

**Deconstructing Frames:
Difference in Global Anglophone Fiction
after 9/11**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Daniel O’Gorman, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed.....

Date.....

Abstract

Many works of '9/11 fiction' have attempted to counteract the 'us and them' identity binaries propounded by both the Bush administration and Islamist extremists after 9/11. Often these works proclaim a kind of empathy of the sort Ian McEwan described shortly after the event. As he put it: 'Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and the beginning of morality'. However, novels about 9/11 have often tended to perpetuate 'us and them' identity binaries themselves.

In contrast to McEwan, this thesis argues that there are a number of contemporary texts that do not straightforwardly generate empathy, but have begun to question the discursive frameworks within which difference is conceptualised. I argue that they do this by blurring the boundaries between the self and the other, drawing attention to the element of the other within the self, as well as of the self within the other. In this deconstruction of difference, categories of East and West, American and non-American, and Muslim and non-Muslim are productively challenged. My thesis finds this deconstruction at work in an eclectic range of novels, including *What Is the What* by Dave Eggers (2006), *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie (2009), *Point Omega* by Don DeLillo (2010), and *Open City* by Teju Cole (2011). It is also evident in texts by other authors, including Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, Hari Kunzru, Jonathan Lethem, Kevin Powers and Salman Rushdie.

The thesis is divided into five chapters, organised in a way that begins in the United States but gradually becomes more transnational, slowly 'unanchoring' itself from the time and place of the 9/11 attacks. In employing such a structure, I hope to show how my chosen novels infuse the event with a strong sense of historicity by, in Kamila Shamsie's words, 'entwining it with other stories'.

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Introduction

Us and Them

Four days after the September 11 attacks, Ian McEwan set the agenda for a new genre of writing, both fictional and non-fictional. Although never explicitly stated, his discussion of the nature of empathy in ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’ is heavily suggestive of an important role for literature and, perhaps even more so, *writers* of literature in the post-9/11 world. In his emphasis on the power of empathy – that is, of ‘imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself’ – to combat impulses towards fundamentalism and terror, there is a strong hint that literature might provide an important forum for such imagination to take place. Indeed, he attempts to enact it himself by beginning to fictionalise the attacks before all of the dust has, quite literally, had a chance to settle:

This is the nature of empathy, to think oneself into the minds of others. These are the mechanics of compassion: you are under the bedclothes, unable to sleep, and you are crouching in the brushed-steel lavatory at the rear of the plane, whispering a final message to your loved one. There is only that one thing to say, and you say it. All else is pointless. You have very little time before some holy fool, who believes in his place in eternity, kicks in the door, slaps your head and

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orders you back to your seat. 23C. Here is your seat belt. There is the magazine you were reading before it all began.¹

McEwan is attempting to show that he is capable of precisely the kind of empathic imagination that the hijackers were not, and that fiction, even in as brief a form as the few sentences here, can help to catalyse a similar sense of empathic identification in its reader. The effect is underscored by his use of direct address: in this instance, ‘you’ (the reader) are the other, forced to imagine yourself into the almost totally unknowable experience of a passenger on one of the hijacked planes.

‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’ is an early contribution to a debate that has been central to fiction and criticism about 9/11 and its aftermath: namely, a debate about difference. This is evident in the fact that McEwan seems unable to decide whether the lack of empathy shown by the hijackers is an inability or a choice. On the one hand, he writes: ‘If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed’.² Yet, immediately after this, he adds: ‘It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim’.³ In the first sentence, the hijackers are unable to empathise, but in the second they have not ‘permit[ted]’ themselves to do so. Moreover, when he goes on to suggest that ‘[i]magining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity’, it is clear that his use of the pronoun ‘our’ is not intended to include

¹ Ian McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’, *Guardian*, 15 September 2001
<<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

the hijackers. What is less clear is precisely who it *does* include. Is McEwan referring to ‘us’ in the post-Enlightenment West? Problematic as this may be, the notion of a shared humanity is one that is closely tied with Enlightenment liberalism. Or is he using the term more loosely, denoting an identity shared universally among all of the world’s population? This is more likely what he is driving at, but then why preface it with ‘our’? His decision to exclude the hijackers from the category would have been clear enough without qualification. Whichever the case, in both instances it is humanity that is the binding factor, the concept through which identification – and, in turn, empathy – becomes possible: it is *us*, the members of ‘our’ humanity, who are able to empathise with others, unlike *them*, the terrorists, who have chosen to step outside of it.

The binary at play here will be recognisable to anybody who has paid attention to international news coverage since 9/11: the ‘us and them’ rhetoric employed by the Bush administration was central to its mobilisation of support in favour of military intervention both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. It was in his speech of 21 September 2001 that President George W. Bush made his frequently-cited and controversial declaration that ‘[e]very nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists’.⁴ The ‘us’ in this declaration, of course, ostensibly refers to the United States, but its underlying assumptions are more complex than they are often given credit for: ‘This is not, however, just America’s fight, And what is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom. We ask

⁴ George W. Bush, speech delivered on 20 September 2001, ‘Transcript of President Bush’s Address’, *CNN.com*, 21 September 2001 <<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>>

every nation to join us'.⁵ There is a clearly identifiable 'us and them' binary in the speech, but this binary goes deeper than that of a conflict between America and Islam, or between America and 'terror'. The binary at play in the speech is one that pits those who share the civilisational values that the United States perceives itself to uphold – 'progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom' – against those who wish to see these values destroyed. Putting aside for a moment the question of precisely to what extent the United States might be said to have actually upheld (or failed to uphold) these values during the ensuing war on terror, the 'us' of its 'us and them' binary is one that, perhaps more so than it is often thought to be the case, crosses the borders of national identity: it is the product of an internationalist political stance that in turn implies a crossing of other, related identitarian borders (particularly racial, cultural and religious). As in McEwan's 'us and them' binary, inclusion in Bush's 'us' is not innate, but rather determined through a sharing of a particular value or set of values specifically pertaining to the treatment of others.

This is not necessarily to suggest that McEwan is, as Ziauddin Sardar has put it, really a 'Blitcon' (or 'British literary neoconservative').⁶ Nor is it to conversely posit that the Bush administration was actually, in hindsight, a misunderstood advocate of planetary cosmopolitanism. What links McEwan's article with Bush's speech is that the former's defence of what he calls 'humanity', just like the latter's defence of what he calls 'civilization', ultimately adheres to the terms of engagement dictated by extremist Islam. As Osama bin Laden declared in his speech of 7 October 2001: the United States

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ziauddin Sardar, 'Welcome to Planet Blitcon', *New Statesman*, 11 December 2006 <www.newstatesman.com/200612110045>

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‘came out to fight Islam [in] the name of fighting terrorism. ... I say these events have split the whole world into two camps: the camp of belief and of disbelief’.⁷ While McEwan, Bush and bin Laden are responding to 9/11 from three extremely different, deeply antagonistic political perspectives, in all three cases the details of what terms such as humanity, civilisation and Islam constitute is left conspicuously vague. What all three share is precisely what bin Laden quite accurately refers to as ‘belief’: that is, a fidelity to – or rejection of – fundamental ideological principles. As Ivan Leudar, Victoria Marsland and Jiří Nekvapil have demonstrated in an article that compares the ‘us and them’ rhetoric of post-9/11 speeches by Bush and Tony Blair with two contemporaneous statements by Osama bin Laden:

[there is] a fair degree of symmetry between Bush and Blair’s statements, on the one hand, and bin Laden’s, on the other hand. In bin Laden’s statement, Bush and Blair’s aggressors become the victims and vice versa. Instead of explaining and justifying the attacks on New York, bin Laden refers to happenings in which the ‘Muslim brothers’ were the victims. For bin Laden the conflict is grounded in religion and actions are taken for the sake of God, whereas for Bush and Blair the conflict is between social political and moral systems. His ‘us’/‘them’

⁷ Osama bin Laden, translated transcript of speech broadcast on *Al Jazeera*, 7 October 2001, *Washington Post Online* <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/binladen_100801.htm>

contrast is then in religious terms, which were ignored by Bush, and explicitly set aside by Blair. In each case the distinction is coupled to securing allies.⁸

It is clear from this analysis that an ideological clash is at play not so much *between* civilisations in the sense famously outlined by Samuel Huntington, but, instead, *about* civilisation: that is, literally about what it means to live in a civilised way.⁹ As such, it follows that Bush is, in a basic, descriptive sense, correct to delineate between those who are ‘with us’ and those who are ‘with the terrorists’: in an ideological dialectic on a scale such as this, it becomes virtually impossible to take a neutral position.

However, a deeper problem with the ‘us and them’ dichotomy articulated on the one hand by Bush, Blair and McEwan, and on the other by bin Laden, lies not so much in its descriptive accuracy as in the question of precisely what happens when the borderline between ‘us’ and those external to ‘us’ is subjected to analysis. There are, for instance, already clear disparities in the criteria by which each distinguishes between ‘us’ and ‘the terrorists’: for McEwan, the cornerstone of ‘our’ humanity is empathy; for

⁸ Ivan Leudar, Victoria Marsland and Jiří Nekvapil, ‘On Membership Categorization: “Us”, “Them” and “Doing Violence” in Political Discourse’, *Discourse and Society*, 15 (2004), p. 258 <<http://das.sagepub.com/content/15/2-3/243.full.pdf>>

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Schuster and Schuster, 1996). It is worth noting here that Huntington’s argument is more nuanced than is, perhaps, evident from its frequent citation in political columns and academic studies. For instance, he historicises the binary nature of his thesis by pointing out that ‘the tendency to think in terms of two worlds recurs throughout human history. People are always tempted to divide people into us and them, the in-group and the other, our civilization and those barbarians’ (p. 32). Likewise, he accepts that ‘[t]here is, however, no single cultural spectrum’ (p. 33). Yet, it is clear that he is actively partaking in – as opposed to simply identifying – precisely the kind of civilisational clash that I am arguing against here when he writes: ‘The underlying problem for the west is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflict between Islam and the West’ (pp. 217–8).

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Bush, it is freedom. Both concepts are highly contestable and open to interpretation: one might ask, for instance, whether the concept of the human is a prerequisite for empathic identification, or whether the hijackers simply possessed different emotional parameters, limited to those whom they believed to be practitioners of a 'true' Muslim faith.

Similarly, it is unnecessary for me to elaborate here on the multiple ways in which the term 'freedom' has been interpreted in legal, philosophical and historical thought over the centuries.

Even from this very brief look at the language of the war on terror, it is evident that while there certainly is a consensually agreed 'us' and 'them' at play in the rhetoric of all parties, there are also clear differences in the details of exactly what constitutes each identity category, and nowhere are these differences more clear than in the multiple disparities within, as opposed to simply between, any given culture or identity group. In the context of the war on terror, 'us' and 'them' are, to borrow from Benedict Anderson, 'imagined communities': they are fictions which create fraternity amongst even the most disparate of people. However, in doing so they can also be extremely dangerous: as with Anderson's take on nationalisms, it is precisely this fraternity 'that makes it possible ... not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings'.¹⁰ Indeed, while all players in the present conflict share an aspiration for the ideals of civilisation, freedom and humanity, the meaning of each ideal immediately begins to fragment when subjected to comparison. Nevertheless, to recognise that even these very broadest of identity categories are not only socially constructed, but also filled with difference and contradiction, is by no means to slight the importance of their existence: on the contrary,

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 7.

it highlights an urgent need to think about the *ways* in which the social construction of categories such as these takes place, and as such to actively defend the meaning of each term that one judges to be most ethical and just. In short, I would suggest that an analysis of the ways in which difference is framed in the construction of collective identity is the first step towards a necessary questioning of what it means to be human or civilised in the context of the war on terror.

Aims and Argument

This thesis aims to contribute to such questioning in a small but precise way. It does this by focusing on the role of literature in both shaping and critiquing issues of difference in the construction of post-9/11 identity. While I do not dispute McEwan's implied contention that literature might inspire in its reader an important post-9/11 broadening of empathic identification with others, I would add that it also has potential to go further than this, disrupting and rethinking the processes by which the division between the self and the other are conceptualised in the first place. While numerous works within the genre of '9/11 fiction', particularly those published in the first five or six years after the attacks, have aimed to challenge the politics of the Bush administration by attempting to generate precisely the kind of empathy that McEwan calls for, they have, like McEwan, often fallen into the trap of perpetuating the very 'us and them' binaries that they ostensibly wish to critique, albeit from an inverted, 'liberal' perspective. Much emphasis is placed on empathising with the Muslim 'other', for instance, but this otherness itself

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nevertheless almost always remains taken for granted in a way that is perhaps somewhat archaic in an increasingly globalised early 21st century. Bush's political manipulation of the categories 'us' and 'them' is frequently challenged in this fiction, but the assumptions about identity which underpin this dichotomy remain largely intact. As Kamila Shamsie asks in her 2012 essay 'The Storytellers of Empire': 'where are they, the American fiction writers – and I mean literary fiction – whose works are interested in the question “What do these people have to do with us?” and “What are we doing out there in the world?”'.¹¹

It is the argument of this thesis that there are a number of contemporary texts that do not straightforwardly generate empathy with a fixed other in the way that McEwan describes, but that have begun to question the discursive frameworks within which difference between the self and the other is conceptualised in the first place. Although they are not always American, they do this precisely by asking the kind of questions that Shamsie describes, blurring the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign in a way that draws attention to the element of the other within the self, as well as the self within the other. As a result, categories such as East and West, American and non-American, and Muslim and non-Muslim are thrown productively into question.

¹¹ Kamila Shamsie, 'The Storytellers of Empire', *Guernica*, 1 February 2012
<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/>

Reframing 9/11

‘[I]n American fiction, 9/11 is a traumatic event as ahistorical as an earthquake.’

Kamila Shamsie, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’¹²

The argument that I have outlined above is one that is, at heart, about frames of perception. These frames take more than one form, perform more than one function, and operate on multiple levels, to different degrees of scale. Frames of perception are complex, not least in representing issues of identity and difference, so it is necessary for me here to provide some theoretical grounding.

The thesis itself functions as a kind of framework. It analyses the framing of post-9/11 reality in dominant political and media discourse, as well as the reframing of this reality in eleven contemporary novels, but at the same time it also takes part itself in at least two processes of framing. The first is a framing of genre: it attempts to expand the rather narrow scope of an emerging canon of literature involving what might be termed the ‘9/11 novel’. In Shamsie’s words, this canon might be described as one containing novels that focus primarily upon, or circle closely around, the immediate trauma of ‘the day itself’.¹³ I will look more closely at this canon in the next section of this Introduction, ‘Expanding the 9/11 Genre’. The second kind of framing that the thesis partakes in is one that comes about as a necessary consequence of the first. Specifically, by attempting to adjust the scope of the 9/11 genre, it inevitably also contributes, in a small way, to a reframing of the event itself. By analysing a range of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

novels that, for the most part, initially appear to make only tangential reference to ‘the day itself’, the attacks are necessarily placed within a broader (and, as I will go on to argue, more complicated) context.

I suggest that one result of this reframing of the 9/11 genre – primarily in the texts themselves, but also to an extent in my analysis of them *as* 9/11 texts – is an encouragement for readers to help redress what Judith Butler has described as a ‘derealization of loss’, or ‘insensitivity to human suffering and death’, that has resulted from a media-driven imbalance in the ‘framing’ of violence during the war on terror.¹⁴ Butler uses the 2003 American ‘shock and awe’ bombing campaign in Iraq to illustrate this idea: ‘That the US government and military called this a “shock and awe” strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think’.¹⁵ It is precisely through their de-emphasising of the immediate impact of the attacks that, I argue, the novels at hand are able to explore both the ‘derealizing’ post-9/11 framing of reality that Butler describes *and* the complex constellation of histories from which the 11 September attacks themselves emerged. In doing so, the texts work to complicate the reductive ‘us and them’ identity binaries that have been present in global discourse over the past decade, and upon which a ‘derealization of loss’ relies.

