotty, or if it is about the audience—who, as the narrator puts it, “creates the object to justify its gathering.” The dynamic between the two, at any rate, is not simply one where the former embodies the latter’s hitherto unarticulated sense of “unease.” Rather, it is the crowd’s “swell of approval” that brings out that which they desire, “exploding the quavering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before and unleashing something strong, charismatic, and fierce.” Scotty’s “ballads of paranoia and disconnection” thus signifies on two distinct levels. First, there is his own sense of

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<sup>21</sup> Funk, Wolfgang. *The Literature of Reconstruction*. 179

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Lee Konstantinou makes a similar point in *Cool Characters*.

<sup>23</sup> This is particularly prominent when Bennie and Sasha visit the OK/GO Sisters.

disconnection, self-imposed as it may be. Then there is a larger cultural sense, whereby the assembled gain insight about contemporary culture and society precisely at the moment when something—or someone—is not quite legible within it.

Though I will have more to say about Scotty's concert momentarily, I want to shift into a brief discussion of another point in the novel that engages with the question of how a particular event—a gathering, say, or for that matter, a particular novel or a particular poem—might be said to represent a particular “time” or feeling. The other major example of this idea in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* can be found in “The Party,” a highly exclusive and anticipated New Year's shindig organized by the high-powered PR executive Dolly, or “La Doll,” as she was known at the time. In retrospect, it is not clear to Dolly what it was all supposed to be about. It hardly seemed to matter at the time, though, as if the very act of bringing together the rich and the famous constituted its own *raison d'être*. Indeed, more than anything, “The Party” was defined by those it excluded, meaning that it did not so much envision itself as collecting the who's who of the social scene as bestowing upon its guests this very status. “The Party had nominal hosts, all famous,” we are told, “but the real hostess, as everyone knew, was La Doll, who had more connections and access and juju than all of these people combined” (141). There is a sense, in other words, that Dolly's value is ultimately derived from her position as a node in the network of contemporary celebrity culture.

What Dolly envisions as a moment of triumph turns her professional undoing. For the event, she had designed transparent trays, mounted close to the ceiling and filled with oil and water that twisted, bubbled, and swirled beneath the heat of colored spotlights. As midnight approaches, however, the heat from the lamps cause the containers to “to

collapse, flop and drape and fall away, sending scalding oil onto the heads of every glamorous person in the country and some other countries, too” (142). This event is followed by recriminations that “she’d done it on purpose, was a sadist who’d stood there delighting as people suffered,” a six-month stint in prison for “criminal negligence,” and a “class-action suit that resulted in her entire net worth (never nearly as large as it had seemed) being distributed in small parcels to her victims” (142). When she emerges from jail, “thirty pounds heavier and fifty years older,” “La Doll,” is gone, “wiped out,” and Dolly is simply Dolly, once again (142). “No one recognized her,” the narrator says, “and the world where she’d thrived had shortly proceeded to vaporize—now even the rich believed they were poor” (142-143).

The last part of this sentence refers to the 2008 financial crisis, meaning that Egan aligns Dolly’s fall from grace with events occurring on a world-historical scale that are roughly contemporaneous with the writing of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Consigned to the dustbin of history, Dolly “was left alone,” we are told,

to ponder her miscalculations—and not just the obvious ones involving the melting temperature of plastic and the proper distribution of weight-bearing chains. Her deeper error had preceded all that: she’d overlooked a seismic shift—had conceived of an event crystallizing an era that had already passed. For a publicist, there could be no greater failure. She deserved her oblivion. Now and then, Dolly found herself wondering what sort of event or convergence *would* define the new world in which she found herself, as Capote’s party had, or Woodstock, or Malcolm Forbes’s seventieth birthday, or the party for *Talk* magazine. She had no idea. She had lost her power to judge; it would be up to Lulu and her generation to decide. (143)

The Lulu the narrator mentions here is, of course, the Lulu that figures in “Pure Language.” And in the end, this chapter turns out to be a great deal about Dolly’s relationship with her daughter, which comes up again in “Black Box.” For now, and

focusing on “The Party” in particular, it will suffice to note that it is not clear what “seismic shift” La Doll “overlooked,” in the same way that it is not clear exactly what structure of feeling Scotty’s concert called forth.

The examples of events or “convergences” that supposedly did provide such clarity provide a clue as to what Egan is about here. By necessity, these events will appear different depending on what historical and ideological position one occupies. Take the Woodstock festival, which is invoked both here and, perhaps more appropriately, in relation to Scotty’s performance. What is perhaps most telling about Woodstock is the fact that it was and is a political lightning rod, and a longstanding conservative bugaboo. At the time, the festival appeared to many commentators as a symbol for an ascendant youth culture. A *Time* essay titled “The Message of History’s Biggest Happening,” for instance, posited that Woodstock should be counted “as one of the significant political and sociological event of the age,” constituting as it did, in their opinion, “the moment when the special culture of U.S. youth of the ’60s openly displayed its strength, appeal and power.”<sup>24</sup> But the story does not quite end here. In Morris Dickstein’s view, for instance, the festival “represented a failed utopianism that very easily got commercialized,” which is to say that it “was expropriated by the very commercial values it had tried to escape, becoming a staple of advertising and a boon to the exploding consumer culture.”<sup>25</sup> Beneath the surface, Egan invites us to imagine Scotty’s concert in similar terms, even if the novel does not allow for it to be historicized in quite this way.

