# “A SHOT IN THE DARK”: POST-9/11 ONE-OFF SPECULATIVE FICTION

by

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Abstract

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The cultural, political, and historical impact of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, as an event, continues to be questioned. For this project, I will examine six "one-off" or "one-time" works of speculative fiction from highly-acclaimed and award-winning writers— Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* (2012) —who, prior to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, all worked predominantly in creating works in the genre of realist fiction. In writing works of speculative fiction during what has been deemed the "age of terror," these writers, through cognitive estrangement, have developed works in separate generic spaces where the intersection of event and corporeality collide (in what Ilai Rowner refers to as the "literary event"). In doing so, they examine not only the repercussions of a post-9/11 world, but they also present warnings against future events that now

resonate globally. The crossing of these writers from realism to genre or speculative fiction is an act of artistic and historical refraction, a change of direction from one medium to another; in other words, they are works representative of the "disruptive nature of genre fiction." Considering the spectacle of 9/11 and the creation of these texts in the wake of the tragedy, I will focus most of my attention on examining these texts through the theoretical lens of "the event" and event theory as presented in Ilai Rowner's 2015 study, *The Event: Literature and Theory*, which focuses on establishing a theory of the "literary event" influenced by an amalgam of event theories and definitions from Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot, and Deleuze. Rowner's approach attempts to establish a theoretical set of questions that will illuminate the role of the event in literature by identifying and analyzing the intersections of language and corporeality within an event. Since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, understanding the overall impact of an "event," be it a single individual accomplishment or global tragedy, has likely never been more important than in the 21st century. I argue here that September 11th, as a historical event and spectacle, created an initial indistinguishability of reality and non-reality, which I believe provided an event-inspired gateway for these six novelists to make their generic leap from realist works to the genre of speculative fiction and, more specifically, the subgenres of alternate history, dystopia, and post-apocalyptic fiction.

Table of Contents

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

P.D. James's *The Children of Men* is a dystopian work set in England in 2021 that presents a country mired in crisis, as all men have become sterile and the future of humanity is in jeopardy. Under the control of a tyrannical leader, Xan, the controlling forces of the government encourage suicide for the elderly and treat immigrants as if they were slaves. Theo Faron, the novel's narrator and protagonist, remembers back to the year 1995, known as Year Omega, when he first heard the shocking words of a biologist "that nowhere in the whole world was there a pregnant woman" (7). The cause of the universal infertility for humans was initially considered a disease, but as countries competed for trying to find a cure, the cause became less and less important as the anxiety and hopelessness of citizens peaked as it was believed that "it is twenty-five years now since a human being was born and in our hearts few of us believe that the cry of a newborn child will ever be heard again on our planet" (9). Theo reveals that as the end of days nears, the Omegas, the last generation, have just lost the last of their group—the last human being to be born—in a senseless pub fight.

James's dystopian creation, published in 1992, served as both a warning against and an examination of the issues of government control, population

control, and immigration, at a point in British history when rising immigration concerns in the 1990s were identified by UK national statistician, Len Cook, as "the most significant social change in Britain" (Carvel 1). The importance of the publishing of James's dystopian novel during this period is twofold. First, *The Children of Men* is a significant departure from James's five-decade career as a mystery writer. Of the nineteen novels that James published, *The Children of Men* is the only work that she published outside of the genre of mystery/detective fiction. Second, the novel serves also as an example of how the power and influence of historical events can impact the creation of art and literature. Thirdly, the novel presents a dystopian world in which a catastrophic event plays an integral role in the development of the society in its current state; however, the cause of the event that altered the world has seemingly become irrelevant or forgotten by the story's end. Although historically-inspired creations are common in all art forms, what makes James's novel stand out is her choice of genre: a work of speculative fiction, or more specifically, dystopian fiction—a genre that archetypally examines the political and cultural issues of technology, war, and science, within a time and space that is much worse than the reader's world (Sargent). James's decision to create a work of dystopian fiction reveals a creative literary move that at first glance may seem risky for an established author, especially for her loyal fan-base as a mystery writer; but more importantly, the writer clearly had a specific message and concern about 1990s England that she

ultimately believed could only be presented in a lost and collapsing dystopian world.

James's choice to create a single work of speculative fiction in *The Children of Men* is an example of what I refer to in this study as a "one-off genre-jumping novel," a singular work created outside of the literary genre or world for which the writer is best-known. Although "genre-jumping" is often considered less risky and almost expected in other art forms (music, visual art, film), the creation of a one-off novel carries a certain literary and critical significance due in part to the importance and emphasis of genre in fiction studies. Since literary critics and theorists are prone to analyze and question the ways in which a writer's individual works fit within his/her own canon or within a larger genre, while also examining a text and its national or global significance, the single publication of a generically different work for an established literary writer raises important questions concerning the writer's specific choice of genre. Within the genre of speculative fiction, a "genre jump" invites questions concerning what the specific generic or narrative framework "allows" the writer to do or create. Choosing to create speculative fiction, especially a critical dystopia or alternate history, also allows the book to be read through an allegorical or historical "lens" that could present new critical readings under the guise of a societal, cultural, or global warnings.

For this project, I will examine the "genre-jumping one-off" works of six highly-acclaimed and award-winning writers— Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* (2012) —who, prior to the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, all worked predominantly in creating works of realist fiction in the genre of what can be considered as "high literature," works of literature deemed by literary scholars as works of "artistic merit" that reflect more on social and political issues than works of genre or popular fiction. However, each of the six authors mentioned above chose to create a single work of speculative fiction in the years after the attacks on September 11, 2001. The significance of this group of one-off novels is that each writer, much like P.D. James in the 1990s, chose to leave their usual "working" genre of realist "high lit" fiction to create a one-off novel of "popular/genre fiction," or more specifically, speculative fiction. The choice of these writers to make this leap from realist to speculative fiction, I will argue, has created the beginnings of a generic paradigm shift that in part was influenced by the events of 9/11. Although the closing of the gap between high literature and genre fiction has been in many ways a much-lauded characteristic of postmodern fiction since the 1960s, the global, cultural, and political impact created by the unique spectacle of the attacks on 9/11 as an "event"—born out of the

traumatizing visual of the attacks being witnessed globally on live television, followed by the countless times the attacks were shown in the media in the days and weeks after, were pivotal in creating both a post-9/11 culture and language in the months and years after the attacks. However, the spectacle of 9/11 as an event also serves as a post-postmodern catalyst, or archetypal shift, as the visual horror of the attacks symbolically (and in a very real sense) erased the lines between reality and fiction for those who witnessed it; as the seemingly improbable conversion of planes into weapons, the collapsing of two 110-story skyscrapers which played out on television like a disaster movie, and the senseless and seemingly invisible death of thousands occurred live over a span of a few hours for a global audience. I argue here that September 11th, as a historical event, created this initial indistinguishability of reality and non-reality, which I believe provided an event-inspired gateway for these six novelists to make their generic leap from realist works to the genre of speculative fiction and, more specifically, the subgenres of alternate history, dystopia, and post-apocalyptic fiction. Considering the spectacle of 9/11 and the creation of these texts in the wake of the tragedy, I believe that the importance of the generic leap for the six novelists can be best analyzed through the theoretical lens of the "event" and event theory,[1] which questions the recognition, identification, and aftermath of certain forms of events. The results of examining the various events in these works will vary, be it

[1] Definitions of "event" and the work of several event theorists will be covered in "Chapter 2: Narrative, Historical, and Literary Event theory".

through the questioning of historical, narrative, or literary events that may have been influential in the creation of each of these works. My research here will focus on the relationship of event theory and literature in order to examine the role of the "event" within each text.

Although the generic move by these writers could be rightfully viewed as a profitable endeavor in which the writers could be jumping on the bandwagon with the resurgence in dystopian and young adult dystopian fiction after a traumatizing event like 9/11, I argue here that these one-off novels are instead works that are reflective to some degree of not only the 9/11 world and the global and cultural shockwaves from the aftermath of the event, but also that they stand out as individual speculative works that both reflect and refract the concepts and impact of the "event"—be it in its construction, performance, or aftermath of a given event(s)—while also offering warnings for the post-9/11 world. My project will question the impact of history on each writer's generic turn (in other words, each one-off is its own "authorial event") in these six individual works produced after 2001, questioning not only the characteristics and risks of the generic shifts of each writer, but also reflecting on the impact of the "event" in each work and how 9/11 worked as a possible catalyst for this one-off generic shift. My analysis will also address how this event-focused approach to this group of novels broadens the field of utopian/dystopian studies by not only more examining more closely the impact of global events at the intersection of literary genre, history,

and event theory but also by way of examining texts that cross the generic boundaries of these esteemed writers who felt a need to seemingly question this intersection as well. In creating works of speculative fiction, these writers are able to examine the ever-changing post-9/11 "age of terror," allowing them to work outside the limitations of creating a work as being categorized as a "9/11 novel" but still reflective of the post-9/11 world. By establishing worlds through cognitive estrangement, the six one-off works create separate generic spaces where the intersection of reality and derealization collide through the impact of event and corporeality (in what Ilai Rowner refers to fiction as the "literary event") in order to examine not only the repercussion of a post-9/11 world but also to present a warning against future events—warnings against political, economic, and global issues that are now, in 2017, resonating in both the United States and globally[2]. The crossing of these writers from realist fiction to genre or speculative fiction is an act of artistic and historical refraction, a change of direction from one medium to another, which makes each a work that is representative of the technology that Lev Grossman refers to as "the disruptive nature of genre fiction" on the contemporary novel (Lanzendörfer 2).

[2] Rowner's definitions of literary, narrative and historical event are addressed in Chapter 2.

***Defining the "One-off Genre-Jumping Novel" and Genre after 9/11***

In defining the "one-off genre-jumping novel," I must first address the term "one-off" and the connotations of that term as it applies to popular culture and how I view the term as significant to the works that I am analyzing in this project. First, the term "one-off" is a British term born out of the manufacturing industry which, according to William Safire, represented a creation of a product that was "the only of its kind." (1). However, musicians and artists adapted the term to refer to a single *event*: a "one-off" performance or showing[3]. In my project here, I focus more on the latter definition of "one-off" as event in referencing not only the six novels that I discuss, but also in considering the generic choices each writer was forced to make in considering the different forms of speculative fiction. Just as important, however, is the relation of the term "one-off" as a distinguishing term when in reference to historical events, such as 9/11, and other important and unique historical events.[4] The attacks on September 11, 2001, can be viewed as a one-off event since no greater act of violence and destruction had been seen by so many and broadcast live on television. Thus, this

[3] The term "one-off" is also synonymous with the term "one-shot," another British term.

[4] According to Ben Zimmer, in NYT Magazine, July 2, 2010: "Arnold Zwick […], a linguist at Stanford University, reported in 2005 that a friend suggested adding *one-off* to the Eggcorn Database, (a repository for words and phrases that have been reshaped to give them new semantic footing) […] in the belief that [the term] derived from *one of (a kind).* But it turns out that *one-off* is the original (as the historical record proves), and *one-of* is actually the eggcorn, a seeming "correction" by those who think that *one-off* must be an error. For instance, a transcript of a 2007 speech by Francis Fukuyama at the Brookings Institution refers to 9/11 as "a pretty lucky one-of event." I believe here that Fukuyama's "one-of" statement reflects the same definition of "one-off" that I am adopting for this project.

definition of "one-off" that I am adopting and its relation to the novels, 9/11, event theory, and the specific events that will be addressed in the novels and in my overall analysis, is crucial to understanding the connections of these works. But this definition is bookended by the fact that almost all of these six writers return to creating realist fiction after their initial one-off stab at speculative fiction. Not only is this authorial choice by the writers to move back to their respective creative genres an important move for each writer, but it also adds to the cultural capital and literary significance of the given messages and themes addressed in each one-off work.

In addressing the impact of the event of 9/11 on literature, Sicher and Skradol argue that "it is not a matter if whether or not utopian thought is still sustainable or practical, but of what happened in postmodern fiction under the impact of a real collision of reality and imagination" (152). This collision of fiction and the "real" is the generic thread that the one-off writers all had to consider and tread to maintain, within their individual creations, a sense of plausibility. Each speculative fiction subgenre that is utilized in the one-off novels has its own "fine line" in maintaining a sense of plausibility. Works of alternate history can slip far into the realm of implausibility or satire if the altered historical event in the novel is too extreme to maintain the slightest possibility of believability. Stephen King's *11/22/63* is an example of a work in which the novel loses "fictional feasibility" due to the fact that the narrator has to travel back in

time to try and prevent the assassination of President Kennedy, a narratological move that slants the work into the genre of fantasy or magical realism. Likewise, dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction can also tread into the generic realms of fantasy by including zombies or other-worldly creatures within their speculative narratives. Although other writers, such as Colson Whitehead in his novel *Zone One*, have taken the leap into speculative fiction after writing mostly realist fiction, Whitehead's novel crosses over into the genre of fantasy in the work by creating a post-apocalyptic zombie-killing adventure. Thus, the point in maintaining plausibility is a key element in my working definition of one-off genre-jumping novels due to the fact that the six writers examined in this project clearly made specific efforts in their works to stay within the range of the "possible." For Roth and Chabon, the altered historical event in each novel is based within the parameters of actual American history, which allows each of them to maintain narrative credibility. In the post-apocalyptic novels, McCarthy and Marcus are able to maintain verisimilitude by creating American wastelands that are plausible from the standpoint of post-war technological advancements and the ensuing age of terror that inevitably will follow. Ishiguro and Lee's anemic worlds feel all too real due to the issues of class separation and the questions that each work raises concerning identity and what it means to be human. The choice of genre for each writer allowed each of them to be critical of the post-9/11 world within a plausible space that can forever serve as a warning.

John Frow states that the importance of genre in literature goes far beyond being "merely stylistic devices" (2). Genre instead "create[s] effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science" (2). Thus, the choice of a writer, especially an established writer, to leap into a different genre, seemingly in reaction to a major historical, social, or even personal event, gives cultural capital/weight to the event, while also again raising many questions that go beyond the creative process and the fact that the writer is "simply choosing to go in a different direction." Thus, the purpose and message of the final literary product comes into question. The choice to move to speculative fiction for these six authors is of generic significance due to their post-9/11 creation, but the choice also further closes the gap between what is designated as high literature and genre fiction, even though according to Lev Grossman in *Time* in 2012: "literary writers…have been frantically borrowing from genre fiction of late" (2). The key word here is "borrowing," where writers seemingly inject elements of genre fiction; however, I argue here that the one-off novelists go beyond borrowing from speculative fiction, and that their act of "genre jumping" is significant because of two chosen actions: first, the choice to create a work of speculative fiction, and second, to return back to realist fiction after the publication of their one-off creation. These moves are indicative of something

bigger than an authorial experiment in another genre, and, as Grossman suggests that there is some kind of a revolution:

> We expect literary revolutions to come from above, from the literary end of the spectrum—the difficult, the avant-garde, the high-end, the densely written. But I don't think that's what's going on. Instead we're getting a revolution from below, coming up from the supermarket aisles. Genre fiction is the technology that will disrupt the literary novel as we know it. (2)

Grossman's comments are further supported in Tim Lanzendörfer's *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*, where he states that "it is certainly no longer possible to dismiss genre fiction outright as 'junk fiction'" (2) and that "the novel is increasingly headed toward amalgamated forms that combine temporary realist forms—the bildungsroman, the social novel, the political novel—with formal elements previously confined to the genres of science fiction, crime, and fantasy, among others" (3). What seems to have been occurring more often is the borrowing of generic characteristics, which, as Bakhtin suggests, is due to the permeable nature of the boundaries of the novel (*Dialogic*). But Lanzendörfer also states that speculative fiction, like other genre fiction, is "a universal novelistic development, one not confined to any gender, ethnicity, or national background" (4). In other words, if the idea of genre is to be understood as a technology and a tool for cultural diagnosis, then attention must be paid to the various forms in

which an engagement with genre permits us to read contemporary literature differently (4).

In determining genre characteristics, Ramon Saldivar argues that this closing of the gap is creating more of a shift to what he deems as "speculative realism" which is essentially "a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and fantasy proper" (Lanzendörfer 3). This reverse of terminology in describing these genres from "speculative fiction" to Saldivar's "speculative realism" is one that I suggest has been further influenced in the wake of the September 11 attacks—just as the event of 9/11 blurred the boundaries of the real and the unreal. The vacillating between speculative fiction and speculative realism is, in many ways, at the core of the six one-off novels examined here for two main reasons. The writer's individual choices of genre (dystopia, alternate history, post-apocalyptic) each possesses an inherent critical approach that allows them to question reality through fiction. But because of the juxtaposition of 9/11 as being a historically "real" event, while simultaneously being an event of cultural derealization, the one-off writers are seemingly questioning fiction through reality.

Out of the early theoretical questioning of the reality/unreality of the attacks, the rise of fiction about 9/11, in a sense, would slowly become its own genre. Works such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) are two of the more popular

9/11 novels that attempt to represent the horror of the attacks but also capture the fear and trauma that would rupture the lives of those who survived the attacks. As DeLillo's fractured narrative of the months and years after weaves in the lives and plots of the terrorists throughout the novel, *Falling Man* opens with the protagonist exiting one of the towers just before it collapes. Foer's work, narrated by a nine-year-old boy months after the attacks, revolves around the boy's quest to try and understand the loss of his father in the towers. Although each of the works capture the angst and fear of the attacks, they also iterate (as most 9/11-fiction does) an emphasis on the role of the body as a narratological instrument. Jenn Brandt argues that these two novels (and other 9/11 works) "use the physical bodies of characters to bring heightened awareness to the ways bodies have increasingly been seen as commodities and indicators of valuation" (6). Brandt identifies one of the more recurring binaries in 9/11 studies and in 9/11 fiction: the role of the body and the "non-body" and the event itself. I define the "non-body" here as the death of someone in the attacks whose body was never found. Those who perished and seemingly disappeared in the attacks were memorialized by some by burying a body-less, empty coffin. This recurring motif of the disappeared or "vaporized" body of those lost in the towers is often presented in 9/11 fiction (particularly in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, in which Oskar remembers attending his father's "funeral"), but the dead also act as "ghosts" in flashbacks of the protagonists in the fictional 9/11 world. Another

9/11 trope that concerns the body is the image of the falling body, which was created by a photograph taken by AP reporter Richard Drew near the North Tower. The infamous "falling man" image is one of the most powerful images taken of the attacks, and one of the few that featured a body. Drew's photograph of a man falling from the burning tower captured both the reality and unreality of the attacks.

This juxtaposition of corporeal representations, along with issues of discovering a language that would enable for some kind of control or understanding of the events of 9/11, and the seeming derealization of the new post-9/11 world, all converge into a space that metaphorically houses aftershocks of the image-event of the attacks. I argue that the space created by the one-off novels I examine here gain their generic ground, due in part to the influence of a post-9/11 dystopian-esque reality. The need to create speculative worlds that are deemed worse than our own in the weeks and years after the towers fell offered the one-off writers a chance to make the leap; however, complicating these matters is the idea that the tragedy of 9/11 altered the perspective of not only the individual, but also how we "read" the rest of the world. In the years after September 11, a number of critical academic articles were published addressing the assumption that the attacks in some ways skewed the perspective of readers when reading certain texts. Denis Donoghue questioned the context of reading *Moby Dick* and analyzing the contents of work after 9/11, implying that how we

read was altered by the September 11 attacks. Donoghue argues reading Melville's novel after 9/11 makes it "inevitable […] to interpret it as a revenge play and that the ways of reading said text are open to the complications of events:

> When we refer to the contexts of reading, we allow for choices. There are times in which one takes up a book and withdraws into its privacy: the world outside might as well not exist. At other times, one is reading with half a mind and listening, with the other half, for a knock on the door. Sometimes not even half of one's mind is available, and the knock on the door announces demands that can't be evaded or postponed. These make up the "violence without" which Wallace Stevens thought of as provoking a corresponding "violence within," acts of the mind in its own defense. Then there are the other people who have read the same book and made sense of it in ways that do not coincide with one's own. They, too, are in the context […] (165)

Donaghue implies here that reading after the September 11 attacks in some way changed (maybe temporarily) how we read—allowing the event to have invaded the subconscious of the reader. However, one could argue that the choice of genre of a novel or short story plays an important role in this invasion of the mind. After 9/11, the genres of dystopian, post-apocalyptic and alternate histories would

become not only tremendously popular, but in some ways, these genres created a fictional spatiality that in late 2001 and the years that followed, allowed for a respite from the reality of the terror of the attacks.

Dystopian theorists also responded to this need for a transformation of language in the months after the attacks. Raffaella Baccolini's reflections in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, restate the need for a transformative language, stating that this need rings true with Tom Moylan's analysis of the use of language and control in dystopian fictions, stating that "language is a weapon for the reigning dystopic power structure" (*Scraps* 149). A "new" language would have the potential to both revitalize the spirit and cauterize the wounds of a traumatized society, either real or fictional. Moylan explains further how the control of language is crucial to dystopian narratives:

> The dystopian protagonist, however, is generally prohibited from using language, and "when h/she does, it means nothing, words have been reduced to a propaganda tool" (quoting Baccolini, "It's Not in the Womb"). Despite the initial silence, the counter-narrative is often accomplished precisely by way of language. [...] control over the means of language, over representation and interpellation, is a crucial weapon. (149)

Baccolini, in the concluding chapter, hopes that the horrific and violent attacks on 9/11 may one day open a key component of dialogue and understanding. Baccolini writes that:

> Perhaps we can be helped by this image: as a critical or open dystopia, with its disasters and representations of worse realities, retains the potential for change, so we can discover in our current dark times a scattering of hope and desire that will arise to aid us in the transformation of society. A need for clarity, a sort of Raymond Carver "what we talk about when we talk about utopia" and a desire for (or "a dream of) a common language" (Adrienne Rich) with which to speak inform this project, in order to attempt to understand what we are living and to resume a possibly transformative language. (235)

***9/11 as Event***

In examining the theory of the "event" as a cultural, historical, or political action, the intersection of reality and derealization are again at play. To understand the impact of an event, an attempt must be made to both recognize and identify the event itself and its source, along with an analysis of the possible cause and the event's aftermath. These efforts are crucial in being able to recognize and evaluate both real and fictional events on both a personal and global scale. For

example, the impending post-apocalyptic aftermath of Y2K was the global event most hyped in the media during the two year period before the September 11 attacks. An estimated $3 billion was spent globally on Y2K preparations by individuals, global companies, and national governments in hopes of surviving the catastrophic technological crash that scheduled to happen at midnight on December 31, 1999. The reality of this possible tragic event was dethroned on January 1, 2000, as by most accounts, little to nothing occurred after the months of commercial and media hype the year preceding. Y2K was eventually dismissed globally and is now considered to have been a non-event that helped usher in a brief but hopeful global outlook for the incoming millennia.

But in 2001, the non-event with the historical moniker of Y2K was forgotten and replaced by the event that was quickly deemed as "9/11." In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard referred to the attacks as "the 'mother' of all events" in which "the whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event" (4). Although Baudrillard further states that "when it comes to symbolic events on a world scale—that is to say not just events that gain worldwide coverage, but events that represent a setback for globalization itself—we had had none" (3). Even though a long history of global terrorism exists and that there have been numerous acts of violence and terrorist attacks all over the world since September of 2001, the horrific acts of 9/11 should be considered in some ways as its own "one-off event," specifically as both an act of terror and as a global image-event.

No other tragedy or attack observed on such a global scale has impacted the world to such a historical or political level—and the force of the event was felt in an instant. The visual of the attacks on live television, that were not only replayed countless times on American television and around the world for days and weeks afterwards, made the attacks the first national/global events to be viewed and experienced on live TV, and now, thanks to the internet, can now be replayed *ad infinitum* on YouTube and other internet sources. Unlike other global catastrophes, either man-made or natural, the attacks on that Tuesday morning can be visually and (in some video clips) audibly relived 24-7 as a visual or image-event.

However, as Baudrillard observes, 9/11's event of global disruption not only changed the relations of power and history, "but so, too, are the conditions of analysis [changed]" (4). The attacks, and the aftermath of the event, created a series of claims concerning the importance of that day, with the primary claim being "everything changed" (especially in the United States). The claim that everything changed was challenged almost immediately. Other contemporary theorists soon after began trying to articulate the significance of 9/11 as an event. Slavoj Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* argues that the media's repetitive replaying of the images of the planes crashing into the towers created the most pure form of *jouissance* for viewers, that "we wanted to see it again and again," which in turn complicates our ability to recognize the real and the unreal

(12). Although he acknowledges the tragic loss of life from the attacks, Žižek takes a psychoanalytic approach in trying to imagine the American reaction to the tragedy, asking: "[…] what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives – why?" (17). He further discusses the blurring of reality and fiction, stating that:

> Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality—remember the postmodern doxa according to which 'reality' is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we perceive as a substantial autonomous entity. The lesson of psychoanalysis here [post-9/11] is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction*—we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. (19)

Paul Virilio's *Ground Zero* furthers Žižek's questions of reality and fiction by arguing that the post-9/11 world is now a place in which reality has been not only altered by the event, but that the virtual world is now preferred over reality. The attack itself, for Virilio, was "*an act of total war*, remarkably conceived and executed, with a minimum of resources" which as an act of terrorism solidified his theory of the "derealization of the battlefield[5]" (82). Here, Virilio acknowledges that terrorism is indeed a new form of war and that a new brand of

[5] Virilio first addresses the theory of military and war derealization in *War and Cinema* (1989).

terrorism now existed, making the attacks on 9/11 an event that confirmed "for us all the change in the military order" (81). In other words, Virilio believes that the significant historical "event," such as modern warfare or terrorist acts, are often viewed through the media with little bloodshed or bodies. He assumes that a lack of violent visual imagery is preferred when there is less visual reality, which means there is essentially less to witness. Virilio here seems to be in agreement with Baudrillard, whose controversially publication, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, argues that due to the media coverage of the Gulf War, which was mostly focused on the overwhelming airpower of the US forces, essentially "did not happen" due to the lack in any visual evidence of casualties. In other words, the media's derealization of war and terrorism, and even in the attacks on 9/11, seems to be turning events of terror into a "real" reality show.

The cultural embracing of derealization that Baudrillard, Žižek, and Virilio address also explore the complexities of trying to fulfill the need to find both a way to understand the tragedy and the necessary language to further describe the issues of reality and unreality, or at the very least, try to find meaning after the tragedy. In the days and weeks after the attacks on September 11, many cultural theorists proclaimed that an initial struggle with language had ensued concerning the efforts of many trying to put the impact of that day into words. In an interview months after the attacks on the World Trade Centers, Jacques

Derrida explained this lack of comprehension in naming historic events in his interviews with Giovanna Borradori:

> We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, *le 11 septembre*, September 11. The brevity of the appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy—a name, a number—points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize, that we do not yet know how to qualify; that we do not know what we are talking about. (86).

This new terminology coined by the US government and adopted by media outlets to refer to terrorism and the "levels of terror" stages that were covered, turned the "event" of the attacks—more specifically, the violent act itself—into the new "age of terror." Jeffrey Melnick reflects in 2009 in *9/11 Culture* that even though Derrida was initially right in his early assessment of language after the attacks, there would eventually be a way to discuss the traumatic events of 2001:

> "9/11" is a language. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, and tonalities. While this language has certainly been spoken across all media, that fact should not obscure a more important reality - that 9/11 has exerted a more profound influence on certain forms of American cultural expression (e.g. Hollywood film and

> underground hip hop) while leaving other forms (network television, for instance) relatively unchanged. (6)

Although Melnick acknowledges the cultural incorporation of the events of 9/11 in the United States, he also argues that there is a problem in naming the event due to the fact that the cultural impact of the "event" of the attacks immediately transforms itself into something else entirely. He states that the term "9/11" has over time transitioned form being an almost sacred term in the United States into something more unstable. He relates that part of this might be due to the 9/11 cultural "shout-out," (a term taken from hip-hop practices of naming friend, family, God, whoever, in songs and performances) in which American pop culture has turned the term into "a vehicle more than a destination" (142). For example, in an episode of the animated TV show, "Family Guy," one of the main characters, Lois, runs for mayor and learns quickly to say 9/11 whenever possible to get her audience's attention. In another example from the movie, *Gone Baby Gone*, after Helene McCready's kidnapped daughter has been returned to her, causing Helen to state her gratitude by saying: "Thank you to all the police and firemen…I feel like 9/11 right now." (144). Melnick's approach here acknowledges that the events of September 11, along with the new language and terms born out of that day, are absorbed into popular culture. But as with any major historical event, its cultural absorption is a double-edged sword. The threat of 9/11 becoming more integrated into pop culture insures in some ways that it

will eventually become simply more of a day of commemoration every year rather than an impactful historical event. The importance of evaluating 9/11 as an event from different perspectives, particularly through the works of art produced in the wake of tragedy, advances not only the historical impact of that day, but it also aids in avoiding the commodification of the tragedy as a simple commemorative date. In "Echoes of the Cold War: The Aftermath of September 11 at Home," Elaine Tyler May discusses how the attacks on 9/11 impacted not only average civilians, but also those writers and journalists who write and create for a living. May states that for many:

> There seemed to be no way to describe the attacks in any familiar context. However, before the sun set on that horrible day, witnesses and journalists were already reaching into historical memory in order to make sense of what happened. The terrorist attacks on that day were the most deadly and destructive assaults by foreign foes on the continental United States in the nation's history. Lacking a vocabulary as well as any historical precedents to place an event of this magnitude in some familiar and manageable context, the nation's leaders, pundits and large numbers of citizens struggled to find reference points in World War II and the Cold War. (35)

May explains that this initial inability to find words, language, or referents to match the terrorist attacks as a transformative moment. She reflects on cultural critic Kenneth Burke and his depictions of "moments of historical crisis as calling for "frames of acceptance," in which new situations are met with old frames" (36). May writes that:

> Burke derived his model from the Christian frame of acceptance utilized by the medieval Church, the model is suggestive for post-9/11 America" (36). According to Burke, the old frame provides the parameters for response to a new crisis. Although "new factors…bewilder the old frame, which is not designed to encompass them," the frame "will be extended to meet the new necessities by casuistic stretching" (May 36).

Amy Kaplan in her essay "Homeland Insecurities: Transformations of Language and Space" furthers Mays application of Burke's frames of acceptance (or, as it may apply to 9/11, "re-frames") in examining some of the language born out the 9/11 tragedy. Kaplan states that "Since September 11, 2001, new words have entered our everyday lexicon as though they have always been there" ("Homeland" 55). She states that:

> I am interested in how these words [ground zero, homeland] frame, interpret and produce meanings—and preclude other meanings—both for the events that have come to be known as "9/11" and for

> changing images of U.S. nationhood and its relation to the outside world." (55). [Concerning the term, Ground Zero]: "[it] is a highly condensed and charged appellation that has come to represent the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the physical location itself, the experience of untold suffering, and the absence of the twin towers, the people, and the corpses to bury" […] the term itself that started with the first use of the nuclear bomb. It was coined to describe the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (56)

Kaplan's point here is "to highlight the importance of language in giving meaning to an event that seems to defy meaning, and to suggest that narratives and metaphors bear the traces of history that our current usage disavows" (57).

But just as important as defining an event is the need to examine the act itself or the cause of the event. In respect to questioning the role of the event in this project, defining "terrorism" is at once a necessary and complex task. Michael Baur broadly defines "terrorism" as:

> The systemic use of actual or threatened violence against persons or against the vital interest of persons […] in the pursuit of political, ideological, religious, social, economic, financial, and/or territorial objectives whereby the violence is sufficiently random or indiscriminate so as to cause fear among members of the terrorist's

> indirect target group, thus creating a generalized climate of fear, distrust, or instability within certain sectors of society or within society at large, the ultimate aim of which is to influence popular opinion or governmental policy in a manner that serves the terrorists objectives. (13-14)

The climate of fear that Baur addresses became the norm in the weeks and months after the 9/11 attacks. A key element to Baur's definition resides in the dissemination of whether or not the terrorist event is an actual event or a threat—as each possibility holds a certain about of cultural capital today. The actual or "real" terror event directly feeds the climate of fear; however, the mere threat of terror, which can stem simply from the rhetoric of terrorism that is reported in the media or addressed by political figures, maintains the climate of fear. In no uncertain terms, the terrorist threat, even if not enacted, is an event in today's political climate.

In determining other identifiable characteristics of modern terrorism, Haig Khatchadourian believes that terrorism is "bifocal" because the act of terror is always aimed at two separate targets: direct and indirect. He states that on one side are the

> […] 'direct' victims or targets (those who directly or immediately suffer the violence done by the terrorist); these are the victims are killed, wounded, and maimed in terrorist attacks, and/or whose

> vital interests are directly harmed by other forms of terrorism such as industrial terrorism, electronic terrorism, or cyberterrorism. Secondly, terrorism is also aimed at a set of 'indirect' victims or targets[who] do not suffer the terrorist's violence directly, but are instead observers of the violence done to the terrorist's direct targets (Baur 10-11).

The distinction between direct and indirect targets is significant in recognizing not only the dual effects of terrorism, but also in the recognition and assessments of terror events in literature. In Rowner's definition of the "literary event" (addressed in detail in Chapter 2) he acknowledges the importance of choosing fragments from the text for analysis; thus, the need to recognize the specific intended target for the act of violence in the work of literature is imperative to my analysis.

A distinct problem within the "war on terror" is the chasm in technological approaches between those who fight terror and those who work to enact terror. Philip McReynolds compares the two disparate tools of terror and the technology used to fight it, stating that:

> Tools as simple as box cutters, Molotov cocktail, conventional (and often homemade) explosives strapped to suicide bombers, and relatively simple antipersonnel weapons such as hand grenades, small arms, and shoulder-mounted rockets tend to be the favorite

> tools of terrorists. This tendency toward the low-tech is more striking when one considers the high-tech means employed in the "war against terror": fighter jets; satellite- and laser-guided bombs; extensive computerized systems for information collection, storage, and retrieval; cruise missiles; and all of the other advanced weaponry and support gear of modern armies. (78)

The disparity between the two technologies contribute to the maintenance of the cultural climate of fear and continue to contribute to its heightened state. An act of terrorism, be it a simplistically-devised attack or a government-sponsored bombing of a terrorist cell, continues to feed the on-going political arguments as to what makes an act "terroristic." One crucial point that Baur also makes concerning terrorism is that "the ultimate effect of terrorism is to put modern, liberal society into conflict with itself" (20). Thus, as will be discussed in the coming chapters, the turning of a society against itself is a key element in the one-off works. The importance of recognizing events in the one-off novels is not only to designate the societal rupture and "what went wrong" in each novel, but also to assess the "eventness" or impact. Since one key characteristic in both utopian and dystopian studies is how "technology" is either criticized or praised for its negative or positive cultural contributions, as either a means of control or as a scientific advancement, it is necessary to assess if act of terrorism occurred within

an event or as an event, or if a character might be "defined" as a terrorist or have terrorist-qualities in these works.

### *Scope of Study*

The theoretical basis for this project is addressed in Chapter 2 and revolves around the different theories of "event" presented and defined by Ilai Rowner in *The Event*, in which he presents a foundation of theoretical approaches to historical and narrative events, while also presenting his own theory towards the "literary event," which is based on the relationship of corporeality and event. Rowner bases his philosophical approach on developing a theory towards a literary event that is influenced by the works of Heidegger, Blanchot, Derrida, and Deleuze, to create an approach in which the concepts of corporeality and language produce a unique way of both "reading and writing" the event. Rowner's approach to the event, and more specifically the literary event, provide a lens to examine not only the effects of history in literature, but it also allows for the questioning of generic choices made by the genre-jumping one-off writers by providing an interesting juxtaposition against the genre of 9/11 fiction, with each speculative genre providing insight into 21st century issues concerning representations of the body in the forms of disappearance, dismemberment, and the dispossession. The concepts of event theory are important to this study in that the questions raised by examining the power or significance of the event creates a

theoretical space where the impact of historical events can be weighed and assessed.

