

OUT OF JOINT: NEOLIBERALISM, NARRATIVE, AND THE GOTHIC QUEST  
FOR PLACE IN THE DIALECTICAL WEST

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I argue that although the Gothic sensibility in the U.S. cultural tradition is often associated with the regional spaces of the South and the Northeast, we should also be willing to imagine the U.S. West in Gothic terms. Stories of ghosts, haunting, and trauma help us to come to terms not only with the historical legacy of the Western frontier, but can also help us grapple with the West in today's period of global capital flows, inequality, frayed social ties, and the deterioration of meaningful metanarratives. Toward this end of reconsidering the West as a haunted space of trauma (past and present), I examine cultural texts that help illuminate the fraught, "out of joint" qualities of the post-1989 West: Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*, Sherman Alexie's *Flight*, Walter Kirn's *Up in the Air*, Richard Rodriguez's *Brown*, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, and Charles Bowden's *Murder City*.

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INTRODUCTION: PROFANE ILLUMINATIONS IN THE  
NEOLIBERAL WEST

This isn't about good people vs. bad people. It's about the machine that's taken over this country. It's like something out of science fiction. The land, the cattle, human beings—this machine don't give a shit. Pennies a pound, pennies a pound. That's all it cares about, a few more pennies a pound.

--Rancher Rudy Martin (played by Kris Kristofferson), Richard Linklater's *Fast Food Nation*

During my trips to meatpacking towns in the High Plains I met dozens of workers who'd been injured. Each of their stories was different, yet somehow familiar, linked by common elements—the same struggle to receive proper medical care, the same fear of speaking out, the same underlying corporate indifference. We are human beings, more than one person told me, but they treat us like animals. The workers I met wanted their stories to be told. They wanted people to know about what is happening right now. A young woman who'd injured her back and her right hand at the Greeley plant said to me, "I want to get on top of a rooftop and scream my lungs out so that somebody will hear."

--Eric Schlosser, from *Fast Food Nation* (186)

Working with and against the imagery provided by the Church and the conquest, [shamanic] *yage* nights offer the chance, not to escape sorrow by means of utopic illusions, but rather the chance to combine the anarchy of death with that of carnival, in a process that entertains yet resists the seductive appeal of self-pity and redemption through suffering...[This] profane illumination...brings the gods to earth...subjects fate to chance, and determinism to active human agency...a domain of chance and perhapsness...What is at work here is an image of truth as experiment, laden with particularity, now in this guise, now as that one, stalking the stage whose shadowy light conjures only to deconjure.

--Michael Taussig, from *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (467, 465)

Toward the end of Richard Linklater's 2006 film *Fast Food Nation*, co-written with Eric Schlosser and based on his 2001 muckraking book, a Mexican meat-packing worker named Francisco (Hugo Perez) slips and falls into a machine when it unexpectedly turns on. Trapped inside, Francisco screams and writhes, his body wracked

by the blades. His friend Raul (Willmer Valderrama) tries to help but falls on his back, watching the machine mangle Francisco's leg. The scene is shocking, but not for obvious reasons. Somehow—though I almost hate to think of it this way--the sequence seems slightly ridiculous, even uncomfortably comic, such that it seems somewhat removed from reality. Perhaps this strange effect is related to the fact that earlier in the film, Francisco had been presented as a clown of sorts. In one such scene, while working alongside Raul spraying blazing hot water and chlorine chemicals on the plant's roof, Francisco begins jumping up and down and shrieking. The problem? Not the dangerous cleaning material, which fogs up his goggles and makes him susceptible to accidents, but...a rat. Later, Francisco and Raul play soccer together, and Francisco cavorts around the field, hamming it up for his friend. With these scenes in mind, the accident seems like a physical prank, Francisco's bouncing body a continuation of his Chaplin-like slapstick. And yet, when I first watched the scene, I felt something deeply unsettling in my stomach. On the one hand, it felt like too much, overkill, a way of bludgeoning the audience into accepting a "message" about the fast food industry. But on the other hand, the very excessive quality of the scene—and even its queasy comic effect—is exactly what makes the scene feel uncannily real. If such a thing happened in everyday life, it might feel just as unreal, a cruel joke and an unbearable message all in one. It could not help but feel out of joint.

We do not see Francisco again in the film, but we learn that Raul has injured his back and that his company will not pay for his health care because he has tested positive for drugs. Nevermind that the use of methamphetamine ("crank") was an open secret at Uni-Globe meat-packing plant (Raul's supervisor sold it to workers in order to help them



keep up with the break-neck pace of the disassembly line); Raul has no recourse. He, along with his girlfriend Sylvia (Catalina Sandino Moreno) and her sister Coco (Ana Claudia Talancon), are in the country illegally, having paid a *coyote* to shuttle them across the border from Mexico. Sylvia, among all the film's immigrant characters, had been most skeptical about the border-crossing foray (and most nostalgic for Mexico); early in the film, she leaves the meat-packing plant after one day, refuses to go back, and finds a job as a maid in a hotel. (Her sister Coco, by contrast, leaps into the new country with reckless abandon, initiates a risky love affair with her sadistic supervisor Mike [Bobby Cannavalle] and becomes hooked on meth, but also uses her erotic appeal to secure herself a good position at the plant). But with Raul laid up and unable to work, Sylvia takes drastic measures: she submits to sex with Mike in order to get one of the worst jobs in the plant, on the so-called "kill floor," where the bodies of freshly killed cattle careen endlessly on hooks, ready to be chopped up by saw-wielding workers. Sylvia's job is at the "gut table," and involves processing the interior contents of the cows' stomachs—in other words, their shit. The scene is phantasmagoric; we see slow, distorted shots of cows being decapitated, their legs sawn off quickly as they rotate through the kill floor, their bulging stomachs rolling like bags of jelly toward the workers. Sylvia, already traumatized by recent events, appears positively terrified in this unfamiliar milieu. Although her face is covered with a white mask, we can see tears rolling down her cheeks, mingling with splattered blood.

Such dreamlike images--Francisco's accident, Sylvia's descent into a shifting cavern of blood and death—exemplify what Walter Benjamin, in a 1929 discussion of surrealism, described as the "profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological

inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (“Surrealism” 71). In the profane illumination, we get down to the strange bottom (or rather, the bottomlessness) of the material world in which we live. Benjamin is not extolling phantasmagoria for its own sake, which he derides as a “histrionic stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious” (78). Rather, the profane illumination has a side that is not mysterious at all, since it is perfectly ordinary: “We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (78). (Elsewhere he described the related concept of the *dialectical image*, in which condensed, overdetermined contradictions could emerge like a scene from a dream). Not content with depicting the mysterious side of the mysterious, Linklater offers us a more unsettling, everyday impenetrability. Although *Fast Food Nation* is not a supernatural horror film (it has no literal vampires or zombies), it is nonetheless gothic in that its narrative explores trauma and probes dark corners that we would rather not visit, and because we see its story through the partial lens of people who do not know what they are getting themselves into. Like other gothic narratives, *Fast Food Nation* highlights the uncomfortable permeability of bodies; its decapitations, spillovers, and unwanted sexual penetrations dramatize the unstable border between inside and outside, the painfully open contours of the self. And in doing so, it lays bare the guts of the region it depicts. Its portrayal of the U.S. West uncannily reveals what is constantly before our noses, but so often eludes representation; the film is one of few to seriously depict Western suburban sprawl, immigration (much of the movie is in Spanish), and the lives of low-wage workers. Within this context, the meat-packing plant may pose as just another business

providing jobs for the community (in the standard chamber of commerce parlance), but is instead revealed as a gothic castle concealing horrors behind an implacable façade.

Mike, the manager who mediates between workers and the invisible executives of Uni-Globe, is something like a devil, not because he is unequivocally evil, but because of the contradictions he embodies. He is both evil and good, since although he can *take away* (a job, a preferred position, dignity), he can also *give* (money, drugs, access). He must be placated, but this placation comes at a price. In his dialectical quality, Mike resembles the devil in South American folklore as related by anthropologist Michael Taussig. In the 1970s, newly proletarianized Colombian farmers told stories that helped them cope with a strange new system, different from the kinship-based model of reciprocal exchange in which they had been raised: the capitalist structure built on wage labor and the abstract exchange of commodities. According to these “devil pact” stories, sugar cane harvesters could make Satanic deals that would allow them to cut more cane and earn more wages. The catch, however, was that although the deal resulted in more short-term production, proceeds from the extra cane could not be used productively, but only to buy luxury goods for immediate use. They could not be used to plant fields or buy animals: “these wages are inherently barren: the land will become sterile, and the animals will die” (*The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* 13). The devil pacts “have baleful consequences for capital and human life”: “It is...said by many persons that the individual who makes the contract...will die prematurely and in pain. Short-term monetary gain under the new conditions of wage labor is more than offset by the supposed long-term effects of sterility and death” (13-14). Similarly, Bolivian miners saw the devil as “the true owner of the mine and the mineral,”; “although he is believed to

sustain production, the devil is also seen as a gluttonous spirit bent on destruction and death...this production is believed to be ultimately destructive of life” (14). The miners treat the devil as a familiar figure (they call him *Tio*, or uncle), and they believe he must be respected if they are to stay safe in the mines; as a result, they conduct ritual offerings to this devil, personified in statues to look like a *gringo*, with sunglasses and a cowboy hat.

Raul, Sylvia, Coco, and Francisco, too, give offerings to the ambiguous devil-spirit of the meat-packing plant: blood offerings, sexual favors, and their own limbs. And although Mike is hardly the most powerful figure in the plant (he, too, must give offerings to those higher up, who push him to keep the assembly line moving in order to reach productivity goals), he is perhaps the closest personification available to the workers of the ambiguous authority under which they live. Like the Bolivian devil, he is aggressively virile and masculine (the statues are often depicted with huge erect penises), and although he does not wear a cowboy hat, he drives a huge truck with an expensive stereo, and parades his wealth before his charges. And he certainly has something to offer; given the comparatively high wages available at the plant when compared to jobs in Mexico, one can see why these migrant workers would be attracted to the job--if they are willing to grapple with this devil. In one scene in the film, Raul and Sylvia wander the streets of Cody, Colorado (actually filmed in Colorado Springs), amazed by the lights of a seemingly never-ending strip mall. Here, it seems, is a new and abundant life, and Raul is positively ecstatic to eat at a local Chili's. And yet, just as Taussig's South American storytellers see a contradiction between rapid short-term production and long-term barrenness, the migrant workers in *Fast Food Nation* find that in the U.S. West their

wages do not necessarily buy them stability or a fertile, meaningful life; instead, *Fast Food Nation*'s narrative is largely one of pain, injury, loss, humiliation, and isolation, of drug addiction, exploitive relationships, and the collapse of former standards of behavior. At film's end it is entirely unclear where the stories of these people might go.

Surely the South American stories do not apply perfectly to Linklater's characters, who cannot retreat to the subsistence practices of Colombian farmers. Raul's cohort were proletarianized long before they crossed the border, and may find a better deal from the devil in the U.S. than in Mexico. But the old stories ring uncannily true even in this new context, where devil pacts have become a banal fact of life; the commodity fetishism unleashed by the modern capitalist economy, augmented by the commodification of the image in the postmodern society of the spectacle (and the bewildering sorcery of high finance), still results in forms of barrenness that contradict official narratives of freedom and abundance. For years we have seen (often exaggerated) gains in productivity and wealth<sup>1</sup>-- but also disintegration: the collapse of moral narratives and the demise of notions of social obligation embedded in terms like *reciprocity*. In our new context--all but saturated with the ethos that struck South American neophytes as alien and upsetting--the devil is surely afoot. Jose E. Limon, for one, describes the devil rising again in the everyday folklore of 1970s South Texas, presumably to signal another moment of

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<sup>1</sup> As David Harvey points out in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, worldwide growth rates have actually fallen since the 1960s and 1970s: "Aggregate global growth rates stood at 3.5 per cent or so in the 1960s and even during the troubled 1970s fell only to 2.4 per cent. But the subsequent growth rates of 1.4 per cent and 1.1 per cent for the 1980s and 1990s (and a rate that barely touches 1 per cent since 2000) indicate that neoliberalization has broadly failed to stimulate worldwide growth" (154). So why does the global economy appear so dynamic in news reports? Partly because, as Harvey puts it, the growth has been uneven, mostly concentrated in India and East Asia: "That 'success' was to be had somewhere and for someone obscures how neoliberalism has generally failed to stimulate strong and sustained global growth. The illusion is created that if only we all performed like the successful growing countries of the moment then we, too, could be successful" (Harvey *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* 66). But we might also point to the fact that most gains have gone disproportionately to the elite classes, especially in the financial sector, and to the fact that the media world increasingly allies itself with such figures.

transition. This shift is the neoliberal turn, from an older Fordist economic model (in which workplaces largely stayed put and proletarian cultures could develop as a counterweight to exploitation) to the post-1970s model of what David Harvey calls *flexible accumulation* (in which global capital moves more easily, exploits labor more effectively, and shifts the sites and methods of production, distribution, and consumption in the blink of an eye): “I see [the devil’s] intense presence in southern Texas and later in all of Mexican America as a register of the society’s initial and shocking encounter with the cultural logic of late capitalism.” This new devil “is less a folk figure than in South America and more...a modernist figure indebted to the past but open and available as a flexible and critical tool for reading and critically evaluating a threatening present” (179-180). For Limon, then, “dancing with the devil” is part of postmodern life, but in recognizing it as such we grasp a tool that we might use to understand our situation.

*Fast Food Nation* (both Schlosser’s book and Linklater’s film) registers the shift toward a regime of flexible accumulation—and thus the rise of this new devil—in acute ways, revealing the contradictory legacy of mobility, speed, growth, and flexibility in late capitalist economy and culture. In describing the rise of the Western meat-packing plant, Schlosser maintains that conditions for workers, cattle, and surrounding townspeople are determined not simply by accident, but have emerged through a historical process that neatly follows the neoliberalization of the global economy. In this history, narrow efficiency, corporate profit, flexible labor contracts, and abstract “throughput” (the speed and quantity of units processed and shipped) emerge as paramount, squeezing out all other concerns: the lives of workers, environmental quality, and the broad public good (68). It is a story of increased centralization, of high technology, and of top-down power

masquerading behind the slogan of free choice. It is a story in which the state is used by powerful corporations for their accumulative purposes, but then gracefully bows out when it comes to the matter of regulation, social investment, and redistribution. And it is also a history of *fun* as a privileged category: of enjoyment raised to the status of a moral value (even an oppressive obligation), of bright colors and sensory pleasures, of marketing tie-ins with Beanie Babies and kids' movies, and of privately financed playgrounds at fast food restaurants across the globe.

Today's slaughterhouse, like the fast food industry that drives its development, is largely a product of the past few decades, the outcome of both technological changes amenable to the hiring of unskilled workers and of Ronald Reagan's deregulation policies, which allowed centralized meatpackers to take over smaller, regional players.<sup>2</sup> The result: a hugely powerful meatpacking industry employing a "migrant industrial workforce," the industrial equivalent of itinerant farm workers (149). Most of these workers are encouraged to come (without papers) from places like Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and are subsequently treated like the cattle, subjected to the same brutally efficient push for high throughput. They are paid low wages, denied benefits and training, placed in dangerous environments, and pressured not to report injuries. By design, turnover is extremely high, making it difficult for workers to organize and defend

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, the meatpacking industry was a problem long before Ronald Reagan: around the turn of the century, Upton Sinclair described the horrifying conditions within Chicago's meatpacking plants. In response to his 1906 book *The Jungle*, citizens demanded safer meat. Meanwhile, the trust-busting activities of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson helped to demolish the so-called Beef Trust, leading to a relatively decentralized meatpacking industry populated by many regional players. But although food inspection got much better, the treatment of labor did not improve until after World War II, when high-skilled meatpacking workers received high wages, good benefits, and relative dignity in most U.S. slaughterhouses. Around 1960, however, a company called Iowa Beef Processors (IBP) instituted what Schlosser describes as a "revolution" (151): an assembly line style of meat processing that vastly increased throughput and made skilled workers unnecessary. Slowly, even people who worked in formerly progressive plants (like Monfort in Greeley, Colorado) began to lose wages, benefits, and protections. And in the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan encouraged centralization in the meatpacking industry, in effect rebuilding the monopolized Beef Trust that wielded power decades before.

their interests. Workers stay at a job for an average of a few months before moving on, often to meatpacking plants elsewhere. And while these large corporations take in big subsidies from governments, they have little loyalty to the places they exploit. Instead, they move from place to place in search of the best deal (luring workers from the most impoverished areas), forcing nations, states, regions, and cities to compete for the privilege of hosting them and their mixed fallout. The upshot, as Schlosser puts it, is a situation in which everyone and everything is in motion: the assembly lines, the steers, the workers, the commodified beef, and the corporations themselves. But while this motion is liberating and empowering for the corporations, it is largely unpleasant for the workers, who feel coerced into a difficult nomadic life:

Moving constantly is hard on their personal lives and their families. Most of these new industrial migrants would gladly stay in one job and settle in one spot, if the wages and the working conditions were good. The nation's meatpacking firms, on the other hand, have proven themselves to be far less committed to remaining in a particular community....No longer locally owned, they feel no allegiance to any one place. (163)

Yet those companies *are* in place. The neoliberalization of the meatpacking industry is also a process of Western-ization, as agricultural companies have moved from eastern centers like Chicago toward Western places like Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, and South Dakota. As Schlosser puts it, “The relentless low-cost competition from IBP [the meatpacking company Iowa Beef Processors] presented old-line Chicago meatpackers with a stark choice: go west or go out of business. Instead of symbolizing democracy and freedom, going west meant getting cheap labor” (155). And upon further inspection, it becomes clear that Schlosser’s entire book is a story of the U.S. West—or more exactly, of the transnational region that Americo Paredes called Greater Mexico. The march of fast food culture—and the parallel reshaping of agriculture, food processing, labor, and



the built environment—has occurred alongside the post-WWII development of the West. The high-growth period for fast food restaurants, it turns out, occurred after 1968, presaging the birth of what historian William Leach describes as the “intermodal” society (of container shipping technologies, communications networks, and a deregulated business environment) that connects the U.S. to the rest of the globe, and enables rapid flows of goods and information (54). Thus fast food culture is an important aspect of an entire global culture and economy built around high technology, efficiency, and throughput—and in the U.S. this culture reaches its epicenter in the West. Here we find a powerfully dominant automobile culture, a mythology of consumer pleasure rooted in sites like Disneyland, and a strange paradox: anti-government rhetoric sprouting alongside the benefits of government-financed projects, from freeways and military-industrial hubs to dams and research centers (and crucially, subsidies for fast food-related industries).<sup>3</sup>

Yet as Schlosser’s focus on the effectively invisible world of the migrant industrial workforce makes clear, New Western space is not only built on motion, but on inequality and exclusion; its mobile network is also highly segmented, dispersed, and unevenly constructed, such that it keeps “lower” spaces (meat-packing plants, apartment housing, dumping grounds, rural hinterlands, fast food kitchens) separate from “higher” ones (research campuses, gentrified urban cores, wealthy exurbs, and regulated “natural”

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<sup>3</sup> The fast food industry, for example, initially emerged from Southern California, a region largely settled during the age of the automobile; it depended on (and helped solidify) the automobile culture as an indelible fact of U.S. life. And just as neoliberalism requires state involvement even as it officially champions the free market, the U.S. West is defined both by dependence on government largesse and antipathy to its restrictions. Restaurants like McDonald’s took off in Western regions characterized by twin facets: conservative free-market politics on the one hand, and heavy government involvement on the other. The Sunbelt economy was based on military spending, on large-scale irrigation projects, and on the interstate highway system. And fast food chains have long benefitted from tax breaks, government subsidies (for hiring new workers, even if the workers only last a few months), and infrastructure development.

areas). Appropriately enough, the film *Fast Food Nation*, set in the fictional town of Cody, depicts a spatial network both connected and divided, and driven by the imperatives of capital (from real estate companies and developers to the automobile industry and California-based fast food companies). Together, these industries exert a spectral influence across a whole range of landscapes and separated spaces: Mexican villages (and the desert borderlands through which the workers travel), low quality worker housing in flophouse hotels, suburban homes and their connected public schools, strip malls, party sites in the mountains above the city, college dorm rooms, and old-style ranchlands squeezed by new commercial and housing developments. And if in a sense all these spaces are unified—similarly situated beneath the spectral dome of capital—they are also mutually inaccessible and socially incommensurable, often divided by powerful boundaries. In Cody, encounters and confrontations are kept at a minimum, especially between classes. Public spaces, insofar as they exist, are mostly dominated by cars. In its suburban neighborhoods, we see no people outside talking with each other. Thus, like the façade of the slaughterhouse, Cody conceals from many of its citizens the gothic horrors occurring in its secret spaces.

Since the spaces of *Fast Food Nation* remain largely separated from each other despite their imbrication in a common network, it is appropriate that the various narratives in this seemingly haphazard, tipsy (even awkward) film never truly connect or add up, as it were. If in other popular multinarrative films like *Crash* and *Babel*—as in the urban novels of Charles Dickens—separate narrative threads resolve through important coincidences, such that disparate characters meet or collide in a catharsis of one kind or another, in *Fast Food Nation* no such catharsis arrives. And contrasted with

these other films, which seem to trumpet their importance, *Fast Food Nation* feels tossed-off and anticlimactic, as if mocking the idea of its importance. None of its characters succeed in any triumphal sense, and strangely, what initially seems to be its main character (a corporate marketing executive played by Greg Kinnear) disappears halfway through the film after failing to blow the whistle on his company. We are left, instead, with the ineffectual protests of a group of college-age activists (who resent the company's treatment of animals, workers, and the environment) and the grinding struggles of the immigrant workers. Yet these two groups, who would seem to have common cause in their critique of Uni-Globe, never meet, since the film can imagine no social space in which they would actually encounter each other, either in conflict or in solidarity. In the face of such a spatial regime, the filmmakers are skeptical that their film will have a significant impact on producing the consciousness required for transformation.

However meandering, the film is not devoid of desire, narrative meaning, urgency, or a sense of history. It is not an example of what Bill Buford described in the early 1980s as an avoidance of the "large historical statement" in U.S. fiction (cited in Jameson *The Seeds of Time* 149). On the contrary, *Fast Food Nation* seems positively driven by an agenda of social transformation, even if it can hardly imagine how such reforms might take place. But rather than *resolving* its tensions and contradictions (above all, the failure of common class interests to coalesce in a productive movement) in a cheap or sentimental way, *Fast Food Nation* allows those contradictions to hang in the air. Its spatio-temporality is above all dialectical; it dramatizes a particular, contingent conjuncture in which—at least in principle—events could go any number of ways,

depending on how those contradictions are resolved. This unremitting dialectical approach, in fact, explains the apparently wayward style of the narration, in which even failure is not final. At one point, for example, the college-age activists enact a farcical plan to free the cows from the Uni-Globe feedlot, but fail to achieve their objective since the cows refuse to move from their enclosure. This scene could be interpreted as a fatalistic symbol of the inevitable failure of Americans to break out of their passive role as fattened cattle, so to speak. But such a metaphysical reading ignores the experimental nature of the rescue attempt; Paco, one of the students, insists that if they had a “cattle prod” they might have succeeded. In light of his revisions, we should not necessarily interpret the passivity of the cows as a timeless judgment; rather, a single, historically situated attempt resulted in contingent failure. One of the students, Alice (Avril Levine) does in fact interpret the failure as a grand narrative of loss: “Why do the bad guys always win?” Paco, however, responds curtly, “They win until they don’t.” In other words, although oppressive structures exist, events are unpredictable: the company will continue to mistreat animals and workers until historical conditions change.

In terms of history, then, the film deploys a calendar shot through with an explosive sense of time, such that even if its characters fail to band together to transform the structures that shape their world, the (dim) possibility remains that eventually they will. Its seemingly lackadaisical, improvised vibe is actually congruent with the always imminent possibility of intrusion and change. In contrast to the fast food world, which portrays itself as natural, determined, and inevitable, *Fast Food Nation* portrays temporality as up for grabs, interruptible, surprising, and out of joint. The film’s temporal-existential energy is supplied most clearly by Uncle Pete (Ethan Hawke), a

former inhabitant of Cody who unexpectedly drops in on his niece Amber (Ashley Johnson) and his sister Cindy (Patricia Arquette). Although he is only in town for a night, and although Amber's mother Cindy rails in a half-annoyed way about Uncle Pete's wacky ideas, he profoundly influences his niece by warning her about the danger of becoming trapped in Cody and urging her to consider her life direction. His advice, however, is phrased with the film's peculiar mix of urgency and self-effacement. Although he claims to have no absolute answers ("Do not listen to me"), he interrogates Amber and interjects a note of doubt into her psyche. After he tells a story about getting kicked out of the University of Colorado for protesting its investments in apartheid South Africa, she quits her job, initiates relationships with local college students, and participates in the illegal protest at the feedlot. Uncle Pete's rhetorical structure ("Don't listen to me—but really, listen to me") is also the rhetorical structure of the film: an urgent encouragement combined with a pose of inadequacy that leaves a great deal on the audience's shoulders.

Uncle Pete's out of joint appearance provides the film with a key moment of existential intensity, since in interrupting its narrative he disrupts the flow of homogenous time and renders history urgently present. By evoking the past (the anti-apartheid struggle, Cindy's early pregnancy, the transformation of Cody according to the dictates of neoliberal development), Pete urges Cindy and Amber to become subjectively engaged, to give up fetishes like "hope," or the "fun" provided by what Cindy describes as the new activities available in Cody ("You know, I actually think it's better now. There's more stuff to do"). He frames the issue in narrative terms, urging Amber to practice what Peter Brooks calls "anticipation of retrospection"—to imagine today from a future perspective

(23). In doing so, he also urges the viewer to pause, to step back and consider, even to question hysterically. Pete seems to truly care for his niece, enough to visit her, take her out, and drill her with his questions. And because he cares about her, he cannot accept Cody as it has become. Pete understands that he has neither a halo nor all the answers (“I’m not trying to come across like some Polly Perfect here. Alright? I’m going to make some cabinets for some rich New York investment banker fuck who probably spends two weeks a year at his Montana ranch, so don’t listen to me.”) But he nevertheless sticks to his guns, refusing to celebrate the transformation of Cody. In response to Cindy’s half-mocking complaints—that Pete “hates everything,” that she doesn’t have time to think about politics, that “both Democrats and Republicans are crooks”—Pete suggests that such cynical resignation is exactly what power wants: “This is why revolutions are meant for the young.” In such ways, Pete (laughingly) tries to open up a sense of history as an unfolding process rooted in a historical calendar.

Pete’s uncertain salvo, both ironic and deadly serious, mirrors the approach of the film itself, which also functions as a serious game of interruption in a bedeviled context. Like many of its allegorical characters, Linklater and Schlosser’s film is occasionally clumsy and not always successful, but it is audacious in its own way; it is an experiment, a low-budget film made on the run, a stab in the dark. As they point out in their commentary on the movie, Schlosser and Linklater barely managed to make the film because of low funding, and the cast and crew were often forced to squeeze many hours of filming into a single day. Finally, its controversial themes resulted not only in marketing difficulties, but in concrete filmmaking challenges: the film includes unprecedented images of the inner workings of meat-packing facilities, including shots of

the “kill floor,” the nightmarish world of decapitation and the setting for the film’s resolution (the filmmakers could only gain access to a Mexican meat-packing plant, since American plants refused them entry; and even in the Mexican plant, their time was restricted, forcing them to film in a hit-and-run *guerrilla* manner, as it were). Thus if the filmmakers’ risks do not match the risks of the film’s immigrant characters, *Fast Food Nation* nevertheless affirms an ethos of resourceful and experimental energy captured in the Spanish term *rascuache*, best translated as “making do with what is available.” Its heroes are ambitious border-crossers, hemmed in by a structure of fear and obstacles, using experiment both as a potential way out and in order to create new collective formations. As audience-members, we are invited to join this clique of creative resistance modeled by a series of these formations: the filmmakers, the college activists, and the immigrant workers.

If we think in dialectical terms, then, we would be careful about ascribing some all-encompassing pessimism to *Fast Food Nation*, or even a fully coherent narrative of dominance and resistance; rather, as Fredric Jameson has put it, when we think dialectically we resist the urge to pin down a situation as unified or monolithic: “If at every moment in which we represent something to ourselves in a unified way, we try to undo that and see the contradictions and multiplicities behind that particular existence, then we are thinking dialectically” (“Marxism and the History of Theory” 160). Seen through such a lens, *Fast Food Nation* does not depict a hopeless situation—even if one of its most articulate characters (dialectically) cautions against hope itself (Uncle Pete: ““Don’t just hope. You can’t just sit back and hope. You have to do something. In a town like this, hope will kill you.”) As I have tried to illustrate, even its most traumatic scenes

are partially undone by alternative affective currents. Francisco's horrifying accident also reminds us of the man's humor, physical expressiveness, and risk-taking openness toward the world. Even the scene's surprising quality reminds us that grace or luck can surprise and intrude, just as violence can. And Sylvia's trauma at the gut table (and at the hands of Mike) is not simply a one-way story of victimization; after all, she only undergoes these ordeals because of a fierce attachment to Raul, and because she hopes that her dance with the devil will open up unexpected doors. In sinking to the abject level of what Slavoj Žižek has called "subjective destitution"—in facing the excremental Real not only at the heart of a cow, but also at the heart of human subjectivity and social life—she perhaps finds an unexpected strength (*The Ticklish Subject* 161).

We, as viewers, also sense this strength. Merely by surviving in this bedeviled space, Sylvia, Coco, Francisco, and Raul reiterate the appeal of the gothic mode, which in Steven Bruhm's terms can enact a kind of "exorcism" on the reader/viewer by facilitating "survival by proxy" (272, 273); by identifying with the "traumatized subject" of gothic narrative, we can achieve an inoculation against fear, reaffirm the value of life in the midst of death and loss, and take courage from the very act of survival (272). He cites Cathy Caruth on the importance of narrating trauma as a way of moving beyond it: "To listen to the crisis of a trauma...is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is how to listen to departure" (cited in Bruhm 273). In this case, the trauma of proletarianization in a neoliberal U.S. urban space is not the end of the road, but the beginning—a point of departure that rings with the losses experienced across an entire terrain of struggle.



Dragged to the Bottom: Biology and Spectrality in the New North

As is the case with other feedlots (and slaughterhouses) across the high plains, the feeder cattle on the ground at Wilderado represent but a subset of an intricate, integrated global system of beef production, marketing and distribution. This system is enabled by certain trade agreements (GATT, NAFTA), by the flexibility of transnational capital, and by the mobility of the largely immigrant labor force staffing the feedlots and packing plants and trucking companies typically owned by multinational agribusiness corporations. It is a system whose feedlots and slaughterhouses are typically located in close proximity not only to supplies of grain but also to the interstate highway system that enables the cattle to be trucked efficiently from ranch, to feedlot, to slaughterhouse, and then to retail stores and to coastal ports for the export market. It is a system enabled by container shipping technology at these distant ports to which the highways lead, and it is an integrated system in that the same container shipping and interstate transportation corridors can be and are used to import as well as to export frozen beef. *In short, there is the actual steer living on the ground and gorging on the hormone-laced feed at this place called Wilderado, and there is this actual steer's spectral or virtual double, the "world steer," an entirely fictive but nevertheless real bovine creature produced by the flow of the global commodity futures market—an abstract creature, in short, whose shifting exchange value overdetermines the actual steers and feeder cows on the ground and fouling the space of local places in, say, Texas, Nebraska, Australia, and Argentina.*

--Stephen Tatum, "Spectrality and the Postregional Interface" (5 my emphasis)

Yes, everything is interconnected. And it sucks.—Timothy Morton, from *The Ecological Thought* (33)

In rehearsing the details of a recent film in the contemporary West, I hope to indicate the guiding terms and principles of this dissertation, which revolves around three key themes: place and the regional (specifically the transnational U.S. West), the gothic narrative form, and the neoliberal. Specifically, I want to argue that in the past several decades, and especially since the collapse of Soviet communism in 1989, people across the planet have struggled with what is more or less a common problem: the difficulty of establishing meaningful narratives in an increasingly connected and hypercapitalized world. As George Lipsitz has put it, so-called globalization is often presented in triumphalist terms, but whatever its positive aspects, it also produces trauma:

For millions of people around the world, the present moment may seem like midnight. The rapid movement across the globe of people, products, ideas, and images seems to undermine foundational certainties about the meaning of local

and national identities, the value of personal and collective histories, and the solidity of social relationships and social networks. New forms of economic activity produce both astounding wealth and and appalling poverty—sometimes in the same locations. New technologies liberate us from tiresome tasks yet create unprecedented environmental dangers. In some respects global marketing brings the people of the world closer together than ever before, yet consuming the same products, enjoying the same entertainments or working for the same employers does not seem to make us any less divided, as old antagonisms and new enmities create violent conflicts on every continent. (3)

Since the acid bath of capitalist production creates vast wealth, but also poverty and social disintegration, postmodern subjects are often hard-pressed to find a sense of meaning, home, place, and structure. Like the characters in *Fast Food Nation*, they often find themselves lost, despairing, or confused about their place in the world. But precisely because the regime of flexible accumulation destabilizes once-meaningful narratives and social networks, it also gives rise to compensatory counter-narratives, some quaint (local commerce movements, nostalgic marketing schemes) and some quite dangerous (fundamentalism, tribalism, and various forms of cultural nationalism). And although it reduces differences in some ways (people around the world shop at Wal-Mart), it also *produces and profits from differences*, since marketing to various niche groups can be a lucrative enterprise, and because people divided by market segments are less likely to band together in opposition to neoliberal hegemony.

When it comes to contemporary U.S. cultural nationalism—and particularly, the nostalgia among many white citizens for a clear-cut moral narrative built on Anglo-Protestant dominance—the imagined space of the West has played an important role. Faced with a series of trends since the 1970s (deindustrialization, the rise of global economic competitors, outsourcing and offshoring of jobs, national disgrace in places from Vietnam to Iraq, and the increasingly nonwhite demographic character of the

country), many white Americans have followed Ronald Reagan and looked to the frontier West as a nostalgic pastoral space: a day-lit and God-ordained fountain of freedom, reinvention, and innocence. Leave the gothic stories to the South and the East, such people might say. Those were the spaces of civil war, class conflict, and slavery. The frontier West, by contrast, was (and remains) the space of morning, the place to go in order to get away from the past and create a new Eden. It evokes the space where the jackpot was always around the corner, where conflicts and crowds (and repressive customs and hierarchies) could be escaped. As a result, the West is often the imaginative site toward which white Americans retreat in order to deny the globally interconnected spaces of the modern and the postmodern. Whether through movies and novels, wilderness backpacking trips, or rustic home décor, the West lives on, even if its celebration often betrays notes of melancholia, desperation, or fetishistic denial among its devotees.

However, as others have registered, such an escapist fantasy cannot withstand the shocks of rapid global economic and cultural flows. Writing in 2000, in the wake of the NAFTA agreements, essayist Richard Rodriguez saw a situation in which “white” increasingly faced uncanny incursions of “brown.” These terms do not signify some kind of transhistorical racial essence, but rather illuminate specific reactions to the trends of neoliberal uneven development. In Rodriguez’s hands, “brown” signifies impurity, blurred boundaries, and miscegenation: “Fugue and funk. Brown, the color of consort; brown, the color of illicit passion—not blue—brown, the shade of love and drawn shades and of love children, so-called...secret cousins; brown, the stench of rape and of shame, sin, slippage, birth” (133). Brown is historical rather than mythological, the body rather

than transcendence. It is erotic and tactical, and not at all innocent. In contrast, “white” for Rodriguez implies a strained insistence on purity and separation: “every knuckle of America strained to accomplish an assertion: I am innocent” (200). With its desire for borders, whiteness feels itself besieged from without, its fiction of individual sovereignty inundated with the too-close proximity of encroaching bodies:

Biology is a metaphor for life at the bottom, or undifferentiated life...the stew of humanity...And every once in a while, Americans are dragged to the bottom. The jury room. The army physical. The department of motor vehicles. The emergency room. The United Airlines counter. The Last Judgement. Undifferentiated life is a test of the American I, whereby each must figure out the ‘system’ and seek her own advantage—must figure out a way to get the fuck out of here. (213-214)

Rodriguez later helps explain the post-Reagan West (and the impulse to “get the fuck out of here”) through his unique geographical notion of the “New North,” a space toward which Anglo/Protestant cultural nationalism has presumably been retreating. If, as he argues, the “impulse of the Wild West was not wildness but domesticity” (150), the Northern part of the American West, the “New North,” has become an imaginary space of decontamination, an attempt to avoid the conflicts of history and the proximity of crowded biology. In the symbolic world signified by places like Idaho, Utah, Montana, and Alaska, we find a series of essentialisms: American exceptionalism, ecospiritual nature worship, racial difference, and fundamentalist Constitutionalism. The common denominator here is a desire for innocence and unfettered space: “The New North is where environmentalists seek a purer air or stream, a less crowded freeway.... where nostalgic skinheads pursue the American Normal Rockwell idyll, fleeing Hispanics who swarm the construction sites of L.A.” (157). The New North, then, is an imaginative site far from what Rodriguez calls “undifferentiated life,” and what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, or naked life—the very condition of being dominated by sovereignty (in

whatever form). It is fitting, then, that Rodriguez's examples of confrontation with the "stew of humanity" involve both governmental agencies (the army, the DIV, the jury) and private companies (airline counters): in all of these spaces, we find ourselves recognizing the power of sovereignty over our biological bodies. And this encroachment on the "American I" is what whiteness cannot abide, what opens up a space for the imaginary New North. In this fantasmic space self-sovereignty can receive its vital life support, whether in the form of a wilderness fantasy or a test of racial purity—or both.

As a manifestation of the unsymbolizable Lacanian Real, then, Rodriguez's *biology* evokes what Slavoj Žižek describes as the terrifying Neighbor: "what is toxic is ultimately the Neighbor as such, the abyss of its desire and its obscene enjoyment. The ultimate aim of all rules governing interpersonal relations, then, is to quarantine or neutralize this toxic dimension, to reduce the Neighbor to a fellow man" (*First as Tragedy* 46). The bodies (and desires, and enjoyments) of others, in their too-proximate quality, challenge the symbolic structure in which we would like to fit comfortably. But is not Rodriguez missing something here? In using the word *biology*—and focusing on *physical* intrusions into personal space—Rodriguez obscures the fact that today, many of the global flows that disrupt the sovereignty of bodies (individual and national) are not biological in any meaningful sense, but *abstract*. Or, to put it another way, they are what theorist Gayatri Spivak describes as *spectral*. For Stephen Tatum (who draws on Spivak here, but focuses on the U.S. West) even rural spaces have become spectralized, since they function as a staging ground for "the dematerialization of peoples and things that operates across the restructured landscape of multinational corporate capitalism." In the hyper-capitalized digital postmodern context, "actual physical topographies are

transformed into virtual or simulated landscapes of grids and points, of circuits and networks through which capital, laboring bodies, images, and commodities flow” (15). Thus alongside the many physical manifestations of shock experience—Neighbors, migrants, shit, waiting in lines—we find another manifestation of the Real in the flows of finance: the disappearance of funds here, the intrusion of new factories there, the earthquake of a stock market crash or a liquidity crisis.

Such spectrality can be difficult to trace, but is no less powerful for its immaterial quality. The shifting landscape of the rural West as described by Tatum, “with its *maquiladores* and factory farms and tribal lands and toxic landscapes and suburban edge cities”—not to mention “the pulsing, ghostly flow of immaterial capital and intellectual property through the electronic portals of...satellite, digital, and computer technologies”—is produced and reproduced according to abstract imperatives that seem designed to make physical confrontation difficult, unlikely (14, 15). How many of us have actually been to a factory farm, a *maquila*, or even a technological research center? But one might easily grant to this spectral form of the Real a driving force, such that the biological Real functions as its after-effect. In *Fast Food Nation*, the most traumatic manifestations of the biological Real emerge in a spectral framework which prioritizes throughput over people; from a purely economic point of view, Francisco’s accident is a mere blip, an instance of collateral damage in an otherwise efficient and profitable enterprise. Faced with what Schlosser calls “corporate indifference,” (186) Francisco may experience a powerlessness and invisibility as traumatizing as the accident, such that the corporation’s unassimilable operations appear as implacable and sublime as the whirring blades that shred his legs. In his anger, he cannot even point to a human enemy, a “bad”

person to blame, but instead faces “something out of science fiction,” the logic of an auto-piloted machine that creates *en masse* but also destroys. As an Andean neophyte might put it, *the true owner of the meat-packing plant is the devil*. In *Fast Food Nation*, then, we see dramatized in disturbing fashion a contradictory meeting-point, where the supposedly toxic South (with its biology) and the New North cannot be effectively separated, but exist in the same dialectical contact zone.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, it is only because U.S. culture so often invests the West with utopian energy in the first place that it can function as a symptomal point of entry, perhaps the *best* place to deconstruct the tropes that have come to stand for U.S. cultural nationalism as such (individualism, autonomy, freedom, God-given power), especially given that neoliberal ideologues have deployed these same tropes in the new frontier of an ever-expanding global economy. The contemporary West is characteristically a site of intense contradictions. To begin with, although it stands as a locus for narratives of national pride and power, the West is fully integrated into a global economy dominated by an increasingly off-ground, transnational ruling class. But we can point to further contradictions: Although it easily summons archaic images of cowboys and Indians, it is perhaps the most technologized and administered region of the country, since its development occurred latest; a space of great natural beauty, its people are often prodigal with resources, spewing carbon dioxide and nuclear fallout into the air; and if it is the site of luck and discovery, embodied in a number of “rushes”—not only the Gold Rush and related ore-induced frenzies, but oil and gas booms, land rushes, technology and real

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<sup>4</sup> Given that *Fast Food Nation* is partly filmed in Colorado Springs (and that Schlosser’s book makes much use of the city), it is perhaps noteworthy (if only in a metaphorical sense) that Colorado Springs is an ecosystemic contact zone as well. It marks the space in which three ecosystems meet: the Western rocky mountain area, the southwestern desert region, and the eastern plains.

estate bubbles, and other potential jackpots that give rise to big winners—it is also the site of despair, destruction, disappointment, since most people were either excluded from the winnings or displaced by them. Finally, if the West reveres the individual (the lone prospector, the heroic cowboy, the solitary hiker), it is also the site of the individual's undoing in a number of ways: through the centralized control of corporations aided and abetted by the federal government, through social-ecological disasters like the Dust Bowl and climate-induced wildfires, and through the impersonal quality of the boom-and-bust cycles in the first place.

Perhaps above all, the West is contradictory because it is a *place* dedicated to constant mobility, and thus evasion. Critic Robert Seguin has called attention to the way two spatio-cultural tropes (the *frontier* and the *pastoral*) combine forces in U.S. culture to hide the reality of class conflict

With frontier mythology, it is precisely movement and dynamism that are emphasized, a continual movement forward that keeps one ahead of the pressures of society, ahead of the inextricable webs of economic dependency and inhabiting an 'empty' space suitable for peremptory and often violent acts of self-creation (which inevitably set loose a free-market logic in their wake, which must be evaded yet again). Pastoralism, meanwhile, seeks a retreat from the market...through a strategic inertia, through a small-scale, self-maintaining, homeostatic production system. (11)

Both tropes have been regular features in cultural representations of the U.S. West, and although seemingly different, they are profoundly connected. The symbol of the *frontier*—initially embodied in land available for settlement, but later imagined in more metaphorical terms—has ideologically functioned as a “safety valve” that mitigates class conflict by providing a space in which the supposedly “artificial” constraints of class can give way to a more “natural” field of opportunity. But such desires for dynamism often coincide with a pastoral wish to flee a complex and increasingly urbanized world of



power, such that the West is often rendered as a simplified pastoral idyll defined by a “beautiful relation between rich and poor...a feeling of solidarity between classes” (William Empson, cited in Seguin 25). The West, then, can work as both pastoral and frontier; on the one hand, dynamism itself is pastoralized (treated as a smooth, egalitarian process of expansion and renewal), while on the other, the sentimental pastoral beckons as an imaginative retreat from the dislocating effects of actual capitalist expansion.

Insofar as we remain in the grip of a frontier mythology (or its uncanny flipside, the pastoral Eden), we remain incapable of developing places geared toward goals incompatible with such fantasies: not only class consciousness, but nurturance, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility. In an age of global warming, terrorist movements, drone warfare, financial crises, capital flight, and the traumatic breakdowns in social networks described by Lipsitz, Western contradictions can no longer withstand the pressures operating on them. No place can be seen as separate from any other. We in the First World are haunted not simply by crimes of the past (from colonialism and racism to war and class conflict), but by crimes of the present that emerge in uncanny ways from near and far: exploited service employees who make the system run, Chinese workers roused in the middle of the night from a company dormitory to rush in a quick order of I-Phones for export, migrant workers picking lettuce from California to Chile. In response, we must pull a difficult trick; we must simultaneously rebuild places disrupted by capitalist deterritorialization *and* forge deepened connections across borders. We must deny the safety valve mentality of the frontier fully as much as the stasis of the pastoral. And we must assert the power of narrative to establish more durable forms of meaning within a situation that is finally both unmappable and unpredictable.

My answer, then, to the contemporary need for reorientation is not to deny the trauma by clinging to a celebratory vision of a global village (or its perverse mirror-image in the cult of the fragmented, schizoid subject of postmodernity), nor to hunker down in nostalgic localist fantasies of a simpler, less connected world. Instead, we must work through the traumas of postmodernity by developing new and more haunted (and haunting) narratives. We should be willing to dig through remains, pry into dark corners, and prod into the vulnerable places of memory and experience. And insofar as the West often functions as a fetish that enables U.S. cultural nationalists to evade their connection to a whole series of subjugated and invisible Others (both at home and abroad), we should insist on imagining the West as a gothic space. In sum, I argue for what I call a *gothic quest for place*, built on the premise that in a rapidly changing and interconnected world, no place can be separate, safe, or permanent. It is because we are uncomfortably, uncannily intimate with each other across global space, that any quest for place must be gothic; we will always be haunted by Others who will often seem too close, who will challenge our sense of psychic, physical, political, and ecological wholeness. And it will be gothic because some of these Others will testify to the fact that our interconnected world involves uneven access to power, visibility, and even claims to ontological being. It is these repressed figures who embody most intensely (and most frightfully) the position of everyone else in the system: permeable, vulnerable, acted upon. Thus in the face of a capitalist poetics of disattachment (the commodity fetish, the reification of social roles, its segmented spaces and invisible people), we must strive to produce a radically egalitarian version of what Bill Brown has seen in the phenomenon of regionalism more generally: a new “poetics of attachment,” this time capable of

mobilizing resistance across borders in order to produce durable and nurturing places interlinked from below (92).

## CHAPTER 1

### SHOCK AND AWE IN THE GLOBAL MESH

A state of shock is not just what happens when something bad happens to us. It is what happens to us when we lose our narrative, when we lose our story, when we become disoriented. What keeps us oriented and alert and out of shock is our history. So a period of crisis like the one we're in is a very good time to think about history, to think about continuities, to think about roots. It's a good time to place ourselves in the longer human story of struggle.

--Naomi Klein, from the Michael Winterbottom film *The Shock Doctrine*

Todo se mueve / La tierra se mueve / Las piernas se mueven / El agua se mueve / El tiempo se mueve / La sangre se mueve / Cuando yo recito tu te mueves.

Everything moves / The land moves / Legs move / The water moves / Time moves / Blood moves / When I sing, you move.

--Calle 13, from "Todo se Mueve"

The modern age compels us to think big...Any thinking that avoids this 'totality' is part of the problem.

—Timothy Morton, from *The Ecological Thought* (4)

#### Postmodernity and Narrative

It is my contention that postmodernity produces a number of shocks like the ones described by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*: climate-induced hurricanes and other disasters, droughts, terror attacks, wars, mass migrations, instant slums, global financial crises (and ensuing austerity policies), and capital flight, to name a few. And to Klein's shocks, we might add the *psychic* dislocations implied by what media theorist Douglas Rushkoff calls "present shock": the way participants in digital capitalism are

systematically prevented from stepping back from short-term, drive-inducing stimuli in order to access a sense of past and future. As Klein registers, what makes these traumas especially difficult is that they occur within a disorienting postmodern context in which meaningful, stabilizing narratives are either unavailable or severely challenged. I do not claim that the fact of trauma makes postmodernity new, since who could pretend that similar shocks have never happened before? Karl Marx, writing in 1848, famously described capitalist modernity as a storm of “everlasting uncertainty and agitation” in which “all that is solid melts into air” (38). And Walter Benjamin, writing in the early twentieth century, described “shock experience” (*Chockerlebnis*) as constitutive of modern life, as people flocked into cities, said farewell to archaic modes of production, and died in unimaginably violent wars. But although Benjamin used the word *Erlebnis* (“isolated experience”) to describe experience becoming increasingly difficult to narrate, people during his time nonetheless employed metanarratives that helped them explain their situations to themselves: nationalism, communism, tribalism, and religion, to name a few. Meanwhile, the culture industry and the science of marketing—though certainly powerful--were relatively new and rudimentary.

In the era of late capitalism, however, we face the advanced fulfillment of both Marx’s prophecies about the chaotic structure of the global economy *and* the advanced development of what Bernard Stiegler has described as the psychotechnical management of consumption. On the production front, capital in recent decades has reclaimed the rights of flexibility that it briefly relinquished during the post-New Deal Fordist-Keynesian window; in the so-called neoliberal economy, capital is free to go wherever it wants, such that individual nations, regions, and territories retain increasingly less control

over the rapid flows on which their economic status depends, and must compete with each other to flatter global capital. And if capital has expanded its *geographical* reach in an attempt to penetrate new markets and exploit new workers, it has also increasingly colonized *psychic* space in a comparable expansion of what Stiegler calls “psychopower” (46). We no longer live in an economy based on production or contribution, but an economy based on consumption that seeks to evade the tendency of falling profits by ruthlessly monetizing libidinal energy (human desires and drives) through communications technologies and marketing. Both of these developments—geographical penetration and psychic saturation—disrupt previous structures that once facilitated meaningful narratives of identity over time. And they take place in a context defined by the unprecedented *velocity of flows*: of images, information, commodities, capital, and (some) people.

The rise of this post-Fordist consumer economy parallels the rise of cultural postmodernism, in which what Jean-Francois Lyotard famously described as “grand narratives” have become unmoored. For many postmodernists, narratives of universal emancipation—communism, Christianity, modernism—no longer seem viable; instead, they have given up on the idea of large-scale social transformation and instead focus their attention on micronarratives that speak to a heterogeneous and complex world. And they deny the supposedly “natural” quality of any of them. Instead, they emphasize the falsity of a number of orthodoxies: the belief that the planet Earth is a self-balancing system conducive to life, the God-given quality of national and local peoples, and the essential reality of categories like race, ethnicity, and gender. And if in some ways this postmodern framework can be liberating, especially for people who had once been trapped within

boxes prescribed by the category of the natural, the collapse of metanarratives also produced subjects particularly susceptible to the shaping efforts of capital. If capital entered a phase of flexible accumulation in the 1970s, its increasing dominance over the material, social, and psychic domains enabled it to foster similarly *flexible human beings*. Such people could be expected to move away from their communities of origin, adapt to new and contingent cultures continually reformulated to suit the accumulation of capital, and renege on once-binding attachments to others. Even the postmodern emphasis on heterogeneous micronarratives plays into the hands of capital, since “different” people could be sold different (and ever-shifting) products to suit their protean identities. And since emancipatory “grand narratives” could be labeled as oppressive and universalist, ruling class interests could rest easily in the expectation that a broadly based challenge to capitalist hegemony would never gain prominence.

If any metanarrative has emerged in recent years, then, it is that prescribed by the Washington Consensus around free market capitalism, formal democracy, and liberal pluralism—what Francis Fukayama, writing in the wake of the collapse of Soviet Communism, called “the end of history.” Through the so-called Bretton Woods organizations that emerged alongside U.S. hegemony after World War II (the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund), the new global order has pushed nations around the world to submit to so-called *structural adjustment* policies: fiscal austerity (via the diminishment of government-supported social protection), the reduction of barriers to foreign trade and investment, privatization of formerly public services (and formerly public or common resources), and a preference for technocratic governance as opposed to bottom-up democratic initiative. This

neoliberal order—what David Harvey has described as a wager “that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 2) –picked up steam in the late 1970s, such that by 2005 one of its ideologues, the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, could announce “the irrefutable fact that more open and competitive markets are the only sustainable vehicle for growing a nation out of poverty” (cited in Harvey *Cosmopolitanism* 52). The role of government, in such a view, mostly involves creating a “good business climate” through incentives designed to attract financial investment and jobs (53). And culturally, the various peoples around the globe should adopt a set of neoliberal values: hard work, openness to change and new technologies, individual initiative and responsibility, and respect for equal rights (especially property rights). Since older forms of community reciprocity or social caretaking can easily contradict a culture built around the principle of mutual exploitation, they must be outgrown, or at least subsumed beneath market imperatives (52).

Nonetheless, this neoliberal global capitalist narrative, however utopian at times, does not offer *meaning* in the same way that previous metanarratives did. Its supporters rarely present it as an ideology at all, but as a neutral machine that *works* in an abstract way to produce a given rate of growth, productivity, and so on; they feel little need to specify why such numbers might be desirable for specific people on the ground, and never guarantee that all people will benefit. Thus although the neoliberal gamble relies on an optimistic projection of endless gains, it does not prescribe what people should value, or provide its subjects with a meaningful narrative in which to participate. Instead, it



mobilizes them individually and commands them (tautologically) to pursue their own interest, as long as that interest coincides with the formal rules of the neoliberal structure. For that reason, theorist Alain Badiou has argued that global capitalism does not produce a “world” in the same way that other narratives (Christianity, Confucianism, communism, or the varieties of nationalism) have. Rather, in Slavoj Žižek’s summary,

Capitalism is the first socio-economic order which de-totalizes meaning... (There is no global ‘capitalist world view,’ no ‘capitalist civilization’ proper; the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations, from Christian to Hindu and Buddhist.) Capitalism’s global dimension can be formulated only at the level of truth-without-meaning, as the ‘Real’ of the global market mechanisms. (*First as Tragedy* 25).

Because capitalism does not provide a way for individual subjects to relate to a meaningful social totality, it effectively outsources the production of meaning to other players, including the essentialisms officially disowned by cultural postmodernists (now recast in terms of diversity): to nationalist or localist patriotism, to art, to notions of cultural identity (often based on race and ethnicity), and above all to religion. There are no official monuments to capitalism, and no one volunteers to die for its functioning; its only justification lies in its efficacy, such that when it results in crises (like the most recent one), its defenders can only reassure them that the crisis will pass and all will be well.

Not only does global capitalism fail to offer a “world” to its participants, but it resists narrative formulation because its operations are so complex, opaque, and wide-ranging that no coherent story can be drawn from them. Fredric Jameson, in his classic work on postmodernism, described in 1984 the difficulty for postmodern subjects of producing a “cognitive map” that might help them situate themselves in their

surroundings. In his oft-cited analysis of Los Angeles, he describes the Westin Bonaventure Hotel as a “postmodern hyperspace” that

has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually...the symbol and analagon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (44)

In the ever-shifting world of flexible accumulation, keeping up with the network that connects capital, labor, and consumption becomes an increasingly daunting task. Faced with an object in my life world (a cup of coffee, say), I am hard-pressed to understand who produced it, under what conditions, and why I am buying it in the first place. Pitted against and within the sublime Real of capital flows, but unable to assimilate its complex patterns into their subjectivity, postmodern subjects end up seizing on various fragments of experience in an effort to construct a meaningful story.

The fragmented quality of cognitive mapping matches the fragmented quality of the economy and culture that it tries to analyze. In “Culture and Finance Capital,” Jameson highlights the longstanding process of *autonomization* at work in capitalist modernity, through which “what were formerly parts of a whole become independent and self-sufficient” (264). This category of *autonomization* includes the older forms of *reification* identified by Georg Lukacs and others: the production of money, labor, and other commodities defined in terms of abstract exchange value and thus atomized equivalence; a segmented division of labor into separate spheres (like art, science, and manufacturing); and through Taylorization, the transformation of labor from an artisanal workshop context (where a worker might see a product through from start to finish) into a more abstract process in which individual workers engage in repetitive, separate activities

and are denied access to the whole picture of production. However, Jameson also draws from theorist Giovanni Arrighi to illustrate how the increasing role of finance capital in a digital information economy *redoubles* these effects of reification, leading to a volatile (and ultimately unsustainable) situation of “capital flight”:

Capital itself becomes free-floating. It separates from the concrete context of its productive geography. Money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense), as though somehow in the national moment money still had a content. It was cotton money, or wheat money, textile money, railroad money, and the like. Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, it separates itself from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight. (259)

The radical *autonomization* presupposed by finance capital (practiced as an abstract speculative game that loses contact with whatever “products” might underlay the trading, bundling, and betting) has cultural analogues in what Jameson sees as a culture of “extreme fragmentation” (265). The quick edits of TV commercials, for example, no longer have the alienating effects of older forms of surrealism, but simply comprise the banal form of lived experience in an advanced media culture powered by rapid digital transfers.

Because neoliberal culture does not simply presuppose the continual implosion of any structuring metanarrative, but often positively *revels* in fragmentation, Slavoj Žižek has described our post-1968 period as “post-Oedipal” (*The Ticklish Subject* 334). The archetypal postmodern individual, no longer subject to the paternal law of symbolic authority (but still subject to the obscene Father’s sadistic law of compulsory pleasure), becomes a pleasure-surfing fetishist, what Žižek calls “the polymorphously perverse subject following the superego injunction to enjoy” (*The Ticklish Subject* 248). Like the nomad in cyberspace, such an individual adopts various identities at will and transitions

between them willy-nilly in the pursuit of (now obligatory) enjoyment. And with paternal authority largely displaced, contemporary cultural voices rarely urge us to face the hysterical *symptom*, which causes doubt and anxiety, and nags us with a sense that things are somehow “out of joint” (*The Ticklish Subject* 224). Instead, in the post-Oedipal age, we can more often embrace the easier option of the perverse *fetish*, a part separated from the whole in such a way that clinging to its efficacious presence can suture the lack implied by the unavailability of that whole. For Žižek, the composer Schoenberg’s “extreme hysterical tension” typifies the symptomatic mode, while Stravinsky’s “pastiche-like traversing of all possible musical styles...with no real subjective engagement with any specific element or mode,” exemplifies the perverse mode (*The Ticklish Subject* 250). And such a transition has important political consequences. In Žižek’s description, *politics proper is the domain of hysteria* (an anxious desire to alleviate the symptom), while perversity is perfectly compatible with the carnival of late capitalism since it ensures certainty and enjoyment even in pain; even the most perverse pleasures can be incorporated into a market economy.<sup>5</sup> Žižek’s project, then, involves breaking through

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<sup>5</sup>Thus although the perverse subject often congratulates himself on escaping the symbolic mandate of the paternal law, in doing so he unwittingly subjects himself to an even more ferocious and insidious figure: the mocking superego, which exerts control not simply over his actions (“You must do this!”), but also over his experience of them (“You have to try this, and you must enjoy it!”). Žižek’s work is permeated with examples from a culture of obligatory enjoyment. Sometimes such superego injunctions appear in the most mundane environments; for instance, he points to a New York hotel sign as evidence of the unspoken power of these injunctions: “On the information sheet in a New York Hotel, I recently read: ‘Dear guest! To guarantee that you will fully enjoy your stay with us, this hotel is totally smoke-free. For any infringement of this regulation, you will be charged \$200.’ The beauty of this formulation, taken literally, is that you are to be punished for refusing to fully enjoy your stay....The superego imperative to enjoy thus functions as the reversal of Kant’s ‘Du kannst, den du sollst!’ (You can, because you must!); it relies on a ‘You must, because you can!’ That is to say, the superego aspect of today’s ‘non-repressive’ hedonism (the constant provocation we are exposed to, enjoining us to go right to the end and explore all modes of *jouissance*) resides in the way permitted *jouissance* necessarily turns into obligatory *jouissance*” (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* 58). With such a framework in mind, I would point to the “bucket list” phenomenon: a recent trend of books with titles that positively bludgeon the reader into a never-ending and obsessive search for enjoyment—or, more precisely, an admonition to enjoy as much as possible before death intervenes and puts an end to the search. Books like *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* and *1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die* impose on us a profound pressure, since they suggest that any

the certainty of the fetishist by instilling hysterical doubt in him: “The question of how we are to hystericize the subject caught in the closed loop of perversion (how we are to inculcate the dimension of lack and questioning in him) becomes more urgent in view of today’s political scene” (*The Ticklish Subject* 250).<sup>6</sup>

Because the perverse subject can glide past experiences without subjectively engaging them—in Jameson’s terms, he can “soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex” (“Culture and Finance Capital” 272)—his relationship to history becomes significantly transformed. The past becomes not a shaping process, not a

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waking moment not spent in enjoyment (or in the pragmatic utilitarian market practices that enable us to afford such enjoyment) is a moment wasted. Although such texts invoke the symptomal anxiety situated around death, they also strive to glide past such anxiety in a fetishistic attempt at denial (just as the term “bucket list” evokes the euphemistic phrase “kicking the bucket”). The superego anxiety here, then, is different from the symptomal anxiety that something is “out of joint,” the hysterical questioning of identity and desire; the authors of these books are perfectly certain about what brings enjoyment. The only anxiety lies in the impossibility of fulfilling the rigid superego demand.

<sup>6</sup>In “Culture and Finance Capital,” Jameson puts forth a thesis virtually identical to Žižek’s diagnosis of contemporary society as rooted in the perverse fetish (as a form of autonomization) rather than in the older mode of the symptom. Jameson, in contrasting the older surrealist “symptom” (illustrated in Luis Bunuel’s films *An Andalusian Dog* [1928] and *The Golden Age* [1930]) with the logic of the fetish at work in Derek Jarman’s newer experimental film *Last of England*, echoes Žižek’s contrast between Schoenberg and Stravinsky. If Bunuel’s films create symptoms by portraying a traumatic encounter while withholding the larger narrative with which we might make sense of them, Jarman’s film provides us with a knowing sense of meaning by offering a fragmented jumble of stereotypes, each of which alludes to some other meaning in a playful game of reference. Like a movie preview that makes no narrative sense but nonetheless provides us with the spectacular “highlights” of a story that was probably a secondary consideration anyway, Jarman’s film provides us with perverse enjoyment and “meaning” in a way that the Bunuel film does not: “The image fragments in Bunuel are... forever incomplete, markers of incomprehensible psychic catastrophe, obsessions and eruptions, the symptom in its pure form as an incomprehensible language that cannot be translated into any other.... In Jarman’s *Last of England*, however, about which words like surrealist have loosely been bandied, what we really confront is the commonplace, the cliché. A feeling tone is certainly developed here: the impotent rage of its punk heroes smashing about themselves with lead pipes, the disgust with the royal family and with traditional trappings of an official English life. But these feelings are themselves clichés, and disembodied ones at that... everything here is impersonal on the mode of the stereotype, including the rage itself.... What happens here is that each former fragment of a narrative, which was once incomprehensible without the narrative context as a whole, has now become capable of emitting a complete narrative message in its own right. It has become autonomous... in its newly acquired capacity to soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex...” (271). The perversion of Jarman here, through which various references achieve a fetish value that glides past anxiety in the “fun” pursuit of meaning, resembles the work of other postmodern pastiche artists, from Beck (in rock music) to Quentin Tarantino (in U.S. indie film). Like the day trader who plays mathematical games with the futures market, or a newscaster who casts a brief eye on devastating world events before moving on, these artists inhabit an autonomized sphere replete with clichés about the outside world. They know everything that is happening—and pride themselves on their vast breadth of reference—but refuse to engage subjectively with it. And they are happy to remain in this fetish space.

genealogy of struggle that exerts pressure on us in urgent ways, but a fragmented set of signifiers available for pillage. The past might simply be ignored, except that in a digital age nothing entirely disappears; as a result, accumulated images crowd the present in their chaotic, undead fashion, waiting to be soaked up and projected in pastiche forms that require attention only for a moment. In these readings, then, the post-Oedipal individual, denied a structuring narrative, subsists in an advanced version of Benjamin's *Erlebnis*, a state of flat and "isolated experience" typified by the gambler who continually moves on to the "next card" in the pile (*The Writer of Modern Life* 195). And the mode of communication that corresponds to *Erlebnis* is not *story* (which haunts the listener with its generative properties, such that it cannot be fully exhausted), but *information* (which is rapidly consumed and discarded). This ascendancy of information over story—and thus drive over desire—results in the loss of a sense of meaningful experience across time, a phenomenon which Benjamin illustrates in terms of the calendar: "the man who loses his capacity for experiencing feels as though he has been dropped from the calendar" (*The Writer of Modern Life* 201). Fittingly, for Jameson Fukayama's end of history involves a frenetic implosion of the calendar, resulting in a paradoxical situation of "change without its opposite" (9). It offers a model of permanent revolution as persistent monotony, since while the particulars change the form remains the same, like a mall in which new stores perpetually open up, offering new products to replace the vanished older ones (though the older products retain a ghostly, "retro" afterlife). Thus we have "a steady stream of momentum and variation that at some outer limit seems stable and motionless" (*The Seeds of Time* 17, 16).