The nature of La Doll’s aspirations, by contrast, suggests that her primary touchstone for “The Party,” and Egan’s too, is Truman Capote’s *Black and White Ball*. In

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in Moretta, John Anthony. *The Hippies: A 1960s History*. 291.

<sup>25</sup> Dickstein, Morris. “The Hipster Mainstream.” n.p.



Amy Fine Collins's retelling, the Black and White Ball—"elegiacally" referred to by attendee and former *Harper's Bazaar* fashion editor as "The Last Great American Party"—does not so much sum up an era as it marks a moment of historical transition, signaling at once "the death knell of an elite culture founded on privacy, exclusivity, and breeding" while also heralding "the emergence of another, more raucous one, devoted to publicity, celebrity, and big money."<sup>26</sup> It is easy to see that La Doll aspires to Capote's notoriety, which one might say is a product of his astute, if ultimately self-destructive, positioning at the interstice between these two cultural formations. And one might say, too, that nothing quite encapsulates the intersection of publicity, celebrity, and money as the Forbes 400, published for the first time in 1982. Indeed, in comparison to the capitalist bacchanalia of Malcolm Forbes's infamous Moroccan birthday bash, the Black and White Ball appears downright modest.

Yet it is ultimately the *Talk* launch party—which was also, at the time, referred to as "The Party"—that is most resonant with Egan's larger concern with media transformations and their effects. *Talk* was a new general interest magazine, led by Tina Brown, formerly of *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, and financed by Hearst and Miramax (then owned by Disney). Unlike the Black and White Ball, which was purely the object of a new kind of media attention, there is thus something decidedly self-reflexive about this event. Held on Liberty Island, the magazine's "impossibly glamorous" launch party seemed, as David Carr puts it in a *The New York Times* article from a decade later, to inaugurate "a new era of media fabulousness."<sup>27</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy enough to see how utterly hubristic such a vision was. "Rather than

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<sup>26</sup> Collins, Amy Fine. "A Night to Remember." n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Carr, David. "10 Years Ago, an Omen No One Saw." n.p.

the culmination of a century of press power,” Carr observes, “the *Talk* party was the end of an era, a literal fin de siècle. Flush with cash from the go-go ’90s and engorged by spending from the dot-com era, mainstream media companies seemed poised on the brink of something extraordinary. But that brink ended up being a cliff.”<sup>28</sup> The internet, as it turned out, was not just a complement to magazines and newspapers, but a disruptive force that has decimated the business models (advertising and subscriptions) that once sustained traditional publishing. Indeed, Brown’s later endeavors in internet media speaks powerfully to this truth.

Dolly’s “The Party” does, ironically, end up becoming part of a certain kind of celebrity culture mythos. Most immediately, this can be seen when it is revealed to Dolly that Kitty Jackson, the actress that figures in the chapter’s chief plot line, has faked the burn marks that she marked the actual guests as the scalding oil crashed down on them. One might, here, draw another parallel to the Black and White Ball, and to the way certain individuals would pretend to have been invited, but that they were unable to attend due to prior engagements. Capote, though, in an act of devious genius, outed these people by leaking the guest list to the press. The point is not that these situations are exactly alike, but that in each case, what matters is a process of public exclusion that is fundamental to creating an “inside” and an “outside.”

Scotty’s concert operates differently, if we are to believe the narrator of “Pure Language.” To be sure, one might consider this in terms of the shared experience of being there, listening to this performance, apparently so unlike anything else.

Immediately after commenting on Scotty’s ambivalent power to speak to the present,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

however, Egan turns away from the unresolvable problem of how to articulate the structure of feeling that his performance apparently evoked. “But of course,” the narrator pivots,

it’s hard to know anymore who was really *at* that first Scotty Hausmann concert—more people claim it than could possibly have fit into the space, capacious and mobbed though it was. Now that Scotty has entered the realm of myth, everyone wants to own him. And maybe they should. Doesn’t a myth belong to everyone? (336)

In this passage, the pronoun “Now,” together with the adverb “anymore,” shifts us from the anticipatory relation to the concert that up until this point has structured the chapter to a retrospective one. Then there is the suggestion that Scotty’s performance is now, from this unspecified point in the future, the stuff of myth—which, following Bakhtin, and a number of other influential critics, would mean that it now exists outside historical time. We do not, in either case, learn much about this future world. What we do know, however, is that if Scotty used to “belong” only to himself, precisely because he (unlike, say, Alex) “had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset,” he has now become someone who everyone wants to “own.” This is somewhat ironic, if only because it offers a perverse confirmation of Scotty’s theory that it is all “X’s and O’s” anyway. “Doesn’t a myth belong to everyone,” Egan’s narrator asks. Well, perhaps. But in this instance, this seeming egalitarianism entails the wholesale negation of the present.

Crucially, the reader cannot share in the experience of Scotty’s concert. We do not know what he sounds like, and neither does Egan, for that matter. “There was a way,” she explains in an interview, “in which I wanted to leave that sound unconnected to the

real world.”<sup>29</sup> If we could ever hear it, the performance would immediately lose its stipulated power. Ironically, in the becoming-myth of Scotty’s concert, whatever feeling it gave rise to must have by necessity have passed.