The notion of reality being framed in a way that benefits hegemonic power, or that harms those antagonistic to it, is by no means specific to Butler. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, for instance, is among the most prominent studies to have made such an argument in recent decades (his main contention is that ‘the Orient is *contained* and

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

represented by dominating frameworks’).¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard has also influentially decried a contemporary ‘collapse of reality into hyperrealism, in the minute duplication of the real, preferably on the basis of another reproductive medium – advertising, photo, etc’.¹⁷ He has gone on to apply a similar argument, controversially, in his 1991 article, ‘The Gulf War Did Not Take Place’, as well as more recently in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, in which he posits that ‘[i]t was, in fact, ... [the towers’] symbolic collapse that brought about their physical collapse, not the other way around’.¹⁸ The cultural theorist Marc Redfield has made an argument along similar lines on the topic of post-9/11 collective trauma, which he suggests can in many instances be described as a kind of ‘virtual trauma’, conducive to the perpetuation of dominant discursive frames. In Redfield’s words, virtual trauma constitutes ‘a wound that ... exceeds the difference between the real and the unreal’. “September 11,” Redfield argues, ‘is at once traumatic and not quite properly so ... its temporal complexity and spatial diffusion depend upon its global tele-technical diffusion as name (“September 11”) and as spectacle’.¹⁹ Susan Sontag’s much-cited 2003 study, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, meanwhile, has argued for the power of photojournalism to counter governmental attempts to minimise the horrors of war in its framing of discourse: ‘In an era of information overload,’ she writes, ‘the

¹⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 40.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (USA: Semiotext[e]: 1983), p. 141.

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Gulf War Did Not Take Place’, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. By Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2003), p. 44.

¹⁹ Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 45.

photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it'.²⁰

However, two of Butler's more recent studies – *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009) – have provided the most prominent and far-reaching theorisation of the processes at play in the construction of reality after 9/11. Butler does not provide an easy-to-summarise definition of what she refers to as 'the frame' (or occasionally in the plural, 'frames'). The reason for this is that the concept is, necessarily, highly diffuse and slippery. However, she does provide some relatively clear descriptions of what the frame does. 'The "Frames" that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot,' she writes, '(or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject'.²¹ For the most part, these frames are to be understood as visual phenomena, but she makes clear that they are also part of a more abstract, discursive framing of the ways in which life is 'recognized' as life: that is, as what she terms sufficiently 'grievable' if lost: 'Such frames are operative in imprisonment and torture, but also in the politics of immigration, according to which certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such'.²²

From just this brief outline of Butler's analysis, it is clear that the framing process that she has in mind is one that is characterised by a language similar to that of the us-and-them binaries, which I have described in the first section of this Introduction. 'Why should it be, for instance,' she asks, 'that Iraq is called a threat to the security of

²⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 22.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15 and 24.

the “civilized world” while missiles from North Korea, and even the attempted hostage-taking of US boats, are called “regional issues”?’²³ Likewise, the ‘visual aesthetics’ of reportage on war in the global media are such that they

do not show violence, but there is violence in the frame of what is shown. That latter violence is the mechanism through which certain lives and certain deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture ... by the war effort. The first is an effacement through occlusion; the second is an effacement through representation itself.²⁴

Such a framing of the world according to US foreign policy interests has a damaging effect, Butler argues, on the ability for ‘us’ in the West to recognise, in a meaningful, empathic way, the equal value of all human life around the world. Following Levinas, she claims that the way to redress this imbalance is by re-emphasising a sense of the ‘precariousness’ of human life: that is, ‘to be awake to a sense of what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself’.²⁵ To redress a ‘derealization of loss’, in other words, it is necessary to acknowledge the difference of others at the same time as one upholds a sense of shared humanity (and, in particular, of human vulnerability).

However, while the novels under analysis in this thesis frequently challenge the ‘frames of war’ that Butler describes, they also attempt to refigure a broader process of

²³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 130–1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 134 and 135.

framing, within which dominant media representations of violence only play a part. Expanding the scope of their engagement beyond the ‘visual aesthetics’ of war, they also work towards a reconfiguration of what, drawing on Heidegger, one might describe as a contemporary, globalised ‘world picture’. According to Heidegger, “‘world picture’ ... [is, obviously], a picture of the world. But what is a world? What does ‘picture’ mean here?”.²⁶ “‘World,’” he suggests, ‘serves, here, as a name for beings in their entirety’.²⁷ Meanwhile,

[t]o be “in the picture” resonates with: being well informed, being equipped and prepared. Where the world becomes picture, beings as a whole are set in place as that for which man is prepared; ... Understood, in an essential way, “world picture” does not mean “picture of the world” but, rather, the world grasped as picture.²⁸

In the sense described here, ‘being well informed, ... equipped and prepared’ does not equate to being educated about important goings-on in the world, but denotes an ingrained sense of what it is like simply to *exist* in the contemporary world. It can be equally indicative of ignorance or solipsism as it can of a more expansive curiosity about events unfolding in distant parts of the globe. One is, as such, always necessarily contained ‘in’ the picture’s frame, but to ‘grasp’ the world ‘as picture’ is to simultaneously have a *perspective* on the picture that is completely unique. Those

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 67.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

contained by the ‘world picture’ are, at the same time, its spectators. ‘World picture’ is a way of understanding one’s perception on the world as both framed by and, in turn, *reframing* reality: a mutual, if frequently uneven process that is broader in scope than that which Butler outlines.

In making this comparison to Heidegger, I do not mean to critique Butler’s understanding of the framing process. Although there are aspects of her argument that I do consider questionable (and which I will go on to look at in Chapters 1 and 2), my point here is to show how the more broad-scoped reframing of reality in my selected novels – which, incidentally, repeatedly underscore the salience of much of what she argues – places her post-9/11 frames into a useful context. Specifically, it is through a ‘world picture’-like broadness of scope that, in my view, the texts productively *enhance* Butler’s analysis by showing how no single perspective on the frame can ever be the same as any other. No matter how powerful the frame, it is always necessarily perceived from a unique and deeply subjective position in space and time. Butler at one point reminds her reader about the philosophical truism that ‘[w]e cannot easily recognize life outside the frames in which it is given, and those frames not only structure how we come to know and identify life but constitute sustaining conditions for those very lives’.²⁹ However, what I hope to show is that the novels encourage an understanding of the frame as not always ‘given’, but instead also at least partially constructed by the texts, as well as by the readers themselves. It is through an awareness of this construction that, I argue, the novels might be seen as representing the beginnings of

²⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 23.

what Derrida has described as a necessary set of ‘new modalities’.³⁰ By, in Derrida’s words, ‘analyzing and discussing the very foundations of our responsibility, its discourses, its heritage, and its axioms’, the novels both challenge and potentially help to reconfigure the frame.³¹

Expanding the 9/11 Genre

The novels that I have chosen to focus on are varied. Some engage directly with 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror, while others mention them very little, if at all. Some are by long-established authors, while others are from newer or more cultish figures. Although all of the novels are Anglophone, they are not limited to any particular place: the authors are from all over the world, and in many cases consciously resist easy association with a single nation or area. In addition to this occasional transcending of national borders, however, there are two characteristics that connect all of the novels. The first is that they each either avoid or consciously subvert the genre of the ‘9/11 novel’, a highly marketable category that has been prominent in literary fiction in the years since the attacks, which tends to engage closely with the event and its immediate aftermath (examples include *Windows on the World* by Frederic Beigbeder (2003), *The Good Life* by Jay McInerney (2006), and *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo (2007)). The second way in which the novels are connected is that they perform this subversion through a shared interest in difference, not only *between* nations, cultures and

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, qtd. in interview, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 126.

³¹ Ibid.

individuals, but also *within* them. I suggest that the novels deconstruct the differences between identities in a way that is more thorough, sophisticated and nuanced than is often the case in more straightforward examples of 9/11 fiction.³²

None of this is to suggest that the novels I am analysing here are necessarily of greater literary merit than earlier works of 9/11 fiction. While style, aesthetics and other aspects of the work that one might deem to be of ‘literary’ value are ineluctably of central concern to this thesis, my primary intention is to analyse how these literary features contribute to the ability of the texts to deconstruct the ways in which post-9/11 difference is framed. It is also necessary to note here that the sample of novels under analysis in this thesis is far from exhaustive. The critic Richard Gray has already identified a recent – and extensive – burst of culturally polyphonic novels to emerge in the wake of the first wave of 9/11 fiction: novels, which ‘resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transitional, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them’.³³ In addition to a selection of the novels that I analyse here (such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007) and *Point Omega* by Don DeLillo (2010)), he includes a number of others that, at least initially, might not seem out of place in the present study. Among these are *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006), *Tree of Smoke* by Denis Johnson (2007), and *Netherland* by Joseph O’Neill (2008).

³² In this, my argument is not unlike that made by Stef Craps in a comparative analysis of the films *9/11* (directed by Jules and Gedeon Naudet) and *09’11’’01* (an amalgamative work produced by Alain Brigand, but comprising eleven short pieces by as many directors). As Craps puts it: ‘Unlike *9/11*, which places the events in a political and historical vacuum and thus ends up echoing the official discourse, many of the films making up *11’09’’01* insist on the interconnectedness of 11 September with tragedies taking place elsewhere for which the United States is seen to be at least partially responsible’. Stef Craps, ‘Conjuring Trauma: The Naudet Brothers’ 9/11 Documentary’, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 37.2 (2007), p. 195.

³³ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 17.

However, it is important to point out that although the scope of this thesis precludes a close analysis of every relevant text, some of these seemingly polyphonic texts have been omitted for more significant reasons. *Netherland*, for instance, employs a sophisticated layering of narratives to infuse post-9/11 Manhattan with a complicated sense of historical context, but the relationship between its protagonist, Hans van der Broek, and a mysterious Trinidadian called Chuck Ramkissoo, in my view ultimately relies too heavily on precisely the kind of overly rigid delineation between self and other that the novel otherwise attempts to deconstruct. It is for a related (but not identical) reason that I have chosen to omit from my analysis Amy Waldman's *The Submission*, another text that might be described as culturally polyphonic (and which appeared shortly after Gray's study was published). Despite the obvious relevance to this thesis of *The Submission's* premise, in which a US Muslim architect causes a national outcry by anonymously winning a competition for the design of a Ground Zero memorial, I have chosen not to feature it in my analysis because the 'us' that it quite ingeniously problematises remains one that specifically pertains to *American* identity. This is by no means a complaint about Waldman's novel, but merely a reason for my choice to focus on works in which the 'us and them' dichotomy under analysis is more thoroughly uprooted from nation and nationality.

Although most of the novels that I analyse in this thesis might quite easily be categorised alongside Gray's culturally polyphonic fiction, I generally try to avoid the term: my purpose here is not to reify a new sub-genre of 9/11 literature. In contrast, I aim to trace an important pattern of resistance to generic categorisation in these otherwise rather oddly matched and (as yet) non-canonical texts. Indeed, the pattern I

am tracing is one that crosses *between* canons and genres. I would instead characterise what emerges as a kind of *constellation*, flashing momentarily into view at key points in the texts, but becoming more clearly discernible when the novels are placed alongside each other in a form of alignment. Although the texts that I analyse in this thesis contain a relatively substantial number of such constellational ‘moments’, I would suggest that they are also evident in examples that are arguably much more fleeting. I am thinking, for instance, of the jarring moment in David Foster Wallace’s short story ‘The Suffering Channel’ (2004), set primarily in a fashion magazine’s headquarters in the World Trade Centre shortly before the attacks, when without any explanation the reader is informed that one of the office’s staff members ‘had ten weeks to live’.³⁴ Another example might be identified in the repeated, evocative references, throughout McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic *The Road*, to ‘[c]ars in the street caked with ash, everything covered in ash and dust’.³⁵ Likewise, it is also subtly apparent towards the end of Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), when the narrator opens the coffin of her younger brother, killed serving in Iraq. The casket has an American flag draped over it, but upon lifting the lid, she pensively notes that ‘the flag slid to the floor’.³⁶ Walter Benjamin memorably argues that ‘[i]deas are to objects as constellations are to stars’, and I am suggesting something similar here.³⁷ While the novels’ engagement with the 9/11 ‘day itself’ might at times seem transient, when read alongside one another, the ideas about

³⁴ David Foster Wallace, ‘The Suffering Channel’, in *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2010), p. 326.

³⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 11.

³⁶ Lorrie Moore, *A Gate at the Stairs* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 298.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 34.

the event and its aftermath that emerge link together in a way that might help to shape new, more nuanced understandings of the contemporary world.

My point is by no means to articulate a distinct division between the two kinds of post-9/11 novel, one ‘good’ and one ‘bad’. What the novels under analysis here exemplify is that the impact of 9/11 on literary fiction has reached far beyond the limits of the 9/11 genre: it has given rise to a cultural condition that permeates contemporary literature more broadly. Indeed, in the majority of the texts that I analyse, the attacks and their immediate aftermath take up only a small section of the plot – if they are explicitly mentioned at all. Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*, for instance, is particularly difficult to pin down. If *Falling Man* has been widely received as the author’s contribution to the 9/11 genre, then *Point Omega* is something slightly different: although clearly engaging with post-9/11 political issues (particularly the invasion of Iraq in 2003), it does so in a more oblique way, placing the event in the context of a broader post-Cold War decline of American power.

A key part of Gray’s argument is that works within the genre of 9/11 fiction have largely failed to ‘dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders’.³⁸ He includes within this category novels such as *Falling Man* and McInerney’s *The Good Life*, as well as *Terrorist* by John Updike (2006) and *The Emperor’s Children* by Claire Messud (2006). These texts, he argues, remain ‘eerily analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream American media after 9/11: a desperate retreat into the old sureties’.³⁹ What Gray calls for instead is a kind of literary ‘enactment of difference’: that is, ‘not only the capacity to recognize that some kind of alteration of imaginative

³⁸ Richard Gray, *After the Fall*, pp. 18–19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

structures is required to register the contemporary crisis, ... but also the ability and willingness imaginatively to act on that recognition'.⁴⁰ However, while I would agree that the novels under analysis in my thesis do attempt to 'enact' the kind of difference or cultural polyphony that Gray describes, they also take a step further than this, working to additionally question the processes by which cultural difference is delineated in the first place. It is primarily for this reason that I have attempted to resist rooting my research in a single geographical location. As Gray's study focuses on US fiction, the kind of difference that he argues is enacted by his selected novels is largely defined by the extent to which it diverges from normative American values. By contrast, in this thesis I frame my chosen texts as products of a globalised market, so the 'difference' which is enacted is somewhat more nebulous and diffuse. Gray is certainly correct to suggest that post-9/11 fiction holds the potential to prompt an 'alteration of imaginative structures', but my suggestion is that the most salient way in which literary texts might offer this is through a deconstruction of the borderlines between self and other: that is, a deconstruction that not only 'enacts' a sense of difference from normative experience, but that also draws attention to the difference always already at play *within* normativity itself.

Difference and Empathy

This thesis has been produced five years on from the end of the Bush era. Barack Obama has won his second consecutive Presidential election, driven by a political

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

language based principally upon the value of empathising with those on the margins of normative experience. In a speech on the Presidential campaign trail in 2007, he famously stated that what the US Supreme Court lacked under the Bush administration was ‘the empathy to recognize what it's like to be a young, teenaged mom; the empathy to understand what it's like to be poor or African-American or gay or disabled or old. And that's the criteria by which I'm going to be selecting my judges’.⁴¹ In light of this, one might legitimately ask why I am drawing so heavily upon a political rhetoric so closely associated with a Presidential administration that has been out of power for more than half a decade. My response is that despite Obama’s undeniably more nuanced and sensitive language in dealing with 9/11 and the war on terror, a reductive ‘us and them’ dichotomy remains strongly at play in global political and media discourse, as well as in prominent cultural commodities such as films, television shows and popular novels. While it is by no means my aim here to critique identitarian difference *per se*, I do wish to question the *processes* by which it has often been conceptualised since 9/11. As I have already stated, the way in which I aim to do this is by showing how in my selected novels, the division between self and other is always one that is flexible and porous, the familiar necessarily containing an element of difference and the different necessarily containing a degree of familiarity.

It is this notion of difference within the familiar, and vice versa, that ultimately complicates the kind of ‘us and them’ binary espoused by Ian McEwan, George W.