Furthermore, because my emphasis is on examining the role of events in representations of dystopian worlds reflective of the post-9/11 world, the focus of my genre study will be specifically adult dystopian literature. Trying to include the massive amount of highly popular young adult dystopian literature, and/or the literature that directly represents the burgeoning genre of 9/11 fiction (works directly reflective of 9/11, and the days/weeks after the tragedy) that have been produced since 2001, is beyond the scope of this project. Much like with early 9/11-related fiction, a study of the literary, film, and cultural boom of young adult dystopian fiction after 9/11 could easily be someone else's dissertation. These genres are already being mined by scholars, most recently by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry's important 2009 work, *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, which examines a variety of children's utopian and dystopian literature from the 18th century to the present day. Also, numerous examinations of 9/11-specific fiction have been recently published as well, including Richard J. Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*, Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, and Jo Lampert's *Children's Fiction about 9/11: Ethnic, National, and Heroic Identities*. Each of these areas, YA dystopia literature and 9/11 fiction, already have a growing body of scholarship, and each genre requires a different approach to the intended audience than with the texts

that I have assembled for my research. Also, despite the fact that some of the most prolific and highly regarded speculative fiction writers are women, such as Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. LeGuin, I must acknowledge that within the period that I am examining here (2001-present) that there is a lack of one-off female speculative fiction writers. Even though there have been a number of new popular adult dystopian novels published recently by female writers, especially Edan Lepucki's *California* (2014) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), the writers themselves do not fall under the "one-off genre jumping" requirement because they failed to publish mostly realist fiction before 2001.

Thus, in the chapters and sections that follow, I examine the six one-off genre-jumping novels through the theoretical lenses of genre, event, and 9/11 theory. To aid in my analysis, I have created small sections of analysis congruent with the speculative fiction genres that are referred to as "theoretical interludes." Each interlude provides brief theoretical summaries concerning the speculative fiction sub-genres that the one-off writers work in. My hope is that the interludes provide additional theoretical context as to the critical and historical approaches these different subgenres in order to evaluate the significance of the choice of genre for each writer and speculate on the purpose or message of each of the one-off novels. Chapter 2 is dedicated primarily to the theories of the event that may be addressed to differing degrees throughout my analysis. This chapter focuses mainly on Rowner's approach to the literary event and how it creates a conducive

approach to analyzing both event and speculative fiction. I discuss a number of theoretical approaches to event theory in the chapter, but the focus revolves around Ilai Rowner's definition and approaches to literary, narrative, and historical events. The chapters that follow are presented under the subheadings of their respective genre; however, it is important to note that some of the characteristics of dystopian fiction can be recognized or permeate into alternate history and post-apocalyptic, as these two genres can be viewed as sub-genres of dystopian fiction. In Chapter 3, I will examine the departure from his American Trilogy and the historical transformations in Roth's *The Plot against America* and how his counter-historical work in the genre of alternate history allowed him to immerse/place himself in a historical situation that could examine the sweeping arm of history and historical determinism, while at the same time signaling in the novel how easily American democracy and the overall direction of a country can change with one event. Chapter 4 will question Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* alteration of history as he imagines an almost-utopian Jewish community for post-World War II survivors in Alaska, seemingly saving countless numbers of people from being lost in the concentration camps and gulags during the Holocaust. For Chabon, one alteration in the "historical machine" does not have to be a horrific event. In Chapter 5, the post-apocalyptic America of McCarthy's *The Road* allows the writer to create a possible final

chapter to his canon that examines the end game of violence[6]. The novel examines also the end of times and the role of language in a world destroyed by man and violence—the ultimate terror. This concern with language and its power to destroy and instill violence is the focus in Chapter 6 as Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* as it explores the lethality of the relations between words and space. The switch to speculative fiction allows Marcus to examine the physically destructive power of language by creating a post-apocalyptic event and environment where the language of children can kill. Chapter 7 will examine Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as he questions the absurdity of identity issues concerning what it means to be "human." Ishiguro hypothesizes on the concepts of the "other" and the issues of boundaries between "us and them" which are brought to light by examining the differences and separation of humans and clones. Chang-Rae Lee's novel, *On Such a Full Sea,* the most recently-published of the one-off genre-jumping novels, is the focus of Chapter 8. Lee's genre jump allows him to create in the novel an America that is referred to as an "Association," implying that a business or club is in charge instead of an organized government. Lee attempts to examine history under the narrative form of a group history, which works as an untrusted narrative group that is retelling history and is often unsure of what is fact or fiction. The novel presents a class-distinct set of cultural groups that in many ways are reflective of America here and now. Lee provides a

[6] McCarthy is rumored to have other novels completed, but *The Road* is his last published novel.

terrifying template as to how easy it is to destroy democracy though class segregation and division into "settlements." The final chapter takes a wide-lens view of the one-off's as works born out of a historical event and how the further examination of literature through event theory in works of speculative fiction expands the conversation on the roles of history and narrative. Also, I argue for the continuation of 9/11-related studies, be it through the study of 9/11 as a historical event or through the study of 9/11 fiction and other art forms, such as in the study of critical dystopian works created after 2001.

# CHAPTER 2

# NARRATIVE, HISTORICAL, AND LITERARY EVENT THEORY

The six genre-jumping one-off speculative fiction novels that are examined in this project are, in numerous ways, products of "events." As previously mentioned, from a historical standpoint these works were produced in the period after the September 11th terrorist attacks. And although some critics, like Jean Baudrillard, deem the events of that day to be the "mother of all events," the understanding of an event, or its "eventness," cannot only change over time but can also be purposely diminished by those in power or, conversely, an event can be over-emphasized for political, economic, or global gain. The study of the importance of the "event," be it a single individual accomplishment or a global tragedy, has likely never been more important than it is in the 21st century. The significance of event analysis, from a historical, political, or cultural perspective, not only allows for a deeper understanding of the causes and/or effects of specific occurrences, but the analysis of an event and its "eventness" reveals both a hierarchical understanding of how information, data, and narrative are understood to be either real and true, and what other information should be considered as unreal or false.

The one-off novels that I analyze in this project reside within this event-space that exists between cause and effect. As stated in the introduction, the texts that I will be analyzing offer several connections to the philosophical concept of "the event," and the complexities of applying questions of significance to historical events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11. I will focus most of my attention on examining these texts through the theoretical lens of "the event" presented in Ilai Rowner's 2015 study, *The Event: Literature and Theory*, which focuses on his efforts to establish a theory of the "literary event," which he credits as being an amalgam of event theories and definitions of Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot, and Deleuze. Rowner's approach attempts to establish a theoretical set of questions in order to examine the role of the event in literature by identifying and analyzing the intersections of language and corporeality within an event. Before my analysis of the six one-off texts and the role of the event in each, I will present in this chapter a number of theories and definitions based on Rowner's *The Event*, in which he questions the major differences between characteristics of the "historical event" and the "narrative event," and how these theories contribute to and complicate his concept of the "literary event." I will then discuss Rowner's approach to defining "the literary event" and explain why his event-driven approach in examining the relations of corporeality and language, as reflected in the dual act of writing and reading "corporeally," is appropriate for my chosen one-off speculative fiction novels.

In an attempt to create a possible "theory of literary events," Ilai Rowner's *The Event* initially breaks the event into three specific types, all of which will inform his approach to examining the event in literature. Rowner offers the following as his initial definition:

> The term *event* will be defined here as any irregular occurrence, real or fictional, that has effectively and obviously come about. At the same time, it is in the very substance of the event to comprise an unknown element that is imperceptible and inappropriable. At the foundation of this book lies the supposition that literature, as an art of language and as an act of fiction, essentially relates to the problem of the event and is precisely concerned with the event's dimension of inexhaustibility, to the *eventness* of the event, which simultaneously is the condition for its concrete occurrence and projects its ideal inconceivability" (1).

Rowner's questioning of the relation of event to literature attempts to link language with the power of the event, further defining it as

> […] a sign that unexpectedly appears or a blow that suddenly hits—it is through violent disturbance, astonishing irruption and disruption, or confusion between image and reality that the event incessantly acts on the literary work as a call for absolute creation in which the reverberation of writing and reading must obstinately

> persist. The event stamps itself on the literary work as an entity of fascination or anxiety. A happening that remains nameless forces itself on the work through these passions [fascination/anxiety]. The work of literature, as both writing and reading, becomes then the making of the event itself: the more one engages with the event's unprecedented order, surrendering to unheard ambiguous language and sensations, the more the work becomes the 'the offspring of the event,' to borrow Deleuze's beautiful expression" (2).

In the following two sections, I discuss both the historical event and the narrative event as presented in Rowner's argument. Since one of my arguments is that the one-off works were influenced by historical events and since some texts address historical events within the narrative framework of the novel, I chose to include these theoretical approaches to both history and narrative in order to draw from individual theories in my analysis.

### *The Historical Event*

In order to separate his theory of the "literary event" from other approaches to history, Rowner begins by presenting several major theoretical approaches in order to define and address the characteristics of the historical event. Beginning with Paul Ricoeur's seminal *Time and Narrative I*, Rowner states that Ricoeur believes that "time can be humanly grasped only when it is

arranged by a narrative intelligence [and] it is only when we articulate time in a story that it becomes historical. This assertion remains valid if we consider it from the opposite perspective: history attains meaning only as a result of the insertion of time into narrative" (Rowner 4). Thus, the relationship between history and narrative is both symbiotic and dependent in not only how the narrative is presented, but also in how representations of history can be perceived as either true or inaccurate. Ricoeur sees an indirect relationship between history and narrative when it concerns the role of the event, which he (according to Rowner) defines as "an intersection between the ontological happening within the course of time and its epistemological function in the intelligible reconstruction created by historical discourse" (4). Rowner summarizes in *The Event* the six specific qualities of the "historical event" that Ricoeur focuses on:

> a) History privileges the event that has effectively taken place in the past.
> b) The event relates necessarily to the human actor either as its
> c) The event brings about change.
> d) […] the event is conventionally conceived as unrepeatable and singular.
> e) The event is contingent and not necessary.
> f) The event is a deviation from the norm […] (4)

Ricoeur's historical event characteristics stated here are important in my analysis for two reasons. First, Ricoeur's characteristics would easily identify with 9/11 as a major historical event, but his six qualities also aid in defining the influence of history on the one-off novels as significant literary works, as well. The one-off

writers have "authored" novels that are for each a significant authorial "events" as they not only examine the power of the event in their works, but also how their generic choices and creations are significant changes of direction for each writer. Also, Ricoeur's concept of the historical event is also crucial in my analysis of alternate histories, much like Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, in examining not only how history is manipulated by the authors, but also how each writer also argues their pre-publication need to justify their counter-historical creations. Rowner also emphasizes the significance of Ricoeur's terminology concerning how events of history become "historical" through the stages of "prefiguration," "configuration," and "refiguration." Ricoeur states that

> *Prefiguration* reveals the pre-understanding of the world that allows the passage from physical occurrence to historical narrative […] *Configuration* is the composition of the historical narrative itself in which the unity of the *muthos*[7] both protects the discordance of the event and endows it with newly settled sense. *Refiguration* is where the historical event becomes the cultural property of a society of readers and writers. (6-7).

The one-off novels, as I am examining them in this project, act as configurations (or counter-configurations in the case of alternate histories) or refigurations of the

[7] *Muthos* here refers to a series of plots, or the concept of truth through story.

impact of the event or the "eventness" of both 9/11 and the post-9/11 world. The narratives constructed by the six one-off writers, however, also follow other additional event approaches.

### *The Narrative Event*

To better exemplify the differences between a narrative event and a literary event, Rowner initially states that "the term event is fundamentally bound to the concept of plot in narrative theory" and that the "common narrative structure of the plot can be defined either by a narrative unit of one or more events or as the succession of events that composes a narrative relation" (14). Rowner refers again to Ricoeur in outlining the dimensions of the narrative event, stating that within Ricoeur's determination of *chronological* and *non-chronological* narratives that the event does not act as a "singular or closed occurrence" in either narrative form (14). In other words, unlike the historical event, the narrative event has a different form of "resonance" in that the event does not just occur and then disappear, even though historical events are often subject to "disappearance" when dismissed by historians. He states that the shift or disappearance of historical events in history as being a significant contributor to the study of literature. Rowner emphasizes this noting how Jurji Lotman recognizes in *The Structure of the Artistic Text* that "a change in the cultural codes at a given historical moment causes the same narrative situation to appear twisted" (15).

Lotman is referring here to the cultural indoctrination of historical events; thus, an event as impactful as the attacks on September 11th would undoubtedly alter the course of literature and narrative to some degree. Rowner and Lotman both agree that "the task of literature is to inaugurate new writing events that create new perceptions: to value the insignificant, to reveal the unheard of as a new source of inspiration, or to bring to light the detail that defamiliarizes the most common is the driving force of the historical evolution of literature" (15). Again, the one-off novels examined here fulfill this task of literature by creating new writing events that were inspired by the shift in perceptions of reality and non-reality after the events of 2001.

In addition to changes in the cultural codes, the narrative sequence, according to Rowner, also plays a definitive role in the "defamiliarization of the common" in literature. Rowner states that "the narrative event does not only refer to an action within the world, but depends on the activity of the linguistic sequence as such" (16). The sequence can revolve around what Barthes refers to as the "nucleus event" in which he "uses the image of the atom to show the difference between a *nucleus event* and the surrounding cloud of acts that are subordinated to this kernel" (Rowner 16). The nucleus event "inaugurates or concludes a series of satellite acts; it is responsible for the logic of the plot, presenting its pillars as well as its moment of risk. The satellite acts, however, either expand or diminish the pathos of the nucleus, either cover or discover its

information" (Rowner 16). Barthes concept of a nucleus event is important to the overall approach that Rowner pursues in that he emphasizes throughout *The Event* the need for recognition of the "literary events" in terms of their relationship between the corporeal and the authorial language that accompanies the action of the event.

The narrative relationship with the event that both Barthes and Rowner address echo Aristotle's concept of the *peripeteia*, defined as the "transformation in the order of the action, a catastrophe that violently changes the fortune of the characters from good to bad, from success to failure" (Rowner 19). Aristotle's term has seemingly been adapted or redefined in describing pivotal moments in narrative, such as in Suvin's concept of the "novum" in science fiction narratives or in Hellekson's "nexus" moment in alternate histories. Rowner does emphasize that "although the peripeteia seemingly runs counter to the expected course of events, its astonishment cannot be the effect of pure chance" (19). In relation to the one-off novels (as I argued in the Introduction), the writers made careful decisions in their choices of events that contribute to the peripeteia in each work in order to maintain a high degree of verisimilitude. These creative choices insure that the "daunting calamity [in the novel] has to respect the internal necessity and probability of the composition" in order for the "tragedy [to steer] the error-afflicted situation toward purification and the feeling of terror toward recognition" for the reader (Rowner 20).

### *The Foundation of the Literary Event*

Although Rowner's approach to the "literary event" contains its own set of requirements and parameters, he is careful to argue that the concept of the "literary event" is still evolving. He clarifies this by explaining that "the literary event certainly has a visible face, it involves an actual performance or a narrative fact, an unbearable revelation and encounter that memorably echoes the importance of the literary episode" (173-4). Rowner's theory of the literary event stems from an amalgamation of other philosophical approaches that are central to the study of the literary text. I will discuss the four approaches[8] here briefly as

[8] Theoretical texts that approach the event as a subject of study has had a recent surge in publications in the last decade. In Slavoj Žižek's *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept*, he defines "the event" as "[…] an amphibious notion with even more than fifty shades of grey. And 'Event' can refer to a devastating disaster or to the latest celebrity scandal, the triumph of the people or a brutal political change, an intense experience of a work of art or an intimate decision" (3). More specifically, Žižek further explains that an event at its most basic state is

> […] something shocking, out of joint that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation. There is by definition, something 'miraculous' in an event, from the miracle of our daily lives to those of the most sublime spheres, including that of the divine. At first approach, an event is thus *the effect that seems to exceed its causes* – and the *space* of an event is that which opens up the gap that separates an effect from its causes. (4)

It is within this "space" that Žižek posits here between cause and effect that create one of the paradoxes of the event. In considering the attacks on September 11th as an event, Žižek's "space" between the cause and effect of the event is crucial in determining the overall impact or "spray"[8] of the violent acts of history and their cultural impact.

One earlier work, Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* (1988), is one of the subject's seminal texts. Quentin Meillassoux states that Badiou's definition is that of:

> An event is always undecidable in relation to knowledge, and can therefore always be annulled by one who only believes in brute facts: is there political revolution, or merely an accumulation of disorder and crime? Amorous encounter, or merely sexual desire? Pictorial novelty, or shapeless mass

each are discussed in *The Event*, in order to connect their theories within Rowner's overarching theory of the literary event, but also to allow me to reference them in my own analysis.

Rowner acknowledges Heidegger's *On Being and Time* and *Identity and Difference* concerning the role of event within his concept of *Ereignis*, which Rowner designates as an impossible term to define. However, the term does embody Heidegger's concept of "the event of appropriation," in which the event goes beyond s simplistic action: "'event' is not simply occurrence, but that which makes any occurrence possible" (*Identity* 36). Thus, the concept of Being for Heidegger, as an event of appropriation, "is nether the infinite presence nor the

---

> and imposture? […] This undecidability of the event is given in the fact that it has always already disappeared the moment it is located. (3)

Badiou's and Lacan's approach to event is brilliantly adapted in Philip E. Wegner's *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*, in which he periodizes the literary, film, and cultural events of the long 1990s.

Claude Romano's has published several texts on the philosophy of the event, including *Event and World* (2009) and *Event and Time* (2013). His most recent, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*, argues that:

> There is no event without change. But does it suffice that there can be a change for there to be an event? Among changes, some take place in such a way as to presuppose a permanent substratum: a barge floats on the river, a bird sits on a branch. Others, on the contrary, "blaze," so to speak, without it being possible to designate in them, or "under" them, anything that remains: lightning flashes, a sound reverberates. From a linguistic point of view, the use of nouns refers in the first case to beings ("the barge," "the bird"), and in the second to the event itself. But of these two types of change, the first is no less an event than the second. For both can appear. In order for there to be an event, a change has to appear, or rather, the event is the appearing of the change itself. (216-17).

Romano's argument that change itself is pivotal to the event, Žižek's spatial analysis, along with Badiou's undecidability of the event, presents three separate approaches that are subtlety different that can, however, greatly alter the perception of an event. Although I do reference Žižek's work, my focus for this project revolves around the literary events of the one-novels; thus, the majority of my analysis stems from Rowner's work and the texts that he adapted in *The Event*.

dialectical becoming of a total conception of history. It is, rather the non-predetermined historical destination of transformable visibility and language" (Rowner 29). Heidegger's concept of event, as determined by Rowner, acts as an agent for questioning or determining one's existence, which Heidegger believes is best accomplished through language and poetry. For Heidegger, "poetry is the 'primal form of building'[9] the road toward man's own sense, preserving his historical inheritance and rearticulating his unique position between heaven and earth" (29). Rowner seems to borrow Heidegger's formulation of the event of appropriation in his own theory of the literary event by adopting the need to choose a fragment from a literary text and examine it from outside the textual constraints of culture and history in order to examine the fragment from a perspective outside that of a simple plot event.

In contrast to Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot's position concerning the event in *The Space of Literature* is that "the event becomes the prerogative of the work of literature and the destiny of the writer," but I argue that this also should include the destiny of the reader as the "event occurs only to the one who is involved within the work of art: the one who experiences the 'disappearance of language' and the 'resemblance' of the image" (Rowner 29). Rowner states that unlike the event/language connections made by Heidegger, Blanchot sees the experience of reading as a "dizzying homelessness," and that the event is "a

[9] Rowner quoting from Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (228).

necessary process of ceaseless dissimulation that appears when literature confronts the impossible" (30). Blanchot's focus is more concerned with the "being of literature" and In *The Space of Literature,* he focuses on the concept that "art is," rather than concerning with the purpose of art or its usage. Rowner states that for Blanchot, "the event of the poem begins when man and gods, conscience and truth, vanish" (74-5). The disappearance of man parallels the loss of language as well:

> Blanchot argues that the transformation of the real into image and language's act of disappearance is not conveyed through the word as an isolated expressive unit, but rather emerges in the poetic articulation between words, when the words disappear too, dragged along in the rhythmic movement of evaporating sounds and vanishing shadows. (81)

Blanchot here reflects upon how reality is found in between the words, in the spaces and rhythms of sentences in literature. The examination of spaces, speed, rhythm, and language are concepts not only key to my analysis of the literary texts, but they are all also elements of examination that are referenced in the study of 9/11 as an event.

Even though Jacques Derrida spoke extensively about the attacks of 9/11, Rowner refers back to these interviews concerning the event and literature after the attacks. Rowner extends and compares Heidegger's theory of the event of

appropriation with Derrida's concepts of the event after 9/11, stating that an event "accentuates the singularity of a clash occurring for the first and last time, an unexpected irruption or invasion of an occurrence that is radically open to the chance and venture embodied by the coming of the impossible. Rowner states that the event for Derrida "marks the absolute alterity of the encounter" (Rowner 31) or the "experience of the impossible" (32). The impossibility of the event in turn creates an "unknowing" language; however, this "lack of language, this ignorance or deficiency in 'saying' the event, must not lead to closure: it should be followed by fundamental affirmation and ceaseless questioning" (99). Rowner states that the event takes on elements of Derrida's concept of *hauntology*, that since the event cannot be fully understood, that there is a secrecy that haunts every event (99). Here, Derrida's terminology of calling the haunting a form of "spectrality" or "iterability" […] "designate[s] a process in which a phenomenon repeats itself by taking a different appearance" (100).

Derrida also refers to "the core of the event" as "the *thing*," which Rowner translates as "the event itself, as 'thing,' says Derrida, never happens; it is the thing to which accidents happen" (101) and is known because of its ability to suspend any concepts of the "known" (102). Derrida infers that the defining constructs to an event are complicated both by a need to name the event (language) and through its relation to death (corporeality). For Derrida, the dead body is in some instances proof of an event, whereas the "existence of the victims

is proof not only that the event has taken place but also that the extreme violence cannot be reduced to any impression and knowledgeable statement" (104). Rowner explains that "the event imprints its absolute trace on the dead" and provides a distinct difference between the act of the event itself and the impression that we as readers or critics of the event try to interpret (105).

Derrida also addresses the theory of the event as "other," with it defined as "something that is always improper, always inappropriate" but when it is linked to an event the other becomes an "emergency, a real, suddenly emerging threat" (Rowner 105-6), and it is within the literary text that the concept of "otherness" is most apparent. Rowner states that Derrida believes that "the force of a text emanates from the untranslatable aspects of language and experiences, which Derrida calls *remainders* (*restance*) or *residues* (*restes*) that simultaneously re-mark the event" (113). Derrida's demarcations of remainders and residues reflect one of the central purposes here in my examination of the one-off novels: to look at each novel as its own "event" and question the "eventness" of each; but to do so within the parameters Rowner sets forth in *The Event* of analyzing how the "singularity of the event becomes exemplary within [each] text" and by how it "[…] resists full understanding and appropriation" to the degree that each work "releases semantic or semiotic residues" and "brings about a process of *iterability* and *spectrality*" (113).

Finally, Rowner states that Gilles Deleuze's approach to event is the focus of the concept of writing corporeally, which Rowner deems as a key element in determining the impact of the event in literature. Rowner believes that within the context of these four event theorists that

> […] we can say in general that Blanchot-Derrida's way highlights the power and image of death, while Deleuze focuses on the power and image of life. The first two perceive art as a living dead-body, while the latter perceives art as a dying living-body. The former way constructs the problem of the event through the present-absent terminology of different states of death: the corpse, survival, loss, grief, the phantom (revenant) and vampires, resemblance or simulacrum. The latter, in contrast, speaks of the event in the terminology of life decomposing: flesh, meat, bones, sensations, intensities, 'affects' and 'percepts,' joy and suffering, illness and the project of health—all these accompany the affirmation of a dazzling becoming. (191)

In Rowner's interpretation, Deleuze's concept and relation of body and language is itself a two-fold process, stating that

> Deleuze writes: 'Every event is like death' because dying is a double occurrence. On the one hand, it possesses an aspect that is effectively present and singularly real, a possible aspect. On the

> other hand, dying, in itself, is impossible, because it is the 'non-place' and the 'non-identity' that are incessantly un-happening and therefore impersonally unaccomplished (192).

The non-place that Deleuze relates concerning the process of dying invokes a "non-space" that is corporeally related, but it also echoes in the writer's creative choice: creating a utopian ("non-place") or dystopian world in itself is creating a "body" event or "death" event.

Deleuze further states that

> The stoic distinction between corporeal and incorporeal to this dual conception of the possible and the impossible. Dying acts on the body or grows in the body, not as an obscure state of mind […] but in extreme proximity to a concrete wound or illness. At the same time, death becomes real as the most distant, the incorporeal par excellence that has no name and no ground" (192)

In other words, there is no event without the body according to Deleuze, as he believes that "every event accomplishes corporeal actualization (*effectuation*) as well as virtually accomplishing creative counter-actualization (*contre-effectuation*). The actualization of the event is corporeal by definition: an event occurs where there is an encounter between bodies" (193). Rowner concludes with his approach to the dependency of corporeal and language, stating that

> The qualities and organization of the bodies, their vulnerability and rawness, bring the actual traits of happening to the surface. The latter are reduced to their primitive and tangible condition: when the blade cuts the meat, when the flesh is touched by the fire's heat, or when two eyes meet, a physical process wraps itself in a visual or in a sound effects that call for counter-actualization, for a somatic language and ethical concerns (194).

In the following section, Rowner's dependence on Deleuze's philosophical approach to corporeality and language, as well as the influences of Heidegger, Blanchot, and Derrida, will be apparent in his construction of his theory of literary events.

### *Rowner's Theory of the Literary Event*

Rowner states that in moving towards a theory of the "literary event" that there are principles that help to both identify and define it.[10] Rowner believes that when analyzing a work of literature that the reader must acknowledge the existence of a "space" or in-between position between the textual and the corporeal that initially must be acknowledged and accepted in one's analysis. This acceptance allows "one's own presumptions from getting in the way of the

[10] Rowner's principles are summarized here, but the final principle ("writing corporeally") is key to my overall analysis; thus, that principle will be discussed more that the initial principles.

openness of the encounter between the realm of language and the corporeal exigency" (169). Secondly, Rowner affirms that to analyze the literary event that the critic must adhere to "the suspension of all general rules and judgment, all original intentions or ideological aims [and] all semantic and historical references," which narrows the analysis to only the event (170). Rowner's third principle, which works in concert with recognizing the literary event as a confluence of the corporeal and language, requires that the critic must also "[…] recognize the works particular rhythm and mood and to penetrate the region that can be named the 'tempo*r*ature' or the 'tempo*r*ament' of the work" in order for the analysis "to focus on the way the work deeply strikes, before the work of interpretation starts conceptualizing or codifying the context" (170). This third principle will serve as a crucial analytical approach when examining the literary events in the one-off novels in which I question the "speed" or tempo of a given literary event or when examining the temporament of the language/dialogue surrounding the literary event.

Rowner also designates that the literary event has to come from a specific "piece" of the work, forcing one to "choos[e] to focus on a *fragment* of the work" (171) and that the act of "microanalysis has to lift out a creative problem and present it as a singular case study" (170). Rowner's act of choosing a fragment in which language and the corporeal collide allows for an analysis "similar to the musical interpretation of preexisting musical creation" (171). Within the

questioning of the fragment, a space exists not just for the event but for the "eventness" created by the writer which allow for examination of the "improvisational" characteristics of the event. In keeping with musical analysis analogies, Rowner denotes that examining the event fragment is much like analyzing a melodic idea or motif; however, when examining the literary event, these variations "develop on the basis of a missing theme, on a lacuna [an unfilled space] or hiatus" (171) Thus, Rowner reemphasizes that there cannot be just one event definition, but that it is ever evolving from one reading, one reader, and one historical period to the next. He writes:

> This dynamic vision squarely opposes the static formal understanding of 'there is.' It suggest examining the work of literature with the intuition that something is always in the process of being made, something is always in between the already-happened and the to-be-happening. From this point of view, to ask is not 'what is there' but rather 'what is happening' in the work of art. (173)

Rowner believes that the literary event acts as "a perceptible secret" that "sometimes […] imposes itself as the unique law of the work" (174) and that the "literary event refuses to limit itself to the mere representation of a theme or to the presentation of a technical operation" (175). He also argues that it is important to "take into account the generic conventions [of a work], but what is truly at stake

here is the moment in which the work of literature creates a burden that becomes inevitable and unbearable" (175). Thus, the boundaries of the literary event presented in *The Event* are in many ways a starting point for a "*closer* reading" of a text that goes beyond questioning just the narrative and historical events.

To address the creative or writing aspects of the literary event, Rowner's final principle revolves around the concept of "writing corporeally." Thus, he posits that the writer's use of the corporeal within the text creates the "eventness of the event" in order to illustrate "the pure energy of life [that] is involved in the event; a supreme sensibility exists in the impersonal entity that emerges from the bodies' incommensurable shock and confrontation" (195). The intersection of the body and language in the literary event forms what Rowner calls a "vital move" because "it reveals the speed and power of the event's energy of life, focusing on the way this energy unfolds through the participants of the event, inscribes itself on their bodies, and transforms their actions and passions" (204-5). Within the literary event, the body's role can be found under these conditions:

> (1) corporeal substances that participate in the event as its actual cause or result.
>
> (2) relations of forces that define the nature of the encounter between these substances, as well as the spatial and temporal relations of the event.

> (3) impersonal life energy that agitates in and between the substances as the signature of the event's being of becoming, thus imposing a unique production of writing (206)

In other words, Rowner argues that the "body of the event" must be exposed and questioned "in order to reveal the creativity and necessity of literature" (205). Much like any event, the vital move that he outlines and includes in the act of "writing corporeally" makes the act of writing "performative" or act as a "literary performance" (208). Again, it is within these corporeal boundaries that the body will be examined within the parameters of the literary events in the following one-off works—an approach that will illuminate not only the "eventness" created by each writer, but also how the novels work as literary refractions of the post-9/11 world.

Even though Rowner argues that in his theory of literary events that the analysis has to come from a specific example in the work and analyzed outside the context of the text, he does state that due to the fact that the event examined is indeed textual that "the method of observation that seems adequate is a close analysis of the actual elements presented in the text" (172). In other words, textual criticism must occur, despite the need to suspend judgment of the text. In my analysis, along with each novel's connections to the post-9/11 world, I will incorporate other specific forms of textual analysis with Rowner's and the other event theorists' approaches, which will include the application of Brandon

LaBelle's concept of acoustic spatiality to some of the literary events in the works, along with Virilio's various philosophical approaches to "cultural speed" and his concept of *dromoscopy* and accelerated culture. Both LaBelle and Virilio's concepts, which when applied textually, will each further Rowner's concepts of examining the temporality of a text.

In his study of acoustic spatiality, Brandon LaBelle states that "If sound, *as I'm pursuing*, creates a soft architecture, hinging together material and immaterial matter, as a place to dwell, it does so by also creating a stage or scene for the unnamable and the nameable to meet" (12). Besides establishing a sound space, he also argues for the expansion of sound and acoustic studies as a structural approach that questions and evaluates "sounds ability to move in and out of focus, flowing as raw material and then, at points, cohering into meaningful exchange, lends to our sense for being in a certain place, at a certain time" (12). LaBelle's approach to space and sound resonates within Rowner's approach to the event and its influence on literature when he states that "[sound] does so by integrating into the field of listening what is beyond or removed from ourselves. In other words, sound, as that which crosses over, which forces into proximity one and the other, brings into contact the represented with the non-represented – with what has a name and what is yet to be named" (12). LaBelle also argues that "through its ability to disrupt or unsettle the lines between inside and outside, between one skin and another's, sound pulls into its movement the private and the

public," and it is important to note that like the event "sound is never truly one's own, nor does it settle within any fixed boundary or shape" (13). By questioning the role of sound in scenes of literary events, in my opinion, the critic creates a space for:

> An architecture onto which many claims are continually made in this way, I [LaBelle] take sound as the very means by which we learn to negotiate the challenges of presence and absence, of the real and the virtual, to ultimately remake or reconfigure difference and commonality - of what is mine and what is yours. (12)

Questioning more of the visual aspects of an event than the aural, Paul Virilio, one of the first cultural theorists to publish on 9/11, argues that there exists an "Aesthetics of Disappearance" (which he wrote about pre-9/11) that is related to the visual interpretation, reception, and the problems that speed produces within this aesthetic. Virilio introduces in this aesthetic the understanding of "picnolepsy"—the epileptic state of consciousness produced by speed, or rather, the consciousness invented by the subject through its very absence: the gaps, glitches, and speed bumps lacing through and defining it. Virilio uses theory of cultural speed to explain the unreality presented in today's media:

> The aesthetics of immediate perception disappear through dromologistical media techniques, replaced instead by proliferating

> fantastical telepresent real-time images, and leading ultimately to a complete "derealization" of the world (Baldwin 134).

The concept of derealization, as it is addressed in the one-off novels, as well as in the actual image-event created by the terror events on 9/11 and in the ensuing onslaught of media information since the attacks in 2001, is a product of the acceleration of culture. The inability to disseminate reality from unreality has been jeopardized and thus, so has the importance or relevance of the historical past. In addressing Virilio's approach to cultural acceleration, Steve Redhead questions that "If accelerated culture is the 'popular,' the 'contemporary,' the 'now,' where everything is speeded up so much that reality is just a blur, how long are its historical roots?" (51). Virilio addressed this issue in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2000, stating that […] century on century, since the Renaissance, western culture has accelerated. There are always more narratives and more images than the year before, and new technologies are constantly discovered that allow them to be distributed to a wider constituency and at a greater speed. […] Can it keep on expanding infinitely and still be making our lives richer?" (52). It is within these two key analytical approaches—acoustic spatiality and cultural acceleration— to the text's literary event that will extend my analysis to another level of close reading. By adapting these approaches to the texts, I hope to further Rowner's concept of the literary event by questioning additional performative elements of the works from the aspects of spatiality and

temporality and how these conceptual approaches further the understanding of the "event."

The performative elements of Rowner's approach to the literary event focuses clearly on corporeality and its role in the event; however, I argue here that within the study of the literary event, when looking at post-event fiction that questions of spatiality and awareness need to be included in the examination of the event, as it is just as important to the recognition and analysis of the body. My first reason for including looking at space and acoustic spatiality under the umbrella of the literary event will uncover more about the "eventness" of the event; in other words, to understand what happens within the event and the impact of the event, the space and sonic elements are always in play; but the combination of these two elements as "evental" questions is often ignored in literary studies. Secondly, in regards to the one-off novels, examining the corporeal, space, and aural elements will reveal further the influence of September 11th on the authors and the texts created after the attacks. Since 9/11 has been acknowledged and analyzed mostly as an image-event, I argue that looking at the attacks as an event that not only changed the skyline of New York City, but that the falling of the towers (and the construction of the One World Trade Center) also altered not only the spatiality of downtown New York City, but also the acoustics of the area. With the destruction of the towers, or what music and sound scholars refer to as "the built," the acoustic space of the area was altered by the terrorist events and in

the rebuilding of the "Ground Zero" space. In following the theories of both Deleuze and Rowner in their approaches to the event, the "virtuality" or "doubling" that arises from an event each implies that a space exists that is at once "there" and "not there"—which is why examining the temporality or speed, and the acoustic spaces or sound/created (or not created: the silence) as "event acts" can provide more clarity from a cultural or historical understanding of the "eventness" of the event(s) created by each writer.