### 3

Standing next to Bennie at the concert, Alex is overcome with the feeling that “what was happening around him ... had already happened and he was looking back” (336). This moment, on the one hand, corresponds to the larger temporal shift in respect to Scotty’s concert, as outlined above. But it also quite literally translates into the setting of the concert what has, up until this point, been one of the chapter’s major sub-threads: Alex trying to remember details about Sasha. At first, he simply remembers that he first heard Bennie’s name from a “girl he dated once, when he was new to New York” (311). All he knows is that there was a wallet involved, somehow. Later, Alex remembers Sasha’s name, though he cannot recall whether or not their date ended in sex—as so many of his dates did back then. And later still, he searches for her face in the crowds that are making their way to the concert, even though he cannot quite remember what she looks like.

After the concert, Alex asks Bennie about his former assistant. Bennie reveals (to Alex and the reader, both) that he had to fire her due to her “sticky fingers,” and muses on the fact that he has no idea what he is doing now (338). By chance, they walk by the tenement building where Sasha once lived. Bennie points it out to Alex, who experiences “a hot-cold flash of recognition, a shiver of *déjà vu*, as if he were returning to a place that

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<sup>29</sup> Kachka, Boris. “A Visit from the Goon Squad Author Jennifer Egan on Reaping Awards and Dodging Literary Feuds.” n.p.

no longer existed” (338). They ring the buzzer, though the name does not match, and wait. In what follows, Alex comes to remember Sasha’s apartment in vivid detail: colors, scents, sounds. In particular, he remembers the bathtub in the kitchen, the only one he had ever seen, and the one Sasha, back in the novel’s very first chapter, imagines him as struggling to remember in the future. As he stands with Bennie, “suspended in the same precarious excitement,” Alex’s “longing” for Sasha” at last assumed a clear shape” (339). He imagines “walking into her apartment and finding himself still there—his young self, full of schemes and high standards, with nothing decided yet.” But the “careening hope” he feels at this moment soon collapses. “She’s not here,” Bennie declares, finally, before expressing hope that she might have found “a good life” elsewhere: “She deserves it” (339).

The absent presence of Sasha thus constitutes an important pivot in this chapter. On the one hand, it resists the centralizing logic of Scotty’s concert. On the other, it redirects Alex’s nostalgia towards a feeling of openness in respect to the possibilities of the present. The reader is not, however, left wondering, as Egan has already revisited “future” Sasha in “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.” This chapter, written in PowerPoint by Sasha’s daughter Alison, ultimately constitutes a more effective engagement with media than “Pure Language.” It is worth noting, though, that many strategies are the same. Both chapters, most importantly, consider the nature of media, mediation, and subjectivity through the lens of generational stratification. But whereas technology neutralizes or makes irrelevant Alex and Lulu’s differing world views, Sasha and Alison communicate through their generational divide.

PowerPoint is a medium in Gitelman's sense because the "technological nucleus" of the software's user interface does organize a set of protocols and "default conditions" for disseminating information. PowerPoint standard templates are instantly recognizable, and elements like the bullet point list, Clip Art, WordArt, and the SmartArt graphic all form part of what we might call the aesthetics of PowerPoint, as well as (and this is not a coincidence) the software's path of least resistance.

Today, use of PowerPoint is ubiquitous in business, public, and academic settings alike, and as a result, one might expect each of these spheres to have internalized some ways in which the software models informational flows. "The communication between the larger social world and software use and design is a two-way process," Lev Manovich argues in *Language of New Media*. "As we work with software and use the operations embedded in it," he continues,

these operations become part of how we understand ourselves, others, and the world. Strategies of working with computer data become our general, cognitive strategies. At the same time, the design of software and the human-computer interface reflects a larger social logic, ideology, and imaginary of the contemporary society. So if we find particular operations dominating software programs, we may also expect to find them at work in the culture at large.<sup>30</sup>

PowerPoint's proliferation over the last two decades has been accompanied by intensifying level of critical scrutiny. Critics of the software argue that PowerPoint's stupefying "cognitive style"—a term popularized in this context by presentation guru Edward Tufte, the most prominent among the detractors—has had wide-reaching effects.<sup>31</sup> The most forceful indictment the software in this respect comes from French

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<sup>30</sup> Manovich, Lev. *Language and New Media*. 118.

<sup>31</sup> See Tufte, Edward. *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within*

journalist Franck Frommer, who in a book-length study seeks to uncover the “devastating effects” of the software’s “growing dominance over the way thought is expressed and, most important, conceived in contemporary society.”<sup>32</sup> Similar sentiments are abound in countless think pieces that, more often than not, are tinged with the same quasi-parodic sensibility that defines Tufte’s work on this topic.