⁴¹ Barack Obama, qtd. in ‘Context of Obama’s “Empathy” Remark’, Abby Livingston and Mark Murray, *NBCNews.com*, 1 May 2009, section First Read <http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2009/05/01/4430634-context-of-obamas-empathy-remark> As Anna Hartnell argues: ‘Obama does of course continue to articulate and transform a narrative of American exceptionalism. ... [Y]et the fact that Obama’s vision of America is so open to worlds beyond America paradoxically undermines the story of American uniqueness’. Anna Hartnell, *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from Du Bois to Obama* (London: Pluto, 2011), p. 238.

Bush and Osama bin Laden. In the novels that I analyse in this thesis, the limits of what McEwan terms ‘our humanity’ are explored in a way that subjects to scrutiny not only the processes by which empathic identification with others takes place, but also the implicit assumption that encouraging empathy with others is the most desirable way in which literature can contribute to political discourse after 9/11. This is not an assumption that is limited to McEwan: as I have already shown, it is implicit in Richard Gray’s call for ‘enactment of difference’. However, it is also present in other studies of the 9/11 novel. For instance, in his chapter ‘Seeing Terror, Feeling Art’ in Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn’s edited volume *Literature After 9/11*, Michael Rothberg posits that ‘terrorism doesn’t so much eliminate as *readjust* affect’, and identifies the writing of Don DeLillo as being particularly able to ‘help us to reimagine the possibility of seeing and feeling *at the same time* in order to foster an embodied form of understanding’.⁴² Likewise, in a very thoughtful analysis of John Updike’s critically maligned novel, *Terrorist*, in the concluding chapter of *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, Kristiaan Versluys writes:

The critics hostile to the book see in this discovery an example of pure idiopathic projection. ... [However,] Updike’s attempt to represent the Other (the terrorist, the Muslim) results in the Other discovering the Other (Ahmad’s discovery of

⁴² Michael Rothberg, ‘Seeing Terror, Feeling Art’, in *Literature After 9/11*, ed. by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), pp. 139 and 131.

his own fealty to mundane American reality). As a literary achievement, this is very different from rendering the other as the same.⁴³

This latter empathy corresponds precisely with what Jill Bennett, following Kaja Silverman (herself influenced by Max Scheler), has described as a need for more heteropathic empathy in the post-9/11 world. For Bennett, ‘heteropathic’ empathy implies ‘an identification with an alien body or experience’, and exists in contrast to ‘ideopathic’ empathy, which is ‘essentially self-referential, grounded on shared reality’.⁴⁴ The notion of heteropathic empathy also, of course, chimes strongly with Butler, who argues in *Precarious Life* that ‘[post-9/11] mourning might (or could) effect a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere’.⁴⁵

The contribution that these theorists have made towards a reformulation of empathy along more heteropathic lines has been valuable in numerous ways. However, the novels that I analyse in this thesis also work to draw attention to the potential shortfalls of an empathy – idiopathic or heteropathic – that is overly indiscriminate. Indeed, they occasionally go as far as to display what Carolyn J. Dean has described as ‘[t]he consciousness that empathy can no longer be considered a straightforward response to suffering’.⁴⁶ ‘[W]hether willed or intuitive,’ Dean argues, such a consciousness ‘arguably represents a dramatic shift in the suffering body’s ability to

⁴³ Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 175.

⁴⁴ Jill Bennett, ‘The Limits of Empathy and the Global Politics of Belonging’, in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, ed. by Judith Greenberg (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 134.

⁴⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy After the Holocaust* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 15.

represent humanity's violated dignity, one whose meaning is still unclear'.⁴⁷ As I have already suggested, by challenging the commonly understood borderlines between 'us' and 'them' in the context of the war on terror, they show that a constellation of difference and discord lie at the foundations of any identity category, no matter how seemingly cohesive or homogenous. As such, they reinforce what the psychologist Martin Hoffman argues about empathic response in his book *Empathy and Moral Development*. Namely, he suggests that while crucial to the project of 'demand[ing] basic human rights everywhere', empathy can in some situations actually be counter-productive for a progression towards this ethical goal.⁴⁸ Hoffman describes a number of 'self-destructive mechanisms' by which empathy can effectively undercut itself, which he collects under the umbrella term 'empathic over-arousal': that is, 'an involuntary process that occurs when an observer's empathic distress becomes so painful and intolerable that it is transformed into an intense feeling of personal distress, which may move the person out of the empathic mode entirely'.⁴⁹ He argues that 'the culmination effect may be that the observer's empathic distress diminishes to the point of the person becoming indifferent to the victim's suffering'.⁵⁰

The novels under analysis here demonstrate that a new post-9/11 ethics drawn from trauma-induced empathy might not in itself be sufficient for a serious rethinking of the contemporary politics of identity and difference. They show, rather, that in order for empathy to have significant practical effect beyond the academic sphere, it needs to be

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 298.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.198.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 205–6.

compounded with something like what Hannah Arendt notably describes as *thinking*, or the ‘two-in-one’: that is, ‘the specifically human actualization of consciousness in the thinking dialogue between me and myself [which] suggests that difference and otherness ... are the very conditions for the existence of man’s mental ego’.⁵¹ Empathy without thought – that is, without an acknowledgement of the ‘dialogue’ between the self and its internal other, or the ‘*duality of myself with myself*’ – can easily become not only a self-defeating mechanism, but also, more damagingly, a narcissistic and inadvertently imperialistic one, in which the empathic act takes precedence over the political action that it can hypothetically initiate.⁵² By compounding empathy with ‘thought’, the novels move a step closer than many of the above theorists do to reinforcing what, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra calls ‘empathic unsettlement’, or the ‘desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis’.⁵³

Thesis Structure

The thesis is divided into five chapters, organised in a way that begins in the United States but gradually becomes more transnational, slowly ‘unanchoring’ itself from the time and place of the 9/11 attacks. In employing such a structure, I hope to show how

⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 187.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.187.

⁵³ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 78.

my chosen novels infuse the attacks with a strong sense of historicity by, in Kamila Shamsie's words, 'entwining it with other stories'.⁵⁴

Chapter 1 takes as its starting point the approach to literature offered by Judith Butler in *Frames of War*, in which she argues that the work collected in Marc Falkoff's edited anthology *Poems From Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*, can potentially help prompt 'new constellations for thinking about normativity' in the United States during the war on terror.⁵⁵ Basing her argument on the notion that public discourse on the war on terror is shaped by a powerful framing of reality by hegemonic media corporations, she suggests that the poems help contribute towards a desirable explosion of these frames, blurring the boundary between normativity and difference through what she describes as 'an insurrection at the level of ontology'.⁵⁶ However, I argue that Butler's theorisation of the frame, and the way that it informs her reading of the Guantanamo poems, does not itself go far enough towards producing the kind of insurrection at the level of ontology that she describes. The reason for this is that Butler's language relies upon a number of ideological assumptions that maintain the very 'us and them' binaries which she ostensibly aims to deconstruct. With reference to Dave Eggers' 2006 biographical novel, *What Is the What*, I suggest that literature can potentially be conducive to a more thorough ontological insurrection than Butler allows for in her own recent writing, and that it does so by blurring, rather than exploding, the frames by which reality is delineated during the war on terror.

⁵⁴ Shamsie, 'The Storytellers of Empire'.

⁵⁵ Butler, *Frames or War*, pp. 14–5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

In Chapter 2, I analyse two novels that are set in Manhattan in the initial half-decade following the attacks: *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem (2009) and *Open City* by Teju Cole (2011). (In the case of Lethem's novel, 9/11 is never mentioned explicitly, but there is reference to an unnamed catastrophic event that has taken place in the city's recent past.) The argument of this chapter is that, despite superficially conforming to what the critic Ruth Franklin has described as 'the stubborn, inward gaze of the post-9/11 novel', the novels complicate the boundaries between self and other in a way not dissimilar to that of Eggers' *What Is the What*. Although the texts vary significantly in terms of style and form, I suggest that they use their intensely 'inward gazing' focus on Manhattan as a means of *critiquing*, rather than perpetuating, the sort of isolationist framing of reality exemplified by their protagonists. Each novel depicts what Butler might describe as a kind of 'deterioration of context' in Manhattan, in which the city's inhabitants have begun to live in a reality seemingly detached from the world outside of their immediate urban surroundings.⁵⁷ However, this sense of detachment is foregrounded in a way that prompts the reader to think about the extent to which she might be passively complicit in the perpetuation of simplistic 'us and them' binaries in post-9/11 socio-political discourse.

Chapter 3 explores this deconstruction of post-9/11 difference further by analysing three novels that have engaged to varying degrees with the most recent Iraq war: *Gods Without Men* by Hari Kunzru (2011), *Point Omega* by Don DeLillo (2010), and *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers (2012). In it, I argue that the novels challenge the 'derealization of loss' that Butler identifies in the framing of post-9/11 reality. In

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

doing so, they help to generate what the geographer Derek Gregory describes as a sense of ‘connective dissonance’ – or a kind of connection *through* difference – between the United States and Iraq.⁵⁸ The chapter begins by suggesting that the novels use the trope of the wilderness, particularly the desert, to create an uncanny interchangeableness between the two nations’ landscapes. It goes on to posit that this constitutes a kind of connective dissonance which relies just as much upon what is absent from the narrative as upon that which is explicitly stated, and that the desert constitutes a useful device through which to encourage the reader to think about this absence because it is a place in which absence is, paradoxically, constantly present. This paradoxical relationship between absence and presence is explored even further in the chapter’s final section, which analyses the ways in which each of the texts presents its reader with traumatised characters for whom, following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a sense of home – and the feelings of self-identity attached to it – has been rendered hauntingly absent.

In Chapter 4, I analyse two novels by Salman Rushdie, a highly transnational author whose identity is split over three continents and shaped by both secularism and Islam. The novels in question are *Shalimar the Clown*, (2005) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). In the former, Rushdie explicitly engages with the fallout of 9/11 and the onset of the war on terror, whereas in the latter, he appears to move well away from current affairs by exploring the parallel histories of sixteenth-century Florence and Mughal India. Despite this apparent shift away from contemporary politics, however, I suggest that *The Enchantress of Florence* is in fact at least as enmeshed in post-9/11 discourses of identity as its predecessor, aiming throughout its narrative to challenge the

⁵⁸ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 256.

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kind of ‘us and them’ binaries that have underpinned the framing of the war on terror. It does this, I posit, by subjecting to scrutiny the notion of ‘difference’ itself. In doing so, I argue that Rushdie is, in both novels, forced to question – and, in turn, push further – the kind of thinking about difference that has been present in his writing throughout his career. Indeed, the novels point towards an author actively struggling to offer the kind of post-9/11 ‘insurrection at the level of ontology’ that Judith Butler calls for in *Frames of War* (discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis).

In Chapter 5, the thesis’ gradual ‘unanchoring’ of 9/11 from the localised introspection identified by both Butler and Shamsie (and, in my view, critiqued by Eggers, Lethem and Cole) reaches completion through an analysis of three novels by authors of Pakistani descent: Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie (2008), and *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam (2009). I argue that the novels evidence a complex sense of ambivalence about identity and difference after 9/11. On the one hand, all three authors aim to undercut a stereotyped framing of Pakistan in the global media that tends to reduce the nation to its Islamist extremist elements. On the other, they make a point of acknowledging the nation’s problem with religious extremism as one that is both real and dangerous, and attempt to combat it by offering a vision both of and for the country that is more pluralistic and globally connected than hard-line Islamists might be comfortable with. Rather than straightforwardly attempting to replace dominant media frames with an alternative, more authentic representation of Pakistan, they emphasise that the country is far too complex – socially, culturally, politically and historically – to be accurately represented at all in anything but the most fragmentary and transient of ways. Aimed at an

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Anglophone audience, the novels simultaneously work within and against the conventions of the global fiction market, framing Pakistan in a way that – to borrow a term from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – attempts to provide an ‘explanation’ of the nation to outsiders at the same time as it shows that any explanation of a country so large and complex in the form of a novel is ultimately impossible.⁵⁹ As a result, in these novels, the ‘us and them’ rhetoric often characteristic of the discursive framing of the war on terror is rendered demonstrably meaningless.

⁵⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 72.

Chapter 1: '[N]ew constellations for thinking about normativity': Rethinking Judith Butler's 'Frame' with Reference to Dave Eggers' *What Is the What*¹

1.0 Introduction

This chapter aims to critique Judith Butler's recent use of the concept of the 'frame' in the context of the war on terror. While many of the questions that Butler raises about the ways in which violence is framed in the post-9/11 world are perspicacious, I argue that this conceptual reliance on framing actually stands in the way of her ability to answer them. Instead, it causes her to inadvertently exacerbate precisely the kind of framing process that she is ostensibly attempting to deconstruct. By making this argument, I do not mean to negate the ultimate goals of her project, nor the headway she makes towards them in other ways. Neither am I attempting to undercut her ideologically, by taking what some might interpret as a Badiouian position that rejects her as a proponent of a nihilistic 'ethics of difference'.² Rather, my aim is essentially to push her thinking further, holding her to account when she claims that her point is 'not to paralyze judgement, but to insist that we must devise new constellations for thinking about normativity if we are to proceed in intellectually open and comprehensive ways to grasp and evaluate our world'.³ I suggest that Butler's analysis of the frame *does* in fact involve a partial paralysis of judgement, which

¹ A version of this chapter is forthcoming in *Textual Practice*. I thank the peer reviewers for their highly useful comments.

² Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 20. In a critique of Lévinas' work on externality, upon which Butler has drawn heavily in her recent books, Badiou argues: 'This commonsensical discourse has neither force nor truth. It is defeated in advance in the competition it declares between "tolerance" and "fanaticism", between "the ethics of difference and racism", between "recognition of the other" and "identitarian" fixity'.

³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 144–5.

prevents these ‘new constellations for thinking about normativity’ from being as fully realised as they otherwise might be.

With reference to Dave Eggers’ biographical novel, *What Is the What* (2006), a text that actively strives to challenge the media-driven post-9/11 framing of reality by telling the ‘real-life’ story of a marginalised figure, this chapter contends that literature can prompt its reader to think about the framing of contemporary reality in ways that may help more radical ‘new constellations’ to begin to emerge. I make this case in two parts. In the first, I analyse Butler’s understanding of the frame, showing why her approach to literature plays a key part in what is problematic about her theorisation. In the second, I explain how Eggers’ novel offers a more nuanced and radical approach to the process of framing post-9/11 reality; an approach that foregrounds the textuality of the frame and suggests that the reality it limns might be more open to interpretation than Butler’s analysis allows.

2.0 Butler’s Frame

2.1 ‘Grievability’ and New Empathic Ties

Butler has employed the notion of the frame as a means of helping to explain why, during wartime, the Western mass media can sometimes appear to deem the lives of certain people more worthy of grief than those of others. The idea is developed primarily over the course of two of her most recent major studies: *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). In each book, Butler attempts to confront what she identifies as a dehumanising ‘derealization of loss’ – or in other words, an

‘insensitivity to human suffering and death’ – that is enacted through an imbalance in the degree of compassion with which prominent media outlets respond to (or ‘frame’) death, depending on where it takes place and who it is that dies.⁴ In response, Butler aims for an ethics based upon the establishment of new empathetic global ties. She insists that the creation of such ethical ties is ‘not a matter of a simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be unmade?’.⁵

In *Precarious Life*, as an example of what she describes as a kind of ‘hierarchy of grief’ in Western discourse, Butler cites the case of a Palestinian citizen of the United States who attempted to submit obituaries to the *San Francisco Chronicle* for two families killed by Israeli troops, only to be eventually rejected on the grounds that the newspaper ‘did not wish to offend anyone’.⁶ She suggests that by placing these lives outside of its frame of ‘grievability’, the newspaper’s politically-motivated editorial stance might actively contribute to the perpetuation of an imperialistic culture of violence: ‘[w]hat is the relation,’ she asks, ‘between the violence by which these ungrievable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability? Are the violence and the prohibition both permutations of the same violence?’.⁷ She later asserts that media coverage of the war on terror is generally constituted by images that ‘do not show violence’, but that contain ‘violence in the frame [of] what is shown’.⁸ The resulting ‘derealization of loss’, she posits, ‘becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished, ... [taking] place neither inside nor outside

⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 148.

⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 33.

⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained'.⁹ As its title suggests, in *Frames of War* Butler explores the idea further, emphasising its power to capture and to dominate: 'As we know,' she writes,

“to be framed” is a complex phrase in English: a picture is framed, but so too is a criminal (by the police), or an innocent person (by someone nefarious, often the police), so that to be framed is to be set up, or to have evidence planted against one that ultimately “proves” one’s guilt.¹⁰

She goes on to explain that:

[t]o call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. ... Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things'.¹¹

The drive to reduce and contain reality causes the frame to help perpetuate a kind of dominating, Orientalist epistemic violence against those represented within it. It is, as such, of particular use to those in power during times of war, whether they consciously exploit it or not.

⁹ Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 8.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.

2.2 Forestalling Judgement

As I have already stated, I argue that Butler's analysis of the frame is problematic because it partially forestalls judgement, and as such ultimately maintains some of the 'mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion' (to borrow Paul Gilroy's phrase) that underpin the very normativity that she wishes to challenge.¹² Despite numerous attempts to avoid an over-reliance on East/West or Third World/First World binaries, I would suggest that such binaries remain implicit in her argument: while the frames through which war is represented are shaped by what she claims are a set of hegemonic, normative values, she never gives any clear sense of precisely what these values are or by whom they are perpetuated, besides a loosely defined 'non-figurable and, to some extent, non-intentional operation of [state] power'.¹³ While in Butler's earlier work on gender, the normative values under analysis are of a clearly defined type (heteronormativity, in particular, specifically denotes a privileging of heterosexual experience in a deeply gendered contemporary society), in the broader context of US foreign policy the values implied by the term have become considerably more diffuse.

It is also worth noting that Butler's emphasis on the power of mainstream news outlets to reinforce 'certain larger norms' makes almost no acknowledgement of blogs, social media and other online methods of news distribution: as David Gauntlett argues in his article 'Media Studies 2.0', '[c]onventional concerns with power and politics are [now] reworked ... so that the notion of super-powerful media industries invading the minds of a relatively passive population is compelled to recognise and address the

¹² Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p. 45.

¹³ Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 73–4.

context of more widespread creation and participation'.¹⁴ This is not to say that such innovations have necessarily undercut mass media power, but simply that given their patent impact on the ways in which contemporary war is framed, it is odd that she merely glances over them.

The main problem is not simply that Butler avoids a detailed explication of her suggested link between media framing and state power: more importantly, it is that she appears to make an implicit assumption that the reader shares her own value judgements about the norms that this link is perpetuating. Developing the point with a discussion of the framing of the war on terror during the 2005 Abu Ghraib controversy, for example, Butler suggests that 'the problem ... is not just internal to the life of the media, but involves the structuring effects that certain larger norms, themselves often racializing and civilizational, have on what is provisionally called "reality"'.¹⁵ This is, of course, not a new claim, and has been repeated frequently in the dozens of books about 9/11 and the mainstream media published in Europe and the United States throughout the last decade.¹⁶ My point is that Butler makes her argument in a way that reinforces precisely the kind of 'structuring effects' on reality that she ostensibly aims to critique. Specifically, her use of the noncommittal pronoun, 'certain', *appeals* to her reader's existing prejudices rather than challenging them, an appeal that recurs when she repeats the word at key points throughout: 'certain secular conceptions of history'; 'a certain conception of freedom'.¹⁷ The implied meaning in

¹⁴ David Gauntlett, 'Media Studies 2.0', *Theory.org* (2007; revised March 2007; posted with new introduction, January 2011) <<http://www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm>>

¹⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 74.

¹⁶ In a particularly impassioned example, Douglas Kellner has argued that '[the US] corporate media, especially television, are part and parcel of the New Barbarism, spewing forth almost unopposed propaganda for the Bush administration and fanning war fever and terrorist hysteria, while cutting back on vigorous political debate and varied sources of information as it produces waves of ideologically conservative talk shows and mindless entertainment'; Douglas Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 24.

¹⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 104.

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each instance is easy to determine, but only in an imprecise, conversational sort of way: to discern what she means in more exact terms is a difficult task, and any attempt at detailed interpretation may vary in key ways from what Butler herself has in mind. I do not mean to be pedantic here (it would of course be impossible for Butler to avoid using shorthand completely), but in each of these cases, ‘certain’ is used to indicate – and to subtly pass judgement upon – a set of ‘conceptions’ that are of central concern to her thesis. By relying on the reader to take her implied meaning for granted, she reinforces an existing, consensually agreed-upon left-wing ‘constellation for thinking about normativity’, which by her own reasoning should itself be subject to an ‘ontological insurrection’.

Mark Neocleous identifies a similar lack of specificity in his review of *Frames of War* for *Radical Philosophy*:

Symptomatic of the lack of clarity concerning the book’s central purpose is the number of rhetorical questions that appear again and again through the text, with some rhetorical questions containing more than one question. ... One is tempted to respond with a version of that item of 1980s’ corporate bullshit directed at workers who bring their bosses problems when they should be bringing solutions: ‘Don’t give me questions, Judith, give me answers’.¹⁸

Although I would not go as far as Neocleous in my critique (his extremely harsh review dismisses *Frames of War* all-but-entirely), highlighting Butler’s rhetorical questions is important because it again draws attention to an apparent reluctance on her part to substantiate the normativity that ‘we’ need to devise new constellations for

¹⁸ Mark Neocleous, ‘You’ve Been Framed’, *Radical Philosophy*, 158 (2009), p. 53.

thinking about. It raises the possibility that this reluctance to specify might actually be an inability, as doing so would require her to question the ideological assumptions upon which her own left-wing academic language relies. The problem here is that by exempting these assumptions from a full analysis, Butler comes uncomfortably close to perpetuating precisely the kind of unhelpful cultural relativism that, in its more crass manifestation as conspiracy theory, she elsewhere rightly dismisses as ‘simply [another way] of asserting US priority and encoding US omnipotence’.¹⁹

2.3 A Problem for Literature: The ‘visual divide’ and Poems from Guantánamo

As I have already indicated, I do not dispute Butler’s basic assertion that ideologically inflected norms of one kind or another are at play in the process of framing reality: she explicitly accepts that ‘full inclusion and full exclusion are not the only options’, and that, as such, ‘the point [of analysis] would not be to locate what is “in” or “outside” the frame, but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself’.²⁰ However, the nuance of this argument is once again undercut later on, when she resorts to an analysis of the globe that does not blur the boundary between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, but instead relies on an overly clear-cut ‘visual divide’ between the First and Third worlds:

[t]he critique of the frame is, of course, beset by the problem that the presumptive viewer is “outside” the frame, over “here” in a first world context, and those who are depicted remain nameless and unknown. In this way, the critique I have been following stays on this side of the visual divide, offering a

¹⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 9.

²⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 75.

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first-world ethic and politic that would demand an outraged and informed response on the part of those whose government perpetrates or permits such torture.²¹

Butler is, admittedly, trying hard to question the discursive structures in which her own 'ethic and politic' is framed. Nevertheless, it is also evident that the characterisation of this ethic and politic as 'first world' – and, thus, ““outside”” the frame – relies on an assumption that the 'presumptive viewer' has no meaningful access to the world on the other side of the visual divide. By this I do not mean to make the Orientalist argument that this 'third world' reality is actually in some way straightforwardly knowable. Nor do I want to suggest that the representations of it within Western media-driven frames might be more accurate, so to speak, than Butler claims. Rather, what I am taking issue with is specifically the implication, inherent in this notion of a visual divide, that the 'first world' reality on one side of the frame is somehow less authentic than the 'third world' reality on the other: as she has herself argued elsewhere, on the topic of Giorgio Agamben's heavy reliance on the categories of sovereignty and *bare life* in his analysis of post-9/11 US counterterrorism policy, '[w]e need more complex ways of understanding the multivalence and tactics of power to understand forms of resistance, agency, and counter-mobilization that elude or stall state power'.²² The idea that the frame can divide visual reality into clear-cut 'sides' is fundamentally flawed, and contradicts the more complex analysis of the framing process that Butler undertakes elsewhere in her study.

²¹ Ibid., p. 93.

²² Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull, 2007), p. 42.

This division of reality into authentic and inauthentic experience is most clearly evident in Butler's discussion of Marc Falkoff's poetry anthology, *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*, a volume which 'includes twenty-two poems that survived the censorship of the US Department of Defense'.²³ To place this in context, Butler draws attention to the book's claim that '25,000 lines of poetry written by [detainee] Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost were destroyed by military personnel'.²⁴ In her analysis, the poems in the collection 'offer a different kind of moral responsiveness, a kind of interpretation that may, under certain conditions, contest and explode the dominant schisms running through the national and military ideology'.²⁵ In addition, they 'constitute and convey a moral responsiveness to a military rationale that has restricted moral responsiveness to violence in incoherent and unjust ways'.²⁶ Although Butler's use of the word 'explode' is uncharacteristically hyperbolic, the notion that the poems have the potential to in some way challenge the 'dominant schisms' in contemporary political ideology is perfectly legitimate: they provide a perspective on reality that is at odds with that contained within most Western media frames.²⁷

Indeed, in her close reading of a selection of individual poems, there is little evidence of any such explosion of frames taking place. Her analyses are generally –

²³ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 55.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Cathy Caruth has also used the phrase 'explosion of the frame' in a discussion of media representations of war in her recent essay, 'Lying and History': 'If the Pentagon Papers have the force of a revelation, it cannot be because they reveal any facts that are not known (including the facts of the lies themselves) but rather because they produce, from within the very medium of the image (the public press), the force of an explosion that transmits and makes legible the explosion of the fact in the modern world. It is, perhaps, the performance of a kind of *explosion of the frame* of the media through the very media that create this frame'. Cathy Caruth, 'Lying and History', *Eurozine*, 9.0 <March 2009 <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-09-caruth-en.html>> I would argue that Caruth's use of the word 'explosion' is more appropriate than Butler's, for two reasons: (1) it refers to a disclosure of specific, classified information about US Government involvement in illegal activity; and (2) the 'frame' here pertains to the way in which a particular story is reported, rather than to a broader discursive structure that perpetuates hegemonic norms.

and to their credit – more subtle than this, focusing on the ways in which the physicality of the poems (some of which were originally carved into Styrofoam cups) has helped the detainees to potentially ‘re-establish a social connection to the world, even when there is no concrete reason to think that any such connection is possible’.²⁸ In doing so, her close readings draw attention to the ways in which the poems *blur*, rather than explode, the emotional boundaries between the United States and the rest of the world. For instance, in her response to a poem by Abdulla Majid al-Noaimi, which contains the lines ‘the tears of someone else’s longing are affecting me / My chest cannot take the vastness of emotion’, she writes: ‘he is, as it were, dispossessed by these tears that are in him, but that are not exclusively his alone’.²⁹ This is not an explosion of the frame so much as a reconfiguration of it. The closest that Butler comes to providing clear evidence of how the frame is exploded comes in her suggestion that the volume’s opening poem, a meditation on the paradox of ‘fight[ing] for peace’ by Shaker Abdurraheem Aamer, ‘expos[es] the hypocrisy of the US military’.³⁰ This may well be the case, but even if one takes his ‘drive toward exposure’ (as she goes on to put it) at face value, it remains a far cry from an explosion of the dominant schisms that characterise the frame’s underlying ideology.³¹

It is a little later on that her argument becomes most problematic, when she writes that ‘the poems break through the dominant ideologies that rationalize war through recourse to righteous invocations of peace; they confound and expose the words of those who torture in the name of freedom and kill in the name of peace’.³²

²⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

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One might make the obvious point here that the poetry anthology, edited with a transparent political agenda by a vocal US liberal, itself clearly exists within its own left-wing ideological frame (one that is, in turn, ‘framed’ by the fact that thousands more poems were destroyed by the military). What is more troubling, however, is that when Butler suggests that the poems ‘break through the dominant ideologies that rationalize war’, she is reading them with a striking absence of critical analysis. While her description of the poetry ‘as evidence and as appeal’ indicates that she is approaching it as testimony first and as art second, nowhere does she question the veracity of the writing’s content.³³ If the Department of Defense has been draconian in its censorship, then I would suggest that Butler is overly trusting, granting the poems a sense of truthfulness and authorial reliability that would surely be absent in her response to any other text, literary or otherwise.

‘The body breathes,’ she writes, ‘breathes itself into words, and finds some provisional survival there. But once the breath is made into words, the body is given over to another, in the form of an appeal’.³⁴ The metaphor of the body ‘breath[ing] itself into words’ imbues the poetry with a sense of physical authenticity that Butler clearly does not intend to be taken literally, but I would argue that her need to resort to overtly figurative language here in the first place belies the notion that the poems are in some way ‘break[ing] through’ an occlusive, homogenous frame. She writes that the poems constitute ‘a network of transitive affects’, and that they are ‘insurgent interpretations’, but I think it would be more accurate to say that this is what they *bring about*. As with any work of literature, rather than breaking through or exploding a homogenous frame, the poems can necessarily only *connect* with the complex

³³ Ibid., p. 59.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

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matrix of signs that make up any reader's individual contextual reality – or, to borrow a term from Derek Attridge, *idioculture* – at a given time. (Attridge defines idioculture as ‘the singular, and constantly changing, combination of cultural materials and proclivities that constitutes any individual subject, the product of a specific history of exposure to a variety of cultural phenomena’).³⁵ I am thinking in particular here of Derrida's much-cited argument that:

there has never been anything but writing, there have never been anything but supplements and substitutional significations which could only arise in a chain of differential references. The “real” supervenes or is added only in taking meaning from a trace or an invocation of supplements [*un appel de supplément*]. And so on indefinitely, for we have read *in the text* that the absolute present, Nature, what is named by words like ‘real mother,’ e.t.c. have always already escaped, have never existed; that what inaugurates meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.³⁶

The poems may reconfigure the reader's reality in a slightly new way or they may not, but in either case, what takes place is a process of reshaping an already existing reality, not the replacement of a false reality with one that is somehow more true.

In what follows, I aim to demonstrate how Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* (which, like Falkoff's volume, attempts to challenge media-driven post-9/11 frames of reality

³⁵ Derek Attridge, ‘Context, Idioculture, Invention’, *New Literary History*, 42. 4, pp. 682–3.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Jonathan Culler, qtd. in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 106. Butler is, of course, perfectly entitled to take a different approach, but if this is the case then it should be more clearly signposted.

by telling the story of those whom they marginalise), can be read in a way that undermines, first, Butler's understanding of the frame as a structure inflexible enough to be exploded, and second, the problematic authenticity that – as in her reading of the Guantánamo poems – she implicitly confers upon those who are subjugated by it. I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the framing process is evident in a number of questions arising from the book's authorship, not least that of whether it fits within the conventional narrative frames of fiction or non-fiction at all.

3.0 '[A]n insurrection at the level of ontology': *What Is the What*

3.1 '*Imaginary journalism*'

Dave Eggers is co-founder of the San Francisco-based non-profit *Voice of Witness* book series, which publishes volumes of oral history intended to '[e]ngender greater awareness, discussion and action in response to [social and human rights] injustices'.³⁷ He is well known for his advocacy of storytelling as a means of helping to encourage political change. This advocacy has been evident in Eggers' own writing since around the time of the organisation's establishment in 2004, and is clearly at play (albeit in a gestative form) in his short story collection of the same year, *How We Are Hungry*, which includes within it the arrestingly-titled flash fiction piece, 'What It Means When a Crowd in a Faraway Nation Takes a Soldier Representing Your Own Nation, Shoots Him, Drags Him From His Vehicle, and Then Mutilates Him in the Dust'. Evoking a 'derealization of loss' not unlike that which Butler discusses, 'What

³⁷ *Voice of Witness* website <<http://www.voiceofwitness.com/about/>>

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it Means...' describes a man's feelings as he stares, while 'sitting in his home, comfortable, wearing warm socks and drinking orange juice', at a photograph of a soldier being tortured to death in another part of the world.³⁸ Eggers has since published a number of politically-charged works, including the critically acclaimed *Zeitoun* (2009), a powerful biographical account of the injustices undergone by a Syrian American man and his family in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as well as the novel *A Hologram For the King* (2012), a parable about the wane of American power during the global recession.