## THEORETICAL INTERLUDE: ALTERNATE HISTORY

Both dystopian fiction and alternate histories are commonly designated as subgenres of science fiction; however, scholars of utopian and dystopian fiction for a time seemed to give little credence to alternate histories, considering the counter-historical works to be something altogether outside of the realm of utopian studies. This approach could be due in part to the ever-evolving definition of "dystopia," along with the seemingly constant blurring of the permeable genre boundaries in most of the subgenres of science fiction. However, the problem could simply be the inclusion of the term "history" (with its implication that some form of "truth" or "facts" are involved) as a generic reference that turns some dystopian theorists critics away from alternate histories—in much the same way that the term "alternate history" genre tends to frustrate many historians (i.e., history is true; if it is not, it fails to be history). Karen Hellekson, in *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*, articulates this awkward relationship between science fiction and history:

> The alternate history relies on the same articulations of change evident in history. Science fiction, though a literature of the fantastic, is rule bound. It sets up rules it wants to follow and the follows them, using some rules of the universe (black holes, gravity) but breaking others for the sake of plot convenience

> (faster-than-light travel, alien life). Science fiction plays within boundaries of physical law even if the writer sometimes makes up the laws. One boundary that science fiction does not tend to subvert is that of history and change: the movement from past to present, in terms of historical development or of evolution, is taken as a given" (4)

Hellekson's argument outlines a probable cause for the utopian/dystopian critics avoidance of "messing with history," and thusly, not messing with "alternate" histories, as well. However, the worlds of both dystopias and alternate histories function in very similar ways, despite the issue of how to deal with "history."

Hellekson defines three different approaches to the alternate history genre, with "each defined by a specific relationship between the moment of the break on the fictional word from our own and the narrative locus developed in the text" (*Shockwaves* 201). First, Hellekson defines one narrative approach as the "nexus story," which is a counter-historical story or novel that "focuses on a crucial; point in history, such as a battle or assassination, in which something different happens that changes the outcome" (Hellekson 5). Secondly, she expands the genre to what she actually calls an "alternate history," which differs from the nexus story in that the "alternate history" story "take[s] place years after a change in a nexus event, which has resulted in a radically changed world" (7). Hellekson's third approach is the "parallel worlds stories," that she defines as

"alternate histories that exist simultaneously" (8). In summarizing Hellekson's approaches to alternate histories, Philip E. Wegner offers in *Shockwaves of Possibility* that Hellekson's approaches to the alternate history story is reflective of the narrative approaches of utopian fiction, whereas the focus on the event that caused the nexus moment takes a backseat to the world that now exists, stating that "the labor of the narrative is shifted from relating the founding event to elaborating the contours of the transformed world and explaining what it means to live in it" (203). But most important to this project is Wegner's intersection of alternate history and dystopia, which takes place at the point when the "discomfort in and resistance to that world becomes the main concern, we shift into another even closer relative of modern science fiction, the dystopia" (203).

As much as both alternate fiction and dystopia genres and writers "deal with history," the issue of playing with or changing history has been an issue for centuries; in other words, how does history, or better yet, how do historians, deal with the idea of altering history? According to Niall Ferguson, the relationship between historians and alternate histories has been a fractured relationship: "The hostility to counterfactual arguments has been and remains surprisingly widespread among professional historians. Indeed, E. P. Thompson has gone so far as to dismiss 'counterfactual fictions' as mere '*Geschichtswissenschlopff*, unhistorical shit'" (5). Ferguson further argues that 'not all historians would call themselves 'determinists,'" but he believes that most schools of historians "regard

'what if' questions as fundamentally inadmissible" when it comes to analyzing the past (5). Ferguson claims that although it is natural for humans to ask "what if?" questions concerning their own personal lives, asking questions of a "deterministic interpretation" of history is problematic in many areas, "whether by posing implausible questions or by providing implausible answers, counterfactual history has tended to discredit itself" (19). However, in recent years, some historians have begun to see that alternate histories do have merit. Ferguson explains that:

> Of course, we know perfectly well that we cannot travel back in time and do these things differently. But the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of how we learn. Because decisions about the future are—usually—compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done. (2) [...] For, in considering only the possibility which was actually realized, [a historian] commits the most elementary teleological error. To understand how it actually was, we need to understand how it actually wasn't - but how, to contemporaries it might have been. This is even more true when the actual outcome is one which no one expected - which was not actually thought about until it happened. (87)

Ferguson's compilation, *Virtual History*, a 1997 collection of counterfactual stories written by leading historians, attempts to remedy the teleological error that he addresses above. By having historians actually creating fictional narratives examining questions of world history (i.e., what if Russia had won the Cold War? What if Kennedy was not assassinated?) seems to clarify a shift in the overall opinions of alternate histories in historiography: an effort to put to the test the theory that "virtual history is a necessary antidote to determinism" (89).

The tragedy of September 11th, just as with other significant historical events, has also prompted a rise in the number and popularity of alternative histories. Gavriel Rosenfeld, a professor of history at Fairfield University, argues that the recent elevated interest in alternate histories was initially born out of the "legitimation of science fiction" as an "accepted genre of creative expression" in the 1960s; however, other cultural trends played a role as well:

> The rise of postmodernism, with its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, its privileging of "other" or alternate voices, and its playfully reconfiguring of established historical verities, has encouraged the rise of alternate history. The gradual discrediting of political ideologies in the postwar world [and] the end of the cold war has eroded the power of deterministic

> worldviews and thus boosted the central allohistorical[11] principle that everything could be different. Lastly, the information revolution, by liberating human beings from the constraints of real space and time through cyberspace and virtual reality has given us the confidence to break free of the constraints of real history as well. (92)

Much like in dystopian fiction, the alternate history often functions within a place considerably worse than the society in which that reader (and author) currently live, and counter-factual histories actually create and/or recreate (and not destroy or demean) the challenging cognitive maps of historical situations inside imaginary societies. And, for the most part, the more conceivable or more convincing alternate histories are the better, as the works cannot be so far-fetched by place or time; thus, the negative visions of social and political development in the alternate history must remain in a realm of "feasibility." Moylan seems to echo Hellekson's alternate history definition rather than offer an explanation of dystopian functionality when he states that

> The foremost truth lies in its [the genre's] ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the

[11] Karen Hellekson notes that "alternate histories are also known as alternative histories, alternate universes, allohistories, or uchronias. One scholar, Joerg Helbig, prefers the term *parahistory*. Historians use the term *counterfactual*" (3).

> historical spacetime of the author can be *re-presented* in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions.

Thus, the relationship between dystopian fiction, alternate history, and history itself is complex, but according to Rafaela Baccolini, "all utopias and dystopias are dependent on their historical context for understanding," even though that the "relationship between the utopian genre and history has always been controversial" ("Memory" 114). Baccolini argues that

> Dystopia, therefore, is usually located in a negatively deformed future of our own world. In this respect, it clearly appears as a critique of history--of the history of the society shaping the dystopian writer in particular. In order to do this, as Jean Pfaelzer says, dystopia often portrays a 'historical collapse,' almost 'a regression' to a previous time (62). Thus, dystopia shows how our present may negatively evolve, while by showing a regression of our own present it also suggests that history may not be progressive. Paradoxically, then, dystopia depends on and denies history. ("Memory" 115)

It is from Baccolini's claim that dystopia both depends on and denies history that the relationship of the powerful historical ripples of September 11th and the fictional works born out of that event gain significance. The texts that are

to be examined in the following two chapters are both examples of the complex relations and history that Baccolini questions. Philip Roth's segue way to speculative fiction with *The Plot Against America*, as well as Michael Chabon's move into alternate history with *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, elicit a number of generic questions concerning dystopian fiction and its relation to other genres, as well as how history plays a significant role both in and outside the texts. Although neither Roth nor Chabon's work are definitively "9/11 novels," they are one-off dystopian/alternative historical works that attempt to right what Moylan sees as a problem of "remembering history" properly, not just memorializing it: "one of the lessons of both classical and critical dystopia, therefore, is that the world is capable of going from bad to worse, not only in an punctal moment but more often in a complex series of steps arising from the existing social order and the choices people make within it" ("Critical" 241). Moylan adds that dystopian fiction can also contribute to history and memory by understanding that:

> Whatever bad times are upon us have been produced by systemic conditions and human choices that preceded the present moment--but also such conditions can be changed only by remembering that process and organizing against it. One of the dangers of the official and popular responses to an event like 11 September is therefore the erasure of memory of such root causes. (241)

One could argue that much of 9/11-focused fiction falls within Moylan's claim: that the 9/11 genre of literature acts as a "popular" response to the historical event itself. The power of the one-off speculative fiction works discussed here are that from a generic, narrative and historical approach, the works elevate outside of post-9/11 literature and reside somewhere above the popular fiction to reside generically somewhere in between the concepts of high literature and genre fiction. In other words, they reside in a specific space at the intersection "non-fiction" and "fiction," or the "real" and the "unreal."

The two one-off alternate histories examined in the following chapters are each in a sense a generic hybrid. Roth's dystopian America in *The Plot Against America* is also a synthesis of Hellekson's generic labels of nexus story and alternate history, as the event of Lindbergh's election victory is being examined from the standpoint of an older and fictional "Philip Roth" as narrator; however, the majority of the novel is the narrative of the altered events of World War II. Chabon's counter-historical novel is also of this same hybridity of looking back at a past event, but the focus of *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* is more on the current world, changed after the events that relocated Jews from Europe to Alaska. In some ways, Roth's approach to alternate history is one of the study of event, its power and its immediate impact, what Wegner ties in with the *Augenblick* definition of Georg Lukács, in which he states that due to a powerful event "history is set on a radically other course" (*Shockwaves* 201). Chabon's

novel, however, in referencing the events that created the current world where Landsman resides, seems to approach the event not as a study but more as an accepted repercussion that cannot be changed. The narrative approaches of each writer reflect a reconsideration of event and history in a post-9/11 world with each simultaneously asking the question of "what if?" by answering "here's how…"

## CHAPTER 3

## "AN ABOMINATION OF VIOLENCE: PHILIP ROTH'S AMERICAN DEREALIZATION IN THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

The publication of Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* in September, 2004, initially appeared to many Roth critics and readers as another possible turning point in the writer's long and fruitful career. But even before the novel was published, it did not take much to see how his first novel after 9/11 was going to be different. Roth's first narrative event was publishing an article in *The New York Times* prior to the release of the novel explaining to a degree the purpose of his upcoming work. Roth's article, "The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*," seemingly was composed in an effort to inform his audience that the soon-to-be-published novel was an alternative history—clearly a departure from everything he had ever published prior in both genre and narrative approach. Roth claims in the essay that he "had no literary models for reimaging the historical past," admitting that he was however "familiar with books that imagined a historical future," most notably George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984* ("Story Behind"). And although he acknowledges that Orwell's novel is a dystopia, a "political warning," Roth states that in his soon-to-be-published novel, he had created and "imagined [a] uchronia" ("Story Behind"). Roth's reasoning and generic identification in his *Times* essay helped to explain some of his motives for

jumping to this new literary genre, but his central motivation appears to be that he wants to examine the contingent and deterministic theory that "history claims everybody, whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not." And although Roth correctly recognizes (to a degree) the differences in genre between his novel and Orwell's, the dystopian fiction and alternate histories have more in common than most writers and critics will admit. Ultimately, Roth's pre-emptive publication in *The New York Times* was an initial attempt on his part to get the future readers of the novel participating in the critical act of asking the "what if?" question in their own lives in a still fragile post-9/11 world. Thus, this calculated narrative event on Roth's part also initially presents and later accelerates the questioning of what is real and unreal—in both real life and in the novel—once the novel is released.

The title of the novel itself, seemingly stolen from the newspaper headlines in the days after September 11th, 2001, also made an initial impression that Roth's newest work would be his "9/11" novel, in much the same way readers looked to other major American writers such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, writers whose work often reflect and react to historical events, to respond to the tragedy[12]. Although it was quickly revealed before its initial

[12] Other significant American "high literature" postmodern writers, such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, would later publish 9/11 novels. DeLillo's *The Falling Man* is considered to be one of the preeminent 9/11 works, and Thomas Pynchon's recently published *Bleeding Edge* examines not only the tragedy of 9/11, but also the rise of the internet as its own dystopian world.

publication that Roth's most recent work was not specifically a "9/11 novel" by generic definition, it instead became clear to many critics that *The Plot Against America* was born out of the event of September 11th due to its examination of the violent, unpredictable, and unyielding power of history, the realities of collective national trauma, and the arrival in America of what Roth terms "a perpetual fear"—a fear that rose out of a sense of historical determinacy that reflects the approach that "it" (i.e., terrorism, fascism, etc.) can in fact happen anywhere (*Plot* 1).

Initial critical reactions to *The Plot Against America* were less concerned with Roth's choice of jumping in to the alternate history genre than they were in trying to determine his political reflections and any possible allegorical links to 9/11. For Roth, history has some form of a role in a majority of his works. He had become more keen in the years prior to *The Plot Against America*, as his focus became more centered on examining history's effect on the American individual. Roth's previous three works, which critics deemed his American Trilogy (*The Human Stain, I Married a Communist,* and *American Pastoral*), are the products of Roth's writing epiphany in how he would, in the future, examine history in his own writings. Roth addressed this important personal/professional moment in a BBC interview:

> When I began these books I was sixty […] so I'd been around a long time, and I could see my own country historically. And so I

> thought, what else do you know, and I said for god sakes, it's right in front of you, it's right in front of your nose. And there it was, of course. And I thought, treat '98 as though it were '48, treat 98 as though it were '68. You see? See it, if you can, as history. (Royal xi)

Critics and Roth fans alike initially believed that *The Plot Against America* would follow this same generic "fictional/historical formula" that Roth had embraced in these three works. The "American Trilogy" was deemed by many critics to be the best works of his career.[13] However, critics are still torn in questioning how to read *The Plot Against America,* and if it should be read in the same way as the Trilogy; in other words, did Roth create in *The Plot* a work in which he "treats 1941-42 as though it were 2004?" Or has he abandoned this approach in order to create something generically and narratively outside his authorial comfort zone?

Many critics will argue that Roth has no comfort zone. Roth claims that his venture into the genre of alternative history seemingly came to him as innocently as the aforementioned "history epiphany." While reading the proofs of historian Arthur Schlesinger's autobiography in December 2000, the writer discovered the seed for *The Plot against America*:

> I came upon a sentence in which Schlesinger notes that there were some Republican isolationists who wanted to run Lindbergh for

[13] Add/discuss critical Roth studies that focus primarily on the American Trilogy works.

> president in 1940. That's all there was, that one sentence with its reference to Lindbergh and to a fact I'd not known. It made me think, "What if they had?" and I wrote the question in the margin. Between writing down that question and the fully evolved book there were three years of work, but that's how the idea came to me. (*Times* 1)

According to Claudia Roth Pierpont (no relation), Roth began working on *The Plot Against America* in December of 2000 " a month before George W. Bush took office," and a little more than a year and a half before the attacks on 9/11 (272). Pierpont states that at the time of the attacks Roth was "in a swimming pool in the City Athletic Club in midtown Manhattan" (271). He then "came out of the pool to hear the news. Leaving the building, he walked with the crowds up Sixth Avenue. He was glad to be in the city rather than off in Connecticut [where he normally resides], and he had no thought of leaving: 'I wouldn't have wanted to be alone'" (271).

Considering both the political, sociological, and global angst after 9/11, Roth's seemingly innocent leap into the science fiction sub-genre was surprising to some literary critics, but clearly was not a shock to most. Again, the focus of early reviews was less about genre, and more about what Roth was saying about early-2000s but *not* saying concerning post-9/11 America. In one of the first published critical reviews, Paul Berman's *New York Times* book review (October

3, 2004) entitled "'The Plot Against America': What If It Happened Here?" compares Roth's novel of an alternate history with a classic from the same genre, Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*[14]. In this article, Berman is one of the first critics to compare some of the historical/fictional instances in Roth's novel with certain contemporary events and actions of the current Bush administration, though he states that he believes that *The Plot Against America* "is not an allegorical tract about the present age" (5). Berman further states that *The Plot* is driven by the "anxious, ancestral, midnight fear of the American Jews […] which is old, old, old" (9). Another important critical review of the novel was written by Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* ("The Plot against America," October 3, 2004), in which he states that with this novel, Roth has written "in some respects a parable for our times" (4). Rather than focusing his review on the possible political references from the work, Yardley focuses on Roth's fictional adaptation of Charles Lindbergh as compared with the venerated aviator's historical representations. However, Yardley emphasizes that "this is not a novel about Lindbergh (or Roosevelt, or Henry Ford, or Fiorello La Guardia, or any of the historical figures who appear in its pages) but a novel about America… [and] its susceptibility to demagoguery and anti-democratic impulses" (2).

[14] Sinclair Lewis is also, by my definition, a one-off dystopian writer. Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* follows the election of populist Buzz Windrip to the presidency, only to examine Windrip's creation of an American totalitarian state modeled after Adolf Hitler's regime.

Roth's temporary transition from American "high" literature to genre fiction was probably softened by two major factors: first, and probably the most important factor, is Roth's own history of generic blurring and narrative "swings" in his novels that he has taken throughout his career leading up to *The Plot Against America*; however, these generic swings seems to more constrained to movements between realist fiction and satire. Thus, from the standpoint of genre, moving to alternate history and dystopian fiction is significant move. In trying to define what kind of writer Roth really is, one could say that he is and has been an American realist (in his earlier works from the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s) in which he generically resided in social and psychological realism (Shostak 281). In the 1970s, Debra Shostak argues that this is the period that Roth begins:

> Experimenting with genre, from satire, fable, and parody to multi-layered reflexive narrative, in prose ranging from raucous exaggeration to pained delicacy. Having developed a preference for the first-person voice, Roth devotes the books of the 1980s and 1990s to the alter ego Nathan Zuckerman and to auto-biographical and faux-autobiographical writing. In his subsequent work, he recommits himself to realism. The American trilogy of the 1990s makes plain what was always tacit: the individual's inextricable position in cultural history. (Shostak 281)

Secondly, over his career, Roth has been fearless in his creations—a fearlessness that he argues in the documentary video *Philip Roth: Unmasked* that he gained after reading Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*: "It was then that I realized I didn't have to write reality […] I could do whatever I wanted, and I've done that ever since" (*Unmasked*). His desire to "play with reality" has guided him to ask the questions of "What If?" (the central question of all speculative fiction, and specifically alternate histories) as it applies to history in several early works. Roth playfully re-imagined the history of major league baseball in *The Great American Novel*, creating a "countermyth to legends of American manliness and brotherhood" (Cooper 241 in Royal). Roth critic Alan Cooper also questions Roth's "What If?" approach in Roth's short story "Looking at Kafka," in which he posits "what if the great Czech writer's personal history had been reversed, his works lost and his life extended into one of part-time hack teaching?" (242). Roth even tests the waters of alternate history in *The Ghost Writer*, in which the character of Amy Bellette is suspected of being Anne Frank, who according to the novel did not perish in the Holocaust but instead resides anonymously in the United States after World War II. Thus, it is from this artistic fearlessness that Roth creates *The Plot against America*, and within it a world that is both altered from the history we know, and worse than the one we (as readers) now live in.

***Roth before The Plot against America***

No matter the time period, Derek Parker Royal states that "the project of America has been in the fiction [of Roth] from the very beginning" (ix). However, unlike a number of his later works, history was not in the forefront of his early realist works. Royal states in the introduction to *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, that "many people were surprised" in the summer of 2001 when *Time* magazine declared Philip Roth as America's Best Novelist" (1). This title seemed unlikely at the time due to Roth possessing, over the arc of his career, a "restless sampling of fictional modes, forms and styles, with much overlap as his career gathers force" (Shostak 281 Writers). Royal summarizes comically Roth's "restless" pseudo-generic path:

> Since the 1970s, his novels have been labeled pornographic (*Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Breast*), vulgar (*The Great American Novel* and *The Anatomy Lesson*), misogynistic (*My Life as a Man* and *The Dying Animal*), self-absorbed (*The Counterlife* and *Deception*), politically slipshod (*Our Gang* and *I Married a Communist*), politically incorrect (*Sabbath's Theater* and *The Human Stain*), and even anti-Semitic (back *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*). (Royal 1)

What Roth, however, is most famous for over his career is his creative unpredictability, and it is in his works that he (and we as readers) share his belief

that "Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends" ("After Eight Books" 111). In his first published collection, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), the title novella subtly presents a 1950s Jewish community in America in "a decade devoted to forgetfulness" (42) dealing with the assimilation of Jewish values and American ideals. In the 1970s, Roth turned from his psycho-sexual examinations of *Letting Go* and 1969's controversial *Portnoy's Complaint* to create an American political satire in *Our Gang* (1971), taking political aim at Richard Nixon in hopes of "destroy[ing] the protective armor of 'dignity' that shields anyone in an office as high and powerful as the Presidency" (Reading 40). Roth's following work, *The Great American Novel* (1973), presents a quasi-alternate history in the modern world of baseball. Much like the historically-based *The Plot Against America*, *The Great American Novel* "has its origins in something that we all recognize as having taken place"; however, Roth abandons the seriousness of his early works to create a fictional baseball universe *in The Great American Novel* that contains "a level of bizarre clownish inventiveness similar to much of the 'real' American history" (Reading 80).

The seeds of Roth's ability to blend/bend history into his fiction are seen most clearly in his American Trilogy and *The Dying Animal*. In these novels, Roth frames American post-war history by examining certain decades and events that were particularly volatile—in *American Pastoral*: the Vietnam War, along with allusions to World War II; *I Married a Communist*: the era of the McCarthy

witch hunts; *The Human Stain*: the Clinton administration and the Lewinsky affair; and *The Dying Animal*: the Y2K fears of 1999—and in doing so, presents them as modern "American tragedies" (Lyons 125). In these works, as in *The Plot*, the male protagonists suffer from the often-violent impact of history upon their own personal lives, an event that either destroys them or forever alters their future.

Roth's first trilogy installment, *American Pastoral*, recalls the life of Nathan Zuckerman's high school hero, Swede Levov, the Jewish all-American athlete whose perfect American life is destroyed by his teenage daughter's involvement with the bombing of the local post office and general store, an event that shatters the world around him. Swede's daughter, Merry, angered over the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War, joins a radical anti-war group bent on destroying all things "American," or in other words, all things "Swede"—taking her father "out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk" (Pastoral 86). Swede falls from his established life of American perfection—star athlete, father, successful businessman, husband to a former Miss New Jersey—all due to the literal "explosion" of 1960s wartime America. Zuckerman explains that the sudden terrorist blast that rocks the "quaint Americana" (68) of Old Rimrock, New Jersey is history, as "people think of history in the long term, but

history, in fact, is a very sudden thing" (87). Swede's daughter, the "Rimrock Bomber," not only blows up the local post office, but she has "[brought] the war home to America" (76). In his review of *American Pastoral*, Louis Menand states that "historical novels are about head-on collisions. They are about people who get blindsided by change" (88). Swede Levov is blindsided not only by his daughter's actions and the explosive radicalism of the sixties, but by the perfidy of the promises of post-World War II America. Roth presents a pastoral image of American life being destroyed and the traumatic repercussions of history that give rise to the anxiety that ripples through the novel.

Sarah Kanowski believes that the thematic thread that runs through Roth's trilogy is betrayal—not just at a personal or familial level, but also "at the core of national history" (123). Following *American Pastoral*, Roth replaces the pastoral image with its "sentiment of nostalgia" and supplants it with the "the impulse toward revenge" in *I Married a Communist,* a work in which he creates a "narrative of retribution—what happens after the fall" (Shostak 249). Much like the previous novel, Nathan Zuckerman again narrates, though in this novel Murray Ringold, Zuckerman's ninety-year old friend and former English teacher, co-narrates the story, which follows the collapse of another of Zuckerman's heroes, Ira Ringold, Murray's brother. With Murray's help, Ira's life opens up to Zuckerman over the course of the novel, through what is essentially a conversation between the two men over the course of six days. We learn from

their discussions that after fighting in World War II, Ira became involved in a labor union and subsequently began impersonating Abraham Lincoln at numerous work and union functions, often debating issues in his monologues from both Lincoln's time and his own period of the 1950s. Ira eventually creates and stars in his own radio show, "The Free and the Brave," which reenacts historical events from American history. Fueled by his friendship with Communist father-figure Johnny O'Day, Ira becomes a rage-infested member of the Communist Party, believing "that America was on the road to fascism" (202). Ira's fall from celebrity is due in part to the demise of his marriage to movie star Eve Frame, whose book, entitled *I Married a Communist*, portrays Ira as "'a Communist madman' who had 'assaulted and browbeaten her' with his Communist ideas" (*Married* 242). Historically, Ira's story falls into the same time period as "Henry Wallace's failed campaign for President under the banner of the Progressive Party and the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anticommunist witch-hunt" (Shechner 175). In *I Married a Communist*, Roth presents his most tragic Shakespearean hero in Ira Ringold, whose downfall is his violent rage—his "whole life was an attempt to defuse the violent impulse" of his times (282). Roth suggests in Ira's story that we "have no excuse for finding betrayal anywhere but at the heart of history. History from top to bottom" (185).

As Roth explains in a May, 2000, interview with Charles McGrath, the trilogy incorporates "the historical moments in postwar American life that have

had the greatest impact on my generation," including the era of the McCarthy witch hunt, the Vietnam War, and finally *The Human Stain*'s period of the late 1990's involving former President Clinton's sex scandal and impeachment hearings (8). In the final trilogy novel, Roth continues to observe the effects of national history on the individual. Through Zuckerman's guidance, we follow the life of Coleman Silk, a seventy-one year old college dean and classics professor, and his affair with a much younger illiterate cleaning woman, Faunia Farley—a story that parallels certain aspects of the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair, through the time of the Clinton impeachment hearings (both the affair and hearing are referenced in the novel). Silk, a light-colored black man who passes himself off to others as being both white and Jewish, is driven from his university teaching position due to his uttering the word "spooks" in class, referring to two absent students who he later discovers are black. Silk is thus abandoned by his peers and the university due to his supposedly racist remarks. Two years later, after leaving his teaching position, Silk's affair with Faunia begins and a former colleague threatens to make public his relationship, stating in a letter to Silk that "everyone knows you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age" (*Human* 38). The colleague's efforts to ruin Silk's reputation fail as Silk and Faunia are killed after being driven off the road by Faunia's ex-husband, Les Farley, a psychotic Vietnam veteran who has been stalking the couple. The novel ends with Roth's trilogy-narrating author, Nathan Zuckerman, chillingly

questioning the war veteran/murderer about his life, and the final scene is one of Roth's chilling and almost trademark American pastoral/antipastoral scenes: "Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man [Farley] on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America" (361). This surreal scene is in many ways a major event in the novel as the reality of the pastoral scene is juxtaposed against the unreal physical stillness of Farley, whose mind, chaotic and damaged from war and yet clearly capable of killing without remorse, sits in peace.

Transitioning from the historically-driven trilogy, Roth subtly places the "event" in American history under a "millennial microscope" in *The Dying Animal*, a sexually-driven work which returns to the narrative of David Kepesh (narrator of *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*), who Roth says "takes a historical view of the development of what [Kepesh] calls his 'emancipated manhood,' and describes his sexual independence as a bequest of the 1960s" (Guardian 1). Kepesh's graphic and often-disturbing affair with young Consuela Castillo and their sexual encounters take center stage in the novel, but it is Roth's staging of America's response to the new millennia and to the Y2K scare that places *The Dying Animal* in its historical context. In the novel, the impending event of Y2K has the United States poised and ready for a disaster of its own at the close of 1999, ready for "the Armageddon that we'd been waiting for since

August 6, 1945" (144). Roth equates the millennium-ending fireworks celebrations to the overseas battles of World War II: "the light whirling over nighttime London more spectacular than the Blitz. And the Eiffel Tower shooting fire, a facsimile flame-throwing weapon such as Wernher von Braun might have designed for Hitler's annihilating arsenal" (144). In Kepesh's eyes, this spectacular fireworks scene is the only incredible event that occurs on a night that many believed to be "the disaster of the end" (145); but the world does not end and all of the American-driven Y2K hype and terror embarrassingly close the millennium.

Unlike *The Plot Against America*, the apocalyptic fear of *The Dying Animal* does not encompass the entire novel. History, as of midnight December 31, 1999, is, as Roth suggests in the trilogy, very abrupt. The fear that resonates from a post-9/11 reading of *The Dying Animal* stems from Roth's eerily-accurate statement comparing the aforementioned fireworks to a modern-day terrorist offensive. The tragedy of 9/11 echoes through the scene of Kepesh watching the New Year's fireworks over New York City on television, observing the "brilliance flaring across the time zones, and none ignited by bin Laden" (144). The theme of apocalyptic fear, originating from a fleeting appearance of history that arises in *The Dying Animal*, as well as in Roth's trilogy, can be seen at the

root of *The Plot Against America*—traumatically bridging the past with the present.[15]

### *Jumping Genre: The Plot Against America*

In *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth creates an alternate reality by transmuting a single historical event—imagining how his childhood and how his family's future might have been different if they had been forced to deal with the terrifying "realities" of a fascist America set between 1940 and 1942—the brief years of the fictionalized Charles Lindbergh administration. The novel, narrated by a seven-year-old "Philip Roth," begins with the horror of the 1940 election for American Jews: Franklin Roosevelt loses the presidency to Lindbergh in a landslide, converting the isolationist anti-Semitic aviation hero into the most powerful leader in the world, while at the same time fueling fear and anger in the Jewish American community, much like a "furnace that takes you and twists you like steel" (*Plot* 16). Lindbergh's political agenda is initially based on preserving "American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war" (30). And since, in the newly-elected President's mind, "Adolf Hitler has established himself as the world's greatest safeguard against the spread of communism" (83), the citizens of the U.S. should rest comfortably in the

[15] Some of the analysis and summary of Roth's works was initially part of my Master's Thesis "The Curse Never Fell Upon Us Until Now: History and Fear in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*."

"independent destiny for America" (84). Weeks after his inauguration, Lindbergh signs "an agreement" with Hitler solidifying peace between the U.S. and Germany, causing many Americans to celebrate that no young men from the U.S. would be fighting and dying; yet, as young Philip Roth (the narrator) states, "All the Jews could do was worry" (55).

Although Roth obscures the boundaries of history and fiction in *The Plot*, the actual events of the novel revolve around the Roth family and the "perpetual fear" that they themselves and their Jewish American community must face in light of the new administration (1). As Philip "narrates" the counter-historical events of the book, which is essentially told from the point of view of an older man looking back at a time in his childhood, one observes the effects of fear taking hold of his family, especially in Philip's father, Herman, as he curses the political headlines of the day. Herman's emotional outbursts stem not only from the election of Lindbergh, but also from being blacklisted as a Jew on a family trip to the nation's capital, and from his employer's participation in Homestead 42, a government funded program that would send him and his family to Kentucky to work and live along with the other Jewish "homesteaders" from his company who are being "transferred" (207). Herman's problems at home arise from his oldest son, Sandy, and his participation in Lindbergh's "Just Folks," a program similar to Homestead 42 in which the newly created Office of American Absorption sends mainly young Jewish boys to toil in the fields of mid-western

states—separating and traumatizing Jewish American families. The Roth family, along with their fellow Jewish neighbors, must also deal with the war directly coming home to them. Herman's nephew, Alvin, is forced to live with the Roths after having his leg blown off while choosing to fight with the Canadian forces in Germany. When Alvin is forced to share his room with Philip upon his return from the war, the reader observes the young protagonist growing up quickly, from being a seven-year-old, self-described "embryonic stamp collector" (1) to experiencing the childhood-altering event of watching his father break down after visiting Alvin and the other amputees in an army hospital (113). Philip's "personal" history has been altered, "never [to] return to the same childhood" again (114). Ultimately, the Lindbergh administration disintegrates when President Lindbergh disappears, leaving Louisville, Kentucky heading back to Washington D. C. in the *Spirit of St. Louis*—"the most famous small plane in aviation history"—never to be seen again (*Plot* 307).

Roth's generic shift from American realism to speculative fiction raises many questions concerning the effects of the choice of changing genres: most importantly, what did Roth have to say in *The Plot against America* that would require a generic leap into what many critics and historians categorize as science fiction? Numerous recent critical evaluations provide multiple hypotheses concerning Roth's genre move. Catherine Morley argues in "Memories of the Lindbergh Administration: Plotting, Genre, and the Splitting of the Self in *The*

*Plot Against America*," that the novel is less about contemporary America and more a "deliberate statement against critical interpretations of his fiction," and that his "focus on plot, on language, on genre, on narrative, and oratorical modes, and the awkward borderland between fact and memory (the written and unwritten worlds) is, in many ways, a return to the preoccupation of his earlier fictions" (147-8). Morley sees Roth as "self-consciously and self-reflexively playing games with genre, combining the fantastic with the realistic, in order to demonstrate to the reader the means whereby all history is subject to infiltration by the authorial consciousness through which it is filtered" (137). Jason Siegel further considers Roth's generic shift in "The Plot Against America: Philip Roth's Counter-Plot to American History," stating that he believes Roth created his counterfactual history not as critique of current "real life," but instead as "a true history that challenges and supplements our notion of American identity as defined by the cause and effect of actual events that comprises its actual history" (131). Siegel posits that "the purpose of Roth's novel is to disrupt the reader's sense of the contents and nature of American history" conforming to Linda Hutcheon's theory of metafiction in that the "various plots" against America in the novel meant to demonstrate that history cannot be accurately represented by a unified teleological storyline" (150). Roth, however, goes beyond Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction by "redefining historical truth […] as a plurality of

narratives, both factual and fictional, that alone can begin to depict the multifarious experiences by Americans" (150).