In this way, PowerPoint has become an unlikely hotbed for debates revolving around form and content, medium and message, and indeed the shape of contemporary culture. Before we turn back to Egan, though, it will be useful to consider how other artists have engaged with the cultural currency of PowerPoint. A 2003 issue of *Wired* magazine that juxtaposes an article titled “Learning to Love PowerPoint” with an article titled “PowerPoint is Evil” provides a particularly poignant case. The latter article (byline: “Power Corrupts. PowerPoint Corrupts Absolutely.”) is written by the aforementioned Tufte, and summarizes the argument of the then recently published *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*.<sup>33</sup> The former is written by musician and artist David Byrne in support of his new book of PowerPoint art, *Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*—a title that is itself a pun on *Envisioning Information*, Tufte’s famous 1990 book on graphical representation of complex data sets.<sup>34</sup>

Both *E.E.E.I.*, the acronym by which Byrne’s book is more commonly known, and *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* are satirical. While Tufte certainly tries to argue his case with some degree of rigor, he also uses humorous phrases such as “chartjunk” and “PP Phluff”—accompanied by a “re-branded” jar of Marshmallow Fluff—in his

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<sup>32</sup> Frommer, Franck. *How PowerPoint Makes You Stupid*. xv.

<sup>33</sup> Byrne, David. “Learning to Love PowerPoint.” Tufte, Edward. “PowerPoint is Evil.”

<sup>34</sup> Byrne, David. *Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*.

description of the effects of PowerPoint.<sup>35</sup> Byrne similarly pokes fun of the standard PowerPoint tropes, through what can only be described as a form of WordArt kitsch that combines garish graphics with egregiously incomprehensible graphs. In “Learning to Love PowerPoint,” Byrne models readings of number of the slides included in his book. “This whirlwind of arrows,” he writes about one of them,

pointing everywhere and nowhere—each one color-coded to represent God knows what aspects of growth, market share, or regional trends—ends up capturing the excitement and pleasant confusion of the marketplace, the everyday street, personal relationships, and the simultaneity of multitasking. Does it really do all that? If you imagine you are inside there it does.<sup>36</sup>

Byrne is adamant that while his work with PowerPoint started as a joke, it “took on a life of its own as I realized I could create pieces that were moving, despite the limitations of the ‘medium.’”<sup>37</sup> In effect, however, his satire amounts not so much to the elevation of the corporate into the realm of the poetic as much as the assertion that the corporate is itself a form of poesis. “If business is poetry,” Byrne writes in the introduction to one of *E.E.E.I.*’s sections, “then numbers are words and sales presentations, marketing meetings and conferences are the salons and literary collaborations of our time.”<sup>38</sup> Byrne’s engagement with PowerPoint thus begins and ends with a simultaneous critique and celebration of “PowerPoint Phluff.”

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<sup>35</sup> The centerpiece of Tufte’s monograph is his analysis of a series of NASA slides assessing the damage suffered at launch by a piece of dislodged foam insulation to the *Columbia* space shuttle, which would later, and tragically, disintegrate upon re-entry. The slides in question, displaying a “festival of bureaucratic hyper-rationalism,” Tufte argues, obfuscated the real threat, and thus contributed negatively to NASA’s crisis management effort. The cover of Tufte’s book is adorned by a photo of a Soviet military parade in Budapest, complete with speech and thought bubbles stating, for example, “HIERARCHICAL ORDER! ISN’T IT GREAT?,” or “AN INTEGRATED APPLICATION SOLUTION FOR SHOW TRIALS!” For one critique of Tufte’s argument (by the author of a book about how to use PowerPoint in business), see Gabrielle, Bruce.

<sup>36</sup> Byrne, David. “Learning to Love PowerPoint.” n.p.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Byrne, David. *Envisioning Epistemological Emotional Information*.



Egan's encounter with PowerPoint occurs on much different terms. It is true that the medium's "corporate aesthetic" remains crucial.<sup>39</sup> But for Egan, it is no longer an end-in-itself or the object of self-reflexive satire. Having long harbored the ambition to write something in PowerPoint after realizing that it has become something of a "literary genre," Egan at first contemplated following a corporate character into her corporate future.<sup>40</sup> She soon realized, however, that "having a corporate character tell a corporate story in PowerPoint did not make it feel less corporate. In fact, it made it much worse."<sup>41</sup> We thus end up with "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," a slide presentation "about a family who struggles and loves each other," written from the perspective of twelve-year-old child ("children," Egan notes, "just aren't corporate").<sup>42</sup> This "sweet family story" is, in Egan's estimation, "too conventional to have been written in a conventional way."<sup>43</sup> But with the help of the "cold, corporate feeling" of PowerPoint, Egan is able to create an "envelope for that sweetness," and so prevent it from being "sentimental or cloying." Where Byrne exaggerates the perceived corporatism of PowerPoint and revels in the absurdity of the ensuing "art" as a reflection of the absurdity of the form itself, Egan seeks to produce a feeling of domestic intimacy that would appear to be alien to the medium.

For Lee Konstantinou, the PowerPoint chapter provides evidence for an ultimately uncritical relation to the process of commodification, both as it applies to the self, and as it applies to artistic production. Incidentally, this is the same argument that he

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<sup>39</sup> Egan, Jennifer. "Experimentation in Fiction: Notes from a Reluctant Practitioner." n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

makes about “Pure Language” in particular, but also about *A Visit from the Goon Squad* more generally. Citing Tufte, Konstantinou asserts that what matters is not what content one does or does not communicate through a platform like PowerPoint, but how that platform itself works to reify speech and so render “genuine human communication” impossible.<sup>44</sup> Egan’s emphasis on the “emotional expressivity” of PowerPoint does, to be sure, belie “any simplistic or moralizing attack on new media systems” in a way that is not, perhaps, true of her engagement with T’ing in “Pure Language.”<sup>45</sup> But to say that this means that her satire is “ultimately half-hearted” is to presume the truth of Tufte’s techno-determinism.