The point at which Eggers' writing first develops beyond identifying a *need* for the kind of new empathic ties that Butler calls for (as in 'What it Means...'), and instead begins actively striving to engender them (as in *Zeitoun*), can be traced to his 2006 publication, *What Is the What*, the novelised autobiography of real-life Sudanese 'Lost Boy' Valentino Achak Deng. The book recounts Deng's life story from an early childhood in the Southern Sudanese village of Marial Bai in the early 1980s, through his experience of death, disease and displacement during the Sudanese civil war, up until his present life as a refugee in the United States after 9/11. At a first glance, the writing appears to do away with the stylistic reflexivity characteristic of Eggers' earlier work (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* [2000], *You Shall Know Our Velocity* [2002], and *How We Are Hungry*). Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that there is still a degree of hermeneutic playfulness at work in the text, particularly in the games that the narrative plays with the boundary between fact and fiction. Despite being authored (in a literal sense) solely by Eggers, in its Preface, Deng himself claims that 'all of the major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one

³⁸ Dave Eggers, *How We Are Hungry* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 17–18.

depicted within these pages'.³⁹ Likewise, the book's flyleaf proclaims its subtitle to be 'The Autobiography of Valentino Achack Deng', but then adds directly beneath this: 'A Novel by Dave Eggers'.⁴⁰ As Elizabeth Twitchell notes in an article on the novel for *American Literature*: 'From the very first page of the book, the reader is disoriented, suspended in a space of uncertainty and multiplicity. ... "Truth" is subservient to the book's more urgent message, which is grander than the experience of any single person'.⁴¹

It would be easy to be cynical here by attributing the book's labelling as a novel to the powers of marketing. Its British publisher, Penguin, officially categorises the work as 'fiction' on its back cover, and, as Thomas Jones has pointed out in an otherwise highly favourable review of it for *The London Review of Books*, '[while it] may make sense from the point of view of publicity and sales ... it also inspires unease: Achak may benefit from the text, but he doesn't own it; he has become a character in a fictionalised version of his life story that legally belongs to someone else'.⁴² However, Jones is quick to assert that '[p]ractically speaking, this hardly matters: the motives for and consequences of Eggers's actions are unquestionably benevolent, and the book could not have taken the form it has without Achak's consent and blessing'.⁴³ Indeed, despite any problems that it might raise, the description of the book as both an autobiography *and* a novel signposts, from the very start, a kind of hermeneutic tension that is at play throughout what initially appears to be (at least by Eggers' standards) a fairly straightforward first-person narrative. As Twitchell puts it

³⁹ Dave Eggers, *What Is the What* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. xiv.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, n. pag.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Twitchell, 'Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*: Fictionalizing Trauma in the Era of Misery Lit', *American Literature*, 83.3 (2011), pp. 637–8.

⁴² Thomas Jones, 'This Is Not That Place', *The London Review of Books*, 29.12 (21 June 2007): <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n12/thomas-jones/this-is-not-that-place>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

elsewhere in her article: ‘In its blend of fact and fancy, the novel gestures toward a form of empathic exchange that is both self-aware and deeply committed, one that might be capable of refiguring the power relations that have so long bedevilled Western representations of Africa’.⁴⁴ In this light, it might be useful to describe the book in the way that David Amsden does in a piece in *New York* magazine: namely, as work of ‘imaginary journalism’.⁴⁵ (It is for this reason that, throughout this chapter, I refer to *What Is the What* as ‘the book’ rather than as ‘the novel’).

3.2 Frames of Representation

Deng’s narrative can be divided into two chronological frames. First, there is an ‘outer’ frame, which constitutes his recent life in America, during which he undergoes numerous difficulties and hardships. The most significant of these is the armed robbery of his apartment, the event with which the book opens. In addition to this, there is also an ‘inner’ frame, in which the adult, refugee Deng tells the story of his late childhood and adolescence as a displaced ‘Lost Boy’ in Sudan and Kenya during the civil war. He recounts this story, in fragments, to a number of people that he encounters during his time in the US. However, it is not always entirely clear whether he is literally speaking to these figures, or simply imagining what he would say to them if they would care to listen.

In either case, as Robert Eaglestone has argued in *Studies in the Novel*, the narrative can be viewed, like a number of Holocaust texts, as an ‘allegory of failed

⁴⁴ Twitchell, ‘Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What*’, p. 635.

⁴⁴ David Amsden, ‘Truly Heartbreaking’, *New York Magazine* (22 October 2006)
<<http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/23147/>>

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understanding’, in which ‘figures not involved in the traumatic events are shown in their misreading or incomprehension of the events involved’.⁴⁶ In this way, it is possible to read Deng’s ‘silent’ testimony as roughly analogous to the poems by Guantánamo detainees that Butler discusses, signifying a particular kind of emotional pain alien to mainstream US experience. However, the book makes no suggestion that the incomprehension Deng faces is wholly the result of media-driven frames.

Although the people he meets continue to reduce him to a pre-conceived African stereotype (one of his assailants in the first chapter even goes so far as to address him simply as ‘Africa’),⁴⁷ in each instance it is a matter of choice: all he requires is for them to engage him as an equal and actively listen to his story, yet this repeatedly proves a step too far. It is this *choice* not to listen that is biting critiqued in the book’s closing sentences: ‘How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist’.⁴⁸

The most prominent way in which this artificial boundary between Deng and his US (non-)interlocutors is confronted in the book is through a complete disregard for it in the narrative’s form: drawing equally upon both the traditional Sudanese oral storytelling style and the written word of the novel, Eggers gives a new, post-9/11 spin to Salman Rushdie’s famous claim that postcolonial fiction is a means by which ‘the Empire writes back to the Centre’.⁴⁹ This presents a challenge to the logic upon which Butler bases her notion of the frame. Specifically, through its combination of

⁴⁶ Robert Eaglestone, “‘You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen’”: Holocaust testimony and contemporary African trauma literature’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1–2 (2008), pp. 80–81.

⁴⁷ Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 535. Adam Kelly cites this sentence as an example of the kind of ‘direct acknowledgement of reader by writer, and vice versa’ that is characteristic of David Foster Wallace’s notion of a ‘New Sincerity’ in contemporary American writing; Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction’, *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 146.

⁴⁹ Salman Rushdie, qtd. in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), n. pag.

storytelling styles (oral and written), as well as storytelling forms (fiction and non-fiction), the text draws attention to the epistemic violence not only intrinsic to an imperialist framing of the world, but also to that of the outwardly anti-imperialist notion that the framing process can be so powerful as to render the colonial subject completely unrepresentable. (Butler makes this case with reference to the war on terror, which she suggests is framed by '[a] mechanism through which certain lives and deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture ... by the war effort'.)⁵⁰ The unrepresentability of the colonial other in this case contains within it the presumably unintentional implication that issues of representation are somehow, at least to a degree, less problematic in the case of the uncolonised Western self.

It is the sense of 'either/or' absolutism in this argument that the hybridity of Eggers' narrative reveals to be most problematic. Indeed, the very nature of its blending of influences raises questions about whether 'hybridity' is itself a suitable term for the kind of interweaving of worlds upon which it is founded, or whether it too is part of the same 1990s lexicon of postmodern critical theory in which Butler's notion of the frame is also steeped. After all, hybridity, like the frame, whilst ostensibly acknowledging the hyphenated construction of human identity, remains reliant upon the notion that there are at least two presumably homogenous entities, or worlds, from which the hybrid strands of identity are spun. Even to suggest, as I have, that a narrative like that of *What Is the What*, which combines African and (even more vaguely) 'Western' influences, is to come dangerously close to an essentialising acceptance that there is an African world and a Western world in existence in the first place.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 147.

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The question of how to configure a new critical language with which to engage this fissiparousness has, of course, been much debated. Perhaps most notably, Deleuze and Guattari have suggested that identity can be better accounted for through the concept of an ‘assemblage’; that is, a reality which is literally assembled from the shifting fragments of other assembled realities.⁵¹ However, my point here is not to pit terms like ‘assemblage’, ‘hybridity’, and the ‘frame’ against each other in a lexicological competition. Rather, my aim is to highlight just how contestable each of these terms is when subjected to questioning. Butler herself acknowledges a need for a new idiom, and edges towards a more mellifluous model of reality when she posits that it is no longer sufficient (if indeed it ever was) to think about the globe in terms of a crudely delineated ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’. As she writes in *Precarious Life*: ‘[w]e would be wrong to think that the First World is *here* and the Third World is *there*. ... These topographies have shifted, and what was once thought of as a border ... is [now] a highly populated site’.⁵² Indeed, Eggers’ Deng mirrors this point almost exactly when he says: ‘[s]ome sociologists, liberal ones, might take issue with the notion that one society is behind another, that there is a first world, a third. But southern Sudan is not part of any of these worlds. Sudan is something else, and I cannot find apt comparison’.⁵³

The fact that Eggers writes this specifically from a ‘non-Western’ point of view, wilfully delving into an imaginative representation of Deng’s mind, is crucial in that it enables him not only to account for a shifting of topographies, but also to participate in an active deconstruction of them. Although, here, one might again draw attention to the potential ethical problems that such an act of representation might

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 7–8.

⁵² Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 49.

⁵³ Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 49.

raise, I would once more go along with Elizabeth Twitchell when she suggests that ‘*What Is the What* engages the specter of discursive imperialism yet undermines its importance by questioning our assumptions about what makes for “authentic” representation. We are left with a voice that is both hybrid and singular, distinctly audible and yet impossible to locate’.⁵⁴ Deng’s narrative, I would argue, encourages the insurrection at the level of ontology that Butler’s analysis ultimately stops short of providing, and it does this not simply by attempting to ‘explode’ the frames – or ‘topographies’ – of war, but also by drawing attention to the inherent narcissism of any attempt to delineate reality along the lines of a hegemonic visual divide. In one of a number of instances in which Eggers attempts to convey the universality of Deng’s story, he writes: ‘I knew that the world was the same everywhere, that there were only inconsequential variations between the suffering in one place and another’.⁵⁵ *What Is the What* indicates that in order for new empathic ties to begin to emerge, one needs to recognise the overlap between multiple coexisting, occasionally incommensurable realities, and as such to emphasise the degree to which human experience, and in particular the experience of violence, is shared.

3.3 ‘[T]he collapsible space between us’

In the book’s final paragraph, Deng says that he will continue to tell his stories ‘because to do anything else would be less than human’.⁵⁶ He then directly addresses the reader, saying: ‘I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us’.⁵⁷ It is the ability of storytelling to figuratively ‘collapse’ the space between people, to

⁵⁴ Twitchell, ‘Dave Eggers’ *What Is the What*’, p. 639.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 535.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

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transcend the barriers of identity, that, in *What Is the What*, is the central component of the ontological insurrection necessary for an establishment of new empathic global ties. It encourages ‘new constellations for thinking about normativity’ not so much by exploding a dominant frame, but rather by connecting with and reshaping it. In contrast to Butler’s argument, empathy is generated through an *increase* in judgement: by imagining oneself into the specificities of Deng’s represented experience, one is able to make a more empathically-informed, discriminating response to the violence he has witnessed, and to think even more critically than Butler does about one’s own part in it (even if this part simply constitutes a ‘first world’ impassivity).

The key word here is ‘imagining’. I want to avoid falling into the trap of implying that Eggers presents his reader with a straightforwardly authentic account of Deng’s experience, as I think Francine Prose comes close to doing in an otherwise insightful review for the *New York Times*:

You know precisely who the boys were because you have experienced their mass migration and the mass murder that occasioned it through the eyes, and in the compelling voice, of Valentino Achak Deng. By the time the members of Eggers’s large and youthful fan base have repeatedly consulted the book’s map of East Africa, tracing the Lost Boys’ wanderings, they will be able to visualize the geographical positions of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya with a clarity surpassing their possibly hazy recall of anything they might have memorized for a World Civilization class.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Francine Prose, ‘The Lost Boy’, *The New York Times* (24 December 2006): <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/books/review/Prose.t.html?pagewanted=all>.

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While Prose is right to suggest that the book will put its readers in a better position to ‘visualize’ Deng’s war-torn East Africa, it is important to remember that this visualisation is an act of imagination: rather than helping the reader to ‘know precisely’ the experience of the Lost Boys, it does the opposite, drawing urgent attention to exactly how *little* she knows of it, even after sifting through the book’s 535 pages. The book does not encourage its reader to know the experience of the other so much as it prompts her to question the extent to which she ‘knows’ herself. As Attridge puts it in his article: ‘Just as the work at the time of its birth [finds] possibilities for otherness within an apparently coherent cultural fabric, embodied in the artist’s idioculture, so the work at the time of its reception can exploit the possibilities for otherness in the apparent coherence of the culture embodied in the reader’s idioculture’.⁵⁹ The book reconfigures the reader’s reality not by exploding the frame by which it is limned, but by challenging its perceived coherence: the boundary between the familiar and the strange is rendered newly mellifluous. (In this sense, one might also view the text as a prime example of the kind of ‘New Sincerity’ that Adam Kelly identifies in the work of David Foster Wallace and his contemporaries: a kind of fiction in which ‘[f]ormer divisions between self and other morph into conflicts within the self, and a recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins, putting in doubt the very referents of terms like “self” and “other,” “inner” and “outer”’.)⁶⁰

The imaginative collapsing of space is perhaps most evident in one of the narrative’s recurring tropes: shadows. Shadows are prevalent throughout the text. Often they are sinister and frightening: for instance, the army of janjaweed horsemen

⁵⁹ Attridge, ‘Context, Idioculture, Invention’, p. 693.

⁶⁰ Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity’, p. 136.

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that descends upon Deng's village at the start of the civil war is described as being 'like a shadow made by a low cloud ... a shadow mov[ing] quickly over the land'.⁶¹ At other times, however, they provide relative safety and relief: in the very same scene, Deng hides from the horsemen 'in the shade ... amid a dense thicket'.⁶² Likewise, when, later on, Deng is given shelter in the hut of a village woman who reminds him of his lost mother, he says: 'I missed the shadow of my mother, listening to the sounds inside her. I had not realized how cold I had felt for so long. This woman gave me her shadow and I wanted to live within it until I could be home again'.⁶³ In most cases throughout the book, however, the signification of these shadows is ambiguous. The Lost Boys are described as inhabiting a 'shadow world'⁶⁴, and are themselves frequently referred to as 'shadows'.⁶⁵ In other words, shadows occupy an ambiguous area somewhere in the middle of a continuum between dark and light. Neither good nor evil, moral nor immoral, shadows work as a kind of figurative tie between the many worlds that are brought into contact through the nexus of the text. They reflect the shifting hermeneutic ambiguity engendered by the narrative itself, collapsing the space between the worlds of fact and fiction, the text and its context. More importantly, they attest to an understanding of the mechanics of representation that is more fluid than that offered by Butler's outline of the frame.

⁶¹ Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 89.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

3.4 *9/11 and the Language of the Frame*

This more fluid framing of reality is evident in the way that the Sudanese war casts its shadow over another traumatic event in the text: 9/11. The book is, of course, ostensibly ‘about’ Sudan, but – as with many contemporary US novels – its structure makes it impossible to read without also thinking about 9/11 and the war on terror.⁶⁶ The reader is prompted to empathise with the plight of the Lost Boys through a figurative tying of their largely unreported collective trauma to the more widely discussed experience of New Yorkers following September 11. Eggers’ depiction of the ‘web of money and power and oil’ driving the Sudanese civil war holds a mirror up to the complexity of global conflict since 9/11, encouraging precisely the kind of ‘new constellations for thinking about normativity’ that Butler calls for, while also lending the issue of Islamist terror a sense of nuanced historicity by locating it in a complicated historical context.⁶⁷

Constituting a meeting point of sorts between the book’s inner layer and its outer layer, the 9/11 attacks are particularly memorable to Deng because they take place just before he flies to the US to begin his new life as a refugee. There is a brief foreshadowing of the attacks approximately halfway through the book, when, seemingly in passing, Deng mentions that ‘[o]nly forty-six refugees were scheduled to fly to New York on September 11, and one of them was me’.⁶⁸ More importantly, it is the event with which the narrative culminates: recalling his initial encounter with the attacks on a television screen in Kenya, Deng portentously states that among his fellow Lost Boys, ‘[i]t was generally agreed that any war the United States would be

⁶⁶ Notable examples of such novels include *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006), *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem (2009), and *Open City* by Teju Cole (2011).