Although these critiques focus on genre-related questions relating to the significance of Roth's generic and narrative moves and shifts in *The Plot Against America*, Roth's constraints concerning time in *The Plot* also bring about questions concerning the novel's generic categorization. Unlike most alternate histories in which the novel is based in its entirety within the author's counter-world creation, as Roth's novel closes it is moving toward a "returning" to what could be termed as "actual historical time" and actual history, as America and the world seem to be drifting "forward" toward what we deem as "known" history. For example, in one of the narrative events in the novel, Franklin Roosevelt does return for a third term as president in November, 1942 (instead of 1940, as he does in real history), after Mrs. Lindbergh calls for a new election upon the disappearance of her husband. Also in the work, Pearl Harbor *is* attacked by the Japanese, though the bombing occurs in December of 1942, not 1941. The novel's return to "true history" can also be seen in Roth's alluding to President Roosevelt having later died in office in 1945 "weeks before the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allies" (*Plot* 327), just as "real" history recalls. Young Philip's comparison of the assassination of Walter Winchell to the shooting of Robert Kennedy in 1968, a future historical event far outside the time constraints of the story, further supports the dissolving of the "alternate" part of history in the

novel into "historical" time, as "Roth's history" turns/returns to what can be deemed as "textbook history" (272). From these examples, America returns (though awkwardly) back to what Roth describes as "what we schoolchildren studied as 'History'" (*Plot* 114), allowing the chronotope of *The Plot* to dissolve from the time and space of the Lindbergh-created American dystopia into a new chronotope of "actual" or "true" history; in other words, history as we now know it. Roth's morphing of time from the alternate history into "true" history forces the novel to lean away from the characteristics of alternate- or counter-historical genres and more toward what we should deem as a literal "uchronian" genre, a term that is often used as a synonym for alternate historical stories. Since the term's literal translation is "no time" or a "non-time," I argue here that in the case of *The Plot*, that uchronia must also be used (in its most literal definition) in classifying the novel's genre. Although *The Plot* inception is in an alternate historical time (or field), ultimately the alternate world itself "dissolves" and "resolves" back into real history— creating what one could describe as a "bubble" in history in which time and history (the chronotope) *exist* for a brief time, then weave back into the history and time of the "real" world, allowing history to return to "textbook" or "harmless history" –a concept of history that Roth, over the course of his last few works, finds so difficult to accept (*Plot* 113). Roth's "uchronian bubble," or chronotope, formed in the novel forces us, as readers, to understand that history, as understood broadly as groups of events of the past, as

well as the singular historical event—*was* and *is* never "inevitable" and above all, should never dissolve and be forgotten—echoing Walter Benjamin's warning that "for every image of the past that is not recognized *by the present* as one of its own concerns […] threatens to disappear irretrievably" (247).

### *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*

The initial risk for Philip Roth's move to speculative fiction would seem at first to be tremendous, but in many ways the shift to speculative fiction is just another way for the writer to play with and question reality and unreality. At the turn of the millennium, after the American Trilogy and *The Dying Animal* were published, Roth was at the top of his game as a writer, garnishing awards and accolades and peaking in his 60s. However, it is Roth's career-long generic play that allowed him a little more flexibility to take an authorial risk. One could argue that Roth's decision to use the names of his "real family" as the characters in *The Plot Against America* also reduced the risk; however, using his real name in his novels is a narrative move that Roth has done many times before in his novels *Deception, Patrimony, and Operation Shylock.* He has been criticized for this act by critics, who try and question the works as semi-autobiographical to some degree, but Roth never "shows his hand." His autobiography, *The Facts*, published in 1988, opens with a letter that Roth has written to a recurring narrator in several of his novels, Nathan Zuckerman, causing one reviewer from *The New*

*York Times* to call *The Facts* a "combined short novel, apologia pro vita sua, confession, exercise in nostalgia and reparation and informal reader's guide to the works of Philip Roth" (Kaplan 1)[16]. For Roth, blurring the lines between the real and the unreal in his work was a game; however, the game became much more serious after September 11 and the creation of his fear-maligned America in *The Plot Against America*. Concerning the creative process of writing his one-off novel, Roth stated in "The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*" that creating a counterfactual work gave him the "opportunity to bring my parents back from the grave and restore them to what they were at the height of their powers in their late 30's," and he confesses that he "tried to portray them as faithfully as he could—as though I were, in fact, writing non-fiction" ("Story Behind" 1). Thus, Roth's generic shift, specifically to alternate history, allowed him to examine one of the most prominent and difficult issues to deal with post-9/11—disappearance. In Roth's novel, the concerns over disappearance and loss are corporeally based, reflective of Rowner's theory of the literary event, which allows for the writer to examine the power of the event and the unpredictability of history within the boundaries of his (fictional) childhood home, allowing the "sweeping arm" of history to show up in his own living room.

This performative visual act of derealization is at play during a number of examples revolving around the literary event in *The Plot Against America*. One of

[16] Kaplan, Justin. "Play it Again, Nathan." NYT Book Review. 9/25/88

the initial examples in the novel occurs in a seemingly harmless scene, in which young Philip Roth decides to attend a movie in hopes of seeing his Aunt Evelyn in the opening newsreel footage, as she had been invited to the Lindbergh White House upon the visit of Nazi leader von Ribbentrop. Philip's trip to the theatre was influenced by his father seeing the news clip a few weeks earlier at the same theater, which turned out to be a traumatic event for his father who witnessed Aunt Evelyn in the news clip possessing "a mile wide" smile (*Plot* 195). Philip arrives at the theatre "just as the lights went out and the martial music came on and the film began to roll" (199). The young boy is then barraged by historical events on the screen, some of which are: "British land on Madagascar to take over French Naval Base. Pierre Laval, chief of the Vichy French government, denounces British move as 'act of aggression.' RAF bombs Stuttgart third consecutive night. British fighter planes in savage air battle over Malta." (199). The visual flood of bodily carnage, the "stretchers bearing living torsos, bayoneted civilians, dead babies, beheaded bodies bubbling blood," were visually traumatizing, along with a "multitude of helmets, uniforms, weapons, buildings, harbors, beaches, flora, fauna—human faces of every race—but otherwise the same inferno again and again, the unsurpassable evil" (199-200).

The witnessing by Philip of these visual historical events, the disturbing images of war and bodies in this scene, and the speed of which young Philip is taking them in, is an example of Virilio's picnolepsy, as the images create a

derealization of the visual media being presented at high speed. The war, and the film footage of corporeality in its disfigured and destroyed shapes, is at once visually "real" (actual bodies) and "unreal" (bodies on screen). However, the visual presentation of the war news that Philip is watching quickly changes. After being subjected to these images, Philip then describes the film cut away from the carnal violence to a clip of the White House, which presents a utopian scene as described here by Philip: "A twilit spring evening. Shadows falling across the sprawl of lawn. Blooming bushes. Flowering trees" (200). Philip's jarring transition is further complicated by finally seeing his Aunt Evelyn in the White House clip for around three seconds. He summarizes the visual event, again questioning the reality of the entire moment:

> The rest of the national news and the closing sports clips were incomprehensible to me and I kept hoping for the film to spin back to the moment when my aunt materialized asparkle with the gems previously the property of the rabbi's late wife. Among the many improbabilities that the camera established as irrefutably real, Aunt Evelyn's disgraceful triumph was for me the least real of all. 200-201

Philip's experience here in the movie theatre is a key moment in the novel and important as a literary event, in that the young boy questions the reality of the corporeal images he sees on the screen; and yet, the least real thing that he

witnesses is the brief appearance of his aunt. In other words, the one truly real thing (person/body) that Philip sees on the screen he deemed as unreal, but yet the bodies and images of war represented for the young man are reality.

The questioning of the body and reality in *The Plot Against America* are further pursued through the motif of dismemberment. Roth's integration of the corporeal imagery of the war in the theatre scene is juxtaposed in the novel against the scenes concerning the bodily damage inflicted on Philip's cousin, Alvin, who lost part of his leg in the European theatre during World War II. Alvin's dismemberment is probably the first "real" event for Philip, as Alvin's non-triumphant return from battle brings the war into the Roth family household. What becomes most corporeally predominant are scenes and interactions in the novel is Philip's reactions and initial involvement with caring for Alvin's stump. Leona Toker posits that "the motif of prosthesis recurs insistently throughout the narrative" of *The Plot Against America*: "From the legless little Robert's platform on wheels, through—most prominently—Cousin Alvin's artificial leg, to Joey Cucuzza's hearing aid" (confirm citation). In order to examine this form of disappearance in the novel, Toker applies "Marshal McLuhan's idea of technology as an auto-amputated extension of the human body," which claims that

> When the nervous system is exposed to too much external irritation, it alienates part of itself to achieve numbness, with the

> self no longer recognizing the auto-amputated parts as its own extension. The theme of the painful, often unbearable exposure of the nervous system recurs throughout Roth's work. In *The Plot against America*, it is tackled through the motif of amputation. (43)

Unlike the scenes of dismembered bodies witnessed by Philip in the war footage in the movie theater, his involvement with caring for the amputated area of Alvin's leg brings the reality of the war to light. When the Roth family pick Alvin up at the train station after the injured soldier's discharge, Philip's father initially tells Philip "Don't be afraid of Alvin and don't be afraid of his leg" (126). As Philip is convinced by his parents to help Alvin care for his leg and his "broken down stump," the reality becomes too much for the boy. As Philip eventually learns to help dress the stump, he finally has to witness the bodily dismemberment, which he describes as "animal-like," resembling "the elongated head of a featureless animal" (136). For both Alvin and Philip, the stump is now the reality of their times. Philip seemingly provides the definition of a stump to help him cope with the events that have now altered his young life. He refers to a stump as "the blunt remnant of something whole that belonged there and once had been there" (136). For Philip, one could easily read Alvin's stump as a metaphor for Philip's newly ingested concept of reality concerning his young life, which works as a micro-example of Roth's questioning of the sweeping arm of history,

which no one seemingly never has control of. Thus, as Alvin tells Philip when dressing his leg: “The stump goes bad whatever you do.” (137).

Roth bookends his focus on the literary event and corporeality with a confrontation between Philip’s father, Herman, and Alvin, when the young former soldier returns to visit the Roth family after departing in the spring of 1942 for several months to find work in Canada. Alvin’s return to visit the family was to be a peaceful one, but upon returning to see the family members that helped him after the war in “a Buick automobile [and] a sharpie’s suit,” Herman takes issue with the choices his nephew is now making in his new life his appearance and with “the scum of the earth for your friends” (297). The verbal altercation that begins between Herman and Alvin quickly turns violent, after Alvin spits in Herman’s face after being accused by his uncle of not caring about the events of the day concerning President Lindbergh’s policies toward Jews. Philip describes the “abomination of violence” (295) that ensues between Herman and Alvin, as the former soldier’s prosthesis “had cracked in two, his stump was torn to shreds, and one of his wrists were broken. Three of my father’s front teeth were shattered, two ribs were fractured, [and] a gash was opened along his right cheekbone” (296). The reopening of Alvin’s stump again and the wounds to Philip’s father were further compounded by the amount of blood spilled in their living room, as Philip states that “I didn’t have the capacity in 1942 to begin to decipher all the awful implications, but just the sight of my father’s and Alvin’s blood was

stunning enough. Blood spattered the length and breadth of our imitation Oriental rug, blood dripping from the splintered remains of our coffee table" (295). In this exchange of violence, Roth in some ways flips the script from the initial theatre scene. The multiple scenes of violence and bodies that appeared quickly on the screen were visually halted by the almost pastoral images of the White House. In this climactic battle between Herman and Alvin, Roth's pastoral home setting is destroyed not only by the physical altercation, but in the big picture, the event of the presidential election and the perpetual fear born out of it were contributors to the corporeal damage to Philip's father and cousin.

The scenes analyzed here create what Rowner calls the "body of the event" in examining the literary of event of a work, and how they create the "energy that agitates in and between the substances as the signature of the event's being of becoming" (208). Roth's corporeal writing becomes performative in Philip's initial theatre scene and the climactic battle in the Roth's living room, traversing into examples of how violence only breeds more violence. Roth's approach here questions the events of violence and war and their "dimensions of inexhaustibility" which contributes to the inconceivability of the event. By bringing the violence home—and for Roth this elevates the importance of his choosing to use his family and home setting for this novel—he is able to create a novel that is a study in the realities of violence and to emphasize the importance of the individual to be able to recognize and separate events from non-events. By

bringing the realities of violence into one's home, as presented here in *The Plot Against America*, and just as in the days after the attacks on 9/11, the results are traumatizing. Roth writes that in the novel that "It's so heartbreaking, violence, when it's in a house—like seeing the clothes in a tree after an explosion. You may be prepared to see death but not the clothes in the tree" (296). Again, Roth's comment here is in any ways reflective of the event of 9/11, as the attacks were an attack on the "home" that is America; however, it also could be read as a criticism of today's issues with how so much information, from both the media and social media, are now a part of our homes. The perpetual fear that Roth creates in the novel now belongs to all, America included, and it is no longer just a part of any marginalized other.

Roth's treatment of the event in the world of his alternate history allows him to question historical determinism and how the direction of an individual, or a country, and the realities that go along with each, can quickly disappear. In *The Plot against America*, Roth's nexus event that elects Charles Lindbergh president and alters the trajectory of historical events to come takes a different turn narratively than most other alternate history short stories or novels. As Roth subsequently closes his "chronotopic bubble," and history seems to return to the "real" path of history in the 1930s and 1940s, it comes at the expense of the central figure in his alternate world with the disappearance of Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh, while flying in the Spirit of St. Louis, simply disappears under

suspicions of him being kidnapped by "by a conspiracy of Jewish interests" (308). Lindbergh's plane, described by Roth as "the modern-day counterpart of Columbus's *Santa Maria* and the Pilgrims' *Mayflower"* simply disappears eastward. Lindbergh's "disappearing airplane" and the disappearing airplanes of the two jets into the Twin Towers on 9/11 present in some ways counter-images of derealization. As Roth portrays Lindbergh's plane disappearance, either intentionally or not, he presents his own spin on the motif of prosthesis. First, Roth's the *Spirit of St. Louis* is in one sense a vessel of freedom and technology—but for every advancement in technology, as Virilio states, an accident will always follow. Lindbergh's plane is not a weapon in *The Plot* (as opposed to the planes of 9/11), it is simply a vehicle that is used in one of the final scenes of the novel, as a vehicle of memory, as Lindbergh lands the plane in Kentucky to say the brief following words: "Our country is at peace. Our people are at work. Our children are at school. Now I'm going back to Washington so as to keep things that way" (307). Lindbergh's seemingly utopian message is met with the inevitable (according to Virilio) accident. The image of Lindbergh and his plane as they both simply "disappear eastward," echoes the speed and visual brilliance of the two planes disappearing, almost quietly, into the Twin Towers in 2001. Roth's images of the missing—be it his own family (the Roths in *The Plot*, or Roth's own choice to bring his family back to life in the novel) or country (the disappearance of

security; the loss of innocence) are central to the relations of genre and narrative in *The Plot Against America*—trying to make the "real" a little less so.

The disappearance of Lindbergh at the end of the novel, combined with the story's return to "normal" history, raises questions concerning whether the novel moves toward a hopeful conclusion, as most dystopian novels attempt to create. Though most dystopian texts display the worst of possible worlds throughout the story, some works "affiliate with a eutopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do)" (Baccolini 6). But considering the after-effects of Lindbergh's reign, particularly in the Roth family and their neighbors the Wishnows, life for Jewish-Americans will never be able to return to the level of normalcy or "American pastoral" setting that they may have lived before. Yet, Roth's closing of the dystopian nightmare and slow "returning to actual history" at the end of *The Plot Against America* could be his own projection of how those who are tragically and directly affected by the events of history *never* forget; but it is the victims, in time, that tend to be forgotten.

Finally, Roth's analysis of the role of event in history and in the novel concludes with a "Postscript" which serves as a tool to aid the reader in differentiating between "where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" (364). The writer lists over 40 primary historical texts that he used in the creation of the novel, from the biographical (A. Scott Berg's *Lindbergh* (1998)) to historical reference works (Peter Teed's *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century*

*History*, 1914-1990 (1992)). Roth follows the list of references with a section entitled "A True Chronology of the Major Figures" in which he provides detailed factual timelines for six of the characters (mostly events concerning the lives Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Charles Lindbergh), but he also includes a section of 34 brief biographies entitled "Other Historical Figures in the Work," which is intended to allow for the reader to make clearer connections in the novel between the "real" historical characters and the historical/fictional events around them. Roth concludes the "Postscript" with a speech delivered by Lindbergh at the America First Committee in Des Moines, Iowa, on Septemeber 11, 1941, a speech in which Lindbergh states his case for staying out of the war despite the efforts of the British, the Jews, and the Roosevelt administration. Roth also includes a short excerpt from A. Scott Berg's *Lindbergh*, in which the aviation hero argues that peace could only be if people "band together to preserve that most priceless possession, our inheritance of European blood" which would include "a united strength among ourselves; on a Western Wall of race and arms which can hold back either a Genghis Khan or an infiltration of inferior blood" (391).

The inclusion of a postscript or a forward helping to differentiate between real history and the unreal is often provided in some works of alternate history, but they are often simplified statements that merely claim that "this novel is a work of fiction." Roth's lengthy and detailed postscript is a narrative event on its own, as the sheer volume of information provided adds to the complexities of

determining fact from fiction. But only Roth can say whether or not providing an entire speech from Lindbergh that was given exactly 70 years to the day (Septemeber 11, 1941) before the terrorist attacks was a coincidence or just another attempt to blur the lines of reality and non-reality.

***Roth after The Plot: A return to "postmodern realism?"***

After the success and controversy surrounding *The Plot Against America*, Roth left behind the speculative realm of fiction and returned to creating realist works that focused more on mortality, and thus, more on the corporeal. Shostak argues that "with the twenty-first century, Roth's comedy, whose influences range from Borsch Belt comedians to Kafka, recedes, was replaced by bitter yearning, bleak realism, condensed forms, and austere prose" (281). *The Plot Against America* would be Roth's final "big" novel, as he began writing shorter works that began to question one's mortality and the inevitable ending of life. Beginning with *Everyman* in 2006, he returns to present-day New Jersey, extolling the story of a never-named protagonist, who after marrying and divorcing three times, inevitably "retires, takes up painting and finally dies, on the operating table" (Brauner 219). His 2007 novel *Exit Ghost* revolves around the return of narrator Nathan Zuckerman and is set to the backdrop of the 2004 American Presidential elections, as Zuckerman returns to New York for a medical procedure. Roth's next work *Indignation* (2008) is set during the Korean War reveals the story of

Marcus Messner, whose narrative concerning his time at and expulsion from Winesburg College forces him to be drafted into the war. Messner initially reveals in the novel that he is already dead and explaining his story from the afterlife. But in true "Rothian" fashion, Messner later reveals that he is actually in an unconscious stupor from a morphine drip that is helping him deal with his physical injuries from battle. But in his final published novel *Nemesis* (2012) continues his study of the body as he questions the 1944 polio epidemic, because his narrator, Bucky Cantor, contracted the disease as a playground director in Newark and battles a debilitating guilt concerning the loss of children to the affliction. And yet, with his prolific literary output since the publication of *The Plot Against America*, history and disappearance still remain a player in Roth's work, all the way to the announcement of his retirement from writing in 2012. He stated in an interview with David Remnick in *The New Yorker*, "To tell you the truth, I'm done" (1). But Roth's questions concerning reality and unreality, and how making certain choices can shape one's life, and whether or not we have any control concerning our lives and livelihoods, and, if it is possible for an individual to "withstand the onslaught of circumstance?" (*Nemesis*, flap) are more relevant in 2017 than in any time in history. But thankfully, Roth's study of the event as a post-disaster, post-9/11, pre-Recession, pre-Trump counter history in *The Plot Against America* at least contributed to the study of the current Age of Terror by simply asking, "What if?"

# CHAPTER 4

# "THE BACK HALF ACRE OF NOWHERE": HISTORY, PLAY, AND LANGUAGE INMICHAEL CHABON'S *THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION*

In many alternative histories, the staggering wake of a terrifying historical event is presented in the early pages of a work: the rise of Buzz Windrip to power in the pre-World War II classic, Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*; the post-war establishment of a totalitarian fascist imperialism presented in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*; the angst-riddled Roth family in *The Plot Against America*. However, at times, the counter-historical event in a work of alternate history is introduced without great fanfare or immediate terror or danger. Michael Chabon's one-off counter-history, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, presents an altered history that observes a select community of Jewish settlers in Sitka, Alaska, some sixty years after the end of World War II and the fall of the state of Israel. And although Chabon does alter history in the novel, and examines the power of history to a great extent—history, or better yet the events of history—seemingly takes a narrative "backseat" within the novel's Jewish utopian/dystopian landscape. It is within Chabon's genre hybridization of detective novel, Jewish-American fiction, and alternative history that the writer

explores not only the impact of history on a cultural and sociological level, but its direct effect on the individual. Raffaella Baccollini writes that "History, its knowledge, and memory, are therefore dangerous elements that can give the dystopian citizen a potential instrument of resistance. But, whereas the protagonists, in classical dystopia, usually do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope" (115). Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* stands out as a critical and at times ambiguous dystopia/utopia because it examines these dangerous historical elements that Baccolini refers to by first questioning the power and deterministic capabilities of history, by extolling the importance of memory outside the often-blinding powers of history, and by focusing on the power and importance of language and play.

Compared to Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Roth's counter-historical novel *The Plot Against America* creates a high level of fear and angst due to its narrative dependence on "hysterical mode of storytelling" that often depend "on dramatic accounts to communicate distress" in hopes of creating a specific type of emotional response from the reader (Haaken 456). This act of selective remembering, by politicians, media, songwriters, poets, novelists, et al, after 9/11 is significant to cultural theorists and critics whose jobs rely on the analysis of major historical and cultural events. Ann Cvetkovich argues that this critical work concerning the event of 9/11:

> […] is especially urgent for the task of building cultural memory around September 11 and resisting the momentum of the culture industry, which is eager to tell a story that glorifies heroes and stresses national unity. In the United States, September 11 has already joined the pantheon of great national traumas, and I fear that its many and heterogeneous meanings (including the fact that it is a national trauma) will be displaced by a more singular and celebratory story. (472)

Thus, according to Cvetkovich, attempting to excavate "meaning" out of historical events/tragedies that are on the same scale of "event" or "eventness" of 9/11, is difficult to write about due to the importance of finding the language to describe an indescribable event. However, at the same time, there lies a narrative importance to get the true story (or true history), to a large degree, "right." Where *The Plot Against America* focuses on a perpetual fear, which arises as a result of the overwhelming power of a historical event, Roth is careful to avoid creating a work of speculative fiction that integrates a series of narrative events that reveal a story that simply finds its verisimilitude by simply celebrating the rise of the human spirit during tragedy. Chabon, by choosing to blend the genres of detective fiction with that of a critical alternate history, goes against Roth's narrative approach by seemingly backgrounding the historical events that he alters in the novel, which allows for the protagonist, Landsman, and the other inhabitants of

Sitka to search for and embrace whatever parts of history that he/they can control—their personal, community, and local histories. Even though there is great national and global trauma in Chabon's Sitka, Landsman continues to search and reach for any event or anything that is real, while sifting through all that cannot be real.

Again, much like Roth's counter-historical novel, Chabon's one-off follows a Jewish community dealing with the aftermath of World War II; but, by providing a series of narrative events as the murder-mystery is revealed in the work, the Jews of Sitka come away with a very different outcome that what history remembers. The altered narrative approach in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, and the comparative fearlessness that Chabon creates in the town of Sitka, Alaska, in 2007, acts as a microcosm of what could be best described as an alternative post-World War II Jewish life. In the fictional Sitka, some 3.2 million Jews still inhabit the panhandle of Alaska some sixty years after the passing of the fictional Alaskan Settlement Act of 1940 (fictional) and the fall of the state of Israel in 1948. These altered historical events reside further in the historical background of Chabon's novel than in *The Plot Against America*, forcing the reader to critically consider if any truth can be known.

Chabon's alternate history, along with an examination of his works previous and his two published novels since (*Gentlemen of the Road* and *Telegraph Avenue*) highlights an authorial canon that 9/11 in some ways may

have helped influence other alternative narrative and generic approaches. In some ways, the fact that Chabon's novels champion the postmodern importance of eliminating the boundaries that separate genre fiction from high literature by fighting against the literary stalemate of having (as David Foster Wallace assumes in his post-9/11 essay, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's") the same "movie on all the channels," Chabon accomplishes this by examining in his "one-off" dystopian work the ease of "back-dropping" the disruptive nature of history and the controlling exasperations of genre and language. In what is foremost generically a detective novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, dips into the genre of speculative fiction, trying to forge a continued path of least resistance between pop culture and genre fiction in his last two works.

According to Helene Meyers, Michael Chabon's canon has three significant generic shifts, with the first centering around what she refers to as his "picaresque" phase with his first two coming of age works published in the late 1980s and early 1990s (13). Chabon's first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988), revolves around the post-college summer of Art Bechstein and his awkward relationship with his gangster father named Joe the Egg, and the complex interrelationships of his college and post-college life. *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* fits soundly into the genre of contemporary realist fiction and also as a bildungsroman in which Chabon examines the complex relationship of sexuality and identity. Chabon's follow-up novel, *Wonder Boys*, is a picaresque coming-of-

age story (a *kunstlerroman*, according to Meyers) in a blending of genres that examines the relationships of a spiraling creative writing professor, Grady Tripp, and his difficulties in creating a follow-up to his highly-touted first novel, *Wonder Boys*, in which he seems to turn to his own obsessions of genre by "littering" the novel with references and stories of failed genre writers.

In *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Chabon's Pulitzer Winning novel, Chabon makes a historical stretch genre-wise by creating a work that begins at the beginnings of World War II as Joe Kavalier is able to escape Nazi-invaded Prague and ends up in New York City. With the help of cousin, Sammy Clay, a young Jewish artist who idolizes Houdini, the two men begin creating their own comic world amidst the angst of historical uncertainty. Although Chabon allows for narrative cameos of historical figures (Orson Welles, Salvador Dali, etc.) in the novel, *Kavalier & Clay* is his first novel to delve into history. Andrejz Gasiorek argues that "*Kavalier & Clay* addresses the Holocaust obliquely by focusing on a character who escapes the war-torn Europe while the rest of his family remains trapped there," as the novel "attempts to imagine how lives that have been blighted by specific historical events might unfold" (882). This approach in some ways opens the door generically for Chabon's approach that he will take in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*—examining the direct impact of history; however, altering historical events in his one-off novel blurs the gift of hindsight. Gasiorek further believes that *Kavalier & Clay* is a work that is

"concerned with survivor's guilt [as] the main protagonist suffers from the almost unbearable knowledge that pure contingency has rendered him safe, while his family is doomed" (882). This angst forces the creation of Kavalier's graphic novel that

> […] returns to prewar Europe and transforms the clean-cut, virtuoso superhero into the enigmatic, ambiguous golem from which he came has two consequences: it avows a heritage and a history that the Nazis heave tried to eradicate, and it exposes the limitations of the fantasies embodied in caped crusaders would flatten caricatural villains in the page of comic books, while in reality Europe was caught up in a war that claimed millions of lives. (888)

In many ways, Chabon's reclaiming of Jewish history in a comic-style in the novel reflects not only how the "unspeakable" can be approached (as in Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* series, and in his post-9/11 *In the Shadow of No Towers*) but in a sense predates his own future venture into addressing tragedy and history in his future works, both pre- and post-9/11.

Chabon's initial excursion into detective fiction came with the novella, *The Final Solution* (2004), in which the writer brings together the reading of an aging Sherlock Holmes (although he is unnamed in the novel) against the backdrop of the Second World War. T*he Final Solution*, his first published work

after 9/11, reveals not only a deeper engagement with history for Chabon, but his most concerted effort of integrating the Holocaust in his work. Although the guilt of escaping the Holocaust is prominent in *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, *The Final Solution* is a work that "lends itself to being interpreted as an allegory of man's futile quest for understanding the Holocaust" (Craps and Buelens 569). According to Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, *The Final Solution* "can thus be seen to abide by the demands of what Gillian Rose has called Holocaust piety; that is, devotion to the idea that the Nazi genocide is a radically unique event outside of human history, ineffable, beyond comprehension, and impervious to analysis" (569). The story revolves around the murder of a British intelligence officer and the stealing of Bruno, a talking parrot that is stolen from his companion, Linus Steinman, a traumatized and mute German Jewish refugee. The parrot possesses the gift of being able to recite strings of German numbers, which is why the parrot is stolen---to identify and break Bruno's code. Craps and Beulen argue that the novel" is less a detective story than an elegy for the detective story, a mournful reflection on the loss of the rational and moral order of the world, which is a necessary precondition of the genre" (572)

Craps and Buelen's description of detective fiction in many ways identifies one of the primary shared characteristics it has with dystopian fiction, as there is always a loss of the rational and moral order. Chabon's pre-*Yiddish*

*Policemen's Union* detective novel, however, opens the door for the writer to follow Philip Roth (a hero of Chabon) and to take history into his own hands.

In venturing into speculative fiction, Chabon's one-off novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* works primarily a detective novel, but one that is set within an alternate history revolving around post-World War II Jews living in post-war Alaska some fifty years after the end of the war. The novel follows Meyer Landsman, as he begins investigating a murder case in his own hotel, the Hotel Zamenhof. Landsman is down on his luck, having divorced his wife, Bina, who is now his boss, and having lost his sister in a plane accident. Landsman's world is further compromised by the current political situation in Sitka, which having been a federal district for the past sixty years as a "provisional Jewish homeland for refugee's from Hitler's Europe and from the military demise of Israel in 1948," is about to return to control of the U. S. government (*Yiddish* 54). In other words, he is on the verge of homelessness.

The body that Landsman is called was once known as Mendel Shpilman, the son of Verbover Rebbe Heskel Shpilman. Mendel was known as the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, the possible messianic redeemer of the world. Landsman ignores his wife's order to aboandon the case and meets with both the Verbover Rebbe, Shpilman's father, and his mother, Batsheva Shpilman discovering that neither parent has seen or heard from their son in over twenty years. Batsheva confides in Landsman that Shpilman is gay, and yet she still sets her son up with the

accomplished daughter of a renowned rabbi After Mendel no-shows the wedding, Landsman pieces together (with clues from Bastheba) that Mendel and his sister, Naomi, died on the same day and links the two events together. Naomi had flown Mendel to a rehab center, The story concludes with Heskel Shpilman, excited by the possibilities of rebuilding the Temple and the future coming of the Messiah, along with accepting an offer to return his drug-addicted son,to him and the Verbovers. But once Mendel realizes what was being organized around him, he escapes with the help of Naomi. Landsman later discovers that the father (Hertz Shemet) of his cousin and partner Berko Shemet, was the one guilty of later killing Mendel. Hertz believed that if he killed Mendel, it would prevent the blowing up of the Dome of the Rock and the battle for Jerusalem. After the murderer is revealed, Landsman and Bina both take a vow of silence from U.S. government agencies to keep the rest of the story under wraps in exchange to remain on the police force and stay in Sitka after the Reversion. But in the end, Landsman chooses not to stay quiet and decides to phone and tell a reporter that "I have a story for you" (*Yiddish* 411).

Unlike Roth's *The Plot Against America*, Chabon's alternate historical "event" or nexus moment is not at the forefront of the novel. For Roth, the horror and fear generated from the nomination of Charles Lindbergh as the Republican candidate for President of the United States in the novel's opening sentences is

the source of "the perpetual fear" that envelops *The Plot* (3). Chabon's moment[17] of altering history comes in the opening chapter and revolves around the fact that the post-World War II Jewish settlement in Sitka, which has existed for almost sixty years, is now about to experience "reversion" back to Alaskan control—making the current chronotope of the narrative "a strange times to be a Jew" (*Yiddish* 7). Placing the moment of historical relevance in the background of the novel offers some interesting results in what Hellekson describes as a "true alternate history," or stories that "take place years after a change in a nexus event, which has resulted in a radically changed world" (7). Although Chabon's approach to history looks at first to making history only "slightly eschew" from actual history (Davis); however, there are large historical consequences that occur—some of which Chabon seemingly allows to pass by without much explanation of possible repercussions. Aside from Chabon's established Sitka settlement, actual history is altered as the narrator reveals the death of Anthony Dimond, an actual member of the House of Representatives who was the main force in "real history" in defeating Franklin Delano Roosevelt's efforts to make Alaska a Jewish homeland. In *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, Dimond is killed by a "drunken, taxi-driving schlemiel named Denny Lanning—eternal hero of the

[17] Roth's *The Plot Against America* was born out of reading Arthur Schlesinger's historical draft of a World War II history text. Chabon's initial idea for his novel came from reading Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes's proposal to actually move European Jews to Alaska. Chabon also credits buying *Say It in Yiddish* by Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich in 1993, a book he calls "the saddest book I own" and one that he initially thought was "inexplicable, possibly a hoax" (*Yiddish* P.S. 18)

Sitka Jews" (27). The most significant historical modification by Chabon comes one-third of the way through the novel; however, it is only presented as an anecdotal detail concerning a clock seen in Rebbe Shpilman and his attorney, Aryeh Baronshteyn:

> In the corner by the door stands the famous Verbover Clock, a survivor of the old home back in Ukraine. Looted when Russia fell, then shipped back to Germany, it survived the dropping of the atomic bomb on Berlin in 1946 and all the confusions of the time that followed. It runs counterclockwise, reverse-numbered with the first twelve letters of the Hebrew alphabet. (136)

Again, unlike Roth's approach to the power of history, and the powerlessness felt in the wake of history's most significant events, Chabon's additional nexus event is simply mentioned as an aside in this scene; however, history in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* may rest in the background of the novel, the impact, just as in Roth's alternate history and others like it, is both purposeful and impactful.

In making an initial post-9/11 reading, Birte Otten's "Arbitrary Ruptures: The Making of History in Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*" attributes the popularity of alternate historical fiction after 9/11 as something spawned out of the technological revolution. Otten discusses Gavriel Rosenfeld's opinion of seeing the internet, or rather the technological revolution, as one reason for alternate history's coming to prominence in the first place. By its

transcendence of restrictions of time and space, the internet itself has "introduced us to an alternate or 'virtual' history" (Rosenfeld 8). Otten sees *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* as a novel that addresses two topics that are of vital importance for the connection between alternate history and the 9/11 discourse. One engages with "nexus events" in life; the other, closely linked to the first, with the possibility of "shaping reality." Otten also explains how characters in Chabon's work embrace the "ruptures of history" to differing degrees. In contrast to Bina and Landsman, Otten argues that Mendel and the fundamentalists create a third option. Experiencing the impossibility to achieve what they want, they all attempt to regain control over their lives (or their lives' dreams, in the case of the fundamentalists) by actively creating reality.

> They themselves generate a historical rupture and so become the shaping forces of history. Within these plotlines, then, the novel shows its genre awareness by addressing issues that characterize the genre of alternate history: the existence of consequential nexus events, the possibility of different options at a given situation, the influence of outside forces in such situations, the contingency of history, and the consequences that follow. On the novel's diegetic level, the characters bring about historical ruptures to shape history just as the 9/11 terrorists wanted to shape history. The novel

> therefore addresses questions that also are of major relevance to the public discourse in America since 9/11. (8)

Otten believes that alternate history novels, by their very genre conventions, presuppose a rupture of history. They presume that at a specific point in time, history took a different turn. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* postulates that "Jews have been tossed out of the joint three times now—in 586 BCE, in 70 CE and with savage finality in 1948" (*Yiddish* 17). The novel needs this deviation from the actual course of history in order to create the background against which its major themes, the existence of nexus points as a possibility to shape reality, can be played out to their full extent. Chabon's alternate history novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* reflects the growing popularity of representations of past events as well as alternate history's increasing popularity. Otten states that the reasons for this can be found in the novel's engagement with issues that parallel those in our timeline:

> It presents a setting in which the characters are ruled by outside forces. It addresses the changing of society, the disorientation that accompanies it, the feeling of losing control, and the clashing of various (political, religious, individual) interests in a world determined by different power players. Even though the fictional background deviates to a large extent from our own world, the

> novel nevertheless addresses broader themes that are of relevance for its readers as well. The contrast between the formal disparity of factual and alternative history on the one hand, and their thematic similarity on the other highlights the 'presentist' aspect of the novel. (13)

From a different generic aspect, Adam Rovner argues that Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (along with Nava Semel's *Isralsland*) are examples of what he calls "philosophical genres" in which he juxtaposes the similar generic and narrative attributes of the detective with the alternate history novel. He argues that alternate histories are seemingly "a kind of detective fiction that rebels against historiography's displacement of the contingent" (149). Rovner references Ernst's Bloch's theory that "the detective form allows readers to explore a hermeneutic gap of our contingent existence: that everyone on earth is thrown into a world 'not of his or her choosing'" (148). Rovner further argues that he agrees with Bloch's assessment that "detective fiction and other popular forms of literary entertainment reveal races of a utopian longing suppressed by the social impulse to preserve the status quo," (148) which allows for Rovner to question Chabon's "use of detective fiction to challenge the consensus of national and ethnic identity and affiliation" (149).