Alison is quite aware of the generic conventions of PowerPoint. Take, for instance, the slide labeled “Annoying Habit #92,” in which a skeptical Sasha asks Alison to try writing instead of making slides. “Excuse me,” an indignant Alison replies as if responding both to her mom and self-reflexively commenting on her chosen format: “this is my slide journal.” Then, in the very next slide—after Sasha decries the ratio between whitespace and “writing” in the PowerPoint presentation, which finds an analogue in Tufte’s remarks on the “low spatial resolution” of PowerPoint—Alison provides a list of “Slide Slogans from School That I Fire at Mom (just to annoy her).”<sup>46</sup> In this slide, we find a number of speech bubbles arranging slogans such as “Charts should illuminate, not complicate!” and “Give us the issues, not the tissues!” around a central bubble that states “Please, Ally, have mercy!’ Mom says. But she’s laughing.” PowerPoint, Frommer argues, “tends to promote use of an impoverished, standardized, and

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<sup>44</sup> Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters*. 263.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*. 4.

depersonalized language.”<sup>47</sup> Alison repersonalizes this clichéd PowerPoint lingo, however, as seen in the juxtaposition of these vacuous slogans with the familial intimacy of a mother and daughter having fun together.

The most important through line in “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” concerns Drew’s relationship to Lincoln. “Right now,” Alison writes in the slide that introduces her brother, “he’s obsessed with rock songs that have pauses in them.” These pauses, then, becomes an optic by means of which we get to glimpse scenes of domestic interaction, and metonymically, they stand in for the challenges and rewards involved in having an autistic brother or son. In the same slide, which is shaped like one large triangle split into four smaller ones—or, in SmartArt speak, a “Segmented Pyramid” that can, PowerPoint advises, be “use[d] to show containment, proportional, or interconnected relationships”—we also learn that Lincoln “knows more than grown-ups about certain things.”<sup>48</sup> The inverted middle triangle, which shares sides with the three other ones (the last one announces that Lincoln “looks like Dad, but younger and skinnier”), provides one such fact, at once impersonal in form, yet extremely personal in the provided context. “A ‘full rest,’ is four beats long,” we learn: “a ‘half rest’ is two beats.”

Throughout the journal, it becomes clear that the fundamentally decent Drew is stressed and overworked, and that he is having a hard time connecting with his son. A slide titled “Ways It Can Be When Dad Comes Back” contains a seesaw graphic in which boxes labeled “Site in Car Before Coming In,” “Hugging Mom,” “Silent,” “Angry,” and “Gin Pouring” are toppling over on one side, outweighing boxes labeled “Kissing Mom,” “Telling Stories,” “Laughing,” and “Wine Cork Popping” sitting on the other. Another

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<sup>47</sup> Frommer, *How PowerPoint Makes You Stupid*, 223.

<sup>48</sup> PowerPoint 2010. n.p.

slide titled “Lincoln Wants to Say/Ends Up Saying,” meanwhile, shows the interior thought process by which “I love you, Dad” becomes “‘Hey Dad, there’s a partial silence at the end of ‘Fly Like an Eagle,’ with a sort of rushing sound in the background that I think is supposed to be the wind, or maybe time rushing past!’” Lincoln’s preoccupation with pauses appears to Drew as a form of anti-social behavior. Sasha does not agree, arguing that music “connects him with the world.” And it becomes clear, too, that the pauses become a point of connection between Sasha and Lincoln, precisely because she takes him seriously.

At one point, Drew asks Lincoln to explain “why the pauses matter so much to you.” Lincoln responds by discussing individual tracks in detail. Exasperated, Drew shouts “Stop!” and tells Lincoln to “Please. Forget I asked.” A furious Sasha leans close to Drew, and explains (in a gigantic speech bubble covering an entire slide):

The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn’t really over,, so you’re relieved. But then the song does actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL.

This is followed by “A Pause While We Stand on the Deck,” visually represented as an empty box (224). Then Drew gathers Lincoln in his arms before Lincoln runs into the house, followed by Sasha. Alison and Drew, who “drains his gin and tonic and shakes the bare ice,” instead go on a walk. In one slide, Alison filters the sounds of the desert through Lincoln’s favorite pauses, with which she too is intimately familiar. A faint clicking noise, we learn, appears to Alison just like “the scratchy pause in ‘Bernadette,’” while a humming noise reminds her of “the pause in ‘Closing Time’ by Semisonic.” The outermost ring in the “Basic Target” SmartArt—designed to “shot containment, gradations, or hierarchical relationships”—that Alison uses for this slide then announces

that “The whole desert is a pause.” Ultimately, though, this graphic does not so much illuminate as it obscures the relation between these experiences.