⁶⁷ Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 438.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

engaged with would be the biggest war the world has ever known. I took what I had seen of explosions in films and extrapolated. The coming war would look like that, fire filling the sky, covering the world'.⁶⁹

Of course, none of this necessarily contradicts Butler's aim to widen the potential scope of empathy by rendering the 'ungrievable' grievable. What distinguishes the empathic affect generated by *What Is the What* from that described by Butler is that in this case it is the framing of violence itself that makes possible the creation of new empathic ties. This is not so much because it expands the borders of the dominating Western frame in a gesture towards greater inclusiveness: rather, it is because it draws attention to the unstable textuality of the frame itself. It demonstrates, in other words, that the frame can be a powerful colonial tool, but only – paradoxically – insofar as one continues to 'read' it in a consensually expected way, thus *perpetuating* the notion that it is a powerful colonial tool. While *What Is the What* does prompt its reader to challenge the framing of reality, it also goes further by encouraging her to likewise challenge the *language* upon which the frame relies. Arbitrarily delineated categories such as 'Western' and 'non-Western' are brought into question, and ultimately woven together in a complex and multitudinous mesh of realities: by empathising with Eggers' representation of Deng (that is, by imagining herself into his experience), the reader is not exploding the frame so much as ceasing to comply with its *terms*.

It is the terms of the frame, rather than the frame itself, that constitute the ultimate boundary for Deng as a refugee in the United States after 9/11. Shortly before he gets on the plane to New York in Nairobi, a friend of his says: '[y]ou're a soul whose human form happened to take that of a boy from Sudan. But you're not

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 526.

... . You don't have to accept these limitations. ... What right do all these people have to draw boundaries around the life you can live?'⁷⁰ However, it is not until he has lived for some years in the US, and experienced the suffocating restrictions placed upon him simply through his African refugee identity – not just from people who are outwardly hostile toward him, but also from liberals whose extension of hospitality is rarely unconditional – that he comes to accept the truth in this advice, and to begin to live his life independently of both dominating frames *and* the well-intentioned liberal sentiment that continues to play by the rules set by such frames. He begins to embrace the uncertainty of his future, using it as a tool to help build a new life for himself: 'Today I have options,' he says in the book's closing chapter, adding: 'For years I have vowed to return home, but not until I had finished my college education. ... I believe this day will come. It is, though, taking longer than expected'.⁷¹ He has started to understand the way in which his identity is constructed, both by himself and by others, and to begin using its malleability to his advantage. As Butler herself puts it (channelling Hannah Arendt) in *Who Sings the Nation State?*, '[t]he problem is not just one of inclusion into an already existing idea of the nation, but one of equality, without which the "we" is not speakable. ... [When] we hear illegal immigrants declaring in the streets, "*el pueblo unido jamás sera vencido*," ["*the people united will never be defeated*"] we can trace the rhetorical terms through which the nation is being reiterated, but in ways that are not authorized – or not yet'.⁷²

Deng's narrative, like the immigrant declaration that Butler cites, articulates a challenge to precisely this process of hegemonic 'authorization'. '[The Lost Boys] had been thrown this way and that,' he says, again towards the end of the book, 'like

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 464.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 534–5.

⁷² Butler, *Who Sings the Nation State?*, p. 60.

wind in a hysterical storm. ... But we're no longer rain We're men. Now we can stand and decide. This is our first chance to choose our own unknown'.⁷³ Whether this chance will be taken is left unstated, but the resulting ambiguity is central to the way that any reading of the narrative necessarily challenges the hegemony of the frame: it is not the framing of the unknowable other that, in itself, perpetuates the entrenchment of hegemonic norms, but rather the unthinking adherence to a language that aligns the notion of unknowability with otherness in the first place. Like Deng, the reader is challenged with the task of building her own unknown. The narrative invokes her sense of individual responsibility as a world citizen in a way that gestures towards a different kind of ontological insurrection: she is not let off the hook, so to speak, by the notion of an all-encompassing frame held like a blindfold over her eyes by hegemonic media discourse. Rather, by moving beyond the language of the frame, the reader is able to begin more radically devising the 'new constellations for thinking about normativity' that Butler otherwise rightly calls for.

4.0 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for a rethinking of Judith Butler's use of the concept of the 'frame', pushing her thought even further along the intellectual trajectory that she sets up by subjecting her own basic ideological assumptions to an 'insurrection at the level of ontology'. In order to create the conditions necessary for 'new constellations for thinking about normativity', I have suggested, it is necessary to stop thinking in binary terms ('East'/'West', 'Us'/'Them', 'Inside'/'Outside' e.t.c.), and instead to

⁷³ Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 531.

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think more rigorously about the processes through which the ‘framing’ of post-9/11 reality takes place. I have asserted that this framing process is more complicated – and also more susceptible to individual judgement – than Butler gives it credit for, and that this problem is encapsulated in the lack of critical analysis with which she approaches Mark Falkoff’s *Poems from Guantánamo* collection.

Using the example of Dave Eggers’ *What is the What*, I have demonstrated how an analysis of contemporary literature can complicate the media-driven process of ‘framing’ post-9/11 reality that Butler describes. I have suggested that Deng’s narrative takes Butler’s theorisation of post-9/11 ‘framing’ a step further by blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography: the book does not ‘explode’ the ‘frames’ of post-9/11 American reality so much as attempt to remould them in a way that includes the experiences and narratives of those who might previously have been marginalised. The text works towards engendering precisely the kind of new empathic global ‘ties’ that Butler drives at, but does so in a way that demonstrates that such ties might only come about through a deep and honest interrogation of the basic assumptions inherent in loaded terms such as ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘us’.

Chapter 2: '[W]ith thousands of others in their solitude': Gazing Inward in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* and Teju Cole's *Open City*

1.0 Introduction

In her 2012 article 'The Storytellers of Empire', Kamila Shamsie argues that 'with pitifully few exceptions, the [American] 9/11 novel looks at 9/11 the day itself, in New York—think of the most acclaimed novels in that genre: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*'.¹ This is not to say, Shamsie continues, that 'September 11, the day itself in New York, is not itself a worthy subject for fiction'.² Rather, her point is that 'just as the day itself is only one part of the genre of 9/11 nonfiction books, so it should be with fiction'.³ This desire for novelists to shift their fictional framing of September 11, in a way that places 'the day itself' into a complex geopolitical context, is one that is shared by other critics also. Michael Rothberg has argued that '[w]hat we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others'.⁴ Likewise, as I mentioned in the Introduction, Richard Gray calls upon American novelists to perform a literary 'enactment of difference'.⁵ He draws attention to a minority of non-canonical post-9/11 texts that, in his view, 'reconfigure language, the themes and tropes of American writing in terms that go

¹ Kamila Shamsie, 'The Storytellers of Empire', *Guernica*, 1 February 2012
<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Rothberg, 'A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray', *American Literary History*, 21.1 (2009), p. 158.

⁵ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 30.

way beyond bipolar, biracial models. In the process, they become a lexical equivalent of the immigrant encounter, transforming their literary environs just as they are transformed by them – and, in effect, force us to rethink 9/11'.⁶

In this chapter, I analyse two US novels that 'reconfigure' the framing of 9/11 in the transnational way that Shamsie, Rothberg and Gray describe: *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem (2009) and *Open City* by Teju Cole (2011). However, they perform this reframing in a style that maintains an intense focus upon the American self. This inward-focus has prompted numerous reviewers of the novels to only mention their commentary on 9/11 and its aftermath in passing, if at all.⁷ On some occasions, critics have made a point of criticising the novels for their apparent lack of interest in exploring the complicated global context from which the 9/11 attacks emerged. Ruth Franklin, for instance, refers to the texts as exemplary of what she terms 'The Stubborn Inward Gaze of the 9/11 Novel': 'our novelists,' she argues, 'continue stubbornly to insist on turning their gaze inward, bizarrely searching for the answer to the question of 9/11 in America rather than at its global source'.⁸

There is no denying that the narratives of both novels are deeply 'inward gazing' in their exploration of post-9/11 identity in the United States. In *Chronic City*, the privileged Manhattanites who make up its cast are so self-involved that they have become completely unaware of goings on beyond the Lincoln Tunnel. The narrator of

⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

⁷ See e.g.: Patrick Ness, 'Chronic City by Jonathan Lethem', *Guardian*, section Books, 9 January 2010 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/09/jonathan-lethem-chronic-city-review>>; Matt Thorne, 'Chronic City, by Jonathan Lethem, *Independent*, section Books, 15 January 2010 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/chronic-city-by-jonathan-lethem-1867893.html>>; Giles Foden, 'Open City by Teju Cole – review', *The Guardian*, 17 August 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review>>; Miguel Syjuco, 'These Crowded Streets', *New York Times*, section Books, February 25 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0> Of these reviews, only Syjuco's makes explicit reference to 9/11, but even this is only in passing. I mention this not as a criticism, but merely as an observation.

⁸ Ibid.

Open City, meanwhile, wanders around Manhattan, lost in thought about the postcolonial connections between his cosmopolitan surroundings and the external, globalised world, only to be struck dumb by a revelation that he may have placed a mental block on his own role in an act of violence in Nigeria two decades earlier. However, I argue that both novels use the ‘inward gazing’ solitude of their Manhattanite protagonists as a device through which to *critique* precisely the kind of isolationist framing of post-9/11 reality that Franklin accuses their authors of perpetuating. In each narrative, Manhattan is a site upon which multiple realities jostle for space, but is in danger of allowing this multiplicity to become obscured by a reactionary intensification of solitude that in turn reinforces simplistic ‘us and them’ identity binaries. Building on the argument I made in Chapter 1 with regard to Dave Eggers’ *What Is the What*, I suggest that *Chronic City* and *Open City* encourage the kind of new empathic ties that Judith Butler calls for in her recent work, but do so in a way that prompts an even more thoroughgoing ‘insurrection at the level of ontology’ than that which she describes, blurring rather than exploding the boundaries between the self and the other.⁹

2.0 Virtual Unreality: *Chronic City*

Chronic City is a novel filled with solipsistic characters. However, as I have already mentioned, I argue that the text itself is not solipsistic: instead, it utilises the ‘inward gaze’ of its protagonists in a way that critiques what its author has, in interview,

⁹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 33.

described as a post-9/11 impulse to ‘forget this event or displace it’.¹⁰ It does this by presenting its reader with a Manhattan which, as the narrative progresses, comes to seem increasingly unreal (the characters’ experience of the city may or may not be the product of a sophisticated computer simulation). In doing so, the novel complicates the division between reality and unreality. Rather than attempting to replace the latter with the former, it foregrounds the constructedness – and, in turn, manipulability – of both. By drawing attention to this manipulability, it encourages the reader to consciously *challenge* any framing of post-9/11 reality that is reliant upon reductive ‘us and them’ identity binaries.

2.1 Ellipses and Insteadmen: An ‘Inward Gazing’ Manhattan

I begin my argument by showing how Lethem depicts a Manhattan whose inhabitants have subscribed to a frame of reality so ‘inward gazing’ that it prevents them from conceiving of a world beyond the island’s shores. What this depiction of Manhattan encourages, I suggest, is not so much a despair at the overwhelming power of such a frame, but rather an understanding on the part of the reader that subscription to it is, at least in part, a matter of choice. This, in turn, means that the frame can be actively challenged and subverted.

The novel’s plot resists easy description, but an attempt to do so is necessitated by what can only be described as the narrative’s sheer oddness. The text relates a year in the life of its narrator, ex-child actor Chase Insteadman, a charming but slightly vapid Manhattan socialite in his late thirties who continues to rely

¹⁰ Jonathan Lethem, qtd. in ‘*Chronic City* – Jonathan Lethem in Conversation with Tom McCarthy’, *London Review Bookshop*, 7 January 2010 <<http://www.lrbshop.co.uk/news/36/Chronic-City---Jonathan-Lethem-in-conversation-with-Tom-McCarthy-.html>>

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financially on the reputation that he made for himself in a hit 1980s sitcom called *Martyr & Pesty*. As his knowingly unsubtle surname suggests, Chase has drifted aimlessly through his adult life, often lacking purpose and feeling like his existence is constituted by an identity framed and projected upon him by the national entertainment press. Like the city of which he is a part, Chase is, as reviewers of the novel have noted, ‘now just a stand-in for a greater (perhaps former) reality’.¹¹ Despite his childhood fame, he is presently most well-known for his engagement to an old flame, Janice Trumball, a scientist caught on an International Space Station surrounded by Chinese mines, but whom Chase has in fact neither seen nor been in contact with for around twenty years. Janice’s emotionally charged letters to Chase are regularly published in a special ‘War-Free’ edition of the *New York Times* (although at the end of the novel he finds out that they have actually been composed by his secret girlfriend, Oona Laszlo, a ghost-writer who, like Chase, lives a kind of double-life in which her sense of self is obscured by the multiple identities that her job requires her to inhabit).

Chase’s decreasing faith in the reality of the world around him, and the desire for authentic experience that this generates, are among the novel’s key themes, and a similar desire is invited from the reader throughout the narrative. This is evident in elements from the intimate, cannabis-addled friendship that Chase sparks up with an oddball ex-liner note writer and aficionado of all manner of cultural marginalia called Perkus Tooth, to the mysterious, unidentified force destroying buildings around Manhattan on a regular basis. (The Mayoral authority blames the attacks, surreally, on a tiger that has escaped from the Central Park Zoo, but rumour has it that this is a

¹¹ Arthur Nersesian, ‘Chronic City’, *Publishers Weekly*, section Reviews, 8 March 2009
<<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-385-51863-5>>

cover-up [no less surreally] for a potential scandal surrounding a powerful subway-tunnelling digger that has run off course and that nobody in the Mayor's Office seems able to bring back under control).

2.1i 'Pocket universe'

Regarding the novel's peculiarity, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Suffice it to say that one of the cumulative effects of all this questioning of authenticity is to ultimately pass comment on the kind of reactionary framing of reality that Judith Butler has identified in contemporary post-9/11 discourse, especially in the context of the war on terror. Butler argues that, generally speaking, '[the mainstram media] do not show violence, but there is violence in the frame of what is shown. That latter violence is the mechanism through which certain lives and deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture ... by the war effort'.¹² While knowingly hip, self-referential and idiosyncratic, the novel also provides a serious satirical examination of this kind of 'refusal to show violence', and it does so primarily through the microcosm of its Manhattan setting. Manhattan is literally an island cut off from the mainland: Chase describes it as a 'pocket universe' in which '[n]obody – that's no *body* – really believes in the news from beyond the boundaries of their neighbourhood'.¹³ Its physical separation from the rest of the city neatly mirrors the epistemic distance – or 'ellipsis', to use a term that forms something of a motif throughout the novel – between Chase and the various people around him, as

¹² Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 147.

¹³ Jonathan Lethem, *Chronic City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 386.

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well as between himself and the world beyond the island's shores (and even between himself and the International Space Station supposedly stranded out in the cosmos).

Manhattan's 'unreality' is literalised by the fact that the city depicted is one that apparently exists in an alternate universe. In addition to surrealistic plot elements such as the mysterious 'tiger' attacks (which the characters usually seem to regard as little more than slightly odd) and a bizarre uncertainty amongst the characters about whether Marlon Brando is alive or dead, there are hints throughout the narrative that this is a contemporary world in which 9/11 has either not taken place or, for reasons that remain unexplained, has not been acknowledged. The suspicion is all but confirmed towards the end of the novel when, following Perkus' untimely death (evidently caused by his hiccups), Chase has a conversation about him with their mutual friend, Richard Abneg. Running through a list of the cultural miscellanea that Perkus has obsessed over throughout his life, Chase makes a passing reference to 'Philip Petit crossing that impossible distance of sky between the towers, now unseen for so many months behind the gray fog'.¹⁴ (The 'gray fog' perpetually clouding the city's financial district is itself one of the novel's many surreal motifs. In his review of the novel for the *Guardian*, Thomas Jones accurately posits that it is evidently 'the fallout from some terrible and inadequately remembered event ... [but perhaps] too murky a metaphor to have a concrete analogue'.)¹⁵ As James Peacock puts it in his recent book-length study of Lethem's work, it is primarily through this reliance upon ellipses, as a recurring trope, that the novel engages with 'the complex relationship between personal and public reactions to the [9/11] catastrophe'.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 430.

¹⁵ Thomas Jones, 'Chronic City by Jonathan Lethem', *Guardian*, section Books, 17 January 2010 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/17/chronic-city-jonathan-lethem-review>>

¹⁶ James Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 152.