The crucial point here, however, is not to assert a snobbish distaste for the rhythms of fashion or an elitist disregard for a popular culture of consumption. The point is that these cultural developments (the demise of paternal authority, the feeling of being dropped from the calendar, the lack of any ordering narrative, the enshrinement of the atomized individual consumer's perverse enjoyment, the monetization of libidinal drives) combine with economic developments (the weakening of the labor movement, low wage jobs, heightened competition, persistent structural unemployment, the proletarianization of formerly rural inhabitants) to produce a toxic situation for those at the bottom of the social ladder. The much-touted "growing middle class" in so-called developing nations must be juxtaposed against those facing crises in their dramatic exposure to market discipline and its ensuing social dislocation: the farmer dispossessed of his land and crowded into chaotic slums, the woman sold into sexual slavery, the child raised in a situation of deteriorating social ties, the Beijing resident choking on the world's worst air. And although we should not romanticize the precapitalist past, we might also understand why Taussig's South American agricultural workers and miners would allegorize the capitalist form of production through the contradictory figure of the devil, who offers short-term gain at the expense of long-term sterility, death, envy, and social chaos. Taussig's storytellers did not oppose development or growth across the board, but they also saw that in destroying older, communal cultures, the bourgeois revolution exacted a severe social cost. Is not this ambiguous devil figure still at work—in India, in Brazil, in Nigeria?

In the U.S., too, we are compelled to "dance with the devil," in Jose E. Limon's terms. Not only do we find pockets of the so-called First World (from L.A. to New

Orleans) that evoke the Third World contrast between wealthy gated communities and slums, but we also face a situation that might have been foretold by a Bolivian miner: a culture of competition, disintegrating social ties, and low-grade violence incompatible with life. Such a dance with the devil is hardly new (as any glance at slavery, or the nineteenth century clash between robber barons and workers, would attest), but it nonetheless signals a shift: alongside the post-1970s neoliberal consensus we are witnessing the collapse of a New Deal structure based on ideals of equality and fraternity. Insofar as these ideals are treated as ancillary to liberty (narrowly defined as the “free” pursuit of economic self-interest in a contract economy), they lose salience and begin to atrophy. If the pre-1970s U.S. Fordist economy depended upon a sharply racialized class structure, at least it observed a social contract according to which the state bore an important responsibility for social welfare.<sup>7</sup> And post-war U.S. culture, however oppressive in racial and gender terms, still featured prominent narratives that fostered transgenerational nurturance: a residual populist culture of mutual support left over from the 1930s and the Popular Front; networks of churches and unions; and ethnic neighborhoods, often rooted in a history of labor activism. Today, by contrast, not only do we see high degrees of social inequality in the U.S., but a culture in which almost everyone has come to accept urban violence, rampant drug use, the highest prison population on the globe, low wage jobs, failing schools, unemployment and underemployment, and a public health disaster in the absence of affordable health care. A

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<sup>7</sup> As many commentators have pointed out, until the 1970s U.S. (white) workers enjoyed high wages, generous benefits, and relatively high rates of social equality. To be sure, citizens in the post-war U.S. enjoyed anomalous competitive advantages which disappeared as Europe and Japan rebuilt their industrial infrastructure (and later, when the formerly Communist nations entered the global economy). Still, the advance of such global competition does not excuse the state of responsibility for ensuring social welfare and advancing the cause of equality.



global market society, then, has not been kind to everyone in the First World or the Third World; the neoliberal situation is characterized by inequality across the board and the distribution of wealth upward, such that David Harvey could characterize it as “a project to achieve the restoration of class power” (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 16).

It does not require a socially conservative Moral Majority mindset, then, to argue that the collapse of any ordering social narrative beyond capitalist norms can easily result in catastrophe for those at the bottom, who now face the full brunt of capitalism’s regained flexibility in exploiting labor. To take one example, Jose E. Limon, writing in 1994, describes a shift toward social fragmentation in Southwestern Chicano communities since the 1970s. In comparing the experience of elites in Los Angeles with the subaltern experience of Chicano laborers, he plays off of Jameson’s description of the Bonaventure Hotel’s cultural postmodernism to describe a kind of *postmodernism from below*: “It is the same fundamental cultural process, although what is lucrative and exciting among the upper and middle classes and the intelligentsia is deadly and enervating among those below....Each class sector, it might be argued, is...dealing with its own devil, struggling with its own version of a consumerist decentering postmodernism” (111-112, 114). If older generations of Chicano youth were often socialized within a patriarchal culture in need of significant reform—especially with regard to the treatment of women and gays—at least this culture established social norms, institutions, and practices that afforded a measure of protection from a “depthless” culture deprived of a calendar, and an economy predicated on financial gambling and capital flight.

In trying to explain a “crisis” situation in South Texas that he perceives as a smoldering war of position between class factions, Limon resorts to the work of David Harvey, who describes the regime of flexible accumulation in terms that Benjamin’s gambler would recognize. For Harvey, the liquidation of memory presupposed by a culture of “instantaneity” and “disposability” is perfectly in keeping with the primary aims of a neoliberal economy built on “accelerating the turnover of goods in consumption”:

It means more than just throwing away produced goods...but also being able to throw away values, life-styles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being... This transience...creates a ‘temporariness in the structure of both public and personal value systems’ which in turn provides a context for the ‘crack-up of consensus’ and the diversification of values within a fragmenting society. (*The Postmodern Condition* 286)

Although this diversification of values can easily be appropriated by a rhetoric of celebratory multiculturalism, it can also prevent the emergence of broad oppositional social movements. Commentators from Limon to Cornel West call attention to the way that such a decentered “fragmenting society” is both perfectly amenable to capitalist forms of deterritorialization and dangerous for vulnerable communities. As West puts it with regard to poor African-American communities, “We have created rootless, dangling people with no links to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life....This culture engulfs us all—yet its impact on the disadvantaged is devastating, resulting in extreme violence in everyday life” (cited in Limon 115-116). Such dislocating tendencies afflict black and brown people disproportionately, but the issue here is one of class, not race; white poor and working-class people are affected in the same ways.

The social failures of neoliberalism, then, lie partly in its tendency toward what Stiegler describes as a “dictatorship of short-term-ism” (57): an emphasis on narrow, immediate gain incompatible not only with narrative meaning, but also with care-taking as such. Rather than an economy and culture predicated on long-term *investment*—in young people, in intergenerational and spatial solidarities, in collective long-term desires—we have an economy and culture predicated on careless *speculation*. Resources, whether environmental, social, or psychic, are recklessly plundered in this post-Thatcher process of institutionalized carelessness, resulting in negative externalities: the destruction of environmental resources (like the climate), the liquidation of social resources (people, communities, intergenerational nurturing) and the decimation of psychic resources (motivation, desire, purpose). And crucially, although the poor certainly receive the worst impact of these negative externalities, in a marketing-saturated consumer society, the proletariat is not simply the “working class,” but everyone:

the proletariat are those economic actors who are without knowledge because they are without memory: their memory has passed into the machine that reproduces gestures that the proletariat no longer needs to know—they must simply serve the reproductive machine and thus, once again, they become serfs. Today...it is *consumers who are henceforth deprived of memory and knowledge by the service industries and their apparatuses*. (35).

Just as Taylorized production results in a proletarian class cut off from the full process of production (and thus a people deprived of *savoir-faire*, the knowledge required in creating and building), Taylorized consumption fosters a proletarianized people cut off from the full process of consumption (and thus deprived of *savoir-vivre*, the knowledge and techniques required in the art of living) (16).

For Stiegler, then, financial speculation is coterminous with a neoliberal niche marketing culture built not on desire *per se*, but on short-term drives that function like

addictions. The result is not “collective individuation,” but “disindividuation” and the production of “dissociated milieus” in which meaningful solidarities cannot emerge (58).

In such a Taylorized consumer society, the chief forms of affiliation are not collective; instead, they resemble what critic Robert Seguin (after Sartre) describes as a pattern of serialized “anticollective collectivities,” paradoxically both atomized and homogenous:

A series is a human grouping that effectively has its principle of unity outside itself (‘in the passive unity of the object’), such that, while each member of the series ignores all the others...a homogenous collective dynamic results. Sartre’s initial example is the line of people waiting for a bus, an analysis that then leads him to the effects of radio broadcasts (and mass media generally), and, finally (and perhaps unsurprisingly), to the free market itself....Seriality thus produces paradoxical anticollective collectivities, fundamentally passive groups that project an essentially statistical existence and that can then be polled as to what they believe, or what they will buy, and whose implicit response will always be ‘whatever you want us to.’ (140-141)

In such ways, then, the neoliberal period signals a strange re-emergence of South American devil folklore: a paradoxical vision in which short-term production coincides with long-term barrenness, and in which massive social organization coincides with massive social disorganization. The relation here is something like what Stiegler describes as the *pharmakon*, a cure that is also a poison; mobility, flexibility, consumption, and novelty are beneficial in moderate doses, but deadly in large doses, resulting in a society in which the organizing principle is “*detachment, that is, of unfaithfulness or infidelity* (equally called flexibility)” (83).

### The Destruction of Place

In elevating the *pharmakon* of flexibility to a toxic level, the Taylorized society of consumption has fostered what historian William Leach has labeled “the destruction of place” in America. For Leach, place signifies not merely a location on a map, but rather a “meaning . . . bound to a geographical reality both historical and lasting.” Because it involves historical duration, place has a temporal quality that results in a “layered quality for those people who feel it” (7). According to Leach, two opposing forces in U.S. life—one “centrifugal” and place-eroding, the other “centripetal” and place-building—have battled for centuries in U.S. history (8). Centrifugal forces have been dominant during most of that time, visible in the motion of migrant pioneers who often settled land only to abandon it for the next available opportunity, and perhaps more importantly, in the industrial powerbrokers who during the latter half of the nineteenth century moved capital across borders with a degree of freedom only recently revived in the contemporary economy. Industrialists (and their allies in government) fostered a dependent and mobile labor force, pioneered a mass consumer ethos based on the “cult of the new,” and continually reshaped the landscape in an effort to amass wealth (13). But in response to these developments, U.S. citizens have always mobilized counter-tendencies of place-building. Such centripetal tendencies became especially powerful during the post-New Deal period for some of the reasons I have mentioned: relatively high wages and good benefits (at least for white workers), long-term job contracts, and the continued salience of cultural narratives predicated on social obligation.

Although Leach praises certain aspects of the 1950s and 1960s, he is careful not to overstate his case about this period, which also saw the destabilizing forces of

migration, unemployment, mass consumerism, and the atomizing effects of television, suburbia, and segregation. Some of these forces are worth dwelling on, because they set the stage for the less stabilized model of place that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. George Lipsitz is particularly scathing about the way U.S. governmental policies in the 1950s, which encouraged suburban homeownership and mass consumption through tax breaks and subsidies (including the funding of roads and infrastructure), helped to dismantle earlier forms of collective action built around an older sense of place. People who once lived, for example, in close-knit urban neighborhoods moved to suburbs, where they could easily opt out of many social interactions. Meanwhile, the continuing collapse of the family farm and its replacement by large-scale agribusiness contributed to a parallel deterioration in a rural sense of place. Television, too, fostered a culture in which families remained isolated within their own homes, and mass consumption encouraged people to think of themselves as consumers first and citizens a distant second. Through what Lipsitz describes as the “managed gaze” of television, suburbia, Disneyland, and shopping malls, post-war subjects were increasingly encouraged to tune out (or simply exclude) any experiences or people that distracted them from a life build around market imperatives (25).

Meanwhile, the Treaty of Detroit in 1950, effectively a truce between labor and management in that it channeled productivity gains toward high wages and job security, fostered a quiescent labor movement which was ultimately unprepared to challenge the later onset of neoliberal labor discipline in the Reagan era. For Lipsitz, the legacy of the 1950s lies in the collusion between big government and big business to channel public money into the private profits of home construction, automobile, and household goods

industries, rather than toward a national health care system, schools, public transportation, and affordable urban housing. The concessions (briefly) granted to workers helped to facilitate a population increasingly docile in its relationship to corporate power, self-focused in its preoccupation with consumption, and both ill-equipped and ill-disposed to band together to support government or community action on behalf of economic equality:

These state-subsidized improvements in material wealth...offered participation in a commodity-driven way of life as reparations, seeking to create a world in which people's identities as consumers would become more important than competing identities as workers, citizens, or ethnic subjects. While relying on the power of the state, they also hid the state, privileging private acts of consumption over collective behavior, and presenting the carefully constructed world of commodity relations as if it were the product of democratic choices. (247)

Although Lipsitz laments the demise of “ethnic” identities once associated with labor activism, ethnic identities did not disappear. Rather, as critic Walter Benn Michaels has argued, an agreement between both the left and the right to focus on identity issues of race, gender, sexual orientation often translated into a discourse of diversity that allowed Americans to avoid discussing economic inequality, except in identitarian terms. Despite the important civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, then, by the 1980s most Americans had lost whatever class-conscious “chops” they may have once had, such that Ronald Reagan could pose as the successor to Franklin D. Roosevelt by selling populism with an elite corporate face.

Whatever the legacy of the 1950s and 1960s, Leach is unequivocal in identifying a deteriorating quality of place in the U.S. that takes an especially important turn in the 1970s. In the year 1980, 20 percent of the nation's population moved to a different place, a level of mobility higher than it had been since World War II. Since the onset of

neoliberalism in the 1970s, we have seen a series of developments that have restored class power to the top even as they have ensured the smooth global flow of capital: the weakening of labor (through the decimation of unions, but also through guest worker programs, offshoring, automation, and the manipulation of both documented and undocumented immigrants), the deregulation of industries like transportation and shipping, and the consolidation of industries like banking, real estate, and the media into huge, multinational conglomerates. Thus Leach argues that the resurgence of centrifugal force in U.S. life is due primarily to structural economic changes:

the return of the global economy with its cohort of transnational businessmen and businesswomen; the spread of a *landscape of the temporary* populated by skilled and unskilled people alike, willing or compelled to go anywhere to find work; and the expansion of a service economy (above all of tourism and gambling) that has replaced manufacturing as the primary employer of unskilled workers. (25 my emphasis)

The landscape of the temporary can be seen in the way that downtowns have been replaced by fringe commercial developments at freeway intersections (though more recently, older downtowns have been gentrified to provide a “sense of place” and “community” for those who can afford it). It can be seen in the way that the consolidated network of temporary work agencies (dominated by one player: Labor Ready) farms out low-wage laborers to tech firms and service industries, in business executives who fly from meeting to meeting across the nation and the globe, and in the way that “temporary housing”--from trailer parks to expensive turnkey operations--have become increasingly common (60).

Leach identifies a dominant metaphor for the temporary landscape in the “intermodal” infrastructure that emerged in the 1980s: the apparently seamless connection from shipping port to truck to freeway to department store to home. Through



deregulation, container shipping, computerized organization, and a consolidated transportation infrastructure, the U.S. in the neoliberal period has become a space of “connections but not connectedness,” subjected to “a power poised and ready to make its way across all boundaries, to find its way, compel its way, push, push, and push, fashioning America, as it had never been, into a grid of terminals and highways, of ports of entry and ports of departure” (54). (Later the internet revolution added a digital layer to this network of flows.) And while the intermodal grid, with its “just in time” delivery of both commodities and workers, has resulted in an efficient and streamlined economy, it has also resulted in class polarization and labor insecurity. Using sophisticated software, for instance, employers can schedule (often part-time) workers only on an “as needed” (or even an “on call”) basis, such that workers cannot schedule other jobs or child-care, but must heed their managers’ every desire. Since so many of these laborers cannot afford the commodities that so efficiently flow within the intermodal economy, they have been driven to work more hours, to provide two incomes for their families, and/or to go into debt. But increasingly, multinational businesses no longer need to rely on American consumption, since rising elites in the developing world constitute new markets, even if their nations also contain the world’s most exploited workers. The trend, then, is toward a *global* polarization between classes, unevenly divided *within* nations, regions, and cities. A mall in Guatemala, with its megaplex theaters and armed guards, has more in common with suburban California than with the goat carts and shanty towns across the street.

Seen from this global perspective, Leach’s vision of the “destruction of place” is especially inadequate, since embedded in his critique of the predatory neoliberal

economy is a critique of cultural cosmopolitanism that often threatens to slip into nationalism or nativism. In his desire to cultivate *places* defined according to common memory, habits, and customs, he often appears to look wistfully toward the 1950s, when apparently the national community was internally loyal. Because Leach prioritizes the problem of *placelessness* in the U.S., while largely ignoring people in other places, his emphasis on loyalty can often come across as calloused and narrow. And indeed, he ignores the structural factors that made the post-WWII U.S. economic growth the exception rather than the rule: by the 1970s and 80s, postwar Europe and Japan had rebuilt themselves and emerged as powerful competitors to U.S. economic power. Returning to 1950s America is neither desirable nor possible, and the U.S. inhabited a global economy long before the 1950s. But to dismiss Leach as a reactionary or a nativist would be to play into the hands of pro-market neoliberal ideologues who would use the suffering of non-Americans to justify labor discipline everywhere. The answer to these ideologues is more complicated than Leach wants to believe; it involves not simply admonishing them to be more loyal to their “places,” but rather implies the necessity of a *global* movement for the construction of nurturing communities, on behalf of the right of workers all over the world not simply to move where they want, but also to stay in place.

The goal, then, should somehow involve building a structure of support to counteract the worrisome trends Leach sees in the U.S., but that obtain in various ways across the globe. In other words, we need something like a globalized Popular Front culture, accommodating of certain differences but unified enough to challenge the baleful affects that accompany capitalist production. Unfortunately, far from highlighting class conflict, postmodern diversity and autonomization mostly function to segment social

space, preventing differing social groups from finding commonality with each other across space and across generations. Divided according to niche market segments (by age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality), pitted against each other through economic competition, distracted by commodity (and other) fetishes, postmodern subjects unsurprisingly have a difficult time developing social movements that go beyond local, micropolitical, or issue-based concerns: gay rights, protecting wilderness, defending the tribe, buying local food. As George Lipsitz puts it, such division does little to challenge the structure that produces barriers between the privileged and the invisible excluded:

The failure of conservative economics to deliver the prosperity it promised to most Americans or to confront the consequences of the economic inequality it exacerbated leaves individuals with few options... The proliferation of new market identities and desires challenge us to search for sources of unity in an economy and culture increasingly dependent on generating new forms of differentiation and division. (257, 267)

A focus on diversity as an end-in-itself, then, can combine with a throw-away culture to render huge groups of people disposable (and invisible) in the perpetually shifting carnival of a market society. And the problem with a consumer culture is not that its commodities often disappoint (though they often do), but that it helps prevent the emergence of alternative collective formations.

### The Gothic Quest for Place

#### Part 1: The Mesh

Deterritorialization implies that the average daily life, in the context of globality, is shaped by structures, processes, and products that originate elsewhere. From the food, clothes, and fuel we buy to the music and films we enjoy, the employer we work for, and the health risks we are exposed to, everyday routines for most people today are inconceivable without global networks of information and exchange. And while it is

possible to ‘reterritorialize’ some of these dimensions by, for example, buying locally grown produce or supporting local artists, a more complete detachment from such networks is surely not within the average citizens’ reach. To say this is not in and of itself to question the desirability of reestablishing a sense of place, but it does limit its viability as a model for thinking about the future of significant portions of the population.  
 --Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (54)

Awareness of the mesh doesn’t bring out the best in people....We’re losing the ground under our feet at the exact same time as we’re figuring out just how dependent upon that very ground we are....Interconnectedness isn’t snug and cozy. There is intimacy, as we shall see, but not predictable, warm fuzziness. Do we will the hole with holism and Heidegger? Or do we go all the way into the hole?  
 --Timothy Morton, from *The Ecological Thought* (31)

Given the threatened status of durable narratives within the postmodern constellation, it is perhaps unsurprising that many (like Leach) take Naomi Klein’s advice too hastily: by elevating the search for “roots” to a fetish in itself.<sup>8</sup> Faced with the absence of a world, these people are compelled to build an unassailable world around them in one form or another. The German cultural critic Ursula Heise, for one, has noticed an inordinately nostalgic focus on place, the local, and face-to-face phenomenological sensory interaction in the U.S. environmental movement. U.S. localists often act as if accumulating local knowledge (learning the names of birds in their backyards, growing their own gardens) can enable them to place themselves in an otherwise unmappable world. In doing so, they often ignore the extent to which terms like “local,” “artisan,” and “place” can be mobilized as niche commodities *within* the dominant system of a neoliberal global economy.<sup>9</sup> But such a Heideggerian focus on

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<sup>8</sup> In the wake of the recent financial crises, many free market ideologues have advocated a redoubled return to fiscal austerity, competitive values, and the suppression of state involvement. Just as, in Klein’s formulation, capitalists take advantage of, or even foment, crises in places like Chile, Iraq, and New Orleans in order to impose privatization policies on a traumatized public, they have attempted to use the financial crisis as a springboard for further neoliberalization.

<sup>9</sup> Here we might point to the word “artisan” as a symptomatic entry point. It is impossible to move through a typical U.S. city without encountering constant evocations of this term: artisan crafts, artisan breads, and similar cultural formations, from knitting to gardening. But because the surrounding context has changed, the word artisan today suggests a vastly different subject position from what it once denoted. I can buy

“dwelling” (on the cultivation of a holistic sense of home defined according to the concrete parameters of a supposedly organic community) is not simply the province of sentimental U.S. environmentalists. Heidegger also enjoys popularity among postcolonial scholars who hope to defend or resuscitate the supposedly bounded and coherent life-worlds of indigenous groups and colonized peoples the world over.<sup>10</sup> In their belief that they can reconstruct paternal authority as it once existed, Heideggerian advocates of dwelling share a commonality with the more virulent forms of fundamentalism and cultural nationalism that react against a neoliberal ideology predicated on market cosmopolitanism.

Contemporary narratives of meaning and identity are threatened, then, but they have not disappeared; far from it. Rather, narratives like religion, but also those that circulate around the notion of territoriality and place have become intensified in certain ways, even as their meaning has become transformed. Above all, such narratives have become defensive and compensatory in direct response to their waning legitimacy in a world of unstable borders.<sup>11</sup> As many commentators have noted—and as developments

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artisan products and local food at the farmers market and convince myself that I am living in an organic community centered in place. But in doing so, I am ignoring a series of factors that enabled that person to make and sell those artisanal products: a spouse with a job in the information economy, a second job, inheritance money or property, and so on. More importantly, the fungible money used to buy these products comes from the postmodern economy, such that the word “artisan” becomes not simply a compensatory sign for the loss of an older system, but a highly sought-after commodity that can be sold within the postmodern economy. And again, what is being sold here is not so much the artisan product itself, but rather a narrative of meaning within a cognitively unmappable postmodern context in which stable narratives have become distinctly ineffective.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the chapter “The Postcolonial Critique of Liberal Cosmopolitanism,” in David Harvey’s *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*. Theorists like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Uday Singh Mehta, and Arturo Escobar revive Heideggerian localist ideas (not to mention Edmund Burke’s anti-imperialist tradition) in order to critique the universalist notions inherent in the liberal tradition.

<sup>11</sup> One can still obviously identify as a Christian or a Muslim, for example, but the meaning of that identity has changed along with the context in which it appears. A Christian today does not inhabit the same subject position that a Christian once occupied, since no matter how sincerely one professes Christianity, one is still affected by the hegemonic postmodern cultural situation in which such metanarratives have come under question. A Christian can’t help but be aware that other narratives exist, such that his narrative becomes immediately defined as one contingent form among others: as a belief system, a lifestyle, or a

from the U.S. Tea Party to the European anti-immigrant backlash demonstrate--even if cultural nationalism is under siege, it still exerts a powerful force. More exactly, it exerts force *because* it is under siege. In his 1996 essay "Localism, Globalism, Cultural Identity," Mike Featherstone argues that the nation, like capitalism itself, actually functions according to a model of crisis. The more the contours of the nation are threatened (whether from within or without, by immigrants or by foreign competition and investment), the more the nation attempts to strengthen its cultural boundaries by retreating to what Featherstone calls its "ethnic core." In situations of perceived threat, the dominant group within the locality or the nation may "present an oversimplified, unified image of itself to outsiders" which conceals "social differentiation" behind an egalitarian "mask" (55). We should not be surprised, then, that the era of neoliberalism is also the era of resurgent cultural nationalisms, from the revival of the Confucian "Middle Kingdom" in China to Hindu nationalism in India.

Alongside the rise of nationalist narratives, we have a revival of the localist discourse highlighted by Heise. Although many of these local fetishists would describe themselves as environmentalists, they sometimes ignore the key ecological principle: the interconnection of all things, not in some holistic or smooth sense of flows or natural balance, but in a way that is in principle unpredictable, discontinuous, and unrepresentable. Our environment (in which the social world and the so-called natural world have become impossible to entangle) is connected in this "out of joint" sense.

Unfortunately, the terms we generally use to denote such interconnectedness (network,

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marketing demographic. He deploys Christianity within the terms of a pluralist framework that he is already compelled to accept. Accordingly, the very discourse of Christian fundamentalism as a theological salvo appeared most powerfully during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century context of secular (Darwinian, Freudian, scientific) attacks on religious truth-claims. The marginalized resistance implied by the term testifies to the power of the new hegemony.

system, biosphere) carry connotations of smoothness that do not obtain in reality; even the highly technologized “networks” that enable global capitalist flows can be rendered as natural, sleek, and flowing. In response, Timothy Morton (who coined the phrase “dark ecology”) uses the term *mesh* to signify interconnectedness that does not fall into holism, but instead suggests a fraught quality, an uncanny intimacy that disturbs even as it beckons. On the one hand, the disorienting mesh can be a terrifying experience. On the other hand, the intimacy of the mesh compels us to work together, since our permeable, incomplete selves are dispersed within it: “Up close, the ecological thought has to do with warmth and tenderness; hospitality, wonder, and love; vulnerability and responsibility.... It must be personal, since it refrains from adopting a clinical, intellectual, or aesthetic (sadistic) distance” (76). The local, then, for Morton, is not reassuring, but uncanny, “strangely familiar and familiarly strange,” the site where we encounter the “strange stranger”—indeed, where we discover that we *are* the “void” of the strange stranger, not single but multiple, and not bounded but painfully open to ecological, social, and economic flows (*The Ecological Thought* 50, 80).

Thus while some theorists, from Žižek to Morton and Jameson, see social and political potential in the *hysterical* subject who reacts to the mesh with troubled questioning, others tend to celebrate the polymorphous, schizoid quality opened up by deterritorialized fragmentation. If both types question the viability of narrative (and of a reified sense of place), these *perverse* theorists derive enjoyment from this impossibility by rendering the unmappable late capitalist landscape not a space of uncanny disturbance but a positive network of rhizomatic flows. Here I am referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose work displays a breadth and complexity that I hesitate to simplify,

but who at times seem to cast deterritorialization and nomadism as fundamentally liberating. They have numerous followers today. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, attack all durable forms of identity (and place), and instead celebrate the networked movements of the “multitude,” conceived as an ever-shifting human and nonhuman alliance through which newly generative modes of life can be produced in a chaotic process of becoming. In Western studies, Neil Campbell has recently endorsed the notion of a “rhizomatic West.” Campbell fruitfully draws from Deleuze and Guattari, but also from scholars like J.B. Jackson and Robert Venturi, who valorize nomadic ways of being and seeing, and strike a populist pose by ratifying the supposedly vernacular culture of U.S. mobility: automobiles, trailer parks, and road trips. The problem with such neo-Deleuzian approaches, however, is that the rhizomatic world they trumpet is not only coterminous with deterritorialized capitalism, but has also become a smooth, Utopian, libidized space of its own. Though officially endorsing disruption, the minor voice, and protean identities, these theorists often idealize rhizomatic flows to such an extent that we might ask a relevant question: Among all the disruptions, where is the disruption?

Even theorists of place who do not employ Deleuzian terms often slip into such a perverse mode; Bruno Latour, for example, emphasizes a relational view of space in which any single place cannot be defined on its own, but must be imagined as a nodal point within a network of flows: “there is an Ariadne’s thread that would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global....To be sure, the innovation of lengthened networks is important, but it is hardly a reason to make such a great fuss” (121, 124). Latour emphasizes the hybrid quality of the “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects” that constitute these networks, and rejects attempts to “purify” subjects and objects by



separating the two (51, 87). So far so good—except that *contra* Latour’s comic and reassuring rhetoric (nothing to be alarmed about, just a bunch of hybrids moving around in long networks!), there may be a reason to make a fuss. As Arif Dirlik points out, such analyses tend to evacuate place of any meaning whatsoever, stripping the dialectical tension away from territoriality and leaving us with a sterile vision of hybridity that, in practice, leaves most of the boundary-*building* to capital itself. As Dirlik puts it, anti-essentialist notions of hybridity have value insofar as they confront oppressive local hierarchies; but what happens when power takes a rhizomatic form, such that mobility is imposed from the top down, and identity fragmentation serves the very mode of exploitation? In such a post-Oedipal context, the supposedly stable binary of “purity” and “hybridity” calls out for deconstruction, since it tends to ignore the crucial variable of power (Latour notably avoids discussing one of the most important hybrid/quasi-subjects of the last several centuries, the corporation!):

Why do we not speak about contradictions any longer? Against hybridity, contradiction presents us with the problem of recognizing difference, but also demanding their resolution, since contradictions may not be sustained indefinitely without reconfiguring difference... Under conditions of ‘unequal exchange,’ the resolution is likely to be more in favor of space over place, of abstract power over concrete everyday existence, where the former may even produce the ‘differences’ of the latter in a process of maximizing its power while mystifying its location. (38-39)

With Dirlik’s concerns in mind, perhaps the best overview of the debates about place and space—and particularly about the tension between nomadism and place-building, between identity and difference—comes from Marxist geographer David Harvey, who sees the matter in dialectical terms. Drawing from Alfred North Whitehead’s vision of place as a “permanence” or an “event” that acquires temporal and spatial power for a given time of “relative stability” before receding, Harvey articulates a

Lefebvre-ian vision of space as simultaneously real (built space, monuments, mountains), relational (imbricated within a network of flows), and representational (mediated by symbols, stories, and memories) (*Cosmopolitanism* 190). And with regard to these realms, neither the Heideggerian focus on phenomenological space and holism, nor the Deleuzian focus on flows and mobility, adequately captures the dynamics of power involved, such that

Everyone who begins at some point finds herself or himself drawn into an unavoidable dance of the dialectic across the terrain of complementary spatio-temporalities. From this standpoint those who proclaim, with Aristotle, that there is some essentialist theory of place, that ‘place is the first of all things,’ or who hold, with Heidegger, that ‘place is the locale of the truth of being’ (though not of becoming) are plainly mistaken. The only concept of place that makes sense is one that sees it as a contingent, dynamic, and influential ‘permanence,’ while being integrally contained within the processes that create, sustain, and dissolve all regions, places, and spacetimes into complex configurations. (194).

Neither hybridity, then, nor (relative) purity has absolute precedence, just as becoming has no precedence over being, and flows have no precedence over place. Each is dialectically intertwined with the other.

Harvey’s dialectical approach is particularly helpful when it comes to another fraught term of recent cultural theory, the *heterotopia*, used in contrasting ways by two French theorists: Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. In Foucault’s perverse approach, we find an emphasis on the separateness of “other spaces” in which non-normative practices can emerge. As Harvey points out, given the apparent freedom and heterogeneity available in such spaces, Foucault’s conception “appears attractive”:

It became possible to identify absolute spaces in which difference, alterity, and ‘the other’ might flourish or (as with architects) actually be constructed...It encourages the idea of what L. Marin calls ‘spatial plays’ to highlight choice, diversity, difference, incongruity, and incommensurability. It enables us to look upon the multiple forms of transgressive behaviors (usually normalized as ‘deviant’) in urban spaces as important and productive. Foucault includes in his

list of heterotopic spaces such places as cemeteries, colonies, brothels, and prisons. Foucault assumes in this piece that heterotopic spaces are somehow outside the dominant social order....Whatever happens within them is then presumed to be subversive and of radical political significance. (160)

Ultimately, Harvey rejects Foucault's notion of the heterotopia as an escapist fetish. It is no accident that Foucault singles out the seafaring "ship" as the "heterotopia *par excellence*," since in highlighting "pirates" and "adventure" Foucault reveals the fairy tale quality of the heterotopia's fragmented disarticulation from the social totality (cited in Harvey *Cosmopolitanism* 160). Furthermore, in celebrating *any* space in which "alternative" social arrangements occur, Foucault ignores the extent to which heterotopias might be used for a wide range of political purposes, not all of them progressive.

Poised against Foucault's relatively inert conception of the *heterotopia*, Harvey highlights Lefebvre's comparatively ignored but more dynamic version. Lefebvre, in contrast to Foucault, "understood heterotopias as spaces of difference, of anomie, and of potential transformation," but he did not envision them as "alternatives" to "the accomplished and rationalized spatial order of capitalism and the state" (161). Such spaces were not reified parts, like a sea-faring ship cut off from land. Instead, he saw a "dialectical...tension" in the interplay between the heterotopia's space of desire and the restless colonization of the dominant order: "Anomic groups construct heterotopic spaces, which are eventually reclaimed by the dominant praxis" (cited in Harvey 162). The usefulness of the heterotopia lies not in what Harvey calls "segregation and separation, but about potentially *transformative relations with all other spaces*" (162 my emphasis). Only if the heterotopia can avoid becoming entirely reclaimed by the dominant praxis--if it can then alter that dominant praxis in some progressive way--can it

be an accomplice to an emancipatory politics.<sup>12</sup> Against rhizomatic space, we have the uncanny dialectical space, not merely a constructed nodal point within a network of flows (though it certainly is that), but also a relatively durable permanence caught in the mesh. Such a space might be a place, insofar as it might persist through time and memory, but no matter how durable, it would remain an unpredictable and provisional salvo within a changing dialectical situation of power.

Through such attention not simply to the interplay between local and global, but to the unequal power relations between them, Harvey's work dovetails with the notion of *critical regionalism*, a term that has lately been up for grabs in critical circles. Although it has been given both Heideggerian phenomenological inflections (by architect Kenneth Frampton<sup>13</sup>), and neo-Deleuzian inflections (by Neil Campbell<sup>14</sup>), critical regionalism always involves mediating between space and place, the local and the global, past and present, and between phenomenological experience and abstract structures. Critical regionalists, then, attempt to work through the past in order to move forward in the present, and seek to draw productively from past traditions without being dominated by them. Specifically, they try to learn from cultural forms that have grown over time in particular places (even if such places emerge as nodes in broader networks). But although

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<sup>12</sup> The point is worth underlining given the widespread preference in the contemporary American left for heterotopias of the Foucauldian sort: urban farms, gay/lesbian hangouts, the Burning Man Festival, intentional cohousing, and the like. In such spaces, the creation of a local, heterogeneous, "alternative" community is often celebrated as an end in itself—a logic which saw its culmination in the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City (and across the nation), as if the whole point of gathering in places like Zuccotti Park was to experience an "alternative" sense of spontaneous community for a few weeks. In contrast, Harvey calls attention to the "houses of the people" formed in early twentieth century Italy, spaces which functioned as branching-off points for union activism, discussion, and concrete everyday interactions—and that crucially "served both practically and symbolically to shape the ideals and practices of radical socialist democracy in opposition to the dominant forms of class power" (*Cosmopolitanism* 158). In considering such spaces, we might deploy a Kierkegaardian irony, and ask: among all subversive spaces, is there a subversive space?

<sup>13</sup> In his 1983 essay "Toward a Critical Regionalism: Six Points For an Architecture of Resistance."

<sup>14</sup> In *The Rhizomatic West*.

they highlight the phenomenological experience of place, critical regionalists generally avoid fetishizing places as parochial enclaves. Frampton, for instance, uses the term *critical* to distinguish his program from a primordial or culturally nationalist vision of place, and thus insists that even the most localized culture retain a connection to the “universal” network of flows in which it is situated. Or, as Žižek puts it, what is universal about us is not that we all participate in the broader world from a position of particularity, but that we are “uneasy” with that very identification—that we never quite succeed at local identification in the first place, because we are disturbed about its very coordinates (*Violence* 157). Anyone, no matter how ostensibly rooted in authentic place dwelling, is at some level uneasy with place-identification as a defining feature. It is this feature of uneasiness—of being torn—that constitutes the proper critical regionalist sense of place, and not a purely nomadic, free-floating consciousness.

Instead, critical regionalists are only interested in place insofar as the production of “permanences” can help foster a deep, global democracy in which ordinary people can have the dignity of participating together to shape life rather than simply having it packaged for them from above. Gayatri Spivak, for example, uses the term in order to focus on the neoliberal threat to social protections; if she warns against reified and exclusive forms of cultural nationalism, she defends the state as a potential provider of social protections, and imagines a triangulating “critical regionalism combating global capitalism” that might “go under and over nationalisms” to produce a “robust citizenship for the people down below” (78, 94, 89). And a key part of this dialectical process of anti-capitalist place-building involves mobilizing memory as a resource in an effort to situate human experience within a narrative of struggle, however complex or

(necessarily) incomplete. As Walter Benjamin has put it, such memories and traditions are necessarily ambiguous, potentially useful for oppression, but also for liberation: “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (*Illuminations* 255). Thus although critical regionalism is not opposed to change as such, it also insists on the value of honoring the best impulses of the past. It fights against a sense in which the modern person can feel dropped from the calendar, and instead searches for time-warps, such that significant historical moments can inspire present commitments. In short, critical regionalism struggles against the tendencies toward historical “depthlessness” and fragmentation that Fredric Jameson has seen as characteristic of stylistic postmodernism (*Postmodernism* 9).

The most promising articulations of critical regionalism, then, do not see it simply as a formal aesthetic (as a way of constructing buildings, for example), but as a globally interlinked social movement directed toward establishing what Arjun Appadurai calls “globalization from below.” Such a movement would ideally recognize that in order to combat global capitalism, we cannot simply engage at one scale (the local, the regional, the national, the global). Instead, just as global (or *glocal*) capitalism operates on all of these levels simultaneously in order to produce uneven geographical development, any oppositional movement must engage the same terrain. Endorsing such a view does not imply ignoring local cultural, historical, and topographical differences, but it does entail keeping a constant eye on the social totality: the ecological mesh that makes identification with any single place untenable. Precisely because, as Alain Badiou puts it, “There is nothing more captive, so far as commercial investment is concerned, nothing more amenable to the invention of new figures of monetary homogeneity, than a

community and its territory or territories” (*St. Paul* 10), it is not enough to focus on the local, which by itself is too weak to confront the power of capital—and which is never by itself anyway, since as Morton puts it, “*Here* is shot through with *there*” (*The Ecological Thought* 52). Instead, we must cultivate a degree of cheerful indifference toward many cultural differences, not to deny them or to flout local customs unthinkingly, but to open a space for the building of translocal, transregional, and transnational alliances.

However promising this incipient dialectical mode of critical regionalism might be—and Spivak emphasizes its infancy, as a “fledgling project,” “not an analysis”—it remains haunted by a host of problems (114). If we hope to establish new narratives that can challenge a “worldless” global capitalism built on abstract autonomization and obligatory enjoyment over and above any communal ethic of reciprocity and responsibility, and if we hope to situate ourselves in the mesh, we must grapple with the problem of representational form itself, and particularly with the problem of narrative and narrativity identified by Jameson and others. If we emphasize the value of constructing place as a layered site imbued with memory that can motivate collective action and solidarity, we must not simply create new fetishes, but must somehow engage people at the symptomatic level, evoking doubt where certainty once obtained. At the same time, however, we must not be paralyzed by doubt, but must mobilize critical regionalism in a regenerative project of networked place-building. If, as Naomi Klein puts it, our challenge involves overcoming the shock of postmodern experience in order to formulate a better story, then how can we move past the impasse posed by trauma?

## Part 2: The Gothic and Trauma

We crave the Gothic... because we need it. We need it because the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us—a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe—and that wrenching withdrawal, that traumatic experience, is vividly dramatized in the Gothic....As we confront the underlying terror of our times, after all, the Gothic provides us a guarantee of life even in the face of so much death...But the pleasantly terrifying thing may be that this life, this consciousness of being alive, is constantly shadowed by previous and imminent breakage and dissolution. Contemporary life constantly reminds us that we are moving toward death, or at least obsolescence, and that life we must continually strive to hold together....The Gothic's basic investment in ravaging history and fragmenting the past meshes with our own investments now as we attempt to reinvent history as a way of healing the perpetual loss in modern existence.  
--Steven Bruhm, from "Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It" (273-274)

'Awakening' is a word that would be seen by most people today as equivalent to demystification: shedding light on obscure fields of knowledge, separating myth from reality, lies from truth, and so on. I think that is quite wrong. In terms of what Benjamin was doing, and more importantly how the world is put together in my opinion, it seems to me that awakening means piggy-backing, moving with the dream world. It is not a clarion call through the enlightenment to separate myth from reality. It is to enjoin myth to reality....So I've always understood his work as demystification and re-enchantment, in which that spark of hope you talk about presumably has an electrifying role to play.  
--Michael Taussig, from *The Carnival of the Senses* (53-54)

If critical regionalism hopes to challenge neoliberal hegemony, it must not simply introduce a set of aims and principles (an intellectual justification), but must also deploy a rhetoric in the world that can foster what Raymond Williams has called *structures of feeling*. As Jane Bennett argues, when it comes to ethics, Western theorists have too often focused on developing some new law, some airtight philosophical framework, and have less often focused on the important matter of embodied practice—not only the necessary process of developing institutions (like places), but also the production of a sensibility (what she calls an “energetic of ethics”) that might animate our participation within those institutions (155). Bennett, for her part, insists on the value of “enchantment” within any such sensibility; arguing against the remorselessly negative rhetoric of “demystification”



offered by many Marxist scholars, she insists that “one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the services of others” (4). And here it seems to me that the characteristically dark approach of the Gothic form paradoxically offers us hope, since as Bruhm puts it, insofar as Gothic texts confront death, trauma, and loss, they also highlight the power and possibility of life, healing, and (albeit in a distorted, haunted fashion) the reconstitution of narrative meaning. Furthermore, insofar as gothic texts explore the territory where the everyday and the impenetrable meet—and trouble the boundary between playful exaggeration and the “real” world—they provide a particularly potent source of the enchantment Bennett is looking for. There is room, I think, in the gothic form for wonder, humor, and the love of life described by Bennett. The gothic can be exuberant, especially insofar as it provides a space for grace, or what Bennett describes in terms of the “swerve” that cuts through negative repetition in order to inaugurate a positive and life-giving form of repetition (71).

Even when gothic tales allow space for magic, imagination, and playful free association, they never lose sight of the symptom that renders our experience out of joint. As many commentators have noted, the gothic deals with frightful confrontations we would rather not face, with unwanted revelations and the secrets buried in the closet, the uncanny that is both familiar and unfamiliar. Above all, it thematizes the disintegration of the self as it faces disorienting knowledge; as Bruhm puts it, “Time and again the contemporary Gothic presents us with traumatized heroes who have lost the very psychic structures that allow them to access their own experiences....The self is shattered into pieces” (269). Such a disintegration mirrors the notion of the *abject*, conceived in Julia

Kristeva's terms as the reduction of subjectivity to a recognition of its vulnerable, multiple, dependent state, best symbolized in the simultaneously embracing and engulfing space of the maternal body.<sup>15</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle argues that "the repressed, archaic, and thus deeply unconscious Feminine is a fundamental level of being to which the Gothic finally refers," and that at this level we find "both the ultimate Other and the basically groundless ground of the self" (11). In keeping with Klein's formulation, trauma here is defined as that which escapes narrative or symbolic formulation. We may never finally put trauma to rest, since its very nature lies in the repetitive way the past haunts us, compelling us to revisit distorted images and fragments like the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder patients described by Cathy Caruth: "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (cited in Bruhm 268). A gothic text can work in such a fashion, its narrative growing out of a disturbing engagement with repressed elements.

Because the gothic form is fascinated with hidden crimes, some critics (notably the late pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty) have attacked it as a gloomy practice that can block the free pursuit of a better future by enslaving us to a view of personal and social history as imbued with a spectral form of sin. Rorty urges us to forge cultural unity

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<sup>15</sup> As described by Jerrold E. Hogle, Kristeva's mother-body, which must be thrown off since it reveals to us our ultimately lack of self-integrity and our dependence on others, sounds like Morton's idea of the ecological mesh: "The Gothic often shows its readers that the anomalous foundations they seek to abject have become culturally associated with the otherness of femininity, a maternal multiplicity basic to us all...Here is the reason, a key factor, why Kristeva can link horrifying abjection with our throwing off of the memory that we have archaically been both inside and outside the mother whom we now fear and desire at the same time" (Hogle 10). The term "Mother Earth," then regains all of its uncanny connotations, such that our relationship with the systems on which we are dependent—the social ecology fully as much as the "natural" one—is imbued not simply with holistic warmth, but terror as well.

by cultivating a “daylit” attitude, and by imagining our history in terms of a “romantic poem” that can inspire us to get beyond trauma (94, 29). But others have insisted that the gothic is not necessarily about mere terror or paralysis—or rather, that even insofar as gothic texts frighten us, they often do so because facing fear is a prelude to healing. In his essay, “The Nurture of the Gothic,” William Veeder draws on Michael Taussig’s description of Colombian shamanic practices to argue that gothic literature can produce “self-healing through terror” (34). In a typical Putumayan ceremony, a shaman leads patients in the ritual use of a hallucinogenic plant called *yage*. A patient might have to push through visions of terror (not to mention vomiting and diarrhea) in order to reach a beautiful vision that propels rejuvenation. Such healing sessions are serious and practical, but also improvised and full of jokes, as the impenetrable visions are constantly interrupted by everyday tasks: gathering wood, eating, laughing. Similarly, for Veeder the most sophisticated and imaginative gothic texts summon everyday visions of demonic possession, uncanny repetition, or haunting because in working through such images, we can face repressed fears, resentments, and acts of violence, and emerge with more vitality and agency: “I believe the nature of the gothic is to nurture. This belief derives from what I take to be a basic fact of communal life: that societies inflict terrible wounds upon themselves and at the same time develop mechanisms that can help heal these wounds” (20). And while Veeder acknowledges that all art and narrative provide a space of imaginative play in which to work through trauma, he argues that the gothic mode pays particular attention to repressed experiences that might not otherwise see the light of day.

We might quibble with Veeder’s simplified view of the gothic as always positive or progressive; many forms of horror gothic produce paralyzing visions of fear, with no

healing in sight. Moreover, the act of healing itself can be ambiguous or even horrible. One can heal the wrong person, or “heal” a society by exterminating an innocent scapegoat. The anti-immigrant backlash in the contemporary U.S., for instance, is driven by gothic fears of the national body’s contamination. Still, to point out the ambiguity of the gothic is not to devalue its potential role in producing healing through terror, or in rendering experience in an urgent and powerful way. Indeed, many commentators see in the gothic (and its phantasmagoric relative, surrealism) the best way of representing a reality in which distortion is part of the weave of experience. Walter Benjamin, for one, in emphasizing that the historical materialist’s task does not necessarily involve telling the story of the past “the way it really was,” endorses the power of surrealism, allegory, and dreamlike montage as a rhetorical way of mobilizing subjects politically and personally (*Illuminations* 255). Rejecting a mimesis built on simple and transparent facts, Benjamin argued that only a phantasmagoric vision with its profane illuminations could adequately capture a modern experience permeated by complex built space, abstract finance, surprising encounters, and commodity fetishism: “No face is surrealistic in the same degree as the true face of a city” (*Surrealism* 73).

The seminal defender of the gothic tradition in modern U.S. literary criticism, Leslie Fiedler, echoed Benjamin’s insistence that modern life can only be rendered in surreal terms—but he applied Benjamin’s insight not to European cities like Paris, but to U.S. frontiers, cities, and contact zones. Fiedler argued that the U.S., founded on the ambivalent repudiation of the British father-king but also through frontier violence, could not be approached through sentimental or realist forms. Instead, in his admittedly Eurocentric view, he saw the U.S. as a haunted project to begin with, since it could never

deliver on the “innocence” it purported to attain; the U.S. was a “world which had left behind the terror of Europe not for the innocence it dreamed of, but for new and special guilts associated with the rape of nature and the exploitation of dark-skinned people; a world doomed to play out the imaginary childhood of Europe” (xxvi). With these “special guilts” in mind, he maintains that the gothic form is the only “mature” form available to U.S. writers in their attempts to grapple with their society. He praises Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for instance, as quintessentially gothic and thus more “realistic” than supposed realism: “To discuss...in the light of pure reason the Negro problem in the United States is to falsify its essential mystery and unreality; it is a gothic horror of our daily lives” (470). Indeed, Eric Savoy argues that the gothic confronts what Lacan described as the Real (a disturbing intrusion that haunts us precisely because its “traumatic ‘otherness’” cannot be directly symbolized in language), and that the American Real has a historical and social content: “Gothic images in America...suggest the attraction and repulsion of a monstrous history, the desire to ‘know’ the traumatic Real of American being and yet the flight from that unbearable and remote knowledge” (169).

Political scientist Bonnie Honig, too, rejects Rorty’s view that democracy requires a romantic notion of cultural nationalism. Indeed, in her view the very desire for such a unified peoplehood is the surest way to trigger gothic fears of an Other who can be blamed for ruining the “daylit” project. Instead, as she sees it, the experience of democracy is rarely daylit or transparent; in a democracy we find ourselves groping uncertainly in a largely “opaque” situation, unclear about the motivations of others and unsure of who or what to trust (107). As such, if democratic experience had a genre, it

would resemble not the historical romance but the *female gothic* (sometimes described as the *quotidian gothic*). Drawing on texts like Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Honig describes the female gothic heroine as a woman protagonist who explores the mysterious spaces within a complicated world above her. Armed with "passionate ambivalence," she is the model democratic citizen:

the subjects best prepared for the demands of democracy are those who exist in an agonistic relation to a founder (or a father or a law) whose alienness is a poorly kept secret; subjects who do not expect power to be granted to them by nice authorities (fathers or husbands) with their best interests at heart (or, if they do harbor such an expectation, they are the sort that is able to rally after an initial disappointment); subjects who know that if they want power, they must take it. (114-115)

Honig distinguishes the female gothic from the "horror gothic"; in the horror gothic, structures of authority are reified as monstrously powerful and impossible to resist, and thus can only engender "paralyzing paranoia." Rather, the female gothic subject's restless exploration of the landscape of power doesn't always yield obvious answers, but nevertheless leaves her more capable in the end: "Whatever they discover—it doesn't matter what, really—the exercise of detection teaches them agency, and they become less vulnerable" (118). Yet even if the gothic heroine can learn agency, she can never "take total control" over her life; none of us can. Rather, the gothic mode "teaches us not only the powers, but also the limits of self-conscious agency," a "lesson" that Honig sees as a "valuable" rejoinder to a naïve view of individualism and self-authorship (118).

For Žižek, too, the hysterical subject (while necessary as a counterpoint to the certainty of the perverse subject), does not have the last word. Žižek does not endorse a mad, hysterical questioning that blocks the emergence of a new social order, since any such hysteria would merely serve the status quo. Instead, drawing on Lacan's

differentiation between various discourses (the Master, the University, the Hysteric, the Analyst), he lays out a schema by which hysteria leads toward a *new* Master discourse, even if any new hegemony remains vulnerable to further hysterical questioning. The important distinction here lies in the way that different subjects react to the “act,” the intrusion of the traumatic Real (embodied, say, in Klein’s shock): if the agent of University discourse, “with his chain of knowledge... wants to reduce the consequences of the act to just another thing that can be explained away as part of the normal run of things,” and if the Master acknowledges the act but wants to ensure that it leads directly to an impregnable narrative, the hysteric, by contrast, does not reduce the act to the “normal run of things” (*The Ticklish Subject* 165). Nor does he remain content to call for a Master discourse that would be shielded from all doubt. Instead, he “insists on the gap that forever separates an event from its (symbolic) consequences”; the traumatic Real, by its nature, cannot be symbolized (165). But although this hysterical step is necessary, Žizek sees a step beyond it, in Lacan’s discourse of the Analyst. The Analyst acknowledges the unassimilable trauma of the confrontation with the Real and the “subjective destitution” (296) it creates, but nevertheless pushes toward a restructured symbolic order: “This position, while maintaining the gap between the Event and its symbolization, avoids the hysterical trap and, instead of being caught in the vicious cycle of permanent failure, affirms this gap as positive and productive: it asserts the Real of the Event as the ‘generator,’ the...core to be encircled repeatedly by the subject’s symbolic productivity” (165). Hysteria, then, is one deconstructive step toward the construction of a new reality. In the discourse of the Analyst, the hysteric’s sense of lack, uncertainty, and vulnerability *is* the basis for a new narrative.

In political terms, the Analyst asserts the power of negativity by cutting through the perverse loop of the fetish and zeroing in on the symptomal element of the social edifice: what Jacques Ranciere calls *the part of no part*. Whatever their number, these figures are defined by contradiction, since their place within the hierarchical social order is that of exclusion:

The leftist political gesture *par excellence* (in contrast to the rightist slogan ‘to each his or her own place’) is...to question the concrete existing order on behalf of its symptom, of the part which, although inherent to the existing order, has no ‘proper place’ within it (say, illegal immigrants or the homeless in our societies)...One pathetically asserts (and identifies with) the point of inherent exception/exclusion, the ‘abject, of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality...in our case, of saying ‘we are all immigrant workers.’ In a hierarchically structured society, the measure of true universality lies in the way parts relate to those ‘at the bottom,’ excluded by and from all others. (*The Ticklish Subject* 224)

For Zizek, then, any new and more just social order (the Christian notion of rebirth, taken up by Alain Badiou in left-political terms) must pass through a version of the *death drive*: via the “negative gesture” of identification with this “excremental remainder,” such that the road toward a new society lies in assuming the subjectivity of the abject, of *shit* (160-161). And such an approach is inherently dialectical, in the sense that it involves seeing the potential for transformation in a situation of contradiction. The “proletarian,” who sells his soul (as it were) as labor power and thus becomes a functionally “disposable...piece of shit,” is also the fulcrum around which transformation might take place (157). In any given situation, the identification of such a (symptomal) “out of joint” contradiction opens up paths toward a new kind of development.

Thinking in Zizek’s terms—about the value of a disjointed, symptomal *fragment* which stands in for the universal—helps us to clarify, if not finally to solve, the fundamental problem of Jameson’s work: the conundrum of representation (and thus of



narration) in a postmodern situation. If representing such a situation in its totality is never achievable—if “the situation is not a realistic thing for us to make a simple representation of, even if we believe in narrative”—then we must rely on *fragments* (Jameson “Marxism and the Historicity of Theory” 160). And for Jameson, *allegory* is a provisional attempt to prioritize and organize these fragments, an intervention within an ever-shifting network of power relations, such that certain parts are taken to stand in for elements greater than themselves: “Allegory happens when you know you cannot represent something, but you also cannot not do it” (Jameson “Marxism and the Historicity of Theory” 161). And since allegory involves narrating what cannot be narrated (like trauma), it is a regular feature of gothic fiction. Žižek, then (drawing from Rancière and Badiou) provides a gothic allegory in which a part (the “part of no part”) stands in for the whole, thus establishing a symptomatic point of departure for analysis and intervention. Whatever else we must consider in the contemporary moment of capital, then, we must begin with this “point of exclusion,” which acts as a key to begin dislodging other elements of the existing edifice (Žižek *The Ticklish Subject* 224).

### Part 3: Negative Repetition, Positive Repetition

What would life be if there were no repetition? Who could want to be a tablet on which time writes something new every instant or to be a memorial volume of the past? Who would want to be susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly diverts the soul anew?

--Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (131)

If repetition is possible, it is due to miracle rather than to law. It is against the law: against the similar form and the equivalent content of law. If repetition can be found, even in nature, it is in the name of a power which affirms itself against the law, which works underneath laws, perhaps superior to laws... It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and artistic reality.

--Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (4)

What is dramatized in this embattled gothic process of analytic therapy is a tension between different forms of *repetition*, both negative and positive. Indeed, repetition is one of the most important tropes of the gothic, since uncanny experience is defined by the continual re-emergence of some repressed element. Trauma would not be trauma were repetition not involved; in the replaying of the painful memory, and in the often unhealthy repetition of defensive coping mechanisms, we can find ourselves trapped in behaviors and impulses that subjugate us with their power. At the same time, however, the healing process is defined by *positive* forms of repetition. As narrative theorist Peter Brooks has pointed out, any narrative (in literature, social life, or psychoanalytic therapy) deploys various kinds of repetition; a successful narrative is not simply a metonymic series of disconnected fragments or signifiers, but relies on “binding” moments (connections in the text that Brooks describes as “metaphorical”) that link elements of the text in order to produce meaning, all of which is mobilized toward some presupposed end (death, the wish, the end of the story, a cause) (101). These binding moments, which resemble what Soren Kierkegaard has called *repetitions* (and what Walter Benjamin called *correspondances*), involve connections between past and present—and between different elements of self and society—in a manner indispensable to the construction of a new critical regionalist poetics of attachment across time and space. In helping us narrativize our positions, however provisionally, positive repetition can help produce new forms of both agency, ritual, and place.

The question of repetition comes into focus, interestingly enough, in Richard Rorty’s complaints about an unhealthy gothic fixation on *sin*. Rorty’s aim here is not misplaced, since in the gothic literary complex sin takes on great importance. But his

imagination of sin—as a violation or moral stain that provokes the wrath of God—is extremely limited. Deeper and more productive understandings of sin are available that might help clarify the power of repetition in the gothic tradition. In the classic Christian understanding outlined by St. Paul, a gothic writer if there ever was one, sin appears not as a violation of a prescriptive law, not simply as “doing something wrong,” but as a state of spirit possession that limits a person’s capability for loving creation by compelling a morbid and unwanted repetition. In his recent reading of St. Paul, Alain Badiou describes Pauline sin as a state of metaphorical *death* insofar as it engenders negative repetition, while *life* involves an escape from this very slavery. And for Paul, sin is a structural component of the law itself (“the law is cursed”), such that the original trauma lies in the paternal imposition of the law. In turn, life is regained through a ritual repetition of Christ’s resurrection, through which a new law (that of *love*) is established; this new law does not negate the previous law but fulfills its original intention in a complex way.<sup>16</sup> Pauline sin is therefore an example of what Freud described as the *uncanny*, an experience that is disconcerting because it is both strange and familiar, and because it evokes or repeats a repressed experience and thereby provokes its return. More importantly, sin deprives us of agency, insofar as it makes us (in Paul’s terms) *want what we don’t want to want*. In its fascination with sin, then, we might say that the gothic is fascinated with negative repetition in its uncanny dimension, and with the lack of agency that is associated with being trapped by the past.

Drawing from the same well of Christian narrative understanding, Kierkegaard was aware of the negative forms of repetition, but for him, genuine repetition involved

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<sup>16</sup>For a detailed analysis of Paul’s view of sin, see Alain Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

not an unconscious or automatic action engendered by a failure to work through the past, and not the endless appearance of the same. Instead, a true repetition leaves the past behind but draws from it in order to perform the new in the present. Kierkegaard distinguished between the terms *repetition*, *recollection*, and *hope*. Recollection, in his framework, is a melancholy orientation toward an irretrievably lost past; it is “repeated backward.” Hope, meanwhile, implies “restlessness” and a dalliance with the future, but is “cowardly” since it can be endlessly deferred. “Genuine repetition,” in contrast, requires “courage” since it does not take cover in the past or the future, but assumes full responsibility for the present; it is “recollected forward” because it lets go of the actual, external past but repeats its best impulses internally and spiritually: “it is not a question of the repetition of something external but of the repetition of his freedom” (131, 304). In attempting to explain the specific role of repetition, Kierkegaard resorts to metaphor: “Hope is a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but it has not been tried on, and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit. Recollection is a discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it. Repetition is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags” (132). Both hope and recollection, then, are ways of evading the truly new; hope postpones it to a later date, and recollection can only pore over the “memorial volume.” We repeat only if we don’t cling to the past, but instead conjure it as an interlocutor, the spirit of which we might be able to re-perform on a new stage.

Despite the cozy connotations of a garment that fits closely and tenderly, repetition is not necessarily snug and comfortable—or rather, it can be seen to fit only after its ordeal has passed. However rewarding it might turn out to be afterward, the

prospect of a genuine repetition can be a painful spiritual trial; in order to engage in a repetition of past freedom, one must sometimes make a risky leap into territory that seems absurd, because none of the external conditions seem favorable to it. Indeed, it might involve the “shattering” of one’s customary personality, and can thus require more than a person thinks is possible. Repetition occurs at a Benjaminian moment of danger, when, “From the point of view of immediacy, everything is lost” (Kierkegaard 212). And it might not work. For Kierkegaard, to repeat the movement of Abraham, Job, or Christ is a frightening prospect. (We might also mention the complexity of repeating the spirit of a founding act like the American or Mexican Revolution, or the spirit of a great work of art). The pursuit of repetition, then, involves the search for something to be faithful to, and the ensuing steadfastness that goes along with this assertion. As ironic and humorous as Kierkegaard can be, he is not deluded into imagining that it is truly possible to maintain a distance from one’s commitments. As Jonathan Lear notes, it is precisely the tension between ironic distance—a pulling away in which one questions a particular social role and the system that makes it possible—and the unavoidable necessity of commitment that characterizes Kierkegaard’s particular form of irony.<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaardian repetition, then, implies not a homogenous flow of time, but a heterogeneous Benjaminian time characterized by loops, jumps, and pauses within an embattled situation.

Such a “long practice” is exactly what writers like Baudelaire and Proust were up to when they evoked what Benjamin calls *correspondances*, through which (for example)

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<sup>17</sup> Or, as Kierkegaard wryly argues (via another pseudonym Johannes Climacus), “From the fact that irony is present, it does not follow that the earnestness is excluded. That is something only assistant professors assume” (cited in Lear 19).

an experience in the streets of Paris is linked and compared to a past experience (*The Writer of Modern Life* 202):

What Baudelaire meant by *correspondances* can be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form. This is possible only within the realm of ritual. If it transcends this realm, it presents itself as the beautiful. In the beautiful, ritual value appears as the value of art. *Correspondances* are the data of recollection—not historical data, but data of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life.... The images of caves and vegetation, of clouds and waves which are evoked at the beginning of this second sonnet rise from the warm vapor of tears—tears of homesickness.... What is past murmurs in the *correspondences*, and the canonical experience of them has its place in a previous life. (198)

It is true that the “tears of homesickness” described here can devolve into the static and cowardly *recollection* described by Kierkegaard. But the “encounter with an earlier life” can also enable the repetition of spiritual impulses perceived to have been at work in the past. The proposal is this: in that earlier life, there “murmured” a freedom that may or may not have been achieved in reality, but with which we can nevertheless ally ourselves in an attempt to weather a “crisis.” Whether or not the experience so described is indeed “crisis-proof”—in the sense that it can withstand literally anything—is not the issue. The point is that through ritual, or through the manifestation of ritual in art (i.e., the “beautiful”) we have the opportunity to channel the vital spirits of previous struggles, previous discoveries, and previous desires. One is no longer dropped from the calendar, but uses the calendar to highlight qualitative meanings and significances that can be recuperated and repeated in an attempt to grapple with the “crisis” of life in capitalist modernity, and perhaps to change its conditions.

Freud, too, confronted negative repetition through life-giving forms of positive repetition conceived as performance in the present. And, *apropos* of Kierkegaard, Freud’s form of positive repetition involves an engagement with the past rather than a simple

jettisoning of it. For Freud, in the theater of psychoanalysis we revisit the past so that we can tell our life story in new ways. Through the process of *transference*, the analyst and the analysand work together to produce a new and more life-giving fiction that can disarm the power of negative repetition by confronting past trauma and producing a rhetorically persuasive counter-story, complete with powerful images that can crystallize in the analysand's mind and supply her/him with tools to move forward. Drawing from Freud, Peter Brooks argues that all narrative functions according to a similar model of transference. If Freud argues that transference "creates an intermediate region between illness and real life, through which the transition from the one to the other is made," then narrative does the same thing (225-229). The reader of a narrative does not approach "real life," but a "dilatatory space" through which real life can be imaginatively mediated, reconfigured, and worked through (102):

Transference, like the text as read, becomes the peculiar space of a deadly serious play, in which affect, repeated from the past, is acted out as if it were present, yet eventually in the knowledge that the persons and relations involved are surrogates and mummies. The transference actualizes the past in symbolic form, so that it can be replayed to a more successful outcome... Disciplined and 'subjugated,' the transference delivers one back to a changed reality. And so does any text fully engaged by the reader. (235)

In the case of psychoanalysis, the analyst is not specifically concerned with whether the analysand's narrated memories actually describe real events, or whether they are pure fantasies. The goal, in the end, is to construct a narrative in which past and present can be reconciled in such a way that the patient can thrive in the social world.

The most powerful and compelling forms of the gothic, then—whether at work in Putumayan shamans, Zizek, Taussig, Freud, St. Paul, Benjamin, Honig, Brooks, Benjamin, or Kierkegaard--always yearn to transcend the gothic itself. Refusing to

remain attached to the root of the trauma, these thinkers instead seek ways out of negative repetition—not by setting out, Richard Rorty-style to come up with a nicer and more romantic story that will give us better self-esteem, but by engaging in the painstaking work of what Michael Taussig describes as “raking over the coals of events” (*Shamanism* 394). The proper response to Rorty, then, is that moving on from the past, or from problems that are currently repressed, is easier said than done. Ongoing traumas like racism, class domination, and the patriarchy must be worked through and faced, and it is not always clear how to go about doing so. We cannot simply wave a magic wand and make past traumas disappear, especially since the material and psychic implications of that past haunt the present in fundamental ways. Thus if Rorty is correct to point out that a horror gothic outlook (in which the forces of darkness dominate everything) can lead to a sense of paralysis, commentators like Fiedler, Honig, and Žižek have pointed out that cheap horror gothic is not the only mode available to us as a way of confronting our various repressions, traumas, and fetishes. A more mature form of the gothic would recognize the necessity of working through the trauma of the past, and of keeping a suspicious eye on power wherever it is exercised, but it would never allow trauma the last word. Instead, it would allow room for grace and joy.