## CHABON'S EVENTAL "PLAY"

Chabon's generic interplay has become a stylistic staple for his novels, but he is also a crusader for the elimination of generic boundaries between high literature and genre fiction; thusly, his segue way into alternate history is in some ways the least surprising of the six novelists analyzed here. Chabon discusses his obsession with genre in his essay "Trickster in a Suit of Lights," in which he states that within every genre "there are those conventions [of each genre] to be considered"; however, he adds that

> Many of the finest 'genre writers' working today, such as the English writer China Miéville, derive their power and their entertainment value from a fruitful self-consciousness about the conventions of their chosen genre, a heightened awareness of its history, of the cycle of innovation, exhaustion, and replenishment. When it comes to conventions, their central impulse is not to flout or to follow them but, flouting or following, to *play*. (22)

One way in which Chabon "plays" with genre in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is through the ideas of placement of "generic space" within the novel; in other words, the writer's choice to have one genre in a sense take a backseat in the novel to a more predominate genre. At its core, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is a hard-boiled detective novel, reminiscent of Raymond Chandler—but at the same time, the "allohistoical" aspects of the novel are present, important in all aspects

of the novel and its storytelling characteristics, but the counter historical aspects take a backseat to the mystery of solving the murder mystery of Mendel Shpilman.

Although Chabon's emphasis on genre exploration and exploitation is not without practicing predecessors, it is important to examine his generic shift in light of a major historical event like 9/11. Chabon's assent into historical fiction, followed by the post-9/11 step into alternate historical fiction with *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, that the eliminating of generic bounds reflects a new way of thinking. Clifford Geertz writes in his essay, "Blurred Genres," that finding "interactions and intertextualities" in and out of literary texts is a "procedure that represents a refiguration of social theory; he sees it as indicative of a change in social inquiry from one concerned with *what knowledge is* to "what it is we want to know" (Cohen 15). Ralph Cohen further explains this approach as follows:

> In these works, the combination [of genres] of autobiography, laboratory or classroom practice and politics is related to social and political attitudes. Combinations present not merely the procedures of scientific or literary inquiry, but serve to illustrate the procedures by which they conceal antagonisms, prejudices and disunity. This generic analysis redirects textual analysis: from studying behavior to studying the grounds of behavior; from the

> overt desire to manipulate behavior to studying the nature of this desire, the actual processes of manipulation. (16)

By placing *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* mainly under the generic umbrella of detective fiction, while also placing the story within a structure of post-World War II America that never existed, Chabon forces readers to question everything they know in a post-9/11 world—what is real, what has been manipulated, and what has never been and never will be.

Chabon's altering of history, after his introduction and establishment of how Sitka, Alaska, became a homestead for Jews after the end of World War II and the fall of Israel, appears in many ways to act simply as side notes in the novel, with most of his historical references presented without much explanation as to how the historical event originated, or even more importantly, how did the event "play out" over time--either throughout the novel or in the future. In many alternate histories, the aftermath of the event is often described or examined throughout the work. In Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, the United States and its Allied Forces lost "a war" twenty years prior to the opening of the novel the reader learns that the United States is now occupied by both Japan and Nazi Germany. The details of how the United States lost the war is detailed periodically throughout the novel: the assassination of Franklin Delano Roosevelt by Giuseppe Zangara in 1933 may have led to the country's later maintaining their stand of isolationism. Other events, such as the regional divisions of the country:

the Pacific States, which are under benign control of the Japanese, but the area from the Rockies to the east coast are under horrific German rule--are also "brought to light" throughout the book. Even in Roth's novel, the aftermath of the historical "apex" moment of change (the election of Charles Lindbergh as President) is examined from the points of political, economic, and sociological effects on the Roth family and the country as a whole.

However, Chabon's historical repercussions in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are in many ways less examined. The most predominant historical change in Chabon's novel is the relocation of millions of Jews to Alaska—an effort that, in the novel, saves millions of Jews form the horrors of the Holocaust. By comparison to real history, one could argue that the Sitka, Alaska, that Meyer Landsman presides and that Chabon has imagined in the work is more utopian that dystopian. Sitka is at once a safe haven for Jews that is on the verge of being transformed from the "Federal District of Sitka," "with a population in the long jagged strip of the metro area of three point two million, [and] averages about seventy-five homicides a year," into an American wasteland (*Yiddish* 6). Aside from Chabon's introduction to Sitka, other major historical events, some of great significance, are simply mentioned "in passing," seeming acting as "sideshadowed" events in the novel, with little examination of their powerful ripple effects. In the novel, Chabon claims at one point that John F. Kennedy marries Marilyn Monroe in his altered universe, bringing his obsession with

popular culture into his alternate history. But probably the most significant altered historical event that is alluded to in the novel concerns the atomic bomb being dropped on Berlin. In a scene in which Detective Landsman and his partner, Berko, attempt to question a Rabbi concerning his knowledge of the murder of his neighbor, Chabon presents the information on the bombing with little prior or post-explanation of the bombing:

> In the corner stands the famous Verbover Clock, a survivor of the old home back in Ukraine. Looted when Russia fell, then shipped back to Germany, it survived the dropping of the atomic bomb on Berlin in 1946 and all the confusions of the time that followed. (136)

In this example, Chabon in some ways approaches history from a distinctively different position than that of Roth or Dick: the power of history seemingly accepted as something "that simply happened," not as a particularly significant force. From a standpoint in actual history, the repercussions of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan still stand as a major historical event--one which many argue introduced the real world to its accept the probabilities of real dystopian and apocalyptic possibilities; but in Chabon's novel, the bombing of Berlin is a side note, or in a sense, history is “backgrounded” in the narrative.

Because of his amalgam of genres (mainly alternate history and detective fiction) in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Chabon’s novel is the only one of the

six one-off works analyzed here to present a terrorist attack as an event. Margaret Scanlan suggests that an "alternate history, in addition to opening up a space between an actual and an imagined present, also opens up a space between an actual and a forgotten past" (524). She focuses much of her essay on the terrorist aspects of both Chabon and Roth's alternate worlds, examining Chabon's choice not to "fold back" into actual history as Roth' novel does, but that

> These fresh spaces in which Chabon stages his *inverse* 9/11 (the Zionist plot in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* in which the U.S government aids to destroy the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem) allow him to offer at least two correctives to popular narratives. One is the story that Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda are representative Muslims whose dangerous religion demands killing infidels. This narrative justifies not only capturing real terrorists, but also a larger, even ineffable War on Terror that looms as 'the single most important priority of our species [18]'" (524).

Chabon's "reverse" terrorist attack plays a dual role as a literary event of the novel. First, the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, when examined through the lens of Derrida's theoretical understanding of event, presents a narrative event that in some ways "re-marks" the events of September 11. As "historical events," real large-scale acts of terrorism, as well as the example in the novel, the event

[18] Last quote borrowed by Scanlan from the 9/11 novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Moshin Hamid.

becomes the "other" (Rowner 105), an emergency or threat that by its force establishes separation or a divide; in other words, another version of "us" and "them." However, this "evental divide" that is created by Chabon allows for questions concerning the definition of "terrorism" or, more specifically, what makes an event a terrorist act.

The recognition of the terrorist act in the novel is introduced when Landsman and Bina interviewing Alter Litvak, a hired informant who is a former explosives expert who is believed to have possibly played a part in the murder of Landsman's sister and in the killing of the Mendel Shpilman, the possible Tzadik Ha-Dor. As the interrogation is going on, the sound of cheering from a group of rebel Hassidic Jews emanates from another room. Landsman and Bina observe the young Jewish men standing in front of a large television watching breaking news coverage of the bombing of the Dome of the Rock. Chabon describes the visual event on the screen as "an image that will soon be splashed across the front page of every newspaper in the world" (*Yiddish* 358). Landsman watches the screen in shock, but not just because of the images; rather, he is mostly aghast by the fact "that an object eight thousand miles away had been acted upon by Jews from Sitka" (359). This scene in some ways echoes the day of the attacks on September 11th: a global terrorist event watched on television that will be repeated endlessly in the media; an event celebrated by some, but also terrifying others. As Landsman stares at Bina to see her reaction to the terrorism coverage on

television, he notices that she "watches without expression except at the corner of her eyes," a look that reminds Landsman of the other time he had seen her with expression (359). Landsman remembers the time that he and Bina attended an engagement party that included, as a joke, a penguin-shaped piñata. The children at the party were blindfolded and allowed to take turns "beat[ing] the penguin with savagery," and once it exploded "the candy came showering down […] wrapped toffies, peppermint, butterscotch" and Bina observed the actions of the children as she now observes the televised terror attack, with again "her arms folded and a pleat at the corner of her eyes" (359). The explosion of the piñata and the showering of candy places also echoes 9/11 as a visual event. By doubling and juxtaposing the terrorist event against the memory of the children's busting of the piñata in some ways magnifies these two acts of corporeal violence. The act of blowing up the Dome of the Rock in the novel is a futile move considering that Mendel Shpilman, the possible Tzadik Ha-Dor, was the murder victim found by Landsman at the beginning of the novel. The terrorist act, in a sense, was done in vain—much like the smashing of the penguin piñata. Chabon's choice to piggy-back these two events in a way acts as a narrative "smoke-screen" by hiding yet another reversed event in the narrative that, much like these two scenes, act as "semiotic residue" of 9/11.

Chabon's inclusion of the terrorist act described above works as a "nucleus event," to borrow Barthes's term, that concludes a series of satellite acts

in the narrative. The satellite acts that lead to the nucleus/literary event also seem to be part of one of Chabon's narrative events as he appears to create what I will call a "terrorism scenario," a juxtaposition of characteristics and stages that an act of terrorism would likely follow to create a terrorist event. A basic terrorism scenario would include the initial acceptance of the person willing to create an act of terror that bodily harm or death is irrelevant to themselves and those around them, which includes the preparation, execution, and outcome of the attack-event. The body, in this scenario, becomes the catalyst and the "other" of the event—becoming both corporeal/tool, living/dead. Chabon's larger "terrorism scenario," when examined as a narrative event, is, much like the terrorism attack of the US-aided attack on the Dome of the Rock—the concepts of reality is reversed or flipped. Chabon reverses the narrative sequence of the terrorism scenario, culminating with the viewing of the terrorist coverage on television, to seemingly present a hidden literary event as a terrorist scenario.

Chabon's terrorism scenario begins as Litvak, the hired military man and explosives expert, who is also one of the masterminds of the terrorist attack, is playing chess at the compound that that houses the rebel Jewish sect, awaiting the arrival of Mendel Shpilman, who is being flown in by Landsman's sister. The scene shifts next to Litvak's memory of piecing the plot together and an initial meeting with Heskel Shpilman, Mendel's estranged father and leader of the Verbovers, the Jewish organized crime group that Landsman is investigating. The

two men, Heskel and Litvak, meet in at the Ringelblum Avenue Baths to discuss the planning of the events to come, but in doing so the bodies of each man are described in detail. Litvak's body is described as having a "vandalized body" with a "puckered purple mouth on his right shoulder, the slashes of red velour on his hip, the pit in his left thigh deep enough to hold an ounce of gin" (341). Due to an accident, Litvak also does not speak, so he carries around a notepad and pen, so he is also verbally challenged. Litvak's body also contains:

> […] screws in his hips, which ached; his knees thudded and gonged like the pedals of an old piano. There was a constant thrum of wire in the hinges of his jaw. He ran his tongue across the empty zones of his mouth with their feel of slick putty. He was accustomed to pain and breakage, but since the accident, his body no longer seemed to belong to him. It was something side and nailed together out of borrowed parts. (347)

In similar fashion, Heskel Shpilman's body is described "the horror and the splendor of it, naked as a giant bloodshot eyeball without a socket […] a slab of wet limestone whelmed with a black lichen of hair" (341). As Heskel's body becomes visually clearer in the steam, Chabon describes his physique as containing a "belly pregnant with elephant triplets, the breasts full and pendulous, each tipped with a pink lintil of a nipple. The thighs great hand-rolled marbled

loaves of halvah. Lost in the shadows between them, a thick umbilicus of grayish-brown meat" (341). Chabon's depiction of these two distorted bodies creates images of something non-corporeal. Thus, the bodies of these two members of the terrorist sect are portrayed as essentially inhuman or "other." The writer has established in this initial section of the narrative sequence (or terrorism scenario) a projection of a lack of concern for the body. After the end of Litvak recounting this meeting with Heskel, Litvak is brought back into the current narrative, where he is about to meet and physically confront Heskel's son. These scenes concerning Litvak are ultimately revealed to being part of a written narrative during his questioning from Landsman and Bina, which is strategically placed in the narrative sequence right before the event of the terrorist attacks on television. In a sense, what Chabon creates here is a reverse terrorism scenario: the "planning stage" of a terrorist event (the chess match), the evidence of the disregard for the body both one's own and others (bath scene), followed by the televised terrorist scene (terrorist event) which is quickly followed by the recognition by Landsman and Bina that Litvak, despite his physical handicap, has disappeared (death or disappearance of the terrorist). This narrative sequence created by Chabon also invites a "9/11 reading" if sequenced backwards from: the death/disappearance of the terrorist (crashing of the plane into WTC tower), completing the assigned task and creating the terror event (explosion and spectacle on television), the destruction/disappearance of the body and bodies (towers falling), etc. Chabon's

narrative sequencing creates both a narrative event within a literary event which is centered on the questioning of the corporeal within the text.

Chabon's examination of the event in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* questions not only the relations between the corporeal and language, but also in the questioning of language in defining the terms of both "terrorism" and "terrorist." By including the reverse terrorist scene, Chabon seemingly places the title of "terrorist" and "American" under the same "semantic umbrella" as the United States government plays a role in an act of terrorism is the form of a US-funded bombing in Israel. The writer's choice to include the act of terrorism, but not acknowledging it as an act of terrorism but instead as a "bombing" event, throws open the post-9/11 arguments concerning US military involvement in other countries. In other words, if the US takes unprovoked military action against another country, should that be defined as simply "a military action" or should it be considered an act of terrorism? How Chabon is able to narratively create this question is aided in many ways by his choices of and blending of genre. The "eventness" or impact of the terrorist attack created by Chabon is to a degree hidden by the backgrounding of the event beneath the generic layers of the detective story and his initial altering of history.

Chabon's terror event, although backgrounded in the story, while also being the most similar event in its narrative presentation to a 9/11 terrorist scene than in the other one-off events, is a key literary event in its examination of

language/definition of post-9/11 terminology and event, as well as in questioning (like Roth) how the most subtle event in history influences or affects/controls the masses. There seems to be a narrative "bait and switch" within the narrative events and sequence and it is to the strength of Chabon as a writer that this narrative act is easily done. However, by looking at the novel from an even broader lens, Chabon's narrative and literary constructs and events in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are in many ways a warning against the cultural ignorance of event recognition and how the definitions, dialogue, and narrative of an event can be easily manipulated and made to sound real or believable, even when it is fiction. In the post-9/11 world, Chabon's narrative "play" with reality and unreality makes the importance of questioning and understanding events imperative, but also how ignoring the "eventness" of a given event is dangerously easy.

## THEORETICAL INTERLUDE: POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION

Frank Kermode, in his 1967 ground-breaking work, *Sense of an Ending*, states that "apocalypse depends on a concord of imaginary recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain 'in the midst.' Its predictions, though figurative, *can* be taken literally, and as the future moves in on us we may expect to conform with the figures" (*Sense* 8). He clearly could see the changes in the cultural understanding of apocalypse: a definition (as applied to genre) that now encompasses natural disasters, plagues, and man-made disasters. Kermode states that "In their general character our fictions have simply moved away from the simplicity of the paradigm; they have become more open" (6). Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow further addresses this reasons for this paradigm shift in *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats,* arguing that we now live in a world that was, at one time, the stuff of fiction:

> The truth is that serious perils to the existence of humanity have become a fact of contemporary life. The threat of mass death, environmental devastation, and even human extinction is an alarming reality. In the past twenty-five years, more than a thousand books have been published with "Armageddon" or "apocalypse" in the title. What was once dismissed as apocalyptic

> fanaticism is now the prediction of leading scientists. A large majority of the world's population has never known a time when nuclear destruction was not a possibility. (8)

Wuthnow's claims concerning the cultural concerns of the current times foregrounds the use of the term "apocalypse" in the post-Hiroshima/ post-9/11 world, reaffirming that the rising popularity of dystopian fiction, and more specifically its sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction are, as Lyman Tower Sargent argues, "product[s] of the terrors of the twentieth century" (9).

In attempting to define the genre, John J. Collins states in his seminal text, *Apocalypse: the Morphology of a Genre*, that a work of apocalyptic fiction is:

> A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another super natural world. (9)

Collins argues today that his 1979 definition "started from a list of apocalypses that were prototypical, and distinguished between central and peripheral characteristics," and that he intentionally avoided discussing the function of the genre in order that function "was best discussed at the level of the individual texts, in their specific contexts, and that the commonly accepted idea that apocalypses were intended to comfort and exhort a group in crisis" (*Oxford* 5).

Collins further states that the modern representations of apocalypse, especially in art and fiction, has expanded the definition to fit the current times. Collins even goes as far as calling McCarthy's *The Road* a "modern 'apocalyptic' novel" is part of "a long tradition, going back at least to Qoheleth, of writers who try to "shrink" apocalyptic eschatology to make it fit our mundane experience"(13).

Although the American cultural obsession with the "end of days" has been building since the dropping of the atomic bomb at the end of World War II, Avril Horner states that as a cultural trope, the eschatological obsession is both timeless and universal:

> The Apocalypse is not new of course: the Book of Revelations left a strong mark on Western Literature, one of the most famous examples being Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, published in 1826. Apocalyptic fictions and predictions, like the Gothic, tend to bubble up during times of crisis; it is, for example, generally accepted that both the Second World War and the Cold War resulted in spaces of apocalyptic writing. Over the last twenty years or so, however, apocalyptic scenarios have become increasingly common in both film and fiction. (38)

Horner believes that much of the motivation for apocalyptic writers is to, in a sense, "play" with historical and cultural events; but, as it is with all speculative fiction, they play from a distance: "While envisioning the end of the world as we

know it, these apocalyptic narratives engage—in a displaced manner—with images that have haunted the recent past" (38). Horner helps explain indirectly here the post-9/11 rise in the numbers of post-apocalyptic literature and film that were created, as it has become more clear that the visual-event—the collapsing of the twin towers, the billowing smoke and dust seemingly erupting on the streets of New York City—were indeed reflective of apocalyptic imagery.

Elizabeth Rosen furthers Horner's beliefs concerning the cultural reception of apocalyptic narratives, stating that the genre itself has changed over time:

> It is [now] more than a religious story that has been passed down through the ages. Apocalypse is a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it. Anyone who notes the often alarmist delivery of news reports about global warming or conflicts in the Middle East, or goes to the Cineplex to see the latest end-of-the-world scenario avoided (or not), or listens to American presidents speak in terms of evil empires ore axes of evil can easily be forgiven for believing we are approaching End-times. (xii)

Rosen's contemporary list of daily-life scenarios reflect a commonality that "the end," however it is represented—in the media, film, fiction, song— is more real now than ever. In some ways, Rosen echoes M. Keith Booker's comments concerning the cultural oversaturation of all things dystopian. However, after

9/11, this cultural infusion of the end of days cries out for the need to question the events of all sizes.

Apocalypse, according to Isak Winkel Holm, is included among his brief taxonomy of "the most prominent disaster images in the cultural history of the Western world" ("Cultural Analysis"). Holm states that these disasters generally start "from the individual human being via the political community and its natural surroundings to problems of cosmological and theological size" (24). The following list pertains summarizes this taxonomy of disasters:

> *The sublime*: When we perceive disaster through the cognitive scheme of the sublime, we focus on the violent sense experience overwhelming the observer who, stricken with terrified dumbness and bodily stupor, experiences a masochistic blend of pain and pleasure.
>
> *Trauma*: when we perceive disaster through the cognitive scheme of the trauma we focus on the wound [...] that the violent event inflicts on the human psyche. (24)
>
> *State of Emergency*: [...] focus[es] on the breakdown of legal and normative structures caused by the disaster.
>
> *Risk*: [...] focus[es] on the rational calculations of the probability of a disastrous event.
>
> *Imbalance*: [...] and sustainability [...] focus[es] on the imbalance between human and biophysical systems causing disaster. (25)
>
> *Apocalypse*: [...] focus[es] on the end of the world as we know it. this way of making sense of disasters has theological roots in the Book of Revelation.
>
> *Blessing in Disguise*: [...] focus[es] on the ways disasters prepare for new growth.

> *Theodicy*: [...] focus[es] on a god (or some god-like agent) who can be held responsible for the whole event. (26)

Holm's list of these prominent cognitive schemes concerning disasters are applicable to disaster fiction; however, Holm's argues that choosing one cognitive scheme for application and analysis of an event or text is a mistake: "a comprehensive cultural analysis of disaster" must include questions from all possible schemes (27).

Much like the narrative approach to the dystopian narrative outlined by Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Claire P. Curtis states in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* that most apocalyptic works follow a similar narrative path. First, Curtis states, the protagonist and the event are introduced and their connections are made from a distance:

> Traditionally, the main character (typically a white male) is introduced prior to the apocalyptic event with his problems, issues, loves ones, etc. There is a reason why he is out of town or out of the way or in a safe place the day of the event, so you rarely get to see the event through his eyes or her eyes. Instead the event is witnessed from the perspective of some minor characters who will die dramatically mid-novel. (8)

Curtis also outlines the steps of survival that are usually taken next by the protagonist. Depending on the traumatic event that has occurred, the pace concerning the following actions determine the outcome of the protagonist:

> First he must reconcile his immediate survival with his need to continue to survive given the water, hailstones, radiation, earthquakes, plague, etc. In the initial movements toward survival—finding food, finding or making shelter, the survivor stumbles upon a companion—usually someone weaker (a child, or a young woman) or sometimes an equal with a useful know how (a gardener or hunter). Once the small group has been established them, mere survival starts to move into long term flourishing (8).

Curtis further outlines the involvement of the protagonist not just in regards to the crisis or cataclysmic event, but with the surrounding people and their reactions to these extreme outside forces. The "necessary Other" is always a factor in these survival scenarios, and Curtis argues that "escape can only be found in forming a large community. Thus, the typical post-apocalyptic novel uses the threat to the safety of the small collection of survivors to cement their ties and to push those survivors into a more self-consciously organized system" (8).

However, there are some critics who find conflict in placing post-apocalyptic fiction under the same generic taxonomy of science fiction. Wegner states in *Shockwaves of Possibility* that Mark Rose's approach in *Alien*

*Encounters* makes the claim that apocalyptic fiction and science fiction are genres in opposition and that "the apocalyptic moment is unrealizable in narrative" (Rose qtd. in Wegner 91). Rose believes that the apocalypse is not capable of creating meaning, but instead fathers meaninglessness, and "at that far point [the apocalypse], the separation between self and other, human and nonhuman, collapses, as does any distinction between past and future" (Rose qtd. in Wegner 91). Wegner, in his approach to addressing the generic value of post-apocalyptic fiction, eschews Rose's constraints and instead borrows from Moylan's concept of the critical dystopia by adopting the title of "a critical post-apocalypse," which he defines as a work that "interrogates the pseudo-event of a supposed apocalypse, showing the vital political importance of being able to recognize them as such, and then educating the reader's desire for an authentic event: not the end of *the* world, but the end of *a* world" (94).

Wegner's re-definition of a post-apocalyptic work is important and applicable to post-9/11 apocalyptic works. The two novels addressed in the following chapters, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, explore what can be read as the end of two worlds more so than the end of *the* world. One of the most highly-acclaimed apocalyptic novels, McCarthy's *The Road* allowed the writer to create a fitting ending to his canon's study in American violence by turning the fall of America into an episodic tale of survival of an unnamed man and his son. The novel resonates as a post-9/11 critical post-

apocalyptic work by creating a world where language and history no longer hold any value, and how man's violent tendencies have led to a time of continuous terror where no place is safe and every moment is seemingly an event. Marcus's world of terror in *The Flame Alphabet* places language at the forefront as a language virus takes control in the US and can only be acquired by hearing the spoken words of children. To survive, silence, not words, are key, as Marcus unveils a world where language is a form of terrorism and eventually it becomes impossible to know who is in control because no one can listen. These two one-off novels encapsulate the post-9/11 angst that still has us all thinking if there is any longer a place where we can feel truly safe.

# CHAPTER 5
# NO ONE IS LISTENING: VIRUSES REAL AND VIRTUAL IN BEN MARCUS'S *THE FLAME ALPHABET*

In Jean Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism,* a work published within a year after the Septemeber 11 attacks, he relates that "terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere" and that because of this "virus" there exists now a "global perfusion of terrorism, which accompanies any system domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere as a double agent" (10). This chapter focuses on a slightly different form of a virus presented in Ben Marcus's novel *The Flame Alphabet,* a post-apocalyptic dystopia that examines the life and death capabilities of language by presenting a society that is plague-ridden by a "deadly verbal virus," in which spoken language, initially from the mouths of children, becomes lethal to the adult population. The language toxicity that reaches and plagues a small New York community in the novel exasperates the adults to the point where parents flee from their children in hopes of survival. *The Flame Alphabet* at once extols the violent impact of language along with the perils and dangers of communicative failure and the seemingly crushing discovery and need for silence in a world that cannot find a medium for dialogue. Although a complicated relationship of language and silence played a primary stake in one of Marcus's early works, the complex engagement of language and silence (when to

speak/when not to speak; what to say/what not to say; when to laugh/when not to laugh, etc.) is in some ways also reflective of the days and weeks in post-9/11 America during a time when silence and discourse had almost life or death implications.

Before *The Flame Alphabet*, Marcus published two other works: *The Age of Wire and String* (1995) and *Notable American Women* (2002), with each work praised by critics for each possessing experimental narrative structure, but most notably, for the writer's "play" and (at times) "abuse" of language and meaning. *The Age of Wire and String* was described in an initial review as "part handbook, part scientific treatise, part legal document, part academic polemic, part dictionary, and possibly a veiled confession" (D. W. Daniels 8). As a work of experimental fiction, the book is somewhat generically indefinable. Even though the title implies that this is a collection of short fiction (*The Age of Wire and String: Stories by Ben Marcus*), this collection has also been reviewed as a novel and (much like parts of McCarthy's *The Road*) an extended collection of prose poems. But in this debut work, Marcus includes 41 short 1-2 page fictional pieces which are grouped into eight separate subheadings ("Sleep," "God," "Food," "The House," "Animal," "Weather," "Persons," "The Society") in which he states early on in the book that the purpose of this work is "to present an array of documents settling within the chief concerns of the society, of any society, of the world and

its internal areas" (*Age* 4). Marcus's "handbook" is both a work of realism and a disjointed amalgam of thoughts and approaches.

One example in *The Age of Wire and String* from the early "Sleep" section presents snoring as a language unto itself: defining the act as "accidental speech" which are "language disturbances caused by accidental sleeping, in which a person speaks in compressed syllables and bulleted syntax" and that should be responded to with "apneic barks" (8). Each of the eight separate sections of the work also contains a "Terms" section that touches loosely on that sections of readings—another avenue for Marcus to "play" with language. For example, in the "Sleep" section, Marcus defines an "Albert" as the a "nightly killer of light" (13) and a "shirt of noise" as "garment, fabric, or residue that absorbs and holds sound, storing messages for journeys" (14). As modern linguistic terms and definitions, the references are seemingly nonsensical; however for Marcus, this seems to be the point of experimental writing—allowing the reader to enter a different emotional or psychological place during the act of reading (or as Rowner states, "disappearing" into the text. Marcus's complex narrative provides the work with its own set of gratuitous postmodern interpretations, making his experimental novel/prose poems/collection of stories a "text that does not lead one by the hand, or eye, to some deep emotive state, rather it allows the reader to delicately piece together with wire and string a new universe" (D. W. Daniels 8). Marcus does establish in *The Age of Wire and String* an understanding that the

intersection of language and meaning are, and should be, both complex and dangerous.

Marcus's second major work, *Notable American Women* is a dark and comic novel that continues Marcus's exploration of language and its purpose. The story revolves around the fictional Marcus family (son "Ben," father "Michael," mother "Jane") and the aftermath of the mother's involvement in a cultish group of women who refer to themselves as "Silentists" who "practice all means of behavior modification in an attempt to attain complete stillness and silence" (*Notable* 17). Rather than continuing with experimental narrative practices, Marcus presents the novel in essentially three different narrative sections, beginning with Michael Marcus's introduction in which he claims that "I will not succumb to the easy distractions of language poison," relating his angst for being harnessed and eventually buried alive in the backyard by the Silentists (3). Jane Marcus's membership in the female cult (behind their leader, Jane Dark) forces the character of Ben Marcus to not only question the absurd reality of attempting to be silent, but to also accept that he has clearly lost his freedom and his own identity:

> I am probably Ben Marcus. I might be a person. There's a chance I lived on a farm meant to muffle the loud bodies of this world, a sweet Ohio locale called Home, where our nation's women angled toward a new behavior, a so-called Final Jane. We could have had

> special weather here, a behavior television, a third frequency, after AM and FM, for women's messaging, for women to steal the air and stuff it with their own private code. (*Notable* 45)

Jane eventually puts her son Ben (in his narrative in the middle of the novel) through an absurd "corrections" program:

> There would be new learning water to drink, new behavior flash cards, and gymnastics against emotion. An itinerary was written out for me with early rising times, and cleaning duty at the fainting tank. The ladies in the room applauded my mother, quietly patting their knees as they crouched like skiers (*Notable* 37)

Ben's involvement with the Silentists was something he could escape from in his youth, but clearly his efforts proved futile as he is "put to sire" for the Silentists, with no other young males being "sufficiently available to dispense completions [sex] in the selected women" (99). As with most works of fiction with multiple narrators, the reader is forced to determine which narrative perspective can be "trusted"; thus, Marcus's detailed information and misinformation gradually flows more freely in the novel. Jane Marcus's narrative takes over in the final chapter, which functions as a memo to Michael concerning their relationship and son. Jane notes that

> If Ben elects voluntary paralysis when he turns eighteen, and inhabits a silent suit down at the Akron Stillness Center, I would at

> least like him to have experienced, for the purposes of late dismissal, the dubious pleasures and vague disappointments of running, jumping, sliding, and walking, the dullness and fascination of being able to lead his own body off road into the woods" (237).

Although Jane's desires for her son seem to forecast events to come in Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, the Marcus family's story reads like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* meets an absurdist version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, as language and how it is both used and regulated are keys elements in *Notable American Women*. Marcus (the writer) not only creates an outlandish cult vocabulary in his works, but he also questions the control and effects of language on not only the individual, but on the larger global community, as well.

Despite Marcus's recurring interest in the power of language, his generic shift to speculative fiction in *The Flame Alphabet* places the reader *in media res* of a "speech epidemic" in which any spoken language has become toxic and is spreading across the United States, with the origins of the "disease of spoken language" unknown. Misinformation concerning the epidemic is rampant, as the first reported cases were understood to begin in Jewish children. The language virus initially does not affect children; however, it is the spoken words of children that are slowly killing the adults. In the novel, Sam, the protagonist and narrator, struggles to find answers concerning the epidemic, but helpful information is

scarce as he and his wife begin to suffer physically and mentally from the virus. His wife, Claire, is stricken the hardest with the verbal toxicity as she becomes weakened from the painful dialogue and contact that she has with their daughter, Esther, a teenager who tends to "laugh off" the physical, psychological and emotional frailty of her parents. As life becomes more dire, Sam becomes acquainted with Murphy, a seemingly intelligent but anxious man who is also trying desperately to find ways of surviving the epidemic; however, Murphy become a voice of confusion in many ways as he speaks much like a conspiracy theorist. Despite Murphy's imposing on Sam's frantic search for answers concerning the epidemic, Sam creates a small make-shift lab in his kitchen and creates pills that he hopes will save Claire's life. For the pills, Sam made of a combination of "reduced solutions of saline, blended anti-inflammatory tablets, atomized powder from non-drowsy time-release allergy vials" combined with "water-charged vitamins" that he describes as "health bombs to go off only when the exposure [to Esther's voice] was intense" (71). However, Sam's efforts are futile, and once he discovers his mailbox jammed with documents, he discovers that he has received The Proofs, a medical broadside of LeBov, one of the leading voices in the efforts to combat the epidemic. Inside the proofs, Sam finds a history of the speech diseases in which "alongside the historical anecdotes were medical recommendations, refutations, preventative treatments" (83). Sam concludes that "The Proofs was conspicuous for its absences of conclusions" (85). Eventually,

busses are sent in to the cities to remove children and take them to Forsythe, a research center in Rochester inside an abandoned high school, parents were told that their kids "would not be subjected to medical tests" but "would be kept safe, held for you, in order for local recoveries to flourish. Medical babysitting" (87).

Later, it is announced that LeBov, one of the main sources for news and directions concerning the virus, has died, with the news announcing that he "was perhaps the first researcher, certainly the most outspoken, to identify the threat of language" (109). When the news station posts a picture of Lebov, Sam suddenly realizes that Murphy is Lebov. When Sam decides to go back to the hut, he finds LeBov (Murphy) in the hut and after a verbal altercation, Sam asks if the toxicity really did start with Jewish children, but Lebov disappears and does not answer—confirming that Lebov is a conspiracy theorist. When Sam returns home, he discovers that Esther had found her mother asleep in her (Esther's) bed. The impending verbal tirade from Esther is described by Sam as "a language so rank that I failed to breathe [and] lost control of my hands" (132). Sam eventually musters the strength to drag Esther out of the house and states:

> At the sidewalk I dropped her and with my hands I made the most terrible gesture I could. It was the most fluent I'd ever been without speech.
>
> *Stay, stay there. Do not come in this house again. You are forbidden from here. We do not know you.*

> […] If Esther tried to return, I would be ready for her. I would meet her with everything I had. (133)

Sam would later discover the tirade that Claire wrote Esther a letter that he was not to read or see. Sam, in a similar act, made a voice recording for his daughter before they abandoned the area. With the establishment of a mass quarantine, Sam has to physically carry Claire to the car as they ready to depart. At the sound of a departure horn for the citizens to leave, Claire jumps out of the car and runs free toward the fields. As Sam tries to help her back to the car, he is dragged back by the quarantine men and Claire is picked up and taken away in a cargo truck. Sam's only option it to continue, as he drives north alone heading towards the Forsythe site. On the drive, the horror of the speech epidemic becomes more obvious as he notices that everything with lettering, from stop signs to advertisements, are covered or camouflaged.