2.1ii 'Beyond the Lincoln Tunnel'

Indeed, it is by *not* mentioning 9/11 – that is, by passing over the event in the style of a conspicuous ellipsis in its narrative – that *Chronic City* offers an ironic, self-reflexive comment on the framing of reality in American political and media discourse following the attacks. Specifically, by removing 9/11 from the memories of Manhattan's 21st Century inhabitants, the novel provides a sense of just how large a space the event has taken up in the city's collective imagination. Through the absence of 9/11, the scale of the city's 'inward gazing' isolationism is thrown into relief, and the result of this is bitterly satirical: without reportage on 9/11 and the resultant war on terror, Lethem shows that the *New York Times*, in actuality, might as well be 'War Free'. Through its depiction of a Manhattan without 9/11, the novel critiques a contemporary American culture so fixated upon the singularity of one act of terror that it chooses, albeit passively, to lose interest in learning about other acts of violence around the globe. In a typically self-deconstructive passage, Perkus draws explicit (if only semi-intentional) attention to this solipsism: 'That's why everyone loves you Chase,' he says, 'You're the perfect avatar of the city's unreality. Like Manhattan, you're a sentimental monument, stopped in time. I wonder what would happen if we asked this cab to take the Lincoln Tunnel? What sort of a world is left out there?'.¹⁷ (The gaps in Perkus' dialogue here are intended to signify hiccups, and constitute one of the many – often knowingly unsubtle – ways in which the novel reifies ellipsis.)

However, this increasingly 'inward gazing' insularity in Lethem's Manhattan ultimately works to critique, rather than uphold, what he has elsewhere described as a

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 386.

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similar condition in a post-9/11 America ‘stoned on media confusion’.¹⁸ A cursory glance at Lethem’s non-fictional writing since the attacks evidences a clear and urgent compulsion to prevent a furthering of American exceptionalism or isolationism, and it places emphasis on a need to contextualise the attacks in a way that fosters empathic connections between the trauma they caused and that experienced by victims of other acts of political violence around the world. For instance, in an article about an Egyptian political activist – as well as cousin-in-law of his – with whom he grew up in Brooklyn, Lethem writes:

[i]n the immediate aftermath of the New York attacks Saad wrote a new postscript for the reissue of *Egypt, Islam and Democracy*. Writing from his jail cell, he reminded us that, for Egyptians, September 11 has a relevant local precursor, one rarely mentioned in American discussions of the World Trade Center disaster – the attacks at the Temple of Luxor in 1997, in which Islamist militants killed sixty tourists, mostly Swiss, British, and Japanese, as well as a number of Egyptian guides. ... As New Yorkers must fear al-Qaida living next door, so must Egyptians. It isn’t only the Lethems who would, given the chance, sooner be sunning themselves at a motel poolside.¹⁹

The fact that there is no mention in *Chronic City* of a contextual precursor such as this (which clearly has personal pertinence to Lethem), is precisely its point. Lethem himself has stated that the novel “‘is about not thinking about 9/11’”, but I would add

¹⁸ Lethem, qtd. in ‘*Chronic City* – Jonathan Lethem in Conversation with Tom McCarthy’.

¹⁹ Jonathan Lethem, ‘My Egyptian Cousin’, in *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), p. 233.

to this that it is also about not thinking about other acts of political violence too.²⁰ In placing an extended, metaphorical ellipsis in the place of the 9/11 attacks in the novel, Lethem puts the reader in the uncomfortable position of those for whom acts of traumatic political violence are glanced over or forgotten about as a matter of regularity.

2.2 Deterioration of Context

The novel's claustrophobic zeroing in on its very specific location serves as a structural metaphor for the kind of 'deterioration of context' that, according to Butler, results from the 'orchestrating designs of the authority who [seeks] to control the frame'.²¹ She writes:

What "gets out of hand" is precisely what breaks from the context that frames the event, the image, the text of war. But if contexts are framed (there is no context without an implicit delimitation of context), and if a frame invariably breaks from itself as it moves through space and time), then the circulating frame has to break with the context in which it is formed if it is to land or arrive somewhere else. What would it mean to understand this "breaking out" and "breaking from" as part of the media phenomena at issue, as the very function of the frame?²²

²⁰ Jonathan Lethem, qtd in Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem*, p. 152.

²¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 12.

²² Ibid.

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For Butler, ‘deterioration of context’ surrounding 9/11 in US public discourse is directly correlative to the ability of the state to exercise its power for potentially nefarious ends. This is not something that has passed Lethem by: his emphasis on the importance of context will already be familiar to readers of his previous work (the opening sentence of his 1999 novel, *Motherless Brooklyn*, is ‘Context is everything’).²³ Moreover, in his article ‘The Ecstasy of Influence’, he argues (following Heidegger) that the complex strands of influence from which literary texts are spun make them necessarily resist utilitarian ‘enframing’; that is, any legal, political or market-driven attempt to extricate a text from its necessarily multiple contexts:

[“enframing”] encourages us to see the objects in our world only in terms of how they can serve us or be used by us. The task he identified was to find ways to resituate ourselves vis-a-vis these “objects,” so that we may see them as “things” pulled into relief against the ground of their functionality.

Heidegger believed that art had the great potential to reveal the “thingness” of objects.²⁴

The parallels between Heidegger’s ‘enframing’ and Butler’s ‘frame’ are clear (they both involve a damaging ‘deterioration of context’), and the existence of the *New*

²³ Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 1.

²⁴ Jonathan Lethem, ‘The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism’, in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, p. 98. It is worth noting here that Heidegger’s notion of ‘enframing’ is rather different from that of the ‘world picture’ that I referred to in the Introduction. While the latter potentially enables a broadening of perspective, ‘enframing’ is more in line with Butler’s restricting frame (although it pertains specifically to the effects of *technology* upon perception): ‘Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological’. Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, trans. by William Lovitt, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. by William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland, 1977), p. 20.

York Times' 'War Free' edition in *Chronic City* might initially appear to reinforce Butler's emphasis on the power of the media in 'framing' normative post-9/11 perceptions of reality. However, I would suggest that as a satirical device it also has the function of holding media *consumers* to more stringent account than she does. 'It took a lot to keep the War Free edition from seeming a tad thin, I guess', Chase says at the end of the novel, after finding out about the fabrication of Janice's letters from outer space.²⁵ What is implicit is that the omission of war from news reportage is only marketable because there is a market *for* this kind of framing of it. While one might argue, as Butler does (following Talal Asad) that the desires and 'moral responses' of the news market are themselves 'founded in affect, ... tacitly regulated by certain kinds of interpretive frameworks', there is a consistent sense throughout the novel that the rather narrow, 'inward gazing' mutual reality shared by its characters is one that is arrived at through an act of at least partially-conscious choice.²⁶

2.2i 'Some rupture in this city'

The title's double meaning is itself a case in point. As reviewers of the novel have noted, the word 'Chronic' most obviously refers to the potent marijuana that Perkus gets regularly delivered to his apartment, where the friends gather to retreat into a deeply 'inward gazing' interior world of digressive conversation and half-serious paranoid conspiracy theory.²⁷ Late on in the novel, however, another meaning emerges: when Chase and Richard bring him to the hospital in order to seek treatment for his rapidly worsening 'Chronic esophageal spasms,' a nurse brusquely informs

²⁵ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 459.

²⁶ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 41.

²⁷ Ness, 'Chronic City by Jonathan Lethem'.

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them that ‘Chronic refers to a diagnosis that shouldn’t come to the emergency room’.²⁸ In this exchange, the choice that the characters make in spending their lives retreating into the comforting alternate reality induced by ‘Chronic’ is immediately connected with the notion of degenerative illness. Moreover, it draws attention to the problems that can arise when a consensual framing of what constitutes an ‘emergency’ omits any kind of danger that is not immediately apparent in its nature (the argument takes place shortly before Perkus dies of his condition). It is through this choice to perpetually escape the reality of the world outside their immediate surroundings that the characters’ actions in turn foreground the broader willingness of their fellow Manhattanites to partake in the “melodrama” of the *New York Times*’ ‘War Free’ edition. The paper is successful not so much because it “frames” the news in a way that reflects hegemonic political values, but rather because it caters to an audience with an already existing ‘inward gazing’ aversion to the potential harshness and violence of reality in the outside world, an aversion stemming from an uncomfortable sense that they may themselves be implicitly involved.

This is absolutely not to make a straightforward value judgement about Chase and his Chronic-smoking friends, nor about the ‘War Free’ edition’s readership more generally. In addition to the element of choice involved in the characters’ interpretation of reality, the novel also gestures towards the possible reasons that an aversion to the uncomfortable reality of the world outside Manhattan might have come about. Again, it is a hiccup-ravaged Perkus who gives the most pointed clue about what this reason might be:

²⁸ Lethem, *Chronic City*, pp. 408–9.

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“Something happened, Chase, there was some rupture in this city. Since then, time’s been fragmented. Might have to do with the gray fog, that or some other disaster. Whatever the cause, ever since we’ve been living in a place that’s a replica of itself, a fragile simulacrum, full of gaps and glitches. A *theme park*, really! Meant to halt time’s encroachment’.²⁹

In the hands of virtually any other novelist, the signification of 9/11 through an *actual* ellipsis – that is, literally through ‘some rupture’ in Perkus’ dialogue (a hiccup, no less) – would without doubt be an exercise not only in embarrassing authorial cack-handedness, but also brazen insensitivity to those affected by the attacks. However, through what I would suggest is a kind of doubled self-reflexivity, Lethem manages to foreground both this lack of subtlety *and* the very foregrounding process itself. In doing so, he directly engages with what Martin Randall describes as the difficulty that much literary 9/11 fiction has faced in striking an appropriate register in which to speak about the attacks: ‘it risks both sentimentality and tastelessness in the pull between honouring the integrity of the event and also by potentially transgressing certain inchoate but nonetheless powerful boundaries of representation’.³⁰ He draws attention not only to the inability of fiction to satisfactorily ‘frame’ the event, but also to the problems implicit in even representing the attempt to frame the event’s ineffability.³¹ The point here is that even the notion of its ineffability is understood

²⁹ Ibid., p. 389.

³⁰ Martin Randall, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 18.

³¹ Lethem might here be said to be writing in what Nicoline Timmer, with reference to David Foster Wallace, has described as a ‘post-postmodern’ mode of ‘critical fiction’: that is, a kind of contemporary fictional writing ‘that shows a heightened awareness of the twists and turns of critical theory of the last few decades, and very “knowingly” ... [works] through some of the most arresting contradictions and paradoxes of postmodern thought’. Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), p. 23.

through a kind of frame: a fact that he movingly deliberates over in his essay ‘Nine Failures of the Imagination’, which was published in the days following the attacks.³² The comedic content of the passage, as such, avoids insensitivity precisely because of the way that it mimics a desire – amongst the main characters, the readership of the ‘War Free’ *NYT*, and (it is implied) the citizens of ‘real-life’ post-9/11 New York – to frame the contemporary world in a manner that avoids confronting or working through the trauma of the event. By choosing not to think about the recent ‘rupture’ in the city, or about the trauma it has caused, they are in turn choosing to remain ignorant about the historical context within which it is located. In doing so, they remain compliant with a narrow framing of reality that maintains an artificially rigid division between identity categories such as ‘us’ and ‘them’.

As Perkus suggests, this narrow framing might be described in terms of a willed ‘encroachment’ of time, or, as Chase himself puts it elsewhere (evoking Wallace Stevens) an ‘intimate bounding of necessary fictions’.³³ However, while the novel repeatedly underscores this idea of an ‘intimate bounding’ of fictions in its critique of the way in which post-9/11 reality has been ‘enframed’, my argument is that it does this in a manner that is more complex than it might at first appear. It is, after all, a truism of cultural theory that when agents of hegemonic power such as the mass media begin to understand that reality is constructed – that it is, essentially, a fiction – they can quickly attempt to manipulate this construction in the interest of

³² In the essay, Lethem asks of himself the following: ‘*Am I willing?* Can I bear to narrate this into normality, forty hours after they crumbled and fell? To craft a story: *and then, and then, and then?* Will the words I’m spilling here seem fatuous or hysterical or naïve by the time they’re read? Likely so. I’m failing and relieved to fail. I’m disgusted with myself for consenting to try. Speculation feels obscene. So does this self-indulgent castigation. Except there may be some slim value in offering to a rapidly toughening future some hint of the white noise of one human imagination failing, on what they’re calling the day after, to yet meet the task at hand. The channel surf of denial and incomprehension: an extremely local report’. Jonathan Lethem, ‘Nine Failures of the Imagination’, in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, p. 222.

³³ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 449.

furthering a potentially nefarious political or economic agenda.³⁴ What Lethem does through his more nuanced commentary on the framing of reality in *Chronic City* is to reinforce the idea that, for the same reasons, reality can be counter-manipulated in a way that *resists* hegemonic power. In his description of reality's fictions as 'necessary', he mirrors Dave Eggers' demonstration in *What Is the What* that the framing of reality does not constitute a transformation of reality into fiction, but rather the remoulding of one already existing fiction into another (see Chapter 1). It is by challenging and reconfiguring the framing of reality, the novel shows, that the reader might be prompted to think about the ways in which she can enact an 'insurrection at the level of ontology', and in turn begin to reframe post-9/11 reality in less binary terms.

2.2ii 'Self-division': The Observer-Hero Narrative

As I have already indicated, Perkus is the only character who, through both his theorising about 'some rupture in the city' and the literal 'rupture' in his expression of this theorisation, even comes close to recognising that a traumatic event might have occurred in the city's recent past, let alone to begin attempting to rebuild a connection with the world beyond Manhattan's shores. However, there is another 'rupture' at play in the structure of the narrative itself. Although the novel might initially appear to resist categorisation within any established genre (which would render it an anomaly among Lethem's other works), Peacock points out in his study

³⁴ See e.g.: Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005); Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994); Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

that the relationship between Perkus and Chase resembles that of what Lawrence Buell calls ‘observer-hero narrative’, a genre that includes novels such as *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Good Soldier*: Chase narrates the story, but Perkus is the figure around which the story revolves.³⁵ ‘[I]f one agrees with Timothy Melley,’ Peacock argues, ‘that trauma results in a “profound sense of self-division” ... then one might be more inclined to read the observer-hero relationship as revealing of rupture, of the divided self which derives from the need both to experience trauma and to bear witness to traumatic experience’.³⁶ By employing a narrative style in which the narrator is not necessarily the same character as the protagonist (understood in a basic sense as the figure who drives the plot’s action), Lethem automatically draws attention to a division, or dissensus, between perspectives within his already decontextualized, inward-gazing Manhattan. In doing so, he shows that even a reality framed in a manner so apparently insular and homogenous is itself subject to multiple points of view: Chase’s ‘pocket universe’ is merely one among many other ‘intimately bounded’ fictional universes. As he puts it himself near the start of the novel: ‘To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave We only pretend to live on something as orderly as a grid’.³⁷

2.2iii Aggressive Witnessing

In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kalí Tal argues that ‘[b]earing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to

³⁵ Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem*, p. 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁷ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 8.

revise or to repress experience Its goal is change'.³⁸ It is this sort of 'aggressive' bearing witness to the meaning of 9/11 – a bearing witness that *establishes* meaning – that *Chronic City* implies is lacking in the decontextualising 'us and them' binarism through which contemporary American political and media discourse is often framed. However, in its shift towards a reconfiguration of modes of comprehension, the novel does not suggest that identity-forming media 'frames' can – or even should – necessarily be done away with, but rather that the *unthinking* legitimation of them through a collective (and paradoxical) judgement-to-suspend-judgement needs foregrounding. In doing so, its reader might be in a better position to make informed decisions about the ideas and interpretations of reality to which she wishes to subscribe.

There is a sharp irony at play in the solipsistic reality of Lethem's Manhattan, in that it is not despite, but *because of*, the characters' subscription to a deeply inward gazing frame that they fail to bear witness to a conspicuous traumatic 'rupture' in their own recent past. By depicting a city so solipsistic that it fails to recognise the existence of a world beyond the Lincoln Tunnel, Lethem literalises the commonly held understanding of trauma as an experience totally 'outside the range of normal experience', and that cannot be comprehended using any existing frame of reference.³⁹ Indeed, the details of the city's recent 'rupture', as well as those of the unreported war taking place in the wider world, might be seen as an example of what, borrowing from the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, Perkus describes as an 'unthought known': '[y]ou absorb a thing like this before you've assembled the context necessary

³⁸ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 7.