At the same time, however, we must acknowledge the unstable, trickster side of the gothic, since part of what makes gothic texts (from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* to HBO’s *True Blood*) attractive and popular in the larger culture is that they dangle before us images of terror that can be treated *either* as symptoms *or* as fetishes; if we choose, we can treat the images in gothic texts as overwrought nonsense, as histrionic, or as purely comedic in their distortion and amplification of existing social fears. As Jerrold E. Hogle



puts it, in confronting Gothic texts, “we are always poised on a fulcrum” between denial and confrontation:

Do we let them mainly protect and justify us as we are (which most of them can, if we seek that through them) or do we let them arouse us to reconsider and critique the conventional norms of western middle-class culture, which can confront disguised challenges to them in the Gothic (if we let it) more vividly than anywhere else? Will the fear that Gothic works to arouse keep us from facing the longings and anomalies behind those terrors that the Gothic also depicts? (19)

Fiction, in this framework, emerges as a form of sorcery or magic. All literature is sorcery in that it projects visions into the world that have real effects, whether positive or negative (there is no guarantee that the text’s magic will be beneficial). It compels a hallucinatory trance and thereby possesses us with its unpredictable and unstable spirit. If it can result in danger and terror, it can also result in what Michael Taussig calls “the power of grace...the transformation of a bad situation into a good situation” (“Carnival of the Senses” 55). And if there is no necessary end to this process of revision and reworking, it is not always because we don’t want to be healed, but because healing and nurture is a perpetual way of life.

What I draw from this constellation of gothic tropes, then, is a subaltern cosmopolitan critical regionalism that is gothic in its rhetorical approach, or more succinctly, a *gothic quest for place*. Here the past is given up for dead, since its paternal authority cannot be resuscitated in the same way, and nor should it. But despite such a loss, we can still draw from ghosts of the past (especially the ghosts of the oppressed, who continue to haunt us) as we forge our way into the future. In spatial terms, we assert that place still matters, since the construction of relatively durable permanences helps us in our project of transgenerational nurturance, but we do not allow such places to become fetishized ends-in-themselves, since we never lose sight of the symptom that provides

access to the universal: the part of no part, the contradictory site of exclusion as a mode of inclusion. Because everyone is wrapped up in the same mesh together, we must recognize that, as Krista Comer puts it, “there is no shelter from the global storm” (15). Just as a stable sense of self is always threatened by the vulnerable multiplicity that we are tempted to throw off and deny, a stable sense of place, too, is unavailable. Even so, we must strive to produce provisional forms of place: not simply connections, but attachments. Whether in place or in motion, this sense of mutual reciprocity within the mesh must trump the protection of any single place. When it comes to the nurturance of the “part of no part,” the *gothic quest for place* imagines a logic that parallels the Christian maxim “Whoever shall seek to save himself shall lose himself,” but translated into spatial terms: “Whoever shall seek to save his place shall lose it; while whoever loses his place for the sake of the excluded, shall gain it.”

#### Cultural Nationalism, Postcolonial Melancholia, and the Dialectical West

The visionless legacy that all of these fallen cowboys hand on to the women in their lives....They walk home from the funeral, one foot in front of the other, mother and daughter holding hands....They keep going...no martyrdom here, no bid for the cultural satisfaction of white motherhood....But there is a grim and familiar kind of Western female stoicism in operation...where women at the day's end, try to put together the pieces in order to give to their children at bedtime something other than a cynical story, a joyless kiss goodnight.

--Krista Comer, from *Landscapes of the New West* (229)

As we have seen, the neoliberal situation produces a crisis in narrativity, and as a result provokes a number of compensatory narratives (localisms, regionalisms, nationalisms, tribalisms, fundamentalisms) that offer to situate the subject within an unmappable totality. And Mike Featherstone, in calling attention to the defensive phenomenon of contemporary cultural nationalism, highlights the uncanny return of the

ethnic core as a structuring principle within such narratives. By mobilizing the ethnic core, we imagine (falsely) that we can batten down the hatches against the neoliberal global storm. Featherstone may be correct here, but it is still unclear what the U.S. ethnic core might be, or if it can be identified at all. Surely, even in what Featherstone describes as the older and more sedimented nations (Britain and France, for instance), the core is not a given, but emerges through a process of cultural contestation. Yet perhaps given the U.S. history of settler-colonialism, we might identify its ethnic core in the mythological West, conceived as the locus of Anglo-Protestant cultural nationalism, Manifest Destiny, and Empire. In doing so, however, we must recognize the unstable nature of the West as a site for primary identification. Because the West is not simply a pastoral, but a frontier, the dominant (male, white) settlers of the U.S. West have consistently displayed deep ambivalence about the very notion of settlement, with its attendant visions of domestication and feminization. Any orientation provided by the West is always already complicated by an individualist ambivalence to orientation as such. The hegemonic Anglo-Protestant's aims are simultaneously domestic and expansionist; he does indeed long for home as a stable place, but he also longs for release from the restrictions implied by any such place.

However complicated its dynamics, the frontier West as ethnic core is fundamentally connected to a U.S. imperial project that now appears both fundamentally flawed and unsustainable. Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner eulogized the close of the official frontier in 1893, Anglo-Protestant men have sought to rediscover its rejuvenating properties in new imaginative and spatial frontiers: in cultural texts and practices (novels, movies, outdoor sports), but also through colonial expansion, from the internal

colonialism of the Western frontier (the Indian wars, the dispossession of Tejanos and Californios, the mastery of nature) to the ever-expanding realm of the global economy. Having effectively subjugated the Indians, frontier enthusiasts like Theodore Roosevelt turned their expansionary virility to other pastures: to Cuba, the Philippines, Hawaii, and gunboat diplomacy. And after World War II, the U.S. committed itself unequivocally to what David Noble has called the “sacred international marketplace,” but it did so without resorting to the old-fashioned forms of imperialist expansion (288). Instead, its gambit for global hegemony relied on more subtle, neocolonial strategies of domination; although the U.S. did not (usually) occupy foreign territories directly, it used economic, cultural, and military power (covert action, diplomatic pressure, sponsored coups, and especially “debt traps” and monetary policy) to push open global markets and install U.S.-friendly regimes wherever possible. Meanwhile, in concert with the rise of a Taylorized consumer society, it employed “soft power” to colonize psychic space the world over. During this Cold War period, for example, Western texts (and especially cowboy narratives) helped to establish legitimacy for both U.S. white masculinity and imperial power.

Ronald Reagan, in particular, drew from such frontier Western narratives in his bid to revive a teetering post-Vietnam white masculinity, and in the process articulated a potent ideological brew based on contradictory notions of the “private”: the private individual participant in the (global) market, the private/domestic home space of the sentimental family, and the “domestic” sense of nation as expressed in Anglo/Protestant cultural nationalism. But Reagan’s contradictions could not ultimately be maintained, since the free-floating speculative capitalist individual inevitably chafes against both the demands of the sentimental family and the nation’s cultural and political boundaries. The

neoliberal principle of flexibility is incompatible with these institutions, and indeed, leads to their active destruction. But in destroying them, the neoliberal economy destroys elements that it requires in order to function, such that Reaganite cultural nationalism (embodied today in the guise of the Tea Party) runs up against a contradiction that lies first and foremost in the neoliberal relation to the state. In theory, neoliberals urge the state to stay out of economic matters, and to reduce its interventions in the social world; but in practice, they *need* the state (and other institutions) to manage the chaotic effects of capitalist deterritorialization, to enforce property rights and trade, and to provide meaningful identitarian narratives for citizens across the globe. Neoliberals demand open borders (at least for capital), but they secretly rely on borders as well. They want it both ways.

Thinking in these dialectical terms helps clarify the importance of President Bill Clinton's rise to power in 1992; when Clinton enraged white supremacists by challenging Reaganite cultural nationalism, he was trying to cover over the contradictory relationship between neoliberalism and the state. In celebrating America's multicultural heritage and articulating a global cosmopolitan vision, he hoped to embrace neoliberalism on its own "borderless" terms, and in the process make economic and diplomatic connections around the world, especially in growing Third World markets. But he did not get rid of the contradiction between nationalism and the transnational ruling class; instead, he simply delayed a reckoning with it by coasting on a high-growth, speculative (and unsustainable) technology-based economy. In his own way, then, Clinton too kept promise with the Western U.S. ethnic core. In his fundamentally optimistic view of the global economy as a free space of constant expansion, in his championing of the new frontiers of technology

embodied in Western spaces like Silicon Valley, and in his continuation of U.S.-led neocolonial practices (like the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund), Clinton helped keep the pastoral/frontier ideology alive. Americans could open up to the world economy *and* retain their fated sense of exceptionalism.

However, as in the boom/bust cycles of the Western past, the bubbles of the 1990s (and later the 2000s) eventually burst. Faced with a downturn in the technology economy, President George W. Bush doubled down on the real estate market, hoping that new construction and speculation would make up for other economic losses, but this practice, too, led to more shocks. The neoliberal era of foreign investment and rapid capital movement is characterized by financial crises (which have popped up from Argentina and Sweden to Mexico and Thailand), and by 2007 the U.S. faced its own housing-based collapse, which soon spread throughout the world financial system. Earlier, on September, 11, 2001, another bubble burst: the common sense among Americans that they were impregnable from the mass civilian casualties that had been widespread in other parts of the world. The muddling, bloody, and uncontrollable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—combined with the relative rise of nations like China, Brazil, and India on the world stage—laid bare a problem with American power. Only in the presence of threats to its hegemony (both terroristic and economic), it seems, could U.S. commentators finally begin talking about U.S. Empire, such that a book like Fareed Zakaria's 2003 *The Post-American World and The Rise of the Rest* rattled many (white) Americans who imagined U.S. power as a God-given privilege. Though U.S. hegemony has been declining since at least the early 1970s, U.S. citizens (especially white citizens) had not squarely faced this loss, instead preferring remasculinized Reaganite uplift to Jimmy

Carter's more straightforward acknowledgement of "malaise," resource shortages, and uncertainty. But facing a floundering war on terrorism, along with problems like global warming, financial collapse, economic inequality, and low rates of social mobility, no one could ignore the idea of U.S. decline any longer. Meanwhile, the demographic decline of the white population (and continuing immigration from Latin America and Asia) continued to rattle many Anglo-Protestant cultural nationalists who felt that "their" country was slipping away from them.

Although U.S. citizens must increasingly face their imbrication in history, and thus in an unpredictable and uneven social and ecological network, intellectual awareness of the mesh does not necessarily translate into emotional acceptance, or into a proportionate grief, shame, and atonement about the role played by U.S. empire. Instead, it is fair to say that most U.S. citizens have been evading a reckoning with the false promise of the postwar American Century for decades, since perhaps the Watts riots in 1965, if not before. In that sense, the U.S.'s recent travails appear as the uncanny return of repressed problems that crested most visibly in the 1970s, but that Reaganite and Clintonian forms of frontier/pastoral utopian thinking obsessively swept under the rug. Bill McKibben, writing in dispiriting terms about the looming, slow-motion apocalypse of global climate disruption (now not a threat to future generations, but simply a present fact of life), describes from an environmental point of view a sentiment that could be extended to social life more generally:

The problem was not that Reagan's sunny optimism somehow masked a fascist soul; the problem was his sunny optimism. He really believed it was morning again, and when the economy turned up, so did the rest of the country; the ambivalence about growth vanished, and with it our last real chance to avert disaster. Because the next twenty-five years, all lived in Reagan's shadow, were

the years when we pumped the carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and the oil out of the ground. (94-95).

This disaster is not only an environmental one, but (for those at the bottom), a broadly social one: of wasted human potential and atrophied infrastructure, of mass incarceration and hopelessness.

What U.S. citizens have faced over the past few decades, then, is analogous to the disorientation British subjects have experienced in the wake of their own imperial decline. British cultural critic Paul Gilroy has identified “postcolonial melancholia” as a desperate and “neurotic” obsession with a more “comprehensible and inhabitable” past, a “hunger for reorientation,” and an inability to acknowledge connections to those affected by a history of colonial domination (89-90). If Britons have not been able “to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige,” it should not be surprising that many white Americans face a similar struggle letting go of a narcissistic “fantasy of omnipotence” (90, 99). Gilroy further argues that the “possibility of healing and reconciliation” lies in an honest appraisal of the national past:

Before the British people can adjust to the horrors of their own modern history and start to build a new national identity from the debris of their broken narcissism, they will have to learn to appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and to their benefit...to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness. (99)

In other words, the route toward a new, more just, and less neurotic collective lies in a new way of telling stories: in a Gothic process of digging through remains, prying into dark corners, and prodding into the vulnerable places of memory and experience.



As contemporary artists and critics are increasingly willing to face, the West was, and is, a gothic space and not simply a sun-lit one—not just a *fetish*, but a potential *symptom* of trauma. What Patricia Limerick called the “legacy of conquest” in the West—Indian removal, war with Mexicans, prostitution, lonely pioneer women, rapacious boom-and-bust cycles, labor violence, lust for land, and class stratification—surely calls for a gothic approach, just as the twin forces of the biological and spectral Real compel us to face uncanny skeletons in the closet like the workers in *Fast Food Nation*. Krista Comer, in particular, documents the rise of a new Western regionalist literature in the 1970s and 1980s that paralleled the rise of the new Western history exemplified by Limerick and her colleagues. Taken as a whole, the new Western regionalist literature has had mixed results, since it often slips into untenable modes of localist celebration or Heideggerian holism (especially insofar as it remains fixated on a desire to return to the precommodified world of the preconquest Indian). But as Comer points out, much of this literature is commendable because it is largely characterized by an attempt to *grapple* with modernity (and postmodernity) rather than to simply repudiate it. Led primarily by women and minority writers, from Barbara Kingsolver to Gloria Anzaldua, the new Western regionalism has generally rejected Reaganite narratives of Western masculinity, militarism, individualism, and anti-government autonomy in favor of different ideals: community, reciprocity, mutual nurturance, doubt, egalitarian sexual pleasure, and a protective social order governed by some form of state apparatus. Even its focus on the preconquest Indian often reveals—as does Taussig’s work in South America—a vivid critique of the contemporary capitalist order, although the lessons we

learn from this precommodified social world must be balanced against our need to dance with the devil in today's transformed conditions.

In advocating such values, such writers struggled not merely against Reagan's revival of cultural nationalism, masculinity, and white supremacy, but also against the Western literary tradition presided over by Wallace Stegner, who challenged frontier rapaciousness (especially on the ecological front), but who largely excluded women and minorities from his work, clung to what Comer calls a bourgeois anti-modernist outlook, and retained a fetishistic vision of the West as a *geography of hope* (130). In that sense, the post-Reagan (and post-Stegner) Western imaginary owes a great deal to the growth of feminism and multiculturalism in the West. But as I have indicated, the postmodern legacy described by Comer—with its “fragmented, non-universalist, evolving ontologies” and its “multiple, bastard, miscegenistic, gender-bent, hybridized” identities (4-5)—is rife with problems of which Comer is fully aware, since the very fragmentation implied by postmodern life is easily exploited by the rhizomatic power of global capital, making coherent class-based narratives of struggle that much more difficult to develop. Indeed, in her many qualifiers and back-tracking moves, her defense of place and her warnings against it, Comer in *Landscapes* is moving toward a dialectical vision of the West more indebted to the notion of the contradiction than to smooth hybridity (and such moves presage her more recent work on translocal surfing communities and critical regionalist theory). Again, the answer does not lie in the reassertion of primordial and essentialist narratives of ethnicity and nation, in a resurgence of paternal authority, or in the rejection of hybridity. Nor does it lie in Foucauldian micropolitics, or in a weak bourgeois cosmopolitanism complicit with free market utopianism.

Instead, the answer involves dancing with the devil: acknowledging our imbrication within this contradictory system, but also confronting the symptomal elements that haunt it and provide the levers with which we might trouble and transform it. And it involves not reveling in the absence of paternal authority, but making up for this loss through nurturing forms of place and narrative grounded in the abject (female, castrated, excremental) figure of the excluded. Within this constellation of new Western regionalism, then, I find the most compelling texts among those which participate in the gothic tradition I have tried to outline here. Recent texts, among them HBO's *Deadwood*, but also the work of Sherman Alexie, Cormac McCarthy, Annie Proulx, Charles Bowden, Richard Rodriguez, Walter Kirn, Ruben Martinez, Luis Alberto Urrea, Richard Linklater, the Cohen Brothers, and Sandra Cisneros strike me as both gothic and progressive in their outlook: haunted by nightmarish crimes, but motivated to work through trauma in order to move toward a more just society. Although I do not examine all of these writers in the dissertation, I try to capture the spirit of this gothic Western critical regionalism, in which healing teeters so eerily on the border of fear. Finally, all of these texts I examine—from Cisneros, Alexie, and Rodriguez to Kirn, Krakauer, and Bowden—are vibrantly alive when it comes to the problematic of space; in theorist Doreen Massey's terms, they help us come to terms with a world in which space is not inert or given, but is as "equally challenging and equally lively" as temporality (*For Space* 13).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Such texts participate in what Stephen Tatum has described as a "forensic aesthetic" in the West, built around an exploration of "material artifacts" that register haunting evidence of trauma: "loss," "death," or "pain" in "a cordoned off or framed topography of ruin or contamination...material traces mutely registering that once upon a time something existed, something happened in this place" (127). In turn, they exemplify his notion of "spectral beauty," a form of beauty that does not maintain a stable aesthetic distance from the Real of trauma, but instead remains haunted by it. Spectral beauty is compatible with the *gothic quest for place*, since it involves creating ritual spaces of relative permanence in which healing can take place; these spaces do not devolve into fetishistic denial, since they never lose sight of the symptom that makes healing necessary. Tatum cites the late writer Ellen Meloy here, whose Navajo friend tells her

I have chosen to focus on the post-1989 period, rather than tracing the new regionalism from the 1970s onward, because I am interested in the way that the Fukayaman “end of history” hypothesis plays out in Western literature, especially insofar as that utopia is disrupted by a number of factors: memories and visions of precapitalist modes of production, the uncanny return of history in the 9/11 attacks, the haunting quality of our distant connections in the ecological and social mesh, and ultimately, the recent financial crises. Slavoj Žižek puts the matter succinctly: “Fukayama’s utopia of the 1990s had to die twice, since the collapse of the liberal-democratic political utopia on 9/11 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism; if the 2008 financial meltdown has a historical meaning, then, is as a sign of the end of the economic face of Fukayama’s dream” (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* 5). But even if the Fukayaman dream is dead, we have learned nothing from the gothic form if we forget that the dead are never truly dead, but live on in many different forms. As we continue to face a host of shocks and specters, the ensuing years will involve a contest in which competing narratives, from fundamentalist revivals to reassertions of the Fukayaman dream, will battle for the allegiance of people across the globe. In this context, perhaps the tales we must ultimately tell our children, in Comer’s terms, should be gothic fairy tales:

enchanted, strange, often humorous—but with a haunting core of vulnerability, intimacy,

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about the permeable but protective character of ritual ceremonies: “only when someone was in a sacred situation, at a sing or ceremonial... was harmony restored, and even then, residue remained outside the ceremonial membrane usually in the form of ghosts, so you had to keep singing, all your life” (cited in Tatum 140). Such rituals enable participants to grab hold of a place on the calendar, not in a permanent or closed-off sense, but through Kierkegaardian repetition of a provisional harmony that acknowledges ghosts but strives to keep them at bay. In similar fashion, the texts under discussion here imagine place as simultaneously haunted, joyful, and playful, however rooted in a recognition of the traumatic sublime. A quest is not an adventure, not a permanent epistemological or ethical solution; instead, it requires us to keep singing, all our lives.

and perhaps even hope. And although these stories must always resonate on the small, uncanny level of the child's bedroom, they might also explode onto a planetary stage.

## CHAPTER 2

### SHAKING AWAKE THE MEMORY: THE GOTHIC QUEST FOR PLACE IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S *CARAMELO* AND SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *FLIGHT*

With the ravages of the unconscious continually interrupting one's perception of the world, the protagonist of the contemporary Gothic often experiences history as mixed up, reversed, and caught in a simultaneity of past-present-future. History has made a promise—that one will grow from a fragile, vulnerable child to an autonomous, rational adult—but it is unable to keep that promise in the twentieth-century. It can only offer a future that is already suspended between present and past.

—Steven Bruhm, from “Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It” (267-268)

In the first season of HBO's *True Blood*—a contemporary vampire series set in small-town Louisiana—a young black woman named Tara Mae Thornton visits a local conjure woman who offers to expel her demons. Though she still questions this supernatural diagnosis, Tara bears psychic scars from abuse at the hands of her alcoholic mother, and is willing to try almost anything to move beyond the past. Besides, she has visited Miss Jeannette before: this conjure woman cured her mother Lettie of alcoholism. Earlier in the season, Lettie surprised Tara by insisting that she was not to blame for her drinking; instead, a “demon” occupied her and determined her decisions: “All those terrible things I did to you—it wasn't me who did them. I have a demon inside of me... A demon, living and breathing inside me—eating me up... Don't you laugh at the devil, Tara Mae, 'cause he's as serious as cancer.” After reluctantly supplying her mother with

money to pay Miss Jeannette, Tara had accompanied Lettie to see the shaman-like healer (who appears to live in an old, abandoned bus, and who wears a raggedy dress out of the nineteenth century). During that visit, Miss Jeannette explained that she lives in the woods to escape “all that pollution and technology.” She tells the two women that she doesn’t use “cell phones” and “microwaves” because “That’s how the demons travel. That’s why I stay out here in the woods—away from civilization.” Using her seemingly old-fashioned methods, Miss Jeannette miraculously exorcises the demon from Lettie, who stops drinking and professes that she no longer needs alcohol.

After curing Lettie, the conjure woman gives Tara some unexpected guidance: she warns Tara that her mother’s demon is nothing compared to the devil that lives inside of Tara. Miss Jeannette’s implication is that letting go of resentment, especially when one has faced real abuse, is even more difficult than giving up alcohol. And in fact, Tara’s sense of victimhood and injury haunts her and makes her incapable of maintaining fruitful connections with others. She fights constantly, loses jobs, and sabotages potential love relationships that come her way. To top it all off, Tara is puzzled—even vexed and disappointed—by her mother’s recovery, since it forces her to confront the possibility that she might not have continued cause for resentment. Is it possible that she might have to forgive her mother now—to give her a chance to make up for what she has done? Compounding this problem is Tara’s skepticism regarding the whole matter of exorcism. In response, her cousin (a gay, drug-dealing short-order cook named Lafayette Reynolds) urges her to rethink her skepticism, at least enough to give her mother some credit: “This world is filled with things we will never understand.” (In a subsequent season, Lafayette discovers that their grandmother was a conjure woman, and falls in love with a Mexican

man named Jesus who learned shamanic secrets from his grandparents). Finally, Tara decides to visit Miss Jeannette herself. The exorcism is more intense than her mother's: after taking a mysterious medicine, Tara sees a young version of herself imploring her with tearful, terrified eyes. Miss Jeannette urges her to destroy the girl. Tara balks, but Miss Jeannette pushes her, and finally Tara attacks the conjured hallucination. Tara then begins to vomit, as if purging herself of the ghost of her younger self. She is tired and sick, but soon begins to feel better. She, too, has been cured, and tearfully tells her mother the good news; for the first time ever, the two women embrace in joy. Lettie rejoices: "We're saved! Both of us saved. You did a brave thing, Tara Mae. I am so proud of you, my baby."

However, Tara's journey is not over; instead, she remains plagued by doubts about the efficacy of the exorcism. When she enters a pharmacy in a neighboring town, she looks suspiciously at the clerk in the store; finally, she pulls off the woman's wig. It is Miss Jeannette, talking on a cell phone just like the one she claimed she never used. Tara angrily confronts her, and attacks her as a fraud. And indeed, it turns out that Tara's vision was brought on by hallucinogens, and her vomiting by ipecac syrup. But the pharmacist defends herself; she points out that she needs the money to raise her children, and argues that "Miss Jeannette" accomplishes real good in the world: "Just because Miss Jeannette ain't real doesn't mean she doesn't help people. You saw how it worked for your mama." She begs Tara not to tell her mother about their confrontation: "Faith's a powerful thing." Thus Tara faces a question: does she tell her mother about Miss Jeannette's fictional identity and risk allowing Lettie to fall back into alcoholism, or does she keep the secret? Either way, Tara is desperate. Though she fears her mother's



demons, she fears her *own* demons even more; if Miss Jeannette is not “real,” then how can Tara still maintain faith in her own cure?<sup>19</sup> Soon enough, although Tara does not tell her mother about Miss Jeannette’s pharmacist alter-ego, she falls off the wagon and returns to her self-destructive patterns; the despair continues, and Tara must figure out another way to conquer her inner demons.

In imagining Tara’s confrontation with shamanic healing, the creators of *True Blood* conjure up a gothic vision that enables them to consider the role of fiction in healing. Miss Jeannette, after all, *is* fictional—not only in the sense that she has been created for the purposes of an HBO television series, but also because within the world of the series she is a performed character. The pharmacist, otherwise immersed in the contemporary world of technology and official medicine, dons the woodsy dress of Miss Jeannette because playing this archaic fictional role yields results: not only money for her family, but also (sometimes) healing and joy for her patients. In this sense, the community surrounding Bon Temps (and especially, we are given to believe, the black community) has conjured her, interpellated her as a projection of their own fantasies of slave-era folk magic and healing. Tara, for example, doesn’t really think there are demons in the world, at least not intellectually. And yet, in some deeper sense, she *does* believe in them. It is only because these demons *do* exert force--because Tara is trapped

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it turns out that killing off the vision of a victimized young Tara is not so easily accomplished: in the second season of *True Blood*, Tara is visited by a strange and beautiful white woman who takes her into her home, gives her everything she wants (delicious food, dips in the pool, drugs, dancing), and reassures her that she is justified in hating her terrible mother. Yet the hedonistic Maryann turns out to be a nodal point of chaos. She hypnotizes almost every citizen of the town, seduces them into committing violence against each other, and fosters constant destruction. Her first crime: she kills Miss Jeannette. And why did Maryann come to visit Tara? Because, she says, Tara called her to come when she conjured up the vision of her young, frightened self. Maryann, it turns out, is yet another uncanny return of that vision; in pampering Tara and assuring her of her victim status at the hands of her mother, she nourishes the young, terrified Tara and keeps the demon alive. The season ends in tragedy, as Tara loses a young man with whom she has fallen in love, a man similarly trapped by Maryann.

by clinging to them in the guise of her young and traumatized self--that Miss Jeannette can function as an efficacious character. Like the demon of alcoholism, Tara's resentment and bitterness are "as real as cancer."

Just as the fictional Miss Jeannette serves as a reflecting mirror for the fears and desires of her audience, the show *True Blood* works in gothic fashion as an overdetermined projection of the fears and desires of a U.S. audience deep in the throes of challenges both personal and political: terrorism, cultural battles regarding religion and sexual orientation, war, class polarization, unemployment, and an economic crisis brought on primarily by malfeasance among a globalized elite of financial players. (And like Miss Jeannette, it reaps commercial profits in grappling with these fears). Here is not the time and place to impose a coherent order on *True Blood's* jumble of social and cultural references, but even a brief sketch reveals that its world of vampires and werewolves is also a reckoning with eruptions in the twenty-first century U.S. political unconscious. The show's premise gestures toward the movement for GLBT rights: vampires have come out of the closet--or in this case, "out of the coffin"--by openly announcing themselves as a presence in American life. And the chief opponents of their assimilation, evangelical bigots like Reverend Steve Newlin, resemble both right-wing militias and Taliban-style terrorists in their violent training camps and religious fervor. Meanwhile, the show continually gestures toward U.S. wars in the Middle East. When Lafayette is captured by vampires, detained in a dank cell, and chained to a metal pole along with other prisoners, the images of torture and fear are no less gothic than the ones that emerged from U.S.-run prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. And Terry Bellefleur (an

Iraq war veteran in Bon Temps who battles post-traumatic stress disorder) finds an unexpected kindred spirit in Bill Compton, a vampire and veteran of the Civil War.

Finally, through the contrast between small-town Southern iconography and cosmopolitan global economic and cultural flows, *True Blood* confronts the contemporary situation of planetary uneven development. Although the show's action takes place in what otherwise seems an unassuming Southern town, Bon Temps somehow becomes the epicenter for century-spanning global clashes between vampires and humans (not to mention factional feuds between humans and humans, and between vampires and vampires), thus indicating a preoccupation with the way that local and regional spaces have become increasingly roped into global economic and cultural affairs. In the opening scene of the series, Tara reads a copy of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: Disaster Capitalism*, a tale of the way vampire-like capital swoops in on disaster areas like Iraq and post-Katrina New Orleans and exploits chaos to impose neoliberal privatization policies. Later, it turns out that certain vampires—many of them aristocrats and banking magnates who have been around for centuries—are behind any number of global problems, from financial crises to Nazism. Like Bram Stoker's original Dracula, who is characterized by his mobility (on trains and boats) and whose expansion from Eastern Europe into Britain provokes the novel's panic, these vampires are savvy travelers and border-crossers.

Yet—also like the contradictory Dracula who, as Jerrold E. Hogle puts it, “can be extremely aristocratic and [yet] cavort among homeless gypsies” (12)—the *True Blood* vampires are unstable signifiers. They are globalized and cosmopolitan (Bill casually listens to Cambodian music in the car!), but also hidebound and hierarchical: their social

order is built on respect for age and experience, and the antebellum-born Bill speaks in stilted nineteenth-century diction. World-weary and eminently cultured, most of them look down on relatively inexperienced humans as a lower species; and yet their hyper-refined tastes and rigid codes coincide with animal-like physical appetites: unbridled sexual lust and a hunger for human blood that can't always be satiated by the synthetic, over-the-counter "Tru Blood" that gives the show its title. In terms of class, then, these creatures come across as an unsteady oscillation between high-class power and the lowest of *lumpenproletariat* disorganization: a curious amalgam of street bikers and CEOs, their spaces a mash-up of seedy sex clubs, classy hotels, and decaying mansions. And on the most abstract level, these vampires are contradictorily associated with both life and death in ways that can be difficult to untangle. On the one hand, they are "dead"; but in the persistence of their drives (they are sexual dynamos) they have unending prowess that ordinary humans yearn to acquire for themselves. Vampire blood becomes a black market drug precisely because, as Lafayette puts it, it distills pure life itself: "Our blood sustains life...this blood *is* life." Who *are* these creatures that are both old and new, civilized and barbaric, life and death? The show titillates by continually withholding a clear answer to the question.

In exploring these contradictory social poles, *True Blood* reminds its viewers of problems they might otherwise want to forget. And yet like many other gothic texts, it introduces such tensions in a way that the viewer can ambiguously disown them if he or she so chooses. Just as Tara can believe in demons without really believing in them (even as she remains tormented by real evils), the viewer of *True Blood* can uneasily dismiss the show as mere entertainment and exaggerated spectacle. Indeed, the gothic form has

always positioned itself unsteadily on a division between high and low culture, between serious art and silly entertainment, and between phantasmagoria and reality—and this ambiguity is a crucial part of its fascination, since if we can disavow the terror provoked by the gothic we can flirt with uncomfortable subjects without needing to face them squarely. There is much to laugh at in *True Blood*, and purposely so—and much absurd spectacle, beginning with the constant nudity for which the show is famous. And yet certain of its moments can haunt with their power: Miss Jeannette rescuing an alcoholic woman through shamanic theater; Lafayette and his lover Jesus drinking vampire blood and taking hallucinatory journeys through the past (and subsequently committing themselves to continuing their grandmothers' healing traditions); the erotic vulnerability of human characters who submit to the vampire's bite. In these moments, *True Blood* achieves what Walter Benjamin calls the “profane illumination”; the show does not simply wallow in “the fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious,” but instead achieves a “dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (“Surrealism” 78-79).

*True Blood* fascinates because like many other gothic texts preoccupied with images of claustrophobia and entrapment, it is particularly interested in the everyday experiences of women. One of the classic images of the gothic (going back to the British novelist Ann Radcliffe) is that of a girl trapped in a haunted house, or attempting a furious escape from the forces that try to keep her stuck within it. In the third season of *True Blood*, Tara is kidnapped by a strange and disturbing vampire named Franklin Mott—strange, because although he holds Tara against her will in an old plantation house, he is hurt and baffled when she tries to escape. This vampire, both emotionally

fragile and sadistically violent, believes that he and Tara have a loving relationship even as he lords his power over her and punishes her for any thoughts of disloyalty. He even dresses her up in an old nineteenth-century style dress and plans to marry her. The subsequent image of Tara, running on the plantation house lawn, wearing a white dress, is both quintessentially gothic and resonant with American historical significance. Like many slave women who were not only treated as property by male owners—exploited both economically and sexually—but also expected to *appreciate* it and to radiate thankfulness toward their masters, Tara's predicament uncannily penetrates the shadowy truth behind what Eric Savoy calls the impenetrable "otherness" of the past (169). The sheer absurdity of Franklin's character is precisely what makes him convincing as a comment on America's past and present (after all, even today U.S. citizens are expected to trumpet love and appreciation for their supposedly exceptional nation, no matter what their experience of it). And the show's main character Sookie Stackhouse (Tara's white best friend) also finds herself in claustrophobic and dangerous situations, unsure of who to trust and groping for the right path forward. If Tara finds in vampires only horror, the orphaned Sookie falls in love with the vampire Bill Compton, who provides for her an ambiguous but promising love as she struggles to find her place in the world.

However, if Sookie and Tara both search for the possibility of a different future, they do so partly by looking toward memories of the past (a tendency formally emphasized in the show's frequent flashbacks). Specifically, they share memories of Sookie's dead grandmother Adele, who took care of them when they were young, and who emerges as a beacon pointing toward a nurturing social order that is otherwise unavailable in *Bon Temps*. If Adele was playing a role—if, like Miss Jeannette, her

performance as a reliable and stable nurturing presence was complicated by some incongruous element—it does not impede her ability to inspire Tara and Sookie. During her life, she was always there to provide some delicious Southern dish for the girls, to take Tara in when her mother was on a binge, to accept and protect Sookie despite the odd gift of mind-reading that makes her suspect in *Bon Temps*. Even when Sookie fell in love with a vampire, Adele invited him over for dinner and asked this Civil War veteran to speak at a gathering of her historical society. Her interest in history, her willingness to face what the ambiguous Bill has to offer, her acceptance of the strange and rejected—all of these elements marked Adele as a safe haven of sorts within the show, but one unfazed by darkness and uncertainty. However, opening up to darkness has its price: it is precisely because Adele accepted vampires that she was murdered by an antivampire zealot. Subsequently, the grandmother is signaled in the show by a repeated, gospelstyle refrain that emerges whenever Tara or Sookie need reassurance, often accompanied by Sookie rummaging through the traces of her grandmother's belongings. Thus, the show seems to imply, no safe haven is absolute, since even the most trusted figure can become the victim of sudden violence and chance.

Yet Adele also represents the show's incipient regionalist impulse, an elusive sense of place rooted in history but not determined by it. Together, Tara, Sookie, and Adele's ghost constitute a female collective that must make its way in a context notably devoid of positive male authorities.<sup>20</sup> And their path lies not in a rejection of history and

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<sup>20</sup> *True Blood* depicts no analogous grandfather presence, and neither Tara nor Sookie has a father to speak of. Male politicians, religious leaders, and policemen are either corrupt or inept. Meanwhile, Sookie's brother Jason supplies the show with its most sustained vehicle for exploring what emerges as a pathos-ridden crisis of masculinity on the show, since as a hypersexual but immature young man he is comically hapless in his desire for masculine gravity. Precisely because Jason has a masculine self-image but no sense of direction, he is easily manipulated by the absurd male figures the show *does* provide: the opportunistic and vampire-hating pastor Steve Newlin and the put-upon policeman Andy Bellefleur. Interestingly, the

place, but in a gothic confrontation with these elements in the aim of producing a more just, fulfilling, and open sense of place. *True Blood*, then, is perhaps emblematic of a certain kind of U.S. gothic regionalist text that has emerged in a contemporary, post-1970s period of neoliberal hegemony. This period is defined, first and foremost, by deterritorializing flows (of capital, images, people, and commodities) primarily controlled by a hegemonic transnational class that attempts to exploit, shape, and destabilize existing places and cultures for purposes of capital accumulation. If U.S. texts like *True Blood*, but also (as I will show) Sandra Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo* and Sherman Alexie's 2007 novel *Flight*, are preoccupied with questions of nurturance and place, then, it is perhaps because a need for enduring, durable, and nurturing institutions (whether cultural, social, or economic) has become more pronounced during the past few decades. During this period, the U.S. has acted in concert with neoliberal ideology to increasingly farm out social functions away from communities and governments, and toward the volatile private market—a path which has resulted in intensified class inequalities and a more precarious situation for workers.<sup>21</sup> *True Blood* both registers these shocks and

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only male characters who emerge with any sense of integrity are “queered” in some way. Lafayette and Jesus are gay, and immersed in shamanic magic. And Sam Merlotte, the owner of the restaurant/bar where Sookie and Lafayette work, is a (closeted) shape-shifter who can transform into various animals, but who was traumatically abandoned by his adopted family when they discovered his strange gift. Finally, Bill is a vampire, and Terry is marked as different by his struggle with PTSD.

<sup>21</sup> Whether it has involved “right to work” laws, the privatization of prisons, or the “welfare reform” of the Clinton ‘90s, the trend since the late 1970s in the United States has meant lower taxes, fewer social provisions, the demise of organized labor and other community organizations, and the ascendance of a hegemonic neoliberal ideology. According to this ideology, the state should avoid intervening in the so-called efficiency of the market, since its actions would inevitably benefit unfairly those political constituencies who could gain the ear of the state. But although many constituencies (from corporate farmers to huge oil companies) do rake in subsidies from the government, women, young people, and families have been largely abandoned. Thus in the United States today, though every politician talks about the sanctity of the family, none of the important provisions a family might need (living wages, childcare, preschool, medical treatment, public transportation) are ensured by the state. Instead, in a nod to Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum (“There is no such thing as society, only individual men and women...and their families”), families are left on their own, free to choose, as it were, between the options available on the market.



imagines fantasies of mutual support that can counter their disorienting affect, or at least keep the chaos at bay for a moment.

*True Blood*, then, exemplifies what I call the *gothic quest for place*. And yet, in some ways it stays within familiar bounds because its gothic images circulate around the region of the South, a space which Americans have become accustomed to viewing in gothic terms. From William Faulkner's novels to Anne Rice's pulpy vampire tales and Seth Graeme-Smith's postmodern pastiche *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, Southern texts often imply the weight of racially motivated historical crimes—so much so, in fact, that it is fair to say that the South has been scapegoated in an effort to let other U.S. regions off the hook for their complicity (and indeed their central role) in any number of horrors. What follows in this chapter, then, is an attempt to trace the trajectory of the gothic regionalist text not merely in *True Blood*'s bloody South, but in the often-romanticized landscape of the U.S. West. Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Sherman Alexie's *Flight*, novels by authors renowned in the multicultural literary set, are more high-brow than *True Blood* (although each in its way uses humor, spectacle, and pop culture references to interrupt and complicate its graver gothic revelations). But like the creators of *True Blood*, Cisneros and Alexie dive into history, driven by an urgent desire to foster nurturing for characters who find themselves adrift in a confusing and terrifying structure of power. And both texts involve phantasmagoric confrontations with the dead.

Thus, if *True Blood* follows the well-worn path of the Gothic South, *Caramelo* and *Flight* remind their readers that the U.S. West, too, is haunted by crimes both past and present, and cannot be quarantined from transnational global flows. *Caramelo*, in particular, is haunted by a structure of patriarchy that exists on both sides of the U.S.-

Mexico border, and by a racialized division of labor in which Mexican-Americans often toil in the service sector of an increasingly post-Fordist economy. *Flight*, appearing several years later in a post 9/11 environment, faces up to urban poverty, a historical legacy of Indian subjugation, and international terrorism and war. And notably, in a prefiguration of *True Blood*'s focus on the struggles of a younger generation to find faith and purpose, both *Caramelo* and *Flight* find in the experience of child narrators a way of thematizing the problems of institution-building and social responsibility in a context dominated by the creative destruction of contemporary capitalism.

#### The Politics of Memory in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*

In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in the position of having to play detective. *Flanerie* gives the individual the best prospects of doing so...His indolence is only apparent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant...The hero of the book decides to go in search of adventure by following a scrap of paper which he has given to the wind as a plaything. No matter what traces the *flaneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime.

--Walter Benjamin, from *The Writer of Modern Life* (72)

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger...The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over them both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it...Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

--Walter Benjamin, from *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (255)

At one point in Sandra Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo*, the narrator—a teenaged girl named Celaya who attends a public vocational high school in San Antonio, Texas—flees (in classic gothic style) from the rocks and insults of her female classmates. These native *tejanas* believe that Celaya, with her more recent ties to a prominent Mexico City

family, holds herself above them (“Think you’re so smart because you talk like a white girl....You think you’re better than us, right?”) (356). In her attempt to escape their attacks Celaya plunges headlong onto the interstate. It is in this moment of danger-- paralyzed by fear in the “middle strip” of the freeway, “puking up tears,” pelted by gravel, surrounded by roaring semitrucks, and bemoaning her lack of place in the world—that Celaya first hears the ghostly voice of her dead Mexican grandmother speaking to her. “Celaya. The voice is so sharp and clear and close to my ear, it hisses and sizzles and makes me jump. Celaya” (357).

It is thus in the middle of a multifaceted crisis, and amid the disorienting motion of a high-speed transportation artery, that Celaya’s surreal dialogue with her grandmother’s ghost begins. And this Day of the Dead-like summoning enables Cisneros to work through the novel’s central theme: Celaya’s fear of repeating the grandmother’s failures, and hence of being trapped by the past. In a climactic visitation the Grandmother pleads with Celaya not to “repeat” her mistake of marrying in a desperate hope to escape confinement, since in escaping her father’s house she can so easily fall into a new and equally dependent confinement: “Me? Haunting you? It’s you, Celaya, who’s haunting me. I can’t bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life?” (406-407). A whole series of maladies plagues Celaya and links her to her Grandmother’s story in Mexico City: her lack of options as a girl in a Mexican-American family, the trauma of moving to a new and forbidding place, the danger of aspiring to outclass her peers, the lack of private space, the financial and social pressures of poverty, institutional racism. Surrounded by all of this dark magic, Celaya scrambles for any avenue of escape, and finds death terrifying but also vaguely desirable. “Is hell San Antonio?” she asks (354). Caught by

the mob of tormentors, she offers a despairing answer: “Take me, dangle me from the bumper. I don’t care, I never belonged here. I don’t know where I belong anymore” (356). The space of the interstate—the image of the open road so dear to mythological visions of the U.S. West-- is fundamentally ambiguous in this scene. If Celaya yearns to escape her noisy and chaotic house, to have peace and quiet, friendship, love, “to do something interesting...to design houses, or teach blind kids to read, or study dolphins, or discover something,” the interstate and the mobility it represents is exactly what she will need to master (352). In this sense, it represents possibility, transformation, motion. And yet this space is also confusing, dangerous, cutthroat, as vehicles jostle for position—so fast-paced that it might easily swallow up a lone girl fleeing across it, and turn her into yet another piece of roadkill.

While Celaya’s problems are uniquely shaped by her female position within a patriarchal culture, her father Inocencio faces his own moments of danger. Soon after Celaya flees onto the interstate, Inocencio, a Mexican immigrant who fought for the U.S. Army in Korea, is forced to scour his house in search of legal documentation. In response to being made to feel unwelcome in his adopted country, he too summons an ambivalent image of the road as a metaphor for a motion that is both alluring and disorienting:

Nogalitos. Old Highway 90. Father remembers too clearly the route south, and it’s like a tide that tugs and pulls him when the dust rises and the cedar pollen makes him sneeze and regret he moved us all to San Antonio, a town halfway between here and there, in the middle of nowhere. That terrible ache and nostalgia for home when home is gone, and this isn’t it...In less than three hours we could be at the border, but where’s the border to the past, I ask you, where?  
 –Home. I want to go home already, Father says.  
 –Home? Where’s that? North? South? Mexico? San Antonio? Chicago? Where, Father?  
 —All I want is my kids, Father says.—That’s the only country I need. (380)

San Antonio, then, emerges here not as a final destination, not as “home.” Instead, it is a “town halfway between here and there, in the middle of nowhere,” as if by living in San Antonio, the Reyes family is merely at a way-station *en route* to somewhere else. But while Celaya flees onto the Interstate, which in the novel’s 1960s setting had only recently been built, Inocencio looks nostalgically toward the “old highway” that might carry him back to Mexico--except that any final destination is unclear, because home is impossible to find, unless one can find a border to the past. As a result, Inocencio takes refuge in his family, over whom he exercises a certain authority (his last name means *king*), but also who he can nurture and provide for.

The U.S. West in this passage emerges less as an uncomplicated beacon of youth and possibility, and more as a fearsome and ambiguous borderland, promising what it cannot always deliver even as it provides a space for the pilgrimage to continue. In Jose E. Limon’s terms, it is a “bedeviled” colonial space, not separate from Mexico, but haunted by a history of low-grade war between ethnic groups, genders, and classes (187). In Celaya’s revised grid, the U.S. West largely figures as a forlorn outpost distant from the novel’s geographical navel: Mexico City, “the center of the universe” (384). But precisely because it is so haunted, the West also presents an opportunity for a reconsideration of that intertwined history, just as Celaya’s dialogue with her grandmother’s ghost provides the possibility for a healing renewal. In such a context, motion emerges as a line of flight, a way out, but also as a between-space of death, terror, and loss. No one in this novel wants to remain in motion forever. As playful as the novel is in its narrative form (with its humorous interludes, flash-backs, imagined scenarios, and jumbled historical detritus), it does not move solely in order to move. Rather, its zig-

zagging, its jumping back and forth in time and space, its humor, is governed by a gut-level emotional imperative that doesn't let go—Celaya's desire, not only for privacy, but for commitment, and for nurturance at the social and familial level: for healing. But if Inocencio looks to his family for such nurturance, for Celaya, the family itself, while a nurturing space, is also one of subjugation. She must find a way out—and in this novel preoccupied with history and memory, her way out is through a reconsideration of the past.

Because *Caramelo* leaps through space, time, and memory in an effort to work through trauma, and because its search for healing involves an urgent, phantasmagoric, and sometimes nightmarish path through the surreal quality of the everyday, this novel exemplifies *the gothic quest for place* in contemporary regionalist literature. The novel is chatty, humorous, and magical, to be sure, but it would be a mistake to read it as an unambiguous celebration of Mexican-American culture in the U.S., or as a quaint and quirky family saga. Rather, underneath its vibrant humor lies deep uneasiness and dread, such that the novel's tone resembles what Mary Pat Brady calls “a constant dance along the spine of pain and pleasure”; behind its *cumbia* bounce is an abyss of blues (153). In fact, it is *Caramelo*'s gothic quality that helps Cisneros avoid serious pitfalls in the genre of magical realism, a mode which for Michael Taussig is often rooted in “a long-standing tradition of folklore, the exotic, and *indigenismo* that in oscillating between the cute and the romantic is little more than the standard ruling class appropriation of what is held to be the sensual vitality of the common people and their fantasy life” (202).<sup>22</sup> Celaya

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<sup>22</sup> Cisneros's narrator often enchants the reader with funny asides, and then—abruptly—interrupts the audience with pointed questions that dispel the chatty mood and force a Brechtian distance. To take one example: in a historical footnote about Maria Sabina, an indigenous Mexican healer who introduced hallucinogenic mushrooms to Western hippies, Celaya describes Sabina's later doubts. In response to these

Reyes is not simply “cute,” but is caught in the uncanny repetition of poverty, patriarchy, and national exclusion. Trapped between U.S. and Mexican forms of cultural nationalism and haunted by the subjugation of women in her family, Celaya (like Tara and Sookie) struggles to determine her place in the world. But precisely because the history of subjugation has been building for many generations, confronting it requires a spirited dialogue with the dead that delves into the wounds of history.

Drawing from Benjamin’s linkage between memory and resistance, Brady sees a “politics of memory” in Chicana literature, and argues that “memory fuels resistance” because “dominating systems cannot force people to forget entirely that they are dominated” (138). And for Brady as for Benjamin, memory is not simply a storehouse of images and facts; rather, at key moments memories can surge forward, reminding people of buried desires that challenge official memory. Memories of joy, painful complicity, and longing can all function in ways that are unacceptable to the dominant signifying system, and if these memories could see daylight, they would alter the terms according to which we understand that system. In the Chicana context, Brady notes that the most dangerous (and potentially liberatory) memories might be simple images of women loving women—and in particular, mothers loving daughters. Because patriarchy places men first, any memory in which “male referents drop out” can disrupt the entire edifice; rather than burying their mutual desire for each other in an effort to secure the affections

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“strangers who did not understand that the mushrooms were medicine and, like any medicine, only to be taken when ill, and therefore muddied their purpose on this planet, which in turn lessened Maria’s powers,” Maria asks: “Was it all right that I gave away the mushrooms?” Immediately, Celaya interjects: “*Tu*, what do you say? *Tu*, reader, she is asking you” (195). In forcing the reader to reconsider the questionable appropriation of vision-inducing mushrooms, Cisneros also forces the reader to question his or her uses of the novel *Caramelo* itself, since its phantasmagoric images are also a form of “medicine,” and not simply a “cute” and “romantic” toy testifying to the “the standard ruling class appropriation of what is held to be the sensual vitality of the common people and their fantasy life.” At least Cisneros hopes they aren’t; in this passage about Maria Sabina, Cisneros is also interrogating herself: Am I too appropriating and dispensing these magical medicines in a responsible way?

of sons and husbands, women might be able to offer each other crucial resources in order to gain a foothold in a hierarchical world (164). Or, as Brady puts it, “refusing this complicity and tackling the injunction to put the man first means gaining freedom and also breaking away from ‘*la procesion de mujeres, sufriendo.*’” She thereby replaces the old injunction with a new one: ‘Free the daughter to love her own daughter’ (Loving vii). (160). In *Caramelo*, Celaya’s memories always function politically in Brady’s terms by provoking “dangerous revelations” that challenge the structure under which she lives. Specifically, Cisneros’s images of women loving women aim to disrupt ‘*la procesion de mujeres, sufriendo.*’ Although the Celaya-narrator spends more time in the novel reworking her relationship with her father, her most profound images reimagine her relationship with her mother. Thus although she affirms her love for her father in the novel, she often revolts (both covertly and openly) against his wishes.

However, Celaya does not choose her mother over her father in some clear way; instead, in David J. Vazquez’s terms, she “triangulates” according to their known positions. For Vazquez, post-1960s Chicano/a writers often steer toward new places by employing (and accepting or rejecting by degrees) existing binaries, starting with the black and white terms of U.S. race relations: “Navigators relate an unknown position to the known location of two others by mapping an imaginary triangle....Triangulation is a dynamic technique that engages multiple way points, distances, and recalculations in the process of navigation” (3). Thus Celaya uses her parents’ strengths and weaknesses in order to orient herself; she respects her father’s attempt to uphold some form of social order, but revises that hegemony in terms more favorable to women. Cisneros triangulates in other ways, too. By steering between past and present, for instance, she



does not jettison tradition but instead employs it. While *Caramelo* looks backward—toward childhood, history, and ancestors—it is never nostalgic, but uses compass points of the past while moving beyond them. Similarly, Cisneros triangulates between Mexico, the U.S., and an increasingly globalized contemporary system. In the age of NAFTA, she mediates between nationalist discourse (Inocencio’s nostalgia for Mexico) and a destabilizing postmodern discourse of hybridity and transnational identification; as Vazquez puts it, “Cisneros attempts to triangulate a new sense of the social that is free from static conceptions of the national, but that doesn’t dissolve into the hybridity of the transnational” (177). And Vazquez is correct to argue that she does so partly because, like many other Latina/o authors, she believes in the “matrixed subject” and thus rejects a dominant “liberal individualist” cultural model rooted in the autonomous self. First-person “political autobiographies,” even fictionalized ones like *Caramelo*, “represent the self as inextricably linked with larger social structures like community and national identity” (6). And I would note—given Celaya’s flight from the clutches of Chicano/a nationalists—Cisneros’s triangulation is perilously gothic.

In groping toward an “unknown” course that evades both the stasis of nationalist essentialism and the flux of global flows, Vazquez might usefully consider recent discussions of critical regionalism. As I have indicated in Chapter 1, the best articulations of critical regionalism attempt to evade the tendencies toward “depthlessness” in postmodern culture by triangulating between the global and the local, the past and the present, and the individual and solidarity. In resisting these tendencies in cultural postmodernism—and in articulating a dialectical form of critical regionalism—I take issue with Neil Campbell’s neo-Deleuzian approach to critical regionalism in his vibrant book

*The Rhizomatic West*. While I sympathize with Campbell's celebration of a version of regionalism that proceeds in a constant and open state of becoming, brimming with "lines of flight" (7) and minor trajectories, I worry that a full-scale endorsement of motion can play into the hands of a globalized capitalism that uses destabilization to shape the world according to private market imperatives. Indeed, in the U.S. West "deterritorialization" (72) is hardly a straightforwardly anti-hegemonic trope, since it resembles so closely the frontier ideology of restless expansion and social avoidance at work in dominant Western narratives. An open state of becoming is a good thing, but in my view must be balanced by cultural and political institutions that enable commitment and nurturing as well. Thus in Cisneros's properly critical regionalist novel, she deploys a sense of place that, although wandering and open in its approach (and carnivalesque and earthy in its humor), is not reduced to pure flux or ephemerality. Instead, however desperate, contradictory, or bedeviled Celaya's situation becomes, commitment remains a crucial vector within it and thus renders a facile celebration of nomadism insufficient. In *Caramelo* a permanent home conceived as a reliable refuge from the outside storm is impossible—and yet the need for nurturance remains acute.

We might say, then, that Campbell's regional framework—exciting as it is—suffers from a lack of Cisneros's gothic sensibility. The gothic, with its emphasis on working through repressed crimes, is useful for Western studies because it highlights the role of trauma (and thus of memory and nurturing) in a hegemonic Western imaginary that often buries dark impulses in a pioneering drive toward an ostensibly sunny future. And since many of these traumas have especially affected so-called "minority" peoples in the West (like Chicano/a and Native Americans), nonwhite and female authors are often

more friendly to the gothic—and to its potential healing properties--than their dominant counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Latino/a literature, in particular, adds a crucial element to the U.S. West because its authors have often drawn from gothic traditions in other regions that implicitly criticize the West as a Stegner-ian “geography of hope.” From Hawthorne’s gothic romances to Faulkner’s swampy tangles, and from European surrealism to Latin American and Caribbean magical realism, the roots of Latino/a literature challenge the confident, common-sense masculine ideal projected by hegemonic Western writers. Cisneros’s relation to the U.S. Northeastern regional imaginary provides a case in point. Krista Comer is correct to point out that post-1970s female Western regionalists often turn toward the Northeast because it supplies an antidote to the anti-modernist and white-male-centered impulses of traditional Stegnerian Western regionalism, and because Northeastern versions of masculinity “tolerate self-doubt” and “some bending of the heterosexual imperative” (24). But although her comparison between Sandra Cisneros and Walt Whitman is justified because both authors imagine nurturing homosocial communities (Cisneros turning to female community where Whitman turns to a male one), the reference to the anti-gothic Whitman obscures Cisneros’s literary debt to other Northeastern voices—not only to the solitary and imaginative Emily Dickinson, but also to the gothic lineage of Hawthorne and Melville, for whom the ghosts of the past

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<sup>23</sup> Gothic elements are widespread in Latino/a culture, even if the Latino/a gothic has not always been highlighted by gothic-minded critics. Anthropologists like Taussig and Limon, for instance, see gothic tropes in Latino/a folk practices, especially in the tension between grass-roots appropriations of Christian images and the top-down power of the Catholic hierarchy (indeed, early European gothic novels used images of secretive Catholic cabals to represent decayed feudal authority). In her article “Learning From the Dead: Wounds, Women, and Activism in Cherrie Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints*,” Linda Margarita Greenberg argues that Moraga uses Chicano/a folk Catholicism (*la Virgen de Guadalupe*, the crucifixion, the day of the dead, the ritual display of corpses) to forge a socially conscious gothic text. In *Caramelo*, too, Cisneros “learns from the dead” by narrating the story of the Awful Grandmother, and employs *la Virgen de Guadalupe* as a folk image of subaltern solidarity and healing.

persistently encroach on the present, and for whom sin is very real.<sup>24</sup> She may entertain Whitmanian fantasies, but these fantasies are couched in a gothic frame.

*Caramelo: La Procecion de Mujeres Sufriendo*

It seems to me little attention has been paid to the half-awake world—and call it what we will—this world of daydreaming, the world of reverie and, more complicated still, the world of free-floating attention that Freud wanted from his patients....And, it also seems to me, it is that state of mind that many people get in ritual—healing rituals, religious rituals, the sort of experience of being in and out of a situation at the same time. Now this state of mind just fascinates me. We call it trance....And, you know, since the beginning of time and across all human cultures there's this capacity to...live a huge amount of one's life in this in-between state. For one reason or another in the West we've been pretty bad at either taking advantage of it or giving it a name. It may be that the movies have filled up that space for modern people. In other cultures—many, many cultures...perhaps the majority of the world's population, although it's the poorest people in the world—spirit possession fills that, trance and spirits come into that space....Perhaps thinking about hope in terms of spirit possession would be a shoe-horn into thinking about hope and healing, hope and miracle, or hope and metamorphosis. As I understand it, spirit possession often implies being possessed with the power of grace, the transformation of a bad situation into a good situation.

—Michael Taussig in *Carnival of the Senses* (54-55)

In Chapter 1, I called attention to the importance of repetition within the gothic tradition, and to Bonnie Honig's notion of the "female gothic heroine," who crosses limits by investigating a mysterious world of power that presses on her in frightful ways. Appropriately enough, repetition plays an important role in the female gothic novel *Caramelo*, beginning with its negative manifestations; driven by their subjugation in a patriarchal system, lonely and confined Reyes mothers lavish attention on sons, ignore daughters, and help create the conditions for the neurotic social complex to begin again. But Celaya emerges as a female gothic heroine because she courageously investigates the

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<sup>24</sup>The haunted social warfare in *Caramelo* evokes the way that Thomas Maule, the carpenter cheated by a wealthier man, haunts the Pyncheon descendents in Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*. Cisneros's earlier fiction, too, from *Mango Street* (1984) to "Never Marry a Mexican" and "Eyes of Zapata" (in *Woman Hollering Creek*, 1991), is permeated with witches and ghosts.

past in ritual dialogue with her Grandmother, and through “free-floating” forays into memory. In following the traces available to her, Celaya becomes a *flâneur* in Benjamin’s sense: “No matter what traces the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime” (*The Writer of Modern Life* 72).

However, because the *flâneur*’s wandering through public space is officially reserved for men, her investigations must take place primarily in her mind, and in female gothic terms. In order to probe her gothic world, Celaya must be willing to be labeled illegitimate by powerful voices, and must therefore grow beyond her innocent expectation that authority will always function in her best interest. She must recognize that if she wants power, she must take it. And her investigations lead her into an agonistic relationship with her father, with patriarchy, with U.S. and Mexican cultural nationalism, and with essentialized notions of race and class. They transform her into a “Busybody, Ogler, Liar/Gossip/Troublemaker, Big-Mouth—in Other Words, Storyteller” (351). Through her narrative, Celaya engages in principled nosiness by prodding the limits of her world, sees what she shouldn’t see, tells “healthy lies” for strategic purposes, and sabotages the secrets of others. And although the novel never wraps up all of its loose ends—some of its stories and crimes remain unclear or concealed—Celaya emerges less vulnerable as a result of her explorations. She becomes a taker who refuses to succumb to paralysis, but instead learns agency through betraying the powers that structure her life, even as she acknowledges her vulnerability within (and complicity with) those structures.

In particular, Celaya’s search reveals memories that Mary Pat Brady would describe as liberatory because in them male referents drop out, and because they unveil a space of relative freedom in which the mother can love the daughter. One such memory

comes to light during the first part of the novel, as Celaya recalls an early trip to Mexico City during which she experiences a rare opportunity to connect with her mother Zoila. *Caramelo* depicts female space-time as hemmed-in and controlled, and Zoila's experience at her mother-in-law's house in Mexico City is especially confining. She complains bitterly: "Everytime we come to Mexico it's the same old crap. Nothing but living rooms, living rooms, living rooms. We never go anywhere" (68). In order to escape the endless repetition of "living rooms, living rooms, living rooms," Zoila sneaks out of the house with her only daughter Celaya (she has six sons) and furtively enjoys a lunch with her daughter at a decent restaurant. This memory of mother/daughter love, separated from male referents, surges out for Celaya as an image of glamour and enchantment: "I think to myself how beautiful my mother is, looking like a movie star right now, and not our mother who has to scrub our laundry....And I'm so happy to have my mother all to myself buying good things to eat, and talking, just to me, without my brothers bothering us" (66). There is a *jouissance* in Celaya's recollection of this anomalous encounter, in which Celaya does not have to compete with her brothers for her mother's attention (or worry about spending money), such that she describes it as a "magic spell" (66). On this rare occasion, she and her mother become *flaneuses*, loose in the city.

However, Celaya's naivete about patriarchal surveillance and class realities results in the shattering of this spell. When she innocently blabs to the others about their lunch date, her mother turns on her, calling her a "big mouth," and initiates a dramatic confrontation with the father. In response, Celaya experiences a range of emotions: guilt upon understanding that her mother is screaming "because of [her]"; grief for the loss of the "magic spell"; and confusion about why her happiness has resulted in such anger. The

image of her mother throwing her shoe is powerful enough that it becomes mythologized in her mind as a dialectical image, a negative fairy tale picture of conflict: “Later when I think about it, how I’ll remember it different, outdoors, against the night sky, even though it didn’t happen like that. A Mexico City twilight full of stars like the broken glass on top of the garden wall and a jaguar moon looking down at me, and my mother’s glass shoe flying flying flying across the broken-glass sky” (66). Although Celaya is aware of the tricks of memory (history didn’t “really happen” this way), the image nonetheless reveals a powerful relational truth. The “glass shoe” makes the mother into a Cinderella figure, trapped inside doing housework and deprived of wandering *flaneur* privileges under the exotic “jaguar moon” of a beautiful city. Meanwhile, images of “broken glass on top of the garden wall” mirror Celaya’s interior fragmentation and confusion, and remind the reader of defenses against the possibility of violent intruders, as well as of the barricades and barriers of class segmentation. What shatters here is not simply a glass slipper, but Celaya’s formerly innocent view of the world.

Images of desire for a repetition of *jouissance* between mother and daughter reappear throughout *Caramelo*. The novel is replete with lost objects of affection, but one of the most important is Candelaria, the Indian servant girl who later turns out to be Celaya’s sister, the concealed outcome of a past affair. And since eventually Celaya discovers her father’s secret, her memories of Candelaria are tinged with mourning for a sisterly connection cut off at the root. Candelaria appears in Celaya’s memory as beautiful and dark, a mother-substitute associated with play, laughter, and love: “She likes to carry me and pretend she is my mama. Or I can say,--Caw, caw, caw—and she will drop a little piece of Chiclets gum in my mouth as if I was her little bird” (35). Here

Candelaria evokes a maternal *eros* of the body that is figured on an animal level; Celaya sits on her lap and accepts food from mouth to mouth, like a nourishing kiss. But like her other fantasies of mother-connection, Celaya's friendship with Candelaria collapses under the weight of social structure. Candelaria's ambiguous animal status, the bodily unselfconsciousness that Celaya experiences with her, is stigmatized as dirty and "Indian" by her family and others. Under pressure, Celaya gives her up, but not without ambivalently evoking their bodily closeness: "I'm not allowed to play with Candelaria. Or even talk to her. And I'm not going to let her hug me, or chew the little cloud of gum she passes from her mouth to her fingers to my mouth, still warm with saliva, and never let her carry me on her lap again as if I was her baby....Her skin a *caramelo*. A color so sweet, it hurts to even look at her" (37). The conflagration of pain and pleasure that is associated with Celaya's memory of Candelaria recalls the prohibition against female desire that also prevents Celaya from receiving her mother's full affection. Indeed, Celaya's physical connection to Candelaria communicates Celaya's fundamental desire for physical and emotional closeness with her own mother.<sup>25</sup>

The novel's conclusion confirms that although *Caramelo* spends more pages agonizing over the father-daughter relationship, its heart lies in the repressed mother-daughter relationship. Cisneros's final chapters feature a thirtieth anniversary celebration

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<sup>25</sup> Does Candelaria here repeat the stereotype of Indians as primitive Others, close to nature and therefore possessors of special powers that can rejuvenate supposedly overcivilized moderns? I don't think so, for two reasons. First, Candelaria's power lies less in her race and more in her age; because she has not yet reached puberty, she retains the bodily unselfconsciousness that Cisneros imagines as wild and free, but also as doomed to die with adult socialization. Granted, such characteristics of wildness and freedom are exactly what colonists have imposed on New World Indians, such that Indians represent for them the childhood of modern civilization (which must regrettably be given up). But Celaya seems to understand that such projections are unreliable as a guide to approaching actual Indians. Elsewhere in the text, she is deeply suspicious of authenticity, Indian or otherwise. For example, in narrating the story of Panfila, she describes a middle-class white woman who plays the role of indigenous folksinger so well that it achieves something marvelous and powerful for her audience. Authentic? It hardly seems to matter.



that places the father in a starring role. In these chapters, Celaya pledges her love to her father, but this official father-celebration, though important (Celaya does love her father), is undercut in the novel's final dialectical image, a surreal montage in which male referents drop out. This supplementary "Pilon," an extra chapter thrown in as an aside at the end, features Zoila, Candelaria, the power of female-female connection, and the way popular culture (in this case the old Mexican tune "Farolito") can unleash memories redolent with a powerful desire for a different world. Through this song, people can sift through the past in search of what they have lost: "Out of a happy grief, people give coins for shaking awake the memory of a father, a beloved, a child whom God ran away with" (433). For Celaya, "Farolito" conjures a "state of being" that she can no longer inhabit:

the

music stirred up things in a piece of my heart from a time I couldn't remember....In this case, I'd forgotten a mood. Not a mood—a state of being, to be more precise....girls somewhere between the ages of, say, eight and puberty, girls forget they have bodies....She doesn't look in mirrors. She isn't aware of being watched. Not aware of her body causing men to look at her yet. There isn't the sense of the female body's volatility, its rude weight, the nuisance of dragging it about. There isn't the world to bully you with it, bludgeon you, condemn you to a life sentence of fear. (434)

The mood evoked here—of the intoxicated transcendence of the body—may never be recaptured, since (as any gothic heroine knows) innocence can never be fully regained. Celaya is a brown female body in a system divided according to class, race, and gender hierarchies. At the same time, though, one might wonder whether Celaya (or anyone else) can manage to repeat the spiritual impulse implied by such a state of bodily transcendence: the conquering of fear. While acknowledging that the past is gone, Celaya might be able to regain a semblance of its freedom through the "healing rituals" of reading, writing, and imagining. It might be argued that a repetition of such a mood,

which would imaginatively bind her to others in a temporary forgetting of the individual body, is what Cisneros has been searching for all along in her work.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Cisneros's subsequent montage, the final passage of the novel, brings together distant figures—her mother and her lost sister—in order to dramatize a *repetition* of the conquering of fear implied by the bodily transcendence of girls before puberty. This dialectical image intoxicates by summoning visions of female bodies that Celaya associates in her memory with play, freedom, and nurturing:

The *caramelo* color of your [Candelaria's] skin after rising out of the Acapulco foam, salt water running down your hair and stinging the eyes, the raw ocean smell, and the ocean running out of your mouth and nose. My mother watering her dahlias with a hose and running a stream of water over her feet as well, Indian feet, thick and square, *como de barro*, like the red clay of Mexican pottery. And I don't know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there. (434)

In this imagined country the mother no longer wears glass Cinderella slippers, but allows water to run freely over her bare feet as she nourishes the life around her: an image of both pleasure and nurturing. And although Candelaria feels the “stinging” of the ocean flowing from her face, she is emerging from its clutches rather than being overwhelmed by them. This “Pilon,” then, collects the loose ends that are left unresolved in the preceding chapter's narrative of father-triumph. Although Inocencio is labeled “King” of the Reyes family, this celebration is misleading, a healthy lie. Instead, the last word is given to those elements which trouble his mastery: the unfulfilled mother, the abandoned Indian sister, the hierarchies repressed by a nostalgic rendering of Old Mexico. And we are reminded that while Celaya promised her father not to tell the story of his own

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<sup>26</sup> When Esperanza in *Mango Street* dreams of clouds, or when the good witch Ines in “The Eyes of Zapata” transforms into an owl and flies above the revolution-haunted Mexican landscape, each enters into a trape state to (temporarily) move beyond the body and achieve the same freedom imagined in *Caramelo*.

illegitimate birth, this “promise” was a healthy lie too, since she has spilled his secrets to the reader. In cleaving to the mother, she betrays the father.