In the next slide, Drew declares, “I’ve got to do better with Lincoln.” Alison suggests that he helps Lincoln graph the pauses. “I could do that,” responds Drew. “But will you really?,” asks Alison. “If I say I will, I will.” At the very end of “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” we do get a series slides containing what we can only assume to be said graphs. Technically, these charts (titled “Relationship of Pause-Length to Haunting Power,” “Proof of the Necessity of Pauses,” “Discoveries About Pause Timing (in Bubble Form),” and “The Persistence of Pauses over Time”) constitute what Tufte would refer to as “chartjunk,” as they are all statistically suspect and hard to read. This, though, is hardly the point. The real import of these graphs lies, rather, in the emotional information that they carry in the context of the larger narrative, and in the context of the presumed reconciliation between Drew and Lincoln.

There is a sense, then, in which the musical pause is the ultimate intermedial moment because it can, in fact, be represented visually. This means that these pauses—which, incidentally, are drawn from actual rather than fictional artists—offer us something quite different compared to Scotty or even Bosco. As she was working, in a “PowerPoint fever,” on what would become “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” Egan explains how she began

to sense that there were really good reasons that I had been intuitively drawn to the form, and that it was actually very well suited to be part of the book I was writing—not just because it was a different narrative approach from anything else, but because PowerPoint is an atomized form. It consists of discrete moments separated by gaps. Now Microsoft tries to hide this from us, and create an illusion of continuity with all kinds of flowing graphics. But the bottom line is that there is no continuity: it is

just a moment, and then another moment, and then another moment. And in that sense, it really mimics the structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as a whole, which consists of these moments, these periods of experience, separated by these big gaps in which time goes forward or backward, so there was a certain echo there that I think was very appealing. The book is about time, and about music. The PowerPoint chapter is really about the power of pauses to make us aware of both time and music. PowerPoint is fifty percent pauses, and it allowed me to basically make manifest the thematic content of the book. And so it really is, as I see it now, the heart of the book. It is the one chapter in which time and music fully merge.<sup>49</sup>

Egan's use of PowerPoint does not, however, generate any lasting sense of aesthetic futurity. This is the case not only because other writers have not follow in her footsteps, but because there is no reason why they would want to. There is, to put this differently, something undeniably gimmicky about "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," which, though praised by reviewers, has generated interest mostly on account the sheer novelty of its premise. What other author would write tips for aspiring PowerPoint novelists on the Microsoft Office website, or partially give an interview in PowerPoint? While Egan appears serious, there is nevertheless a distinct knowingness at play here. That very quality, though, only further emphasizes Alison's absolute earnestness throughout. "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" might thus be said to be structured by a desire to sentimentalize the technological. The innocence of the child allows Egan to wield technology emotionally rather than rationally, and so overcome the propensities of the software itself. *E.E.E.I.* remains shackled to its object of satire, and must therefore, to the extent that it succeeds, also fail. There is and can never be a McLuhan-esque reversal. Egan, on the other hand, absorbs PowerPoint as an "anti-environment" that becomes a site for both ethical and imaginative engagement with a generationally stratified mediascape.

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<sup>49</sup> Egan, "Notes from a Reluctant Practitioner," n.p.

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A similar pattern might, in fact, be seen at the end of “Pure Language.” After standing outside Sasha’s apartment, Alex tells Bennie that “I don’t know what happened to me,” his thoughts and reflections still squarely directed at his younger self (339). “You grew up Alex,” Bennie replies, “just like the rest of us” (340). This sentiment is immediately translated into the sounds of the city, with Alex now listening intently to “the hum, always that hum, which maybe wasn’t an echo after all, but the sound of time passing.” A short poem in T-speak follows:

*th bly nyt  
the stRs u cant c  
the hum tht nevr gOs awy.*

I said earlier that it is wrong to ascribe techno-determinist views to Egan, even if “Pure Language” seems to lend itself to such a reading generally. These lines are not directly ascribed to Alex, though it is not hard to imagine that them as reflecting his mental state at the time, that they constitute another “brain-T.” Over all, the effect is one of meditative reflection, directed at a feeling of time passing beyond the individual subject. And the poem is weirdly detached from any one particular subject. In this way, Egan attempts to at least partially redeem a form of communication that up until this point has largely been the object of satire. And it accomplishes this through the evacuation of nostalgia.

I want to conclude this chapter by turning briefly to “Black Box,” which furthers Egan’s experimentation with the relation between novelistic form and modern technology. A brief introduction is in order. Initially, “Black Box” was made available over the course of ten nights in May 2012 via a Twitter account belonging to *The New*

*Yorker*'s Fiction Department (@NYerFiction), with one tweet appearing every minute between 8 pm and 9 pm. Shortly thereafter, the story, which Egan describes in an accompanying interview as "a series of terse mental dispatches from an undercover spy in the future," appeared in the magazine, complete with glossy photo-illustration.<sup>50</sup> Finally, though it is not initially clear, it soon turns out that the protagonist of the story is a now-older Lulu.