After Sam makes it to Forsythe, he collapses outside of his car, only to have "someone [grab] my keys and [he watched as] the taillights of my car squirreled through the nighttime air, then disappeared around a building. There went everything I owned" (150). Sam is taken into the research facility and is there for months, stating that "my days in this northern hole of Rochester were speechless and dark" (153). After a series of "treatments," Sam finds the orange conduit mush like was in their hut back home. He pieces together a connection and wires it to his mouth which blasts a prayer inside his mind that will not leave

his head. He then finds out it is now April and he is released from the research facility to become a researcher himself. On his first day in research, Sam quickly learned that sign language was also forbidden. He still had not determined what went into Lebov's speech-enabling grease or how the white collar at Oliver's actually did. His job at the beginning was to create inhibitors that would prevent him from seeing what he was doing. His job was "to test letters, alphabets, possibly engineer a script. I was meant to string together symbols that might be used as a code, a new language to outwit the toxicity" (167). Outside the facility, "hordes of people sought entrance into Forsythe" (168). Sam begins to try and thin out/alter the alphabet. He begins to question why this toxicity of language is happening:

> Did the language itself matter? Was ours exhausted and did an ancient one need to be revived. Or were we bound to invent a new one, avoiding the perils of every language that has heretofore existed, I wondered.
>
> Or was it that way that language was rendered, drawn, projected, *seen*. Had we tried everything possible in this realm? Was the delivery system the problem? (168)

Sam's questioning, in a sense, responds to the source of the problem: the issues did not seem to be one of language delivery or invention; the problem was *comprehension*:

> Was our aversion to language based on what we said to each other: the cryptic things, the direct things, the disappointing things, the neutral ones? Was it because of what we didn't say? Had we failed to say or wrote down something that would ensure our survival, and now this failure has grown too massive, become irreversible?
>
> But more [questions] came. Was language rich in information, filled with verifiable detail and data, worse than language that lied? Which diction made us sicker? Could abstract language, the kind that skirted anything visual and posited ideas and qualifications over the concrete, be less harmful? Were expressions of love safer than threats?
>
> Everything I produced and sent down to the yard for testing suggested that it was comprehension itself that we could no longer bear. The days of understanding were over. This was not a disease of language anymore, it was a disease of insight, understanding, *knowing*. (195-6)

Marcus questions the incomprehensible in *The Flame Alphabet* in much the same was that Habermas does of 9/11. Habermas's claims of government control over how war and violence are "staged" and controlled, forcing the engagement of the imagination in a time of crisis are reflected in Marcus's novel in the ways in which information concerning the language plague is being presented either through radio or television. In *The Flame Alphabet*, television shows are highly-edited after the outbreak of the verbal plague, but by whom? While participating

in the Forsythe research facility, Sam states that he "could watch [TV] without fear" and that "the comedy shows, for Sam, began to stand in for memories" (174). But because of the language toxicity and the horrific physical pain caused by spoken language and written words, the faces on the screens are blurred out: "the toxicity sucked out of them" (173), much like Habermas's references to the blacked-out media images of 9/11. For Sam and his coworkers, of course there is no sound from the TV either, causing Sam to make the difficult claim that "I lacked the discipline to refuse these images as they appeared to me alone in my bed, hours later. I allowed them to hijack my mental space and hardly fought them off. It was easier to let them play on, endlessly, and such was the material that frequently sent me into spells of anxious, restless sleep" (174). Sam grows tired of the repetition of TV and attempts to mentally disconnect from it, stating that "There was room for me to will my own thought, my own memory, and I would hurriedly try to call up something unique about Esther" (174). However, when Sam's traumatized psyche can sees Esther's face, it is often blurred much like children on TV: "[...] as if, even in the past, *even when I knew her*, she wore a stocking over her head and I never once saw my daughter's face for what it really was" (176). Thus, the visual and verbal incomprehension of trauma, in both *The Flame Alphabet* and in the witnessing of a traumatic event, seem to mentally cancel each other out.

In Sam's world, the progressive weakening of the information system and political system has already taken root. Sam gets most of his information concerning the plague from LeBov and a newsletter that he writes, and blurred-out TV shows. Also, in the world of *The Flame Alphabet*, there is seemingly no government (by any current definition), but there are those who are in control; thus, the source of the pixilated TV programs is left ambiguous. In much the same way, Derrida claims a lack of clarity in that "September 11 is still a part of the archaic theater of violence aimed at striking the imagination. One day it might be said: "September 11'—those were the ('good') old days of the last war. Things were still of the order of the gigantic: visible and enormous!" (154). Borradori also believes that "Derrida's suspicion is that the virtualization of terrorism will erase the remnants of the distinction between terrorism and war and between war and peace." There are worse scenarios, he said, than two commercial planes crashing into skyscrapers and causing their collapse. We know exactly when they began and when they ended. Derrida's closing words reflect more the crisis terror that we've inherited after 9/11: "Yet our unconscious is already aware of this [the threat of further attacks]; it already knows it, and that's what's scary" (1).

### *Language and Death: Terror as Virus*

The verbal toxicity that morphs into the "disease of misunderstanding" that Marcus creates in the novel echoes in some ways the lack of comprehension

after the September 11 attacks in the United States. After the initial fear of the attacks subsided, the arguments on both sides of the political arena began to participate in the "us/them" arguments, or as President George Bush stated in his address to the nation after the attacks: "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush transcript). Within the us/them fragmenting of society after a terrorist event, there arises questions of language and control and, as discussed with Chabon's novel, a need for more concrete definitions as to what an act of terrorism consists of and what defines a terrorist.

Marcus hints at the role of language in its attempts to claim both understanding and definition under the traumatic of instances; although the period after the traumatic event is when individuals and collective groups are most susceptible to manipulation and control. Early on in *The Flame Alphabet*, Marcus denotes that under the conditions of the speech virus, those afflicted are living "in a high season of error" (*Flame* 15). The source of the virus was wildly speculated: "In Wisconsin the trouble was pinned to dogs. Animals took the blame up and down the coast. From Banff, from almost everywhere, came the question of pollutants, which wasn't so wrong. Something in the air, something in the ground, a menacing particle in the water. *Something from the child's mouth*, it took them too long to realize" (16). Worst of all, amidst the confusion, "no one important was really looking into history yet, uncovering precedent, so much of it that the

foreshadowing was embarrassing" (16). As a result, a sense of complacency set in so that Sam and Claire acknowledged that "Our symptoms at first were too vague to name, too easily linked to how we always felt: a bit of sludge in our systems so that we dragged around the house and slept long and looked away from our food. Push our plates to the side. Caught ourselves staring into space, drool flooding from our mouths (16-17). The complacency that Sam discusses here relates a lack of concern for multiple things: the body, language, and the event that is bringing them all together—all of which reflect the terrorist scenarios discussed in Chabon's section. If Baudrillard is correct in stating that terrorism is a virus, Marcus alludes here that the virus is by its terrorism-like.

Marcus also alludes in the novel to the notion that the human lack of understanding within the space of important events can often be caused at times by both a lack of empathy towards others and the narcissistic needs of the individual. Sam discusses how future generations would look back at the event of the speech virus and how it will be remembered:

> Later philosophers of the crisis, like Sernier, would mock the poetics of all this. He'd decry the absence of facts, the vague and personalized anecdotes that inevitably pollute the possibility for real understanding. Personal stories, Sernier would say, are the most powerful impediment to any true understanding of this crisis. As soon as we litter our insights with pronouns, they spoil. Ideas

> and people do not mix. [...] but I'll point out that bugs crawl from his mouth now, and there's no one left to read what he wrote. (39)

Sam's narrative analysis of the virus and how it came to be often clashes with the concepts that Murphy, who is also Lebov,[19] provides in the novel. Murphy is, for all intents and purposes, could be seen as a terrorist; or, at the very least, he is an extremist. Murphy has two identities and uses divisive and incendiary language to confront any audience that will listen. In Sam's first encounter with Murphy, he states that "Murphy open his coat and flashed some corroded metal, a vital signs kit not unlike my own, strapped to his chest like a bomb" (59). Lebov's verbal attacks *are* actual attacks, as he clearly understands the power of his words and how they add to the power of the virus, as he tells Sam that:

> I'm fascinated by people who pout when they can't find sense and logic, and if it's not fair when something in nature does it reveal an obvious pattern. It's a fucking epidemic, and the logic is impenetrable. That's how it succeeds, by being inconsistent and unknowable. Fairness is for toddlers in a goddamn sandbox. No one wants to admit that our machine of understanding is inferior. (61)

Lebov recognizes in this statement Baudrillard's claim concerning the analogy of terrorism as virus: there is no pattern to modern terrorism and it is not

[19] I will refer to the character of Murphy as LeBov from here forward.

inconsistent and often unidentifiable. In order to squelch the virus of language and terrorism, new names, titles, and identities must be created. LeBov relates to Sam that to save themselves then "nothing [can be] called by its accurate title. We've trafficked in an inexact language that must be translated a new. Not even translated. Destroyed. Rebuilt. The call for a new code, new lettering, a way to pass on messages that would bypass the toxic alphabet, the chemically final speech we now used (64). Sam takes this to heart in the early part of the novel, as he attempts to find some form of antidote as well as a cure in Forsythe. Whereas the mind/body has been the creator of language, names, and identities for centuries, Marcus warns the reader in *The Flame Alphabet* of a future that will force humans to imagine how difficult this recreation of language would be.

### *Listening for Home*

In each of the one-off post-apocalyptic texts, language contributes to the deterioration and destruction of the body, as does the environment of each novel—as the concept of safety within certain spatial structures as providing protection has been inverted: no longer is an architectural structure protective. This inversion is reflective in some ways of the horrors of the 9/11 attacks, as the trust in the structural protectiveness of buildings suddenly was lost. This inversion of reality and of the safety of spatial structures also contributes to an environment of silence, which for the afflicted in *The Flame Alphabet* is a place of temporary

peace and possible long-term entrapment. However, it is within their "hut" that Sam and Claire find the most shelter—in a space created specifically for sound to act as a shield against the toxic language virus.

For Sam and Claire, the family home became a place horror and pain due to every encounter they have with their daughter—their safe place in the early stages of the virus is in their "utility hut," a place for them to worship and practice their faith as Reconstruction Jews. Marcus creates within the worship huts a place of escape for practicing Jews to escape the trapping of all things corporeal. In the hut, Sam explains that there are no amenities:

> But our sunken network existed solely as a radio system, feeding Rabbi Burke's services to his disbursed, silent community. Tunnels throughout the Northeast, stretching as far as Denver, surfacing in hundreds of discrete sites. Mostly holes covered by huts like ours, where two members of the faith – the smallest possible *chavurah*, highly motivated to worship without the *pollutions of comprehension* of a community – could privately gather to receive a broadcast. (41)

The huts are also referred to as "Jew holes" and could be located deep in the woods or hidden in plain sight (42). The huts were a place that only Claire and Sam would attend together, and not only could the experience of listening to the Jewish broadcast not be discussed in the hut, but there was no repeating of the

sermon or lecture. The acoustic spatiality of the hut is a place conducive only to listening, and the only technology inside the hut was from a hole in the ground:

> The hut covered a hole and the hole was stuffed with wire. From our own hole came bright orange ropes of cabling, the whole mess of it reeking of sewage, of something dead beneath the earth. This wiring was grappled to the listener, and the listener, called a Moses Mouth by Bauman, even while we were instructed to never refer to it, was draped over the radio module. […] Transmissions flowed into the hood on Thursdays, usually at noon. (43)

The huts worked as both a place of safety, but it also functions as a space that could serve as a place for both events (the transmission of the sermon without the *pollution of comprehension*) and non-events (intended silence). In the hut, the body is not transformed due to language or messages from the outside world. Sam argues that "spreading messages dilutes them. Even understanding them is a compromise. The language kills itself, expires inside its host. Language acts as an acid over its message. If you know longer care about an idea or feeling, then put it into language. That will certainly be the last of it, a fitting end. Language is another name for coffin (41). It is within the acoustic spatiality of the hut where sound is allowed to take on a non-violent physical energy, not just the physical coverage of the structure of the hut. tSam and Claire can coexist in their own "emergent community" that allows for the "stitching together [of] bodies that do

not necessarily search for each other, and forcing them into proximity" (LaBelle 1). The hut serves as both a physical and sound space that protects them corporeally, but it also acted as a place of conception in the past, as Sam remembers that "it was here, one guesses, that our toxic Esther was conceived. Certainly it was here" (49). For Sam and Claire, the hut is not a holy place structurally, but within the walls of the structure a lack of sound allows for the acoustic stirrings to create a corporeal space of safety—something that no longer exists outside the hut. The narrative and literary events that conclude the novel, with Sam's return to the Jew hole, would lack in eventness without the establishment of an initial sound space in the story.

## FALLING TO LIVE

Marcus's closest symbolic connection in *The Flame Alphabet* to the tragedies of September 11 that Derrida (along with Boradorri) revolve around the act of falling: a trope that permeates all of 9/11 culture and fiction that specifically embraces the tragedy in what is now known as the "9/11 novel." Aimee Pozorski reflects on the caustic relation between images of essentially anyone or anything falling and the almost instant cultural connections to 9/11. She references the controversial advertisement for the show *Mad Men* in which an animated depiction of a body falling from a building caused an internet uprising; however, final pages of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

form a "flip book" in which when the pages are flipped, the famous photo of the "falling man" from the towers on 9/11 actually appears to go up towards the rooftop of the twin tower instead of down. Foer's use of "falling" after 9/11 is seen as brilliant, as opposed to the Mad Men advertisement (11).

In *The Flame Alphabet*, there are two scenes that portray the body in the act of falling that are important. The first revolves around Sam and the climactic end of the second section of the novel, when he decided to jump down into the "Jew Hole" to hopefully escape the Forsythe research area. Sam's leap into the unknown resonates with Pozorski's assessment of the ties of "falling" and 9/11:

> Above me somewhere, in a bed, plugged into support machines, *or perhaps plugged in no longer*, was Claire.
>
> For the second time now, instead of staying to help my wife, I went the other way.
>
> I looked at no one, then stepped into nothing.
>
> I plunged down the Jewish hole of Forsythe in free fall, the underground wind rushing over me so sweetly it seemed that, perhaps, as I fell, I might have been in bed, too, and if I only rolled over, just rolled over a bit farther into the darkness, breaching her side of the bed, I could maybe hold my Claire again for a little while, hold her so tight that perhaps it would not hurt so much when together we landed in the world below" (252).

Sam's falling is only reflected again later in the novel, when he witnesses something falling from the sky, an image eerily similar to the "falling man" of 9/11:

> I heard nobody crawling, walking, running. I heard no one hiding behind a tree, breathing. When I tilted my head, all I could see, very high above me, was a bird. At least I think that's what it was.
>
> It was hairless, its face so plain. What troubled me was that I could see the details of its wings too clearly, better than usual, and then I realized it was because the wings weren't flapping, weren't even moving. The bird, far aloft, was perfectly still, falling through the air.
>
> Perhaps it had received a fright, high up in the air. Perhaps it saw something, suffered a shock, lost its powers, and started to fall.
>
> I shut my eyes, waiting for the sound of impact. (287)

Marcus's inclusion of the final images reflect in a distanced and distorted way, the complex relationship of trauma and its reaction to the catastrophic event. Sam's "falling" scene represents what Derrida designates as the unknowable; sadly, the bird reflects the opposite- the knowable: reflected again in Derrida's words: "we know it's coming [the event], and that's what's scary." The novel ends with a traumatized Sam, still alone, waiting silently for his wife or daughter to return

some three years after the plague, as Sam lives in denial and imagines life when his family returns.

> When my family is together again I will not need to speak, to read, to write. What is there, anyway, to say? The three of us require no speech. We are fine in our silence. This is the world we prefer.
>
> It will be enough to walk out the three of us, along the high, scary ledge that lords over the creek and cuts past the shadow of the Monastery into the wide-open field. We will not need to speak. Under our feet will be the vast, shifting salt deposits, just a residue of everything that's ever been said. That's all that's left. We will walk through it into the clearing. We can have lunch on the rocks, then stretch out to rest in the sun.
>
> I will wait for them here in my hut, and when Claire and Esther return, this is what we'll do, as a family" (289).

Thus, in the end, the family unit or "body" is still, in Sam's mind, intact. Marcus's representations of the body and the indeterminacy of language create both a space of silence and a space for corporeal metamorphosis.

## CHAPTER 6

## "NO HELL BELOW US": CALL AND RESPONSE TRAUMA IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

Kenneth Lincoln states that Cormac McCarthy's novels are individual canticles that examine America in a non-politically correct fashion that are "honest bedrock to western history and engrained in American myth" (3). Much like with Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* from a thematic perspective, McCarthy's efforts in creating his post-apocalyptic one-off, *The Road* (2006), in some ways seems a natural progression from his previous works; however, at the same time, the novel is a shocking departure. Lincoln states that in his novels "McCarthy alerts us to the disasters of history, the monstrosities of moral deviance, the absurdities of human fate, the sublime ranges of will and courage, the depths of suffering, pain, and psychopathology" (3). From that perspective, McCarthy's apocalyptic narrative stays on task, as the novel follows the southern trek south of an unnamed man and his son into a now-desolate America. However, if simply comparing McCarthy's first novel, the pseudo-Faulknerian *The Orchid Keeper* (1965) with *The Road*, the novel is undoubtedly a significant generic departure; however, the writer's constant questioning of the human condition across the backdrop of the American landscape is still apparent in McCarthy's seemingly

slow and methodical generic shifting which takes him to the genre of speculative fiction.

Sarah L. Spurgeon, in discussing McCarthy's career, believes that his novels are in part significant due to his "genre-crossing characteristics" and that "debates about placing McCarthy's fiction into genres have engaged critics since the beginning of his career" (2). She believes that the writer "has had at least three literary lives" and that his "genre-jumping" has presented problems for scholars "seeking to organize and impose structure on McCarthy's large body of work" (3), starting with the "southern gothic of his early works, to the Post-Western Apocalypse phase of his most recent novels" (2). She divides his work into the following three "acts": "The Southern/Appalachian Novels" (*The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark, Child of God,* and *Suttree*); the "Southeastern Gothic/The Border Trilogy" (*Blood Meridian, All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing,* and *Cities of the Plain*), and the "Moving into New Country" (*No Country for Old Men, The Road*) periods. Although his last two works do present McCarthy moving into a phase away from the previous "western" periods, *The Road*'s apocalyptic setting and survivalist narrative makes the one-off novel still quite a departure from McCarthy's penultimate *No Country for Old Men,* with its modern setting along the Texas-Mexico border and its examination of violent drug war action that still exists there.

Before his exploratory move into speculative fiction, McCarthy's career began with an examination of unrepentant violence in America in *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), a Southern realist novel set in pre-World War II Tennessee that follows the complex relationships of three men: John Wesley Rattner, a boy whose father was unknowingly robbed and murdered by Marion Slyder, a local bootlegger and criminal, and Arthur Ownby, the title character who finds the abandoned corpse of Rattner's father and builds a shrine for the corpse instead of informing the police. McCarthy's second work, *Outer Dark* (1968), echoes the themes and narrative complexities of William Faulkner as the work is set somewhere in the Appalachian mountains and presents the incestuous relations of Culla and Rinthy Holme, as they bring a child into their isolated world that Culla decides to abandon in the woods after its birth. McCarthy creates a dark and desolate southern spatiality in *Outer Dark* that comes closest to foreshadowing the despair of the man and the boy in *The Road*.

Although the protagonists in *The Road* remind themselves that they are the "good guys" in their dystopian America, the protagonist of McCarthy's 1973 novel, *Child of God*, features one the writer's most heinous characters in Lester Ballard, who is both "a murderer and necrophile, expelled from the human family and eventually living in underground caves, which he peoples with his trophies: giant stuffed animals won in carnival shooting galleries and the decomposing corpses of his several shot victims, male and female" (Luce). Set again in rural

Tennessee, McCarthy again places his story within “a meticulously painted landscape” that is “interspersed with small rural towns, settlements, and homes [...] overlaid with a series of dark, gothic imagery” (Jarrett 40). Lester's isolation from society after losing his family farm sets off his rage against anyone or anything that crosses him. *Child of God* is the first to examine “the heightening alienation of McCarthy's protagonists--an alienation accompanied by violence aimed outward” (Jarrett 8). After *Child of God*, McCarthy would not publish another novel for six years, but his fourth novel, *Suttree*, reveals the chosen loneliness of Cornelius Suttree, an educated fisherman who chooses to wander the streets of Knoxville rather than deal with his rich family. Suttree's relationship with friend, Gene Harrogate, present an awkward traveling duo who deal with numerous distractions from alcoholics, blind men, cemetery workers, and prostitutes.

With *Child of God* being the last of his Southern/Appalachian works, McCarthy waits six more years to complete his Southern gothic masterpiece, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), which critics argue changed the genre of the Western novel. In the novel, the fourteen-year old “the kid,” who was born in 1833, drifts through the Southwest and joins a band of Indian hunters (one of which is a judge named Holden) who gather scalps at $100 apiece for a governor in Mexico. The gangs murdering Indians later expands to Mexicans as well; any of these dark-skinned who crosses the path of this group

were destroyed. Based on actual events that occurred along the Mexico-Texas border in the mid-1800s, McCarthy's reworking of the modern Western genre marks a turning point for the writer as he melds and reworks history within his fiction. McCarthy follows *Blood Meridian* starting in the 1990s with his "Border Trilogy" works, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *The Cities of the Plain* (1998). In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole's story is part bildungsroman and, much like *Blood Meridian*, an often violent journey. The novel is set in post-World War II Texas, as John Grady witnesses the changing of the Texas ranching culture and decides to leave the family ranch and venture to Mexico with his friend, Rawlins. Grady's innocence disappears on this journey when he meets Alejandra, beautiful girl who can never marry an American. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy's young protagonist, Billy, captures and attempts to return a pregnant female wolf back to Mexico, often putting his own life on the line to save the animal. The novel addresses several crossings of Billy and his brother, Boyd, into Mexico to retrieve stolen horses and for Billy to find his brother and return his body to the farm. Closing out the last of McCarthy's westerns, *Cities of the Plain*, brings together the two previous protagonists from the trilogy, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, as they both work for a cattle ranch in New Mexico. As Grady finds love with Magdalena, a prostitute, he ends up in a knife fight with the brothel manager, Eduardo, after he has Magdalena's throat cut due to jealousy.

The ongoing personal battles of his characters and the events of often-grotesque violence in McCarthy's western works only multiply after the Border Trilogy as the writer pivots to the genres of crime/drug cartel thrillers and apocalyptic with the publications of *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* in 2005 and 2006, respectively. As Spurgeon stated earlier, McCarthy's move away from western sagas and into is in some ways a move into a "new country," which could be understood as reflective of the continued violent historical events encountered in the early part of the new millennium. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez addresses how this historical connection could have influenced both of these novels:

> The beginning of the twenty-first century brought about collective anxieties that pointed again to the old fears about a nuclear disaster, a central motif that clearly connects the two novels. In this sense, I understand *No Country for Old Men* as the novel in which McCarthy directly points to widespread human violence as the main reason for the present sociopolitical situation and *The Road* as the book that describes the effects of what might eventually happen if things remain unchanged (45).

*No Country for Old Men* depicts the story of Llewelyn Moss's discovery of dead bodies and a failed drug deal during an antelope hunt in Southwest Texas in 1980.

Moss discovers a truck full of heroin and a bag containing $2.4 million in cash, decides to take the cash. Moss quickly becomes the hunted as he is pursued by hitmen, mainly by Anton Chigurh, who uses a silenced shotgun and captive bolt pistol to murder his many victims. Forrest G. Robinson surmises the transitions between McCarthy's works over the decades, asserting that his works:

> The early writings (*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *The Gardener's Son* [screenplay], and *Suttree*) focus primarily on settings in which ordered social formations are either lacking or in short supply; *Blood Meridian* gives attention to the license accorded forceful, putatively authoritative constructions of reality in marginal situations; the novels of the border trilogy pit romantic constructions of reality (myths) against harsh and even hostile actualities; *No Country for Old Men* hints at the dangers that lie in wait for those whose constructions of reality blind them to the forces of chance and death; and *The Road* dramatizes the attempt to reconstruct a viable reality in a world reduced to violent disorder (90-1).

McCarthy's using America as his own study of darkness and isolation makes the generic shifts he has taken over the years from Southern gothic, to contemporary drug crime novels, to the apocalyptic and dystopian genres with *The Road*, less of

a surprise for readers. However, it is within the language, structure, narrative, and spatiality that McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel creates a realistic global crisis steered by the love and conversations of a boy and his son.

In McCarthy's post-9/11 one-off novel, *The Road* is set in the burned ruins of what appears to be the southeastern United States, approximately a decade after an ambiguously-depicted man-made disaster wipes out most of the country and almost every form of life. Only a handful of miserable, starving humans remain, most of which are depicted as the living dead. The trees and the ground are charred and blanketed with ash, and the burning of the forests and has left an ash-like cloud over the entire country; the cold landscapes and darkened days are succinctly depicted by the narrator: "There was nothing" (9) except that "the mummied dead were everywhere" (14). The catastrophic event that creates the dystopian America could possibly have been a nuclear attack, as it is described only as "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions," an event that literally stops time as the narrator remembers that "the clocks stopped at 1:17," apparently forever (52). However, some ten years later, in an attempt to survive among the ruins, the father and son choose to travel south, and at times east, in an attempt to get to the coast and a warmer climate. The father, who suffers from respiratory problems from breathing in the ash for the last ten years, spends most of his time scavenging for food, clothes, and a place for he and his son to rest,

while during the whole time pushing a shopping cart that contains all of the material possessions that they have left or have taken "from the road."

Psychologically, the father must deal with protecting his son both physically and emotionally—attempting to instill and maintain some kind of hope within the boy, while having no idea what the next minute or day may hold for them. In hopes of keeping his spirits up, the father tells his son "old stories of courage and justice as he [the father] remembered them" (41), and has instilled in the boy that "we're still the good guys […] and we always will be" (77), telling the child that he has to internally "carry the fire," the fire of goodness and mankind (278). Since the incident that charred and created the American wasteland occurred just before the boy was born, the nothingness is all the child knows. The boy's mother, unable to cope with the possibilities that the few remaining cannibalistic survivors are "going to rape us and kill us and eat us," took her own life when the boy was just a toddler, forcing the man go it alone "down this road" as a parent and as a the ultimate guardian (58). As they move across the burned countryside, McCarthy creates in the sparse dialogue between the man and the boy the most valuable possession that they have.

### *Naming "Time" and Traumatic Speechlessness*

Dawn A. Saliba's analysis focuses on the gradual disintegration of language in *The Road*, stating that McCarthy's unconventional use of punctuation adds another layer to the narrative structure and the events that are presented. She states that:

> The lack of names, apostrophes and quotation marks in the novel [...] provokes an eerie sense of displacement within the narrative. The main protagonists are known only as 'the man' and 'the boy.' This absence of any distinguishing signifier causes an almost-every-man effect, causing readers to more readily identify with the unnamed hero and his angst brought on by the savage ruin of his natural world" (145).

The significance of McCarthy's lack of naming is that it reflects not just a loss of personal identity, but also that there is no longer a need for an identity in the wasteland—neither personal nor national—because history has essentially ended. The insignificance of history is made clear when the narrator reveals that "sometimes the child would ask him [the man] questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. [...] No list of things to be do. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later." (54)

One of the few examples in *The Road* in which the man or narrator addresses history and naming/identification are presented in the scene when the cataclysmic "event" occurs. Saliba argues that the event, though not specifically named, possesses characteristics of a nuclear attack (143).

> The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? She said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the light switch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they could go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? She said. What is happening?
>
> I dont know.
>
> Why are you taking a bath?
>
> I'm not. (52)

This memory is the only one that recounts the cataclysmic event in the novel and in doing so the catastrophe becomes an event simply by the time reference; however, one of the most important parts of this scene is the time: "1:17," which

could be an allusion to a verse from the Bible (ex: John 1:17). But more importantly, the time "1:17" itself is the only possible attempt at naming the incident. Claire Curtis argues that within this important scene

> There is something supernatural about the overwhelming death. Just as there is something maddening in the man's refusal to respond to the light or share with his wife what must have been the utter terror of seeing the end. The 'long shear of light' implies a nuclear blast and the details that emerge, the father's cough, the people immolated, Pompeii-like, the death of the birds are all clues to a potential nuclear blast. But this must have been more than one such blast. (35)

The man's inability (or choice) to not attempt a response to his wife's questions is significant at the time of the event and reflects two almost traumatic reactions: the inability to name what was happening due to the sizable "eventness" or overall impact of the event, but also the ability to remember the time in which the final event occurred. The man's latent memory of "1:17" as the day or time when history stopped is in many ways comparative to the almost immediate naming of the events of 9/11: a grasping for language, any words, that might help "make sense" of the catastrophic event. McCarthy's naming of the time of the event places the reader in a place of historical recognition, even though the dystopian

America that McCarthy has created is a "non-place." Ildney Cavalcanti, states that in

> The role of the reader [...] the act of reading is motivated by the reader's subjective desire to be elsewhere. Dystopian texts effect a radically different response when compared to literary eutopias. While the latter trigger a compensatory response to the extent that it offers a momentary bracket from the social evils, the dystopian novum offers no such consolation. (64)

McCarthy's naming of "1:17" in its numerical naming like "9/11" takes away the offer of consolation; however, even with the naming of the traumatic, historical or cultural "event," it is still difficult to embrace the impact of the event, much less trying to understand the impact of what is attempting to be defined. Much like Marcus's protagonist's trials in *The Flame Alphabet*, in attempting to develop a language that would wipe out the spread of the language plague, victims of tragic events attempt to grasp on to words/sentences/phrases that have little or no immediate meaning that could perpetuate or instill order in the chaos. Derrida states that after 9/11 he stated that:

> I believe always in the necessity of being attentive first of all to this phenomenon of language, naming, and dating, to this repetition compulsion (at once rhetorical, magical, and poetic). To

> what this compulsion signifies, translates, or betrays. Not in order to isolate ourselves in language, as people in too much of a rush would like us to believe, but on the contrary, in order to try to understand what is going on precisely *beyond* language and what is pushing us to repeat endlessly and without knowing what we are talking about, precisely there where language and the concept come up against their limits: "September 11, September 11, le *11 septembre*, 9/11" (87-8).

Much like with initial impact in the weeks after September 11, everything and everyone has, in a sense, gone beyond language in *The Road*, As the man and the boy travel, the man's internal voice tries to cope: "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone mad and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?" (*Road* 32). But as the story moves forward, the man's internal dialogue fades away almost in unison with his physical condition. Dori Laub argues that this is the result of trauma, stating that "what occurs in massive trauma is the loss of the internal 'other'" (209). Laub further explains that

> People are so affected by the violence that has broken into their lives that they can no longer maintain the dialogue with themselves that is ongoing in normal life. What they felt, what they saw, what

> they experienced, what they remembered—it suddenly becomes unavailable to them. It's all a haze, like walking in a dream. There's both an inability and a total refusal to keep one's gaze centered on the eye of the trauma. (209)

The man's inability to focus on anything other than the eroded landscape and the looters who want to kill him is also fed by his inability to regain either past memories or his need to repress memories; in other words his inability to remove himself from his traumatized haze is that there is nothing visual around him to commemorate or discuss. As the man walks through an abandoned house in an early scene in the novel, he sees that "there was an antique pump organ in the corner. A television set. Cheap stuffed furniture [...]"; however, his ability to connect these things with his previous life or their roles in American culture have failed until he finds a soft drink machine in an abandoned supermarket (23). McCarthy reveals in this scene that the economic state of the country is no longer of importance as "coins [are] everywhere in the ash," and yet the man ignores them (23). But what forces the man briefly out of his traumatized state is something from his past that he can connect to: a Coca Cola. When the man opens the drink and shares it with his son, he steps out of his traumatized and internally speech-deprived state:

*What is it, Papa?*

*It’s a treat. For you.*

*What is it?*

*Here. Sit down.*

*He slipped the boys knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.*

*The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.*

*Go ahead.*

*He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good he said.*

*Yes. It is.*

*You have some, Papa.*

*I want you to drink it.*

*You have some.*

*He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here.* (23)

The soft drink is too much reality—too much of a past reality—for the man to want to revisit. The event that has destroyed history has also wiped out any need for any examples of any iconic representations of the previous culture.

In his post-apocalyptic fiction, McCarthy's examination of language parallels that of Marcus in that they each deal with the powers of language (for good and for bad) and the healing (McCarthy) and traumatizing (Marcus) capabilities of silence. What each author creates in their one-off works reflects James Berger's explanation of the relationship of speculative fiction with the horrors of language: "Apocalypse and trauma are congruent ideas, for both refer to shatterings of existing structures of identity and language [...] Post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them" (19).

***Language Creation as Mantra***

McCarthy's creation of language in *The Road* is not as visible or as intensely undertaken as it is in *The Flame Alphabet*; however, the purpose is still the same: to heal. Saliba examines McCarthy's language play stating that in *The Road* he "creates new words in his descriptive passages; neologisms and kennings are dotted throughout, formed out of the need to illustrate the vast and sullen deafening chaos that subsumes the duo" (147). Saliba presents examples that support the man's dire need to speak and make sense of his surroundings: "Words

like “illucid,” “parsible,” and “salitter” rise out of the ash; all sorts of kennings from “feverland” to “lampback” to “deathships” abound. This embodies the new lyricism that emerges from a fallen and forlorn world” (147). The new lyricism that McCarthy creates is also reflected in the repetitiveness of some of the words that are passed back and forth between the man and the boy. Saliba further states that “In contrast to the minimalist speech where words like ‘okay’ falter in their role as conveyors of complex meanings and emotions” (147). However, as reflected in the writings of other works born out the 9/11 era, the repetition of the words “okay” in the novel work almost like a mantra for the man and the boy—a constant reminder for each that no matter how horrible their situation is, hope is still alive. Derrida believes that this repetition, after a traumatic event like 9/11, is important:

> This is the first, indisputable effect of what occurred (whether it was calculated, well calculated, or not) precisely on September 11, not far from here; we repeat it insofar as we do not really know what is being named in this way, as if to exorcise two times at one go; on the one hand, to conjure away, as if by magic, the ‘thing’ itself, the fear or the terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing a traumatism, and this is true for the repetition of the televised images we will speak of later), and, on the other hand, to deny, as close as possible to this

> act of language and this enunciation, our powerlessness to name in an appropriate fashion, to characterize, to think the thing in question, to get beyond the mere deictic of the date: something terrible took place on September 11, and in the end we don't know what. (87)

According to Baccolini and Moylan, "language is a key weapon of the reigning dystopian power structure" (5-6). Although the conversations in *The Road* are short in number and often very brief, the importance of language for the man communicating with his son is of paramount importance because words, in a very real sense, are really all they have left. In one pivotal scene, after the father and son come upon one of the few remaining scavengers, one of which grabs the boy and is quickly shot in the head by the father, the man reiterates to the boy the importance of the two of them continuing to "use language" and communicate even after their most violent encounter:

> *I should have been more careful, he [the man] said.*
>
> *The boy didnt answer.*
>
> *You have to talk to me.*
>
> *Okay.*
>
> *You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed*

*to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?*

*Yes.*

*He [the boy] sat there cowled in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.*

*Yes. We're still the good guys.*

*And we always will be.*

*Yes. And we always will be.*

*Okay.* (76-7)

The man is also dependent on language to maintain what is left of his own sanity as he speaks to himself numerous times in the story. In a sense, his own use of language/words is his only remaining source of power as his body continues to break down. Words spoken out loud and to himself creates a defensive armor for the man and the boy, much like the silence of the huts in *The Flame Alphabet* are able to shield Sam and Claire. After his son falls asleep after the attack of one of the bad guys, the man tells himself that "this is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him toward the fire" (74). McCarthy wants us, as readers, to believe that the spoken word is all these two people really possess, and much like the things in their shopping cart, it is cherished and they use it sparingly.