### The Ritual Space of Freedom

Critics have highlighted Cisneros’s preoccupation with privacy, an experience often denied to poor women who must so often spend their lives caring for children.<sup>27</sup> And indeed, any ethic of nurturing, like the one I have endorsed here, must not place an outsized burden on women, but must acknowledge the importance of ritual spaces in which nurturers of all genders can find rejuvenation through the kinds of free-floating activities described by Taussig. Cisneros’s work can be a key resource in developing such an ethic, because she has sought for so long to triangulate between private dream-states and public commitment. Indeed, despite her desire for privacy, Cisneros sees storytelling, writing, and imagining in fundamentally social terms.<sup>28</sup> Thus in *Caramelo*, Celaya participates in a free-floating trance with her dead grandmother to create a narrative that also draws from the voices of others.<sup>29</sup> And while this narrative is exploratory and wandering, it is not merely indolent, but mimics the way a patient and analyst retell the past in order to ameliorate a stubborn illness.

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<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Sanborn argues that critics often downplay Cisneros’s celebration of Emily Dickinson-style privacy. But even Sanborn acknowledges that Cisneros does not exempt herself from social obligation; her vision of privacy differs from Dickinson’s in that she recognizes both how fragile an achievement privacy can be, and how important it is to help subaltern subjects achieve it: “Cisneros revises Dickinson’s relatively elitist conception of privacy in two ways: by insisting on its contingency and by opening it to nonelite practices of identification” (1336).

<sup>28</sup> And Cisneros’s writing has often functioned in this therapeutic sense. Her fiction has seldom strayed far from re-working her family experience, even to the point of repetitive obsession (like Celaya, Cisneros has multiple brothers, a Mexican upholsterer father, and a Chicago-born Chicana mother).

<sup>29</sup> Because the female gothic Celaya’s recuperation of her grandmother’s story is perceived as illegitimate by others, Heather Alumbaugh describes Celaya as a “narrative *coyote*,” analogous to smugglers who help people cross from Mexico to the U.S. Like me, she views Celaya’s storytelling as inherently social and not simply private. Still, where Alumbaugh sees Celaya’s desire to recuperate memory as a response to the way literal *migration* can disrupt historical knowledge, I would argue that the erosion of historical memory is a condition of hegemonic U.S. postmodern experience more generally.

The object of the *caramelo rebozo* provides a suitable image in the text for this social narrative process in the pursuit of positive repetition. But the *rebozo* is an ambiguous symbol, since it can be used productively or counterproductively. Soledad, for example, uses the *rebozo* in her own private moments; by unraveling and raveling its complex strands, she reminds herself of her mother's love and of her link with previous generations of women. But in doing so, she allows the *rebozo* to become a fetish, a vain attempt to hold on to a past that has departed from her; just as she later clings to her son's love although he has grown up and married, she clings to the *rebozo* in order to avoid facing the present. Such a habit of Kierkegaardian *recollection* is precisely why Soledad ends up as a ghost trapped on earth, why she relies on Celaya to redeem her story. And Celaya makes progress toward redeeming that story by transforming the *rebozo* into an object not of *recollection*, but of *repetition*. Rather than repeating her grandmother's failures, she repeats a positive spiritual impulse that Soledad could rarely access: the *rebozo* not simply as an aide to private dreams, but as an agent of communication. Earlier in the novel, Celaya describes the way that the *rebozo* once functioned as a way of talking with others, a "language" that was denied to Soledad because her mother died before she could teach it to her daughter:

Because she didn't know what else to do, Soledad chewed on the fringe of her *rebozo*. Oh, if only her mother were alive. She could have told her how to speak with her *rebozo*. How, for example, if a woman dips the fringe of her *rebozo* at the fountain when fetching water, this means—I am thinking of you...But who was there to interpret the language of the *rebozo* to Soledad? (105)

Because Soledad cannot "speak with her *rebozo*," but instead uses it as a nostalgic fetish by childishly chewing on its fringe, it is up to Celaya to translate for Soledad and thereby to restore a chain of female communication. The *rebozo*, then, can symbolize a female

network of labor and talk: in the process of *rebozo*-weaving, “it was as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on” (93).

If in the above passage the *rebozo* functions as a common labor for women that fosters individuality because it involves variation within a shared (if changing) tradition, later the *rebozo* attains a universal status, a symbol of the way everything and everyone is connected, not in a holistic conflict-free sense, but in the sense that sociality involves an ecology of interdependence and mutual co-authorship:

I look up, and *la Virgen* looks down at me, and, honest to God, this sounds like a lie, but it’s true. The universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a *rebozo*. Pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the pattern, and me affecting theirs. (389)

Above all, people are connected by their common need for nurturance: “Everybody needs a lot. The whole world needs a lot” (389). The fact that Celaya achieves this epiphany immediately after visiting her grandmother’s former house in Mexico City while she wears her grandmother’s *caramelo rebozo*, indicates how memory can work not only to provoke nostalgia, but also to engender renewed fidelity to ongoing work in the present. *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, too, is an ambiguous and powerful symbol in the Chicana context: alternately an official stand-in for the patriarchal Catholic Church (earlier, Celaya’s boyfriend Ernesto uses his devotion to *la Virgen* as an excuse for abandoning Celaya) and a folk symbol for the endurance and faith of “the most wretched of the earth” (388). Thus a line of flight—Celaya’s trip to Mexico City, site of past revolutions-- produces not simply more disorientation, but commitment on behalf of nurturance.

Celaya's momentary healing, such as it is, does not come easily. Instead, her redemption follows Taussig's template of *healing through terror*; Celaya can only become re-energized and reconnected by passing through the horrifying gauntlet of the Real. Immediately before Celaya's ode to the *rebozo*, she confronts disgusting images of decay that have haunted her throughout the novel: "The old cathedral collapsing under its own weight, the air ruined, filthy, corncocks rotting in the curb, the neighborhood pocked, overpopulated, and boiling in its own stew of juices, corner men hissing *psst, psst* at me, flies resting on the custard gelatins rubbing their furry forelegs together like I-can't-wait" (388). This surreal and disturbing urban imagery is connected for Celaya with the body (overpopulation, the "stew of juices"), with the "weight" of the past ("the old cathedral collapsing"), and above all with an insistent male power that intrudes on her youthful sense of self. The phallic "filthy corncocks" and flies "rubbing their furry forelegs together" echo a previous trip to Mexico City, during which Celaya first experienced menstruation and confronted a drunk man exposing himself: "I try not to think, but the things I try not to think about keep bobbing to the surface like drowned people. A green, white, and red gelatin with a dead bug curled on it. A corncob in the gutter. A hairy mango bone. A fly on a drunk man's *pipi*. A thick wad of cotton like a *tamal* sandwich between my legs" (262). Here too we find flies, corncocks, death, and the body: a symbolic distillation of Celaya's traumatic Real, the uncanny return of the repressed that she would rather not "think about" and that she struggles to put into words. And it is the negative repetition engendered by such traumas that Celaya's later trip to Mexico City challenges through positive repetition, such that the terrifying insect images function as a

prelude to the beautiful images to follow: the *rebozo*, *la Virgen*, her grandmother's struggle to communicate.

Despite the phallic imagery operating in these scenes, it would be a mistake to imagine the traumatic Real exclusively as a confrontation with the male realm. Rather, it is only insofar as these male penetrations impress upon Celaya a characteristically *feminine* sense of castration that they result in trauma, hysteria, and disorientation. Especially in her early trip to Mexico City, Celaya's disgust with the "drunk man's *pipi*" coincides with disgust at her own unstable borders as she grapples (for the first time) with the uncanny menstrual eruption from her body. Facing this loss of blood that is both intimate and alien (and yet at the same time a precondition for fertility and birth), Celaya begins to see herself as an abject figure: as a permeable self who cannot *keep it together*, as it were. Facing her grandmother's death, too, Celaya is reminded of "all these things I shouldn't think about" in "this world of rotten pain and stink" (349). Her grandmother in this scene is less a bearer of meaningful stories and more a disgusting piece of meat reflecting the inevitable decay of death. And fittingly, the grandmother's mortal vulnerability here—the contingency of her body, its permeability as it faces the world's ravages—reminds Celaya of a strange confluence of meat, insects, and birth, all leading up to a consideration of her mother. She recalls an odd story: "When I was born Mother said she needed two things after getting out of the hospital—Please, a pork chop sandwich from Jim's Original Hot Dogs on Maxwell Street, and a barbacoa taquito just down the street at La Milagrosa. And me just wrapped in my new flannel blanket, hair wet as a calf...Don't look!" (349). Celaya's grotesque self-image here (as a human animal clinging helplessly to her mother's body) coincides with the carnivalesque image

of her mother devouring meat; here we have a juxtaposition of birth and death (the creation of new life and the devouring of a dead animal), of disgust and desire, that Celaya hardly knows how to symbolize.

If Celaya sees the grandmother's death in this horrified way, and thus yearns to abject it (to throw it off), it is precisely through her subsequent dialogue with her grandmother that she can learn to see death in a different way—not as an overwhelming or disgusting event, but as a positive fulfillment of desire and thus an anchor of meaning in the midst of the unmappable, overdetermined situation of life. Seeing through her grandmother's eyes after she has begun to speak with her ghost, Celaya as narrator/medium channels Soledad's death, redescribing it as a positive repetition of a rare moment of quiet in Soledad's past. Death here becomes not merely disgusting, but peaceful, since it evokes a brief temporal window at a Yucatan beach when Soledad's husband and children left her to rest in the sand:

Soledad fell asleep for a little, the water licking her earlobes, saying things she didn't need to understand. A peace and joy she would remember forever after whenever she needed to feel safe. That's what she felt now as she was dying and her life was letting her go. A saltwater warmth of well-being. The water lifting her and her self floating out from her life. A dissolving and a becoming all at once. It filled her with such emotion, she stopped thrashing about and let herself float out of her body, out of that anchor her life, let herself become nothing, let herself become everything little and large, great and small, important and unassuming. Puddle of rain and the feather that fell shattering the sky inside it, votive candles flickering through blue cobalt glass, the opening notes of that waltz without a name, the steam from a clay bowl of rice in bean broth, and the steam from a fresh clod of horse dung. Everything, everything. Wise, delicate, simple, obscure. And it was good and joyous and blessed. (348)

In much of the novel Celaya fears water and the ocean, since they threaten to suffocate her-- but here she accepts that water (like the mother-body) can be delightful as well as suffocating, welcoming as well as disturbing. The ocean of death, which swallows up



Soledad into nothingness, does not horrify her, but instead involves a profoundly restful permission to let go, “a dissolving and a becoming all at once” that is trance-like in its free-floating quality, such that it gives rise to a whole series of free-associations summoning the most common and transient details in a lyrical procession. Even “horse dung,” in this free-floating sphere, can be beautiful in its everyday impenetrability. The mother-body, then—and by extension, the life-giving ecological mesh in which we live as dependent and partial beings—can be not only terrifying, but intimate, “delicate, simple, obscure,” and perhaps even “good and joyous and blessed.”

Ultimately, Soledad and Celaya’s dialogue produces the novel. The novel *Caramelo* is a repetition of the *rebozo*: a labor of love and a way of communicating with men and women, but also a way of affecting (even if slightly) the broader social weave. By writing, Cisneros inserts herself into a tradition, grapples with the traumatic past, and puts her signature on a specific reweaving of it. An important aspect of that signature is a devotion to Moraga’s law: “Free the mother to love the daughter.” And if in *Caramelo*, Celaya can only find imaginary moments of mother-connection, in her 2009 introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros highlights a brief moment in which such freedom has been achieved in reality. Here she describes bringing her mother to her new office in San Antonio:

Stars come out shyly, one by one. You lie down next to me, and drape one leg over mine like when we sleep together at your home. We always sleep together when I’m there. At first because there isn’t any other bed. But later, after Papa dies, just because you want me near. It’s the only time you let yourself be affectionate....The moon climbs the front yard mesquite trees, leaps over the terrace ledge and astonishes us. It’s a full moon, a huge nimbus like the prints of Yoshitoshi. From here on, I won’t be able to see a full moon again without thinking of you, this moment. But right now, I don’t know this....‘Good lucky you studied,’ you say without opening your eyes. You mean my office, my life. I say to you, ‘Good lucky.’ (xxvi-xxvii)

(It is important to note that while Cisneros's father opposed her desire to write, her mother supported it.) Here Cisneros's peaceful space is not simply her own, but a space open to others. In this case, the father's death, however mourned, results in a space free of "male referents"; if her father's ghost hovers nearby, it does not disturb the reverie of mother and daughter. In the repetition of sleeping with her mother, Cisneros finds a semblance of the free, bodiless quality of play and nurturance at work in *Caramelo*. The imagery in this homage—sky, stars, clouds, moon, art—highlights the free-floating, dreamlike character of their ceremonial sojourn together. Later, in the trance of writing about the episode after her mother's death, and in the periodic promptings of succeeding full moons, Cisneros can repeat the moment and access its power. Like Tara and Sookie in *True Blood*, she finds provisional sanctuary in the memory of nurturing solidarity between women.

However, this passage, written after *Caramelo*, also tells the story of a return to the U.S. West. Here San Antonio is not pure "hell," even if the seemingly Edenic precincts of Cisneros's office are still bedeviled by poverty and conflict (and even if Cisneros still can't quite imagine a fulfilling male/female relationship). Rather, it is a West transformed, even if slightly, by Cisneros's role as a ceremonial leader on behalf of others. The younger Cisneros in 1980 was fundamentally afraid, spooked: "She's afraid of ghosts, deep water, rodents, night, things that move too fast—cars, airplanes, her life. She's afraid she'll have to move back home again if she isn't brave enough to live alone" (xxi). If the older Cisneros is no longer afraid in the same way, it is partly because she doesn't actually live alone—she is surrounded by the presence of others, by supporters, including the ghosts of whom she was once afraid. But it is also because she has created,

with the help of others like her mother, a ceremonial space that can keep the devil at bay. And this quality of what Stephen Tatum calls “spectral beauty” can only be maintained through continual and ritual performance; as Ellen Meloy writes, in a passage cited by Tatum, “the crucial point about such ‘ceremonial membranes’ is that ‘only when someone was in a sacred situation, at a sing or ceremonial...was harmony restored, and even then, residue remained outside the ceremonial membrane, usually in the form of ghosts, so you had to keep singing, all your life” (cited in Tatum 139-140). For Cisneros, “residue” is always left over—in *Caramelo*, the rejected Indian sister Candelaria hangs over the book like a ghost. But Cisneros has also learned to “keep singing” toward a remapping of the U.S. West.

Lifeguards on the Shore of Lake Fucked:

Carnival and Grace in Alexie’s *Flight*

“What year is it?” I ask.  
 That makes them laugh, too.  
 “Dude,” Paul says, “you are way drunk.”  
 “Just tell me what year it is,” I say. “Please.”  
 “Two thousand seven,” he says.  
 “It’s now,” I say.  
 “Well, no matter where you are, dude, it’s always now, ain’t it?”  
 Great, a fucking philosopher. (134)

The above first-person narrator in Sherman Alexie’s 2007 novel *Flight* is confused not simply because he is drunk (though he is), but because he has spent several days moving from body to body, rocketing through historical eras like a spirit adrift in time. In zigzag fashion, the fifteen-year-old boy Zits has already seen through the eyes of multiple figures: a white policeman in Idaho’s Red River Indian Reservation in the 1970s; a small Indian boy at the site of The Little Bighorn Battle in 1876; an elderly

white soldier participating in a massacre in a nineteenth-century Indian village; and a middle-aged white male pilot during the recent past. In the above scene, Zits attempts to determine his whereabouts, and soon discovers more than he wants to know: he lives in the body of his fifty-year-old father, an alcoholic Indian man who left him when he was young, and who now lives on the streets of Seattle. If in *Caramelo*, Celaya speaks with the ghost of her dead grandmother, and realizes the “terrible truth” that in her devotion to her father she has “turned into” a repetition of her (“I am the Awful Grandmother. For love of father I’d kill anyone who came near him to hurt him or make him sad”), in *Flight* Alexie takes Cisneros’s conceit one step further (424). Zits, a foster child who has endured and inflicted years of abuse, and who turns to alcohol just as his father did, literally *becomes* his hated father. This gothic trope, in which one looks in the mirror and sees the terrifying Other, puts Zits in an uncanny and disturbing situation: “I am my father....Who can survive such a revelation?” (150-151)

Yet like Celaya, Zits *does* survive these terrifying revelations, specifically by exploring the hidden crimes of the past. In doing so, he resembles Honig’s gothic heroine in that his efforts to overcome negative repetition (and thus to assert agency) take the form of illegitimate investigations into the structures that determine his life. The female gothic form, then, is not the exclusive province of women caught within the net of the patriarchy, but provides a useful template for any artist who seeks to illuminate a subordinate subject’s efforts to situate herself (or himself) within a complex network of power. Like Celaya’s search, Zits’s quest for nurturance and commitment emerges in response to a moment of danger: Zits (called so because his face is disfigured by acne) is a raging mess, an angry and desperate young man who habitually drinks, fights, and gets

himself kicked out of a serial list of foster homes. Abandoned by his father at a young age, he lost his mother to cancer when he was only six years old. From then on, his life has become a numbing history of negative repetition. He has been abused by many men, and moves through so many houses that he describes himself as a “flaming jet, crashing into each new foster family”: “I often wake in strange rooms. It’s what I do” (11, 1). And like Tara in *True Blood*, he worries that he will never escape this cycle of self-loathing, resentment, and distrust. He has been told by experts that he will always be “programmed” for dysfunctionality: “I’m fighting and kicking because that’s what I do. It’s how I’m wired. It’s my programming. I read once that if a kid has enough bad things happen to him before he turns five, he’s screwed for the rest of his life” (17). In St. Paul’s gothic terms, Zits is enslaved by *sin*—not simply because he continually hurts himself and others, but because he repetitively wants what he doesn’t want to want. He doesn’t want to want alcohol, or to set fires. Rather, he is “dying from about ninety-nine kinds of shame” (4).

However, Zits manages to dig himself into an even deeper pit—one that leads him into a gothic and phantasmagorical trip through time and space. Thrown into jail yet again (this time for pushing his newest foster mother), Zits discovers an odd and beautiful young white man who calls himself Justice, and who emerges as his only friend. Justice is remarkably well-read for a teenager, and sympathizes with Zits’s predicament. He cites Nietzsche, laments the U.S. history of Indian dispossession, and gives Zits a gun. Together, they consider the history of the Ghost Dance—the belief among certain Indians in the 1880s and 1890s that if enough Indians would participate in a ceremonial dance, they could erase white people from the world and bring back lost ancestors. But while

Zits believes that a successful Ghost Dance would require the concerted action of many Indians, Justice begs to differ: “I think you’re strong enough to Ghost-Dance all by yourself. I think you can bring back all the Indians and disappear all the white people” (31). Justice, then, works on behalf of nostalgic Kierkegaardian *recollection*, since he believes that the past can be restored in all its supposed glory. Rather than helping Zits to destroy his traumatized younger self (as Miss Jeannette does with Tara in *True Blood*) and move on toward new forms of solidarity, Justice nurtures Zits’ sense of resentment and flatters him with dreams of absolute power. Zits isn’t sure that he wants all white people to die, but he *does* want his mother to come back. Prompted by Justice, Zits enters a bank with a gun and—in a dreamlike sequence—opens fire on the people in the building. The result is surprising: Zits is lifted out of his body, and wakes to find himself inhabiting the body of a white FBI officer in 1975, engaging in a secret mission at an Indian reservation.

#### Fighting Terrorism Since 1492: *Flight* in the Bush Era

I did a vision quest for five years. And one of those years, it was a beautiful night. Stars were out, and it was calm, just beautiful. It was around midnight, and I got up and I prayed. I sat down, and sat there for a while, and all of a sudden I had these, like flashbacks of Sand Creek, Wounded Knee, and every policy, every law that was imposed on us by the government and the churches hit me one at a time...one at a time, and how it affected my life. And as I sat there I got angrier and angrier, until it turned to hatred. And I looked at the whole situation, the whole picture, and there was nothing I could do. It was too much. The only thing I could do, to me, was when I come off that hill, I’m going to grab a gun and I’m going to start shooting.... Maybe then my grandfathers will honor me, if I go that route. I got up, and I came around, and I faced the East direction. And it was beautiful, I mean, it was dawn. And it was light, enough light to see the rolling hills out there, and right above the blue light in that darkness was a sliver of the moon and the morning star. And I wanted to live. I want to live. I want to be happy. I feel I deserve that. But the only way that I was going to do that was if I forgive. And I cried that morning, because I had to forgive. Since then, every day I worked on that commitment. Now I don’t know how many people felt it. But every one of us, if you’re a Lakota, you

have to deal with that at some point in your life. You have to address that, you have to make a decision. If you don't, you're gonna' die on the road someplace, either from being too drunk, or you might take a gun to your head, if you don't handle those situations. So this isn't history. I mean, it's still with us. What has happened in the past will never leave us. For the next 100, 200 years, it'll be with us. And we have to deal with that, everyday. --Albert White Heat, Lakota, interviewed in Stephen Ives' PBS documentary *The West* (1996)

*Caramelo* emerged against a late 1990s, post-NAFTA backdrop defined by Clinton's official discourse of multiculturalism, the integration of "developing" nations like Mexico into the global economy, and the retrenchment of economic inequality across the globe. Its ghosts emerge from the conflicts and terrors lingering in this U.S.-Mexican nexus: patriarchy and racism on both sides of the border, migrants anxious about being deported, and the fear of proletarianization.<sup>30</sup> Alexie's *Flight*, in contrast, is a document

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<sup>30</sup> As I argue in the Introduction, the Clinton period in the U.S. involved a shift from Reaganite cultural nationalism and Cold War American exceptionalism toward an official state ideology of multiculturalism more suited to a globalized economy in which "developing" countries like Mexico would play a more important economic role. In this sense, *Caramelo* and other Mexican-American cultural texts (from Cisneros's Chicano/a literary cohorts to the films of Robert Rodriguez) served to introduce a broad American public to Mexico as a rising cultural and economic power in its own right. And what did this Mexico look like? It was hard to tell, since so many important and complex transformations were afoot, and because even promising changes (like the end of the PRI dictator-party) seemed pregnant with negative implications. The PRI, which Mario Vargas Llosa had described as the "perfect dictatorship" because it relied not on a single overweening leader but on a deep network of corruption and political power, finally lost an important election, as PAN candidate (and former Coke executive) Vicente Fox assumed the presidency in 2000. But the collapse of PRI's absolute authority over the country coincided with the intensified collapse of Mexican civil society itself, as drug money increasingly began to infiltrate not simply the economy, but also the coffers of government officials at all geographical levels. And NAFTA played an important role in the increasing power of this drug economy, since in opening up more shipments between the U.S. and Mexico, the trade agreement made Mexico a more effective conduit for the trade of guns and drugs than older drug-producing states like Colombia. Thus if the decline of PRI and the rise NAFTA empowered some in Mexico (from manufacturers and drug cartels to foreign investors and well-positioned businesspeople), it threatened others. The establishment of "free trade zones" along the U.S.-Mexico border, for example, led to rapid expansion of the well-known *maquiladoras*, special factories free from U.S. tariffs and duties. Most of the workers at these factories have been women who have hoped to earn money in an effort to achieve independence and upward mobility, but they have often faced abusive bosses, low wages, environmentally unsafe working environments, and crowded, makeshift living conditions outside the factories. Many farmers, too, lamented the post-NAFTA dumping of cheap grain into the Mexican market, and were forced to find work elsewhere—especially in the United States. Most conspicuously from an international point of view, a group of revolutionaries reacted to NAFTA by asserting regional autonomy in a Kierkegaardian attempt to repeat the revolutionary efforts of Emiliano Zapata. Fronted by Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas scrambled the coordinates of the Mexican state not by storming the capital as Zapata had done, but by asserting rights over the southern state of Chiapas, where they established their own networks of power. Thus, Cisneros's publication of *Caramelo* in 2002

of the era that emerged after September 11, 2001, when a Texan president once described by an optimistic Jose E. Limon in 1998 as “pro-Mexican and pro-Mexican American,” and who once eschewed nation building as imperial overreach, shifted his focus away from domestic priorities and toward a global battle for revenge against foreign, barbarian hordes (Limon *American Encounters* 145). The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have produced one gothic trope after another. On the one hand, U.S. citizens were treated to the mesmeric sorcery of head vampire Osama Bin Laden, medieval-style beheadings on the internet, and the global specter of bomb attacks from Spain and England to Iraq and New York City. But on the other hand, Americans got in on the gothic act as well, through bizarre images of torture that emerged from the dungeon bowels of Abu Ghraib and Baghram, fear-mongering red and yellow alerts of U.S. officials, and the increased surveillance of private life in the United States. And even if television stations and newspapers often preferred to sanitize the violent images of dead and wounded bodies produced by the war, the sense of death hovered in the background as U.S. citizens focused on other activities. Meanwhile, ghosts walked the streets in the form of damaged veterans who could not so easily tune out the violence.

These wars, waged on the often lawless frontiers of Pakistan and Afghanistan (though also in the urban jungles of Fallujah and Sadr City) unearthed ghosts from the U.S. past that still linger today: not only Vietnam and Somalia, but also the Indian wars of the nineteenth century. Richard Slotkin has highlighted the way that many white people in the late nineteenth century saw themselves as victims of Indians who raided pioneer settlements, and who defeated General Custer at the Little Bighorn battle of

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coincides with a period of change and possibility in the U.S.-Mexico nexus, but also one of anxiety and struggle.



1876. Enraged by these provocations, these resentful whites adopted a furious rhetoric of race hatred and extermination. And colonialism at home could easily be adapted for colonialism abroad: because U.S. leaders exulted in the dominance of virile and virtuous white U.S. men over and above barbaric heathens, they could justify colonial wars in places like Cuba and the Philippines even after most Indians had been thoroughly subjugated. In 1893, the year that Turner declared the frontier's demise, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show explicitly linked the Indian wars with the new U.S. foreign imperialism; the Wild West's program "declared that the warfare of the future would primarily engage civilized nations with barbarian races, and that therefore the American Indian-fighting cavalry would become the 'pattern of the cavalry of the future'" (80). Buffalo Bill's prophecy has been remarkably far-sighted. Many U.S. soldiers deposited in the Afghan highlands have imagined themselves in a mythic space of cowboys and Indians, trapped (like Zits) in soldier-bodies and in a dimly comprehended pattern of skirmish and revenge. Just as most whites saw themselves as the wounded (and thereby innocent) party after Little Bighorn, most Americans saw themselves as innocent victims of foreign terrorists after the September 11 attacks. Encouraged by political authorities to see themselves as agents of civilization in barbaric outposts, many soldiers imagined that they were repeating Manifest Destiny by facilitating the triumphant spread of the American way in the Middle East.

Alexie's *Flight* intervenes in this cultural landscape of gothic repetition to assert that whatever terror might emerge from Islamist sources in the contemporary context of U.S.-led global empire, one can find ample evidence of terror that has been operating as a matter of course in the U.S. for several centuries: in the brutal history of the Western

frontier, on Native American reservations, inside foster homes and jails, and on the streets of U.S. cities. While wandering the alleys of rainy Seattle, Zits's father wears a shirt that satirizes Bush's war on terror by turning the terms against the president; next to a picture of Geronimo and his forces, the shirt reads "FIGHTING TERRORISM SINCE 1492" (133). But although Alexie would likely endorse the spirit behind such a T-shirt, he is less invested in exacting revenge against white America (and in celebrating something called Indian America unambiguously) than in cultivating a space of caretaking and commitment on behalf of ghosts like Zits who fall between the cracks of officially sanctioned forms of national/cultural identification and privilege. No one—neither Zits nor the novel's white characters—is either entirely innocent or guilty in the struggle over the legacy of violence implied by the continuing line from the frontier of South Dakota to that of Afghanistan. Rather, the cycle of revenge created by terror (whether perpetrated by Islamist radicals or U.S. soldiers) is yet another variety of negative repetition that leaves little room for a swerve that crosses official lines of division and produces nurturance and healing. Like Albert White Heat, then, Alexie wants to register the way that past trauma continues to affect the present, but he also wants to find a way to put the pain to rest through a healing narrative process.

*Flight*, then, is a transnational story of healing through terror. Just as Albert White Heat cannot help but imagine that grabbing a gun and exacting revenge will gratify his ancestors and secure him a place of honor in their eyes, Zits is easily drawn toward violent dreams of remasculinization and cultural revival. And in the figure of Abbad, Alexie somewhat clumsily renders another man acting in blind revenge after the destruction of what he considers his homeland. Like Zits, Abbad (a lonely Ethiopian

Muslim refugee who, with his wife, commandeers a Chicago-bound plane and plunges it into the city) finds himself without a place, and in a repetition of Zits's imagined shooting spree at a bank, channels his dispossession into an act of resentful violence against people who bear no direct responsibility for his predicament. But while Abbad's action feels heavy-handed and forced in the course of the novel's narrative progression (an opportunity for Alexie to say something important about a hot-button issue of the day), it is completely plausible in real life, since people have committed such acts. Alexie's key point, then--that people deprived of a place in the emerging global order are likely sources for continuing violence--is relevant because it highlights the way that today, places cannot remain isolated from each other even when they are thousands of miles apart. In the novel's ecology, the excluded (whether they are from Idaho or Ethiopia) do not simply disappear, but threaten to emerge in uncanny ways. Thus if *Caramelo* helps us achieve what Stephen Tatum describes as "postnational and transnational ways of knowing" ("Spectrality and the Postregional Interface" 6) through its provisional centering of Mexico City in the geographical matrix of the U.S. West, *Flight* highlights transnational flows as well, both in its treatment of international terrorism and in its rendering of conflict within U.S. political borders between Indian reservation-nations and the sovereign U.S. *per se*.

With regard to this last division, Alexie rejects mystical notions of cultural identity and instead highlights the primacy of class inequality that cuts across borders of national sovereignty. Just as Celaya triangulates between the United States and Mexico (and retains no unalloyed identification with either), Zits is a refugee too: a self-described "half-breed" with an Irish-American mother and an Indian father who is not technically

counted as an Indian by the U.S. government, since his father's paternity was never made official. He finds no respite in a pure version of cultural identity, Indian or otherwise. Rather, although the haunted history between Indians and whites in the U.S. West permeates his current self, Zits often criticizes other Indians who refuse to count him in their ledger-books. At one point, he explicitly bemoans his ghostly invisibility in the eyes of defensive Indians who don't want to face the gothic threat he represents: "The rich and educated Indians don't give a shit about me. They pretend I don't exist. They say, *The drunken Indian is just a racist cartoon*. They say, *The lonely Indian is just a ghost in a ghost story*" (7).<sup>31</sup> Thus the prevailing fault line in *Flight* is not that between ethnic groups facing off against each other like unified teams, but the class line between the excluded and the included, between what Richard Rodriguez calls "biology" and those who hope to transcend its uncomfortable proximity. Zits's overweening feature—his prominent acne—is but one way of symbolizing the fact that Zits lies at the bottom of this novel's social heap, and thus has no reliable way of escaping what Rodriguez calls "undifferentiated life"—no way to "get the fuck out of here" except through self-destructive violence and incessant running (*Brown* 213-214). His acne is a marker for his class status, not for his race or culture: "These days, you see a kid with bad acne, and you know he's poor. Rich kids don't get acne anymore. Not really" (21). So when his final foster-mother, Mary, honestly offers to help him heal his skin, Zits receives it as a chance to escape from his subordinate class position—and he doesn't mind that his new foster parents are not Indian, but white.

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<sup>31</sup> See for example, Kathy Dobie's "Tiny Little Laws" on the epidemic of ignored and unsolved rape cases in certain U.S. Indian reservations. *Harper's Magazine* February 2011.

Degradation and Renewal: *Flight* and Carnival

In the world's structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed [the European surrealists] to step outside the domain of intoxication....These experiences are by no means limited to dreams, hours of hashish eating, or opium smoking....The true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson. (But a dangerous one; and the religious lesson is stricter.)

--Walter Benjamin, from "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (71)

In order to capture the uncanny quality of negative repetition that characterizes the U.S.-Indian trajectory from Columbus to Bush, Alexie turns to a phantasmagorical narrative device. Zits does not commandeer a time machine in an authoritative effort to explore history (like The Time Traveller in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*). Instead, in a nod to corny but entertaining television shows like *Quantum Leap*, he is bandied about by time, thrown into new situations as if stuck in the malfunctioning digital memory of a national computer. Just as no one has individual control over the strange glitches and skips of the U.S. historical legacy, Zits has no control over his time-travel, which merely recapitulates the serial shock experience and disorientation that already characterizes his life. If Zits—with his succession of foster-families-- has become resigned to waking up in strange rooms, unsure of what will come next and who to trust, his new vocation as time traveler is in some ways another stage in the same game.

Zits's time travel, though distressing, also eerily expresses a fundamental fantasy that he has already entertained for a long time: the desire to escape his body and become a new human being. Zits often indulges this desire for escape through reading and watching television; he has already informed us of his "addiction" to books (12). But his perennial runaway status also enables him to imagine entry into other, freer bodies.

Earlier in the novel, when Zits escapes from his latest foster family, he pictures himself as a super hero:

My zits give me superpowers. After I cuss out my new foster father, I put on my cape and fly right through the roof of the house. *I am Zit Man, master of the Universe!* Okay, I don't fly. I dodge the foster father's angry slap at my head, shove my foster mother against the wall, and run out the front door. I run the city streets, randomly turning left and right and left and right, because it just feels good to run. I used to dream that I could run fast enough to burn up like a meteor and drop little pieces of me all over the world. (16)

Zits is driven here by hope for a line of flight, a way out of his negatively repetitive situation. And through his imagination, he transforms himself into phantasmagoric beings: first into a flying superhero, then into a *flaneur* running through the city streets, and finally into a meteor. This last image is telling; rather than a vision of *integration* into some redeemed form of society (a family or a collective, for example), Zits can only imagine a violent (if aesthetically glorious) spectacle of *disintegration*, as if for him conquering the world involves splintering himself into tiny parts over the face of the globe. This fragmented sense of place accords with Zits's belief that he has nowhere on the earth to stand; more exactly, he doesn't want to stand in any single place for long, because he fears that he will be hurt if he does: "I'm never in any one place long enough to care" (8).

Thus if Zits has already practiced body-hopping in an attempt to escape a self of which he is profoundly ashamed, his new historical body-hopping does not let him off the hook in the same way. When he finds himself transformed into an FBI agent, he cannot simply run away from the situation. Facing the gun of his partner, he must enter more deeply into the strange world in which he finds himself if he is to find a way out. And if in his standard life, Zits can exercise some degree of control over his fantasies, here he

cannot choose which bodies he will inhabit. Since these lines of flight promise novelty, learning, and self-transformation, but also fear and trauma, their effect is ambiguous. On the one hand, he often expresses exultation at the benefits and privileges his new bodies confer on him. As an FBI agent, he marvels at his new muscles (and penis size!), enjoying the full measure of a white masculine status that has heretofore been denied him. Later, he experiences love, nurturance, and skill in new ways; as an Indian boy he finally experiences a father's embrace, and as a pilot he flies through the air with confidence. But on the other hand, he must also grapple with undesired aspects of these embodied subject positions. On the Indian reservation, he witnesses venal Indians who betray their cause in service to the FBI, and reluctantly participates in the torture and murder of a young Indian man; at the Little Bighorn, he sees Indians murder hundreds of white soldiers and subsequently desecrate their bodies; as an old white soldier, he grapples with the massacre of an entire Indian village; and as a pilot, he inhabits the body of a man driven to suicide. Finally, as we have noted, while dwelling in the body of his father, he wallows in vomit and blood in a rat-infested urban alley. If the overall effect of this shamanic journey through time and space is one of healing through terror, the terror implied by the Lacanian Real plays a key role.

By penetrating and enlivening the history of the U.S. West—with a focus on the experience of Indians—Alexie, like Cisneros, imagines the West as a haunted landscape and a colonial space of violence. While caught in a net of gothic intrigue between the anti-colonialist group Indigenous Rights Now and the double-crossing Indians who work with the murderous FBI, he echoes Celaya's confusion and pain in San Antonio: "I did die, and now I'm living in Hell. I've been sent to Hell. And *Hell is Red River, Idaho, in*

1975” (47 my emphasis). This view of the West as a bedeviled space is further corroborated as Zits inhabits other bodies in the nineteenth century. At first overjoyed by a visit to an Indian camp in South Dakota, Zits (in the body of a small boy) soon realizes that this world is doomed to destruction. His lament about the oncoming history reads as a brief chronicle of native North America, with its legacy of negative repetition, death, and loss:

All these old-time Indians are doomed. They’re going to die of disease. And they’ll be slaughtered by U.S. Cavalry soldiers. They’ll be packed into train cars and shipped off to reservations. And they’ll starve in winter camps near iced-over rivers. The children are going to be kidnapped and sent off to boarding schools. Their hair will be cut short and they will be beaten for speaking their tribal languages. They’ll be beaten for dancing and singing the old-time Indian songs. All of them are going to start drinking booze. And they children will drink booze. And their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will drink booze. (66)

The fact that Zits can recount this history *before it has happened* only adds to the poignancy of the passage. To begin with, it points to a sense of history as inexorable, an unpreventable cycle of death that Zits is powerless to stop even though he can see from a future vantage point. Just as Zits feels he is “programmed” for dysfunction, this world, too, operates according to a fatalistic logic of doom. But this moment does not simply dramatize the strange interjection of a future perspective into the past; it also dramatizes the brutal repetition through which *the past interjects itself into the future*. While describing this litany of disaster, Zits is literally forced to live through it again. Like any trauma, the catastrophic history of native North America is uncanny in the way its effects ripple outward like a curse that refuses to alleviate its grip on succeeding generations.

Despite the despair implied by such passages, *Flight* is not merely a dirge. Rather, like a Putumayan *yage* ceremony (and like *True Blood* and *Caramelo*), Zits’s experience is shot through with laughter. In *Flight*’s carnivalesque world, what Benjamin called “the



mysterious side of the mysterious” is always undercut by the intrusion of everyday life, such that the novel is never merely ethereal or spooky, but deeply infused with the ordinary, the humorous, and the fallible quality of the body. Zits’s situation is at heart comedic; since others do not realize that the ghost of a twenty-first century adolescent boy occupies the body of their partner, friend, or son, *Flight* is rife with dramatic irony and the humor of misunderstanding. Moreover, in its elevation of the inept and wounded Zits to the heroic status of time traveler and narrator, the novel draws from the topsy-turvy world of the carnival, in which the limited human body is revealed as a universal condition. In the carnival, we are all fools, particularly those of us who deny our foolishness and vulnerability. Accordingly, Zits’s narratorial position is that of a clownish “fish out of water” who stumbles through history and receives a number of figurative pies in the face. Narratively, too, Zits’s storytelling voice is not straightforward or authoritative; rather, just as the shamanic *yage* ceremony is constantly “interrupted” by mundane tasks, jokes, and bathroom breaks, Zits’s narration is interrupted by practical problems, wandering digressions, humorous asides, and degraded physical comedy (Taussig *Shamanism* 344). When Zits (as an elderly U.S. soldier) emerges from his tent, he realizes that he has no clothes on, only to dive back into his bed. Earlier, deposited in an Indian encampment, he is taken aback by the stench of meat and humanity: “I never read anything about this smell. I never saw a television show that mentioned it. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but it smells like the Devil dropped a shit right here in the middle of this camp” (61). Zits’s attention to bodily fluids, his profanity, and his undercutting of the romantic image of the Indian camp takes an otherwise “mystical” experience and transforms it into a profane illumination. Here, in Taussig’s terms, “the

heavy tone and mystical authority of the official voice of the past is brought down to earth and familiarized with gentle and sometimes saucy wit” (202).

Later, dwelling in his father’s body, Zits encounters the nadir, the deep pit of what Taussig describes as the carnival’s wellspring of “degradation and renewal” (201). As a homeless man in Seattle, he becomes a darkly comic clown, “shambling” through the city demanding respect, getting himself beaten up, and engaging in free-floating conversations with others on the street. As deeply sad as this experience of homelessness is, it is also humorous, partly because for one so low on the social scale, anything can happen. The anarchy afoot in this world helps to loosen the individuality of all involved, such that secrets emerge into the open. When the father demands that a white man on the street “respect” him by telling him a story, the man tells him a strange tale in which his daughter’s pet bird falls into a pot of boiling water on the stove, and dies at an animal ER despite being attached to an oxygen machine. Zits’s father responds with uncomfortable laughter, and says, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh. It’s not funny”—to which the white man responds, “Oh no, that’s the whole thing. It is funny. It’s horrible too. But it’s hilarious at the same time. And when I saw that bird hooked up to those tiny little machines, *I laughed*” (148). But the humor of this moment is undercut yet again, by the painful secret that this white man will only tell a man this low on the social scale: that because he laughed, his wife and daughter left him, and have still not come back.

Thus if many of these moments are funny—and some horrible and funny at the same time—they can also be simply devastating. And if humor is an inseparable part of Alexie’s novel, this humor crashes up against a deeper imperative for care and nurturing that trips up the humor without negating it. The story about the bird is funny insofar as

we maintain a certain distance from it, but in abruptly collapsing this distance, Alexie forces us to encounter an uncomfortable truth: that for the wife and daughter, the life of the bird matters so deeply that in laughing, the man loses them. This oscillation between a distanced view of events and a more immersed one is typical of the novel, since in occupying different bodies, Zits must empathize with people caught in a dizzying variety of situations while still retaining his own point of view. And as he moves into new bodies, the border between himself and the host-body increasingly diminishes, such that he begins accessing the memories, feelings, and abilities of other selves. While inhabiting Gus, the elderly white soldier and Indian tracker, he feels the man's painful memories of an attack (by a particular group of Indians) on a white pioneer settlement, and feels the desire for revenge. And while in his father's body, he accesses his father's memories of his own alcoholic father—and specifically of the negative repetition of being forced to say, as if in a ceremonial chant, the same words over and over again: “I ain't worth a shit” (155).

The permeability of selves at work here--the way that Zits occupies different bodies, and is in return occupied by them--emerges as something more than “the mysterious side of the mysterious” precisely because this magical interpenetration is also thoroughly ordinary. In the novel's model of the self-caught-in-the-mesh, spirit possession emerges as a guiding metaphor; whether we are shaped by the incantatory words of our fathers, or whether we shape others by telling them our stories, the self is characterized not by absolute self-determination, but by a gothic process of mutual interpenetration that can be alternately terrifying and salvational, depending on the nature of the sorcery involved. And of course, we too, as readers, also find ourselves in Zits's

predicament of spirit possession. Through literary sorcery Alexie deposits us in the body of Zits, a first person narrator whose thoughts we can hear, and poses us with the question of how we will react. Ultimately, Zits is as helpless and pathetic as the bird who fell into a pot of boiling water—and as unlikely to emerge alive after his scarring. Thus although Zits's story is funny in many ways, Alexie dares us not to take his story seriously.

### Not Some Mystical Bastard: the Eruption of Secular Grace

The Resurrection...is not, in Paul's own eyes, of the order of fact, falsifiable or demonstrable. It is pure event, opening of an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible. For the interest of Christ's resurrection does not lie in itself, as it would in the case of a particular, or miraculous, fact. Its genuine meaning is that it testifies to the possible victory over death, a death that Paul envisages...not in terms of facticity, but in terms of subjective disposition. Whence the necessity of constantly linking resurrection to *our* resurrection....In contrast to the fact, the event is measurable only in accordance with the universal multiplicity whose possibility it prescribes. It is in this sense that it is grace, and not history. The apostle is then he who names this possibility (the Gospels, the Good News, comes down to this: we *can* vanquish death). His discourse is one of pure fidelity to the possibility opened up by the event. It cannot, therefore, in any way (and this is the upshot of Paul's antiphilosophy) fall under the remit of knowledge. The philosopher knows eternal truth....The apostle, who declares an unheard-of possibility, one dependent on an eventual grace, properly speaking knows nothing.

--Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (45)

The de-dialectization of the Christ-Event allows us to extract a formal, wholly secularized conception of grace from the mythological core. Everything hinges on knowing whether an ordinary existence, breaking with time's cruel routine, encounters the material chance of serving a truth, thereby becoming, through subjective division and beyond the human animal's survival imperatives, an immortal.

-- Badiou (66)

Like Celaya's story in *Caramelo*, Zits's *gothic quest for place* looks to the past for a source of positive repetition built on a core value of nurturing in a context of mutual interdependence. Key to both Cisneros's and Alexie's vision is a sense that history (whether personal or social) is not necessarily a foregone conclusion or an endless

exercise in the same—or, as Badiou would put it, of death within time’s cruel routine. Instead, what Zits discovers in his hallucinogenic investigation into history is that some form of *grace* can operate, such that it is possible to swerve toward healing and away from a negative repetition that is all too expected. Specifically, Zits encounters an event that, in Badiou’s terms, inspires his fidelity and thereby colors all of his subsequent decisions: during a massacre of an Indian village, Zits (as the white soldier Gus) witnesses a young white soldier saving a five-year-old Indian boy from an otherwise certain death. And after struggling to control Gus’s body, Zits too joins the young soldier (who he names Small Saint), thereby becoming a “traitor” in the eyes of the company. That their fellow soldiers accuse Small Saint and Gus of “going Indian” has a layer of irony here, given that the white Gus is literally possessed by the spirit of a twenty-first century Indian boy. But Small Saint, too, is possessed by some unknown spirit, since he is compelled to save the boy even though the act endangers his own safety and estranges him from his expected social role. The accusations of betrayal underscore the sense in which a swerve away from the sanctioned negative repetition (enshrined in the “laws” of racial and national loyalty, revenge, and what Jacques Ranciere would describe as the official account of who counts) can cut against the grain of legitimacy in exactly the way described by the female gothic. The female gothic heroine is never granted power; instead, she must take it.

In this nineteenth-century frontier context, the idea that a U.S. soldier would “count” Bow Boy within the human domain is so unexpected and illegitimate that it defies belief and provokes official retaliation—but also hope. Zits responds with astonishment: “I can’t believe it. It can’t be true. But it is true. That white soldier, a small

saint, is trying to save Bow Boy. I wonder if the other escaping Indians see this. I wonder if it gives them hope. I wonder if this act of love makes it easier for them to face death” (93). And while this event is hard to believe, its grace is not mystical, not shrouded in the mysterious side of the mysterious. Instead, it is simply part of the process of life, and thereby describes any event (for example, Tahrir Square in Egypt) that could not be predicted by knowing experts, but that nonetheless happens. In describing the escape of Small Saint and Bow Boy, Zits revisits and revises his earlier fantasy of flying. He no longer offers us an image of a meteoric *disintegration*, but one of a nurturing rescue built on the *integration* of a militant collective:

Faster, faster now, faster than I thought possible. I wonder if the pony will catch fire. If the pony has caught fire. If the pony is leaving behind hoofprints that spark and smolder....The pony leaps into the air. It grows wings and flies into the forest. No, of course not. It doesn't grow wings. How can a horse grow wings? That kind of extraordinary magic is not permitted here. No, the only magic here is ordinary. It's so ordinary that it might not be magic at all. It might only be luck. But I'll take luck. (96)

This image is resolutely “ordinary” because for Zits grace does not arrive at the behest of an omniscient power, but arrives as a lucky and contingent breath of air. And Small Saint's revolt, though inexplicable, is ultimately mundane since such unpredictable events happen all the time. It is precisely because such an event could not be predicted beforehand, and because Zits already rejects intuitively the idea that it could be predicted, that for Zits *knowledge* is such a suspect category. Earlier, while inhabiting the FBI agent and faced with the “smile” of the double-crossing Elk, Zits reacts viscerally against the sense that this Indian “knows” him: “I hate that smile. He *knows* me” (52). Zits hates the knowing smile, just as he hates the knowing words of the authoritative psychiatrist who

tells him that he will *always* react violently, because knowledge, as a rule, precludes the possibility of the graceful swerve away from bare repetition.

Thus in *Flight*, as in *Caramelo*, the healing line of flight—in this case, Small Saint and Gus whisking Bow Boy away from death—does not simply destabilize an existing hegemonic relation (though it certainly does that), but also establishes a new master-signifier that makes a new hegemonic relation possible. The event of Bow Boy’s rescue becomes a model for future Kierkegaardian *repetition*, such that fidelity to it involves later attempts to reperform not the external facts of the rescue, but rather a spiritual freedom at work in the act. And in both novels the new master-signifier is that of nurturance: the care-taking of (especially) the young. Later in *Flight*, figures who resemble Bow Boy appear several times; sometimes they are rescued, and sometimes they die. When Zits is finally transported back to the bank and decides anew whether to open fire on its customers, he notices a five-year-old boy in line with his mother and decides to give up his guns. But not every story in *Flight* ends happily. Later, a policeman named Officer Dave tells a gothic story in which grace fails to intervene; after breaking into a house, Dave is horrified to discover the dead bodies of two young children, drowned to death in the bathroom as their drug-addled parents lie unconscious in the front room. But although Officer Dave arrives too late to save the children in the apartment, he later performs a successful repetition of Small Saint’s act. In arranging for Zits to live with Dave’s brother Robert and sister-in-law Mary, Dave treats Zits as a version of Bow Boy, and an Indian boy bereft of a nurturing community becomes part of a new and promising (if uncertain) collective. Whereas earlier in the novel Zits complained that he had been “partially raised by too many people,” now he sees Robert

and Dave as true foster fathers: “That makes sense, I suppose. I need as many fathers as possible” (6, 176).

The conclusion of *Flight*, with its “It takes a village to raise a child” motif, implies an affirmation of an activist state, but also of nurturing cultural practices and institutions beyond the state. Notably, Dave and his two brothers all work for the state in some capacity—Dave as a policeman, Robert as a fireman, and another brother as a postal carrier. As Zits puts it: “You guys are like the civil servant hall of fame or something” (174). Even before Zits is swept into his phantasmagorical flight through history, he expresses “respect” for police officers as a group. Although he acknowledges that “plenty of cops just like to be assholes” (19) he nevertheless insists that many of them are motivated not simply by a desire to wield power over others, but by a desire to create a nurturing sense of stability in the face of chaos: “I don’t like cops, okay? I just have respect for them. A tiny bit of respect. I think a lot of them had drunk, shitty, or missing fathers, just like I did. I think many of them endured chaotic and brutal childhoods, so they became cops because they want to create order in the world.... Good cops are like lifeguards on the shores of Lake Fucked” (18). Thus although *Flight* aims to disrupt a hegemonic vision of the U.S. West in which vulnerable young people like Zits remain unaccounted for (and in which Indians—at least poor ones--still remain largely uncounted), its final aim is not disruption for its own sake. Rather, just as Celaya’s ongoing “respect” for her father indicates not an endorsement of patriarchal rule but an acknowledgement of his attempt to care for her, Zits’s respect for police implies not an endorsement of a hegemonic social structure in which the poor remain subordinate, but



an affirmation of the principle of social order, and thus of hegemony, as such. Even if the lake is “fucked,” as Zits implies, someone must be its lifeguard.

Critical regionalism, too, should affirm the idea of “lifeguards on the shores of Lake Fucked.” Even if we recognize, in gothic fashion, that place is an unstable category, we should strive to create institutions and practices built around a practice of positive Kierkegaardian repetition that allow sustainable nurturing to occur. In the fictional case of *Flight*, Officer Dave only takes an interest in Zits because he repeatedly comes into contact with the boy during police exercises that are bounded within the space of urban Seattle (as Zits puts it, Officer Dave had arrested him “a few dozen times”) (17). If Zits never stayed in one place long enough to care, Dave clearly did. And although in his shamanic visions Zits wanders through time and space, these disorienting visions enable healing precisely because they draw on images from the past that underscore the importance of commitment over time. The dialectical image of two flaming horses, flying over the forest and away from pursuing cavalry--one horse bearing a young white man and a five-year-old Indian boy, the other a grizzled white soldier possessed by a lost soul from the future--swerves away from the typical iconography of the “Wild West” and revises it according to the terms of an undesired but unavoidable interdependence. Small Saint notwithstanding, there are no heroic, individual cowboys here. Rather, its gothic model of the permeable and haunted self--built on spirit possession and everyday sorcery--loosens the dominant model of Western individualism like a bad tooth. In Alexie’s West, enemies are thoroughly intertwined with each other: Indians with whites, Muslims with Christians, ghosts with the living. And in the face of these uncomfortable pairings, *Flight* imagines illicit solidarities across the lines of race, age, religion, and nationality.

However, all of this deterritorialization operates in the service of a new form of territorialization; its irony does not remain in play *ad nauseum*, but is tripped up by a form of commitment that is rooted in an imaginative, enchanted, but nonetheless everyday form of memory. In recalling the love he once received from his mother, Zits puts it this way: “She used to sing...to me when I was a baby. I remember her singing it to me. I know I’m not supposed to remember it. But I do. My memory is strange that way. I often remember people I’ve never met and events and places I’ve never seen. I don’t think I’m some mystical bastard. I just think I pay attention to the details” (2). In engaging in the *gothic quest for place*, we are well-advised to avoid becoming “mystical bastards.” But in “paying attention to the details,” we might discover that memory and experience (and thus pain and loss, healing and solidarity) cannot best be approached in a linear, just-the-facts manner. Instead, they require us to flow with, rather than to deny, the dreamworld that is reality. And it is precisely because reality is a dreamworld that our quests for place must be fundamentally gothic.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION: WALTER KIRN'S *UP IN THE AIR*, FLIGHT, AND THE LIBIDINAL ECONOMY IN THE SACRED SPACE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE

The gravity of the situation / Is hard to focus and harness.  
--Vic Chesnutt, "The Gravity of the Situation"

To live's to fly / Low and high / So shake the dust off of your wings / And the tears out of  
your eyes.  
--Townes Van Zandt, "To Live is to Fly"

I'm part pagan—I believe in breakthroughs, in bursts of astrological beneficence. Things  
rise and fall, but sometimes they rise and rise.  
Ryan Bingham, from Walter Kirn's *Up in the Air* (96)

In the first chapter of the Montana-based writer Walter Kirn's 2001 book *Up in the Air*, the narrator Ryan Bingham describes the last vacation he (reluctantly) took. Bingham has no fixed address, since he has largely given up life on the ground to wander through "Airworld": a dizzying network of plane flights, hotel stays, and business engagements. When his financial services company (a conglomerate called ISM) pushes him to take some time off "for health reasons" (8), Bingham enrolls in two classes at the university: a creative writing course, during which he writes a "short nostalgic sketch about delivering propane with my father in a sixty-mile per-hour blizzard," and a literature course entitled "Country-Music Music as Literature." No one in the creative

writing class likes his regionalist sketch. And the literature class largely depresses him, “worsening the low mood and mental fuzziness that ISM had ordered me to correct” (9). Still, he can’t quite shake the thoughts that occurred to him during this enforced pause: about his father, who once ran a local business before it collapsed in the face of outside competition; about his happy childhood in Minnesota, where he remembers a “golden Mark Twain boyhood of State Fair corn dogs and station wagon vacations to Yellowstone” (54); and about the meaning of country music. As he recalls, the instructor, “a transplanted New Yorker in a black Stetson,” theorized that country music grew out of a need to grapple with U.S. urbanization during the early twentieth century; he “believed that great country lyrics share a theme: the migration from the village to the city, the disillusionment with urban wickedness, and the mournful desire to go home” (9).

Prompted by “dozens of examples” of this theme, Bingham begins to see his travels as a country song come to life, similar to the old pattern but enlivened by new iconography. Bingham’s vision is a mournful tour through the landscape of the post-Fordist economy of the new U.S. West, evoking the architectural sublime of the Denver International Airport but also the ordinary tasks of proletarian service workers and laid-off office managers:

I saw my travels as a twangy ballad full of rhyming place names and neon streetscapes and vanishing taillights and hazy women’s faces. All those corny old verses, but new ones, too. The DIA control tower in fog. The drone of vacuum cleaners in a hallway, telling guests that they’ve slept past checkout time. The goose-pimplly arms of a female senior manager hugging a stuffed bear I’ve handed her as we wait together for two security guards—it’s overkill; the one watches the other—to finish loading file cubes and desk drawers and the CPU from her computer onto a flat gray cart... (9)

In this passage, nothing quite comes into focus because everything is in motion. The “vanishing taillights” indicate a car on its way somewhere else, while “women’s faces”

are similarly “hazy,” not clearly remembered--as if they too have passed only for the moment. The Denver airport is (uncharacteristically, for the Mountain West) shrouded in fog. Meanwhile, the hotel’s low-wage janitors achieve only a ghostly, disembodied presence. Rather than speaking with their voices, they communicate through machines (their mobile vacuum cleaners) to lingering guests, who, like the taillights and the women’s faces, are urged to continue moving. The “female senior manager,” too, is something like a ghost. She is packing up the tools of her trade because she has been let go from her job. Whatever “senior” status she may have once had, she now finds herself adrift, displaced, nervous with goose pimples, and (like the hotel worker) overseen by surveillance. None of these memories are particularly welcome for Bingham. Thinking of his life as a country song will not help him return to his work. As a result, he attempts to erase these memories and move on: “I pulled out of it—barely. I cut that song off cold. It took a toll, though” (9). It does take a toll, as his health worsens; despite his intentions, Bingham cannot cut these memories off cold, since as narrator he compulsively revisits them.

The stuffed bear, too, returns to haunt Bingham later in the novel. Since his job involves “pep-talking the jobless,” he had sometimes used a bear named Mr. Hugs as a “grieving aid,” or (more colloquially) a “squashable”: “As in, ‘The poor lady was hysterical, ripping out drawers from her filing cabinet, screaming, so I gave her a squashable and she calmed down.’” (233). As he enters a Las Vegas hotel, Bingham receives Mr. Hugs in the mail, this time shot through the heart with a bullet, “assassinated” (233). Like his college courses, the bear unearths gothic memories that he would rather not think about. He recalls one scene from his job, “like a slasher movie,” in

which “some menopausal former manager” breaks down from stress and “begins to spout red gore from her left nostril”: “Stress is the killer, they say, and I believe it. I’ve seen the eruptions. I’ve Kleenexed up the fluids. It progresses nine tenths of the way in stealth and silence, until the tenth tenth, when it wails. It roars” (233). Because Mr. Hugs testifies to years of built-up tension, rage, sadness, and finally violent explosions, his material return is uncanny, as if Bingham has been visited by an undead corpse or a lost child. The “mangled” bear, pummeled by unemployed workers, increasingly begins to mirror back to them their own battered condition, such that they “embrace” him all the more. But although the bear comforts the jobless, Mr. Hugs proves too disturbing for Bingham. If he can forget about his clients after the session is over, the bear lingers and becomes strangely animate in his ability to evoke story and memory: “I couldn’t look at him anymore. Two years of rough handling had given him a soul, an expressive face and figure all his own. ‘Sad’ doesn’t capture it. . . Martyred. Forlorn. Unconsolable. Woebegone. Baby Jesus left out in the rain” (234). Now that he finds himself face to face with the voodoo bear, returned from the grave yet again, Bingham sees himself in Mr. Hugs—and tries to forget once more. His method is precise: he downs a medley of prescription drugs and embarks on a hallucinatory, raucous bender through the city that he has earlier described as a slayer of memory: Las Vegas “really isn’t the city for history” (229).

Because the uncanny return of repressed memories drives Bingham to imagine a nurturing sense of place that is largely absent in the Airworld frontier, but because the novel suggests that returning to the past is both impossible and undesirable, *Up in the Air* exemplifies the *gothic quest for place* in contemporary U.S. regionalist literature. If the

gothic form helps us to work through disturbing elements of the personal and social psyche, the *gothic quest for place* presses us to work through the fact that in an increasingly mobile world dominated by consumer capitalist institutions, dreams of a more stable sense of place (and a more meaningful social narrative) continue to haunt us. In response to our unfathomable interconnectedness in a world of uneven power, it can be tempting to imagine quiet corners disconnected from the larger world: art for art's sake, the farmer's market, the gated community. In response, the *gothic quest for place* argues that no such pastoral space can be established. But the *gothic quest for place* also rejects the myth of the frontier, which enables the evasion of social conflict through constant motion. Since gravity always operates on us, eventually we must come down to earth. But coming down to earth is not as simple or forthright as it may seem; try as we might, we can't stay still either, because time, change, and flows constantly defamiliarize the ground on which we stand. If the alternative country singer Vic Chesnutt is right, then, to claim that "The gravity of the situation / Is hard to focus and harness," his predecessor Townes Van Zandt is equally right when he sings, "To live's to fly." Insofar as we face such a dialectical push-and-pull between gravity and flight, the *gothic quest for place* presses us to prioritize, to decide what deserves weight and what doesn't, and to honor the struggles of the past by fostering durable places that nonetheless remain open to the strangeness of an outside world that is never entirely "outside," because it lives within us.

The gothic form departs from traditional realism because in doing so, it suggests that everyday experience is not straightforward but dreamlike and strange, sometimes even nightmarish. True to form, *Up in the Air* is not a realist rendering of the business world, but a phantasmagoric trip through the labyrinths of contemporary consumer

capitalist culture. This Kafka-esque fable is simultaneously enchanting and unnerving, funny and sad, and with its own mode of grace. At one point, Bingham gives us a clue about what he is up to: “In a fable, you find new resources, new powers. Pick an animal, then take its shape” (302). Faced with waning desire and a deadening life on the ground, Bingham takes flight by taking the shape of an airplane, as it were, where he can (in Whitmanian fashion) pursue a wide-ranging democratic friendship in the place where “it all connects” (41). The novel’s epigraph from Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” (“You shall not heap up what is call’d riches, You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve... You shall not allow the hold of those who spread their reach’d hands toward you”) helps illustrate Ryan Bingham’s *modus operandi*; his movement through Airworld, we are given to understand, is not driven by greed, since in fact Bingham owns hardly anything, and shows little interest in money. Bingham certainly wants power over his life (and even revenge), but he is also driven by a frontier desire to embrace movement, to be “everywhere at once,” to create himself anew, and above all, to flee an on-the-ground world presented in gothic terms as stale and controlling.

Bingham, then, implicitly identifies with Whitman’s speaker, for whom *houses* are particularly suspect: “Whoever you are, come forth!... You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house / though you built it, or though it has been built for you. / Out of the dark confinement!” (Part 13). In “Song of the Open Road,” Whitman rails against “indoor complaints,” “parlors,” “schools,” and the stasis of the “stale cadaver” in favor of the imagined autonomy and “fluid and attaching character” made possible by constant motion: “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.” And if Whitman’s



speaker formally acknowledges the rough edges of mobility—if he insists that any traveling companion “goes often with spare diet, poverty, angry enemies, desertions”—Whitman has his own way of spiritualizing even this dust and toil, rendering it so abstractly that it emerges as a smooth dream of unfettered circulation. For Whitman here, the open road promises goodness, happiness, and health, at least for those with the fortitude to travel it (he implies jolly contempt for those who don’t): “I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, / And whoever beholds me shall like me, / I think whoever I see must be happy” (Part 4). And just as many during his time idealized the connections that would result from the telegraph and the railroad, Whitman imagines a myriad of “adhesive” social contacts between travelers on the open road: in temporary stops in cities and hubs, at “wedding-parties” and funerals. Still, any “fluid and attaching” quality experienced by Whitman’s speaker is fleeting, a temporary contract. His traveling companions come and go, such that his final passage—“Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me? / Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?”—rings perhaps more tragically than the author intends. Why, if the speaker consistently rejects the entreaties of his friends to stay with them, would his friends be motivated to remain with *him*?