Tore Rye Andersen has written about how "Black Box" problematizes the question of where to locate the literary. In a general sense, his argument is a familiar one: the book's status as a medium has traditionally been practically invisible. There is a fairly long critical tradition at this point, of course, which considers the materiality of the literary object. But the work of influential critics like D. F. McKenzie, Jerome McGann, and Katherine Hayles have, in Andersen's view, been shaped by the bias that "proper literature is still something to be found in books"—a bias that he also locates in a number of reviews of "Black Box."<sup>51</sup> To Andersen, though, Egan is useful precisely because she challenges "habitual ideas about the relation between literature and media."<sup>52</sup> The literary, such as it is, is constitutively intermedial.

We might, to begin with, note that Egan invites us to think about two different kind of readers. First, there is the reader who received the tweets that make up her story in real time, each interspersed with whatever else was going on in their timeline at the time. On the one hand, this delivery method provides an infinitely variable context for the story, entirely dependent on what other Twitter accounts the individual in question

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<sup>50</sup> *The New Yorker*, "Coming Soon: Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box,'" n.p.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, "'Black Box' in Flux," 123.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



follows. On the other, it creates a community of readers, in the same way a live broadcast on television creates a community of viewers. These individuals, furthermore, also have the option of responding to the story as it unfolds, by retweeting or otherwise reacting to it. The second reader, by contrast, reads the story in its entirety, as it is presented either in the magazine or on *The New Yorker*'s website. The result is a much more bounded experience, and something that at least theoretically hews much closer to the idealized and disembodied reader of formalist literary criticism.

It must also be said, though, that Egan's approach is ultimately relatively conventional. Since it was written and revised well in advance of its heavily curated publication, "Black Box" does not itself, for instance, make integral use of the various social elements that one might otherwise expect from literary experiments on Twitter. Indeed, the idea that the story is even translatable to print speaks to a different assessment: that it is "bad twitterature."<sup>53</sup> It is nevertheless the case, however, that an important aspect of reading "Black Box" after the "event" of its initial distribution revolves around imagining what it might have been like to read it on Twitter. This is certainly true, for instance, in Andersen's work, which entails a great deal of imaginative work to this effect. In this sense, Twitter represents something more than just a formal constraint, however ingeniously integrated into the story.

Taken on its own, there is nothing particularly remarkable about "Black Box." While it is an early example of a major author experimenting with the form, it is not exactly pioneering, even if it is well crafted. For my purposes, the story matters because it

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<sup>53</sup> Rothschild, "Black Box: great story, bad twitterature," n.p. "Egan's sci-fi thriller may have first been serialised on Twitter," reads Rothschild's lede, "but it triumphs in spite of the medium, not because of it" (n.p.)

extends and therefore reconstitutes *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and because it furthers Egan's investment in the relation between public and private, between art and the "now," that I have traced in the above.

Let us, therefore, turn to the actual story. In its barest outlines, "Black Box" focuses on Lulu's work as a "citizen agent" in a largely amorphous Mediterranean location. More specifically, she performs the role of a "Beauty," which means that she seeks to cultivate intimacy with a "Designated Mate" to gather intelligence that we are to imagine as vital to the national security interests of the United States.<sup>54</sup> To do so, Lulu's body is implanted (or, to invoke McLuhan, prosthetically augmented) with microphones, cameras, data ports, and tracking devices, making her body a quite literal extension of state power. "Technology," reads one of the Tweet-sized missives that make up the narrative, "has afforded ordinary people a chance to glow in the cosmos of human achievement." And while the narrative reads, in part, like an action-packed spy thriller, Lulu herself is not a spy, but rather "an ordinary person undertaking an extraordinary task." Her mission is entirely decontextualized, for the reader to be sure, but for Lulu too. The degree to which she is comfortable with operating within these parameters is broadly consonant with the views she articulated in "Pure Language."

Formally, "Black Box" assumes the shape of what the story identifies as "Field Notes," designed to "serve as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work." The result is a curious impersonality, as each of the missives that make up the narrative are addressed, in a series of counterfactual statements, to the "you" of a future agent. "Always filter your observations and experience through the lens of their didactic

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<sup>54</sup> Egan, *Black Box*, n.p.

value,” the narrator explains on one particularly self-reflexive moment, both so that you yourself might learn from them, and so that others might have that opportunity too. Soon, though, the narrative begins to shift the reference of this “you” towards Lulu herself. Take, for instance, the series of statements, midway through the story, beginning with “You will reflect...” Here, we learn “that America is your husband’s chosen country,” that his “rise to prominence would have been unimaginable in any other nation,” and that “you” had decided together “that your service had to be undertaken before you had children.”<sup>55</sup> This sequence then ends with the reflection that “too much reflection is pointless,” and that “these ‘instructions’ are becoming less and less instructive.” At this point, the narrative’s mode of address can no longer sustain the always-fictional separation between Lulu’s status as an agent among hundreds, and the specificity of her own biography.