McCarthy's sparse use of language is most beautifully evident in the numerous descriptive "moments" in which the narrator depicts the death and horror that surrounds the man and the boy in what could be read alone as prose poetry—sections that do not depict plot or actions, just the essence of "being" in their [the man's and the boy's] time. The writer almost forcibly implies to the reader that literally, in the end, our identities and our world were formed, and destroyed, by language. The fragmented imagery of one the opening poetic "moments" exemplifies McCarthy's emphasis on the importance of language to the characters, to his story, and possibly to us all.

> He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone. (11)

Although he strategically places "moments" of prose poetry throughout the novel, this dark, opening example of McCarthy's death-filled prose poetry creates a "bookend

with the final "moment" in the novel, appearing just after the boy has been rescued. The novel closes with these words:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (287)

The blurring of the genres of prose poetry within the context of the novel in a sense "expands the creative potential for critical expression" (Baccolini 7). McCarthy's inclusion of poetic "moments" within the novel is nothing new in the realm of literature; however, Janet Maslin writes that McCarthy's novel "would be pure misery if not for its stunning, savage beauty; […] its pure poetic brimstone" (Maslin 2). McCarthy's treatment of poetry as an event is reflective of Heidegger's conception of the event—that poetry, as its most simple, is an event and a humanistic product. The creating and inclusion of poetic sections in a dystopian/post-apocalyptic work to some degree helps again to establish the authority of the writer as he creates in the prose poems the dystopian imagery along with a sense of urgency—where the "cold and the silence" establishes where America is now [at the time of the novel], to becoming a place that can

"not be made right again." In a sense, the poetic moments keep memory alive, for both the protagonist and the reader.

As first noted in my analysis of *The Flame Alphabet*, the concept of certain spatial structures as providing safety in post-apocalyptic works has been inverted; thus, it becomes less likely that an architectural structure is protective in a dystopian wasteland. Rather, in a society in which humanity, ethics, knowledge, and history are no longer valued, the architectural structure becomes only a temporary shelter due to the constant need for physical movement to maintain survival. For the man and the boy, there is a greater chance of bodily harm or death in an enclosed architectural structure than in the openness of nature. Due to the need to maintain mobility, the man and the boy in *The Road* becomes just as dependent on listening as they are on seeing the dangers that lie ahead. The acoustic spatiality changes constantly for the man and the boy in *The Road* since they do not stay long in any one place. This complex relationship between sound, space, and body becomes most revealing in the night scenes, when the man is forced to trust his hearing more than his sight. He is often blinded by the dark of night, as

> The darkness he woke to on those nights were sightless and impenetrable. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that

> cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. […] He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return" (15).

As a literary event, the sounds and space that the man has to navigate through without light creates what LaBelle refers to as "zones of intensity," in which the borders of public and private are shifted (5). In the American wasteland setting of *The Road,* there is seemingly no longer an understanding of "private" because little can be owned. In the blinding darkness of night, the man's body moves through the public zone of intensity with the "stirrings" of the possibilities of corporeal event, but at the same time, he resides in private zone of intensity as well: no one or thing can see him either. The man's dependence on sound is both paramount to their survival and yet it is ever-changing, so his body must constantly adjust to the conditions.

The uncontrollability of the corporeal relations between the man and a public/private space is central to the examination of *The* Road's literary event, in which the man reflects back on the one set of memories that he can still clearly recall: those of his wife. McCarthy's narrative structure moves with a brisk sequence of memories that integrate their last conversation before she chooses to commit suicide. The man recalls when his wife stated that "Sooner or later they

will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him [the son]. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it" (*Road* 56). She continues to verbally lash out against the man when she states that the reason that they no longer talk about death is "because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about" (56). Her claim reflects the Deleuzian evental concept concerning the corporeal and the incorporeal that is best realized in the dual conception of the possible and the impossible (Rowner 192). Within the literary event of this fragmented scene, the wife's body here is essentially presented by McCarthy as both dead and alive, which is further illustrated in the narrative sequencing that follows their conversation.

McCarthy's sequencing foreshadows the corporeal-related events that reveal the transformation of the wife's "dying living-body" (Rowner 191). After remembering of their final conversation, the man reveals that his wife had killed herself "with a flake of obsidian," a process that he had taught her. McCarthy's narrative next shifts to the next morning as the boy wakes up to find his mother is gone. The boy clearly understands what has happened to his mom, because he never asks where she is or why she left. The narrative shifts quickly back to a memory of the man as he recalls when he and the wife "sat at the window and ate in their robes by candlelight a midnight supper and watched distant cities burn" (*Road* 59). Several nights after this event, their son is born in their home: "a creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end" (59). McCarthy creates dual

corporeal memory scenes here for the man—one in which the wife cuts her own body to end her life, only to be followed by the memory of the man cutting the umbilical cord "with kitchen shears" while "her cries meant nothing to him" (59). One must question here the sequence of events and whether the man's disdain for his wife screaming in labor was something specific to that event (or the memory), or was the eventness of the memory changed knowing how her life would end. McCarthy's literary event sequence also presents a juxtaposed acoustic space here as well, as the mom's screams in their house is narratively placed next to the mom's seemingly silent suicide.

McCarthy questions the role of the event in *The Road* from the perspectives of the public and private, the inside and the outside, the protected and the unprotected. These inversions are reflective in some ways of the terrors of the 9/11 attacks, as the trust in the structural protectiveness of the family unit, architectural structures, and the need for language has suddenly been lost. However, the inversion of reality and the concern over the safety of spatial structures contributed to an environment of silence, as well, as listening (for the man and boy on *The Road*) becomes of paramount importance for their survival.

## THEORETICAL INTERLUDE: DYSTOPIAN FICTION

Dystopian fiction is almost always created under the guise of a warning, often acting as a reactive and reflective response to historical, political, and cultural events and tragedies. Tom Moylan argues that dystopian fiction can often serve as "a prophetic vehicle, the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside" (2). The significance of dystopian fiction is that it can at once be reactive, reflective, and proactive in regards to historical and cultural events—reactive to significant contemporary issues, reflective of important historical events and their aftermath, and proactive in warning us of potential future national or global difficulties.

Gregory Claeys argues in "The Origins of Dystopia" that historically there have been two major theoretical and fictional shifts in the direction in dystopian fiction—what he refers to as a "dystopian turn[s]" (110). The first dystopian turn appeared during the French Revolution, reflected in what Claeys calls a "dialectical relationship emerging between three elements: utopian thought […], the creation of fictional utopias, and a fictional anti- or dystopian response" (111). The second turn, Claeys argues, stems from the domination of eugenics and socialism in the early 1880s with the influence of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* in

1882 and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* in 1890 (112). Despite the genres popularity, the struggles of literary, cultural, and critical theorists in clearly defining what a "utopia" is and what makes something "dystopian" has been and is still an issue. Claeys states that the term "dystopian" refers to a work that portrays "feasible negative visions of social and political development, cast principally in fictional form," and that "by 'feasible' [I] imply that no extraordinary or utterly unrealistic features dominate the narrative" (Cambridge 109). Claeys's theory of feasibility, along with Sargent's taxonomy and Moylan's application of "history" into the determinations of the differing levels of dystopian angst have numerous parallels to the world of alternate history and post-apocalyptic fiction.

The most-noted and referenced taxonomy concerning fictional works along with the accompanying literary genres, Lyman Tower Sargent's widely-cited taxonomy of utopian and dystopian fiction, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited (date)," categorizes each genre according to these variations (such as critical utopia, apocalyptic dystopia, etc.), but his detailed lists have accumulated numerous additions and variations over the years. For this study, the following definitions of Sargent's will be central to my arguments, especially concerning the relationship between dystopian fiction and alternate histories, and they will also probably be the most referenced:

> *Utopia*—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in space and time.
>
> *Eutopia*—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in space and time that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.
>
> *Critical Utopia*-- a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in space and time that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre.
>
> *Dystopia* or "negative utopia" is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in space and time that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived. ("Three Faces" 9)

Sargent argues that although both dystopia and utopia are understood as polarized visions of the world, he believes that they purposefully share what he characterizes as "social dreaming," which includes both negative and positive visions and ideals of a society and how "groups of people arrange their lives and

which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" ("Three Faces" 3).

Tom Moylan places Sargent's concept of "social dreaming" in horrible worlds within a historical timeframe, further describing dystopian fiction in his ground-breaking study, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, that "Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination" (*Scraps* xi). Moylan's definition of dystopia adds what seems to be a direct relation to history itself, arguing that the "negative narrative machine" of dystopian fiction "has produced challenging cognitive maps of the historical situation by way of imaginary societies that are even worse than that lie outside their authors' and readers' doors" (xi). Moylan also further explores Sargent's idea of critical dystopia, which he argues is a "textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on a present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration" (xv). Moylan's most important statement that seems to address the question of history and its relation to utopian/dystopian ideals reveals that:

> Dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. It's very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. (*Scraps* xii)

M. Keith Booker's *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (1994) argues that while literary utopias depict a radical society and reflect an optimistic belief in the triumph of humanity and government, "dystopias present a society marked by suffering caused by human and political evils" (3). In beginning his discussion of utopias, dystopias, and social criticism, Booker argues that "in order to relate the literary history of dystopian fiction more closely to the social and political history of the modern world," that it is important to group works "according to whether their social critiques seem aimed principally at bourgeois societies or totalitarian ones" (20). Booker's initial analysis revolves around the "big three": Huxley's *Brave New World*, as an example of post-World War II bourgeois dystopia, Orwell's *1984* as social criticism of totalitarianism, and what many feel is the first modern dystopian text, Yevengy Zamyatin's *We* . Booker also argues that postmodernist dystopias in the West can be an odd "mixture of seriousness and silliness" (141). Using Woody Allen's film, *Sleeper*, as an example, Booker states that the comic

orientation of  some postmodern dystopian works are presented through a veil "of an almost nihilistic skepticism that dystopian cautionary tales can prevent an undesirable future from unfolding" (141).

By questioning the dystopian characteristics of different cultures, Erika Gottlieb's *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (2001) takes on the Western dystopian genre and juxtaposes it against Eastern and Central European versions, introducing a selection of works from Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Gottlieb demonstrates that authors who write about their dystopian reality while under the control of a totalitarian dictatorship find the worst of all possible worlds—not in a hypothetical future, but in the historical reality of the writer's present or recent past. Gottlieb stresses that the Eastern writer assumes the role of witness in these controlled countries, protesting against a nightmare world that is but should not be, while the Western dystopian writer focuses much more on the "the protagonist's pursuit of history [and the] vital importance of the records of the past" (12), and the "dystopian as a no-man's land between satire and tragedy" (13).

One of the most engaging approaches to genre and event, Philip E. Wegner's *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (2009) makes the claim that the period between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 fostered "a unique consciousness and represented a moment of immense historical

possibilities now at risk of being forgotten in the midst of the war on terror" (9). In this text, Wegner argues that his work is a cultural analysis "of the event simply known as 9/11," and that by examining some of the important cultural artifacts (novels, film, etc.) of the decade before 9/11, he might uncover some of the "intimate connections between that event and the cultural, political, and economic developments in the years that preceded it" (1). Wegner shows how rising cultural phenomena—the debates on globalization, notions of the end of history, the explosive growth of the Internet—were all major factors in making the period of the "long '90s" an important historical period . Wegner's approach *Life Between Two Deaths* is highly influential to the event-theory approach that I take in this study as he places the event-philosophy at the center of his justification for examining the "long 90s" as a period of transformation. He reveals that for his analysis, he "draw[s] on the description of an Event offered by Badiou [to] argue that no such Event in fact occurred on September 11, 2001. Rather than an encounter with the incalculable Real, September 11 was a repetition of an earlier such Event" (8-9). Wegner is not a 9/11 denier, of course, but rather argues in *Life Between Two Deaths* that the attacks on 9/11 complete the periodization of the long-90s when bookended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Wegner's seminal work not only justifies the significance of the relationship between periodization and events, but it places in perspective the

modern day importance of the evaluation of the event and corporeality in cultural studies.

M. Keith Booker returns again and argues in his introduction to the 2013 anthology, *Dystopia: Critical Insights*, that "the increasing popularity of dystopian fiction and film in the early twenty-first century raises the possibility that dystopian visions are increasingly becoming mere spectacles of misery" (11). Booker sees the constant familiarity with dystopian representations as an action that could weaken the genre of its "critical power." He believes that "the images presented in these works may make it harder for the fictions to produce the kind of cognitive estrangement that is crucial to their impact as works of social and political critique" (11). Booker's comments here concerning the over-saturation of dystopian representations are reflective of the one-off creations examined here due to the fact that the writers of these works were all accomplished and highly-regarded writers before their move into speculative fiction. However, I argue that the one-off's contribute more to the generic importance of dystopian fiction created after the tragedy of 9/11 rather than weaken the overall critical power.

The one-off novels analyzed here in the following sections, Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, attempt in many ways to step out of the dystopian familiar, but also stay grounded within the questioning of our global direction in the "age of terror" of post-9/11 culture.

Lee's dystopian creation is the story of a gutted America that, much like the language-depleted worlds with no remaining history that were created by McCarthy and Marcus. The novel centers on B-Mor, what's left of Baltimore, which has become class and spatially divided, with the story of Fan and her descent into the lowlands to find her missing boyfriend making her a hero and a mythological figure among the middle class. The terror in the novel, and for Fan, stems from her inability to find truth in anything or anyone. Ishiguro's dystopian approach to narrative focuses on private school in England that is actually a home for clones. The seemingly peaceful boarding school of Hailsham, as described in the first person narrative of one of the clones, Kathy, is also a "donor" who is taught and cared for by the guardians, who emphasize the need for the clones to create works of art and most importantly stay healthy. Ishiguro slowly reveals the events concerning Kathy and a small group of friends who are told what their roles in society are, as they exist within a prison-like social structure that they cannot escape. The political and social displacement examined in these two one-off novels reveal two lost and complacent societies that cannot evaluate the events of the world, and thus, they cannot know the truth.

## CHAPTER 7

## THE POWER OF SILENCE IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*

Of the texts examined in this project, the writer who has taken the more distinct generic turns over the course of his career has to be Kazuo Ishiguro, which includes his 2005 novel, *Never Let Me Go*. According to Barry Lewis, Ishiguro's work revolves around characters that are in some way out on the margins of society; thus, some of the common themes in his work revolve around displacement and memory – approaches that indirectly reflect ways in which the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries have both been high time of extreme loss, most in part due to two world wars and other violent conflicts (Lewis 5). Ishiguro's "one-off" novel, *Never Let Me Go*, in some ways projects the after-effects of an unnamed major historical events, but he does so with very little mention of actual historical events. He is careful to create a fictional dystopian England in the speculative fiction novel that is both a reflection of global post-war angst and displacement within, as well as a warning to, the changing definitions of what it means (or, more importantly, what it doesn't mean) to be human.

To some critics, Ishiguro's first novel is a work of historical realism. Set in Nagasaki a short time after World War II, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), presents a city in which "the atomic bomb has wreaked havoc upon the lives of its

citizens" (Lewis 20). The novel revolves around the friendship of Etsuko, a pregnant woman adjusting to their altered post-war life, and Sachiko, whose young daughter has become psychologically distraught from bombing and the war. Lewis argues that *A Pale View of Hills* is a novel concerned with displacement: the "geographical displacement of Etusko from Japan to England; the cognitive displacement induced by Etsuko's memories; and the cognitive displacement precipitated by the suicide of Keiko [Etsuko's daughter]" (27). The displacement of Etsuko, due mostly to the post-war issues that her family has to deal with and recover from, provide an early example of the writer's questioning of the historical event and its aftermath. Even though the novel begins after the bombing of Nagasaki, the novel still possesses a "historical resonance, a free ride" on the sweeping power of history (Shafer and Wong 23). Much like *A Pale View of Hills*, (1986) Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, is set in post-war Japan during the years of the American Occupation. The work is narrated by the protagonist Ono, a career painter, who is looking back on his career as a pro-government artist. Ono's involvement with the imperialist movement as was an advisor for the Committee of Unpatriotic Acts. However, he is reviled after the war and his past, which jeopardizes his relations with his two adult daughters, Noriko and Setsuko. Ishiguro creates what seems to be a realistic historical account much like in his first novel; however, the change to a first

person narrative makes *An Artist of the Floating World* read more like a speculative memoir, an approach he later adapts in *Never Let Me Go*.

*The Remains of the Day* (1989) is the novel that put Ishiguro on the literary map, thanks in part to the novel winning the Man Booker Prize in 1989, followed by the success of the film adaptation in 1993. The novel is the first example of several significant generic moves from Ishiguro, as *The Remains of the Day* is presented in the form of a narrative diary and presents the story of Stevens, a British butler who recalls his friendship with a fellow worker, Miss Kenton. Ishiguro is a Japanese-born British writer, so the settings of post-war Japan his first two novels followed with a novel set in England, is not a stretch for the writer on a personal level; however, the shift from a narrative of post-war Japanese artist to the diary of a post-war British butler signifies that Ishiguro was/is not afraid to take generic and narrative chances. Ishiguro's creation of the butler, Stevens, denotes a choice to "escape from the stereotyping of his first two works as Japanese" (Lewis 74). However, Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995) exemplifies an even extreme generic shift away from *The Remains of the Day*, by creating what many critics refer to as an experimental or "dream work." The writer takes a significant postmodern turn into a work that is both narratively displaced and presents what Lewis calls "dream-like distortions" in regards to event and spatiality (105). The fragmented story follows the life of a world-renowned concert pianist, Ryder, who is seemingly a victim of amnesia, as he is

in an unknown European city preparing for a concert, but he has forgotten that he has a partner and a son that are there in the same city. As Ishiguro's protagonist loses more of his memory, Ryder's senses (especially his hearing) become extraordinary, which has forced critics to question if *The Unconsoled* is indeed a dream novel or a work of fantasy; however, many critics see the novel as a nightmarish postmodern work.

Ishiguro's next generic shift comes in *When We Were Orphans* (2000), where the writer seemingly departs from the fragmentation of *The Unconsoled* and moves into the genre of detective fiction. The novel follows Christopher Banks, whose parents disappear in Shanghai in the early 1900s, likely due to his father's occupation as an opium salesman. Banks is sent to live with his aunt in England (again, there is the continental exchange) and later becomes a respected detective. In 1937, Banks returns to China to try and solve the mysterious disappearance of his parents, but his investigation becomes complicated as he arrives during the chaos of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Ishiguro's choice of creating a work of detective fiction in some ways smooths the transition into the dystopian world of his next novel, as both genres often consist of a protagonist trying desperately to solve how an event (be it murderous, or, on a horrific disaster on a global scale) came to be.

### *Ishiguro's One-Off Dystopian Event*

*Never Let Me Go* (2005) revolves around the relationship of three friends, Kathy H., Ruth and Tommy, and their time at Hailsham, a boarding school in England in the late 1990s. The novel is narrated by Kathy as a memoir, as she reflects back on her time at the school and the often dramatic relationships she had with her two friends, as they have both reentered her life more than a decade after Hailsham. Ishiguro is purposefully slow to reveal in the novel that Kathy and her friends are actually clones, conceived in-vitro, and that their time at Hailsham has been to keep them apart from the rest of society because they will eventually have their organs removed, which will then be provided for the "real" people (the non-cloned), also known as "the normals." Kathy reflects back on her days at school throughout the novel as she is now a "carer," someone who helps the "donors" recover after organ-removal surgery. Kathy explains that most of the donors only last through approximately four surgeries before they die or reach "completion," and since she is an experienced carer, she gets to choose the donors that she wants to care for; thus, she chose her two friends from Hailsham, Ruth and Tommy. What ensues in the novel is Kathy's emotional contemplation of both friends and her very human reaction to both of them.

In *Never Let Me Go*, events and history for the most part go unspoken, and this goes for both the plot and the reader, as Ishiguro carefully leaves critical information out that eventually complicates Ishiguro's dystopian novel. First, the

most dominating part of the story revolves around the relationships between the three main characters. Although the story itself is Kathy's first-person narrative, the novel is dominated by the complicated relationships of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, which is essentially a love triangle that is dominated by Ruth and Tommy's relationship and the fact that Ruth knows Tommy and Kathy should be together, but works to thwart their love for each other. This basic plotline is what makes the novel a "speculative diary." But what makes the world of Kathy and her friends seem unstable from the beginning is that much of the information concerning the dystopian characteristics that are in play throughout the story are missing. Yet, "the" event that has created the world of Kathy and the clones is unrevealed, with only some possible causes alluded to in the course of the narrative. One of the more glaring omissions from the novel is the absence of war, which played a major role in all of Ishiguro's previous works. His choice to essentially leave out any historical events that could have created the current dystopic world is problematic. Dystopian fiction often acts as a warning for the possibilities of future atrocities, such as war, the horrors of a totalitarian state, or examines the post-war world; however, war is only mentioned once in referring back to what might be World War II, as Miss Emily, the head guardian at Hailsham, reveals that "after the war, in the early fifties, when the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly, there wasn't time to take stock, to ask sensible questions" (*Never* 262).

Miss Emily's reference the inability to question things sensibly questions the cultural speed of events that occurred in the past. Her historical memory reflects Virilo's theory concerning the psychologically blinding aftermath of the decades-long acceleration of culture happening during the 20th-century. But what Ishiguro leaves out concerning the details of origin of the dystopian world forces the reader to speculate on what could have happened historically. For example, how were "schools" like Hailsham and Morningdale (a controversial school due to their poor treatment of clones) created, and what event(s) caused the need for clone organ donarship? The writer's choice to omit a major historical event can be frustrating to speculative fiction critics; however, a postmodern or post-9/11 reading of a work like Ishiguro's is that the impactful event has either been forgotten or normalized in the collective historical memory —neither of which are positive attributes. However, in a work of critical speculative fiction that does not reveal the dystopian novum, it becomes necessary to question the inclusion of other events.

A number of critics have, however, compared *Never Let Me Go* to other classic dystopian works. Toker and Chertoff state that Ishiguro's novel is reflective of Huxley's *Brand New World* in that it presents two conflicting worlds involved in and questioning the role of in-vitro fertilization (163); however, they contend that the end result of this technique are different for each novel. For instance, Huxley's cloning process revolves around creating beings of a certain

IQ, whereas Ishiguro's world in *Never Let Me Go* focuses more on the harvesting of internal organs. Also, the clones die early on in life in Ishiguro's system due to the series of operations to extract organs, and yet Huxley's genetic modifications and subsequent creations are intended to have an extended life cycle. Also, Toker and Chertoff recognize that the Hailsham environment in *Never Let Me Go* is nothing like the settings of some of Ishiguro's earlier works that had some stronghold or connection with history. As noted earlier, Ishiguro's earlier works emphasize the impact and importance of history, mainly the after-effects of World War II; but *Never Let Me Go* seems to embrace the Controller's words from *Brave New World*: "History is bunk" (Huxley 40). The only historical references made in Ishiguro's novel is in its epigraph introducing the novel: "England, late 1990s" and the mentioning of "the war" (again, probably World War II) (*Never*). Since providing the historical context are important for reader of speculative fiction in interpreting the overall work, *Never Let Me Go* could be considered a work of alternate history based purely on the epigraph. However, this approach is problematic because even though an alternate history has to possess a time in the past or in the future, there is no further historical context provided by Ishiguro to illuminate the cultural or social ramifications of an alternative England other than Miss Emily's mention of a time "after the war, in the early fifties" (*Never* 262). However, *Never Let Me Go* does provide more of context for the work belonging to the genre of dystopian fiction in two ways: first, that the clones/humans were

kept under surveillance and controlled by the schools; and two, this genetically manipulated clone colony is providing a service for the "real" humans outside of the confines of Hailsham. Ishiguro seems to be implying either that there is such a demand for organs that the schools like Hailsham are fulfilling a need, or that the late 1990s British world has reached a moral and ethical crisis in which the cloning of humans has become an accepted practice.

In analyzing the role of the event in other aspects of the novel, the dichotomy concerning the body and what it means to be human (or not human) lingers throughout the story. Karl Shaddox argues that "the shock for *NLMG*'s readers comes not from realizing that the clones are human but that these humans are clones" (453). The fact that Kathryn and her friends are clones only means that they are, in fact, human; however, the realization once the reader is half way through the novel that the narrator and protagonist is a clone creates a separation between narrative and reader, because the reader is suddenly made aware of a change in genre: the reader is suddenly reading speculative fiction or dystopian work. Although the terms "donor" and "carer" are used early in the novel, the context of these terms is illuminated later in the work. Thus, the novel seems to change genres just in the process of reading. Also in the early stages of Kathy's narrative, she addresses the reader directly: "If you're one of them [a carer], I can understand how you might get resentful—about my bedsit, my car, above all, the way I get to pick and choose who I look after" (*Never* 4). Her addressing of "you"

(the reader) could be understood as either that her intended audience for her memoir are other clones, or, that the actual "real" human readers are clones, too—since, as Haddox stated, humans are clones, and clones are humans.

Although the initial separation of the clones and the humans by the schools and other designated areas for the clones, which is clearly an effort of class separation by those in control of England, Kathy and some of the more privileged carers are allowed to drive and travel which begs two different questions: how are the clones physically different or marked to in fact allow humans to recognize them as clones, and why do the clones simply not run away and blend in with the outside "human" world? Ishiguro does not address any bodily distinctions that clearly separate the clones from the humans, so readers are led to believe that there are no corporeal alterations—which makes their complacency to stay within the rules of being a clone even more disturbing. The clones are prepared only for the services they provide as donor and carer along with the product (internal organs) that they "produce."

The commodification of the body in *Never Let Me Go* and the acceptance of the act by not only the clones but the "normals" as well is due, according to Ivan Stacy, to the lack of imperative to bear witness to these atrocities in the given society. According to Stacy, "the reason for these failures is that, while atrocity is perpetrated, it has become normalized, and the imperative for the protagonists to bear witness to the crimes has therefore been eroded" (225). Although Ishiguro's

novel follows in step with how many dystopian narrative often open "*in media res* within the nightmarish society, [and where] cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy, the normality of the location," there fails to be a climactic event where the protagonist "challenge[s] or change[s] the society" (Moylan 148). Stacy further explains why Ishiguro's approach to the body is complicated: Thus, the clone body and the human body simply "are what they are"—and that separation and differentiation of bodies and their purpose is physically invisible and ethically disturbing, is in Ishiguro's world, "the way it is." Stacy further explains the problem of Ishiguro's approach to the body from a different generic and narrative standpoint:

> Cloning narratives are a sub-genre of dystopian fiction, but even in this regard, *Never Let Me Go* departs from the norm. Mark Jerng notes that most cloning narratives describe a process of increasing individuation on the part of the clones, resulting in a transformation from innocence to knowledge of their condition (378). Such a transformation might act as the spur for rebellion, but this fails to take place in *Never Let Me Go* because, I argue, the clones fail to bear witness to their own condition. Again, vision and narrative are the crucial elements in this failure. (238)

Thus, Ishiguro's novel reveals both a failure and an acceptance on both sides of the dystopian front (the ostracized and the empowered) to simply ignore that there

are issues of manipulation and control at stake, which makes the "discomfort in reading [*Never Let Me Go*] stems from the way in which the protagonists' failure to acknowledge how the atrocities contribute to the perpetuation of the dystopian systems" (Stacy 225).

### *Dancing to the Silence*

The literary events that could be analyzed in Ishiguro's novel reflect a different relation to the body than a majority of the other one-off novels in that novel is quite devoid of specific acts of violence. Detailed depictions of the act of organ removal from the clones is never presented in the novel, and even more strange (in comparison to the focus on eugenics in Huxley's *Brave New World*) is that for a work that focuses specifically on cloning and its purpose, *Never Let Me Go* is devoid of both science and technology. In his review of the novel, M. John Harrison notes that "Inevitably, it being set in an alternate Britain, in an alternate 1990s, this novel will be described as science fiction. But there's no science here. How are the clones kept alive once they've begun "donating"? Who can afford this kind of medicine, in a society the author depicts as no richer, indeed perhaps less rich, than ours? ("Clone Alone" 1). Also, technology as we now know it, that was present in Britain in the late 1990s (computers/internet/cell phones) were available to most, but not to the clones in Ishiguro's novel. The technology that *is* a focal point of the novel is sound-related: Kathy's portable Walkman and her

cassette tape of Judy Bridgewater's album "Songs after Dark," which includes her favorite song, "Never Let Me Go." The cassette is one of two things that Kathy searches for: the other is her "normal," the "parent" that was used in the reproductive process. However, the cassette, which, as is all recorded music, a reproduction of a "live" performance, is central to the Ishiguro's creation of the literary event in the novel. The song becomes both body and shelter for Kathryn, both "corporeal" and "incorporeal," accelerating the "eventness" of the literary event. As stated early, Ishiguro's novel is an ontological study of "what is" and "what isn't" and all is determined by what information is disseminated; in other words, the "unsaid" of the author and of the narrator loom over the whole novel. It is within the space of the Bridgewater song being played and Kathy's reaction that the corporeal and language create one of the most important literary events in *Never Let Me Go*.

Much of Ishiguro's writing involves references to certain music or musicians, so the title of the one-off novel and the inclusion of the cassette and song in the novel is not out of the ordinary. Kathy's first mentioning of the song, "Never Let Me Go," comes early on in the novel as she admits that tape is "one of my most precious possessions" (*Never* 64). With the song, Ishiguro does slightly alter music history as the song itself is an actual jazz standard recorded and made popular in the 1950s; however, the singer credited (Judy Bridgewater) is

fictional.[20] This bridge between reality and fiction is key in leading up to examining the important and moving scene in which Kathy dances alone to the song while being watched by one of the guardians at Hailsham.

Kathy's obsession with the Bridgewater cassette tape further widens the understanding that since she is a clone then she is simply not a human, as most of the "normals" believe. She reveals information about the cassette's cover photo that features the singer, which seems to focus on the body of the singer:

> Judy Bridgewater is wearing a purple satin dress, one of those off-the-shoulder ones popular in those days, and you can see her from just above the waist because she's sitting on a barstool. You're looking at Judy from exactly where the barman would be when he's serving her drinks. She's looking back in a friendly, not too sexy way. Like she might be flirting a tiny bit, but you're someone she knows from way back. Now the other thing about this cover is that Judy's got her elbows up in the bar and there's a cigarette burning in her hand. (67).

Kathy's focus on the physical attributes of Bridgewater imply that she is somehow different from the singer on the cover. Kathy, as a student at Hailsham, is restricted from smoking and the guardians were diligent in keeping the clones

[20] The song, "Never Let Me Go," was written by Joseph Scott and first recorded as a blues ballad by singer Johnny Ace in 1953. The song gained popularity with the solo piano version by jazz great Bill Evans and was later recorded by Nat King Cole, Luther Vandross, and by Aretha Franklin on her 1967 album *Aretha Arrives*.

from even considering smoking: “Even if we were being shown a picture of a famous writer or world leader, and they happened to have a cigarette in their hand, then the whole lesson would grind to a halt” (67). This aspect of the cover photo, the smoking singer, enforces the dictum of her world that to be human is to have the choice to care for one’s body (or not); a choice that Kathy and her schoolmates are not allowed to make on their own. The visual “event” of the cover, which helps remind Kathy of the differences between clone and human, becomes just as important as the song itself.

One of the more impactful literary events which involve the song and Kathy occurs when she confesses to an event that occurred back in her dorm room at Hailsham. Kathy returns to her dorm room to grab something and she realizes that she is alone, so she had “an impulse [that] made me get the cassette out of my collection box and put it into the player” (71). It was when she pushed “play” and realized that the volume “was much louder than I usually had it,” but she chooses not to turn it down (71). With the music playing in her dorm room, Kathy begins to dance to the song, “swaying about slowly in time to the song, holding an imaginary baby to my breast” (71). It is within this scene that a transformative (literary) event occurs as Kathy dances and for a moment becomes human, still dancing within the prison-like walls of her dorm, but she is for this short amount of time she is no longer a clone. The clones were forbidden to get pregnant and reproduce; thus, Kathy’s dancing with an invisible baby while the song blasts

loudly, silencing any words or actions that may change her momentary transition to being human.

The song in this scene becomes what LaBelle refers to as sound working as "a hinge" that brings into "contact [the] contradictory and divergent forces, spaces, bodies, and materials" that usually surround Kathy in her existence as a clone or "other" (LaBelle 1). As she dances, she grabs "a pillow to stand in for the baby" and begins singing along with the song: "Oh baby, baby, never let me go…" (*Never* 71) as her voice and the voice of Bridgewater are harmonized in an act that gives Kathy not only a fundamental "presence to [her] individual body," but creating a space that carves out her relation to her own voice "as an identifiable sound of personhood" or "humanness" that circulates around her to create a protective state for her and her imaginary child (LaBelle 1). As Rowner states in describing the literary event, the corporeal and the incorporeal are at work here as Kathy dances and sings, creating a "soft architecture" around her that is both comforting and protective. Ishiguro's creation in this scene brings together both the literary event and the within a space of what LaBelle calls "a soft architecture," a space that "hinge[s] together material and immaterial matter, as a place to dwell, and it does so by also creating a stage or scene for the unnamable and the nameable to meet" (LaBelle 12). The scene, however, does not last, as she is startled at the sight of Madame Marie-Claude, the woman who lives outside Hailsham that comes by to pick up the artwork of the students for display

for the "normal" outside of the school. Madame is staring at Kathy not disapprovingly, but she instead is clearly crying. Kathy admits that "it might have been one of her sobs that had come through the song to jerk me out of my dream" (71). Sadly, it is the crying of a human adult that penetrates the song that takes her from the shelter of the music and her dance, and not the crying of a "real" baby; but the sobbing of the Madame alters the acoustic spatiality of Kathy's event.

Both *Never Let Me Go* and *Upon a Full Sea* each derive their fear-driven narrative effectiveness by creating dystopian worlds in which the inhabitants of each exude complacency and indifference to the events around them. The intersection of language and the corporeal in *Never Let Me Go* spawns from how the act of verbal identity, where characters are simplistically defined and titled as either "clone" or "human," is essentially the only demarcation of identification in the novel. For the clones, their bodies become commodities in the novel as their internal organs are harvested at different stages of their lives. Ishiguro imagines a world where "organ trafficking" has become essentially legal and controlled; however, what is most terrifying is its cultural acceptance. Thus, what defines certain humans as humans is left to those in charge of the government. Ishiguro questions this relationship between language as an identity marker and its effects on the corporeal, defining the human being by "what he/she isn't" which effectively establishes the "us/them" approach to a class structure and a 1990s England in which science and technology have eliminated the boundaries and

definition of humans and humanity. A concern throughout the novel is that the clones never question their situation and that there's clearly no one arguing against the act of organ removals d from the clones (who are, in every sense, human). Essentially, whatever cataclysmic or historical event or events that created a need for the clones to live in the boarding school setting/environment is never revealed to the clones or the reader. Again, this us/them approach is reflective of the post-9/11 anxiety which created a strong need for the drawing of lines concerning who belongs and who doesn't—essentially the act of identifying the other as the other based on bodily appearance, speech accent, etc. Ishiguro's novel refracts the post-9/11 angst concerning trust and rights of the other: anyone who identifies—by name, skin color, or religion—with that of a potential threat.