As if in answer to “Song of the Open Road,” *Up in the Air* ruefully suggests that Whitman’s frictionless frontier vision cannot be maintained indefinitely, but must ultimately come down to earth. Compared to the popular and effective 2009 film by director Jason Reitman, in which George Clooney plays Ryan Bingham with his trademark cool, the book is more desperate: ragged around the edges, a country blues wail suffused with electronic noise. There is a dark edge to Bingham’s Whitmanian

desire as gravity tugs at him, forcing him to recognize the limits of autonomy and motion. Bingham is a mess: his body throttled from constant travel, his mind riddled by guilt and anger, his soul lonely and lost. In moving from place to place, he begins to forget things, and becomes increasingly desperate as his life drains of purpose (indeed, at novel's end we discover that Bingham is afflicted with actual blackouts, after which he remembers nothing). But Bingham is also distraught because he cannot repress a sense that his search for wisdom and democratic friendship is thwarted by the cutthroat and chaotic milieu of casino capitalism in which he has immersed himself. In Kim's novel, the topography of business circulation is not a rational world of straight lines and grids, but a mystical and superstitious (almost medieval!) terrain full of sages, penitents, clowns, magicians, and dragon-slayers. It is not a scientific universe, but a strange world replete with folklore and legends. Las Vegas emerges as the geographical center of this pagan business carnival of the postindustrial frontier: a hallucinatory site of gambling, peppy motivational speakers, and mysterious tips. It bustles as a city largely devoid of memory, devoted to the next big thing, as airborne as any plane. Like an apprentice in search of a master, Bingham travels there to meet his heroes: business writers, celebrities, and motivational speakers. But as in Kafka, these father-figures appear as obscene and disillusioning characters.

Bingham's belief in the power of the market makes him paranoid, but also reassures him because in capitalism he finds a structure that seems to embody the governing principles of the world and thus provides him with a provisional (if unstable) sense of meaning. At the same time, however, he recognizes the way it fosters rapaciousness and inequality. He is torn, then, between opposite impulses; if in the film Clooney plays Bingham as debonair and comfortable (at least until he is disrupted by

various intrusions), in the novel Bingham emerges as contradictory from the beginning, since he both loves and hates Airworld. On the one hand, he often professes devotion to capitalist business culture and the ordered “good life” it supposedly makes possible. At one point, he announces that the gods have ordered the world correctly:

I know of no pleasure more reliable than consuming a great American brand against the backdrop featured in its advertising. Driving a Ford pickup down brown dirt roads. Swigging a Coke on the beach in Malibu. Flying Great West over central Colorado. It’s a feeling of restfulness and order akin, I suspect, to how the ancient Egyptians felt watching the planets line up above the Pyramids. You’re in the right place, you’re running with the right forces, and if the wind should howl tomorrow, let it. (40)

Here Bingham is not free from anxiety (after all, the wind might howl tomorrow, and ancient Egypt was not exactly a classless society), but he nevertheless tries to convince himself that capitalism can foster “restfulness and order” and align the planets properly. But on the other hand, if the market presents itself as a natural order (blessed by the neo-classical economists), it is a paradoxically disordered order: chaotic, mercurial, inhospitable. He sees on-the-ground America—itsself distinctly shaped by the economic forces he otherwise celebrates--as yesterday’s news: “I look down on Denver, at its malls and parking lots, its chains of blue suburban swimming pools and rows of puck-like oil tanks, its freeways, and the notion of seeking shelter in the whole mess strikes me as a joke” (25). Instead, Airworld is the new frontier: “This is the place to see America, not down there, where the show is almost over” (42).

For Bingham, then, the mythical frontier West (with its connotations of freedom, self-creation, and masculinity) has disappeared. More exactly, the frontier has left the ground, such that Bingham searches for possibility not in the Western landscape, but in the late capitalist network of Airworld, where financiers, marketing geniuses, ideas, and

images leap from portal to portal with speed and flexibility. But although he believes that the material West is dead, Bingham still visits its grave sites, if only to mourn its loss. While driving through the Great Basin, he muses about long-dead Utah pioneers, and concludes that their bold exploration is no longer possible on the ground: “The West gave people so much trouble once, mostly because they couldn’t see over its ridges, but now we can, and it’s just another place” (191). In *Airworld*, then (and in the creative destruction of postmodern capitalism) Bingham hopes to become a new pioneer. But even in *Airworld*, Bingham struggles to keep pace with Western ideals of masculinity and autonomy, and often doubts them. At one point, he buys a pair of Western boots, but later rues the purchase and blames the salesman: “The man was sharp, mocking my credentials as a Westerner after I mentioned I came from Minnesota. Instead of buying the boots I should have told him that there *are* no westerners, just displaced easterners, and that includes most of the Indian tribes—read history” (13). Here he imagines the West as a commodity to be sold on the market: a signifying “credential” that no one can be equal to. More to the point, he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the frontier promise and the perpetual displacement it seems to require. The more he launches himself into the *Airworld* frontier, the more he pines for a pastoral space in which he can be at peace—and for something harder to name, an alternative and more nurturing way of life.

Thus Bingham’s discontent with on-the-ground America soon spreads to *Airworld*. Provoked by memories of his small-town youth, he dreams not merely of the capitalist market, where the only liberty is rooted in the economic contract, but also of the fraternity and equality that are in short supply there. Indeed, Bingham’s world is resolutely feudal: power is lodged at the heart of mysterious corporations who wield

enormous power over the serfs below them. He is convinced that marketers control our very movements; as he puts it, “The decisions we make—I don’t think they’re really ours. I think we’ve been figured out” (22). Democracy, in *Up in the Air*, is fast dying: “Sure, today we live in a democracy, and yes, for the most part, it leaves us to ourselves, but there are ambitious people who’d like to change this, and some who boast that they’ve already succeeded” (25-26). Because Bingham can’t imagine a world outside of corporate capitalist mesmeric domination, he adopts a strategy based on the motto “If you can’t beat them, join them.” Bingham’s only revenge—and his only protection, as he sees it-- involves climbing as high as he can up the ladder of power before they can solidify their control over him. He describes his search for a job with a mysterious and powerful new company (appropriately called MythTech) as a desperate attempt to transcend the role of serf-like underling: “I want to be in on that thing, whatever it is. To be safe from them one must be one of them....It’s not a job I’m seeking, it’s citizenship, a seat inside the Dome....unless I get in before the structure’s dedicated, I’ll be a spectator. A mark” (282-283). Bingham’s view of MythTech, then, exposes the extent to which he desires to find *someone* in the pilot’s seat over and above this chaos; in MythTech’s Big Data empire, he sees the glimmering hope that a cognitive map of postmodern life might be found. Capital might be in the process of becoming mafia in *Up in the Air*, but for Bingham, joining this mafia is the only way to act rather than be acted upon.

Libidinal Economy: B Vitamins Straight to the Heart Muscle Itself

Yet Bingham resists recognizing that MythTech's coordinated attempt to monetize the human libidinal economy might be self-subverting, since in Bernard Stiegler's terms, such efforts to manage human drives and desires can have the negative side-effect of draining the psychic resources upon which any economy depends. Indeed, Bingham's confessionals read as a virtual primer on the way that a bedeviled consumer capitalism can sabotage purpose and meaningful narrative, resulting in the kind of spiritual crisis that drives Bingham to the air in the first place. Echoing Michael Taussig's description of South American devil pacts, *Up in the Air* is replete with images of infertility and associated paradoxes: sleep that does not rejuvenate, food that does not nourish. At one point, Bingham frets about the probability that even during sleep, he is "all over the mattress": "You think you're resting, but actually you're expending as much energy as a marathon runner. Every night" (119). And he speculates in paranoid fashion about whether his body is receiving any nutrients, since (as a wild Airworld rumor has it), the "overuse of fertilizers" has created soil "incapable of yielding even minimally nutritious food" (163). If for Stiegler the consumer economy tends to deprive life of its "savor" (30), Kirn seconds him in humorous but unnerving ways. Bingham's marriage, which collapsed partly because they were unable to conceive a baby, illustrates in comic, poignant fashion how the economization of the libidinal economy can sap the desire that it so fervently tries to stoke. In describing his sexual relationship with his ex-wife, Bingham complains that it seemed driven by some outside, Taylorized superego injunction to enjoy: "Now and then I'd catch her in the middle of a particularly far-fetched pose and see that it wasn't appetite that drove her but some idea, some odd erotic

theory. Maybe she'd come across it in a magazine, or maybe in a college psychology class" (26).

The world of marketing, then, as presented in *Up in the Air*, quantifies just about every sphere of human life (from sexuality to human solidarity) in monetary terms, thereby threatening their foundations. When one of Bingham's acquaintances (who sells class rings to high school alumni) complains that Americans don't like to acknowledge their debt to the past, Bingham points to "research" indicating that people will soon be buying class rings again:

You've heard of 'linking'? Linking is part of identity formation. The drive is to attach. To join with larger forces. The opposite is the urge to be yourself. The surveys show people are feeling out of balance here—people of higher income levels, that is. They're getting tired of going it alone, and that's predictive of certain behavior changes. Take Orthodox Catholic churches. They're in a boom. (21)

However, when communal desire becomes reduced to measurable (and predictable, and lucrative) "linking," does it not begin to fade? More exactly, does it not devolve into a vague itch (as Bingham rightly calls it, a "drive") that can be scratched by buying a class ring, or hopping into a Catholic church for a moment before swinging back toward the opposite urge? Bingham's seemingly knowing attitude toward these matters—his apparently blasé recitation of the marketing data—conceals the extent to which he is disturbed by such power/knowledge. If he tries to treat marketing discourse as a fetish by adopting its tone of certainty, he nevertheless cannot shake a sense of anxiety about the calculated laws it would decree for the libidinal economy. In worrying that marketing makes him—in St. Paul's terms—*want what he does not want to want*, Bingham ultimately approaches marketing not as a fetish, but as a *symptom* of something stranger and darker, even cursed (22). His obsession with it is a subset of his agonistic relationship

to authority and the paternal law, and is circumscribed by *fear*: “much of my fascination with marketing stems from my fear of being the big boys’ patsy” (25).

If Bingham is dialectically caught between two impulses—to accept this world of *psychopower* and roll with it, or to fall into full-fledged hysteria in response to its demands—in practice he has become firmly lodged in the psychotechnical apparatus of the consumer economy, since in his job he rockets around the nation attempting to pump recently unemployed workers full of motivational energy. And he is distinctly uncomfortable with this role, as if sensing that his pep talks may simply prop up short-term drives rather than foster long-term and viable social and psychic desires. At one point, he describes himself as nothing less than a *sinner*: “My sharpest fear when I travel is bumping into someone I’ve spoken to about ‘free agency’ and ‘self-directed professional enhancement.’ If such a person slapped me, I wouldn’t fight; I’d drop on all fours and bow my sinful head” (23). And Bingham’s sin here is his contribution to a speculative gambler economy that profits by leaving negative externalities hanging all over the place. In describing his serial relationships with women, Bingham acknowledges that he “owes” them something, but externalizes the debt by passing the cost to other institutions: “It’s a matter of rolling over one personal debt into the pooled, collective debt that’s the business of governments and churches. Or I could refinance, amortize over centuries” (121). Bingham’s role as motivator, too, leaves him feeling as though he has short-changed people; as in his description of his motivational heroes, the rush of libidinal energy only lasts for a moment before disappearing. In lionizing “motivational mainstay” General Norman Schwarzkopf, Bingham insists that the man “delivers...B vitamins straight to the heart muscle itself.” But after this speculative inflation comes the



collapse: “You stand up afterwards ready to thump someone, just name the cause...though this wears off and leaves a startling thirst not even gallons of Vigorade could quench” (226). The jittery, manic-depressive quality of Schwarzkopf’s infusion of drive here testifies to a turbulence that mirrors the speculative financialized economy itself.

In his treatment of the libidinal dynamics in a post-Oedipal, post-Fordist economy—particularly through his presentation of Ryan Bingham as an unstable compound of Dale Carnegie, Soren Kierkegaard, and Willie Nelson—Walter Kirn suggests that a serial abandonment of the past cannot lead to a meaningful life narrative and durable *motivation*. Bingham describes his increasing memory loss this way: “My fast-forward functions, but my reverse is stuck. I can’t even remember when I started forgetting things” (70). A narrative cannot emerge from such a template; it requires both forward and reverse gears, since (as Peter Brooks puts it) the very idea of narrative functions according to a logic of “anticipation of retrospection” (23). As we read a story, we expect that at its end we will be able to enter into reverse gear and revisit previous scenes to evaluate their significance. Similarly, in everyday life we can only find purpose if we expect that later we will be able to incorporate past moments into a narrative, such that from a later point these moments will appear as stepping-stones, repetitions, or key developments. If this reverse gear is stuck, there is (in Kierkegaard’s terms) no *repetition*. Instead, we live in Benjaminian *Erlebnis*, the isolated experience of the gambler fixated solely on the next card.

Kirn’s affinity for the lowlands of postmodern culture—the business self-help section of the bookstore, the religious spectacle, the seedy casino--enables him to tease

out this dynamic of memory, narrative, and motivation, since in these uncanny sites we find the theme of libidinal economy raised to a high pitch.<sup>32</sup> Like other gothic texts which

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<sup>32</sup> Just as other forms of gothic literature employ low strategies of spectacle and draw from popular forms (folk legends, science fiction, fantasy), Walter Kirn in *Up in the Air* seizes on inspirational business literature as a low form that nevertheless contains a kernel of wisdom. Indeed, he suggests that high-brow artists ignore its lessons “at their peril.” Unlike the art world or the academy, which for Ryan Bingham seem to look down on ordinary people and make them feel small, at least the Las Vegas motivational powwow of GoalQuest XX makes people feel important, like they can be Gods one day too. Ryan’s description of a conversion to commercial discourse is a St. Paul moment of transformation: “The sophisticates may sniff, but it’s all true: in the course of certain American lives, way out in the flyover gloom between the coasts, it’s possible to arrive—through loss of love, through the long, formless shock of watching parents age, through inadequacies of moral training, through money problems—at a stage or a juncture or a passage—dismiss the buzzwords at your peril—when we find ourselves alone in a strange city where no one lives any longer than he must and all of our neighbors come from somewhere else, and damn it, things just aren’t working out for us, and we’ve tried everything, diets, gyms, jobs, churches, but so far not this thing, which we read about on a glossy flyer tucked under our windshields: a breakthrough new course in Dynamic Self-Management developed over decades of experience training America’s Top Business Leaders and GUARANTEED TO GET YOU WHERE YOU’RE GOING! And we go. And feel better. Because there’s wisdom there, more than we gained at our lousy college, at least, and more importantly there’s an old man’s face—beamed in from California by satellite—which appears to be looking at us alone, the ninety-eight pound weaklings, and not laughing! A miracle! Not even smirking! Beholding us!” (276-277). Such a passage helps to explain why former New Deal supporters like Ryan’s father would turn toward the gospel of Ronald Reagan: because the tenets and modes once associated with the Left, the championing of the weak (at least the weak white man), have been appropriated more effectively by the dominant ideology of commerce, just as the fireside-chat populism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was appropriated rhetorically by Ronald Reagan. For Bingham, denizens of universities, as well as the (corporate-funded) art world, belittle people and condescend to them: “Art. It always makes me feel diminished. There’s something smug about it. Cocky. Cold” (14). What we might describe as the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” a cold, formalist ethos of demystification that often appeared English departments in the 1980s and 1990s, does not give people a sense that their concerns are important. In the face of what Cornel West describes as “disease, despair, and death,” people understandably search for wisdom. And they look for people who will not “laugh” or “smirk” at their weakness, but will instead encourage them to develop their “core competencies,” to find their own power. Crucially, Bingham’s resentment is couched in regional terms; the wisdom of the motivational world is geared not toward the elites of New York City and Los Angeles, but toward those “way out in the flyover gloom between the coasts.” Bingham, then, like Reagan himself, mobilizes a resentment associated with the marginalized and colonized position of rural and small-town America, but ironically, in the service of the colonizers themselves. Thus, if so-called ordinary people between the coasts can complain about “money problems” or about communities in which no one knows each other, they do not blame policies that have led to stagnant wages and profoundly expensive health care, and they don’t blame a global economic system characterized by creatively destructive restructuring and a redistribution of wealth toward the top. In short, they don’t blame neoliberalism itself and its associated culture. Instead, they search for possibilities, for ways out of their predicament, for a sense of relief that is built into the very idea of such motivational seminars: that the way out is within, and that if they work hard and trust in their inner “core competencies,” they will succeed. It may be obvious now to point out that the left has failed in its core mission here: that if it cannot offer people a sense of their own dignity and importance, and if it persists in a one-sided “hermeneutic of suspicion” unbalanced by a sense of grace or affirmation, it deserves to fail. And yet if Bingham’s commercial heroes address the resentments and desires of the U.S. “flyover” population, which, we must add, is primarily oriented toward white males of a certain age, it is also important to note that they also cater to and flatters those resentments and desires. If people feel weak and vulnerable, one avenue involves telling them that, in reality, if they truly work hard enough, they will not be weak. They will be able to achieve all that they desire, and if they can’t, it’s because the government is

disturb boundaries between high and low, *Up in the Air* is a potboiler with a disturbed heart, perhaps especially relevant to the postmodern reader, for whom literary novels may not be the first choice of reading material. Its zippy narrative, enlivened by exaggerations and carnivalesque humor, seems designed to be read by the very people who lack the time and inclination to focus for long—and thus to people like Bingham himself, stuck in fast-forward.<sup>33</sup> Such readers might glide over its haunted themes—if they choose to. But in reality, Bingham is *not* stuck in fast-forward; he just *wants* to be. Although he is beginning to lose his memory, and although he keeps his schedule so packed that new challenges and tasks always appears on the horizon, he still faces intrusive memories that push him to develop a more comprehensive narrative for himself. Such memories point him toward the past, toward alternative possibilities, and toward dreams both terrifying and healing. If Bingham at one point insists that coping with his job (and forgetting his clients) requires him to “leapfrog mentally,” some of this leap-frogging takes him to places he may not intend to go (102). And in doing so, he may take his readers to places that they didn’t intend to go either: toward painful reconsideration, and thus toward a recognition of the gravity of the situation.

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standing in their way. Such a strategy leads directly to the attitudes of Ryan’s father: that ever since the Progressive movement, the U.S. government has conspired with the coastal cultural elites to destroy small businesses and farms. But there is another way to approach the problem—not to minimize weakness, but to recognize it with all seriousness. And this is what a leftist approach must do: acknowledge, without smirking or laughing at the ordinary person, that individually we are weak, that rural and small-town America has been colonized (along with many other corners of the globe), and that there is no individual way to address the problem. Rather, we can challenge the disruption of communities, the lack of purpose, the “inadequacies of moral training,” and the “strange city” only by challenging reigning assumptions about the freedom of capital and the supremacy of market forces as a barometer for the good life.

<sup>33</sup> In this sense, *Up in the Air* (a literary novel for people who can no longer focus on literary novels) echoes what Benjamin asserts about Baudelaire: that Baudelaire was writing lyric poetry for people who could no longer focus on lyric poetry, because they were trapped in *spleen*: “Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. . . . Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the ‘spleen’ which kills interest and receptiveness. It is strange to come across a lyric poet who addresses himself to such readers—the least rewarding type of audience. There is of course a ready explanation for this. Baudelaire wanted to be understood; he dedicates his book to those who are like him” (*The Writer of Modern Life* 170).

The Demise of the Nation, the Rise of the International Marketplace

The black hole opened by the decline of the paternal figure and the loss of belief in metanarratives marks out a final limit and then substitutes a plunge into limitlessness, an ultimate meaning as meaninglessness. This is the black hole of postmodern culture and the ultimate horror of postmodern Gothic. Nothing escapes from a black hole, not even light.

--Fred Botting, from "Aftergothic: consumption, machines and black holes" (296)

Many of those who have a fear of flying are haunted by a particular thought: that is, how many parts of such a complicated machine as a modern plane have to function smoothly in order for it to stay in the air? One small lever breaks somewhere, and the plane may spiral downwards. When you start to think how many things could go wrong, you cannot help but panic. The people of Europe have experienced something similar in the past few weeks. That a cloud from a minor volcanic eruption in Iceland--a small disturbance in the complex mechanism of life on earth--can bring to a standstill the air traffic over almost an entire continent is a reminder of how humankind, for all its power to transform nature, remains just another living species on the planet.

--Slavoj Žižek, from "Up in the Air" in *The New Statesman* (33)

It is most extraordinary that humans should fly. They have done so only recently, and they do so only clumsily, with a ludicrous hooveraw of noise and fire. Human flight, after all, is only a false and pathetic argument against gravity, which has the upper hand and is the greater fact. All will come down. And some will fall.

--Andy Catlett, in Wendell Berry's 1988 novella *Remembering* (201)

Ryan Bingham's dilemma—about how to find meaning and gravity in a world that seems to thwart solidarity, long-term social nurturance, and durable desire--mirrors the broader dilemma that we face in the postmodern situation. The world in which Ryan Bingham lives is one in which (to use American Studies scholar David Noble's terms) the "sacred international marketplace" (288) has effectively squeezed out other possible forms of symbolic paternal authority, and in some ways presides over the demise of paternal authority as such. In this historical process of usurpation, Noble identifies a key moment in the 1940s, when academic historians largely gave up on an older "bourgeois nationalist" view (represented by figures like Charles Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner), according to which individual nations could be treated as natural and discrete

entities, each with a definitive ethnic makeup (xxvii). The vast destruction of two world Wars (along with the totalitarianisms of the early twentieth century) laid bare the military and economic interconnection between nations, such that many U.S. intellectuals had to face the collapse of once sacrosanct national metanarratives. Where the nativist-minded Beard and Turner celebrated Anglo-Protestant men at the expense of other groups, new historians like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Richard Hofstadter embraced Jews, Catholics, and urbanites. (In the process, they helped open a door for a multicultural discourse predicated on an ideology of cultural identity and diversity). And where Beard and Turner criticized capitalism as a chaotic and un-American enterprise that submerged fraternity and equality (for Anglo-Protestant men) beneath a narrow conception of liberty, Hofstadter and Schlesinger, Jr. championed the marketplace as a realm for the relatively peaceful clash between various interests. And in doing so, they gave up on any vision of America as a land of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Instead, Hofstadter “saw capitalism as the necessary foundation for liberty. He no longer valued fraternity and equality” (Noble 49).

However, it would be a mistake to imagine that after WWII everyone simply joined up to support the new global capitalist hegemony. In destabilizing previous metanarratives, the 1940s period also opened up new debates. What, if anything, should replace the nation as the new sacred space? Were we left with the international marketplace as the primary locus for identification and loyalty? Historian William Appleman Williams, for one, deviated sharply from the new postwar consensus fostered by his contemporaries. He agreed with their critique of bourgeois nationalist nativism. But he rejected Hofstadter’s characterization of capitalism as benign and free, and instead

highlighted the extent to which the proliferation of the market system depended on military force and political power; in fomenting the rise of a global “free market,” the U.S. had not simply hastened a natural process. Instead, through a series of actions-- colonizing the frontier, stifling alternatives in the Soviet and Mexican revolutions, forcing open markets around the world--the U.S. had participated in a violent project to impose market institutions on subjugated peoples. After flirting with a Marxist framework in the 1960s, Williams later identified with a branch of the growing ecological movement and argued that limited resources necessitated a return to smaller scales of social organization. Inspired by traditional indigenous cultures, “He...asked [Americans] to understand that the frustration of their personal lives came from the fact that they were uprooted from their families, neighborhoods, and geographic localities and forced to be abstract units who fitted the demands of the marketplace” (Noble 61).

With the “aesthetic authority of bourgeois nationalism” weakened, then, the newly crowned authority of the international marketplace still faced challengers: international Marxists, advocates of decentralized localism, not to mention residual bourgeois nationalists and nostalgic republicans (xxvii). The critical regionalist project has emerged within this constellation of dissensus regarding the emergent post-WWII hegemony. Gayatri Spivak, for one, rejects both bourgeois nationalism and hegemonic neoliberal capitalism (not to mention William Appleman Williams’ late-period embrace of decentralized localism), and instead endorses “a critical regionalism combating global capitalism” (78). Such a critical regionalism “goes under and over nationalisms but keeps the abstract structure of something like a state. This allows for constitutional redress” (94). Unlike the nationalist William Leach, who looks nostalgically toward a midcentury

U.S. moment of relative social equality (at least for white men), Spivak's project is not nostalgic or reactionary; she affirms that the world is one interconnected place. But like Leach, she does not see in late capitalism an answer to the problem of citizenship. Instead, she advocates a "robust citizenship for the people down below," (89) implying that the answer lies not in submitting to a *race to the bottom* in deference to a transnational ruling class, but rather in painstakingly creating globally interlinked coalitions of workers, families, and excluded people, all of whom have an interest in building their places in concert with others, rather than in mere competition. As such, her notion of critical regionalism resembles what political theorist Bonnie Honig has described as a "rooted cosmopolitanism": "rooted not...in a national ideal but rather in a democratic ideal, one that seeks out friends and partners even (or especially) among strangers and foreigners" (13).<sup>34</sup> (And because for Honig democracy involves not a romantic interaction between homogenous and transparent citizens, but an uncertain groping between people who are often opaque to each other, she sees its practice as fundamentally *gothic*).

I suspect that Spivak knows that the term "critical regionalism" is not new; in fact, it was coined in the 1970s by architectural theorists like Alexander Tzonis and Kenneth Frampton who hoped to resist what they saw as the top-down, homogenizing control of global capitalism and the dominant midcentury modernist "international style"

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<sup>34</sup> Honig uses "democratic cosmopolitanism" and "rooted cosmopolitanism" interchangeably; both refer to the process of forging democratic alliances across borders, but not jettisoning state institutions and practices: "Democratic cosmopolitanism is a name for forms of internationalism that seek not to govern, *per se*, but rather to widen the resources, energies, and accountability of an emerging international civil society that contests or supports state actions in matters of transnational and local interest such as environmental, economic, military, cultural, and social policies. This is a democratic cosmopolitanism because democracy, in the sense of a commitment to local and popular empowerment, effective representation, accountability, and the generation of actions in concert across lines of difference, is its goal. In that sense it is also a rooted cosmopolitanism" (13).

of architecture. And a key trope for the critical regionalist architects is precisely that of *gravity*. In his classic 1983 essay on critical regionalism, Kenneth Frampton described an architectural aesthetic that (in its symbolic and thus rhetorical way) made us particularly aware of gravitational force, and by extension, the materiality of buildings. This focus might sound obvious—after all, who thinks that buildings are not made out of materials, or that gravity does not operate on them? The point, though, is that Frampton, like many in his time, was reacting against modernist architects like Mies Van der Rohe who devised all kinds of aesthetic (equally rhetorical) ways to transmit an impression of weightlessness. These architects, at least in his view, wanted their buildings to come across as light, disembodied, and self-contained, and hence immune both to history and to the influences and counter-influences of the spaces and objects around them. Blithely ignoring (or, in many cases, defying) the contexts in which they appeared, these modernist works were designed to appear as worlds on their own. Thus Henri Lefebvre, in 1974, would write of modernist architecture that it strove for an “impression of weightlessness,” and that this impulse began well before the twentieth century, that in fact it stretched back at least as far as the Italian Renaissance. Such architecture, by obscuring the cause and effect relationship of gravity, led to the exaggerated impression that the world could be composed and recomposed “arbitrarily”: “Once the effect of weightiness or massiveness upon which architects once depended has been abandoned, it becomes possible to break up and reassemble volumes arbitrarily according to the dictates of an architectural neoplasticism” (146).

Frampton and the other critical regionalists wanted to correct this “impression of weightlessness” not by constructing weighty buildings (since, in any case, the modernist



buildings were also weighty), but by constructing buildings that gave off an *impression of weight*—that emphasized their materiality, that made joints and beams visible, that radiated a suspenseful pull of gravity against which the building provisionally fought. And in fact, this rhetorical insistence on gravity, the implication that no matter what else you do or how you think about it, something somewhere is pulling on you and thus limiting your movements (if not always obstructing them) has always been a component of the varieties of regionalism, critical or otherwise. The focus on gravity is emblematic of a regionalist focus on limits, and also of a regionalist discourse in which claims necessarily operate on the individual, who is always already defined socially—that is, as a participant in some material and social context, with its various pushes and pulls. Gayatri Spivak, by attempting to imagine a state form that doesn't devolve into an exclusive territorial nationalism, is trying to thread the same needle that Frampton and Tzonis were trying to thread: she wants to acknowledge our imbrication as vulnerable human beings in social and material contexts (such that we need durable, communal forms of affiliation in order to survive), but she refuses to succumb to the pastoral vision of the isolated space, separated from global interconnection and motion. She rejects the weightlessness of the *frontier* (implied by the international style), but also the grounded stasis of the *pastoral* (implied by parochial or traditional architecture, by a regionalism that is not *critical*).

These critical regionalist themes—gravity and flight, inflation and deflation, weight and weightlessness, frontier and pastoral—are particularly apt for the post-Cold War period, because the neoliberal information economy has often been erroneously treated as a weightless machine floating above earthly constraints. Kirn's novel emerged

in the year 2000, both a high-point of euphoria concerning the international marketplace and a marker of a careless and wasteful period. In the 1990s, the neoliberal tendencies toward frontier-style short-term speculation only increased, and along with them negative externalities in the ecological, social, and psychic domains. During the Clinton years, we saw the increasing financialization of the global economy in the form of unprecedented consumer debt, rapid capital flight across borders, and the deregulation of the financial industries, all of which led to high degrees of risky speculative activity. Meanwhile, psychotechnologies like the internet, cell phones, and digital devices facilitated attention-capture, especially among the youth, while the deregulation of communications industries (in the Telecommunications Act of 1996) enabled monopoly consolidation in the culture industries. Many of the most definitive cultural texts of the 1990s, too, could be said to lack gravity; the TV show “Seinfeld” purported to speculate about “nothing,” while the films of Quentin Tarantino made light of extreme violence and torture. All of these developments were symptoms, in a way, of an absent culture of caretaking that led to vast negative externalities: mass shootings, declining schools, and rising economic inequality, among others. During the Clinton ‘90s, Americans put thousands of people in privately owned prisons-for-profit, dumped carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, pushed Russia into economic “shock therapy,” and supported their oil addiction through careless policies in the Middle East. Meanwhile, reckless speculation in the financialized economy resulted in rounds of debt crises in Sweden, Argentina, and Asia, not to mention the collapse of the technology bubble at the end of the decade.

Although President Clinton reassured voters that the neoliberal frontier would lead to a pastoral world of plenty (a tide in which all boats would rise), not everyone

accepted his promises at face value. In 1999, for example, thousands of protestors faced tear gas, rubber bullets, and police repression in their efforts to disrupt a meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. The loose and varied coalition that gathered there urged greater caretaking with regard to a number of issues: the undemocratic power of international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the privatization of formerly common resources (from medicines to genes), the squeezing out of small farmers under a regime of export agriculture that could easily decimate long-term regional food security, and the exploitation of global workers through intensified capital flexibility. *Up in the Air* registers both the euphoria and anxiety of this period that preceded the gravitational events to follow: the fall of the Twin Towers, the implosion of authority in the Middle East, and the financial mega-collapse of 2007. And although Kirn suggests that turning back the clock and restoring the paternal authority of bourgeois nationalism is not the answer, neither is he content to cede aesthetic authority purely to the international marketplace. Instead, he struggles to answer the questions faced by critical regionalists like Frampton and Spivak: what should a new sacred space look like? What is our responsibility to each other when it comes to fostering places, given that any such places exist in an intermodal hub society profoundly linked in a global network? What does it mean to live in a society in which any authoritative metanarrative is both threatened and (in its virulent forms) threatening? And finally, given the power of a digital consumer economy to capture attention and harness the libidinal energy of human beings, what would a new critique of libidinal economy look like?

Ultimately, Kirn in *Up in the Air* takes a complex, dialectical view toward these questions. Like Zizek and Berry, Kirn marvels at the strangeness of human flight, and

uses the metaphor of jet travel to allegorically comment on a number of speculative leaps in postmodernity: digital technology, environmental manipulation, Taylorized social and psychic engineering, consumer debt, and the turbulence of a financial economy predicated on short-term bets. But unlike the Heideggerian Berry, who rejects most new technologies and fantasizes about restoring an older model of paternal authority, Kirn follows Zizek by insisting that staying out of metaphorical airplanes does not solve the matter. Whether in a plane or not, we are careening through space absent a reliable paternal ordering of the system; nothing (Mother Nature, God, the markets) can guarantee the safety of the human and ecological social project. And while many technologies can be dangerous in important ways, we nevertheless may need to rely on whatever we can in order to support each other going forward. Zizek's conclusion, then, is dialectical; on the one hand, since the global turbulence of financial markets, climate disruption, and blind chance will probably lead to a more destabilized world, "Humankind should get ready to live in a more nomadic way" (Zizek "Up in the Air" 34). But on the other hand, we need to develop global structures of caretaking—simultaneously beyond and below the level of the nation—that will soften the blows of this nomadism, whether it is enforced or chosen. Unlike Berry, who pushes for the restoration of place (in opposition to motion) as the end-all, be-all of human existence, Zizek suggests that place must operate in a gothic landscape that perpetually denies it closure and fearfully exposes it to gravity's vertigo. We can struggle against disorientation, and we can strive to protect each other within the mesh, but we do not face a zero-sum choice between nomadism and inhabitation; rather, we face a choice between taking care (of people, societies, and environments) and evading these responsibilities.

The narrative structure of *Up in the Air*, appropriately enough, is a careening one, both entertaining and disturbing; its suspense depends on the notion of gravity, since as we read through the text, we constantly wonder whether Bingham will collapse entirely, whether he will be able to continue his manic flight by securing a job at MythTech, or whether he will somehow land safely and face his fear of life on the ground and all that it entails about grappling with the past, paying his debts, and (possibly) assuming a caretaking role. And this narrative is anchored by a binding endpoint that Kirn has promised us from the beginning; his metonymic motion and Attention-Deficit leap-frogging from place to place (and idea to idea, and self to self) is only held together by his devotion to a single achievement: reaching one million frequent flier miles. After he crosses this “crucial horizon,” Bingham assures us he will pause and make a decision: “I swear, I’ll stop, sit back, and reconsider everything” (10). But this endpoint is fundamentally ambiguous. In frequent flier miles, Bingham compiles not simply money, which could in principle be exchanged for any commodity, but rather the abstract promise of motion itself—a promise that he will never be required to pause and stay still. But depending on how things go, Bingham may find himself with a million frequent flier miles and *nowhere to go*. In other words, he may have all the choice in the world, and no desire. Although he tells us that—like an addict—he will reconsider everything after this last binge, we also sense that he lives in terror of this moment of reckoning, after which he will have to *decide where he wants to go*—in other words, when he will have to settle on a new narrative.

We're All God's Children Here: The Name of the Father

Gothic fiction is bound up with the function of the paternal metaphor. Since Walpole, Gothic has emerged as an effect of and an engagement with a crisis in the legitimacy and authority of the structured circulation of social exchanges and meanings over which the father figure presides.—Fred Botting (282)

Humanity has nowhere to retreat to: not only is there no 'big Other' (self-contained symbolic order as the ultimate guarantee of Meaning); there is also no *Nature qua* balanced order of self-reproduction whose homeostasis is disturbed, nudged off course, by unbalanced human interventions.--Slavoj Žižek from *In Defense of Lost Causes* (442)

Toward the end of *Up in the Air*, Ryan Bingham finally meets a man with whom he has been obsessed for the entire novel: Soren Morse, president of Great West Airlines. Up to this point in the novel, Bingham has convinced himself that Morse is responsible for the slackening service on Great West, and hence for many of Bingham's inconveniences in the air: "Great West just can't be trusted anymore, it lies to its most loyal customers.... There was a time, not all that long ago, when I thought of Great West as a partner and an ally, but now I feel betrayed" (17). He even becomes convinced that Morse and Great West are tracking him, following his movements and thwarting his progress. Feeling personally hounded by the company which should have been sheltering him as he flies from coast to coast, Bingham pictures his revenge. If he can reach one million frequent flier miles, company policy dictates that he will be able to meet with Morse one-on-one, and Bingham will be able to give Morse "an earful" (18). Bingham, it seems, is fixated on Morse because in the CEO he sees a physical embodiment of a power structure that he feels is controlling his life. He sees the corporation the way anti-clerics once saw the Catholic Church, as a hierarchical and secretive order. And he imagines Morse not as a human being like anyone else (or as a cog in the corporate wheel), but as a kind of Greek god who occasionally comes down to dwell with man:

“Does Morse ever do that walk-among-the-peasants bit, strolling through the airport, shaking hands, patting workers’ backs? Is that a thing of his? The Pope-in-disguise-among-his-children stunt?...The humble act?” (198).

However, when Bingham finally earns a million frequent flier miles and meets Morse in person, he does not find a God. Instead, it turns out that although Soren Morse is still carrying out the company’s duties, he has been officially fired. In response, Bingham is struck by the man’s frailty and lowly humanity, such that he can’t help but associate the CEO with his own father. As Bingham speaks with him, Morse’s voice unearths memories of his father’s decline, the loss of his business and his eventual divorce and death: “It’s a voice I’ve only heard in dreams, where it was usually half an octave lower and transparently that of my father at fifty....The worry lines around the eyes are new, though, and there’s an acrid top note in his breath—of failure and drift and working for one’s self” (297). Until now, Bingham has sought revenge against Morse not because he reminded him of his father at the end, but because he reminded him of his father *before* the end—the successful version of his father. For Bingham, the hot-shot Morse can only be an impostor, a usurper, and Bingham’s Hamlet-like revenge is directed at this fake father. But here, when Bingham actually meets Morse, he finds that he has sympathy for him; he discovers that everyone is subject to the possibility of being replaced by someone else, even when they are at the top: “Everyone knows the service has fallen off and no one, not even the chief, knows what to do. More money, and a shower in his office, but on the whole he’s in this with the rest of us” (298).

Whether or not Bingham is on track here—whether or not failing CEOs (often blessed with golden parachutes) truly are in it with the rest of us—his experience with

Morse helps Bingham to recognize that no one is truly in the pilot's seat; no one can successfully run the show and guarantee the course of the world. As such, his interaction with Morse mirrors his interactions with other authority figures in the novel. The pattern goes like this: Bingham invests tremendous power in motivational leaders who inspire him with their narratives, but when he meets them in person they confound and unsettle him with their merely human (and often absurd) qualities. In this novel, power is constantly linked to the obscene, the tawdry, the most vulgar kind of laughter and enjoyment—even when it remains powerful. What Walter Benjamin wrote of Kafka also applies to *Up in the Air*; in Kafka, all of the “holders of power” are always disappointing in person: “no matter how highly placed they may be, they are always fallen or falling men, although even the lowest and seediest among them, the doorkeepers and the decrepit officials, may abruptly and strikingly appear in the fullness of their power” (*Illuminations* 112). *Up in the Air* is full of such seedy authority figures. When he meets a trusted TV financial advisor on the plane and receives a financial tip from him, Ryan describes the moment as one of “grace,” and notes the man’s generosity (46). Later, though, he sees the man receiving a table dance at a strip club, and receives another inside tip: the advisor’s preferred dancer is also a prostitute who specializes in sexual urination. Later, when he sees the “superman” Norman Schwarzkopf on a plane bound for Las Vegas, Bingham is unnerved when Schwarzkopf spends too much time in the bathroom: “We understand, sir; we’re all God’s children here. Still, as his visit lengthens, I feel a shift as all of us stop thinking about ourselves and wonder why that closed door is staying so closed. A hand-washer? Normal travelers’ diarrhea? It’s painful to picture the Big Guy so confined” (227-228).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Later, in perhaps the book’s most humorous scene, he visits his guru, the great Hungarian-American sage



Soren Morse emerges as yet another Kafka-esque figure of decrepit authority. He also provides further evidence of what Bingham has been looking for all along: not revenge, but the reassurance embodied in what Jacques Lacan called the Name of the Father. He has not been rebelling against the corporate world, but probing the heights of its hierarchy for a reassuring sense that the Big Other is indeed keeping an eye on things (even if he can take the Big Other to task for betrayal or tyranny). Since his father could not protect him, Bingham searches for a new father, ambivalently giving his allegiance to the most powerful force he can find: the upper echelons of the corporate universe. Seen in this light, his quest to achieve one million frequent flier miles is not rebellion, but an instance of hysterical acting-out, since it plays into the hands of the Big Other. As Bingham realizes at one point, from the perspective of Great West Airlines he is the “optimal outcome” because in spending his life earning air-miles, he simply offers more and more business to the corporation (165). Bingham’s attachment to the corporate Name of the Father is further revealed in his attitude toward MythTech, the company with a

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of business, Sandor “Sandy” Pinter, and discovers that his idol is (in person) small, somewhat disgusting, and thoroughly ridiculous. He lives a bizarre and contradictory mix of high ideals, tough talk, esoteric knowledge, idiosyncratic rules, low-brow cheapness, and lust. Pinter believes in polygamy and calls his lover a “co-domestic,” yet becomes palpably jealous of her sexual encounters; won’t eat at restaurants because they “screw up the protein chains,” and yet refuses to wash his hands after going to the bathroom, and eats the most tawdry processed foods, from canned fried onions to “plastic tubs of pre-made onion dip”; practices the most ingenious forms of consumer manipulation, even as he complains that the world is becoming a “hive” of control and surveillance; and is tapped into a worldwide network of business contacts (he makes much of his money distributing copies of his speeches), even as he professes hatred of modern “gadgets” of communication. When Ryan presses him about being “implicated” in all of the manipulation he despises, Pinter assents: “Of course... I’m in on the ground floor. I’d prefer it if there was another ‘they’ to join, but this is the ‘they’ that history offered me. Advice: if you hear there’s a ‘they,’ get in on it, if only to be pro-active and defensive” (134). When Ryan notes that Sandy’s attitude appears “passive” (and in contradiction with his official exhortations for “accountability”), Sandy shrugs him off: “The seminars are for psychic adolescents, not vigorous whole realized beings with perspective” (134). Apparently, though, Pinter’s version of being a “vigorous whole realized being” is a perfect illustration of Zizek’s pagan capitalist. The painting hanging in his decadent, half-finished house (patterned after the Roman Colosseum), wildly depicts Bacchanallian lust: “some mythical scene of a semi-naked virgin being chased through a dappled glade by randy goat-men” (130). Yet Bingham hardly has a leg to stand on in criticizing his idol: Pinter’s curious mix of defensive passivity and “pro-active” self-assertion is a philosophy shared by Bingham, who also joins the “they” that the world has offered him, largely as an avenue to power.

grand plan to develop the marketing equivalent of the human genome map, a final epistemological coup that would grant it power over all humanity. But as the MythTech employee Lisa tells him, the point is not that the company is capable of developing such a Master Discourse. They are not selling the code itself, but rather “fear of the code”: “The fear there is a code and that someone else is going to crack it, so you’d better just cough up your energy right now....It’s all a racket. It’s extortion, Ryan. Sheer extortion. The code is a bluff. It’s all Beware of Dog. It’s Daddy’s deep loud voice” (249). For Lisa, then, MythTech is the Name of the Father: a fiction that is nevertheless real in its effects, that wields authority because we want it there to make sense of the world. It is the Big Other that protects us, that we fear to disappoint, and yet that we act out in front of, just as Bingham fears that MythTech is watching his every move as it weighs the decision of whether to hire him or not. His paranoia with regard to Great West functions in a similar way: he *wants* these companies to have omnipotent power.

Ryan Bingham’s agonistic relationship with corporate capitalism, then, is best explained in Oedipalized gothic terms. For critic Steven Bruhm, the gothic form fascinates its readers partly because it grapples with processes of trauma, loss, and mourning. Faced with a “lost object” (classically, the mother’s body), we wrap ourselves in various knots in an attempt to deal with the traumatic loss. And one coping mechanism involves (paradoxically) identifying with the person who has ostensibly stolen the object from us: the father. We can thus find ourselves in the strange position of simultaneously hating the father and yearning to become him:

In the contemporary psychological schema, we desire not only the lost object but the approval of the tyrant who took that object from us...In order to kill the father and thus establish their own autonomy, they first have to assume the father’s strength beforehand...This becoming-father, then, is an act of both homage and

transgression: the son adores the father to the degree that he must kill him in order to become him. (265)

A better explanation of Ryan Bingham's "can't beat them, join them" strategy would be hard to find; after corporate capitalism hastens his father's decline, Bingham both desires the lost object (his childhood sense of security) and the "approval of the tyrant" who took away that object. And in order to take revenge against corporate capitalism—and to establish his own autonomy—he must first assume its strength by *becoming* it.

At the same time, in Julia Kristeva's terms, the subject must "abject" the object that has been lost; precisely because the primal mother-connection entails a blurring of boundaries, a radical vulnerability, and an indistinct self, the subject must throw off the protecting mother. In order to assert his own autonomy, he must (as Bruhm puts it)

discard or jettison the primal connection to her, deem her dangerous and suffocating... We come then not to be mere victims of the lost object—the mother—but active agents in the expulsion of that mother. We are creatures of conflicted desires, locked in an uncanny push-me-pull-you that propels us toward the very objects we fear and to fear the very objects toward which we are propelled. (266)

The attempt to achieve autonomy through identification with the tyrant father, then, is also an attempt to rid oneself of the dependent, in-between state of mother-connection. And the Name of the Father helps us to ward off a hysterical sense of incompleteness that is associated, first and foremost, with the feminine. In images of claustrophobia, enslavement, paralysis, and futile running, the specter of feminine vulnerability lurks in the background. In *Up in the Air*, Bingham's continual motion (like Whitman's) is such a gothic fleeing; his short-term girlfriend Alex outlines his motto: "The line I remember was, 'Change them before they change you.' Autonomy, right? It's all about autonomy" (95). Bingham's failed marriage, his serial abandonment of women, and (as we will see later) his strange relationship with his sister all testify to a fear of becoming engulfed by

what Anne Williams calls the “unruly female principle” (cited in Hogle 10). And yet, as expressed in Bingham’s embarrassed wish to recapture his youth, he also *desires* the lost object. Thus Bingham’s search for a paternal authority with which he can identify is an attempt to ward off a hysteria that always threatens to erupt in him.

Because Bingham wants so deeply for the Big Other of Great West to remain in force, he is less startled by the turbulence that begins to shake their plane than by the fact that Soren Morse can do nothing to stop it: “The sight of a man of his stature, or former stature, strapped in across the thighs and struggling to feed more belt through for a snugger hold, disorients more than the turbulence” (299). This scene, during which the plane’s passengers momentarily lose their equilibrium, echoes Andy Catlett’s airborne disorientation in Wendell Berry’s *Remembering* by hinting that however powerful modern technologies might be, gravity is the greater fact. When faced with a teetering aircraft, Morse and his fellow passengers desperately try to repress any sense that the plane could go down. But Bingham is more equivocal:

Our keel evens but it’s a trick and no one’s buying and yet it remains even, and normal is our most usual condition, so why question normal? Normal’s what got us here...Morse unbuckles to show us all the way, back in the lead and comfortable again, because during normal his orders must be obeyed and his moods are the collective rudder. The episode is over, his face declares, and already he’s revising its severity and telling a little story to himself of uninterrupted control. His airline not only lies to customers, it deceives itself. We’re steady on now and we always have been. ‘Christine, two new glasses. These ones spilled,’ he says. ‘Take them away, please.’ Already concealing evidence....Not me, though. I know when I’ve come through a rough patch and voiced silent prayers that promised deep reforms—the same reforms everyone else was pledging, too, with the full knowledge that we’ll dishonor them the moment we’re done and safe. (300-301)

Here Soren Morse, as Name of the Father and hence the representative of the Big Other’s symbolic order, attempts to return everything to normal. In the face of turbulence and the

threat of crisis, he tries to revise history as continuous, as if everything was always on the right track all along. It is specifically because Ryan is sitting next to Morse that he can see through the charade--and yet can't see through it at the same time, because he is still in thrall to Soren Morse as fetish. He sees that Morse is diminished, that he is simply human, but at the same time recognizes that all of his pledges for "deep reform" will be thrown away the minute they land. So Ryan knows very well that Soren Morse is no God, but at the same time doesn't believe it. He wants to believe that everything is safe, and that everything had always been safe.

Kirn here, like Zizek and Berry, is after the allegory. The way the passengers react to the plane's turbulence mirrors the way that we react to financial catastrophes, to wars, to outbreaks of disease, and (perhaps most clearly) to ecological problems and resource limits. Climate disruption, after all, can be described as global turbulence for an earth hurtling through space. But too often, such threats are not processed as evidence that things could seriously go off the rails—or that they already *are* off the rails. Instead, they are momentary blips, and the Big Other can reassure us that everything has always been moving in a heroic, progressive direction (or alternatively, that the old, sacred Earth was in "balance" before *we* threw it off). But what happens when we sense—as Bingham does, for a brief second—that there is no *telos*, that running with the right currents cannot stave off the howling winds? Or even worse, when we sense that (in Walter Benjamin's terms) from a certain perspective the crisis is occurring *right now*? As Benjamin puts it, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception, but the rule" (*Illuminations* 257).

Muscles Store Memories: *Up in the Air*'s Dialectical Images

Such moments of disequilibrium resemble Benjamin's profane illuminations: cracks in the symbolic edifice that reveal the surreal nature of life in the midst of catastrophe and turbulence, but also the persistent desire for something better. Like the upended glass before it has been taken away and erased, the profane illumination sheds light on the nakedness of humanity, on what we would like to conceal about our individual and collective fragility—and thus on the unruly female principle that we would like to throw off. And for Benjamin, the profane illumination emerges in what he calls *dialectical images*: distillations of repressed desire that take from bits and pieces of the political unconscious, popular culture, and religious iconography to produce phantasmagorical montages that do not explain themselves right away, but that instead haunt the viewer with their visionary power. In *Up in the Air*, dialectical images emerge from Ryan Bingham's memory, and from moments of free-association in which he allows his mind to roam unencumbered. These profane illuminations reveal both catastrophe and the possibility of redemption, desire and disappointment. Visible only for brief moments, these images grow out of traumatic childhood losses (of a sense of safety, of boundedness, of intimate love). And they help us diagnose why Bingham has taken to the air in the first place.

The first image I would like to examine emerges in Bingham's memory of his younger sister Julie, whose life has been an unmitigated mess--though I will have to outline the curious history of Ryan and Julie before the image will come into focus. An anorexic at a young age, Julie has lived as if on a rollercoaster of despair. Bingham

describes what he calls the “case history, starting with the bogus model search when Julie was fifteen”:

Like the other local girls caught up in the fraud, she stopped eating. She ran. She gorged on laxatives. When the promoters vanished with her entry fee, she and a few of the other dupes kept dieting. They started shoplifting, formed a little crime club. The school called in social workers from St. Paul. There was a drug bust, a suicide attempt. Eventually, something turned the girls around, though. They filled out. They got educations. They learned some sense. Except for my kid sister. So much grief. The teenage marriage. The teenage divorce. The year in massage school. The food fads and the pills. The racist second husband who went to Sandstone for forgiving sales bonds on a color copier. And only lately, in the last two years, a kind of peace for Julie, a new purpose, rehabilitating injured animals on a Humane Society rescue farm. (44-45)

Though Julie is engaged to be married to a new man, Bingham is understandably skeptical that it will work out this time. Although he hopes that her new job working with animals will help her form more permanent attachments, he recognizes that Julie has (barely) gotten by in life by refusing to maintain strong relationships: “This is a girl who assumes all bonds are temporary, who’s famously well-defended against loss. Her divorces were strangely painless” (89).

The plot thickens, however. Drawing from a long tradition of gothic flirtation with sexual taboos, Kirn indicates that Julie’s resignation to loss partly stems from the demise of an attachment that could only be temporary, because it violated a core social norm: a passionate and mutual romantic attachment to her brother Ryan. Although the two never seemed to have engaged in sexual activity, the twelve-year-old Julie developed a powerful crush on the college-age Ryan, and her brother reciprocated. (Or was it the other way around? Do we trust Bingham here?). In any case, this “romance” was doomed to fail; after a neighbor spies Julie’s head on Ryan’s shoulder at an R-rated movie, their mother puts an end to the mutual love: “We were finished” (149). Leslie Fiedler, in his

seminal take on the gothic tradition in U.S. literature, describes the role of brother-sister incest in the gothic novel as a multifaceted one. On the one hand, brother-sister incest can indicate a desire for a utopian and prelapsarian world of purely natural and spontaneous passion, since it involves love within the small and known circle of the same. But such a love also expresses a rebellion against parental and social authority. As a result, Fiedler sees such images of brother/sister incest (rife within gothic literature) as emblematic of the guilt of the revolutionary, who feels damned by his rejection of *status quo* social norms and paternal authority. The pursuit of brother/sister incest, then, can also result from a masochistic search for self-punishment; in defying social norms, the incestuous partners find themselves caught in a maelstrom of chaos that ultimately leads to death: “it projects not only the desire to revolt but also to die; that is to say, beneath the yearning for rebellion lies hidden the wish to be punished for it” (399).

True to form, brother/sister incest in *Up in the Air* appears as both the loss of a utopian connection and a death wish. Neither Bingham nor Julie is capable of recovering from the loss of their partnership, since neither is able to maintain fruitful relationships; each continues living, but as a zombie. And each is trapped by the past. Bingham in particular retains an abiding hatred of his (castrating) mother—and even hints at one point that in taking to the air, he is running from *her* (150). Not only did Bingham’s mother take away their romance; her parenting style involves continually forcing her children to give up the things they loved. Bingham bleeds resentment as he describes the way his mother forced her daughters to give up riding horses “to stimulate their interest in boys”:

They hated her for it. My mother was a scientific parent; she taught third grade before she married my father. She believed in stages of development. Under her



system, keyed to crucial birthdays, teddy bears disappeared when kids turned eight, replaced by clarinets or swimming lessons. She had us baptized at ten, confirmed at twelve, and bought us subscriptions to Newsweek at fourteen. How she settled on Newsweek I don't know. (57)

Bingham's mother, then, embodies social authority and enforces a bourgeois "scientific" order on her children. In place of the rustic and archaic fantasy of horse-riding (and the even more archaic fantasy of incest), she follows a modern psychological regimen of social adjustment: not only timed religious rituals, but also access to ideological pressures in the form of that bourgeois icon, *Newsweek* magazine (now, alas, only available on the web!). Bingham spends the novel resenting the way his mother left his father when he was down. Instead, she remarries (a usurper) and spends her life driving around the country in a recreational vehicle. Bingham's mother is paradigmatically mobile, and forces her children to leave things behind. Ironically, then, Bingham's rejection of the grounded life is a rejection of the world endorsed by his mother, a world in which his "modern" and mobile mother is the supreme authority—yet his rebellion takes a similar form of mobility. He, like Julie, is so "well defended against loss" that he avoids holding onto anything.

If Bingham's mobility involves a flight from his mother, it also involves a flight from the abjected female principle as such. What seems to bother him most about his relationship with his sister—a relationship about which he tells no one in the novel, except *us*, his readers—is that in deviating from the law (here embodied not by the castrated father, but by the scientific mother) he finds in *himself* the chaos associated with the abjected mother-connection. In cleaving to his sister and butting up against the castrating force of the mother, Bingham was forced to confront his own incomplete status, and thus his own radical vulnerability. His later attempts to live a thoroughly

standard middle-class life—his failed attempt to marry and have children, his job with a respectable corporation, his ostentatiously “moderate politics” (3)-- seem a desperate attempt to live down this hysterical moment of transgression, castration, and loss. Otherwise, he might have to confront the hysteria that lies underneath his otherwise standard self. What Bingham seeks to throw off is “the otherness of femininity, a maternal multiplicity basic to us all,” since “all ‘abnormalities’ we would divorce from ourselves are a part of ourselves, deeply and pervasively (hence frighteningly)” (Hogle 10, 12). When Bingham finally reveals his memory problems to the reader, he tellingly refers to himself as a multiple (and therefore unstable) self: “It turns out that we’ve been together this whole time, all of the Ryans. We just got separated. This has happened before. I’ve never told a soul. I’ve met myself coming and going. It’s a secret” (151-152). Julie, for Ryan, *is* hysteria: where the law disintegrates, where the stable self falls apart and fragments, where sheer need intervenes.

Julie’s downfall may be linked to the loss of her relationship with Ryan, but it is also rooted in the predatory culture of consumer capitalism. As described by Ryan, the “start” of her decline began with a “bogus model search,” in which unscrupulous marketers draw young girls into a mad scramble for fame, attention, and money, driving them into anorexia in the process—not to mention crime and drugs. Julie, in fact, is specifically impressionable and thus vulnerable to the ventriloquistic voices around her, especially the psychotechniques of an exploitive commercial culture. When Ryan visits Julie at his sister Kara’s house in Utah, he insists on turning the TV off because it has an inordinate impact on Julie: “It’s always wise, in my experience, to turn off any nearby TVs or radio when trying to dissipate emotional tension; they have a way of blurting out

bad thoughts, of lobbing idea grenades into the room” (143-144). Julie seems hypersensitive to these “idea grenades.” Later, when he takes Julie with him on a business trip, he is startled by her compulsive shopping: “My sister feels ill at ease, I’m learning, if she goes for more than an hour without a purchase” (177). And her susceptibility to insistent cultural voices is not limited to the commercial realm; she is also drawn to the emotional outpouring of U.S. religious culture (itself imbued with a commercial ethos). Bingham describes a period during which she took a job at a “St. Paul religious gift shop” and became born again; he recalls a Christian rock concert—“a spectacle of fog and laser lights and colored scrims”—which draws Julie in completely: “The band released white doves during the encore, and afterwards Julie and others rushed the stage and dropped to their knees before a neon cross next to the drum kit. It shook me to see such need in her, such thirst” (65). Yet although Julie is drawn in so easily, she also nervously pulls herself out just as easily; more exactly, it is precisely because she is so vulnerable to short-term drives that she feels the need to protect herself against loss by flitting from one thing to the next.

The Julie back-story culminates in one of the strangest images in the novel, the dialectical image to which I have been building. And this image emerges from Bingham’s memory during a rare moment of pause, as an erstwhile girlfriend Alex rubs his back. In response to Alex’s admonition that “muscles store memories,” this moment of touch provokes Bingham’s memory of attending the Minnesota State Fair with his sister. And we soon sense that this is a memory Ryan would rather not revisit. As Ryan and Julie enter a tent, they see a mysterious block of ice with something in it, supposedly an “ice man.” But Julie doesn’t believe it: “The frosty block of ice obscures the details, but it’s a

body, wrinkled, dark, and hairy, curled on its side like a newborn calf. Convincing. Julie's hands squeeze my skull and I feel a drip. She's weeping. I twist to leave, but she holds me. My neck is wet. 'It's a her,' she says. 'It's a girl. They killed a girl'" (99-100). (Soon after, Bingham recalls other memories: that Julie, working as a masseuse, was assaulted by "the CFO of a major retail shoe chain," and that the police ignored her accusation.) Finally, the memories peter out, as Alex's touch evokes only a negatively repetitive fog of travel in which no particular moments stand out: "no memories...just pain. A thousand plane seats" (100).

Why is this scene so strange and sad, beautiful and horrifying? We could unpack the associations: First of all, we have the erotic overtones of Ryan's love for his sister, since the memory emerges during a massage, and Ryan carries Julie on his shoulders. We also have the theme of being frozen, stuck in place—and both Julie and Ryan are emotionally frozen insofar as they are still stuck in the past, haunted by the loss of their relationship. Equally importantly, however, at this grotesque State Fair we are presented with an image of the predations of a consumer culture: in Julie's eyes, this girl has not only been murdered, but exploited for commercial gain and displayed as a spectacle for others to gawk at. (And in remembering what Julie sees as victimization, Bingham recalls Julie's abuse by the CFO, and especially by the modeling scam built on the lure of displaying young women for profit). Finally, if the hairy calf suggests a strange parody of the womb, in which an uncanny proto-human creature lies claustrophobically encased in an icy membrane, it also suggests the mistreatment of animals and the replacement of an older, smaller form of agriculture with large-scale industrial agribusiness. All in all, this ghastly montage suggests fear and hysteria: Julie's belief that she lives in a world in

which people would kill and freeze a girl, and charge people money to see her. It is Ryan's inability to protect his sister Julie from such a world that motivates his sadness and rage, and his mad scramble for power within it. And in a parallel way, he is also unable to protect his father (and by extension, the world of small businesses and small farms) from the humiliations and predations of a larger economy. In this cluster of associations, Ryan Bingham faces his own lack of autonomy; whether pummeled by psychic forces or by social ones, he cannot fortify boundaries against the intrusion of the Other.

The Garage vs. the Madhouse: Dreams of a Republican Pastoral Space

I learned to live from the present forward only, and I don't regret it. One must these days if one is to stay in business, and it's all business now.

—Ryan Bingham, from *Up in the Air* (205)

Indeed, although Bingham often tries to convince himself that contemporary capitalism brings “restfulness and order” to its grateful beneficiaries, he just as often pictures the capitalist landscape as one of chaos and fear. At one point, he has a dream in which participants in capitalism—here imagined in terms of the popular game Monopoly—take deadly risks that pan out badly: “I dreamed abstractly, of multicolored grids unfurling to the horizon, a giant game board. The game pieces were familiar from Monopoly—the cannon, the shoe, the Scottie dog, the iron—but they floated over the board like space debris. Every few moments, a thin blue laser beam would arc from the board and turn a piece to ash” (121). In this disorganized, free-floating capitalism, potential destruction is always around the corner. Later, while attempting to block out the “madhouse” of Reno, Nevada with hotel curtains, he imagines the capitalist culture as

riddled with mendacity and chaos: “It’s the little deceptions that no one catches that are going to dissolve it someday. We’ll look at clocks and we won’t believe the hands...Feeling a need to halt the swirl, to stabilize, I dial Great West’s toll-free mileage hotline to check the running tally” (86). In this scene, Bingham’s compulsive mile-counting serves as an attempt to “stabilize” what he sees as a volatile “swirl” of lies, tricks, and distrust. Thus oddly enough, Bingham’s jeremiad about U.S. decline leads him to further embrace Airworld’s replicable pleasures. His attraction to modular, Lego-like chain restaurants and hotels, and to countable air-miles, reflects a desire for *order* that he hopes will compensate for the “madhouse” that he otherwise sees around him. As Bingham puts it, in collecting one million air-miles he imposes narrative order on a life (and a novel) otherwise bereft of limits and ends: “It’s a boundary...I need boundaries in my life” (11). And this desire for stabilization echoes the regionalist desire for a more coherent society, such that Bingham can come across as both a fervent nomad and a regionalist prophet at the same time, the two tendencies co-existing tensely in the same person.

Bingham’s contradictory feelings regarding capitalism result in another dialectical image, which grows out of his free-associative attempt to write an inspirational book for the business demographic. In his manuscript *The Garage*, which he composes during moments of lag time by dictating into a recorder, Bingham imagines a surreal world, the hero of which (a man named M) retreats to his work space in order to control his own “biorhythms” in the pursuit of business innovation. This genius is the epitome of the autonomous individual, entirely cut off from the world and in total control of his faculties

(“at one with his core competencies”), such that he cannot be rushed by outside demands (175):

Notes for book: hero floats outside time in *The Garage*. The progress of his projects is all he knows. Self-management means nothing if not this—the task-centered governance of one’s very biorhythms. If not for the quarterly financial statements that come to him through the Communications Portal, which he shreds unread, then burns for heat, my hero would not even know what year it is. The man who makes history is a living calendar, his beating heart his only pendulum. (109)

For some reason, this free individual, so cut off from any social existence that he burns the mail science-fiction style to keep himself warm, is unstoppably devoted to a “project” which miraculously happens to coincide with the most fervent desires of the market. Thus it turns out that being a “living calendar,” rooted in the very rhythms of the body, means being precisely attuned to the calendar implied by the quarterly financial statements he otherwise ignores. Indeed, M’s Zen-like knack for producing “value-adding genius” makes him a hero to the masses who throng outside his garage, urging him to emerge and reap the fruits of his glory (175).

*The Garage*, which Bingham describes as a “gestalt” (176), is what J.G.A. Pocock would describe as a republican vision of a “timeless space” of order and rationality (Noble xxxv). And appropriately enough, Bingham posits the world of the garage as a challenge to the chaos and excess of contemporary capitalism, which he sees as irrationally wedded to a dangerous and unnatural pursuit of growth for the sake of growth:

For years it has been the same message: Grow or die. But is this necessarily the truth? Too often, growth for its own sake leads to chaos: unsustainable capital expansion, ill-timed acquisitions, a stressful workplace. In *The Garage*, I propose a bold new formula to replace the lurching pursuit of profit: ‘Sufficient Plenitude.’ Enough really can be enough, that is. A heresy? Not to students of the human body, who know that optimum health is not achieved by ever-greater

consumption and activity, but by functioning within certain dynamic parameters of diet and exercise, work and leisure. So too with the corporation, whose core objective should not be the amassing of good numbers, but the creation and management of abundance. (66)

Bingham hardly knows where such a message comes from; he worries that “the book is just the overflow of a brain so stuffed with jargon that it’s spontaneously sloughing off the excess,” and admits that “some of the ideas felt foreign to me, with no connection to how I actually operate” (66-67). Yet it is precisely because this book flows from a trance state that it can capture so effectively Bingham’s confused desire. And this desire is contradictory: to have capitalism without “stress” and “growth,” a creative “team” without conflict or even interaction, and a flowering of creative production that is simultaneously unmotivated by market considerations *and* perfectly in line with them. Here indeed is a pastoral vision of material abundance and a beautiful relation between classes: a world of pure use value in which power does not operate. Above all, it expresses a desire for a world in which no father operates; M is not compelled to produce by a paternal law, and yet somehow does not devolve into hysterical chaos. Instead, he manages himself—perfectly.