This trajectory is completed when the narrative turns from its ostensible focus on external action to a much more personal story. Lulu, it seems, is quite preoccupied with her father, whom Dolly used to tell her, in a story that “may satisfy a child for an unlikely number of years,” died before she was born.<sup>56</sup> It all becomes retroactively ridiculous, however, when said child discovers the truth of her paternity as an adult. “Publicists occasionally have flings with their movie-star clients,” the narrator states factually. “Discovering that you are a movie star’s daughter is not,” however, “necessarily a

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<sup>55</sup> These are, ultimately, the moments that allow us to identify the “Black Box” narrator *as* Lulu. We learn about Lulu’s husband in “Safari,” which follows a number of characters on a trip to Africa. In one of the customary flash-forwards that are sprinkled through this chapter, the narrator describes how one of the warriors working as a guide for the Americans will, some thirty-five years later, perish in tribal violence. One of his sixty-three grandchildren, Joe, will study engineering at Columbia, and later “marry an American named Lulu and remain in New York, where he’ll invent a scanning device that becomes standard issue for crowd security.” Joe is also mentioned briefly in “Pure Language,” as Lulu’s fiancé.

<sup>56</sup> Careful readers already know that Lulu believes this to be the case, as this information was revealed already in “Pure Language.”

comfort, and especially not so when “the star in question has seven other children from three different marriages.” This discovery “may,” in turn, lead to “you” obsessively watching all of his movies, reflecting on your own invisibility.” The lesson from all of this, as synthesized for the Field Notes, is as follows: “A sudden reconfiguration of your past can change the fit and feel of your adulthood. / It may cleave you, irreparably, from the mother whose single goal has been your happiness.” It is perhaps not surprising, in this respect, that the story should end with Lulu forgiving her mother. Lying in a boat at sea awaiting extraction, the boat’s movement “will remind you of a cradle,” the narrator writes, that will in turn remind “you” that your mother “always loved you fiercely and entirely.” At this point, “You’ll discover that you have forgiven her,” and “You’ll understand that she concealed your paternity out of faith that her own inexhaustible love would be enough.”

The tension between the individual and the collective is, however, articulated most clearly in the idea of what Lulu describes as the “new heroism.” The series of statements that expounds on this idea count among the most suggestive in “Black Box”:

In the new heroism, the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself.

In the new heroism, the goal is to throw off generations of self-involvement.

In the new heroism, the goal is to renounce the American fixation with being seen and recognized.

In the new heroism, the goal is to dig beneath your shiny persona.

You’ll be surprised by what lies under it: a rich, deep crawl space of possibilities.

Some liken this discovery to a dream in which a familiar home acquires new wings and rooms.

The power of individual magnetism is nothing against the power of combined selfless effort.

You may accomplish astonishing personal feats, but citizen agents rarely seek individual credit.

They liken the need for personal glory to cigarette addiction: a habit that feels life-sustaining even as it kills you.

Childish attention-seeking is usually satisfied at the expense of real power.

An enemy of the state could not have connived a better way to declaw and distract us.

Now our notorious narcissism is our camouflage.

In these statements, Lulu is asserting a new structure of feeling, which re-envisions the “notorious narcissism” that is so commonly associated with social media as a form of “camouflage.” In a series of statements, an ethos of collectivity is advanced: “the goal,” as the narrator puts it, “is to merge with something larger than yourself,” “to throw off generations of self-involvement,” and “to renounce the American fixation with being seen and recognized.” Most immediately, this means that while “citizen agents” may “accomplish astonishing personal feats,” they “rarely seek individual credit” for having done so. Scotty’s “individual magnetism,” for instance, “is nothing compared to the power of combined selfless effort.” And while Alex might decry the limit of expression imposed by T’ing, the “rich, deep crawl space of possibilities” that are to be found “beneath your shiny persona” are ultimately collective rather than individual.

Yet “Black Box,” as we have seen, actually moves in the opposite direction. The clinical and ostensible selfless impersonality that grounds the narrative initially is replaced by the intensely personal. One might read this as a retreat into the kind of interiority that the novel has traditionally been associated with. But it is also possible to see it as an attempt to reverse or leverage how Twitter is viewed in society. In one particularly creative review, Joe Winkler emulates the formal structure of “Black Box” by offering up his thoughts in a series of tweet-sized aphorisms. Drawing on the above

passage, Winkler notes that while many critiques of social media focuses on “its ostensible fostering of narcissism,” Egan attempts to transform Twitter “into a tool for meditative thought.”<sup>57</sup> The takeaway is something along these lines: rather than trying to return us to “a world in which we *used* to read books, where attention spans could hold past 140 characters,” Egan is working from within the system, using a “supposed narcissistic medium to highlight a desire to grow past it.” In so doing, we might “grow past” certain pre-conceptions about the relation between technology and subjectivity, too.

This use of Twitter, in other words, reveals Egan to be working with the novel as a form that is constantly negotiating the relation between its own past, whether real or idealized, and some future version of itself that it is always in the process of becoming. To Egan, platforms like “Facebook and Twitter and YouTube” represents a society that is full of “competition and distraction.” The rise of these kinds of communication technologies does, indeed, seem to have atomized the very idea of attention in such a way as to make the sustained focus customarily associated with the reading of novels something of a rarity. To an extent, this may appear as a somewhat crotchety position. Nostalgia, after all, tells us much more about the present than the past, and it is more often than not connected to retrogressive politics. Egan’s nostalgia is not crippling, however, since it is never allowed to take control over the narrative. Indeed, one might well describe the way Egan combines formal idiosyncrasy with breezy readability as a compromise between traditional ideas about the novel and the contemporary mediascape.

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<sup>57</sup> Winkler, Joe, “Jennifer Egan’s Black Box,” n.p.

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