# CHAPTER 8

## WE ARE ONE BODY: CHANG-RAE LEE'S

## *ON SUCH A FULL SEA*

Ursula Le Guin states in her review of Chang-Rae Lee's one off *On Such a Full Sea* that for some writers in recent years, "dystopia has been a major tourist attraction" and that "everybody goes there and writes a book about it" (1). LeGuin acknowledges that Lee "uses essential elements of a serious genre irresponsibly, superficially [and] as a result, his imagined world carries little weight of reality. The whole system is too self-contradictory to serve as warning or satire" (1). LeGuin, for the most part, could be referring to any of the one-off writers discussed here; however, the leap into dystopian fiction or speculative fiction requires a certain motivation—be it personal, historical, cultural, or psychological. Lee's move into dystopian fiction is a distinct move from his early examinations of modern realism in his novels in *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*, but the generic approach to his novels and a more concerted effort to question the power of history, violence, and the event, begins with his 2010 *The Surrendered* and continues in the nightmarish, class-divided America that is the setting for *On Such a Full Sea*. Much like McCarthy's generic path from his study in abject violence in *No Country for Old Men* to a world that seemingly reflects the end result of chaos in *The Road*, Lee's last two novels follow in a

similar path. However, the events presented in the hell-like world of Lee's America should offer some form of hope for the future, but much like the complacent clones/humans in *Never Let Me Go*, the characters in Lee's novel seem to embrace the adage "we take care of our own." But the most interesting aspects of *On Such a Full Sea* is that the novel's diverse class system in many ways reads like amalgam of the other works in this project; however, there also seems to be scenes that echo other post-9/11 novels, such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The main difference in Lee's later works, though, is a distinct move towards examining the role of events, violence, and the resilience of the human body in a divided and difficult America.

Lee's early works focused on a number of issues and themes that circle around problems on the immigrant or outsider and the feelings of displacement that are always present. Much like the other one-off writers discussed here, Lee's early novels focused more on contemporary realism and are seemingly "event-less" when it comes to large scale historical events. *Native Speaker*, Lee's first novel, is a work that Lee admits has some resonance with his own upbringing. The story is narrated by protagonist Henry Park as he is portrayed as an outsider in almost every way: he is a Korean-American who works as a spy for Glimmer & Company, hired by private clients to do a job where he "wasn't to be found anywhere near corporate or industrial sites [but he] was always assigned to an

individual, someone I didn't know or care the first stitch for on a given day but who in a matter of weeks could be as bound up with me as a brother or a sister or a wife" (*Native* 6). In other words, his identity and his job revolves around blending-in to society, where there is

> Always the intrigue. That certain sequence of unrelated events. Then bang. Dennis Hoagland [Henry's co-worker] said that in our time there were only two or three worth talking about, for complexity, fascination, depth of involvement: JFK, Watergate, the attempt on the Pope. Modern Classics. He said you could tell about a person not from what he believed, but what worried him" (19).

Although *Native Speaker*'s protagonist is a spy, this is not exactly a spy novel since much of Henry's personal issues are the focus and how he deals with adversity. For example, when Henry's 7-year-old son dies when he is accidentally smothered while playing outside under a dogpile of friends, Henry's world is altered by this devastating event but he seemingly represses all emotions in the months after, forcing his American wife, Lelia, to temporarily leave him. From a generic perspective, Lee's initial novel is a character study, a work that examines the struggles of the loss of identity and the even greater problems of establishing identity.

Lee' follow-up novel, *A Gesture Life*, in some ways follows the same tropes of *Native Speaker*, focusing on the themes of personal identity and cultural

acceptance. As stated in the title of a review of *A Gesture Life* in *The New York Times* by Michiko Kakutani, the protagonist of the novel, Franklin Hata, seems to be "fitting in perfectly on the outside, but lost within" (Kakutani). Hata is known as "Doc Hata" due to his medical supply shop in Bedley Run, New York. Hata seems unable to deal with events in his life in a healthy way, as his adopted daughter becomes pregnant at age 18 and he lets the love of his life, Mary Burns, drift away. His inability to maintain healthy relationships is clearly linked to himself being adopted by a Japanese family and then enlisting in the Japanese Army and fighting in World War II. Much like in *Native Speaker*, Lee creates a work that examines alienation and the inability for many to assimilate into American society.

Lee begins to shift slightly away from the immigrant experience with *Aloft* (2004), a novel that presents the benign life of Jerome Battle, a man of great monetary means due to his family's contracting firm, but he is someone who seems to live unbothered by the events surrounding him. The novel is set in the Long Island suburbs—a place that critic John Homans describes in his review of the novel as "a place where almost by definition Nothing Ever Happens […] a place where the challenge is to pass the time" (Homans 1). Though Battle's exterior life seems utopian due to his wealth and status, his real life is marred by his father's health decline, his son Jack's poor managerial choices while running the contracting firm (which is destroying the company), and the news that his

daughter is both pregnant and has cancer. The tragedies and difficulties come furiously for Battle in *Aloft* as Lee moves toward a more event-driven narrative approach.

With *The Surrendered* (2010), Lee begins to show more definitive signs of a generic shift as a writer, a move that will take him from realist character-studies of immigrant problems and affluence to the horrors of war and the weight of loss and trauma. Although Lee balances the repercussions of war in the first-person narrative of *A Gesture Life*, the writer's shift to a third-person narrative voice in *The Surrenders* unfolds the life of protagonist June Han, who is suffering from stomach cancer after having been orphaned decades before due to the Korean War. Lee alters his linear narrative style by alternating and leaping temporally and spatially from 1950s Korea to her life in New York in the 1980s, where she is at age 47 she has been diagnosed with cancer. Terrence Rafferty acknowledges a different approach for Lee as a writer in *The Surrendered* when it comes to history and event:

> The events, the specific experiences, are important, but there's an awful randomness to them, which can be accepted or denied or, most often, willfully ignored. For both June and Hector, war and its aftermath make capricious experience unignorable: 'You could never anticipate what might happen next, the earth-shattering and the trivial interspersing with the cruelest irony. You could be saved

> by pure chance, or else ruined. That was the terror of it.'
>
> Throughout *The Surrendered*, both in the past and in the present, terrible things happen, some purely accidental, some deliberately inflicted, and many that seem to exist in a kind of causal no man's land: nobody's fault, and everybody's. (2)

One of the terrible events in the novel comes early in a scene where June's life is immediately and tragically altered. Stephanie Hsu summarizes the horror:

> The first extended scene in *The Surrendered* is undoubtedly a challenge to read: culminating with June's fortuitous and life-saving encounter with Hector on a country road, it narrates the death of her mother and sister by a mortar shell explosion, followed by the death of June's younger twin siblings, whose sleeping bodies fall from the top of a train car packed with refugees from northern Korea. (23)

The bodily damage and violent events involving a number of the main characters in this novel shows an increased interest for Lee with the "eventness" of the story and there seems to be a concerted effort on his part expand his generic boundaries with *The Surrendered*, leaving the door open for his next drastic genre move into dystopia.

***Speculative Reality***

From the outset, *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) places the reader *in media res* of a not-so-distant America that is now known simply as the Association, where outbreaks of both bird and swine flu dramatically altered the country's population while at the same time most citizens are experiencing extreme climate changes. Within the Association there are three separate social classes: the Charters, who are at the top of the social structure where these citizens (mostly the very rich, including economists and leaders. The second group reside in "the Counties," a distance from the Charters and the inhabitants work constantly as they are essentially the "service people," a mostly underground group of workers who arrived from "New China" a century prior, who work for the Charters. It is within the confines of lowest level group, which resides in B-Mor (formerly Baltimore) that the novel begins—presenting a collective community that primarily produces tomatoes and raises fish for the upper classes. The protagonist, Fan, is a 16-year-old girl who works in the fish tanks of B-Mor as a diver. She flees the safety of her job and living environment to venture into the hard-living Counties to find her boyfriend, Reg, who suddenly disappears. Fan's quest to find Reg, the father of her unborn child, is a study in tenacity and courage as she tries to address one of Lee's and the narrator's philosophical theories: "the question, then is whether being an 'individual' makes a difference anymore. That it can matter at all" (*On Such* 3). She is determined to find Reg after his disappearance, and it is from this one individual choice that her adventure outside B-Mor begins.

Fan's journey into the Counties is comprised of a series of violent happenings aligned as narrative events, which include numerous corporeal collisions and situations, with Lee referencing historically-related events seemingly along the way. Thus, in many ways, Fan is at once an admired hero of the workers that traverses post-apocalyptic terrain to survive. After escaping B-Mor in her initial search for Reg, Fan is struck by a car and is picked up and nursed back to health over time by the driver, Quig, a former veterinarian, and his wife, Loreen, who physically abuses Fan initially, but later accepts the young woman as part of their clan. Quig's compound is a place of healing for many, but he suffers from survivor's guilt as his first wife and daughter were gunned down in a robbery years before, after he lost his veterinary business due to an epidemic that started with animals but also caused hemorrhagic fever in humans—forcing "the banning of all animals indefinitely. Which then became forever" (117). After a separate car accident months after the first, Quig, Loreen, and Fan meet the Nickelman's, a family of acrobats who live under a giant live oak tree. Fan quickly suspects something is wrong with the family when she stumbles across a field of bones. Upon Fan's discovery, she is asked to join the "family" and acrobatic group while Quig and Loreen are tied up and drugged, apparently about to be fed to the Nickelman's wild dogs. Thanks to Fan's quick thinking, they are able to escape. This early series of events establishes not only the major societal differences between B-Mor and how the Counties, but also the early

transformation of Fan from fish tank cleaner to survivor, this change enforced due to the fact that she is searching for Reg and that she is pregnant. As an individual, she adapts quickly to the horrors of the Counties.

This focus on the individual in *On Such a Full Sea* is juxtaposed throughout the novel against a first person plural narrator –the collective voice of B-Mor. Lee's choice of narrative point of view can be read as an attempt have the novel read more like a Greek myth, or the writer could be using "we" as just an homage to Yevgeny Zamiyatin's ground-breaking dystopian work, *We*, which is set much like B-Mor with a giant wall that protects the One State. However, this collective voice of B-Mor is resentful of Fan's departure as she is accused of poisoning the fish that she cared for years. The people of B-Mor maintain a work ethic and routine to maintain their way of life, and they have established over time the beginnings of an almost utopian infrastructure: "There hasn't been a property theft in recent memory, and a report of a serious crime, some mugging or assault, would likely halt all work and social activity immediately, for how exceedingly rare such a thing would be, like some solar eclipse" (14). B-Mor protects and comforts its citizens from the extreme weather conditions outside in the Counties by pumping in "seasonally perfumed, filtered air, […], honey-hued halo lighting and the constantly updated mood-enhancing music" (12).

Lee provides little information concerning the nexus environmental event(s) that caused the mass immigration from China that has contributed to the

more dystopian class and welfare system. History, for the workers at B-Mor, is sketchy and selective throughout the narrative. However, the amount of panic that ensues when one of the amenities goes down, sets off immense panic in B-Mor—a terrorizing reaction that implies that a tragic previous event had occurred at some time—an event of which that would be deemed as "large-scale." The narrator(s) explain the horror of the last time the enhanced air system temporarily shut down:

> Eventually people stopped what they were doing and looked about, their mouths half open, awaiting an announcement. None came. Suddenly some people started running, the trigger unclear, and before you knew it, everyone was racing about, toddlers desperately yanked along, the elderly panting and trying to claw through the scattershot mobs, the young and fit sprinting as if the dogs of hell were chasing them. What panic in the corridors! What knife-in-the-heart terror! But then a great wheeze spewed from the ducts […] and the old familiar songs that we never quite listened to reset us to the more tranquil rhythms of our souls. (13)

The ecological event that has set the current narrative in motion in the novel has lead to such extreme weather conditions that "air enhancements" are needed. Lee paints the inhabitants of B-Mor in this scene as being traumatized easily, as the

level of panic initially in the above scene reads much like a tragic scene from a 9/11 novel event that sets off a both a physical and psychological reaction.

However, this is not the only scene that Lee creates that is reflective of the post-9/11 world. After Reg disappears, the narrator(s) state that other people were disappearing, but they were being "officially dispatched" by the governing body, an actions in which the families and loved ones are informed that a person was being removed from the workforce. The families, however, do not question or fight the dispatch call, but they knew that for all intents their loved ones would not be returning which caused the families to "simply [act and accept] as if their loved ones had died" or that they had passed away "just as if from a disease or unfortunate facility accident or old age" (20). Family members would also create old "memorial ceremonies in the customary way, inviting us, depending on the age and status of the deceased, to view the bodies, which were, of course, not there, just framed photographs of them" (20). The "dispatched" and mock funeral scenes here mirror the real-life funerals of some 9/11 victims, as well as scenes of the disappeared in 9/11 fiction, in which funerals were held with empty caskets (as in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*) and again in DeLillo's *Falling Man* – each "burying" a missing body.

Lee's dystopia creation serves as a warning for the future; but also, as in many classic dystopian narratives, *Upon Such a Full Sea* allows for only glimmers of hope for the future. Fan, by her actions and reactions to a series of

events, offers hope to many by simply surviving; she transitions into becoming something of a folk-hero to the people of B-Mor; however, over the course of the narrative, B-Mor looks less like the utopian safe-haven that it was initially revealed. Initially, groups referred to as "The Parkies" once commandeered a large city park, an event that was "identified in our history class materials" by the narrator(s) as something of a utopian cooperative community that allowed this group to "entrenched in their flawed Eden" for more than a generation. The Parkies community appears to be a "Walden Two"-like in its creation, but the community falls apart after "the initial protests and ensuing riots" which created a "sprouted tent city," a temporary community reminiscent of the global Occupy movement in modern times (70). B-Mor itself would later be faced with a possible shutdown, as well, due to imminent cutbacks in their production facilities, prompting a "noticeable rise in the number of people choosing to do away with themselves" (187). But even suicide was difficult in B-Mor due to a ban on firearms, heavy restrictions on drugs, and a lack of "assuredly high-enough places from which to jump" (187). Within the novel, Lee seems to often focus more on turning the cultural and political microscope on major issues in modern-day America and of global issues in other countries, rather than forecasting or warning about where the world is headed—implying in some ways that the dystopian "Real" is now. Where LeGuin criticized Lee's dystopian attempt, other critics extolled the writer's work of speculative fiction, many of which argued for Lee's

ability to advance the generic and narrative qualities of the dystopia. Joanna Biggs argues that "Lee's novel at once inverts the conventions of mid-century dystopian fiction and echoes one of its long-standing themes: stories can transform individuals and, by extension, entire societies" (Biggs 1).

Alongside these scenes involving the dichotomy of corporeality and missing bodies in *On Such a Full Sea* are other literary events where Fan displays her amazing physical prowess. However, there are two specific scenes that involve Fan that create both corporeal and incorporeal exchanges that transcend both the psyche and body. The first scenario describes Fan drifting into a dream state where she imagines floating in a river, when she comes upon Trish and Glynnis, Quig's first wife and daughter, who were murdered many years before Fan's life and Quig's paths crossed. Fan shows Trish "how to stay vertical underwater while keeping her feet above the surface" and moments later teaching her to twirl underwater. Suddenly however, Trish begins to inexplicably sink, and Fan begins to sink uncontrollably with her. Because Fan is a strong swimmer she is able to fight the flow and force, but chooses to sink with Trish to try and save her. Upon almost reaching the bottom, Fan sees Glynnis "pressed against a very wide metal grate, already drowned" (166). Trish, unable to hold her breath any longer and "opened her mouth, her body instantly rebelling against the water filling her lungs" (166). Fan knew that she "could hold her breath a while longer," but she considered giving up and letting "the water cool the burning insider her

lungs"; fortunately for Fan, the force of the water flow that sent them deep into the water ceased, and Fan floated back to the surface. She wakes up soon after, telling no one of the dream (166).

In this narrative fragment, if applying the frame of Rowner's corporeal approach, the literary event of Fan's dream is one of bodily displacement and silencing. The spatiality of the scene, of being underwater, is in many ways Fan's home away from home; but in the dream, the functionality of language is altered and becomes deadly (much like in Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*). However, the scene also provides an interesting temporal and auditory space in that time and sound are truncated, as well. Time is crucial in this scene and because they are underwater, the bodies seem to move in slow motion; even Trish, who is "fiercely struggling" against the underwater grate is in slowly flailing (166). The auditory sounds of being under water heard by the three women also creates a "sinister resonance" that according to Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier's study on the role of silence in sound studies, is a resonance that "invokes a haunting;[…] the insecurities produced by the ungraspable" (Gautier 183). Just as a part of Quig died when his daughter and wife were murdered in the non-dream world, part of Fan dies in her dream. Even though she rises from the river bottom, her use of language, hearing, and her body has changed. Fan's dream event is later doubled by Lee soon after the dream scene, but this time in the "real world," as Quig and Loreen travel to drop off Fan to work for a Charter couple, Mister Leo and Miss

Cathy, in exchange for medicines for Loreen's son. The traumatic drowning dream that Fan experienced is paralleled in the first night that she spends at the new Charter home. As Fan fights to stay awake in hopes of escaping, she does fall asleep before dawn, only to awaken to the lamps off and "a veil of night drawn down over her" (184). She soon discovers that she is not alone, as Mister Leo forces her to gasp upon touching her knee. Fan describes what she hears as non-language, the "horrid murmuring blandishments" from Mr. Leo, causing her to only "half cr[y] out" (184). Assured by her ability to hold her breath for long periods of time in the fish tanks of B-Mor, Fan "deeply breathes" to also realize that "she was passing out" (184). As Mr. Leo moves "to be fully on her," she "now wished to be gone," echoing the same questions she ponders in her dream as to whether she should let herself drown or not. And much like in her dream, "before anything else can happen," the situation changes for her to escape as Mr. Leo slides of her, only to hear Miss Cathy's voice "telling her husband to get off the bed" (184). Lee's doubling of these corporeal events, from both the dream and the rape scene—the inability to speak or hear properly, her body being violated by an outside source— serve as corporeal events that examine spatiality and the auditory effects during traumatic events.

The acoustic spatiality of the space in which Fan was violated by Mr. Leo is also key to understanding the event, for it is within the elderly couple's house that the rape takes place. The home that Mr. Leo and Ms. Cathy have opened to

Fan, what was to be a protective space was quickly violated by Mr. Leo's actions. As fortunate as Fan is that Ms. Cathy comes in during the horror of the bodily contact between the girl and Mr. Leo, the sound of Ms. Cathy's voice is what is consciously heard by Fan. She does not see Ms. Cathy in this scene, and it is only the older woman's voice that alters the vocal noises of the sexual attack. It is later revealed by the narrator that other than a scratch, Fan was "left unsullied" by the confrontation; however, considering the untrustworthy narrative voices, this statement may not be true. However, Mr. Leo's body was greatly transformed because of this encounter, as he is later wheelchair-bound after being struck in the head with a statuette (a "bulbous nude") by Ms. Cathy, causing him to have a massive stroke as he climbed off of Fan. The traumatic silencing of the real corporeal event, as opposed to her dream version, was thwarted by the lone voice that she heard above everything else.

Lee's dystopian world is not lead by a lone character whose purpose is to overthrow a tyrannical government, but Fan's actions and the mythological state that she is awarded by the collective narrative voices of B-Mor remains even after the ambiguous ending of the novel. In the end, we never know if Fan ever finds Reg, and readers are left unclear as to Fan's fate. But what can be acknowledged is that Lee's novel has more in common with the "critical dystopia" genre than it does the traditional dystopia. The uncertainty of Fan's fate at leaves provides the opportunity for a "hopeful" conclusion, unlike the "protagonists of *Nineteen*

*Eight-Four* or *Brave New World* [as] Winston Smith, Julia, John the Savage, and Lenina are all crushed by the authoritarian society" (Baccolini and Moylan 6). Lee's novel, the most recently published of the six one-off works, "allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (Baccolini and Moylan 7). The hope in Lee's novel comes from the fact that throughout the litany of narrative events and physical fractures that Fan endures, she is pregnant throughout her quest. As in *The Children of Men*, hope comes from not only the birth of a child or the event of one body physically harboring another, but from the hope that there is a next generation that will hopefully set the world on a better course. Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* is his most recent novel and the most recently published of the six one-off's, so there is little to examine about his post-speculative fiction genre jump. However, with the novel's ambiguous conclusion, Lee seems to leave enough narrative space for a follow-up to Fan's adventures.

# CONCLUSION

In creating works of speculative fiction during what has been deemed the post-9/11 "age of terror," the six writers examined here produced works that are outside the generic labels of a "9/11 novel," but these one-off novels are in many ways reflective of the post-9/11 world. By use of cognitive estrangement, the six one-off writers have produced works in separate generic spaces where the intersection of event and corporeality collide (in what Ilai Rowner refers to as the "literary event") in order to examine not only the repercussions of a post-9/11 world but also to present a warning against future events—warnings against political, economic, and global issues that are now, in 2017, resonating globally. The crossing of these writers from realism to genre or speculative fiction is an act of artistic and historical refraction, a change of direction from one medium to another; in other words, they are works representative of the technology that Grossman refers to as the disruptive nature of genre fiction.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examined the disruptive counter-historical novels of Roth and Chabon and their questioning of the present by scrutinizing the role of the historical/fictional event. I argue that Roth's *The Plot Against America* is at once a study of the relationships between terror/fear and event, and how in many ways the uncontrollable aspects of "real" history can "act" and change everything;

however, I also assess that the novel serves as a warning against how easy a manipulated and volatile state of democracy can turn when there is political or societal complacency, and how often the impossible is possible anywhere and at any time. Chabon's alteration of history in *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, although it backgrounds the role of history in comparison to Roth's narrative approach, also questions the "what if" of American history and the impact of the historical event. Chabon's questioning of event and history creates a deterministic space in which one choice by those in power could have created a somewhat better outcome with the creation a utopian-esque Sitka, Alaska, experience for WW II Jews. I argue that Chabon's novel backgrounding of history and foregrounding the critical role of language is a critical response to not only governmental control but also a refraction of the role of the "other" in post-9/11 America. What both counter-historical novels ultimately warn readers about is that there is a major difference in altering history to examine the present (as Roth and Chabon do) and altering history to *control* the present. We should, as Orwell stated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, fear the latter of these two actions.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I argue that the post-apocalyptic works created by Cormac McCarthy and Ben Marcus allowed each writer's to examine the issues of language, control, and terror in a post-9/11 world not because of the event, but from the endpoint of damage that has come to be. I state that McCarthy's *The Road* examines an America that has exhausted its capacity for humanism.

McCarthy's novel questions terrorism's ultimate end—a world of fear and obscurity. With the unknown around every step and turn for the man and his son, language becomes a weapon, a tool, and at the same time, a meaningless action. McCarthy questions if mankind's actions are the result of our inability to understand the innate power of language, or is it that the violent tendencies of man destroyed any need for communication. The ambiguous conclusion of *The Road* leaves this critical question to the post-9/11 reader. I also posit that Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* in some ways tries to answer McCarthy's question, as his narrative event is a viral language that kills. In some ways, language in Marcus's America itself can be seen as its own violent weapon, a source of both terror and terrorism (echoing Baudrillard's idea that terrorism is a virus) (Baudrillard 10). The post-apocalyptic approaches by both McCarthy and Marcus to the relations of language, event, and terror, in many ways foreshadow the current governmental and journalistic battles of what language means; in other words, arguments over events that are "true" and things that are "untrue" in our current world and the dissemination of so-called "alternate facts." Again, as with Roth and Chabon's works, the administration of fear, language, and control, are at the core of the post-9/11 world.

In Chapters 7 and 8, I state that the one-off novels by Chang-Rae Lee and Kazuo Ishiguro revolve around separate worlds of political and social complacency and fear in environments that control the "other" through the power

of language and distorted narrative. Lee's America, with its history being retold by way of a group narrative, blurs the lines between the real and the unreal while burying the major events of history as a narrative afterthought. Much like in *The Road*, history has little purpose in Lee's setting of B-Mor; however, the distinct class separations between "us" and "them" are clearly a product of a modifiable history which creates a terrifying state of national complacency. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is a study in the theories of post-9/11 corporeality as a commodity and the ever-growing political arguments concerning language and its ability to racialize for political or cultural gain.

***Research Appraisal***

These one-off novels are significant not only for their contributions to speculative fiction, but also for their creation of a space to raise awareness of the present, mostly questioning our relations to events and how they are valued and analyzed. Since the attacks of September 11$^{th}$, we have become (on a national and global level) a more "event-based" society. In other words, through the use of social media and the news media, it seems that we are historically, politically, or economically "waiting for the other shoe to drop" on a daily basis, whether it be an act of terrorism, a natural disaster, a financial collapse, or significant changes in governmental control in different countries (including the United States).

The issues that the six one-off writers address in their novels are, by their creation as one-off history-influenced works of fiction, examples of the kind of literature and fiction that Timothy Parrish argues should be read "as history," not "as fiction." In *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*, Parrish states that the historical relevance of specific works of fiction should overshadow textbook history. He uses examples from William Faulkner's Southern Gothic fiction and Toni Morrison's slave narratives of magical realism as sources that invoke the human emotions and historical strains of the time, more so than "realist" historical narrative ever could. Although the six speculative fiction one-off's present alternative worlds and question the direction of not only the nation and the globe, they also close the gap between the genre separations of "High Fiction" and genre ("popular") fiction. The artistic and literary credibility established by Roth, McCarthy, Chabon, Marcus, Ishiguro, and Lee, in many ways validates their selected genres of dystopian, post-apocalyptic, or alternate histories, but through these works they have helped bring to significance the study of the event in literature, be it historical, narrative, or literary adaptations. Their creations force readers to question not just the historical value or the cause and effect of an event, but also the impact—the "eventness" of the event.

My research for this project has brought together theoretical approaches towards the study of literature and culture that I had not considered before. I was

inspired by Philip E. Wegner's seminal text *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: US Culture in the Long Nineties* in which he examines literature and film born out of the long decade previous to the terrorist attacks on September 11th. After reading Wegner's work, I moved on to Tom Moylan's S*craps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, and then the post 9/11 dystopian study of *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, edited by Raffaella Baccolini and Moylan. I began to compile a list of dystopian novels published *after* 9/11 in hopes of finding some sort of cultural, social, or political connections between the texts, and I was fortunate to be provided a list of pre-9/11 dystopian novels by Lyman Tower Sargent. The list offered a fascinating context for pre- and post-9/11 speculative fiction[21].

But even after acquiring all of this information concerning the dystopian genre, the works that stood out to me were the "one-off's," mainly because of the writers involved and their lack of a speculative fiction publication history. Yet one of the main concerns I had with this small group of one-off writers was simply "why?" What purpose would it serve these highly-regarded and award-winning literary writers to each write a dystopian, alternate history, or post-apocalyptic novel? And although only the writers themselves can truly answer this question on a personal level, it would only seem logical that an event of some

[21] Many thanks to Dr. Kenneth Roemer for not only introducing me to these important dystopian studies, but also for contacting Dr. Sargent concerning the pre-9/11 dystopia bibliography.

magnitude inspired the leap into speculative fiction. With the terrorists attacks on 9/11 being the main "event" of the 2000s, I began to look at these six one-off works published in the wake of the event as less of an opportunity for financial gain for the authors and more of an artistic opening to examine reality by crossing into the "what is" and examining "what should never be."

The intersection of event (what is) and dystopian fiction (what should never be) was later affirmed in Wegner's *Shockwaves of Possibility* which addressed the generic connections of the event through the theories of Badiou and Jameson, the connection of the body to the event raised my interest in the six one-off novels as well as in the corporeal issues presented in the 9/11 novels and stories I was teaching in my literature courses. I also became intrigued at this time with the concepts of spatiality in literature, and especially how the interactions of body, sound, and space are represented in the novels about Septemeber 11th that I again had been teaching. These theoretical applications have in many ways been synthesized in this project, but I realize that there is much more work to be done to address the juxtapositions of event, corporeality, language, sound, space, and fear in the fiction that is produced in the wake of historical events.

The possibilities for future research are not only viable and important as far as studies of historical event, such as September 11, but are essential to the study of event theory and its ability to illuminate specific moments and their cultural impact. In many ways, the study of evental impact on a historical or

literary level, is a form of "witnessing" that goes beyond the study of historical tragedy and the trauma that is derived from it. Ivan Stacy argues that "scholarly work on the role of testimony foregrounds the imperative to bear witness since testimony is a defense against the annihilation of narrative and memory" (18). Also, adapting the theories of sound studies in relation to questioning the acoustic spatiality within literary or historical events provides not only alternative framework for analysis, but also contributes more information into the analytic processes beyond a simplified cause and effect approach. In addition, I would argue for the pursuit of other "turns" in the history of dystopian fiction and beyond as a way of gauging not only the "spray" or effect of history, but also a large-scale examination of both the creative processes and works created before and after watershed historical or global events. An evaluation of the veteran speculative fiction authors—LeGuin, Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson for example— of alternate histories, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian novels both before and after an event such as September 11$^{th}$ would bring to light even more of the impact of attacks as event and its further influence on popular culture and literature.

This reconfiguring of difference and commonality is crucial to the continued studies of speculative fiction and all event-related (more specifically, 9/11 related) approaches. Even though the attacks of September 11 are remembered every year, and now that the One World Tower is complete along the

9/11 Museum in New York City, the study of 9/11 as event at the collegiate level is in many ways diminishing. Books are still being written about September 11th, but teaching 9/11-influenced literature and culture has come under fire in recent years due to the both the volatility of the topic and the political leanings presented in many of the courses. One example occurred at the University of North Carolina in 2015, when a student published an op-ed piece concerning the texts chosen by Dr. Neel Ahuja, stating that the course readings imparted an anti-American sentiment and that terrorists were being presented in a "sympathetic light." Fortunately, the administration supported Dr. Ahuja and the teaching of the course; however, even if the course's readings did reflect a non-degrading sentiment towards terrorists, that is all the more reason to take the course—to try and understand a different perspective, even if it flies against a student's moral or ethical base. I bring this example up because of my experience in my own "Literature and Film after 9/11" course that I have been fortunate enough to teach several times at The University of Texas at Arlington. The last time I taught the course in 2011, in part due to the 10th anniversary of the attacks, I received numerous negative comments and evaluations due to some of the course material that I required my students to read and watch. A number of students believed that having them watch the film *11 Septembre*, a collection of short films from 11 different directors from around the world, was offensive due to a "lack of empathy" for America in some of the films. In addition, I also received

threatening emails from people who were not in the course. The issues that were born out of the attacks on 9/11 are still here and ever-present, and the only way to help solve these problems is by looking at all perspectives and discussing them. To use the concept of acoustic spatiality again as an analogy, a space has to be created that goes beyond the tragedy and the image-event of 9/11, beyond the political posturing and using 9/11 as an annual cultural "shout out," and move even further beyond the titles and characteristics that make up our current "age of terror," while holding those accountable who use the event of 9/11 as a fear-mongering trope. The cultural dialogue concerning 9/11 has everything to do with divisive rhetoric and nothing to do with the simple act of "listening"—creating a space where understanding and negotiating can occur. Christian Moraru argues that "if the University continues to be a premier place for the critical production and filtering of cultural definitions, identities, and citizenship" (41), then those in academia "need to teach a cosmopolitan literacy based on an attempt to understand the other in his/her material, particular humanness rather than as an allegorical other" (21). The event and the space that is born out of 9/11 is real and can impart meaningful exchanges, but there has to be a collective effort to listen if the power of any event can create sustainable change.

### *2017: The Rise in Popularity of Dystopian Fiction*

Since the 2016 presidential election, the rise in popularity of dystopian fiction has not only provided a boom in book sales, but it has also created a dystopian-fueled "must-read" list on social media, as the change in political direction in the United States has elevated level of fear and uncertainty in the early months of 2017. Michiko Kakutani argues that Orwell's *1984* is, in a country now presided over by reality TV-star and billionaire, Donald Trump, a work that is a "must-read":

> The dystopia described in George Orwell's nearly 70-year-old-novel *1984* suddenly feels all too familiar. A world in which Big Brother (or maybe the National Security Agency) is always listening in, and high-tech devices can eavesdrop in people's homes. A world of endless war, where fear and hate are drummed up against foreigners, and movies show boatloads of refugees dying at sea. A world in which the government insists that reality is not "something objective, external, existing in its own right"—but rather, "whatever the Party holds to be truth is truth. (1)

According to Kakutani, Orwell's novel rose to No. 1 on Amazon's bestseller list after one of Trump's advisors offered that "alternate facts" were being used concerning the presidential inauguration crowd size. (1). Not only is Orwell's novel suddenly of immense importance, even Roth's *The Plot Against America* is

also on this must-read list, due to the ascendance of power of the celebrity Lindbergh and the immediate division among Jews and people of color into "work groups." Also, Alexandra Alter stated in *The New York Times* that in mid-January of 2017 that the "authoritarian overtones" of Trump's rhetoric has skyrocketed the sales of other dystopian classic works as well, with Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here* reaching #9 on Amazon and Huxley's *Brave New World* made it to #15 ("Fears" 1).

This rise in dystopian fiction popularity is at once troubling, due to the fact that the change in the American political landscape has raised the level of fear due to the unknown possibilities of the direction that the current administration will lead the country. However, the positive spin is that the powerful dystopian works of Orwell, Huxley, Zamiyatin, Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, and other speculative fiction writers are being examined again by a very different audience than the one initially intended. The crossing of reality/non-reality boundaries has now become the norm in post-9/11 America, especially with the current administrations relationship with journalists. President Trump has deemed journalists to be a "public enemy" and has made popular the term "fake news" in an attempt to destroy the credibility of any and all who oppose or criticize him. It is within this space of questioning the use of rhetoric that we find the most disturbing elements, most of which are addressed in the one-off works: the control of meaning and language contributing to the inability to either recognize anything

that is true or that contributes to the blurring of the lines of truth. These efforts of the current administration come straight out of Orwell's Ministry of Truth in *1984* and its focus on "reality control." To control reality, a government can use the elements of fear of the known and unknown to persuade the masses. These elements of fear and control that were in the forefront in the days and weeks after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 have now come to the forefront of 2017.

The one-off novels examined here offer warnings against the dangerous possibilities of authoritarian rule in the US, of language control, and of how the understanding, recognition, and questioning of certain events is not only important on a personal level but on the global stage as well. The one-off novels also offer up warnings concerning social, cultural, and political complacency, and how the liberties and freedoms of a society can easily be taken away by those who are in power. One of the more terrifying aspects of this idea of social complacency became evident on large-scale governmental reform issues. After the Brexit vote of 2016 in which Britains voted to leave the European Union, Google Trends posted that the most "googled" questions the day after the elections were "what does it mean to leave the EU?" and "What is the EU?" (Google Trends). Even though these posted search questions do reflect an ignorance of political and social events, they also reflect a complacency and lack of interest in or distrust of the political system or that their voice or vote accounts for little or nothing. Possibly the greatest narrative element of dystopian fiction is

that by its speculative nature, the novels and short stories in this genre force the reader to think critically about the world that they currently live in. Hopefully, the one-off's of Roth, Chabon, McCarthy, Marcus, Lee and Ishiguro, along with the other classic dystopian works on the bestseller lists, are recreating a cultural space where the major issues of today can be better understood and questioned. One only hopes that many readers will enter and be moved by this space.

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## Biographical Information

Michael Brittain received his Bachelor of Arts in English at The University of Texas at Arlington in 2002. In 2006, he also completed his Master of Arts degree at The University of Texas at Arlington. His Ph.D. research in dystopian literature before and after 9/11 was the initial seed for this project. Although that approach eventually became too large, he plans to continue his research within this area, focusing on the intersections of history, literature, and event. His research and teaching interests include post-9/11 literature, utopian and dystopian fiction, and postmodern American Literature.