*The Garage* also depicts a world of geographical stasis, since its hero M never emerges from the garage, even when his fans press him to show his face. It thus reveals the extent to which Bingham’s feverish motion through Airworld is motivated not simply by a desire for the new, but also by a desire for stability, for a safe refuge in which he can escape the pressures of sociality altogether. And he can only do this by becoming a machine, in a sense—by renouncing all conscious decision about what the social world should look like and instead achieving a state in which the natural inclinations of his body (its biorhythms) match perfectly with what that social world already *is*. Bingham



wants to orbit continuously, in harmony with the flows of a natural social order, such that absolute motion is indistinguishable from absolute stasis—which is why he wants so desperately to imagine that capitalism *can be* that natural social order. Such an order would not operate by paternal compulsion, but through some seamless and impersonal mechanism of value-production. But in the end, he cannot endorse capitalism as it actually expresses itself in the world. Instead, the vision he presents in *The Garage* is so different from existing capitalism as to be unrecognizable. A capitalism in which “enough really is enough” is no longer capitalism, since the capitalist system depends on constant growth and expansion. And the hero of *The Garage*, with his unalienated labor that comes directly from “within,” rather than being imposed on him by outside forces, is the exact opposite of the real Ryan Bingham—who is subject to the imperatives of capitalist time, who is pinned directly to a calendar that continually keeps moving, and whose work is alienated.

Don't Tell Me We Can't Be Everywhere at Once:

Globalization from Below

Contemporary life constantly reminds us that we are moving toward death, or at least obsolescence, and that life we must continually strive to hold together. Paradoxically, we need the consistent consciousness of death provided by the Gothic in order to understand and want that life....The Gothic's basic investment in ravaging history and fragmenting the past meshes with our own investments now as we attempt to reinvent history as a way of healing the perpetual loss in modern existence.

--Steven Bruhm, from “Contemporary Gothic: why we need it” (274)

What is missing in the timeless space of *The Garage* is a sense of *history* as unfolding according to a social dynamic that includes conflict and decay, loss and attachment. M has no family, no profound and particular attachments, and it thus

becomes hard to identify what motivates his activity in the first place. But if Ryan Bingham yearns to escape a social world in which motivation is tapped (and potentially depleted) within a social system infused with power, he cannot manage to forget the history in which he is enmeshed. Dropped from the calendar in Benjamin's terms, he tries to imagine other temporalities which render the past irrelevant (capitalist gambling time, the natural biorhythms in *The Garage*), but he is haunted by memory, and thus by the sound of Benjamin's church bells. His description of small-town Minnesota is tinged with nostalgia and loss:

By five I was riding shotgun in the propane truck, learning a business that, if it had survived, I'd still be in today, with no regrets. The secret was providing added value with every refilled tank—carrying the news from farm to farm, adjusting and reigniting pilot lights, delivering packages for snowbound widows. My apprenticeship secured a spot for me in my father's everyday routine and in the larger life of the community. (148)

While in *The Garage* Bingham's description of "demand-based value-adding genius" (175) is entirely abstract and tautological, with no concrete referent (whatever is demanded has value!), here "added value" appears clearly as embodied within a local network of social connection. Bingham's father did not work in isolation according to his own supposedly biological clock, nor did he abandon himself to the dictates of a global market. Instead he worked within "the larger life of the community"; his relationships with customers were not simply speculative and short-term, but long-term investments in a network of mutual caring.

However--and here's the rub--Bingham's father could not maintain life within such an imagined pastoral community; he lost his business to outside competition, as well as his motivation and his marriage. Whatever his misgivings, then, even Bingham recognizes that he can't go back to his own golden moment of the 1950s. Nor does he

truly want to, especially given that this world, too, existed in history, caught within a network of power, conflict, and inequality. It was only later that Bingham recognized the extent to which his home-town existed not as an entity unto itself, but as one node within a larger and more mysterious network. And it is in this moment that we find the last dialectical image I would like to examine: a brief hint at the possibility of redemption in the novel. At one point, as Bingham speaks to his mentor, the business guru Sandy Pinter rails against the intermodal hub society as a “sinkhole”: “This wireless wired hive of ours....No one can be everywhere at once, and why should they want to be? We’ll come close of course. We’ll come within a hair, then half a hair, then half of a half. But we’ll never ring the bell. And that’s their plan, you see. Progress without perfection. The endless tease” (134). As the novel bears out, Pinter makes an important point here: Bingham’s search for perfection, for a seamless and harmonious system of circulation governed by natural rhythms, is never attained.

Nevertheless, Bingham refuses to relinquish his utopian energy. In response to Pinter, a memory surges up for him that indicates a hope in the healing power of industrial technology as a *pharmakon*, if the mobility it makes possible could be properly channeled: as a teenager, he fell through a frozen Minnesota lake and lay in suspended animation for fifteen minutes before being rescued by a helicopter. For Bingham, the incident revealed the limits of his own particular place, and pointed him toward the possibility of human connection on a scale grander than the local or even the national:

I was a country boy once....We were proud of Polk Center. Its farmers fed the world....It wasn’t until the first time I flew, in a medevac helicopter to Minneapolis, that I realized how confined I’d been....I could see all the Minneapolis skyscrapers, some of their floors lit up and others dark, as well as the antennas on their roofs that transmitted our radio stations and TV ball games. I could see the western horizon, where I’d come from, and a dogleg of snowy river

crossed by bridges sparkling with late-night traffic. The landscape looked whole in a way it never had before; I could see how it fit together. My parents had lied. They'd taught me we lived in the best place in the world, but I could see now that the world was really one place and that comparing its parts did not make sense or gain our town any advantage over others....Just thirty minutes. To reach a city I'd thought of as remote, halfway across the state, a foreign capital....Don't tell me this isn't an age of miracles. Don't tell me we can't be everywhere at once. (139-141)

In this lyrical passage, Bingham complicates his professor's country music narrative; though disillusioned by urban wickedness, Bingham sees a utopian kernel in the magic of modernity, and healing power in its miraculous technologies.

Indeed, Bingham has been so entranced with this magic that when life on the ground becomes confusing, he attempts to return to this remembered world of flight. Just as the helicopter saves him from the stasis of a frozen lake, Bingham refuses to become frozen again, to treat one place as the end-all, be-all. Although he has since become trapped in a paradoxical frozen-in-motion stasis—deceived by the belief that he could simply go with the flow--this remembered moment of emergence from ice still offers an original vision of inspiration that might help him change shapes yet again. Even in pursuing MythTech, Bingham hopes to recreate the sense of wholeness that he feels in the helicopter—to see the world fitting together as one place. But although the world is indeed interconnected, it is not *whole* in the way Bingham wants to imagine. MythTech notwithstanding, it cannot be made to “fit together” from above; instead, it remains out of joint in important ways. Ultimately, it is not possible to be *everywhere at once* in some smooth sense. Nor is it possible to create a fail-safe cognitive map of the postmodern conjuncture. The helicopter, then, can only become an image of a critical regionalist *gothic quest for place*—a mobile structure of critical regionalist architecture rather than an ethereal fantasy of harmonious convergence—if we recognize the extent to which it

allegorizes a provisional fight against the pull of gravity in a contingent effort of caretaking. The helicopter, like other contemporary technologies of transportation and communication—from fiber optic cables and digital devices to jets and bullet trains—is a *pharmakon*, potentially toxic but also potentially healing. And harnessing the gravity of the situation involves finding ways to prevent such technologies from destroying the ecological, social, and psychic resources through the reckless proliferation of negative externalities and what Stiegler calls “dissociated milieus,” autonomized spheres of activity in which caretaking is lost (59). Instead, somehow we need to deploy these technologies not simply to stave off the tendency toward falling profit in the short-term, but to aid us in creating long networks of long-term nurturing: of the planet, the social world, and the individual human libidinal economy.

However, in embracing capitalism, Bingham does not find a model of citizenship rooted in mutual care-taking and equality, or in the “sufficient plenitude” of *The Garage*. Instead, citizenship for Bingham is for the few, only available for those at the top of MythTech, or who have achieved some comparable level of power. In the novel’s conclusion, however, Bingham fails to get a job with MythTech. He even fails to *find* MythTech, which has supposedly moved from Nebraska to Canada, but in principle could move anywhere. As a low-level flunkie indicates, any number of enticements might bring MythTech away from the U.S.: “Tax breaks. Lax accounting standards. Who knows? Strict banking privacy laws. Skilled immigrants. It’s not like we’re quarrying Nebraska sandstone—we can run this shop from Djakarta” (287). Thus Bingham, no longer in the air, must face life excluded from what he sees as citizenship. Like many others, he is left behind by the rolling juggernaut of international capitalism. Perhaps this perceived

exclusion explains why, earlier, when he shows up at the headquarters of his company *en route* to Las Vegas, his sneering colleague Craig Gregory associates him with the indigenous Third World: “Listen, you look like hell. Nice boots, but from there on up you’re Guatemalan. If I was a fag I’d reach over and fix your hair.... That may go over fine among the Navajo, but this is white America” (187). Bingham’s western boots mark him as both masculine and “white,” but everything else about him signals that he has been eclipsed or ground under like a global Indian. And there is no fraternity here, lest Craig Gregory be labeled a “fag”—and therefore as insufficiently masculine. Whichever way you slice it, even if the privileges of whiteness have been spreading to the four corners of the earth (including elite Navajos and Guatemalans), capitalism is built on inequality, haunted by the excluded. And if Bingham retains many of the privileges of white manhood at the novel’s end, he nonetheless feels like a refugee: homeless, and with an unclear path forward on unfamiliar ground.

Thus *Up in the Air* depicts a man haunted by memories of a contradictory sort, of Mr. Hugs and market stresses—“baby Jesus left out in the rain”—but also of a miracle helicopter that saves lives from rigid ice and connects the whole world. And it leaves us hanging at the end. Ryan Bingham doesn’t know what he is going to do when he stops flying. His plan, in the short-term, is to go to his sister’s wedding, get drunk, and “walk the surface of the earth” in his cowboy boots (274). That at the end of the novel Bingham is on his way to Julie’s wedding is potentially a hopeful sign—an opportunity for him to work through the past, come down to earth, and confront social pressures rather than evading them through speculative leaps into *The Garage*. (Unless, of course, he is too drunk to begin facing anything!) In facing his sister Julie and letting her go by supporting

her marriage, Bingham would face the strange stranger within himself: the abjected female hysteria from which he otherwise flees. Doing so would not necessarily involve renouncing the validity of their mutual love; Bingham does not need to punish himself for his past, and indeed, he may insist on some level that while giving up Julie may have been necessary, their unlawful love was—and *is*—based on an irreducible kernel that cannot be reduced to law. Indeed, perhaps this irreducibility is what characterizes love as such, which emerges here as an abyss which cannot be counted or corralled. In recognizing as much, perhaps both Ryan and Julie might open themselves up to the world and the strange strangers who populate it. In other words, they might live.

The wedding also represents an opportunity for Bingham to imagine a way beyond the serialized anti-collectives with which he has become enmeshed—the market, the line at the airport, the haggle of competition. As a powerfully Taylorized laborer in tune with the demands of capital, Ryan Bingham is defined first and foremost by his failure to affiliate with others on the basis of solidarity. Perhaps, if he were to follow Gayatri Spivak’s advice, he would give up on his dreams to beat the hierarchy by chasing the frontier and finding a “seat inside the Dome” (282), and instead ally himself with those outside the Dome, outside of Airworld. Perhaps he might give up on the dream of autonomy and recognize his own interconnection with others and the impossibility of permanent barriers. In doing so, he might see that he has something in common with the Guatemalan and the Navajo, such that he might identify with a movement to achieve a “robust citizenship for the people down below” (89). How could he do this? The answer is unclear. As Spivak notes, “Critical regionalism is not an analysis. It is really a kind of fledgling project” (114). And the coordinates for this project are emerging only fitfully:

in the way U.S. news services are finally beginning to pay attention to the Chinese workers who produce the I-phones sold at American Wal-Marts, in globalized anti-austerity riots and Occupy protests, in outrage over economic inequality and crumbling infrastructure (ecological, social, psychic), and in the growing sense that U.S. workers are no longer sheltered from global conditions of competition and precarity, such that a planetary labor movement is beginning to become more imaginable.

At the end of *Up in the Air*, Bingham (who has been flying across the country for years, but not outside of it) is surprised to learn that MythTech would move to Canada, let alone Djakarta. He seems unprepared for the idea that the frontier has not only left the landscape of the U.S. West, but also the airspace of the U.S. nation. Indeed, the very fact of Bingham's *physical* mobility renders him a dinosaur in some ways. (As the film makes even more clear, in the future people like Bingham might not be flying around in the flesh, since they will simply do their work on-line from Nebraska. The intermodal hub society increasingly lies in cyberspace.) If Bingham has survived the manic terrain of Airworld, then, he now faces an even tougher challenge: what Benjamin called the "open air of history" on the gothic terrain of a grounded earth that is also in flight, criss-crossed by leap-frogging flows and discontinuous grids of mobility (*Illuminations* 261).

Bingham's landing, then, is simultaneously the end of a confessional narrative (built on an obsessive and repetitious reworking of a fragmented past), a departure from trauma, and the beginning of a new struggle. In leaving Bingham's future "up in the air," Kirn suggests that any quest for place (Bingham's or ours) will not come easily, since the *gothic quest for place* is no picnic. Any conviviality we can find in it will be difficult to come by. But perhaps a gothic quest for a robust global citizenship from below is our best



hope to “reinvent history as a way of healing the perpetual loss” in a haunted and interconnected world. And like Ryan Bingham, perhaps we will even need our cowboy boots.

## CHAPTER 4

### LOVE THY NEIGHBOR: RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S *BROWN*, *INTO THE WILD*, AND THE NEW NORTH

During the summer of 2006, I studied Spanish for almost three months in the city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala—affectionately known as Xela. Like many language students in the area, I worked one-on-one with a local instructor; my teacher Veronica would spend about four hours a day teaching me grammar and vocabulary, quizzing me, and leading me in stilted cross-language conversations. Since I studied with Veronica for several weeks, we learned a few things about each other. At one point, in the middle of a Spanish-language question and answer session, I told a story about my neighbors in Colorado Springs, where I lived from about 1996 to 2001. After I graduated from college, I lived and worked at a hospitality house for people off the street (and often, out of prison), modeled on the work of Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day. The quasi-anarchist Bijou House, as it was then called, had no paid employees, but we were fairly busy nonetheless. In addition to a 24-hour shift managing the house during the week, I also attended weekly and monthly meetings, attended protests, wrote for and designed the layout for an affiliated newspaper, and worked at a local wood oven pizza restaurant. Like many of the people affiliated with the Bijou House, I was not Catholic (or even Christian), a fact which didn't seem to matter. I'm not sure that I went into these details

with Veronica—especially since my Spanish didn't quite reach that level--but I *did* tell her about our neighbors. Next door to the volunteer house where I lived with my girlfriend (and sometimes as many as nine other people, including a family with a one-year-old child, and a sixty-eight-year-old priest facing prison-time for protesting nuclear weapons), lived a very different kind of family.

This couple also worked at restaurants in Colorado Springs. But they had pit bulls in the yard. They did meth, and they most certainly abused their young children and each other. We could often hear screaming and mutual accusations throughout the day and night, and sometimes their children (two girls and a boy) would wander over to our house and knock, or just stand in the doorway. Occasionally we took them to movies. Later, they attended some of the neighborhood homework sessions we helped organize, and to a Bijou-related summer youth camp. Eventually, the owners of the house took on boarders, a couple who also took meth. At one point, the male boarder attempted to run over his girlfriend with a car as we peered through the window. Luckily, he didn't succeed. Later on, though, another problem emerged: the pit bulls started to get out of the yard. We talked with our neighbors about keeping the dogs inside, and they told us that, yes, they would keep control over them. But we could see them training the pit bulls to attack a tire hanging from a tree in the backyard. We called Animal Control a few times, but the dogs still occasionally escaped their enclosure. Our friends—the ones with the one-year-old—no longer felt comfortable allowing their child outside. Then it happened: one of the pit bulls chewed a leg off of another pit bull. I don't remember how we reacted, but I do know that the volunteer couple living with us decided to leave. They had a few reasons for moving on, and bore no ill will against the Bijou Community (they were dedicated

volunteers), but the terrifying neighbors next door partly explained their decision. For whatever reason, this is the story I told Veronica. Perhaps we were talking about the many stray dogs that walk around Xela, eating garbage in the streets.

Her reaction surprised me. She could not believe that such things happened in the United States. She had always heard from others that the U.S. was, in her words, “perfect”—not *morally* perfect, but streamlined, modern, and clean. Its airports, shopping malls, and libraries simply couldn’t be believed, because they were so “perfect.” She confessed to me that, if she could, she would like to move to the U.S., and that she might even be willing to do so illegally if she could be assured a safe path. (At one point, she asked me if I could teach her some English. I went to her house and helped her conjugate irregular verbs, just as she had taught me). How could I be describing *los Estados Unidos*? Most of all, she could not believe that these people were *white, Norte Americanos*. Mexicans, maybe, or blacks. But white people acting like this? Veronica was different from some of the other teachers at the school, most of whom were young men (some of them gay). These other teachers were, in Veronica’s words “politically conscious,” but also partiers who enjoyed getting to know the European and U.S. women (and men) who came to Guatemala to study Spanish. Many of them had girlfriends (or boyfriends) from out of the country. Veronica didn’t fit in with this crowd. She was older, had a daughter, and did legal consultation out of a small home office. A single parent, she was teaching Spanish to make ends meet, but she didn’t consider herself “politically conscious.” At one point, she told me that she sympathized with those who endorsed “social hygiene,” the practice among Guatemalan authorities of unofficially killing gangmembers, drug traffickers, and who knows who else. Once she described a

nightmare she had the night before: of being trapped on a bus by bandits. She imagined these men as animals or monsters. The United States, in contrast, seemed to her an escape from such violent men. So she resisted my story.

She also resisted my judgment of Guatemala as a “beautiful country” with “nice people.” Of course, I was trying to be polite—but I was also a middle-class tourist from the country that Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias described as “Papa Verde”—the Green Father (referring to the color of U.S. money). I didn’t have to live in Guatemala forever, and I had access to the privileges of a visiting American. I could travel to interesting, novel, and even dangerous places, knowing that it was all part of a temporary adventure. So, in a way, each of us was more attuned to the difficulty of our *own* neighbors: the ones with whom we were stuck on an everyday basis. And although we would like to imagine a world in which all neighbors are unobtrusive, or even helpful fellow men and women (all of the things the word *neighborly* is meant to connote)—and not at all like Veronica’s image of violent gangmembers, or my experience with dysfunctional troublemakers—in some ways *all* neighbors are too intrusive. Slavoj Zizek, for one, describes the Neighbor as above all “terrifying,” since in facing the Neighbor we face “the abyss of its desire and its obscene enjoyment” (*First as Tragedy* 46). I was definitely privy to a fair amount of “obscene enjoyment” during my time in Colorado Springs. But we can’t take refuge in our own little walled-off worlds, since ultimately, we are the Neighbor, too: “the subject as such is toxic in its very form, in its abyss of Otherness” (46). Since the consistency of any person hinges on a certain void at the center, we never quite know our Neighbors, just as we never quite know ourselves. And

if Christians, like the founders of the Bijou House, are commanded to love their neighbors, such a task is easier said than done.

What is true on a personal level is also true (in some ways) on an international level. Especially in Europe and the United States, the question of immigration has reached a high pitch of hysteria in some circles. The ironic truth is that although Veronica imagines running North as a way of getting away from her *own* neighbors, many in the U.S. would view her as an unwelcome and toxic Neighbor, a contaminating force from a South conceived as riddled with problems. In this chapter, then, I would like to examine questions that circulate around the figure of the Neighbor, and about the desires for separateness and purity--for an impermeable body, whether personal or cultural-national. In particular, I look at these questions through the filter of the American West conceived broadly as imbricated within the Americas, and through the geographical coordinates of North and South as these terms have accumulated meanings, both positive and negative. In the postcolonial melancholiac U.S. West, it turns out, many have still not worked through a neurotic desire to escape their Neighbors—not only those to the South, but any Neighbors whatsoever, including themselves.

### Biology and Spectrality

After Governor Jan Brewer of Arizona signed the recent and controversial Senate Bill 1070 in 2010, it seemed that nearly everyone had something to say about this particular intersection of border matters, citizenship, and race. Some Arizona landowners demanded a stop to people crossing their land in the middle of the night, while others left food for them and offered free transportation. Defensive lawmakers insisted that the

legislation specifically prohibited racial profiling, even as many Hispanics (or simply those with dark skin) feared that their appearance made them suspect in the eyes of the state: impure citizens at best, outcasts at worst. Amid such discussions, the lyrical, mercurial, and occasionally curmudgeonly writer Richard Rodriguez appeared on a radio panel with Boston's Tom Ashbrook. Rodriguez described the standard discourse on immigration as misleading and shallow, and maintained that the issue was more about "morality and poverty" than about "illegality and criminality." In his view, we needed to rethink the fiction of the border entirely. Toward the beginning of the broadcast, he made a plea for us "to see the Americas whole" and called on the continent to submit to a sociogeographical revolution in consciousness by recognizing the continuities and interpenetrations between the United States, Canada, and the Southern countries. He questioned designations like "Latin America" or "the United States," both of which absurdly try to contain spillage within leaky containers. In order to illustrate his point, he relayed an image, familiar from U.S. weather broadcasts on television, of the U.S. represented with "no reference" to Canada and Mexico: "The United States of America is portrayed as a balloon that floats—rather like [in]the Macy's Day parade in New York—without any land connection to its neighbors, so that there's never any weather in Canada, there's never any weather in Mexico. This notion that the United States exists independently of its neighbors...leads more deeply to a kind of innocence of our place in the world" ("America's Law, America's Dilemma").

By advocating such a hemispheric geographical awakening, Rodriguez, like many recent critics of cultural nationalism, proposed that we transcend our "innocence" by embracing a broad-based transnational solution to questions of cultural identity,

affiliation, and citizenship.<sup>36</sup> To Rodriguez, it is as “ridiculous” to imagine the United States as a coherent “balloon” distinct from its neighbors as it is to imagine that Guadalajara has no weather. And of course, weather is not the only thing flowing between nations these days; given the increasingly borderless quality of global capital, with its many concurrent flows of migration, ideas, images, products, and money, many have argued that the nation-state itself can no longer sustain the boundaries it needs in order to function, except in a mode of crisis. Neoliberal capitalism threatens nationalist enclaves in a number of ways (even if it also depends upon and *provokes* cultural nationalist feeling). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in their magnum opus *Empire*, global capitalism in the post-Fordist era poses a significant challenge to the nation-state as the hegemonic form of political sovereignty: “The primary forces of production and exchange—money, technology, people, and goods—move with increasing ease across national boundaries; hence the nation-state has less and less power to regulate these flows and impose its authority over the economy” (xi). But we need not consult a contemporary theorist to see the ways in which capitalism erodes traditional boundaries; in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels famously articulated a prescient vision of decentered and deterritorialized global capitalism that seems even more appropriate today than when he outlined it in 1848: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before than can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (38). And even if this process of

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<sup>36</sup> See for example Jose David Saldivar’s *Trans-Americanities: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico*, along with Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein’s “Americanness as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System.”



deterritorialization proceeds hand-in-glove with a parallel process of reterritorialization, such that capitalism builds boundaries even as it destroys them, it is hard to miss the unstable nature of boundaries in the contemporary context.

Beyond these powerful economic and cultural transformations, by which “all that is solid melts into air,” many white U.S. citizens feel threatened by the demise of whiteness as a hegemonic demographic category. As Hua Hsu reports in *The Atlantic*, by 2042 the nation will likely be categorized as majority nonwhite. The election of a multiracial president, the offshoring of jobs to places like India, the threat of mainly Arab terrorists, and the demographic changes of the past half-century (through both immigration and birth-rates) have combined to produce a siege mentality among some white cultural nationalists. Thus we see a rise in assertions of “real American-ness” and a paranoia about national borders that is only partly explained by fears of terrorism and the escalated drug war in Mexico (though somehow these critics rarely challenge the free movements of capital). And although Hsu predicts that demographic and cultural changes will eventually lead to a multicultural America in which whiteness loses its hegemonic edge, he nevertheless predicts that white cultural nationalists will not go down without a fight: “it’s possible to imagine white identity politics growing more potent and more forthright in the future, as the ‘real America’ becomes an ever-smaller portion of, well, the real America.” He warns of a “yearning for American ‘authenticity,’ a folksy realness that rejects the global, the urban, and the effete in favor of nostalgia for ‘the way things used to be’” (54).

As I have argued in the Introduction, such a “yearning” for a golden past--characteristic of the contemporary U.S. Tea Party--illustrates the continuing power of

cultural nationalism in today's context. And in the case of the U.S., the frontier West provides much of the mythology that might shore up a (threatened) Anglo-Protestant ethnic core in an age of imperial decline. U.S. postcolonial melancholia, then, is visible above all in cultural texts rooted in the frontier imaginary, since it was in this space that God ostensibly ratified Anglo-Protestant power and identified them as His chosen people. But this West has changed. Now facing a West inundated with all of those things from which pioneers fled (urbanism, social fetters, dependence, power), many of these cultural nationalists have run away, either in reality or in imagination, toward what Rodriguez calls the "New North"—the Northern part of the West—where they can evade both the biological Real of the "stew of humanity" and the spectral Real of the rapid financial, labor, and commodity flows that typify the neoliberal economy. Instead, in the New North one can find no Neighbors at all, but only what Žižek calls the "fellow men" (the right sort of person) and nature in all its purity, each tamed of all hints of trauma (*First as Tragedy* 46).

In imagining the New North as a space of whiteness, U.S. cultural nationalists follow in the footsteps of their ideological predecessors: Frederick Jackson Turner, Owen Wister, and Theodore Roosevelt. If Turner's model of Western development could be understood as relatively immigrant-friendly, since in his geographical determinist framework the frontier *creates* Americans (out of whatever they were before), in practice the Turnerian frontier was usually imagined as fundamentally white. And Wister and Roosevelt's influential version of the frontier myth further rigs the game in favor of Northern Europeans. Wister in *The Virginian* sees the West not as an egalitarian laboratory for cultivating Americans, but as a testing ground for a pre-existing American-

ness. People go West for rejuvenation, but what they discover is not that they can be changed, but that they can learn who they really are. More exactly, they learn their place on a seemingly organic hierarchy that (conveniently enough) is weighted toward white upper-class Protestants. Appropriately, the poster figure for much recent U.S. nationalist activity is a wealthy, white and Protestant Westerner: the former Alaskan governor (and one-time vice-presidential candidate) Sarah Palin. Key to her public persona is a hyper-republican code of pioneer producerism; her moose-hunting, guns, and “hockey mom” style of self-sufficiency all play into a powerful historic mythology of what it means to be a real American. And yet, in the Republican Party, such down-and-dirty rural metaphors co-exist with images of the quintessentially urban businessman. What often unites these seemingly disparate icons is precisely the Wister-ian Social Darwinist hierarchy, defined according to the maxim of Wister’s narrator: “All America is divided into two classes—the quality and the equality....Let the best man win! That is America’s word...and true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing” (108). The real Americans (Wister’s “quality”) rise above the rest (the “equality”) on the natural ground of the frontier, after which they are justified in acquiring wealth and property to their heart’s content. Thus in the New North we have a strange amalgamation in which two different fantasies can merge: Inuit-style primitivism and a capitalist ideology of millionaire success. But this vision is always haunted by Others: foreigners, nonwhites, people who don’t know their place. Biology. The stew of humanity.

A prime cultural example of the melancholiac New Northern fear of biology can be found in the 2009 romantic comedy *The Proposal*, starring Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds. In this popular film, a Canadian immigrant to the U.S. (the domineering

publishing executive Margaret Tate, played by Bullock) overstays her visa, and in an attempt to avoid deportation pretends to be engaged to her long-suffering assistant Andrew Paxton (Reynolds). To deceive U.S. immigration authorities, the would-be couple travels to Sitka, Alaska to visit Andrew's family, who turn out to be local barons; they are the town's chief citizens and own every local business. But although these "Alaskan Kennedys" wield tremendous power in Sitka, the town is remarkably free of class antagonism. In Sitka, every (white) person shares the same Reaganite frontier values of self-reliance and down-to-earth folksiness, and the upper-class Paxtons merge imperceptibly with ordinary folks, culminating in an image of all drinking (local) beer together at the tavern. It is in this degenerate utopia that the Canadian Margaret learns not simply how to be an American, but rather that by virtue of her rule-breaking aggressiveness she has been an American all along.<sup>37</sup> The sticking point, however—and the eruption of the biological Real into the film—lies in the character of Ramone (Oscar Nunez), apparently Sitka's only Mexican. Ramone notably (and comically) performs every service job in the town (waiter, male stripper, store clerk, and more). Pathetically in love with Margaret, he emerges as an intrusive presence in Sitka; as a stripper, he bumps and grinds against Margaret in a way that goes beyond comedy into the realm of the uncanny. The film, then, casts the Mexican as a too-proximate Neighbor; though he is not malevolent, but innocent and bumbling, his very innocence becomes dangerous insofar as

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<sup>37</sup> And in an absurd twist on the perennial Anglo-Protestant desire to imagine indigenous support for their usurpation of the land (a wish for the Indian blessing that goes back at least as far as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*), Margaret Tate receives a seal of approval from Andrew's grandmother Annie Paxton, who claims to be part Klingit and engages in what she presents as indigenous ceremonies. One of these ceremonies reveals Margaret—the corporate "witch" and terrifying boss—as the true heir to American legitimacy. The catch, however, is that she must balance her cut-throat capitalist/expansionist tendencies with cultural nationalist frontier values; in marrying Andrew, she not only submits to a partnership with a man, but also recognizes the importance of loyalty: to nation, to family, and to an Anglo/Protestant tradition in which people like the Paxtons can continue to rule.

he does not know his place. His position is fundamentally contradictory, since he is needed to perform servile labor, but cannot ever make his way into the heart of society. Margaret's "capitalist" aggressiveness, then, is celebrated, while Ramone's subaltern aggressiveness is vilified and lampooned.

Here, then, we have a clear vision of the biological Real in the New North. Like my neighbors' pit bulls or Ramon's bumping and grinding, biology is visceral, intrusive, and concrete. But this physical form of the Real obscures the spectral power that lies behind it: deterritorialized capital flows, commodity exchange, and the abstract imperative to fend off falling rates of profit. My neighbors, for example, may have been disturbing in a direct phenomenological sense: the eyes of traumatized children gazing at us through a closed screen door, the threat of being hit by a meth-crazed driver, the sight of pit bulls leaping at a tire hanging from a tree in a grassless yard. But behind these terrifying Neighbors lay another grid, their long hours and low wages conditioned within a labor/capital relation that was not immediately visible and certainly not operating in their interest. When these people train their pit bulls to attack, what are they afraid of? What is driving them, and from where? *The Proposal* provides one allegorical answer: the film's true geographical center is not Alaska, but the financial node of New York City. Andrew ultimately flees from Sitka, refuses to marry a (perfectly nice) local girl, and instead merges with Margaret, such that the true marriage is between the cultural nationalism embodied in Alaska and the financial power embodied in New York City. The latter needs the former for legitimation, but the upper hand lies in New York, not in Alaska. Ramone, then, can run to Alaska in order to avoid the long arm of federal law, but eventually he, too, must grapple with the spectral power of a market economy

managed in a way that is detrimental to his security and well-being. If we see past his role as a biological intruder, we might notice the anxiety in his face (during the closing credits), as he is questioned by an immigration officer; his fear is in this sense universal, since it is shared by anyone who faces the risk of displacement in a fast-moving regime of flexible accumulation. And when Andrew (as if in a slip of the tongue) labels his boss Margaret a “terrorist,” he reveals that the primary source of terror in neoliberal times is not Al Quaida, but a political economy that is functionally terroristic, since it pits people and places against each other in relationships of mutual fear.

#### Peter’s Avocado: Hybridity and Purity

In his focus on *biology* in *Brown*, however, Rodriguez misses many of the *spectral* aspects of today’s cultural context. He has much to say about “poverty and morality,” but precious little to say about the abstract structures of the postmodern digital economy as such. Poverty is an intrusion from the South, whose people come to the North for a better life—by which, presumably, Rodriguez implies a kind of hybrid between what he sees as Southern cultural patterns (family, religion, a recognition of tragedy) and Northern ones (individualism, pragmatism, the comedy of upward mobility): “Perhaps Americans will be rescued by the South...the climate of the inevitable...Down, down to the netherworld of biology...But also of faith” (165). Thus although he takes a kind of *schadenfreude* in the violation of the prissy individualist “American I,” which naively imagines that it can remain separate from the rest of the world, Rodriguez takes an almost entirely *cultural* attitude toward the conflict between North and South. He does not dwell on the colonial economic process through which American power helped to

*produce* the South as we know it, even as Southern workers helped produce the North.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Mexicans play the role of giving Anglo-Americans a dose of reality, as it were—of reminding them of their limitations, of mortality and biology. Rodriguez’s admonition in an essay like “Peter’s Avocado” is accordingly a cultural one: get used to hybridization and impurity, celebrate the loss of boundaries by affirming the strange and complicated mixtures that result from global flows, and recognize that we cannot protect ourselves from the encroaching world of biology. In other words, Rodriguez urges us to embrace a risky cosmopolitan venture built around an uncomfortable but fecund confrontation with Neighbors. And he conflates this cosmopolitan openness with love, both sexual and religious.

In repeating his friend’s dictum—that “We are entering an era of biology rather than the state”—Rodriguez deflects attention away from the spectral financial operations that exert such force in the world, and toward the immediate physical manifestations of that world. And he ignores the extent to which the *state* (and not merely cultural nationalism) still plays a vital role in a global economy that does not simply break down boundaries, but also builds them up. In his haste to declare the end of boundaries and the eclipse of the state by biology, Rodriguez misses the complications at work in this “state-finance nexus.” Because he sees in the near future simply a borderless anarchy (that is nevertheless pregnant with lucrative cultural possibilities for hybridization), he obscures the extent to which a transnational oligarchy presides over this anarchy, benefits from it, and largely protects itself from the “stew of humanity” faced by those at the bottom.

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<sup>38</sup> He does not mention, for example, the role played by the U.S. in shaping the stunted outcome of the Mexican Revolution in the early part of the twentieth century. And he does not describe the U.S. role in fomenting the 1982 Mexican debt crisis and subsequently exacting tribute from the Mexican state through enforced austerity policies that then become *de rigueur* maneuvers in the U.S.-led neocolonialism of subsequent decades. See Chapter 3.

What we find, then, is not a borderless world, but a world of shifting borders largely controlled from the top. The key question, then, is not about whether we should be (in principle) open to others and their differences—about whether we should batten down the hatches and erect boundaries that will protect us from the “biology” of the poor—but about *power*: about who has the right to control boundaries that are deployed as a matter of course in an ongoing project to redistribute wealth upward. With regard to Mexican immigration to the U.S., for instance, the question should not simply focus on the matter of cultural hybridity and tolerance, but also on the matter of economic power—on the way immigrants are used as a pawn in a larger game to discipline labor on both sides of the border. *Accepting* them (or even celebrating their tremendous sacrifices, as many liberal politicians do) does not change the fact of their exploitation.<sup>39</sup>

Given that contemporary neoliberal capitalist ideologues are all *for* hybridity (at least insofar as they can manage it for their purposes), that they scramble the coordinates of place with one hand while constantly erecting new boundaries with the other, Arif Dirlik’s assertion of a “place-based politics” makes more sense. As Dirlik puts it, those who would celebrate a “borderless world” not only ignore existing borders, but deprive oppositional political movements of borders as a chief means of counteracting capitalist deterritorialization: “Place as metaphor....calls for a definition of what is to be included in the place from within the place—some control over the conduct and organization of everyday life, in other words—rather than from above, from those placeless abstractions

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<sup>39</sup>Such “tolerance” is exemplified in the statements of Democratic Arizona Senator Robert Menendez, who rhapsodizes about the intense exploitation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S.: “If you got up this morning and had fruit for breakfast, it was probably picked by the bent back of an immigrant worker. If you in fact had vegetables or chicken for lunch, you probably had it de-plucked by the cut-up hands of an immigrant worker. If you slept in a hotel or a motel of the nation, you probably had your room done by an immigrant worker.” Although this litany is intended to draw attention to the often *unappreciated* work performed by low-wage workers, the reverse gesture of *appreciating* the work does not negate its exploitative quality.



such as capital, the nation-state, and their discursive expressions in the realm of theory” (22-23). And on this unequal playing field, *hybridity* (the myriad cultural collisions and crossovers celebrated by Rodriguez) tells us little about the *power relations* between the different groups and individuals involved. The answer involves not simply forging more and more hybridities and cross-overs—a process perfectly compatible with the exploitations of contemporary global capitalism—but developing egalitarian forms in whatever fashion. Such forms might involve hybridity, insofar as the term implies openness to penetration and merger, but they also might involve relative purity, insofar as the term implies a refusal of entry or the establishment of a relatively durable border, credo, or social practice. The question, again, is a matter of emphasis: on whose behalf are these borders created?

For Rodriguez in “Peter’s Avocado” any such attempt to forge a durable border—indeed, any attempt to impose undue regulation on flows into the body—is immediately suspect. He takes as his overriding metaphor the story of Peter (the vegan son of his friend Franz), who asks his father to buy him an organic avocado. The occasion provides Rodriguez with the conceit for his essay, a meditation on purity and the body which calls the integrity of borders into question. The epigraph for the essay comes from the Book of Mark (7:14): “Can’t you see that nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean, because it goes not into the heart but into the stomach and passes into the sewer?” (cited in Rodriguez 193). In the course of the essay, Rodriguez adroitly questions Peter’s motives, finding in him an untenable “dream of purification...a dream of reconciliation”—a desire to live in an ethereal place “where the wind dies” (229). In contrast to Peter’s approach, Rodriguez points to disruptions, to conflict and collision, to

“a scandal against straight lines and deciduous family trees” (203). And in doing so, he makes a valid point, that despite the intense desire among many Americans to carve out an “inviolable space” for themselves, all individuals are penetrated by a number of ambiguous forces: social, biological, parental. We cannot remain separate, and in that sense, we cannot entirely control our borders. As a result, any attempt to create a purely “clean” body or society is destined for a finicky Puritanism at best, and fascism at worst. Rodriguez powerfully draws on his own experience as a gay Mexican man to highlight the life patterns of those who do not fit into the purifying programs of others: “I lived my life in fragments. For I knew nothing was so dangerous in the world as love, my kind of love” (206). Keenly aware of his own anomalous position, he celebrates anomaly, miscegenation, and scandalous mixture. And insofar as Rodriguez’s essay functions in this queer studies vein—as an illustration of the situation of the *abject*, and as a condemnation of the violence often meted out toward those who remind others of their own incompleteness or vulnerability—he makes crucial contributions.

However, if in celebrating *brown* Rodriguez rightly condemns the cultural nationalist obsession with social hygiene--the fascist model of pure self and community that (inevitably) finds a contaminant in the archetypal anti-Semitic formulation of the “Jew”—his relentless insistence on ferreting out and condemning any desire to draw boundaries masks crucial omissions, and sets up the untenable binary between purity and hybridity that Dirlik challenges. The key symptom of Rodriguez’s evasion is his reluctance to discuss Peter’s dilemma in specific, historical terms. It is strange that in an essay ostensibly about “Peter’s Avocado,” Rodriguez devotes so little space to discussing the avocado itself, the cultural signifier that perhaps best represents the California good

life, right out of the pages of *Sunset Magazine*. He says nothing about its origin, its production, and its history, but instead treats Peter's decision as a springboard for theological and theoretical points about mixed motives, impurity, and so on. The reason is apparent enough: the finicky Peter makes an easy target. Like many other people who insist on eating only organic food, he is probably motivated by some combination of bad faith and blind self-congratulation. Insofar as people like Peter imagine that by buying organic, they are washing their proverbial hands of the system that produces conventional/industrial food, they are kidding themselves. People like Peter often seek to absolve themselves of the sins of a capitalist society by paying a supplemental price (for example, more money for organic food), such that a clean conscience is included in the price of the commodity. And insofar as people are consumed by a religious desire for their own health above all, they do indeed deny the "spiritual guilt" to which Rodriguez justifiably calls our attention (218).

Despite articulating the blanket statement that "Ah! We are deeply impure. Because our environment is impure," Rodriguez never describes the relevant ways in which our socially constructed environment is impure (218). As a result, he reifies impurity as an abiding feature, such that challenging any particular impurity is treated as an exercise in Puritanism. The mesh, however, demands more complicated responses. He doesn't describe the pesticides sprayed on crops in places like the Central Valley in California (or Mexico or Chile), or the migrant farm worker who is not only exposed to these pesticides but receives a subminimum wage for his efforts. He doesn't describe the way treaties like NAFTA empower corporate farmers in the U.S.—already subsidized by U.S. tax payers—to dump grain into the Mexican market, thereby forcing farmers off their

land and into proletarianization (and often, into dangerous migrations to the U.S.). He doesn't describe Wilson Popenoe, the wealthy white U.S. horticulturalist who travelled to Guatemala and found what he called "alligator pears" (later called avocados) which he then began to market in the U.S. Although a fawning biography describes Popenoe as a "friend to Latin America," he was actually an appendage to U.S. colonial exploitation.<sup>40</sup> Funded by his father's mines in Costa Rica, he was subsequently employed by the United Fruit Company, a corporation implicated in widespread exploitation of Guatemalan workers, and in the U.S.-led coup in 1954 which deposed the democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz after he promised to confiscate UFC-owned land and distribute it more fairly among Guatemala's poor Mayan majority.<sup>41</sup> The value of the plants fostered by Popenoe—the avocado in Guatemala, the banana in Honduras—largely ended up benefiting U.S. companies, along with elite Latin American managers. Such an anomalous figure (a white U.S. citizen living in Guatemala, with a foot in multiple worlds) is nothing if not a hybrid and a border-crosser. But the power in the situation is all his.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Fredric Rosengarten, Jr.'s *Wilson Popenoe: Agricultural Explorer, Educator, and Friend of Latin America*.

<sup>41</sup> Today you can visit Popenoe's ostentatious house in Antigua, Guatemala, which, according to [www.popenoe.com](http://www.popenoe.com), is a "must-see on every tourist's itinerary."

<sup>42</sup> If Peter thinks that buying an organic avocado absolves him of any involvement in this mess, he is indeed mistaken. Rather, in his preoccupation with his own health and purity, he is taken up by a contemporary version of what Biblical scholar Marcus Borg describes as a "politics of holiness" operative in the Roman-occupied Palestine of Jesus's time (see, for example, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in The Teachings of Jesus*, reprinted in 1998). The Roman occupiers made it difficult and costly for Jews to follow Jewish Sabbath and kosher laws, and the famous Pharisees thought that since they *could* afford to follow these laws, they could pat themselves on the back and demonize those who didn't meet their rigorous standard. It was these ostensibly "holy" Pharisees whom Jesus addressed when he proclaimed that nothing eaten defiles a man--that merely following the kosher laws did not make one pure, since so many other glaring impurities lurked in the background, unaddressed by these rigorous devotees of their own purity. Today's ostentatious consumers of "local food," the people who can afford to spend weekends making sausage out of grass-fed pigs—and who think that somehow such actions earn them a privileged position in the eyes of the Big Other—are indeed the descendants of Pharisees. Rodriguez, then, could have called attention to other passages in the New Testament: for example, Matthew 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice

Rodriguez, then, chides Peter for wanting an organic avocado (and for not eating meat), but he never considers the notion that Peter—however afflicted with false consciousness about his own implication in these matters—might point toward phenomena worth considering: pesticide use, resource management, worker exploitation, and an entire colonial history. In doing so, Rodriguez misses the kernel of critique in the desire for purity. He calls attention to poverty, but seems content to note our impurity (and the impurity of our environment) and move on. The poor, apparently, will always be with us. And though he describes the Sermon on the Mount—“that plain-air toss of ambiguous bread”—as “the brownest rendition of love I can summon,” and as a “divine paradox,” he does not see that the Sermon on the Mount (like much of Christian philosophy) does not lead to mere ambiguity or paradox, but to contradiction and upheaval (25). The notion that “the poor shall inherit the earth” coincides with another of Jesus’s sayings: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (Mathew 10: 34-36). Jesus here is resolutely opposed to cultural nationalism, to notions of affiliation based on kinship or tribe; this is why the familial bonds must be broken. But he is certainly willing to draw borders. This “sword,” as it were, operates not in service of a pure community that can

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and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” In these passages, Jesus rails against the Pharisees who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others,” who “love to have the place of honor at banquets,” and who “lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.” Do these passages not describe many of the contemporary adherents to the “foodie movement,” who obsess about every little herb (and who pay extra tithes for them), but who neglect the weightier matter: that whether organic or conventional, the capitalist agricultural system rapaciously exploits workers and destroys environments for the profit of a few? But although Rodriguez is wise to these modern-day Pharisees, he does not adequately move beyond them; he, too, remains fixated on the tithes of mint and dill, and not on the weightier matters of the law.

only achieve unity by excluding a scapegoat, but in the service of a universal community: that of the excluded themselves. Rather than simply celebrating hybrids like Wilson Popenoe for their interesting border-crossings, such a cleansing violence would take the side of the Mayan peons who do his work. And it would be unapologetic about drawing such a boundary.

Rodriguez's mapping of North and South, then, is both valuable and limited. In his attack on cultural nationalism, in his defense of the abject (the ambiguous, the composite), and in his recognition that the self is imbricated in a number of social and material forces, he is headed in the right direction. His celebration of *brown* is in many ways a defense of the hysterical subject, who is never satisfied with answers to the question, "Why am I who you say that I am?" But all of this multiplicity leads nowhere—or more exactly, plays into the hands of capital—if we celebrate hybridity in any form, and if we point only to the biological Real and not to the spectral Real of capital. Žižek, in contrast, imagines a hysterical subject who, like Rodriguez, appreciates his or her incompleteness and vulnerability, but who nevertheless deploys an active defense of the proletariat, here conceived as the embodiment of that universal vulnerability. In Alain Badiou's terms, these "invisible" people, whose ontological being is less than that of others, are the basis of any emancipatory revolution: "In any world there are inexistent beings who are alive, but on whom the world confers minimal intensity of experience. Any creative affirmation is rooted in identification of the inexistent of the world" (68). In "Peter's Avocado," the migrant workers (and indeed, the avocados themselves!) remain inexistent, excluded from Rodriguez's full analysis. But it is these people with whom he should be most concerned, and not with people like Peter.

Rodriguez, then, is correct when he argues that there is no permanent escape from “impurity,” from our imbrication in an impure society and environment. But he seems all too willing to allow that society and environment to remain largely as it is. The larger danger, for him, lies in the desire for a smoother and more harmonious world. His chief foil, the Utopian New Northerners, seek such a world by excluding people like him. In response, he rejects all Utopian thinking and instead encourages us to learn to tolerate the new and shifting neighbors of an era defined by a collapsing distance between global players. But in doing so, he unwittingly embraces the Utopian rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism itself. Is there no hope, then, for a Utopian vision that is not grounded on abjection and exclusion, but on a defense of the excluded? Is it misguided to strive for a space of critical distance from which to transform society and the environment—what Alain Badiou calls a “politics of subtraction”—or should we simply make our lowly way through an impure world? By examining the New Northern impulse more closely through a look at John Krakauer’s 1996 book *Into the Wild*, perhaps we will find some answers.

#### Outside in Society: The Politics of Subtraction at the End of History

Escaping from society is not the best way of changing it. On the other hand, radical disassociation from society as it is may be inevitable as a first step before any meaningful reconstruction of society even appears on the horizon as a possibility.  
 --Arif Dirlik in “Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place” (39)

Ironic disruption is... a species of uncanniness: it is an *unheimlich* maneuver. The life and identity that I have hitherto taken as familiar have suddenly become unfamiliar. However, there is this difference: in an ordinary experience of the uncanny, there is mere disruption: the familiar is suddenly and disruptively experienced as unfamiliar. What is peculiar to [Kierkegaardian] irony is that it manifests passion for a certain direction.... An experience of standard-issue uncanniness may give us goose bumps or churn our stomachs; the experience of ironic uncanniness, by contrast, is more like losing the ground beneath one’s feet: one longs to go in a certain direction, but one no longer knows where one is standing, if one is standing, or which direction is the right direction.... The

point, then, is not about leaving the social world behind, but about a particular way of living in relation to it.

--Jonathan Lear in *A Case for Irony* (19)

In a 2012 article about the recently disbanded alternative rock band REM, *Atlantic* writer James Parker describes mishearing a lyric from a 1978 Patti Smith song. Although the words of “Rock n Roll Nigger” actually read, “Outside of society / They’re waiting for me! / Outside of society / That’s where I want to be!,” Parker didn’t realize until years later that he was hearing them backwards: not “outside of society” but “outside *in* society.” Parker ultimately prefers his version of the words, since, as he puts it, the “real” lyrics simply repeat the predictable Romantic desire for a space outside society where the self can discover freedom; his own misheard lyrics, on the other hand, present the exhilarating—and much more dangerous—picture of confronting or meshing with (some form of) society in an effort both to discover its pleasures and to challenge its structure: “My lines...to break the spell of self and plunge into the processes of life, the roiling human designs—to get *out* there, *into* society: the idea is intoxicating!” But as Parker (who happens to be British) suggests, Patti Smith’s romantic version of “rejectionist” rebellion is the more typical path in U.S. culture (44). From Huckleberry Finn to Peter and his avocado, and from Daniel Boone to the libertarian tech entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley, U.S. cultural heroes have often yearned to go it alone, to flee the structures of society in search of a self supposedly grounded in authentic nature.

Such an escape, moreover, often implies a desire for innocence, and thus an escape from authority and power. The American Adam of U.S. folklore and literature desires to be free of social imbrications, to float in the clouds of innocence without being penetrated by the outside world. Accordingly, when Richard Rodriguez channels the



voice of the “American I,” he outlines a desire for an “inviolable space”: “My space should not be violated by smoke or scent or chemical fume, by sound or sight or touch or sexual innuendo or prayer or immigrant. My space, moreover, should not be violated by authority—by parents, doctors, clergy, teachers” (217). As Leslie Fiedler noted in 1960, such a figure fears settling down into a social order or a domestic home life, but thereby remains perpetually committed to a desexualized boyhood; in strenuously insisting on his own impenetrability, he allows no room for adult love and social commitment. But although he would like his rebellion against paternal authority to result in a free world of equal relations, the father’s uncanny specter inevitably comes back; not only does the American Adam feel guilty about killing the father, but he cannot shake off the fact that he has usurped his role. As a result, despite the best efforts of the American Adam to create what Fiedler calls a “sunlit, neoclassical world,” (128) the gothic form reappears, demanding an answer to the questions: What will you do with the question of power? What new society will you create? As a result, the questions raised by Arif Dirlik, not simply about the “escape” from society, but about the coordinates of its reconstruction, cannot be avoided.

Yet as Dirlik also registers, the prospect of actually *transforming* contemporary life (rather than simply adding more fluctuations to the already-regimented series of continual changes that operate in a neoliberal market society characterized by constant innovation and creative destruction) is difficult to imagine if we cannot establish some form of critical distance from that hegemonic social world. Dirlik’s proposal, then, echoes what Jonathan Lear describes as the Kierkegaardian ironic question. For Lear, the practitioner of Kierkegaardian ironic uncanniness temporarily withdraws from her

performance of a given social role, struck by a sense of ignorance about what she should do; but crucially, she does not deny the importance of social reality or ethical commitment. She does not cling to a neutral or innocent form of indecision by throwing up her hands at the undecideability of it all. Instead, even if the ironic question (quintessentially for Kierkegaard, “Among all Christians, is there a Christian?”) disrupts because it has no clear answer, it resonates in such a way that opens up renewed and urgent commitment within a social matrix. Dirlik similarly asks fundamental questions about the neoliberal situation: Among all changes, is there a change? Among all escapes, is there an escape? And finally, among all choices, is there a choice? And these questions, ideally, would lead not simply to more questions, but to new narratives, new attachments, new forms of agency, and new boundaries. Perhaps most importantly, such narratives might enable us to mourn, not simply for the losses associated with postcolonial melancholia (the fantasy of omnipotence, innocence, autonomy, nature), but also for the loss of stable narrative meaning itself.

How do we mourn, then? Fredric Jameson, for one, suggests that the Fukayaman recipe of perpetual innovation within a static frame transforms the very notions of loss and mourning, such that “change without its opposite” easily becomes *loss without its opposite* (*The Seeds of Time* 9). As the dynamics of capitalism eliminate residual spaces of past modes of production, we become deprived of viable historical reference points that might anchor a long-term calendar of structural change and help us measure progress (and register loss) in the first place. Bereft of any metanarrative of emancipation from current dynamics, mourning becomes both perpetual and perpetually stalled; in the incessant flickering of transient and ever-shifting digital images and texts, we find a

prototype for a type of experience in which loss becomes indistinguishable from daily life, heading in no particular direction. Whatever we experience, it is always-already *passé*, outmoded, disappeared, such that we can't experience anything without registering its incipient ruin. The very banality and constancy of such change results in a numbing quality that Thomas de Zengotita has called "culture as anesthetic." For de Zengotita, the symptomatic gesture of such a culture can be found in the TV news anchor's characteristic shift from one topic to another ("A hint of a sigh, a slight shake of the head, eye down-turning; the note of seasoned resignation") and the ensuing edit, as if to say, "If it were up to me as a human being, I would never leave this coverage of thousands of dying innocents, but, as a newscaster, of course, I have to" (39). De Zengotita's point, of course, is that the news anchor's tic is not hers alone, but ours: "That's the one real reality. Moving on" (39). Like Benjamin's gambler trapped in *Erlebnis*, we follow de Zengotita's news anchor by discarding the past at every step.

To be sure, Jameson exaggerates for rhetorical purposes: he is trying to disturb us, to highlight the depthless character of much of contemporary experience. But not every place has been colonized, and in the gothic margins we still register losses of a more profound order. To begin with, we still face the crucial intervention of "death and the passage of the generations"--not simply the particular deaths we experience more or less directly, but also a general sense of decay and violence that belies the smooth dream of the flickering digital world: "not even bodies rotting off stage but rather something persistent like an odor that circulates through the luminous immobility of this world without time" (Jameson *The Seeds of Time* 19). Benjamin, too, saw a suppression of the experience of death in the bourgeois life-world, such that if "dying was once a public

process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one...in the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living” (*Illuminations* 93-94). But it is precisely death that provides “authority” (94) to an older kind of storyteller, since it represents the prototype for an irrevocable transformation—a trace of finality that haunts the TV anchorperson’s shift to a new topic—and because the veil of death mediates the storyteller’s reliance on an entire structure of cultural memory that links him to the past, to ghosts, to ancestors. Death stands as the quintessential binding moment that enables narrative to emerge from chaos. Thus the primacy of death continues in the tradition of the novel, in which death (whether the literal death of a character, or the figurative death of the novel’s ending) provides the basis for hermeneutic interpretation as such, retroactively enabling speculation about the novel’s meaning—and by extension, “the meaning of life” (99). The novel’s narration, then, “yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate”: “What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (101).

In such gothic images of a deathly odor largely repressed within utopian capitalist rhetoric, we find the return of Benjamin’s “long experience” [*Erfahrung*]. Through storytelling and novel-reading, through ritual and memory, through confronting the significant and irrevocable moment of death, we can register the strangeness of time passing and envision interventions that might derail the serial reshuffling of cards inherent in *spleen*. Benjamin therefore highlighted “the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’...the objects that have begun to be extinct...the dresses of five years ago” (“Surrealism” 73). In turning our attention toward these objects—the cards tossed into the pile and abandoned—we are no longer transfixed by the next card, but instead

pause to consider the losses that we experience as a matter of course. And registering these losses can be a prelude to growth and transformation. In terms of historical consciousness, then, we can find ambiguous critical potential in even the most reactionary and archaic social worlds, since in these abandoned worlds we often find an implicit critique of contemporary conditions. This process of reconsideration is what *the gothic quest for place* means: digging through the ruins of the social world in search of clues, not simply to indicate the presence of a bygone crime, but to orient us in a process of social reconstruction.

Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild*, and the New North:

No Neighbors at All

The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun. If you want to get more out of life, Ron, you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy....Don't settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon....You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living....Ron, I really hope that as soon as you can you will get out of Salton City, put a little camper on the back of your pickup, and start seeing some of the great work that God has done here in the American West.  
--Alexander Supertramp (aka Christopher McCandless), in a letter to Ronald Franz cited in *Into the Wild* (57-58)

[There is] a kind of freedom we often undervalue: freedom from burdensome emotional ties with the environment, freedom from communal responsibilities, freedom from the tyranny of the traditional home and its possessions; the freedom from belonging to a tight-knit social order; and above all, the freedom to move on to somewhere else.  
—J.B. Jackson from *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (100-101)

It is from within this static and dreamless post-1989 Fukayaman era, in which dominant cultural voices have posited free market capitalism and representative

democracy as the conditions for all future development, that Jon Krakauer's 1996 book *Into the Wild* emerged, both as a document of one young man's doomed attempt to escape the neoliberal order, and as an ambivalent reconsideration of—indeed, a neurotic and obsessive process of working through—his traumatic failure. In exploring a contemporary American Adam's adventures in the New North, Krakauer lingers over a smell of death that refuses to dissipate. (Sean Penn's 2007 film carries on the would-be therapeutic process, raking the story of Christopher McCandless over the coals yet again from a more distant historical vantage point in which the early 1990s have already begun to become outmoded). *Into the Wild* narrates the life and death of recent college graduate Christopher McCandless, an intelligent and resourceful young man who in 1990 disappeared without notifying his family, donated the bulk of his money to the global charity Oxfam, got rid of his car, and began tramping around the Western U.S. and Mexico before finally trekking to Alaska, where he intended to live off the land for as long as he could. In the end, McCandless starved to death in an abandoned bus, unable to survive alone in his isolated outpost.

If it is true, as Northrop Frye has put it, that the tragic form proceeds as a case before judge and jury, such that the audience listens to lawyers laying out different perspectives on a case, then *Into the Wild* puts the American Adam—with his desire for escape into the characteristically innocent Western space of the New North—on trial from within this Fukayaman period. Krakauer's view is elegiac, rueful; he sympathizes with McCandless's desire for freedom, and both laments and pays tribute to the young man's tragic innocence. He allows the prosecution to speak, but he acts as McCandless's defense attorney: yes, Christopher McCandless was flawed, impetuous, morally

absolutist, self-absorbed, and so on. Yes, he displayed hubris. He was flawed. But in his desire to take risks, in his search for “spiritual revolution”—above all, in his willingness to suffer in his search for beauty and autonomy—McCandless is a tragic hero of sorts (163). He realized too late that he could not go it alone, but if he had lived, we would probably be describing him as a remarkable man. Yet there is something particularly haunting about Chris McCandless’s story. He is not merely a *tragic* character in Krakauer’s terms, but a particularly *uncanny* and *gothic* one. Why, we might ask, are we still talking about such American Adam figures? Why, in other words, must such a character—fiercely defensive of his innocence, committed to escape and independence—be repeated again and again, not only in the tragic form of Christopher McCandless and kindred souls like Everett Ruess (a young man who disappeared into the Utah wilderness in the 1930s), but also in the more comic or “successful” forms of Patti Smith’s punk rock heroes and New Northern libertarians?

Accordingly, Krakauer’s investigation into McCandless’s death often slips into a ghastly tone, as if the author’s obsession with McCandless has veered over into claustrophobic discomfort. For Krakauer the Alaskan wilderness, remapped as the site of McCandless’s death, loses many of its connotations of freedom and beauty, and instead becomes something closer to what Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock has described as Charles Brockdon Brown’s “frontier gothic” tradition. Like the Norwalk of Brown’s 1799 novel *Edgar Huntly*, the Alaskan wilderness “almost consciously thwarts human intentions”; it is

a place of mystery and concealment—a site of hidden hollows, numberless waterfalls, and underground passages. It is a space outside time, of midsummer snow and ‘slow decay’ where ‘eternal murmurs’ whisper across the detritus of ‘storms of ages.’ And it is a devious space that tempts one with the ‘promise’ of

knowledge, only to frustrate one's designs with paths that ultimately lead nowhere. (47)

Investigating the area around the bus where McCandless died, Krakauer is struck by “something disquieting about this Gothic, overgrown landscape,” such that it becomes not merely challenging, but positively “malevolent”: “our feet churn the muck on the bottom into a foul-smelling miasma of decomposing slime” (175-176). And when after trudging through this forbidding place (“gloomy, claustrophobic, oppressive”) Krakauer finally discovers the bus, he recoils at the traces of McCandless in the place: “Sitting on a steel cot across from the stove to mull over this eerie tableau, I encounter evidence of McCandless's presence wherever my vision rests....I feel uncomfortable, as if I were intruding, a voyeur who has slipped into McCandless's bedroom while he is momentarily away. Suddenly queasy, I stumble out of the bus to walk along the river and breathe some fresh air” (179-180).

The ghost of Christopher McCandless, then, hovers over the book (and the film) as an unquiet presence—not quite as a triumphant (if flawed) tragic character who sees a truth and falls in dignity, but as a specter who betokens a mystery yet to be solved, and as a figure with whom Krakauer feels both repulsion and an uncanny connection. In response to attacks on McCandless by local Alaskans—that he didn't know what he was doing in the wilderness, that he was yet another privileged upper middle-class kid who threw away his opportunities, that he recklessly endangered his own health and the feelings of his friends and family—Krakauer suggests that these vehement reactions may conceal the ultimate similarity between McCandless's desires and their own: “I'm sure there are plenty of other Alaskans who had a lot in common with McCandless when they first got here, too, including many of his critics. Which is maybe why they're so hard on



him. Maybe McCandless reminds them a little too much of their former selves” (186). And as Krakauer makes clear, he too identifies with McCandless. Although Krakauer insists that he does not intend to intrude on this story, he spends two chapters describing his own story of obsession in the Alaskan wilderness, recalling a (failed) attempt at an unprecedented solo ascent of Devil’s Thumb in Alaska. As he makes clear, his connection with McCandless is based first and foremost on a shared Oedipal drama; Krakauer, like McCandless, was trying to prove his independence to a father who he perceived as tyrannical and smothering. And like McCandless, Krakauer was not looking for death exactly, but for an exhilarating form of adventure that might filter out the details of the outside world. In the localized immediacy of adventure, Krakauer desperately hoped to find purpose: a “world” and thus a meaning in life.

For Krakauer, then, McCandless is not simply a piece of *information*, not simply a news item to be discarded on the pile, but a fitting subject for a *story* that might provide us with an opportunity to pause and reflect. But if Krakauer finds resonance in age-old dramas—the son striving to impress a father who he both loves and rages against, and in the spiritual adventure—he spends relatively little time discussing McCandless’s social and political context. To put it another way, in the trial staged in Krakauer’s book, the one on trial is Christopher McCandless, and not the society and culture out of which he came. But perhaps it is impossible to understand McCandless’s uncanny quality without prying into the question of why our society continually produces such figures in the first place. Why the urge to escape? To escape from what? Krakauer’s reluctance to engage the merely historical, as opposed to the mythical, is itself symptomatic of the New Northern sensibility; for Rodriguez, New Northerners flee toward the “prehistoric” and

“anti-historical” rhythms of Nature, the mythical self, the “route of the whale” rather than face “all we disapprove in human history” (188). But the uncomfortable familiarity of Christopher McCandless is not simply that he reveals to us some universal or Jungian archetype of the young warrior or the Icarus-like searcher—that he represents something about the adolescent stage of life that his Alaskan critics would like to repress—but that he reveals something about ideals which they *still hold*: about freedom, purity, promise, autonomy, and the like. It is not so easy, then, for the dominant U.S. cultural imagination to forget McCandless. His death (so graphically depicted in the film) resonates as what Jameson calls an “odor that circulates through the luminous immobility” of a digital culture.

The reason he resonates is perhaps because he suggests the ironic question: Among all autonomous individuals, where is the autonomous individual? Like his fellow postcolonial melancholiacs of the New North, McCandless trumpets his innocence and flees from what he sees as invasive social structures. And in doing so, he disowns any further connection to those who have been affected by U.S. coloniality. Notably, he does *not* head to the metaphoric South, toward Indian reservations or to Guatemala, but North to an Alaska that he imagines as a pristine refuge. And there he takes the New Northern ideology even more seriously than its usual practitioners do; not content to articulate a cultural nationalist restriction of borders, he dreams of the absolute purity of an individual self-sufficiency uncontaminated by any form of community whatsoever, let alone the circulation of commodities and capital enabled by the capitalist superstate. He wants to evade both of the chief forms of intrusion in contemporary life: spectrality *and* biology. Traumatized by the over-proximity of Neighbors, he attempts to live in a place

where he can have *no Neighbors at all*. Thus on the one hand, he wants to “kill the false being within” by rejecting the abstract “poison of civilization” (literally, by burning his money) and encountering the world directly (cited in Krakuer 163). He wants to escape many aspects of a hegemonic capitalist society that theorists have often defined in terms of space rather than place: top-down abstraction, communications technologies, the reification of social identities (including class positions), and commodification. In fleeing to a stone-age idyll, he rejects the technology that typifies a spectral West built in tandem with the military/industrial complex (and rebels against his father, a brilliant engineer who designed satellite equipment to benefit the Cold War state). But on the other hand, his rejection of spectral abstraction coincides with a parallel rejection of biology, of the social more generally—of sexuality, of the interpenetration of human beings, of fecundity. His rejection of his parents (and as one of McCandless’s friends put it, his rejection of “the very idea of parents” [115]) signifies a fear of *brown*: the abject, the in-between and composite space of the mother-body, impurity, making, nurturing, the “fugue and funk” of loss and uncertainty, the permeable self.

In his vehement rejection not only of government but also of the family, the domestic home space, the church, the money system, the corporation, and the institutions of contemporary capitalism, he unmasks the contradictions implied by a Reaganite ethnic core that would unite all of these elements under the signifier “private.” McCandless, then, functions like what Slavoj Žižek calls the “obscene supplement” of the liberal individualist frontier imagination in the U.S., since he takes its animating impulses (the desire for autonomous self-creation, self-naming, self-authorship free of external authority) to an uncanny and gruesome breaking point. He is the disturbing return of the

repressed figure of the mountain man: nomadic, antisocial, and unassimilable. And the frontier individualism he represents has now been hounded to the far spaces of the New North, where it subsists on life support. As Rodriguez puts it,

What is endangered in America is the notion of the West. In the late 1950s, at the same time that California became the most populous state, Alaska became a new horizon—an albino hope, a gray-rolled cumulus, a glacial obsession—like Melville’s great whale. Alaska absorbed all the nouns that lay bleaching along the Oregon Trail. Solitude. Vacancy. Wilderness. (156)

If Alaska is the “white whale,” Christopher McCandless is its self-described Ahab, destined to flounder in its wake. His loss, then, is actually *our* loss, rooted in our inability to offer him a vision beyond the frontier ideology he so uncannily repeats. *Into the Wild*, then, stages an ambivalent process of mourning for the loss of the West, not simply as a literal frontier, but as an ideal. Not yet able to focus on the experience of the colonized excluded, it registers these figures only obliquely, in the background. Instead, in lingering on the grotesque details of a death in the wilderness, it documents the loss of the autonomous individual as such, leaving its survivors with questions appropriate for an age of U.S. postcolonial melancholia: what are we left with now? What kind of society would we like to create, and with what structures and openings—what combination of borders and hybridities?

### Utopias and Heterotopias

If McCandless’s yen for escape ultimately leaves him in the uncanny company of desexualized American Adams from Huckleberry Finn to Faulkner’s Ike McCaslin (and even Rodriguez’s Peter), we may have something to learn about a more profound politics of subtraction from his strange tour through the marginalized spaces of the American

West. Our lot is not simply to mock him and move on. McCandless's journey, after all, does not merely take place in Alaska. Rather, McCandless's circuitous odyssey also leads him to any number of odd corners: failed real estate booms, an abandoned army base transformed into a mobile flea market, an inland ocean produced by an engineering mistake, and various lumpenproletariat camps full of hippies and drifters. As if striving to squeal out of the grid of fragmented homogeneity that is capitalist space, McCandless seeks out spaces in which ownership over land is particularly hazy, in which (residual) alternative patterns and habits of dwelling unevenly persist despite their imbrication in a larger hegemonic pattern of ownership. McCandless moves on from these places as soon as they begin to intrude on his autonomy, but they linger in the reader's (or viewer's) memory, providing shards of possibility for different forms of society, affiliation, and ownership. In these discarded, accidental places—the archaic ruins of Utopian dreams left behind in U.S. development—we find room for a Benjaminian *long experience* and a pregnant pause in which ironic reflection can occur.

In a sense, then, *Into the Wild* can be read not as a story of McCandless's "inner journey," not about the *foreground* of the hero's experience; instead, the story's greater interest lies in the *background* through which McCandless travels. Like Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu Mama Tambien* and *Children of Men* in Žižek's interpretation, the film, especially, achieves the effect of *anamorphosis*, a "paradox" through which a certain dimension of reality can only be disclosed obliquely, not directly: "If you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background." If we wanted to, we could view its out-of-the-way spaces, with their non-normative living patterns, as heterotopias in Foucault's terms—as "other

spaces” separate from a dominant social order. But despite their seemingly marginal character, none of these spaces remains independent of late capitalism’s oppressive social dimension. None is an absolute space, not even the Alaskan wilderness. Instead, although the various spaces in *Into the Wild* are largely floundering projects imbued with an escapist Foucauldian ethos, we find in them glimpses of a different way of imagining heterotopias: in Henri Lefebvre’s terms, not as isolated alternatives to a hegemonic order, but as sites for a dynamic interplay between a marginal space of desire and the colonizing efforts of that dominant social order. Such spaces enable a possibility of ironic Kierkegaardian reflection about the totality of which they are an unstable part.

Before describing McCandless’s travels throughout the U.S. proper, it is important to note that the young man flirted with (but ultimately rejected) the opportunity to explore the Southern world of Mexico and Guatemala. And to the extent that the South exists in the U.S. as well (especially in Los Angeles), his rejection of Mexico and Guatemala provides a point of departure for understanding the irresistible urge that pulls him to Alaska. For McCandless is not interested in *any* heterotopia, but only in those spaces that might enable him to avoid *spectrality* and *biology*. And in *Into the Wild*, Mexico does not come across as it might be depicted in travel brochures, as a point of access for the quaint and archaic, the natural or the free. The colonized South, rather, emerges as a space specifically unprotected from the spectral effects of neoliberal power.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, then, McCandless must leave Mexico and Los Angeles, since in these

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<sup>43</sup> In U.S. culture, Mexico often provides a space of freedom, distant from U.S.-dominated institutions: John Wayne and the ex-prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor) running across the border to start a farm at the conclusion of John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), Sam Peckinpah’s U.S. outlaws seeking shelter (and sexual comfort) in a Mexican village in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), or in more complex and ambivalent fashion, Tommy Lee Jones pursuing the enigmatic traces of his deceased friend in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005).

spaces he cannot find even the illusion of autonomy—an illusion ironically more plentiful in the New Northern wilderness of Alaska, where it is specifically managed into existence by government policies. Thus insofar as McCandless's assertion of independence is driven by his desire to evade the paternal gaze, the South (site of surveillance, control, and the *homo sacer* dominated by sovereignty) cannot fulfill his fantasy.

As reported by Krakauer, McCandless twice enacts a journey that symbolically rejects the South and embraces the New North, thus rendering *Into the Wild* not merely a U.S. story, but a transnational story of Greater Mexico and the Hemispheric Americas. The first story occurs prior to McCandless's graduation from college and subsequent transformation into Alexander Supertramp. During a summer break from college, Christopher drives off in his Datsun and indicates his whereabouts only through two laconic postcards to his father. The first reads "Headed for Guatemala," prompting his father's panic: "When I read that I thought, 'Oh, my god, he's going down there to fight for the insurrectionists. They're going to line him up in front of a wall and shoot him'" (124). But later, Walt McCandless receives a second postcard, which reads "Leaving Fairbanks tomorrow, see you in a couple of weeks." As Krakauer interjects, "It turned out he'd changed his mind and instead of heading south had driven to Alaska" (124). In the second story, narrated both in Krakauer's book and in Sean Penn's film, Christopher—newly self-christened as Alexander Supertramp—leaves his Datsun in a ditch in Arizona, buys a used kayak, and floats down the Colorado River, hoping to reach its conclusion. But rather than finding a space of triumphant release at the river's end (which apparently, he envisions in poetic terms as an erotic discharge into the sea), he finds evidence of

Mexico's colonized position relative to the United States. As in Palestine, where Israel assumes control over water supplies and grants only a pittance to the occupied territories, the United States appropriates most of the water in the Colorado River before it reaches Mexico.

Each of these stories indicates that, for McCandless, the South inhibits his New Northern self-image as a heroic, innocent, and autonomous traveler. Had he travelled to Guatemala, McCandless would have headed toward human history rather than prehistory, and may have discovered the extent to which U.S. wilderness, by contrast, is a socially constructed space managed by powerful institutions—local police and authorities, but also federal park rangers equipped with helicopters and complex navigational equipment. Having climbed volcanoes in Guatemala myself—well after the civil war—I can attest to the profound difference in the felt phenomenological experience of place between a managed First World wilderness space and Guatemala's less protected terrain. Although I don't consider myself an overly cautious traveler (my wife and I hitchhiked through much of the country), I can hardly conceive of trudging off into the Guatemalan mountains without a guide and a sizable group of travelers. The risk of bandits or gangs is not to be ignored, such that in any such trip one could not focus on the "natural" scenery without constantly sensing potential (human) dangers around the corner. In Guatemala today—a barely managed state in which narco-traffickers, gangs, and ex-military thugs co-exist with corrupt policemen, Mayan villagers, and a fearful middle-class minority—one cannot reliably depend on authorities. Such risk, of course, would have been magnified by many times during the Civil War. In such a context, the



overriding need for social solidarity could not be escaped; one simply has to depend on others in order to survive.

In Mexico, McCandless learns a comparable lesson. When he finally *does* make his way to what we might call the global South, he discovers that he had reason for trepidation, since Mexico confounds his desire for a “spiritual revolution” in natural solitude (163). In a surreptitious (indeed, *illegal*) kayak trip down the Colorado River, he finds Mexico to be the exact opposite of an escape from society. Instead, although he does manage to live alone for a time off the coast of Baja California, he cannot evade Mexico’s status as a colonized space, worked over by developmental forces. Although he derives a certain pleasure in transgressing the law, he seems uncomfortable with his illegitimate status there as a noncitizen who has crossed the border without identification or permission, and his fantasy of omnipotence is disrupted when he sneaks across the border and discovers that the Colorado River in Mexico has become what Krakauer describes as a “maze of irrigation canals, marshland, and dead-end channels, among which McCandless repeatedly lost his way” (34). In his journal, McCandless (writing in the third person, as if authoring himself as a character in his own book) expresses dismay and confusion: “Canals break off in a multitude of directions. Alex is dumbfounded...Alex is crushed” (34). Soon enough, he finds some Spanish-speaking Mexicans who help him move the boat to a more promising location, and he notes in his diary, “Alex finds Mexicans to be warm, friendly people. Much more hospitable than Americans” (35). But the going does not improve: “All hopes collapse! The canal does not reach the ocean but merely peters out into a vast swamp. Alex is utterly

confounded....Completely demoralized and frustrated he lays in his canoe at day's end and weeps" (35).

Although he finally finds a "miracle"-- some English-speaking Mexicans who drive him to the ocean--he ultimately leaves Mexico with a bad taste in his mouth (35). The last straw occurs when a sand storm in the Gulf of California nearly kills him: "Finally through extreme effort and much cursing he manages to beach canoe on jetty and collapses exhausted on sand at sundown. This incident led Alexander to decide to abandon canoe and return north" (36). Before he can return north, however, McCandless must pass through the gauntlet of the U.S. border. After attempting to skip back into the country (while carrying a gun and no identification), McCandless spends the night in jail and loses the gun to authorities. And he discovers that crossing the border does not enable him to escape the labyrinth of the South, since it has seemingly crept over the border along with him; after travelling through the Southwest from Houston to California, faced with "the unsavory characters who rule the streets and freeway overpasses where he slept," McCandless decides that he has had enough of the South. He travels to Los Angeles "to get a ID and a job but feels extremely uncomfortable in society now and must return to road immediately" (37 sic). Los Angeles, in this rendering, is the South as well, since it lacks the dimension of autonomy available in the West of McCandless's imagination (where "the West is the best"). More than the West embalmed and preserved in the New North, it resembles the confusing network of Mexican canals. (And as I will illustrate later, Los Angeles as a site of spectrality and biology is even more clear in the film. For Sean Penn, the *city of angels* stands out as the degree-zero point of 1990s neoliberal society, a thoroughly made-over site of inequality, surveillance, and

commodity fetishism, and thus as an impure site of confusing penetration that makes innocence impossible.)

Twice, then, McCandless flirts with the idea of a Southern trip, and twice he changes his mind, fixated on the idea of the Alaskan wilderness as the prime locus for his heart's desires. The key, it seems, lies in his statement of defeat, that he "feels extremely uncomfortable in society now." Despite the hospitality of Mexicans, he cannot bear the confusing and claustrophobic quality that "society" seems to bring to places like Mexico. Rather than floating down the Colorado River in the United States, where the river is controlled according to a variety of interests (including, in large stretches, the interest to preserve the river in a managed state hospitable for wildlife and recreation—a state designed to evoke a "natural" feeling), in Mexico McCandless faces what Krakauer calls an "emasculated" river that cannot be navigated at all (32). This artificial river does not even pretend to a state of nature, but is disrupted and channeled into a bewildering array of ditches and swamps according to some larger abstract plan (or a thwarted or aborted plan, as it were). In such a place, McCandless faces not simply death, but death deprived of any heroic narrative. In Alaska, his death (should it come) would be heroic, since on such a "natural" stage he could play out his sublime fantasy of the individual in nature. In Mexico, however, his death would simply be pitiable: a solitary individual trapped in a labyrinthine, incomprehensible, and socially devised network of canals and marshes. Similarly, McCandless may have sensed that travelling to Guatemala (to "fight for the insurrectionists") would culminate in a similar morass: not a clear-cut struggle for rights, but a messy, human struggle in which McCandless might be hard-pressed to find his role.

This Southern labyrinth leads him to Los Angeles. In the film, the brown melancholy of L.A. stands out all the more intensely, since it emerges in contrast to the Grand Canyon spaces of McCandless's illicit river trip, where we become privy to McCandless's preferred mode of interacting with authority: a cat-and-mouse game in which he can simultaneously flirt with authority and avoid its reach.<sup>44</sup> But if McCandless strives to manage the terms of his perverse rebellion, he cannot always strike the right balance. L.A., in particular, leaves him honestly traumatized, just as he is in the Mexican canal system. After a series of wild adventures on a train, which allow him to inhabit the relatively safe symbolic space of the hobo evading authority, he emerges from a squalid drainage pipe to face the unsymbolizable Real of a global city and financial center. This dangerous and traumatizing place is the urban equivalent of the Guatemalan wilderness; dirty and scared, McCandless eyes the place warily, as if expecting violence around any corner. This boy has braved death in a kayak without a helmet, but there is something different about his fear of L.A., since it offers him no narrative, no individuality, no clear

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<sup>44</sup> The libidinal economy of the film's river trip scenes is by no means simple. Slavoj Žižek, in a Lacanian analysis of the 2011 UK riots, argues that *enjoyment* (of the kind experienced by McCandless during his Colorado River trip) does not constitute a *rebellion* against parental authority, but depends on this authority, since enjoyment is only achieved by evading the father's gaze. More exactly, this kind of enjoyment is secretly enabled and provoked by the father's prohibition: "While prohibiting his son's escapades, the father discreetly not only ignores and tolerates them, but even solicits them...for Lacan...the only enjoyments are the little bits left to the servant by the Master when he turns a blind eye to the servant's little transgressions...The servant's belief is that he only gets little crumbs of enjoyment, while the Master enjoys fully—in reality, however, the only enjoyment is the servant's. It is in this sense that the Father as the agent of prohibition or the law sustains desire or pleasure: there is no direct access to enjoyment since its very space is opened up by the blanks of the Father's controlling gaze" (*The Year of Living Dangerously* 49-50). Seen in these Lacanian terms, McCandless's *jouissance* can only be achieved in the interstices of the paternal gaze, which both instigates the rebellion (by turning a "blind eye" to behavior that it secretly would like to engage in) and enables the libidinally charged enjoyment. McCandless, then, would not have insisted on going on the river trip—and would certainly not have achieved such enjoyment from it—were it not prohibited by the authorities that he faces. The paternal gaze is precisely what he both courts and evades in a relatively low-stakes game. If the federal authorities actually succeeded in catching McCandless kayaking illegally down the Colorado River, one can imagine the mere slap on the wrist he would face; since no doubt such authorities harbor Huckleberry Finn fantasies themselves, they would keep a straight face for official purposes, but would play McCandless's game with him by signaling approval in oblique ways.

meaning. Here, McCandless becomes a refugee, unprotected from both the spectral and the biological Real. In line with a host of multicolored faces waiting to enter a homeless shelter, he faces what Rodriguez calls life at the bottom, the undifferentiated life of the stew of humanity. And as a devotee of the New North, he finds this place disturbing and humiliating, an intrusion into his inviolate space. Here he is not cocky and voluble, as he is with others, but silent. The soundtrack plays spare, hesitant guitar chords. Once inside the shelter, McCandless attempts to charm a skeptical black female social worker, but seems to recognize that he sounds silly (rather than defiant and triumphant) announcing his theatrical name: Alexander Supertramp. In subsequent shots, McCandless walks through darkened L.A. streets, frightened by shadows and hooded, huddled figures. He eats at a Mexican café, gazing out the window. Here, McCandless finds a gothic landscape, and Penn underlines his disjointed and halting subjectivity through freeze-frames, jump cuts, and blurry slow-motion shots, as if McCandless cannot assimilate these travels into his symbolic adventure.

Most uncanny of all, he can look up from this place of dangerous poverty to see huge buildings, emblems of wealth and power. Penn presents us with establishing shots (from McCandless's lowly perspective) of tall, sleek banks, but also perhaps the Westin Bonaventure Hotel famously interpreted by Fredric Jameson as a sign of the impossible task of situating ourselves within the "postmodern hyperspace" of late capitalism (*Postmodernism* 44). From McCandless's hounded vantage point, spectralized inequality is profoundly visible, unavoidable, and thoroughly inscribed into his sense of self. Walking past an upscale restaurant, he looks into a window and sees a young, well-dressed man laughing—but the man morphs into a ghostly image of McCandless himself,

wearing nice clothes and gazing at him with a cocky smile. More than anything, McCandless cannot face this uncanny, spectral Real. It is not simply that McCandless is haunted by the repressed return of his perverse rejection of his inheritance—a rejection that can never succeed, since despite burning his money he secretly retains access to class mobility, such that he could willingly become this well-heeled version of Christopher McCandless. Rather, he is disturbed by the very *rupture* between Alexander Supertramp and Christopher McCandless, by his own multiplicity, and by the enigmatic gap that separates them—a gap inextricably bound up with another rupture, the wound of class struggle itself. This rupture is where the Real enters, both for McCandless and for the polarized city. Profoundly enmeshed in this wound that defines the spectralized neoliberal city, McCandless is hard-pressed to preserve the innocence that he craves. In seeing his ghostly double, McCandless is forced to confront the hysterical question: Who am I for the Other? Why am I who you say I am? And unable to face this abyss at the base of his subjectivity, he panics, retrieves his things from the shelter, and hops a train out of the city in search of the New Northern fetish.

This time his encounter with authority is different: no longer a romantic hobo performance of freedom but a confrontation with the Real of an authority disinclined to play games. In an uncanny evocation of the power of corporate railroads during the development of the West (and in the harsh treatment of historical hobos and striking railroad employees), he is severely beaten by a company representative who threatens to kill him if he sees him again. Here McCandless becomes a *homo sacer*, since he can presumably be killed with impunity. The affront is not personal, but financial, again evoking the abstract system of finance that rules neoliberal cities like Los Angeles: “This

is the goddamned railroad. And we will do whatever we have to do to keep you freeloaders from violating our liability.” A vicious, barking dog intrudes into the camera: *biology*. In this scene, McCandless unwillingly leaves the terrain of myth and instead finds himself deposited in history, trapped inside the subject position of many who have come before him, thousands who have faced the corporation’s boot in the face, the terrifying canine growl of its dominance. McCandless’s response is the same as his response to the border agent, but this time the symbolic play of authority has been replaced by the Real of a colonizing power: “Yes sir.”

#### Accidental Places

Accidental places are the only real places left.

—Thomas de Zengotita from “The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anaesthetic” (37)

While scientific experiment is indeed the construction of a sure road (of a *methodos*, a path) to knowledge, the quest, instead, is the recognition that the absence of a road (the *aporia*) is the only experience possible for man. But by the same token, the quest is also the opposite of the adventure, which in the modern age emerges as the final refuge of experience. For the adventure presupposes that there is a road to experience, and that this road goes by way of the extraordinary and the exotic (in opposition to the familiar and the commonplace). Instead, in the universe of the quest the exotic and the extraordinary are only the sum of the essential *aporia* of every experience. Thus Don Quixote, who lives the everyday and the familiar (the landscape of La Mancha and its inhabitants) as extraordinary, is the subject of a quest that is a perfect counterpart of the medieval ones.

--Giorgio Agamben from *Infancy and History* (32-33)

In the face of this Southern trauma, where might McCandless find relief?

Retreating from the spectrality and biology of Mexico and Los Angeles—and headed inexorably toward his fate in the black hole of Alaska—McCandless enacts a tour of the weird corners of a U.S. Western imaginary, finding scattered spaces of desire where people strive for whatever distance they can muster from a hegemonic structure built on

the abstract accumulation of property and capital. As a rule, he is drawn to places that cater to mobile characters like himself, people who (like J.B. Jackson's prototypes) want "freedom from the tyranny of the traditional home and its possessions." In the trifold of liberty, equality, and fraternity, he is searching above all for liberty. But in *Into the Wild*'s heterotopic spaces, most people are not looking for liberty alone, however understood; rather, they are torn between place and motion, between nostalgia for residual social structures and a desire for a different future, and between memory and forgetting. Thus in probing these accidental places, McCandless often finds more than he bargained for: not simply freedom from social obligation or authority *tout court*, but alternative dreams of social organization that persist as residual enclaves from a largely bygone pre-capitalist past. In *Into the Wild*, the most interesting—and indeed, strange, enchanting, and dreamlike—places are not the "exotic" spaces of the Alaskan frontier (the "last refuge of experience" that he is aiming for in his grand *adventure*), but the accidental places he passes along the way. In them, the everyday emerges as extraordinary, revealing confused desires for a different world in which labor is less alienated, social relations are more nurturing and durable across generations, and equality and fraternity can thrive alongside liberty. But even these places contain too much "society" for Alexander Supertramp, who must move on to a site where he believes he can evade everything that would inscribe his life from the outside.

What does McCandless find in Alaska? Not the Holy Grail (the road to unimpeachable experience in which reality is distilled into a single phenomenological site), but yet another *aporia* within the mesh. The key moment, perhaps, in Penn's filmic documentation of McCandless's "great Alaskan adventure" occurs as McCandless shoots



a moose and unsuccessfully tries to preserve the meat for later use. Not simply a failed attempt at wilderness butchering, the moose episode carries all the tragic gravity of McCandless's recognition that he has not escaped society, biology, and authority, but has merely become a paternal authority in a different way. Concurrent with images of the rotting moose carcass, Penn depicts McCandless engaged in demented play-acting, yelling at his mother and sister in his father's demanding and angry voice. Possessed, then, by his father's violence, and aware that like Walt he has created a mess and gotten in over his head, McCandless sees that he has not escaped obligation, since he has failed in his responsibility to the moose. Claustrophobic intimacy operates in nature, too. As does power. The moment rings with meaning for McCandless beyond what one might expect; he writes of the "disaster" in his diary: "One of the worst tragedies of my life." In attempting to escape all Neighbors, then, McCandless discovers not only that he has Neighbors in the wild, but that he is toxic himself; in Timothy Morton's terms, he discovers the uncanny fact that he is the "strange stranger" he has been trying to avoid. And if McCandless feels guilty about attempting (and failing) to seize mastery over nature, he no doubt feels similarly guilty about figuratively killing his father by cutting him out of his life—about seizing the authorial right to control the narrative of their relationship.

It becomes increasingly clear that McCandless cannot control his narrative anywhere, least of all in the wild, since the terrifying Neighbors who live there with him exert agency as well. In the wilderness, *biology* becomes invasive, proximate, revealing to McCandless his own permeable and vulnerable body. Beavers build dams that make his return to civilization impossible, rivers swell unreliably, and most importantly, he is

poisoned by a surreptitious intruder into his body, a mold-encrusted wild potato that turns his flesh against itself, making it impossible for his stomach to digest food and hastening his death by starvation. There *is* a lesson in the wilderness, but not one of autonomy in pristine “nature”; rather, the lesson is about *ecology*. The process of looking for food enlightens McCandless to his place within a larger mesh. As Krakauer puts it, although McCandless traveled to Alaska “to explore the inner country of his own soul,” he instead encounters the key ecological insight, that he is constituted within a material context that renders the borders of the individual self unstable: “an extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one’s attention outward as much as inward....The entries in McCandless’s journal contain few abstractions about wilderness, or for that matter, few ruminations of any kind. There is scant mention of the surrounding scenery....He wrote about hardly anything except food” (183). No doubt McCandless experienced beauty in Alaska, but more than anything he experienced the destruction of his inviolate space. As both Krakauer and Penn are at pains to suggest, the ecology of which McCandless is a part is not simply an immediate environmental one. He is part of a social ecology, too. As McCandless’s play-acting, writing, reading, and self-dialogues demonstrate, his adventure is a form of communication that presupposes an interlocutor, an audience.

Whether McCandless ever comes to a realistic or productive vision of the social world is unclear.<sup>45</sup> But just as the disjointed narrative of *Into the Wild* is set in motion by

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<sup>45</sup> McCandless was alone in his Alaskan bus, but some of his cryptic messages get through, even if we can’t quite determine their meaning. Penn and Krakauer make much of the passages McCandless underlined in the books he read in Alaska, especially a passage from Boris Pasternak’s “Doctor Zhivago”: “And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness....And this was most vexing of all.” In the margins of this passage, McCandless wrote “Happiness only real when shared.” Similarly, when McCandless writes his final goodbye note, he signs it not “Alexander Supertramp” but “Christopher McCandless,” indicating that he had once again accepted his imbrication within a social system, and thus come to a kind of peace with the idea of family and authority. But what kind of social structure did McCandless imagine? How far

the wilderness trauma, such that it floats through memory-space in search of significance in McCandless's journey, it will be useful at this point to leave Alaska and scan the map of his travels elsewhere for evidence of such a complex social vision in the background of his story. And although I think we will find more promising territory elsewhere, there is reason to pause for a moment over Carthage, South Dakota, where McCandless falls in with a seasonal team of male workers who use combine equipment to cut grain in a South-North swath from Texas to Canada. In this working class, homosocial atmosphere, McCandless finds a "surrogate family" of men who live in a common house and enjoy work and leisure together, evoking nothing so much as the *artisan republicanism* celebrated by Walt Whitman and others prior to the onset of wage labor as a standardizing structure (and ably described by Bryan Garman). These men, who gather under the umbrella of a man named Wayne Westerberg, hearken back to an older workshop culture of skilled white workingmen who once operated a master/apprentice guild system before it was decimated by the factory system. In this milieu, McCandless encounters an implicit moral critique of the acquisitive and competitive ethos of contemporary capitalist norms—if not a structural critique of capital or of an individual rights framework (such that Garman cites Whitman's claim to be "radical—but not too damned radical"). Historically, artisan republicans opposed the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few; instead, they took pride in their skills, looked out for each other's

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did his social ecology extend? It is unclear. But the passage from Pasternak paints a picture, not of a world in conflict, structured according to divided interests, but "a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple." Here we have an image of durable place, a common project—and yet we have no idea how such a place might interact with other places, or how it might manage internal conflicts "without a ripple." If McCandless settled on this passage as a way of imagining social life (and I would never venture to say that he had), he has substituted an idealized view of individualist autonomy in nature for an idealized view of community. In this picture, we have neighborly neighbors, but no terrifying Neighbors. We have no intrusion of the spectral and biological Real, but rather a cohesive symbolic order governed by Pasternak's Big Other.

interests, and celebrated a republican ethos of fraternity and equality (although this equality did not extend, in their minds, to women or nonwhites). The accidental space of Carthage, South Dakota, then, stands out both as a place that time forgot and as a loose-knit community built on a tension between egalitarian social ties and the worker's freedom of movement.<sup>46</sup>

Although this nostalgic bachelor's paradise surely reveals something about the desire for unalienated labor, about the pleasures of useful work and mutual support, *Into the Wild* offers a more striking symptomatic space in which to consider Dirlik's dialectic of social withdrawal and reconstitution, purity and hybridity. After living briefly in Arizona, McCandless takes to the road once again and ends up at a place in California informally called The Slabs, where he finds a community of a different sort, pregnant with dialectical tension. Krakauer describes The Slabs as an accidental place increasingly claimed by its heterogeneous occupants:

an old navy air base that had been abandoned and razed, leaving a grid of empty concrete foundations scattered far and wide across the desert. Come November, as the weather turns cold across the rest of the country, some five thousand snowbirds and drifters and sundry vagabonds congregate in this otherworldly setting to live on the cheap under the sun. The Slabs functions as the seasonal

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<sup>46</sup> McCandless's affinity for the artisan republican combination of anti-authoritarian populism and liberal individualism helps explain what Krakauer describes as McCandless's unorthodox political positions. As an editorial assistant at his college newspaper, he veered all over the map: attacking Democrats at one moment, and then celebrating Jesse Jackson in the next moment. He started a College Republican Club, but he "lambasted Bible-thumpers of the Christian right" and railed against "the rich kids at Emory." As Krakauer puts it, "Chris's... political positions were perhaps best summed up by Thoreau's declaration in 'Civil Disobedience': 'That government is best which governs least' (123). And McCandless's suspicion for centralized authority coincides with his belief that moral and not structural reform provides the answer for social ills. He was incensed with South Africa's apartheid regime, but even this consuming interest in Africa's humanitarian crisis reveals not a structural critique of capital flows or neocolonial domination, but a liberal individualist ideology of human rights and republican equality under the law. The anti-apartheid struggle supplied him with a perfect mission, since in opposing the legal racism of the South African regime, he could demand formal equality without challenging fundamental economic structures. Similarly, when (as recounted in *Into the Wild*) he travels to inner city Washington D.C. to hand out food (and moral advice) to homeless people, he reveals a worldview in which heroic individual action can defeat poverty and destitution.

capital of a teeming itinerant society—a tolerant, rubber-tired culture comprising the retired, the exiled, the destitute, the perpetually unemployed. (43)

In stressing the “otherworldly” quality of this place—the spare, modernist style of its huge concrete spaces set against the desert sands and sun—Kraauer captures something of its utopian quality. More broadly inclusive than the white male milieu of Carthage, The Slabs functions as a squatter’s paradise for men and women (and their families) who dream of founding a new type of community, built not on long settlement but instead on migratory patterns, like those of birds, or the indigenous tribes that once moved seasonally from camp to camp. The bartering patterns of the place suggest an alternative economy of sorts, in which people scrounge whatever they find along their travels and swap their salvage among like-minded travelers.

Although The Slabs strives through its alternative economy to avoid spectral capitalist power structures—or more exactly, to build itself on its erstwhile ruins—it is also the staging ground for multifaceted human relationships that (more so than in the homosocial sibling society of Carthage) threaten to spill out all over the place in terrifying ways. Here McCandless teams up with some “rubber tramps” (people who drive around the country from place to place) that he had met earlier in his travels: Jan and Rainey Burres, who figure as substitute parents for McCandless, with all the ambiguity such a status entails for a young man intent on purity and self-authorship. From McCandless’s point of view, The Slabs is a dangerous space of *biology*, a labyrinth not of physical danger but of physical and emotional entanglement: of Neighbors, religion, family, and place. More than any other site in McCandless’s odyssey, it represents the two-sided dilemma of maternal warmth (and thus of sexuality); like Rodriguez’s *brown*, it reeks with the stew of humanity, both the sweaty thrill of intimacy

and the suffocating pressures of desire, need, obligation, and love. Even the name implies a slippage between its concrete modernist architectural foundations (slabs of concrete), and Rodriguez's risky biological territory (slabs of meat that might provide sustenance if taken into the body, but must be tended if rot is to be avoided).

It is appropriate, then, that here Alex is compelled to perform social roles that he nevertheless attempts to keep at a distance: friend, son, lover. In the spatial map of *Into the Wild*, The Slabs evokes what Bill Brown has described in regionalist literature as a "poetics of attachment" (42); although the space itself is detached in many ways from the surrounding national space, the exchanges that take place there are specifically of the emotional and cultural kind, such that when Jan Burrell offers McCandless a hand-knit hat as a gift, the young man is hesitant to accept it. He knows that the hat is not simply another object, but is rather closer to what Gillian Brown has called a "sentimental fetish": a thing that links him to others, to the past, to this substitute-mother, and through her to his memory of the mother he has cut out of his life (45-53). Like Celaya's heirloom *rebozo* in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*, the hat lays a claim on him, forges a connection. It is significant, then, that when McCandless arrives in the Alaskan wilderness, he leaves the hat on a branch before crossing a river that functions as the threshold into the wild; in crossing the river, he symbolically attempts to leave behind all obligation to society, all entanglement, all ghosts, all traces of the sentimental fetish. A similar poetics of attachment (and its rejection) appears later in McCandless's response to an offer of adoption from Ronald Franz, an elderly and lonely man who attempts to hold on to the boy he knows as Alex. In asking Christopher to continue his line, Franz is asking McCandless if he will submit to being held. He is asking him to accept a new naming that

will define him, not as a self-created individual, but as one who is identified according to a lawful social relationship: in this case, as an adopted grandson imbricated within the weave of a continuing generational process of nurture as well as authority and obligation. McCandless's rejection of this offer is yet another instance of his rejection of any poetics of attachment, paving the way for his atomized death, cut off from any who might save him.

As Rodriguez's *Brown* reveals, any poetics of attachment points toward the ambiguity involved in recognizing one's incomplete ontological status in Kristeva's image of the abjected mother-body. And in the film, Sean Penn fully develops McCandless's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from this maternal image in the figure of Jan Burres. Burres, mother of a teenaged son with whom she has not spoken in two years, serves as a safer stand-in for McCandless's own mother, who also grieves for a vanished son. But the relationship is predictably tense. On the one hand, McCandless finds with Jan a *jouissance* unavailable elsewhere. With Jan and Rainey, he can play a role denied him at home: the perfect and omnipotent son who ensures familial harmony. In an early scene in the film, he inspires this troubled couple with his boundless energy and vibrant youthfulness (at one point, Rainey laughs at him as an "industrious little fucker," and jokingly compares him to Jesus as a miracle-worker who would walk on water). As if compensating for Jan's lost son, whose ghostly absence makes her wary of further emotional connection, McCandless helps Jan and Rainey reconcile with each other. In cavorting (always innocently, or so he would have it) with Jan in the ocean, he finds a partner in *jouissance*. But when Jan and Rainey's reconciliation becomes sexual—when Alex hears the couple making love in their tent—he disappears. Thus we

have the other side of the tale: McCandless yearns to lose his individuality in union with the mother, but also throws her off since she reminds him of his own vulnerability and incompleteness in the face of power. Still, McCandless cannot quite put Jan out of his mind. When they reunite in The Slabs, Alex's relationship with her resonates with more erotic charge than we find anywhere else in the film. When she pleads with him to call his mother, he reacts with torn emotions. On the one hand, he avoids the uncomfortable intimacy of the conversation and stands up; but he also yearns to please this woman, and thus leans down, so that their faces are nearly touching, and says fervently, "I will sit here with you all night."

Since McCandless is unable to face the mother without acknowledging his own (hysterical, castrated) status, he can take no lover at all. In his book, Krakauer asserts that McCandless probably never had a sexual relationship—not in high school, not in college, and not during his odyssey. But although he recognizes that Oedipal interpretations of McCandless may have merit, Krakauer does not dwell on the matter, instead arguing that McCandless may have found an erotic charge in nature: "His yearning, in a sense, was too powerful to be quenched by human contact. McCandless may have been tempted by the succor offered by women, but it paled beside the prospect of rough congress with nature, with the cosmos itself. And thus was he drawn north, to Alaska" (66). I don't claim to understand McCandless as a human being, but insofar as he emerges as a cultural signifier, it seems productive to imagine him not simply as positively drawn toward some *eros* of nature (though he surely was), but also as repelled by the *biology* implied by human sexual congress. McCandless may have been drawn to an idealized view of the "rough congress of nature" (and indeed, he found more rough congress than



he bargained for!), but it does not go too far to imagine that this “lust” compensated for an anxiety about human contact that he shares with the New Northern sensibility. And Sean Penn seems to agree with me. In the film, he develops a character mentioned only briefly in Krakauer’s book: Tracy, a young woman in *The Slabs* who falls in love with McCandless. Played rather unsubtly by Kristen Stewart, Tracy seethes with sexual desire for McCandless, but although the young man seems willing to transgress other laws, he is unwilling to sleep with this sixteen-year-old girl. In the end, he lectures her hypocritically (and cruelly), “Just remember, if you want something in life—just reach out and grab it.” Yes—reach out and grab it, as long as it is not me, because my space cannot be violated!

Tracy’s inability to hold on to Alex is an overtly sexualized depiction of the plight of McCandless’s other friends in the film, who also would like him to remain with them, but who are (in a way) complicit in his departure, because their desire for him is conditioned by the same cultural logic that inspires him to yearn for new pastures. Tracy loves this free-spirited traveling boy partly *because* he is a free-spirited traveling boy, thereby trapping herself in a deadlock of desire. The melancholy quality of the film—which is, after all, told not from McCandless’s point of view, but by the community left behind—is largely due to the ambivalent character of that community’s desire. In both the film and the book, McCandless is aestheticized as a fleeting character, a lost presence for whom the other characters mourn. Like beauty itself, McCandless can only appear in lyrical and poetic moments that are by nature transitory. The film, especially, employs a poetics of mourning in which the movement of the narrative is interrupted by lyrical recitations, often backed by mobile images, music, and occasionally words on the screen, which appear and disappear in a manner that suggests the mournful quality of language

itself as a Derridean trace of meaning that is always already lost, fading, incomplete. The nonlinear quality of the book's narration, employed by Krakauer as an investigative gesture of circling around the truth of McCandless's story, is further amplified in the film as a visually poetic process of mourning in motion. It takes place not in homogenous time, but in a time punctuated by memories that surge forward, offering pain and solace, hope and despair. As a result, McCandless's advice to Tracy, intended to be inspiring and affirmative, is also a taunt to the *audience*. We are encouraged to grab what we want, but if what we want is Alex, we cannot grab him. He is not only dead, but missing in plain sight; and love for him disappears down a black hole that is not merely his own creation, but constitutes the dead end of hegemonic U.S. Western ideals of independence and rugged masculinity in nature.

If the film suggests an antidote to this deadlock, it is glimpsed only fitfully in possibilities that are not taken, roads that are not travelled. And some of these possibilities emerge at The Slabs, where Alex contrives means of fending off Tracy's sexual advances. These metonymic dalliances, which prolong the moment of his departure, help illustrate the way that art can be made out of absence—that by asserting and embracing a lack at the center of experience we can find a semblance of the way forward. One such moment takes place as Alex and Tracy perform a song together at an open-mic venue at The Slabs. Faced earlier with Tracy in her underwear, Alex says instead, “You want to do something together?” and arranges for them to sing a song on stage. As Tracy strums the guitar and Alex plays the organ, they sing a duet of John Prine's “Angel of Montgomery,” a quintessentially melancholic frontier story about yearning and the desire for a love (and more broadly, a satisfying form of social

connection) that never arrives. In this often-sung tune, Prine tells the story of a woman caught in the negative repetition of a spiritless life, but who nevertheless prays for some utopian intervention. Unable to communicate and trapped in the monotony not only of alienated labor but of alienated desire, she wonders, “How the hell can a person / Go to work in the morning / Come home in the evening / And have nothing to say?” In Alain Badiou’s terms, this woman lives in a world in which no Event is possible: “I ain’t done nothing since I woke up today.” Accordingly, Prine’s angel (“Make me an angel / that flies from Montgomery”) encapsulates a form of grace that would enter in and cut through the deadlock, making some kind of rebirth possible. And yet the narrator in this song can only imagine an “angel” like Christopher McCandless: a long lost “cowboy” and “free ramblin’ man.”

The longing here suggests that although the people of The Slabs inhabit a vernacular culture around the principle of motion (thus ratifying McCandless’s departure even as they mourn it), they are not simply free people making an unambivalent choice, satisfied in Jackson’s terms with evading social obligation and discarding obsolete values and objects. Rather, like Prine’s protagonist, they are the detritus of a capitalist frontier society built on a principle of nomadic motion and rapid commodity circulation. And this society, with its emphasis on individual economic liberty, provides little room for equality, solidarity, or the care-taking involved in the creation of durable places. Indeed, the top-down cultural and economic structures of their society positively encourage motion, serial abandonment, and creative destruction; the demagogues of decentered late capitalism would wholeheartedly agree with McCandless’s admonition to “move around, be nomadic, and make each day a new horizon.” In his denigration of “monotonous

security” in favor of “a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy,” he uncannily captures the precarious quality of rhizomatic neoliberal motion, his ridicule of a “secure future” another way of pushing fiscal austerity and the cult of the risk-taking speculator, his rejection of “human relationships” another manifestation of rigorous individualism. The denizens of The Slabs are in many ways still complicit in McCandless’s nomadic ideology, but they yearn for something different; these refugees and pilgrims gather from the far corners, only to recognize their own bafflement. As ragpickers searching in the desert for the fragments of a new society but with little idea of how to construct it, they do not simply destroy place by moving on, but create place as well. Fleeing a situation dominated not even by desire but by fragmented short-term drives, it is only by retreating to The Slabs, in a sense, that they can have access to desire in the first place, that they can pause long enough to mourn, dream, and perhaps build something new together.

Such an improvised, layered quality of place—along with the yearning for grace to intervene in the deadlock between love and individual autonomy—is particularly visible at Salvation Mountain, a collective art project outside of The Slabs, where Tracy brings Alex early in their interaction. Built by a strange older man named Leonard Knight (along with outsiders who have brought materials to him), Salvation Mountain is a huge installation in the middle of the desert: a sprawling and messy network (mesh?) of plaster, wood, and metal festooned with passages from the Bible and with messages of “love.” When Alex asks Knight where he got the telephone poles used in the installation, the artist responds fervently, “Oh, a lot of people in the valley just love me a lot. Everybody now I think in the whole world is just loving me, and I want to have the

wisdom to love ‘em back. And that’s about it, so I really get excited.” Alex is amused by Knight, and probes more deeply: “You really believe in love, then.” Knight looks him squarely in the eye and repeats, with conviction: “Yeah. Totally.” The passion at work here, combined with the absurdity of the whole project, reveal a structure of feeling that captures a defamiliarizing aspect of the Christian narrative. Like El Pastor in Charles Bowden’s *Murder City*, the man emerges as a folk John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness and using all of his rhetorical power to communicate what he sees as an astonishing and defamiliarizing message of erotic uncanniness: “This is a love story that is staggering to everybody in the whole world—that God really loves us, a lot.” That such a “staggering” message is delivered by this clownish figure, a skinny old fellow puttering around in the desert (outside a quixotic community looking for a new messiah, as it were), is fitting for what Rodriguez describes as “a church established for losers... a kingdom for fools.” As Soren Kierkegaard might put it, the Christian message cannot be fully appreciated unless one understands how absurd the message truly is, and Knight is truly a fool for Christ.

He is not the only fool for Christ in the narrative; we find another such figure in Ronald Franz, who becomes friends with McCandless and is both fascinated and frustrated by the boy’s free-wheeling ways. This elderly man, a devout Christian and WWII veteran, lost his wife and son to a car crash in 1957 and lives alone in Salton Sea, California, a dwindling suburban town alongside an accidental ocean created by an engineering snafu, and the site of a failed real estate boom. When he meets McCandless, the young man is posting up at Oh-My-God Hot Springs, described by Krakauer as a “bizarre encampment” of nudists and hippies, a “community...beyond the fringe, a vision

of post-apocalypse America” (50). In an echo of Wayne’s milieu of artisan republicanism, Franz becomes a master to McCandless’s apprentice. A leather worker by hobby, Franz invites McCandless to his house and helps him design and create a belt festooned with scenes from the boy’s travels. The belt culminates in the letter N, for north. For Penn in the film, the scenes with Franz achieve the existential intensity and minimalism of a California-ized Beckett play. The flotsam and jetsam of Mexico, Los Angeles, The Slabs, and Oh-My-God Hot Springs disappear, and McCandless’s terrain is reduced to an empty suburban house in a seemingly vacant desert city: not the flamboyant apocalypse of the hot springs, but the quiet, lonely apocalypse of two generations facing each other on a single stage, surrounded by the ghostly flows of a society in motion. In the film, they seem like the only people left in the world.

If Carthage is the bachelor’s Eden, and if The Slabs is the *ecclesia* of a messianic community, Franz’s Salton City home is the hermit’s hut. Despite its presence in the midst of spectral flows, it is nonetheless an archaic space in which the cards are not simply discarded onto the pile; rather, the pacing is slow, the confrontation between generations stark, and death hangs in the empty air as a reminder of time’s sudden intervention. And these two people are puzzled by each other and choosing how to react. Franz is fascinated (and sometimes incensed) by McCandless’s rejection of conventional domesticity, and troubled by his lack of a family, but clings to McCandless as if this boy has some secret wisdom. McCandless, on the other hand, is only willing to play the role of apprentice to a point. Most of all, he lectures Franz on his sedentary ways, and encourages him to get out and travel, to see the world and give up the security of life in the suburbs. But he also delights in learning Franz’s leather working skills, and the two of

them enjoy a good bit of back-and-forth banter, as well as mutual confidences and even a moment of grace. At one point, Franz meditates on McCandless's rant against the social world, and perhaps thinking of the boy's family, channels Leonard Knight by evoking the importance of love. As the two sit on a hill over Salton Sea (again echoing Salvation Mountain and the Sermon on the Mount), Franz attempts to give the boy some advice: "When you forgive, you love. And when you love, God's light shines on you." At this very moment, the sun appears from behind a cloud; the old man and the boy erupt together in laughter, amazed at the coincidence. The image is a brief moment of loneliness shattered—even an Event in Badiou's terms, since it transforms the relation between the possible and the impossible in a way that opens up a space for new action.

Yet just as McCandless flees Salvation Mountain and The Slabs, he flees the Salton Sea as well. In doing so, he flees the knowledge embodied in Ron: the tragic knowledge of human mortality, the body's weakness in old age, the trauma represented in Ron's loss of his family in a senseless accident. Unable to process this knowledge, McCandless instead sends Ron a letter upbraiding him about the necessity of uprooting his life, of embracing the chaos of nomadic motion. Both, in their different ways, are right. Though McCandless's message is riddled with a denial of his own social imbrication (and as I mentioned, with a celebration of deterritorialization that mirrors a similar investment within the structures of disorganized capitalism), its implicit message—that we can't hold on to things, that loss is a part of life, that there is no safe retreat in the world—cannot be ignored. But McCandless's upbeat message misses any ironic or tragic quality, any sense that despite our inability to protect a place or a relationship we might nevertheless strive to do it anyway. Instead, he persistently deflects

the flip side of social vulnerability: that even if we cannot protect love, we cannot live without it. It is perverse rather than hysterical. Franz, on the other hand, is the abject figure *par excellence*; upon learning of McCandless's death, he drinks himself into oblivion after having abstained from alcohol for decades. Shocked by the trauma of the event, he renounces his Christian faith and declares himself abandoned by God. Utterly alone, with no family and no heir, he stops drinking, but faces a thoroughly uncertain future. He has no one to take care of, and no one to take care of him, revealing in dramatic terms a culture and economy predicated on carelessness.

The story of *Into the Wild*, in a sense, emerges through eyes comparable to those of Ronald Franz. Like Mr. Franz, Krakauer and Penn remain trapped in the space of recollection not because they are nostalgic in some simple way, but because they are driven to work through the trauma of loss and have not yet emerged on the other side of this therapeutic process. Nevertheless, because its narrative space consistently looks backward, and because it fails to let the past be past, *Into the Wild* never quite reaches a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* of explosive action in the present. Instead, it hovers on the brink of a revolutionary pause. Having been at some point entranced by the frontier values represented by Christopher McCandless (aka Alexander Supertramp), Krakauer and Penn grant him an exalted space at the center of their nonlinear narratives. In their still unresolved postcolonial melancholia, they have only begun to work through the fact that McCandless offers them no solution. Unlike Linklater's *Fast Food Nation*, then, their drama is centered not on the experience of those at the bottom, on the invisible people who staff the fast food restaurants, chain stores, slaughterhouses, and ranches of the New West, but on what Bernard Stiegler has described as a generalized consumer proletariat:



people who have forgotten how to live and desire, deprived of *savoir-vivre* and of “life’s savor” by the penetration of Taylorized management into the libido (30). Desperately searching for life’s savor, Krakauer and Penn are left scanning the traces of McCandless’s journey, as if poring over each frame of the haunting piece of folk art strapped around his emaciated skeleton, with every scene carved into this home-made belt (including the extra holes the young man cut when his body began to waste away) pointing toward its inexorable end in the letter N: North. Thrown off balance, disoriented and lost, *Into the Wild* nevertheless searches among the ruins of North and South for a new direction, and for new Neighbors--not least of all the uncanny Neighbor that is the self in the mesh.

## CONCLUSION

### DESTRUCTION AND REVELATION: CHARLES BOWDEN'S

#### *MURDER CITY* AND THE PROBLEM OF NARRATION

#### IN THE NEOCOLONIAL REPORT

Perhaps you think I am mad? I can see that look in your eyes, and yes, I understand why you have reservations. But then you do not have to listen to those two women talking into the night. I cannot decide what is worse: when they are crying or when they are laughing. And something has changed inside, something in a deep part, near that place we can never locate but often claim is the core of our being. In the past, I have covered kidnappings, murders, financial debacles, the mayhem that my species is capable of committing. I spent three years mired in reporting sex crimes. There is little within me that has not been battered or wrenched or poisoned. But the path I followed with Miss Sinaloa proved all my background to be so much nothing. I have not entered the country of death, but rather the country of killing. And I have learned in this country that killing is good. (xii)

--Charles Bowden, *Murder City*

My concern is with the mediation of terror through narration, and with the problem of writing effectively against terror....The colonized space of death has a colonizing function, maintaining the hegemony or cultural stability of norms and desires....Yet the space of death is notoriously conflict-ridden and contradictory; a privileged domain of metamorphosis, the space *par excellence* for uncertainty and terror to stun permanently, yet also revive and empower with new life.

--Michael Taussig, from *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (3, 374)

At one point in Charles Bowden's 2010 book *Murder City*, Bowden describes what amounts to a magical reality in the relationship between the United States and Mexico. "There are two Mexicos," he writes:

There is the one reported by the U.S. press, a place where the Mexican president is fighting a valiant war against the evil forces of the drug world and using the incorruptible Mexican army as his warriors. This Mexico has newspapers, courts, and laws and is seen by the U.S. government as a sister republic. It does not exist. There is a second Mexico, where the war is for drugs, for the enormous money to be made in drugs, where the police and the military fight for their share, where the press is restrained by the murder of reporters and feasts on a steady diet of bribes, and where the line between government and the drug world has never existed. (118)

Thus if the U.S. press in this description rarely calls into question the relatively ordered Mexico with which they are officially presented (and which confirms their vision of globalization as progress), the “second Mexico” is not a clear picture either—and not only because the Mexican press is intimidated. Rather, Bowden insists that there is no way to know what is going on in Juarez these days. Instead of a clear-cut picture in Mexico, Bowden sees an epistemological swamp in which the desire for order, for explanation or justification, outflanks any reality on the ground. As a result, he argues that “the killings overwhelm simple explanations” (18):

There are too many authors writing too many short stories on bodies, there are too many styles of handwriting... No matter how clever the examiner, still, there is a door behind whatever explanation is offered. The gangs are sent to kill, but who sends them? The cartels are killing, but who in the cartels gives the orders and why? The army slaughters, but who is behind the army? (162-163)

Faced with the annual death and disappearance of thousands of people in Juarez, Bowden dutifully employs numbers (counting the dead as best he can), but also calls them into question. Such numbers, he suggests, easily become a comforting fetish (“We love the look of hard numbers” [41]), obscuring more than they illuminate. And what is true of the drug war is true of the class war also; the fetish term “development,” with its implied *telos* of continual upward movement, covers over a multitude of realities on the ground:

We have made careers out of studying the Juarezes of the world, given them the name Third World. We have fashioned schemes to bring them into our place beside the sacred fire and called these schemes development... We count the employment, we tally the exports, we rummage in the till, and we comfort ourselves with these numbers because that is our safe place. We do not wander the *calles*.... And we are careful what we count. (116-117)

In order to illustrate the slippery quality of economic numbers, he points out that the official population of Juarez is tallied at 1.2 to 1.4 million, even though the city actually has closer to 2 million people (though again, who really knows?). The lower population numbers allow Mexico City to apportion less spending to the city's social services, and have the added benefit of concealing the number of unemployed, poor, and slum-dwellers in the city:

A simple shift in total population takes Juarez from the column called developing to the column called failure.... But what if Juarez is not a failure? What if it is closer to the future that beckons all of us from our safe streets and Internet cocoons?... After decades of this thing called development, Juarez has in sheer number more poor people than ever, has in real purchasing power lower wages than ever, has more pollution than ever, and more untreated sewage and less water than ever. (117-118)

Despite NAFTA, then, despite the much-touted *maquilas*, and despite the fact that Mexico boasts scores of billionaires (including the man many consider to be the world's richest, the telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim), Bowden questions the official story about the country ("The economy will get better, and this will make every single human being better" [115]), and instead asks: what is not being counted here?

In traveling to Juarez to document a neocolonial situation of unequal power relations and exploitation, Bowden enters into a long tradition of colonial muckraking. In some ways, for example, his authorial posture as crime investigator is comparable to that of Roger Casement, a British consul who in 1903 was sent by his government to investigate the Belgian colony of the Congo. As described by historian Adam

Hochschild, Casement begins—like Bowden—from a posture of suspicion.<sup>47</sup> Other inspectors had visited the Congo before, but most had accepted the terms of what we might call the official Belgian tour. As a result, they became spectators of a performance coordinated by colonial officials, and delivered comforting reports and numbers to interested European parties. Casement, however, took his own boat down the Congo River, refused the entreaties of Belgian authorities, and thereby witnessed unimaginable atrocities. *The Casement Report* helped galvanize activists in Britain and elsewhere in their efforts to delegitimize Belgian leaders. But although many Europeans scapegoated King Leopold for his crimes, the Belgians were by no means alone in deploying colonial violence. Even in Africa, German and British leaders committed comparable crimes; and later, Casement travelled to rubber-producing areas in South America, where he uncovered similar atrocities among Spanish colonial officials and their British financial backers. (In the end, the Irish Casement revolted against the British themselves). In discussing Casement's work—and the genre that we might describe as the *colonial report*--anthropologist Michael Taussig agonizes over the same questions of rhetoric faced by Bowden: how best to faithfully document the atrocities of colonialism? Should one adopt a pose of objectivity by producing the expected statistics and dispassionate analysis? Or was it better to transmit a more subjective sense of horror, uncertainty, and fragmentation—in other words, to channel the subjective experience of many who experience coloniality?

After all, what Taussig calls the colonial “space of death” *functions precisely through uncertainty*, such that a vague sense of terror (innuendo, legends, and confusion about where reality ends and madness begins) is not incidental to many manifestations of

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<sup>47</sup> See Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998).

colonial power, but a definitive aspect of a culture in which distortion is part of the weave of reality itself. In such a culture of terror, events happen but disappear into the “epistemic murk” (121), as “officialdom strives to create a magical reality” (4) which renders violence impossible to narrate. The result is a supposedly ordered society that is actually built on a foundation of disorder: “What is endangered...is the existence of the society’s moral foundations” (4). In order to illustrate such a culture, Taussig points to a story repeated by Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman during Augusto Pinochet’s 1980s dictatorship. According to legend, when witches kidnapped children, they would “break the child’s bones and sew the body parts together in an abnormal way. The head is turned around so the child has to walk backwards, and the ears, eyes, and mouth are stitched up” (4). For Dorfman, Pinochet played the role of the witch in this story, transforming ordinary Chileans into something like *Imbunches*: “even if their bones are not actually broken or mouths sewn up, the... Chileans ‘are isolated from each other, their means of communicating suppressed, their connections cut off, their senses blocked by fear” (4). In such a context of isolation and social denial, the difficulty of telling a coherent story is produced as a key aspect of the oppressive situation.

Although it is distasteful to compare tragedies, in the Congo Roger Casement faced a colonial space of death perhaps more extreme than what Dorfman found in Chile; Casement describes a slave labor system in which Belgian authorities kidnapped Congolese from their villages and worked them to death harvesting rubber in dangerous jungles. In response to this disturbing colonial situation, at least in Taussig’s reading, Casement opts for an objective pose. On the one hand, Casement (perhaps inspired by his own experience as an Irishman and a homosexual), is especially capable of adopting the

perspective of Congolese and Putamayan people; he claimed that he could see “through the eyes of another people once hunted themselves” (cited in Taussig *Shamanism* 53). But on the other hand, Casement understood that his elite British audience would resist seeing through the eyes of the colonized, or even through Casement’s complicated subjective position; instead, they would prefer to see events through what Taussig calls “the market-price way of understanding events, political economy as common sense” (53). And in this common sense parlance, the Congolese were functionally voiceless. As a result, Casement does not fundamentally challenge the dominant terms of the government report; instead, he adopts a clinical rhetoric of facts and objective description. Still, because the report is full of so much graphic detail—and because the British public was more willing to oppose Belgian atrocities than to acknowledge the violence that provided the material foundations for their own society—Casement’s report was effective in fomenting anti-Belgian sentiment. As a result of this limited effectiveness, Taussig describes Casement’s “realism” as a politically motivated act: “It was into the official common sense of political economy that the author, willy-nilly, had to squeeze reality” (53). But his report constituted a trade-off; though he achieved a great deal in immediate pragmatic terms, he failed to instill doubt in Britain about the larger colonial system of which the Congo was but a single symptom.<sup>48</sup> And eventually the British elite would turn against Casement himself: he found his end in the hangman’s noose.

However, other colonial reporters have adopted different, more phantasmagoric strategies. In doing so, they help reveal not only how the business-like “rationality” of the

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<sup>48</sup> To illustrate this point, it is useful to point to E.D. Morel, Casement’s ally and the greatest single force behind the anti-Belgian humanitarian movement. Morel saw no problem with British colonialism.

profit motive can lead to atrocities, but also the way that economic rationality can morph into an irrational terror governed by its *own* libidinal impulses—or, as Taussig puts it, “the way business can transform terror from a means to an end in itself” (53).<sup>49</sup> Joseph Conrad, for instance, in contrast to Casement, largely relinquishes any pretense of objectivity in his 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*. Although his narrator Marlowe fails to imagine the inner space of Congolese characters, who hover and grovel like so many ghosts and zombies, Conrad nevertheless captures Marlowe’s subjective experience in a way that might be described as gothic. Rather than simply laying out facts, Conrad depicts the claustrophobia, fear, and discomfort of his protagonist. Puncturing an “illusory rationality...Conrad abandoned the realism practiced by Casement for a technique that *worked through the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality*” (53-54 my emphasis). And this gothic approach remains relevant today, since although old-style colonialism is over, analogous spaces of death have by no means disappeared. Writing in the late 1980s, for instance, Chilean writer and torture victim Jacobo Timerman cannot conclude that his torture was simply an unambiguous means to an end. Instead, its *surplus violence* exceeds the bounds of conventional representation because uncertainty is key to its effect: “like torture itself, [Timerman’s text] moves through that space of death where reality is up for grabs. And here we begin to see the magnitude of the task, which *calls neither for demystification nor remystification but for a quite different poetics of destruction and revelation*” (Taussig 9 my emphasis). In Conrad and Timerman, we are presented with an epistemic murk; and like the *Imbunches* trapped in this murk, unsure of what or whom to trust (and cut off from clear avenues of communication), we

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Taussig chillingly documents the possibility that much of the brutal violence in the Putamayo region made little economic sense, since it depleted the workforce; instead, terror became a fetish product in its own right, driven by the profit motive but also surpassing its coordinates in a perverse pattern.



as readers must work through this particular morass if we are to figure out a course of action.

This gothic path contains potential pitfalls, however (how could it not?); acknowledging terror and confusion does not erase the possibility that paralysis or xenophobic hatred will result from its poetics of destruction and revelation. Indeed, the gothic frame runs the risk of heightening a paranoia that can easily have negative effects. With regard to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Taussig worries that the reader might be taken in by Marlowe's fear of a Congolese space portrayed in phantasmagoric terms. Through Marlowe's eyes, we see the Congo as a Gothicized landscape—not as a straightforward or “real” place, but as a surreal manifestation of Marlowe's pre-existing set of mythological references. And because this lack of objectivity can result in important distortions, Taussig questions the efficacy of Conrad's approach: “Might not a mythic derealization of the real run the risk of being overpowered by the mythology it is using?...Is not horror made beautiful and primitivism exoticized throughout this book?...Is not the entire thing overly misty?” (10). Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has famously criticized the book in similar terms.<sup>50</sup> Yet Taussig ultimately concludes that the very distortion of Conrad's project is indispensable to rendering the horror of coloniality, since instead of resolving the ambiguities in the imperialist myth Conrad leaves them “intact”: “Here the myth is not ‘explained’ so that it can be ‘explained away,’ as in the forlorn attempts of social science. Instead it is held out as something you have to try out for yourself, feeling your way deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness until you do feel what is at stake, the madness of the passion” (10-11). In describing coloniality in the

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<sup>50</sup> See Chinua Achebe in “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*” (in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Second Edition*).

Congo and the Putamayo, then, Taussig questions the parameters of realism as a representational strategy: “Here the need to sensationalize is painfully obvious, moving from the surreal quality of the dream, distanced, inevitable, and maudlin, to the histrionic....Yet could not the histrionic be true?” (33).

In *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Taussig finds a “mythic subversion of the myth” not only in colonial reports, but in a whole range of other sources: shamanic ceremonies, Walter Benjamin’s dialectical images and profane illuminations, surrealist techniques of *montage*, and folk art and stories. In such modes, narration cannot proceed unabated, but is instead disrupted and interrupted, haunted by a disorder that can never quite be harmonized or unified. To reveal the space of death, then, is not to demystify it, but to cause it to come forward in its dark and contradictory magic: “In this state where the disorder of order rules, death becomes not an underworld but coterminous with life’s unstable surfaces and the ‘historical materialist’... stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (466). In such passages, Taussig might as well be describing the gothic approach as I have outlined it in this dissertation. In the Gothic, we confront the difficulty of narration, such that we can no longer tell stories like the beads of a rosary. And the Gothic, too, risks being described as histrionic or sensationalist—and indeed, provides the reader an alibi to treat the whole thing as a bad dream or overwrought nonsense—but nevertheless has the capacity to haunt the reader in a way that a more “objective” narrative might not, and thus to provoke transformation. It asks: might the histrionic be true? As Jerrold E. Hogle puts it, in confronting Gothic texts, “we are always poised on a fulcrum” between denial and confrontation, between perverse self-“justification” and hysterical “challenge” (19). Do we take refuge in University

discourse, which like the forlorn attempts of social science, attempts to explain everything away—or do we feel our way into the heart of darkness until we feel the stakes for ourselves?

### Dancing with the Devil in Neocolonial Space

My subject in fiction is the action of grace in a territory largely held by the devil.

--Flannery O'Connor, from *Mystery and Manners* (18)

When Baudelaire and Blake declare the essentially Satanic nature of commerce, they exploit a great mythological tradition to say something which has not yet been said in any other way.

--Norman O. Brown, cited in Jose E. Limon's *Dancing With the Devil* (16)

With the abandonment of the population rendered supernumerary and unproductive by the rapid expansion of automation, the advances of remote-access computing, the crepuscular decline of the Providence-State would find a geography readily aligned with the decline of public assistance, a geopolitics of emergency, of unemployment, and of destitution illustrating the coming of a post-industrial and transpolitical Destiny-State, founded on the threat, the apocalyptic risk, and no longer that of the political enemy, the economic rival, the social adversary or partner—a veritable countdown of History, end of the principle of territorial integrity and legitimacy, where places, people and things become interchangeable at will.

--Paul Virilio, *Critical Space* (61)

However useful Taussig's framework might be in thinking through the problem of representing terror in a colonial situation, the world we live in today is fundamentally different from that which Conrad and Casement inhabited. Governments do not brazenly pillage other places on the pretext of racial superiority, at least not without incurring the wrath of the so-called international community. *Neo-colonialism*, rather, is a much more subtle enterprise. What Marx called primitive accumulation (the more or less open theft of resources) has largely given way to more complex modes of accumulation, such that, for example, the flow of wealth from poor nations, regions, and individuals to wealthy investors rarely occurs through direct military means. Instead, since the late nineteenth

century, the U.S. has preferred to outsource military repression in Third World areas to friendly leaders (sometimes installed through covert action, as in the 1973 U.S.-sponsored coup in Chile which led to Pinochet's neoliberal dictatorship), and to exercise financial power alongside military threat. The resulting shocks go beyond a simple bayonet in the back. Through debt crises, for example (in places like Argentina, Thailand, Mexico, and elsewhere), investors can come out on top, renegotiating loans to squeeze every drop of money from dependent governments in the developing world. In the Mexican debt crisis in 1982, for instance, the U.S. government encouraged the Mexican government to accept loans from New York investors, but then provoked defaults through changes in monetary policy, after which the U.S. could intervene with "bailouts" (for investors), along with new contracts that required the Mexican government to cut social programs, sell off public assets, and pay high interest rates. The upshot: in former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon's terms, "In times of crisis, money returns to its rightful owners"—in this case, wealthy investors paid off by public funds (cited in Harvey *The Enigma of Capital* 11). The Mexican crisis then served as a model for structural adjustment programs in other nations, administered by the International Monetary Fund and presided over by U.S.-led financial hegemony.<sup>51</sup>

Keeping track of such methods of expropriation, however, is extraordinarily difficult given the fast-paced, improvised nature of market flows within a complex geography irreducible to the level of the nation-state. What can sound like an orchestrated policy in hindsight can actually turn out to be a high-velocity war of position in which various interests (transnational corporations, government officials, informal class

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<sup>51</sup> For more on the Mexican debt crisis, and on the diverse methods by which U.S. financial hegemony leads to the flow of tribute from the poor to the wealthy, see David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 27-31 and 72-75.

coalitions, investors from a number of countries) fight for advantage in a heterogeneous and interactive geographical field. Though the trend of tribute from poor to rich may be traceable from a distance, it is not clear that anyone can actually control any given situation or predict the next turn. Nor is it obvious that anyone is “in charge,” even if some people have access to information, technological capacity, capital, and connections that help them navigate the fast lane of high-stakes finance with more skill and panache than others. In facing down the neocolonial situation, then, it can be difficult to point to willful atrocities of the kind Casement could identify. Representatives of multinational companies do not travel to Mexico, kidnap poor Mexicans, and work them to death by requiring them to provide quotas of rubber without pay. Rather, it can often seem as though each atomized element (individuals, corporations) in a given conjuncture operates on an equal playing field, follows the same global “rules,” and simply makes rational decisions on the basis of economic self-interest. A corporation appears one moment, cuts jobs for a variety of reasons (downsizing, offshoring, new automation technologies), spends money lobbying politicians in one nation or another, secures itself special favors and tax breaks—and disappears, only to appear somewhere else the next moment. And always, it faces competition from others; as a result, it is motivated to develop new product lines, cut costs wherever possible, and react as flexibly as it can to changing market conditions. (Workers on the ground, of course, face an entirely different grid, and are often mystified by the spectral forces which shape their employment prospects, wages, and physical and emotional well-being).

Within this complicated and fast-moving neoliberal constellation of flows, however, we can point to certain important trends, perhaps best summed up in Bernard

Stiegler's phrase "the dictatorship of short-termism" and its corollary, the "becoming-mafia" of the capitalist class (57, 63). Capital, and its ally the neoliberal state, tends to foster the pillaging of long-term resources in a number of ways: by replacing older forms of solidarity with serialized anticollectives, by prioritizing short-term speculative gains over and above social and human investment, by undermining structures of authority and replacing them with the superego injunction to enjoy (defined in terms of short-term drives rather than communal dreams), and by destabilizing the commons of the climate, to name a few. And insofar as the (now transnational) ruling class engages in such speculative and destructive short-term practices, it becomes less a *bourgeoisie* (committed to fostering social order) and more like a *mafia* operating on a cynical principle of indifferent gain: "One calls a speculator...someone who scoffs at the economic as well as social consequences of 'profitable' decisions. Such a person belongs to the category of those whom one otherwise calls the indifferent, the uncaring, or the *careless*" (Stiegler 80).<sup>52</sup> The atomized and decentralized actors in the neoliberal conjuncture, then—however interactive and dynamic—evinced a breakdown in social order that Paul Virilio describes as "dismembering" any "unities" that might lead to a more nurturing collective system: "one catches a glimpse of the...centrifugal process which contributes today to the undoing, along with the territorial organization of the population, of the social and familial tissue inherited from a recent past of productivity" (62). Alongside profit (for some), we have rising negative externalities that must be dealt with one way or another.

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<sup>52</sup> Here Alain Badiou's diagnosis of contemporary capitalism is relevant: "Capitalism entrusts the fate of peoples to the financial appetites of a tiny oligarchy. In a sense, it is a regime of gangsters....Cannot those whose only norm is profit reasonably be called 'gangsters'?" (*The Rebirth of History* 12).

Geographically, then, this centrifugal landscape is far removed from what Virilio calls the older “EXO-COLONIALISM of the central empires,” which were predicated on the long-distance control of industrial processes in the provinces; instead, in today’s “post-industrial ENDO-COLONIALISM”—built on flexible labor practices, instantaneous exchanges and transfers, and remote-control warfare—places are to an unprecedented degree interchangeable with each other, at least in principle: “*that which is interactive is interchangeable*” (59). In such a situation, distance is often erased. The center/periphery structure of colonial control is replaced by a comparatively deterritorialized pattern in which colonized spaces can occur anywhere within the system. Thus as Virilio registers, such a rapid interactive system—what neoliberal ideologue Thomas Friedman describes as a flat world—in no way implies equal conditions; rather, Virilio’s model for neoliberal space is that of the South African township, the dominated Bantustan *within* the nation rather than outside of it (or rather, *included out* of it). Such a model of internal segmentation is visible in a number of spaces, from the hollowed-out postindustrial wastelands of Detroit and St. Louis to the slums of Mexico City and Sao Paulo, from Native American reservations to Palestine. And many of these walls and exclusions are justified by the fact that, in accordance with the collapse of distance, enemies are as interchangeable and interactive as anything else. Global warming, drone bombers, international terrorist groups and gangs, financial crises, and planetary disease contagions (both cyber and bio) are *deterritorialized threats*; they can appear potentially anywhere. And because no one is truly “in charge” of these flows—and no one can predict them effectively, not even the oligarchs—we are left, in the absence of a strong civil society or the “unities” of social solidarity, with a situation uncannily captured in the

paranoid practices of North American survivalist groups; in Virilio's terms, we are left on our own, responsible for our own "self-sufficiency," such that we increasingly become *postindustrial survivalists*.

In attempting to chart cultural responses to this endo-colonial vision of post-industrial survivalism, Fredric Jameson resorts to the term *dirty realism*. In the architecture of Rem Koolhaas, but also in the literary genre of cyberpunk and in films like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Jameson sees a cultural attempt to represent the collapse of civil society, as both private and public spaces become subsumed by the mass, abstract logic of capital (*The Seeds of Time* 153). In the spaces of late capitalism we ostensibly see the demise both of private bourgeois spaces like the home (which become addendums of the private market, "shed[s]...into which you 'put your stuff'") and of public spaces (which become invaded by the market and put to use according to the profit motive) (157). Dirty realism catalogues the replacement of such spaces with new spaces that are simultaneously collective and atomized, like the market itself: "*Dirty* here means the collective as such, the traces of mass, anonymous living and using...the end of the civil, for example, and of official government, which now dissolves back into the private networks of corruption and informal clan relationships" (158). Whether in the form of corporations (or their *doppelgangers* the drug cartels), dictatorial oligarchs and their cronies, or tribal chieftains elevated to state power, these private networks of corruption suffuse both First World and Third World spaces, squeezing out (or infiltrating) the state. In such contexts, people on the ground are effectively subjugated beneath a higher order that is difficult to glimpse directly, but that nevertheless exerts a powerful (even if chaotic) shaping force on the environment. The Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* (itself



modeled on cities like Tokyo), provides a case study here; in such spaces, “the street is somehow inside, so that the city as a whole, which has no profile, becomes one immense amorphous unrepresentable container that realizes the essence of the geodesic dome without the dome itself” (156). Trapped under the dome of a totalizing system that nevertheless keeps a lid on chaos and incommensurable elements, we find ourselves in the “no man’s land” of dirty realism (159).

As a way of envisioning neoliberal urban space, the replicated chaos of dirty realism provides explanatory power (and we will see its application in the close reading of Juarez to follow). But Jameson goes wrong, I think, when he suggests that in postmodern space proletarianization no longer inspires the dread it once did. He certainly has a point: just as the space of dirty realism begins to dismantle the binary between public and private (and the binary between inside and outside), it also challenges the binary between lower class and upper class signifiers. In the spaces of cyberpunk—as in the spaces of U.S. gangster dramas like *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*—the line between the oligarchic ruler and the street criminal is somehow effaced, such that these figures begin to resemble each other in important ways. If, as Jameson maintains, dirty realism grows genealogically from the tradition of naturalism, which was built on a dynamic of simultaneous fascination and repulsion with the lower classes—and thus dramatized “the fundamental petty-bourgeois terror of proletarianization, of slipping down the class ladder, of falling from a secure yet perpetually menaced middle-class ‘respectability’ and ‘decency’ back down into a proletarian space fantasized both in terms of filth and animality and also of insecure wage work”—dirty realism depicts a world in which it is possible to move between these seemingly separate worlds: “There is now a

circulation and recirculation possible between the underworld and the overworld of high-rent condos and lofts: falling from the latter into the former is no longer so absolute and irrevocable a disaster” (151, 152). As a corollary, it also depicts a world of capital-becoming-mafia in which the “elite” are less often recognized as benighted or noble in some way, and more often as ordinary gangsters who have managed to get lucky, or who have a particular drive and a talent for opportunistic action and exploitation. In Karl Marx’s terms, everyone in the *dirty realist* landscape is stripped of his halo.

My sense here, however, is that Jameson oversells the extent to which First World subjects no longer fear falling into the lower echelons of society. Or more precisely, the dirty realist vision fails us on this score, since in its very *dirtiness* it tends to ignore the utopian element in the neoliberal landscape, where clean spaces from Davos to Greenwich Village beckon as escapes from an otherwise dirty reality. Perhaps in a “plebianized” contemporary U.S. culture we do not find the same sharp line of “terrifying specieslike difference” between a dishwasher and a computer technician as once might have obtained between a British country gentleman and a coal miner (152). But the very *slipperiness* between social positions today gives rise to new fears that must be covered over in various ways, such that First World subjects remain haunted by the ghost of an older naturalist moment. Indeed, as Tatum argues vis a vis the information economy of the U.S. West, First World spaces are all too capable of glowing with utopian promise,<sup>53</sup> and thus of summoning fears of spaces in which such promises are denied. Whether in gated communities, chic shopping centers, rustic organic farms, or the “utopian dream attendant upon becoming electronic through technological prostheses,” we are not all

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<sup>53</sup> In Chapter 2, I describe these utopian Western spaces in terms of the *frontier* (in which utopia always remains one step ahead and thus produces motion) and the *pastoral* (in which harmony is established in a heterotopic space such that conflict is denied).

resigned to a dirty realist world (Tatum 21). Instead, we take refuge in what David Harvey has called “degenerate utopias,” where “the dialectic is repressed and stability and harmony are secured through intense surveillance and control” (164, 167).<sup>54</sup> All of the Western degenerate utopias above--enabled by a neoliberal economy built on technology, tourism, the culture industry, and the military/industrial complex—remain haunted, not only by “low-skilled, low-wage earners drawn largely from ‘Greater Mexico,’” but also by offshored production sites like Juarez, Dhaka, and Shenzhen (Tatum 24). The halo remains in place, but only because inhabitants in clean spaces can avoid confronting dirt, or because they can see dirt without registering it subjectively (as in the manner of the fetish: “I know there is dirt, but nevertheless I do not believe it...”)

What Tatum identifies, then, is a *symptomal* anxiety about the proletarian *part of no part* that persists in the contemporary U.S. West and other neoliberal spaces. But these “primal anxieties about proletarianization” (Tatum 24) can be evaded in a number of defensive cultural ways, such that the lower classes are acknowledged or registered but not subjectively engaged (through styles of dress, speech, or musical citations: Beck riffing on gangster rap, or even Camper Van Beethoven riffing on the *narcocorrido*). And this problematic of denial emerges in a U.S. Western context of division between two strata: on the one hand, people who can effectively tune out their contexts (since they inhabit a “mobile” and “placeless or context-free” space engendered by technology, “an

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<sup>54</sup> Harvey draws from Louis Marin to describe the “degenerate utopia” as an autonomized fetish space: “The example that Marin used was Disneyland, a supposedly happy, harmonious, and nonconflictual space set aside from the ‘real’ world ‘outside’ in such a way as to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent history and to cultivate a nostalgia for some mythical past, to perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it” (*Spaces of Hope* 164-167). Beyond Disneyland, we can point to a whole series of postwar spaces in the United States that might function as degenerate utopias: the space of television, suburbia, the fast food restaurant, and the mall, to name a few. One would not want to overemphasize the *success* of the control in such spaces, since even in these realms we find contradictions and conflicts, but to the extent that such spaces reproduce what George Lipsitz has called the “managed gaze,” they often “perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it” (Lipsitz 251).

idealized, homogenous space analogous to that of the identical ‘clean rooms’ where silicon computer chips are produced around the world”) and on the other, people who simply live in the dirtier context that their class superiors so effectively tune out (23). The result is a return of Žižek’s symptomatic proletariat, not simply as a station on the slippery ladder in a dirty realist world, but as a fractured subjectivity of invisibility, destitution, and contradiction, found as much in the border towns of Mexico as among the janitors at a Colorado Springs convention center. And in rendering this anxiety, the metaphoric line between the U.S. and Mexico emerges as a paradigmatic space—not as a literal place (since the First World is also in Mexico and the Third World in the U.S.) but rather as a symptomatic metaphor of the separation between what Žižek calls the “Excluded and the Included” in a neoliberal period (Žižek *First as Tragedy* 91).

Within this anxious border complex, the transnational drug economy (so crucial to any understanding of Juarez) illustrates many of the neocolonial tendencies and contradictions I have tried to sketch out here: global flows, consumer addiction, the becoming-mafia of capital, the dictatorship of short-termism, the collapse of civil society, and the erection of borders designed to contain a deterritorialized enemy. In the neoliberal drug economy, the key nodal points of which have shifted flexibly from the Andes to Mexico and Central America in recent years, the contradictory devil of late capitalism (so uncannily rendered by Taussig’s South American proletarians) assumes symptomatic form: in contradictory fashion, *monetary wealth can only be channeled toward short-term luxury spending, while rendering barren other sources of social fertility*. In Bowden’s description of Juarez, no one necessarily expects to live for long, and the prizes are all too often ephemeral; the cocaine parties, hastily constructed “narco-

mansions,” and money-fuelled bling are understood even by those who enjoy them as momentary waystations on a fast-moving road to death, incompatible with long-term social life. As one former bodyguard tells Bowden, “It was an ugly life. You had money but no peace. You love no one. You serve the devil. You don’t care about your wife or son. One day I said to the Lord, if you exist, rescue me. But I got no answer” (58). Here, lines between mafia, government, and capital can no longer be drawn; and because no one in this system can see the whole picture (let alone control it), terror infiltrates everyday life through the interactive violence of a deterritorialized enemy, and the population is reduced to providing its own security in a postindustrial survivalist manner. But however chaotic the violence in Juarez, inequalities and borders nonetheless remain salient, chiefly in the form of the U.S.-Mexican border, which enables U.S. companies to pay low wages to workers mere miles from the relatively safe city of El Paso, Texas—safe, that is, for now.

*Murder City*, then, is a *neocolonial report*, since it operates in the relatively deterritorialized, free-floating space of the global neoliberal city. In contemporary Juarez as rendered in this text, we do not find an obvious, colonizing nation-state imposing military discipline on a subjugated people (even if the threat of violence always hangs in the air in one way or another). Rather, in the neocolonial report we find evidence of a more abstract mode of colonization defined by restless capital flight, flexible labor practices, the collapse of civil society and its replacement by corporations and cartels, and the financial predation of debt traps and IMF-imposed austerity, all of which lead to the enrichment of a small elite and the relative disempowerment of a subjugated populace. And in *Murder City*, the U.S.-Mexican border functions as a specter, a

haunting barrier that follows characters wherever they go and renders national boundaries symptomatic of other divisions. Insofar as Juarez's violence grows out of its interaction with the U.S. (and particularly the West), *Murder City* is as much a story of the West as of Mexico, illustrating a U.S. terror of its *own* forms of proletarianization and civil collapse even as it documents the impossibility of disentangling any Mexican narrative from a U.S. story within the global neoliberal situation. In documenting these neocolonial spaces, then, Bowden faces the challenges outlined by Taussig, and elaborated by Žižek and Jameson: how to represent the space of death most effectively? How is it possible to cut through the fetishistic appropriation of violence and dirt, to short-circuit the stereotyped repetition of accepted meanings, not only in order to cause anxiety in the reader/viewer but to contribute to a dialectical process of transformation in which the contradictions of the situation come into view in such a way that might reveal new possibilities? If we are not talking about demystification, but rather of destruction and revelation, where might such revelations be found?

In approaching such questions, Bowden is openly suspicious of narrative as such, because as he sees it, telling a coherent story about the recent torrent of murders in Juarez cannot help but reduce the trauma of the Real to the comfortable level of the Symbolic. As he puts it with regard to the inhabitants of Juarez, stories enable denial by offering closure: "The city protects itself by telling stories about itself....And so in this story swirling around Juarez, the murder of a child is made sense of and thus made safe for everyone" (105). Because Bowden chooses the creative nonfiction form, he can shift between registers in a way that disrupts any single mode or story; at one point, he can make an argument supported by facts, while at another point he can interject himself into

the argument, calling these facts into question or expressing his own subjective response to them. Perhaps most importantly, he can address the reader directly, contaminating him with his worries and his struggles. In doing so, he derealizes “nonfiction” itself. But although Bowden resists the way a coherent story can function as a fetishistic end in itself, he nevertheless resorts to narrative strategies in the end. *Murder City* may often read as a repetitive and metonymic series of contiguous elements (the counting of murder after murder), but its edifice is held together by a number of narrative elements: allegorical figures who appear again and again, appeals to a calendar different from the numbing repetition of killing, and an arc of transformation within its central character and narrator, Bowden himself.

Bowden, then, approaches the border-riven neoliberal U.S. West in characteristically gothic terms. *Murder City* is “out of joint” in important ways, since Bowden seems to understand that he is attempting the impossible; he narrates what cannot be narrated because he “cannot not do it” (Jameson “Marxism and the Historicity of Theory” 161). In a dialectical manner, Bowden presses (more or less hysterically, though also analytically) against the limits of an autonomized, fun-obsessed culture of the *fetish* in order to reach the contradictory *symptom* beneath. And staring down the collapse not only of civil society but of what many people call traditional values, as historical memory recedes and a culture based on symbolic paternal authority becomes transformed into a fragmented culture of spectacularized consumption, Bowden must decide how to grapple with the ambiguous ruins of an older form of order. He must decide whether to retreat backwards and deny the devil completely, or to dance with the devil in an attempt to move forward. In response to this gauntlet, he takes guidance, in spirit at least, from

the figure of Kierkegaard as one who believed that the old, supposedly organic world of belief was gone, and that the call to a new form of life arrives not as a gentle transition, not (in Žižek's terms) as "the (re)discovery of what is already in myself," but as "an Event, something violently imposed on me from the Outside through a traumatic encounter that shatters the very foundations of my being" (*The Ticklish Subject* 212). And just as Kierkegaard insisted on the power of the imagined past, the spiritual impulses of which could be repeated in a new context, Bowden looks to the past for guidance without any illusions about regaining it.

### Neoliberal Perversion and the Hysterical Narrator in

#### *Murder City's Space of Killing*

Every time I come to Juarez, I swear it is for the last time. And then, I come again and again. I seldom write about these visits, so that is not why I come. I seldom enjoy these visits, so that also fails to explain my returns. I think it is about tasting the future. Juarez is the page where all the proposed solutions to poverty and migrations and crime are erased by waves of blood. I feel at one with El Pastor. He keeps telling me of his mission, how back in 1998, when the bad snow came, and 'I was driving that day and singing to the lord and it was snowing. I said, 'Lord, I'm working with you,' and the Lord pulled my hair.' That is the moment when he began scooping the crazy people off the streets and creating his asylum in the desert. Now El Pastor is jubilant because he is talking about Juarez. 'I love Juarez,' he says. 'I know it is dirty and very violent but I love it! I grew up in Juarez. I love it. It is a needy city and I can help my city. I can make a little difference.' As he blurts out his love, we are at a red light. A boy with needle marks racing up and down his arms fills his mouth with gasoline, raises a torch, and then spits fire into the air. I tell people I hate Juarez. I tell people I am mesmerized by Juarez. I tell myself Juarez is a duty. And I keep going back, month after month, year after year. I tell people I go to Juarez for the beaches. Or I tell people I go to Juarez for the waters. Often, people tell me I don't know the real Juarez, a place of discos, party-hearty souls, laughter, and good times. I do not argue. I go for what I do not know. I go in the vain hope of understanding how a city evolves into a death machine. I watch modern factories rise, I see American franchises pop up along the avenues. Golden arches peddle burgers, but old MacDonald no longer has a farm. He lives in a shack in an outlaw *colonia*, there is no water, the electricity is pirated, and dust fills his lungs. Everyone has a job, according to the authorities. Every year, some mysterious form of accounting belches forth new economic statistics, and these numbers get bigger and bigger. The city slowly crumbles,



the dead clutter *the calles*. And I keep going back and I have given up explaining my task to others. Or to myself. Like so many people in the city, I am a slave to it and no longer question my bondage.

--Charles Bowden in *Murder City* (100-101)

‘To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution’—in other words, poetic politics? ‘We have tried that beverage. Anything, rather than that!’ Well, it will interest you all the more how much an excursion into poetry clarifies things. For what is the programme of the bourgeois parties? A bad poem on springtime, filling to bursting with metaphors....Where are the conditions for revolution?...Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals.

--Walter Benjamin, from *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia* (78-79)

All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.

--Flannery O’Connor, from *The Habit of Being*

Early in *Murder City*, Charles Bowden describes a *communique* left on a monument to murdered police officers in Juarez: “Under the heading THOSE WHO DID NOT BELIEVE are the names of...five recently murdered cops. And under the heading FOR THOSE WHO CONTINUE NOT BELIEVING are seventeen names” (2). Here the killers of policemen curiously frame the matter of life and death (or more exactly, of life and *killing*) in terms of *belief*, as if the important issue is not what the policemen do, but how they subjectively register the rising toll of murder in Juarez (a city which during the years 2008-2010 became the murder capital of the world). It seems as though the killers hope to facilitate a kind of *conversion*: to shock the policemen out of what presumably is a state of denial or faithlessness. And characteristically, their mode of conversion is a violent one; the dead may not have *believed* before they were killed, but presumably they eventually came to believe. In the preceding pages, Bowden also adopts a violent stance toward the reader in the hope of converting him to a form of belief. Taking on the

narrative persona of the *sicario* (assassin), Bowden virtually kidnaps his reader, pulls him into a car, addresses him in the second person, and subjects him to violent threat: “Damn you, listen as if your fucking life depended on it” (xi).

In treating narrative as a form of (sometimes violent) conversion, the Bowden/*sicario* narrative persona recalls the words of theorist Peter Brooks, who argued that narrative can function as “contamination” in the sense that, once we have listened to a story, we cannot unlearn it (218). A story can be a performative act, accomplishing an initiation such that we become baptized, as it were, into a new knowledge that marks us with a different identity. Bowden, in such passages, aggressively initiates us into a membership in which we might rather not be included. But then, Juarez itself seems to have operated in exactly this fashion for Bowden, since it has figuratively kidnapped the writer (“I am a slave to it and no longer question my bondage”) and conferred upon him what Brooks describes as an undesired “fallen knowledge” (218). Later, after interviewing a *sicario*, he puts the matter in terms that resemble Brooks’s formulation:

I crossed the river about twenty years ago—I can’t be exact about the date, because I am still not sure what crossing really means, except that you never come back. I just know I scratch like a caged animal trying to claw my way out and reach the distant shore. It is like killing. There are some things that if learned change a person forever. You cannot know of the slaughter running along the border and remain the same person. You cannot know of the hopeless poverty of Mexicans who are fully employed in U.S. factories and remain the same person. And you cannot listen to a *sicario*—who functioned for years as a state policeman—tell of kidnappings, tortures, and murders and remain the same person. (137)

Here Bowden experiences knowledge not as a welcome state, but as a foundation-shattering Event that offers him something he would prefer to forget.

El Pastor, too, experiences his conversion—in this case a Christian one—not as a welcome beacon of light, but as a painful initiation in which the Lord plays an aggressive

role, pulling his hair in order to drag him out of his street life of addiction and negative repetition (after which he embarks on a mad career of gathering the rejects of the city and caring for them at an asylum in the desert). As we have already noted with regard to Kierkegaard, such a vision of painful grace has a long history within Christian discourse, from Paul on the road to Damascus to Flannery O'Connor's violent revelations. When Bowden holds a gun to our heads and demands that we listen to his story, he imitates the Misfit in O'Connor's 1953 story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in which a *sicario* of the U.S. South kills an entire family (and finally an aged grandmother) before concluding: "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Like O'Connor, Kierkegaard, Zizek, and El Pastor, Bowden senses that if we are to experience grace, we must be jolted out of complacency by an external act. And this act can only be experienced in terms of the traumatic Real, since only such an unsymbolizable Event can result in a revelation worth having. Bowden's fascination with the traumatized subject, then—most visible in his constant repetition of the figure of Miss Sinaloa, a woman who has abducted and raped by members of a drug cartel before wandering off to El Pastor's asylum to recover—derives from his basic sense that because such a traumatic experience can never be fully explained, it mirrors the action of grace itself.

Just as O'Connor's story involves a dance with the devil (here embodied in the "out of joint" Misfit), Bowden engages in his own dance with the devil by interviewing and even identifying with the murderous *sicario*. Through such "tarrying with the negative" (in Hegel's terms), Bowden arrives at the most disturbing knowledge of all: that, as he puts it, "Dying is the easy part. Killing is the fun part" (123). As in the colonial

space of death in the Putamayo documented by Taussig, killing in Juarez seemingly goes beyond economic rationality (a mere job one does for money, or to secure its rational circulation in the drug economy), but instead becomes an autonomized fetish and an addiction in itself. Killing in *Murder City* emerges as terrifyingly sexy and seductive, not simply an avenue to power but a perverse loop of pleasure. And this fetish quality illustrates why, for Bowden, explaining the violence by reference to poverty, free trade agreements, a patriarchal culture, and neocolonial exploitation is necessary but insufficient. Late in the book, a Juarez lawyer supplies him with gothic terminology that helps him approach the “failure of analysis”: “He tells me criminology will not explain what is happening, nor will sociology. He pauses and then says that we must study *demonology*” (234 my emphasis). In a way, Juarez is crawling with demons because it is crawling with murder addicts, such that any solutions to the problem must address not simply the *material* crisis of the matter (however important poverty may be), but the *spiritual* crisis as well. (We must note here that the demons and addictions here are not limited to Juarez; after all, most of the drugs are consumed in the U.S.). It is perhaps no accident that the *ex-sicarios* documented by Bowden turn to God as the only way out of their predicament; their only escape, as they see it, lies in a confrontation with another kind of death drive, the Real of a power larger than they are.

However, if the neocolonial space of death in Juarez resembles the Putamayo of the turn of the last century in its *surplus violence*, and because it takes place on a relatively lawless frontier in which killing can be done with impunity, it is also different, since it takes place within a comparatively advanced capitalist world system in which the old centers (colonizing nation-states) no longer obtain. Bowden repeatedly tries to

impress upon the reader not only the frequency of killing in Juarez, but above all its rhizomatic, centerless quality, which (like finance capital in Jameson's terms) becomes an end in itself. Like a vision of Hardt and Negri's neo-Deleuzian *multitude* gone bad, the killing in Juarez is a "hydra-headed" beast; it is not managed according to the top-down structure of bureaucracy, but rather emerges as the dark *doppelganger* of the participatory, entrepreneurial culture celebrated in the networked cyberspace of Facebook.<sup>55</sup> Against the neoliberal ideologues, who presume a positive *telos* in a supposedly democratized march of individualized economic activity enabled by the networked global market managed by technocratic governance, Bowden sees something closer to what Jameson calls the collapse of civil society. In this world, "no one is really in charge and we are all in play" (22):

We insist that power must replace power, that structure replaces an earlier structure. And we insist that power exists as a hierarchy, that there is a top where the boss lives and a bottom where the prey scurry about in fear of the boss. Also, we believe the state truly owns power and violence, and that is why any nonstate violence by people earns them the name of outlaws. Try for a moment to imagine something else, not a new structure but rather a pattern, and this pattern functionally has no top or bottom, no center or edge, no boss or obedient servant. Think of something like the ocean, a fluid thing without king and court, boss and

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<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Bowden's description of Juarez as a participatory culture of entrepreneurial murder uncannily resembles writer Stephen Duncombe's description (in his 1995 article "I've Seen the Future—And it's a Sony!" from *The Baffler*) of visiting two museums: an aging IBM compound, where he finds the old top-down announcements of corporate-administered progress (the "gray suits" are alive and well here), and the newer Sony museum, which trumpets not administered repetition but instead a fun and free-flowing "adventure" full of whimsy and enchantment. Multicultural, participatory, and indeterminate in its approach, the Sony museum is beguiling and open, a laboratory of affect: "The message here isn't Think, it's Wonder. In this era where everybody creates, I get the chance to produce Sonyproduct and be a part of the Sonyteam. Tapping into popular democratic aspirations, they give me interactive 'choice.'... Sony Wonder gets under your skin without you knowing it. The chaos it projects keeps you from seeing any pattern or any political ideology. Instead the Sonyworld envelops you: swirling, dancing, embracing, amusing. As a child of the postmodern world, it's hard not to get off on it at some point... Sony doesn't tell me what to do, I'm already doing it" (108-109). It becomes increasingly clear that the supposedly absent ideology of Sony world is its ideology: "for the modern Sonypublic, like for the peasant of years past, the world is fixed, outside of human creation and control. So all that is left for us to do is just sit back and make the best—or worst—of it" (110). As in Juarez, where Bowden finally concludes (with his tongue in his cheek) that the best thing to do is "relax" because there is nothing to be done about the situation, an ostensibly participatory culture reveals its basis in social passivity.

cartel. Give up all normal ways of thinking....Violence courses through Juarez like a ceaseless wind, and we insist it is a battle between cartels, or between the state and the drug world, or between the army and the forces of darkness. But consider this possibility: Violence is now woven into the very fabric of the community and has no single cause and no single motive and no on-off button. Violence is not a part of life, now it is life. Just ask Miss Sinaloa. (104-105)

In such a fluid context, in which even hierarchy is unstable because no one knows who is in charge, telling a coherent story (and thus developing what Walter Benjamin called “wisdom” or “counsel”) is especially difficult.

Bowden’s insistence on the reality of the Event (the traumatic Real of the space of death in Juarez), combined with his continual resistance in *Murder City* to explanation—to the reduction of the act to University Discourse—reveals him as a hysterical narrator, opposed as much to mystical evocations of the ineffable as he is to what Taussig calls “the forlorn attempts of social science” (10). Yes, the explanations may be necessary. We will need to confront the sources of the problem. But first he wants us to understand the subjective destitution of the people involved. This is the starting place. Bowden, then, remains in *shock* at what he finds in Juarez, and as a result, has difficulty transforming his experience into narrative. Like a hysterical survivor of post-traumatic stress disorder he returns again and again to the same themes, tropes, and allegorical figures, as if trying to work through a past that he cannot fully assimilate. As a result, the book reads less as a straightforward documentation of Juarez, and more as a repetitive, circular stab at meaning that never quite arrives, such that we follow Bowden through a series of failed gestures of assimilation: denial, rage, depression, fantasy, and rumination. Like Ike McCaslin in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, Bowden tells *around* the story here; his mode is not simply to tell the story (to narrate the “event” in a way that does not communicate very much), but to express anxiety about the very telling of the story, to

circle around it, to speculate about the meaning of the story before he has even told it, to investigate why the story is hard to tell. In doing so, he highlights his own *Imbunche* status, as one cut off from his senses, and from ordinary avenues of communication.

Much of Bowden's anxiety revolves around the same risk posed by any colonial report, from *Heart of Darkness* to *Fast Food Nation*: that his work will be reduced to the level of the perverse fetish he is trying to document and reveal. *Murder City*, like these texts, is phantasmagoric in its rendering of Juarez, full of ghosts, strange images, and recurring nightmares. But in depicting Juarez as a nightmarish world of violence, he may allow the city and its killers to become yet another fetish; no matter how extreme its violence, a book about the murders in Juarez can become a pastiche in a perverse postmodern culture bent on drawing enjoyment (and profit) from even the most grisly episodes.<sup>56</sup> (In a recent interview, for example, Quentin Tarantino defended his recent

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<sup>56</sup> To cite a very recent example, we might look at Shaul Schwartz's 2013 documentary *Narco Cultura*, a documentary which moves back and forth between two subjects: a veteran crime scene investigator in Juarez (who experiences firsthand the dead bodies in the streets of the city) and an L.A.-based singer of narcocorridos (a popular style of music which glorifies drug violence in places like Juarez). Edgar Quintero, the *narcocorrido* singer, has little experience with Mexico, but instead writes songs based largely on internet research about the cartels, *sicarios*, and the like. And indeed, although one can question many of his parenting decisions (he smokes a joint while driving his son in the car), what strikes one about Quintero is not that he is a bloodthirsty monster, but that he is thoroughly ordinary: a father of two children who changes their diapers, a husband who goes with his wife to Mexican restaurants, and a striving entrepreneur who hopes to provide for his family. There is a strange disconnect, then, between Quintero as human being and his violent fetishized stage persona: he seemingly betrays no anxiety about singing *narcocorridos*, but simply thinks of the music as fun—as he terms it, “badass.” He “knows” about the drug life without really “knowing” it. And one of the most disturbing elements of the film is that this music *is* fun, and that the odd combination of musical and visual signifiers (the traditional-style polka music, the tuba, the bazooka on stage, the fancy embroidered suits that resemble the attire of bygone U.S. country singers like Buck Owens) do in fact radiate a potent quality of “cool,” such that it is impossible to imagine that this constellation of signifiers will not at some point be appropriated within the mainstream culture by a new Quentin Tarantino-style filmmaker or musician. And this “cool” quality may be impossible to detach from any treatment of the phenomenon. When the film showed at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, the local punk-style *Slug Magazine* featured the film on its cover, on which was festooned images of the *narcocorrido* band posing on a dusty hilltop, dressed in their fancy suits and showing off their fetish gear: the tuba, the bazooka, and other “instruments” of their trade. Thus although the magazine article (which, as it happens, was written by a former student of mine, who cites Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* in the text!) was thoughtful and informative, I found myself feeling uneasy about the entire enterprise, and especially the cover. Schwartz, then, like Bowden, dances with the devil in *Narco Cultura*—a contamination perhaps inevitable, but no less disturbing for its inevitability.

film *Django Unchained* by appealing to the “fun” quality of its extreme violence). Bowden clearly understands—and explicitly tackles—the problem that the drug violence in Juarez can become “fun,” “cool,” or, in the characteristic contemporary parlance, “badass.” Indeed, part of his strategy for combating the fetish is to discuss it outright, to call it out in himself and others, and to force us to appreciate its power. Like Conrad, he allows us to feel our way deeper into the myth (in this case, the gangster myth), to try it out for ourselves until we see what is at stake:

A big SUV rolls down the *calle*, you hop in, the windows are darkly tinted, and the machine prowls the city like a shark with its fanged mouth agape, and oh, it is so sweet when you squeeze the trigger and feel the burst run free and wild into the night air, see the body crumple and fall like a rag doll, right on into the black velvet after midnight, and there’ll be a party, fine girls and white powder, and people fear you, and the body falls, blood spraying, and you feel like God even though you secretly stopped believing in God some time ago, and they tell you that you will die, that your way of living has no future, and you see the tired men and women walking the dirt lanes after a shift in the factory, plastic bags of food dangling from their hands, and you caress the gun stuffed in your waistband, and life is so good and the killing is fun and everyone knows who has the guts to take the ride. Dying is the easy part. Killing is the fun part. Taking that first ride is the hard part. (123)

Just as the “fun” of killing (and the thrill of money, cocaine, and women) cuts through the ostensibly drab, intolerable inertia of working in a factory for low wages, Bowden’s virtuosic sentence here—with its long, free-flowing clauses and image after image—contrasts with the short, staccato sentences that populate the rest of the book: the numbing repetition of counting murder after murder. And yet this passage, too, ends with staccato sentences, which like gunshots bring us back from the Symbolic of the gangster fantasy to the Real of death, and a life cut short.

Bowden, then, dances with the devil here, but he always tries to redirect his audience from the pleasure-giving fetish to the anxiety-producing symptom. Again and



again, he attempts to collapse the distance between Juarez and the reader by insisting that his audience cannot keep the city (and what it might represent) separate or autonomized. Instead, as he puts it, Juarez is not a “failure,” but a *success*, the unacknowledged underbelly of the neoliberal utopian dream itself. Like *Fast Food Nation*’s gothic slaughterhouses (and in fact, at one point, Bowden explicitly calls Juarez a “slaughterhouse” [199]), Juarez is not an aberration or a barbaric throwback, but an illumination of the larger structure of throughput, exploitation, and perverse enjoyment that runs freely in the rhizomatic structure of the contemporary global system:

Juarez is not behind the times. It is the sharp edge slashing into a time called the future. ...Here, boys stand on corners with pistols because there is no work, or if there is work, it pays little or nothing. Here, the girls walk by in their summer clothes, but they do not believe in the seasons or in harvest time. Here, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter come and go without much fanfare save a drunken spree to memorialize a dead belief system. This is the way of bullet-streets with graffiti on the walls, steel bars on the windows, faces peering out with caution, and corpses on the shattered sidewalks. ...Every claim of a gain is overwhelmed by a tidal wave of failure. And yet this failure, I have come to realize, is not failure. The gangs are not failure. The drugs, ever cheaper and more potent and widespread, are not failure. The media is increasingly tame here, just as it is in that place that once proudly called itself the first world, a place now where wars go on with barely a mention and the dead are counted but not photographed. ... Please be advised that there will be no apocalypse. The very idea of a *Gotterdammerung* assumes meaning and progress. You cannot fall off a mountain unless you are climbing. No one here is slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. We shall not meet next year in Jerusalem. For years, I thought I was watching the city go from bad to worse, a kind of terrible backsliding from its imagined destiny as an America with different food. I was blind to what was slapping me in the face: the future. A place where conversation is a gun and reality is a drug and time is immediate and tomorrow, well, tomorrow is today because there is no destination beyond this very second. (116-118)

A passage like this, which can only be read as a hysterical rant, employs a fatalistic pessimism that we might not choose to take at face value. By insisting that Juarez constitutes a negative version of Francis Fukayama’s End of History, such that for all intents and purposes nothing can happen any longer because there is no progress but only

a Juarez-like “future” (in which not only the apocalypse, but any calendar whatsoever—“Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter”—has become inoperative), Bowden decisively and hysterically rejects the neoliberal utopian calendar of progress, the bad poem on springtime that Bowden identifies in a “religion called the global economy” (137). But although Bowden seems to take Benjamin’s endorsement of “pessimism all along the line” to heart here, does he truly regard the situation as impossible? Is this the conversion into which he wishes to initiate us, or is this the midnight moment in which the possibility of such a future slaps us in the face, goading us on to some other course of action, or to imagine some other form of progress?<sup>57</sup>

### The Return of the Dialectic: What Is and What Will Be

One of the things that upsets you most in the US is the frequency with which ‘the American dream’ is cited by mainstream politicians. I laughed at it when I first moved here, but I didn’t realize how ubiquitous it was as a concept. It is almost like a serious philosophical concept. You will hear people of all walks of life believing this, not just the President. So you have people from poor communities saying ‘We’ve been deprived of the American dream,’ and so on. The whole vocabulary of dream and magic in countries in more sober times, and political lexicons, would not have used it as such, or it would

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<sup>57</sup> By deploying a pessimistic rhetoric which Slavoj Žižek has characterized through the aphorism “Do not worry—the catastrophe will occur,” Charles Bowden here actually reverses the terms of the fetish. If the perverse subject knows that his fetish is just a game, but nevertheless believes in it (in Freudian terms: I know that the mother has lost the phallus, but nevertheless I believe that she still has it), Bowden here seems to know intellectually that the Juarez future is not inevitable, but nevertheless believes in such a future deeply within his bones. In doing so, he follows Žižek’s peculiar strategy for motivating action in the present: rather than wasting our time in the vain and cowardly hope that catastrophe will not occur, we should proceed as if the catastrophe (ecological disaster, violent global apartheid) has already happened in the future, and adjust our actions accordingly. Just as when we read a novel, we trust that the contingent actions on page one are not simply meaningless because they will appear retroactively important from the position of the end, we should narrativize our situations, presume the end as catastrophe, and then work as hard as possible to prevent the inevitable. Or, to put it another way: “if the catastrophe happens, one can say that its occurrence was decided even before it took place... [Therefore] we should first perceive [the disaster] as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities (“If we had done this and that, the calamity that we are now experiencing would not have occurred”) upon which we then act today.” If we don’t accept the reality of the future catastrophe, we will be able to persist in fetishistic denial (“I know global warming already threatens us in a fundamental way, but... I don’t really believe it”) and will never actually prevent the catastrophe: “Paradoxically,” then, “the only way to prevent the disaster is to accept it as inevitable” (*First as Tragedy* 151).

have been frowned upon. In this country it seems you have been mightily cheated if you don't espouse it. Adorno said after Auschwitz, 'There can be no poetry'—is almost like after they have phrased 'the American dream' there can be *no more dreaming*.

--Michael Taussig, from "Carnival of Senses" (53)

To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent....This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an 'unrepeatable'. They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power...it is not Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days; or Monet's first water lily which repeats all the others.

--Gilles Deleuze, from *Difference and Repetition* (2-3)

Toward the end of *Murder City*, Charles Bowden describes a moment in which time figuratively stops. On the evening of August 13, 2008, a group of men pass by a squadron of soldiers, enter a rehab center in Juarez, and for fifteen minutes gun down a group of recovering drug addicts who have been praying. Nine people die, and several more are wounded. The event impresses Bowden (and stands out amid all the bare repetition of death) to such an extent that he returns to the "toxic" Juarez after a much-needed break:

I am here against my will. I had decided that six months of killing was enough for me and everyone else, and that anything beyond that merely meant repeating what was already known. I had determined that I could not look at one more corpse, that I was ill, and that the toxic elements floating through my cells and through my mind came from this city and this slaughter....But people slaughtered while praying bring me back. (192)

Before he leaves the rehab center (which permanently closed down immediately after the slaughter), he notices a calendar on the wall that will always remain fixed on the same date, "stalled at August 13/14, the night of the killing" (200). But the frozen calendar means little, concludes Bowden, since "time goes on" and many more will continue to die. As a result, Bowden rejects not only the idea of a pause in the endless procession of time and death, but also the very possibility of narrativizing this procession:

We are in a place without beginning or end, and all the ways to tell the story fail me and repel me. There are many dead, and they each have a tale. Beyond that, the efforts to explain are to me efforts to erase truth or deny truth or simply to tell lies. I don't know what is going on, nor do the dead or the living. But there are these stories of the killings, there is the tortured flesh, the individual moments of horror, and I rest on those moments because they are actual and beyond question. (200)

With no beginning and no end, there is no story: only a disconnected series of metonymically contiguous "moments of horror." For Bowden here, to transform these moments into a story would betray the traumatic Real in which they were experienced. Only the dead, it seems, have a right to tell such a tale—but even these ghosts "don't know what is going on."

Despite vowing resistance to the storytelling temptation, a few pages earlier Bowden manages to access a different calendar. While he is attending the funeral at the rehab center, he looks into the eyes of a baby, the son of a former gangmember who was killed on August 13, and can't help but make mental correspondences between this significant moment and other past moments that stand out in time:

I stare into the baby's wide, dark eyes and try to make out what is and what will be. A golden crucifix, Christ with arms outstretched in His agony, floats over the face so still now, the eyes closed. The baby stares with round eyes of wonder. I look into two versions of myself, the body in the coffin and the babe in arms. I am possibly past due for the coffin, but I remember through the haze those early glimpses of life when I was younger than I can even recall, those blues and greens, the smell of fresh apples, the feel of the grain in the floorboards in the old farmhouse, the cluck of chickens, the strange sounds coming from the mouths of adults. So I am in a small room full of people, the body is against the wall in a glass-topped coffin, the baby looks down at the still, dead face, and I can smell fresh hay from some forgotten summer when I first caught the light gleaming into my eyes. And I know that my early days were somehow similar, that bodies were still displayed in the house, that wakes were home affairs, the children and babies were not sheltered from the fate of all living things, and that all of life that mattered took place in the kitchen. (194)

This passage stands out from any other in the book, which otherwise tends to vacillate between numb shock (counting the dead, counting the days), anger, hysteria, depression, the hard-boiled grind of a former crime reporter's trade, and the queasy excitement of finding a scoop. Here we have a different structure of feeling, such that Juarez is not simply "a place without beginning or end," as he later concludes. Rather, prompted by a consideration of birth and death, Bowden hesitates and asks a question about "what is and what will be." Like Uncle Pete in *Fast Food Nation*, he conjures visions of past and future; he considers his own beginning--a memory from a time before he know how old he was, before he started counting days and bodies, before he knew of *sicarios*—and also his own end, the coffin to come. The result is a series of images from a different time: the fruits of the harvest (apples, chickens, hay), sensual feeling (light, images, smells, the sounds of words he doesn't understand), and a social order in which death stands out in sharp relief—not another flip of the card, as he often experiences it in Juarez, but a moment of pause which transmits enough gravity to be recalled years later. Finally, there is the image of Christ on the cross: a death that, in legend at least, leads to rebirth. And crucially, Bowden seems to conclude that the world of this memory is not completely divorced from the world he is in now; here, too, in Juarez, time stops to heed a death.

The free-floating tone here, filtered through the haze of memory, brings to mind Walter Benjamin's reflections on the calendar: its waning in the feeling of *Erlebnis* ("isolated experience" and its associated form of ephemeral *information*) and its necessity to *Erfahrung* ("long experience" and *storytelling*). A calendar, by which Benjamin implies not merely a beginning and an end, but a vision of temporality in which certain moments stand out, resulting in pauses, zigzags, and mental leaps, is necessary if

storytelling is to take place. And as Naomi Klein observes, emerging from a state of shock requires the formation of narrative, since disorienting shock can only be challenged by a form of orientation in which we link our present state to the past and future. Like Klein, Benjamin refuses to allow trauma the last word; he is especially preoccupied with what Peter Brooks calls “binding” moments that disrupt the metonymic flow of contiguous elements and allow story to exist in the first place: ends, beginnings, connections, repetitions, and symmetries (101). In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin speculates that death is a crucial element in the storytelling matrix, since it retroactively confers authority and meaning on the events which precede it. If in an earlier time, “there used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not died,” with bourgeois modernity comes a different, death-denying space in which storytelling cannot so easily thrive:

Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers in eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs. It is, however, characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.... This authority is at the very source of the story. (*Illuminations* 94)

Since we know death is coming, it works like the end of a story; and as Brooks points out, it is only because we know that a story will eventually end that we give meaning (through a process of “anticipation of retrospection”) to the events we read about.

That Bowden only briefly accesses this “data of recollection” (before returning again to his refusal of narrative) indicates the depth of his struggle, and the seriousness of the “shock” and trauma at issue in Juarez. But just as the psychoanalytic patient must work through the past in an effort to create a new narrative, Bowden must (if he is to move forward) figure out a way to narrativize his experience by bringing the past into provisional accord with the present and future. And as Brooks points out, the telling

of a story always presupposes a listener. In psychoanalysis, the listener is the analyst, and through the process of transference, the analyst and the analysand together produce a hypothetical, “what if” space in which the past can be examined, such that it ceases to intrude forcefully in the present in the form of the *symptom*, but instead enables forward movement:

There is in the dynamics of the transference at once the drive to make the story of the past present—to actualize past desire—and the countervailing pressure to make the history of this past definitively past: to make an end to its reproductive insistence in the present, to lead the analysand to understanding that the past is indeed past, and then to incorporate this past, as past, within his present, so that the life’s story can once again progress. (Brooks 227-228)

In Žižek’s Lacanian terms, what we are discussing here is the necessity of movement from the hysterical subject position (in which I cannot form a story because I question every master-signifier that would quilt it together) to the analytic subject position (in which I recognize the necessity for a master-signifier, even if I have faced the *lack* of the traumatic Real, which resists symbolization and produces “subjective destitution”). It involves seizing on to the *symptom* as a dialectical point of contradiction, and working through this “out of joint” element in order to produce new possibilities.

In his dialectical fashion, Bowden ultimately shapes narrative out of the materials available to him, mediating between past, present, and future with the help of a presupposed listener: his audience. To begin with, Bowden turns to *allegory*. What binds Bowden’s book together as a structural edifice is largely its repeated attention to allegorical figures who emerge (he hopes, perhaps) not as stereotypes but as dialectical, symptomatic figures who embody pregnant contradictions of one sort or another. Again and again, he circles around (in section headings, and in quick references) to the same characters: the *sicario* (or “Murder Artist”), El Pastor, Miss Sinaloa, and the hunted

reporter (“The Dead Man Walking.”) The *sicario*, in particular, stands out; in this figure, we find the starkest and most visceral embodiment of contradiction, an angel of death who thereby provides access to an urgent sense of meaning and the possibility of transformation. By interviewing a former professional killer and kidnapper (who nevertheless worked for the anti-kidnapping unit of the federal police!), Bowden dances with the devil in a particularly dangerous and revelatory way—exposing himself to risk, but also discovering a purpose that drives the writing of the book in the first place. In this *sicario*, Bowden finds a figure who dwells in a land above the law, a craftsman and a master of survival who never comes to trust others in any absolute sense, but who nevertheless reaches a point of ultimate “grace” by relinquishing fear, becoming figuratively reborn, and committing himself to combating the death machine that he helped create (224). By interacting with this devil/*sicario*, Bowden comes to imagine *himself* in allegorical terms, since at one point during their meeting the *sicario* interpellates the terrified author by asking him to play the role of *medium*: to channel both the devil’s story and God’s. In becoming allegorized as the shaman-like conduit for the *sicario*’s searing visions, Bowden finds himself confronted with a vision of the future: a goal, an endpoint and “mission” that provides an engine to the book (223). And this mission requires our presence as therapeutic listeners.

This moment of Bowden’s calling, as it were, stands out as the book’s climax, the height of tension in which the dramatic situation of *Murder City* is fully revealed and explored, and in which its conditions of narrative possibility are interrogated most forcefully. And this dramatic situation revolves around the questions the *sicario* implies during this scene: First, do you believe in the Event (the traumatic confrontation with the



Real), and secondly, do you believe in transformation? (Or, what is ultimately the same thing: Do you believe in narrative?) And although Bowden insists that he will always be “haunted,” he answers in the affirmative:

This is the point in all stories where everyone discovers who they really are. Do you believe in redemption? Do you believe a man can kill for twenty years and then change? Do you even believe such killers can exist? In every story, there is this same moment when all you hold dear and believe to be true and certain is suddenly called into question, and the walls of your life shake, the roof collapses, and you look into a sky you never imagined and never wanted to know. I believe his conversion to Christ, I believe he can change, I believe he can never be forgiven. And I am certain my knowledge of his life and his ways will haunt me the rest of my days. He says, ‘I have now relived something I should never have opened up. Are you the medium to reach others? I prayed to God asking you what I should do. And you are the answer. You are going to write this story because God has a purpose in you writing this story...God has given you this mission...No one will understand this story except those who have been in the life. And God will tell you how to write this story.’ (223)

Here the matter is not whether Bowden accepts Christ, or even whether the *sicario* can be forgiven for the pain he has caused, but whether Bowden accepts the possibility of “change.” And in this case, Bowden accepts the role of *medium*; he channels and performs this story of transformation, even if taking upon himself the shamanic role involves adopting masks, dancing with the devil, and facing knowledge he “never wanted to know,” thus risking the collapse of his own foundations by giving up his earlier life of relative innocence.

In the process of channeling the *sicario*, he discovers that “killing is good,” not because violence is always pleasurable (though it sometimes might be), but because in a dialectical fashion the violence of the *sicario* can be a (terrifyingly) positive, affirmative response to a static, deadening situation. In identifying with the violence not only of professional killers but also of ordinary people, Bowden insists that violence can be an act of protest; in acting out a fantasy of power in a situation of powerlessness, the *sicario*

sheds oblique light on possibilities for very different forms of power, and different forms of resistance that might be more constructive and socially fertile. The true death, in this view, involves submitting to the life imposed by neoliberal development, and the true space of death the factory: the low wages, the slums that have grown up around them, the job that can be removed at will by the movements of capital. (As Bowden puts it, “The factories are now the house of death, offering no future, poisoning the body with chemicals, destroying the spirit faster than cocaine or meth” [116]). It is this “crisis ordinary” (in Lauren Berlant’s terms) that the diabolical *sicario* rejects by pushing the crisis into the visible open; “killing is good” because it can serve not merely as a perverse fetish, but as a hysterical symptom of the larger and more structural violence out of which it grows.

Bowden, then, rejects the “sensible people” who have helped create this structural violence. Instead, echoing Walter Benjamin’s judgment (“That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe...hell is not something that awaits us, but the here and now” [*The Writer of Modern Life* 161]), Bowden insists that the violence of the *sicario*—even when it devolves into the perverse loop of the fetish—is preferable to the constituted violence of the existing structure:

Listen to the sensible people, the governments that have told you since before you were born that everything is getting better. Skip those failures—they are bumps on the road, and the road leads to Shangri-La....Or consider the market forces, the magical pulse of an economy now global, hitch a ride on an information highway or bask in the glow of market forces, become part of a giant apparatus that is towing us all toward the golden shore...I can hear the voices of reprimand...yes, I can hear those voices telling me the facts of life. I say dream, I say fantasize, I say escape, I say kill, I say do not accept the offerings of the cops and the government and the guns that have slaughtered hopes for generations and generations. I say fantasy. I say go to Juarez. I say, Miss Sinaloa, will you take my hand? (96-97)

In taking the hand of the *sicario* here, fully as much as the traumatized subject Miss Sinaloa, Bowden draws from these allegorical figures to find the dialectical promise in traumatized and killer alike, and an insistence that (*contra* Taussig's formulation) the American Dream should not spell the end of all dreaming.

In suspending fear of the law, then, the perverse *sicario* (the craftsman, the "murder artist" operating within the autonomized sphere of extortion and death) opens up a space that might be inhabited by more loving souls, thereby suggesting the specter of a different kind of dialectical figure: the *revolutionary* who suspends the space of the law not simply to make money from the drug economy, but to transform and combat the neocolonial space of death itself. In like fashion, *Murder City* presents us with a series of degenerate social formations that, if turned upside-down, might result in a life machine to counteract Juarez's death machine: in the gang we find the distorted premonition of the militant collective, and in the cartel the negative prototype of a broader national or transnational apparatus that might protect the *part of no part*. Seen through this dialectical lens, the cartel's advertisements ("Operative group 'The Zetas' wants you, soldier or ex-soldier. We offer a good salary, food and benefits for your family. Don't suffer any more mistreatment and don't go hungry," or: "Join the ranks of the Gulf Cartel. We offer benefits, life insurance, a house for your family and children. Stop living in the slums and riding the bus") ring with a new meaning (73). Ultimately, the missing term of emancipatory politics revisits the failed promise of the early twentieth century Mexican Revolution: the demise of Emiliano Zapata and his replacement by the new bosses of the Mexican elite who emerged with the support of the U.S. and other colonial powers in the wake of the multipronged revolt. (The Zapatista uprising in the late 1990s

proved to be an incomplete experiment: a pose of military power that collapsed in the face of army reprisals, and thus could not even achieve its limited objective of regional autonomy). No one in *Murder City* seems capable of resurrecting this emancipatory master-signifier, and Bowden lets its absence speak for itself, but in his vehement rejection of the neoliberal utopian dream, he carves out a space in which a new version of liberation might yet emerge.

It is perhaps appropriate that the only figure to mention the Mexican Revolution (228) in *Murder City* is also closest to the revolutionary figure as such: El Pastor, who serves as the John the Baptist of the book, the crazy man in the desert working on behalf of a messiah whose appearance he fervently hopes for. It is in El Pastor that Bowden finds an alternative way of suspending the fear of the law, not the *sicario*'s but the apostle's. El Pastor's laughter is not the perverse "gangster laughter" of the professional killer; instead, it echoes the laughter of a man described earlier in the book, a former drug businessman who conquers a drug addiction, becomes a Christian, and leaves "the life" despite the ensuing dangers to his person (49). The businessman's conversion leads to a terrifyingly comic scene, wherein his former bodyguard finds himself confounded by his boss's strange and jolly transformation: "The business genius becomes a born-again Christian, but his bodyguard does not. One day, he goes for his pay and the guy says he can't pay him, but not to worry, the Lord will. He becomes furious and is going to beat the business mind when suddenly the guy breaks out in laughter. The bodyguard is confused, he slams the door as he leaves" (59). The bodyguard's confusion results from the very absurdity of his former boss, who responds to a veteran killer with laughter and a ridiculous promise that God will pay him. But just as El Pastor inspires strange

conversions in others, the businessman's laughter results in a spiritual crisis for the bodyguard, who "cannot sleep" as "the laughter of the businessman rings in his mind" (59). After a surreal dream in which the Lord visits him, kidnaps him from a party ringing with gangster laughter, carries him through the air, and deposits him on a mountain, the bodyguard also gives up the drug life and becomes a Christian.

El Pastor, who gives up his life of addiction and wandering to start an asylum in the desert, puts into practice the "ontological inversion" described by Alain Badiou as the definitive gesture of the apostle, since in Pauline Christianity "God has chosen the things that are not in order to bring to naught those that are" (47). Because the Pauline rebirth involves the rejection of knowledge, power, and being (what *is*) in favor of foolishness, weakness, and nonbeing (what is *not*), it involves a free acknowledgement of one's lack of knowledge. And not only does the apostle "know nothing," since the possibilities conditioned by an existing empirical reality are precisely what is transformed through the event (45); since eventual grace is dependent on the "things that are not," the Christian is concerned with those things and persons that are "refused" (literally tossed out in the garbage): "The real is attested to...as the refuse from every place, there where the subject rehearses his weakness....One must therefore assume the subjectivity of refuse, and it is in the face of this abasement that the object of Christian discourse suddenly appears" (56 my emphasis). And what does one do when one has been "reborn"? It is not that one immediately begins to refrain from "bad things," as if one could list them in notebook form. Instead, one struggles in order to maintain a fidelity to this universally addressed Event, to persist in love and life, and to cleave to the perpetual possibility of rebirth.

If Badiou focuses on the end result of the transformation (the new symbolic order enabled by the apostle's affirmation), Žižek insists that any such "good news" depends on passing through a negative moment of fragmentation, what Hegel called the "night of the world." Even when a new master-signifier is established, it never achieves absolute harmony, since it remains haunted by this constitutive "out of joint" dimension. Bowden dramatizes such a moment of negativity by imaginatively staging a new version of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, performed by the laconic dead of Juarez at the rehab center (where time stops, as it were). The "new *Our Town*," in which dead citizens of the city emerge to recite one or two lines about their deaths ("Look, I don't even know if I should talk. I was out driving with my wife in my white pickup. Then they took me. No reports about me since then, so I think I'll leave it at that," [215], "I am eight years old. They poured two hundred and fifty rounds into my dad's truck and killed him. They shot my arm off. And then I died" [216]), is a metonymic series of disconnected horrors that cannot be reduced to facile explanation. Brevity is key to its effect, since it prevents us from taking refuge in University discourse or fetishistic distance: "We will not allow anyone with answers to be present. Explanations will be killed on sight.... Just bodies, severed heads bullets, these can attend. It is time to listen and look and feel" (209-210). Here we have something like the "night of the world," in which (in Hegel's terms) "here shoots a bloody head, there another ghastly white apparition" (cited in Žižek *The Ticklish Subject* 35). At the same time, though, Bowden's *Our Town* is an allegorical, narrativizing event in itself, since it brings into being a ritual day that stands out from the calendar, a day left blank. Because it provides a revolutionary pause, a space for recollection, it constitutes an intervention of long experience into a situation dominated

by *Erlebnis* or *spleen*, conceived here in Benjamin's terms: "Spleen is the feeling that corresponds to catastrophe in permanence" (*The Writer of Modern Life* 137).

Through his *Our Town*, then, Bowden allows the dead to speak—and in fact, serves as the shamanic medium through which they can do so. As such, the new *Our Town* resembles and repeats not simply Wilder's play, but the power behind rituals like the Haitian *Ceremony of Souls*, described by George Lamming as a "solemn communion" with the dead in an attempt to chart a course into the future:

The celebrants are mainly relatives of the deceased who, ever since their death, have been locked in Water. It is the duty of the Dead to return and offer, on this momentous night, a full and honest report of their past relations with the living. . . . The Dead need to speak if they are going to enter that eternity which will be their last and permanent Future. The living demand to hear whether there is any need for forgiveness, for redemption; whether in fact there may be any guide which may help them toward reforming their present condition. Different as they may be in their present state of existence, those alive and those now Dead—their ambitions point to a similar end. They are interested in their future. (Cited in Kutzinski 181)

Described in this way, the Ceremony of Souls is not simply a matter of personal insight, not a backward-looking elegy for lost time, and not merely a wistful matter of "hope," but a communal and political affair oriented toward critical questions about the present state of the collective as it moves dynamically into the future. The living are interested in "reforming their present condition," while the Dead can offer a "full and honest report of their past relations with the living." Both look toward the possibility of a redeemed Future. This quality, through which the dead live again and call to us as in a ritual ceremony, helps explain Walter Benjamin's maxim about the way that political struggle in the *now* is better seen as oriented not primarily toward the future (to our children and grandchildren, as the cliché goes), but in a paradoxical way, toward a past that gazes at us and asks us for a future redemption that can only be achieved retroactively: "Only that

historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (*Illuminations* 255). Bowden’s *Our Town* involves an effort to save the dead from their erstwhile fate as metonymic signifiers, headed toward oblivion. Even though they cannot understand their own deaths, their very incomprehension *is* what they can communicate to us, and that from which only future action can rescue them.

The haunted dead, then, resemble what Taussig describes, following Putamayan folklore, as the ghosts who produce “*mal aires*” (*bad winds*). Although the dark magic of *mal aires* are usually described as natural forces beyond the realm of the social (they might appear for no reason at all, or for the same reason a storm might arrive), they can also emerge when violence mars the community in one way or another; ghosts might wander through the streets of the town, bringing *mal aires* down upon the heads of the living. Drawing on anthropologist Robert Hertz, Taussig considers the possibility that when death is not properly inscribed into the community’s narrative, dark magic can result:

‘Society itself dies a little with each individual’s death,’ suggested...Hertz...: ‘Thus when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit,’ he wrote, ‘it is stricken in the faith it has in itself.’ He saw funeral rites and mourning as society’s way of restoring life and integrity to the social bond itself, to what we might call the very principle of being social and being constituted by the collectivity. Nevertheless, Hertz noted, there were certain deaths that society could not contain: ‘Their unquiet and spiteful souls roam the earth for ever,’ he wrote in reference to those people who died a violent death or by an accident, women who died in childbirth, and deaths due to drowning, lightning, or suicide. The normal funeral rites are suspended for such deaths...It is as if, he speculated, these deaths were endowed with a sacred character of such strength that no rite will ever be able to efface them...Is it possible that, as with the image so firmly impressed on memory of an individual struck down by violence, accident, drowning, childbirth, or suicide, so the ghost or the evil winds of a whole society,



struck down by Spanish conquest, could exist as unquiet, spiteful souls roaming the earth forever? (371-372)

Here Taussig speculates about—and later, describes folkloric evidence for—a root of certain *mal aires* in the mass process of colonization itself, which produced such a powerful and unrepresentable wave of death that it could not be managed by the community, and instead emerges in the symptomatic dialectical image of the *mal aires*. In the new *Our Town*, Bowden allows the “spiteful” souls of neocolonial Juarez, whose deaths have not yet been properly managed by the ritual processes of a transnational global media society—and whose deaths should properly threaten that society’s faith in itself—a chance to haunt the living once again.

Given the ritual quality of ceremonial repetition that Bowden gives to his *Our Town*, it is perhaps appropriate that Bowden, accompanied by his enigmatic and traumatized sidekick Miss Sinaloa, offers us a historically resonant dialectical image to wrestle with during the otherwise monotonous performance. This symptomatic image flashes out just as the audience begins to become numb from the play’s repetition; even Bowden begins to lose focus: “I drift off. I listen and don’t listen, in the same way a person sits in a bar and takes in the band and yet is hardly aware of the music” (216). But right when Bowden seems inclined to retreat to a different space and disavow the death in Juarez, he is interrupted by a profane illumination, “little image...a fragment.” He imagines a “barrio,” a “place that eats the cast-off entrails of a richer world.” And in this place he imagines the murder of a cocaine dealer, a man “in his thirties” who “has no other livelihood.” But the dialectical image is not the murder; it is the aftermath:

What I see is his mother. It is night now, the body has been taken away, and there is a light on, the screen door is pushed open, and an old woman with a blank face stares down at the street, and she is there all alone and her son is not coming

home, and her face is as inscrutable as a block of stone. Her arms are crossed, and she is a portrait of grief Juarez-style, silent, enduring, and doomed. (216)

This visionary dialectical image, then, is also a repetition. In presenting this new *pieta* in the midst of postmodern Juarez, Bowden redoubles the power of its original: Mary, the mother of Jesus, mourning the loss of a son whom she could not protect.

This Kierkegaardian repetition is, as Deleuze might put it, “against the law,” since it functions according to a logic not of exchangeability but of uniqueness. Just as someone who recites an old poem in a new context does not replace it with an equivalence, but in commemorating it both imagines the past and stages a dramatic intervention in the present, here Bowden gives up the past for dead and moves forward into the uncertain future. *Murder City*, his list of the dead, is not written in scientific terms, but in lyrical ones as described by Deleuze: in “lyrical language...every term is irreplaceable and can only be repeated.” The mother in Bowden’s image cannot be replaced by some other mother; her story can only be repeated, just as the stories of the dead in the new *Our Town* cannot be explained according to the scientific terms of generality (numbers, statistics), but can only be repeated, over and over, redoubling their power with each lyrical recitation. The miracle, then, is that something new emerges with this very repetition, since its performance can only take place in the theater of *now*, of the *Jetztzeit* in which we attempt to regain hold of our narrative; just as the original *pieta* is a prelude to an unexpected resurrection, Bowden’s *pieta*, too, emerges on stage as part of a drama of rebirth, and of healing through terror.

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