³⁹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III-R)*, qtd. in Laura S. Brown, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 100.

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to grasp it'.⁴⁰ (This is followed immediately by a narratorial aside informing the reader that Ava – Perkus' pet dog – 'hiccupped violently', an apparently insignificant occurrence which attains a degree of blackly comic dramatic irony only upon a second reading of the novel, when one understands that Perkus is himself on the verge of succumbing to a deadly bout of esophageal spasms.)⁴¹

It is worth noting here the similarity of Winnicott's 'unthought known' (or at least Perkus' interpretation of it) to Cathy Caruth's analysis of the indirect manifestation of traumatic memory in *Unclaimed Experience*: in a discussion of Freud's investigations into trauma, she writes that '[w]hat returns to haunt the victim ... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known'.⁴² Part of what makes the memory traumatic is, as I have suggested previously, the lack of a context by which its meaning might be framed. Moreover, while Lethem makes a point of mentioning the presence of 'framed' images (paintings, photographs, TV screens) in various locations throughout the narrative, Perkus' avant-garde 'broadsides' – that is, the large, DIY posters referring to all manner of cultural marginalia that he was once active in producing and pinning up around the city – are the only ones that are ever described as being 'unframed'.⁴³ By the time Perkus does, however, finally begin to take a step out of the city's possibly trauma-induced alternate reality, it is already too late: as Chase puts it soon after Perkus' death, "he had been killed for his glance outside the frame".⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 363.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 6.

⁴³ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 449.

2.2iv Ignorance and Complicity

A couple of sentences after this, Chase guiltily admits to feeling ‘sick with ignorance, and my own complicity’.⁴⁵ It is this idea of complicity through a kind of *willing* ignorance, of what Tal describes as ‘bow[ing] to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience’, that I would argue is what the novel implies is conducive to post-9/11 isolationism. While the inhabitants of Lethem’s Manhattan are indeed, in Butler’s terms, subjected to the ‘orchestrating designs’ of media power (even if this subjection is largely induced through emotional trauma), the novel implies that the interpretation of reality ultimately remains a matter for individual judgement, and that as such it has the potential to be *changed*. It channels a Lyotardian incredulity toward the metanarratives upon which reactionary understandings of post-9/11 reality might be understood to be constructed, ‘delegitimizing’ them by hinting that ‘[i]t is only our wishful senses that give continuity to chaos’.⁴⁶ While this quotation is, admittedly, a piece of dialogue from a character who is presented in a rather unsympathetic light (namely, Laird Noteless, a supercilious avant-garde artist who specialises in making large Ground Zero-like ‘craters’ around the city), the point is reinforced when Chase replies (albeit a little sarcastically): ‘That’s amazing, ... [b]ecause I was just about to say the same thing’.⁴⁷ It is possible to interpret this exchange as a thinly veiled warning on Lethem’s part against forcing any kind of ideologically predetermined, ‘post-9/11’ reading onto a narrative that – although at times consciously evoking a *sense* of the event – avoids directly engaging with 9/11 at all.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 268.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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This is not to suggest that, through its avoidance of directly representing the event, the novel tells its reader nothing about post-9/11 reality, but rather that it calls into question what one might mean when one suggests that it is ‘about’ the attacks or their aftermath. The temptation to read Lethem’s ‘inward gazing’ alternate Manhattan as a straightforward allegory for the ‘real’ post-9/11 Manhattan is to miss the point: in attempting to make ‘sense’ of the novel’s apparent chaos of signification, (that is, to try to ‘connect the dots’, or determine what the narrative’s more obviously fictional elements ‘represent’), the reader is not ‘breaking through’ the novel’s semiotic ‘frame’ to an objective truth, but, rather, ‘framing’ a reality of her own. Derrida notably stated that such was the shattering effect of 9/11 on Western systems of comprehension that, when attempting to discuss the event, ‘we do not know what we are talking about’.⁴⁸ *Chronic City* stands in agreement with this, but also attempts to move – in the style of an ‘insurrection at the level of ontology’ – towards a reconfiguration of First World modes of comprehension in a way that might lead to new, more outward-reaching frames of understanding.

The ‘War Free’ edition of the *NYT*, for example, does not straightforwardly ‘blind’ its readers from the reality of war. The reason there is a market for it in the first place is because its readers have seen *too much* war and have chosen to filter it from their everyday reality. When Chase says that ‘The War Free edition really depended on how you defined war’, he is beginning to show the kind of incredulity that the novel as a whole prompts in its reader: not a complete, nihilistic disavowal of all meaning-giving narratives, but a heightened consciousness of the ways in which

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, qtd. in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 86.

they are constructed.⁴⁹ As Perkus, reciting Leonard Cohen, puts it in one of his liner notes a little later on, ‘*there is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say there isn’t*’.⁵⁰ The point is not so much that the media has forcefully manipulated reality in Lethem’s fictional Manhattan, separating the island from the outside world, but rather that a post-9/11 reading of the narrative shows that this ‘war free’ reality is actually decidedly *not* separated from the world: it is shaped by it. Like a Rubin vase, the context that frames Chase’s ‘war free’ reality might only become visible after a willed shift in perspective.⁵¹ I will now go on to analyse the novel’s encouragement of such a shift in more detail.

2.3 Shifting Perspectives: Authenticating Post-9/11 Reality

In his review of the novel for the real life, war-inclusive *New York Times*, Gregory Cowles writes that Perkus’ ultimate lesson for Chase (and, in turn, the reader) is that ‘[e]ven in an alternate reality – even in fiction – passion and significance are everywhere if you know where to look’.⁵² I would add to this that the novel also emphasises the importance of *how* to look: the framing of reality in the novel rests upon an active decision about how one wishes to *authenticate* the complex and unstable matrix of signs upon which all perception of reality is necessarily

⁴⁹ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 180.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁵¹ Robert Hampson has made a similar argument about Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of that novel: ‘As in those *gestalt* drawings that can be read as either a vase or two profiles, as foreground and background change places, here language that is offered as figurative suddenly asserts its literal meaning, and this kind of unsettling of language proves to be a characteristic feature of Marlow’s narration’. Robert Hampson, ‘Introduction’, in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. xxx. It is worth noting that Conrad’s novella is another well-known text that employs a Buellian ‘observer-hero’ narrative, in this instance to illustrate a division at the heart of the European colonial self.

⁵² Gregory Cowles, ‘Another World’, *New York Times*, 2 October 2009

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/books/review/Cowles-t.html>>

constructed.⁵³ This is evident, for example, when Chase realises that he does not recognise the waitress in his local diner, and as a result is prompted to reflect that ‘[t]he invisible are always so resolutely invisible, until you see them’.⁵⁴ Similarly, in order to see the world – and, more importantly, the war – that exists ‘invisibly’ beyond Manhattan’s shores, Chase does not need to uncover a new, authentic reality by ‘breaking through’ a frame that has been blinding him, but instead to simply learn how to see – and, in doing so, authenticate – his present reality in a different way.

In his frequently-cited book *Ways of Seeing* (based on a television series of the same name), John Berger argues that consumerist desire relies heavily upon a narrowing of visual reality. He writes that ‘[t]he purpose of publicity [i.e. advertising] is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life. ... It offers him an improved alternative to what he is’.⁵⁵ I would suggest that this narrowing of visual reality in such a way that produces a dissatisfaction with one’s present way of life is not dissimilar to the ‘inward gazing’ self-marginalisation of Chase and his friends in *Chronic City*. This is explored most clearly through the novel’s characteristically odd motif of what Lethem calls ‘chaldrons’: that is, the mysterious and extremely valuable vase-like objects that Chase and his friends become increasingly obsessed with as the narrative unfolds. None of the characters have ever actually seen a chaldron with their own eyes, but they spend hours huddled around Perkus’ dilapidated home computer, placing bids for them on eBay, only to be constantly outbid at the last moment by wealthy chaldron collectors. Strange as this

⁵³ Although Lethem draws heavily on techniques that might be described as ‘postmodern’ or ‘deconstructive’, this emphasis on the authentication of reality simultaneously comes close to resembling what Charles Taylor (a critic of both schools of thought) has described as a contemporary imperative to ‘fight[] over the meaning of authenticity The struggle ought not to be over authenticity, for or against, but about it, defining its proper meaning’. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 72–3.

⁵⁴ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 178.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

obsession may sound, the narrative repeatedly testifies to how these elusive objects represent, for the friends, a long sought-after authenticity. In a city that has turned solipsistically in on itself, Chase describes the artefacts as radiating ‘a powerful essence of *elsewhere*’.⁵⁶ For him, the image of the chaldron constitutes an ‘inexplicable ceramic other’: ‘it possessed *thingliness*, yet was wholly outside the complex of *thing-relations*’.⁵⁷ (Lethem almost certainly has Heidegger in mind here: the object, completely decoupled from any referents, represents the ultimate end product in a process of decontextualising ‘enframing’.)

2.3i Breaking the Frame?

In the conclusion to *Ways of Seeing*, Berger writes that ‘[c]apitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. This was once achieved with extensive deprivation. Today, in the developed countries it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable’.⁵⁸ The chaldron has the potential to introduce a desirably tangible element of authenticity to the characters’ lives, and the reason they believe it can do this is precisely because it exists outside of any meaning-making system with which they are able to make visual sense of the world. When they first do a search for the object on eBay, Chase says that its image ‘smashed all available frames or contexts, gently burning itself through our retinas to hover in our collective mind’s eye, a beholding that transcended optics’.⁵⁹ However, the nature of this decontextualised ‘authenticity’

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

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is brought into question towards the end of the novel, when the chaldrons are revealed to exist only as virtual artefacts in a popular online ‘community’ simulator called ‘Yet Another World’, their sole purpose being that of ‘driving players crazy with acquisitive frenzy’.⁶⁰ Modelled closely on *Second Life*, in which players from around the globe interact and lead virtual lives through computer-generated avatars, Yet Another World is the focus of a pseudo-philosophical debate about the nature of reality that is ongoing between Chase and his friends throughout the course of the narrative. Prompting the friends to begin wondering if the Manhattan in which they live is itself a virtual world (merely one more layer of reality in a ‘total and endless’ Russian doll structure of potentially infinite computer simulations within computer simulations), an impulse begins to stir within them to, as Chase puts it, ‘break the frame’.⁶¹

The idea is, of course, far from original, and has been the subject of some critical derision. William Deresiewicz, for instance, writes in his review for *The New Republic* that ‘[t]he media is a lie, the world is a puppet show manipulated for the benefit of the rich and powerful, reality is unstable and personality along with it. We’re all just insteadmen, simulacra of ourselves – acting out our roles, oblivious, in yet another world’.⁶² Likewise, as Ron Charles puts it in *The Washington Post*: ‘Who isn't weary by now of the “simulacrum” plot? ... [A] lot of water has run over this old philosophical tea bag’.⁶³ Indeed, the revelation that the chaldrons are part of just such a simulation might initially seem to reinforce both of these points. Yet, despite the

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 331.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 225.

⁶² William Deresiewicz, ‘A Geek Grows in Brooklyn’, *New Republic*, 15 October 2009
<<http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/geek-grows-brooklyn?page=0,2>>

⁶³ Ron Charles, ‘It’s All A Dream’, *Washington Post*, 14 October 2009
<http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-10-14/news/36902775_1_chronic-city-substitutes-cary-grant/2>

chaldrons' physical unreality, as well as the computer programming that is possibly the source of the characters' otherwise slightly far-fetched obsession over the objects, the novel does not necessarily leave the reader with a sense that the *desire* for the authenticity represented by the vases has itself been inauthentic. Chase may be no more than a computerised puppet (or, rather, a 'Gnuppet', to use Lethem's recurring alternate term for Jim Henson's Muppet franchise, another of the novel's many motifs), but this does not mean that his 'consciousness' or experience of the reality around him is necessarily false. As Perkus puts it after the revelation about the chaldrons: 'The only conspiracy [is] a *conspiracy of distraction*. The conspirers, ourselves'.⁶⁴ Authenticity, the novel ultimately implies, is not the unknown, chaldron-like 'essence of elsewhere' which lies beyond a dominant, 'inauthentic' frame, but rather the *experience* of opening oneself up to this 'elsewhere', or otherness, that – again, as with a Rubin vase – always already exists in the constitution of the self. The question is simply whether one chooses to see it. (With this in mind, Lethem's initially random-seeming choice to have his characters become fixated on, of all things, a vase, suddenly begins to take on a new degree of significance.)

2.3ii 'Synesthetic connections'

The 'inward gazing', potentially virtual Manhattan of *Chronic City* demonstrates that the relationship between literature and hegemonic political frames is more complex and nebulous than it might initially appear. As in the *Poems From Guantánamo* and Eggers' *What Is the What*, it shows that instead of 'breaking through' or 'exploding' a

⁶⁴ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 390.

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homogenous frame, Lethem's novel points towards a mutually reshaping relationship between framing and *idioculture* (see Chapter 1).⁶⁵ Chase becomes aware of 'synesthetic connections' – or what Derrida's might term a 'chain of differential references' – between hitherto apparently disparate elements of his Manhattan reality, and in much the same way the reader gradually projects a network of meaning onto the narrative's initially arbitrary-seeming chaos of signs.⁶⁶ This is not to suggest that the narrative is simply a puzzle or code to be deciphered, and whether Lethem intends for his Perkus-like amalgamation of unusual signifiers to be connected in any specific way is beside the point. Rather, what is important is that the reader makes these connections through a process of conscious *choice*: she is prompted to develop an awareness of the act of judgement that is necessarily central to the process of reading – and ultimately authenticating – the reality of which she is a part. The novel does not straightforwardly offer to replace an 'inward gazing' vision of post-9/11 reality with a more authentic, 'outward gazing' one, but rather challenges its reader to think about what it means for reality to be authentic in the first place.

In making this challenge, *Chronic City* echoes the central point of Philip K. Dick's 1978 essay, 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later':

do not assume that order and stability are always good, in a society or in a universe. The old, the ossified, must always give way to new life and the birth of new things. Before the new things can be born the old must perish. This is a dangerous realization, because it tells us that we must eventually part with

⁶⁵ Derek Attridge, 'Context, Idioculture, Invention', *New Literary History*, 42.4 (2011), pp. 682–3

⁶⁶ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 126. See also: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Jonathan Culler, qtd. in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 106.

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much of what is familiar to us. And that hurts. But that is part of the script of life. Unless we can psychologically accommodate change, we ourselves begin to die, inwardly. What I am saying is that objects, customs, habits, and ways of life must perish so that the authentic human being can live. And it is the authentic human being who matters most, the viable, elastic organism which can bounce back, absorb, and deal with the new.⁶⁷

One might argue here that in order to make this interpretative connection to Dick, it is necessary to have a degree of knowledge about the author's intentions, and Lethem has indeed made no secret of his indebtedness to Dick's work (in an essay on him, Lethem writes that Dick is 'the only prolific author whose whole life's work I can fairly claim to have read through *twice*').⁶⁸ However, I would suggest that as with the novel's numerous other reference points – from current affairs (9/11 and the war on terror) to pop culture (Gnuppets) to literature (the mysterious grey fog which strongly evokes Don DeLillo's 'Airborne Toxic Event' in *White Noise*) – any knowledge about the author's likely influences is of secondary importance to the reader's impulse to make 'sense' of the text. As Lethem again suggests in 'The Ecstasy of Influence' (itself a rather influential work): 'Literature has been in a plundered, fragmentary state for a long time'.⁶⁹ By attaching a post-9/11 meaning to the text, the reader is ineluctably placing it in the context of contemporary media frames, but she is doing so in a way that simultaneously maintains a sense of incredulity toward these frames,

⁶⁷ Philip K. Dick, 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later', *The Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension* <http://deoxy.org/pkd_how2build.htm>

⁶⁸ Jonathan Lethem, 'You Don't Know Dick', in *The Disappointment Artist, and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 77. See also Erik Davis, 'Chronic Citizen: Jonathan Lethem on P.K. Dick, Why Novels are Weird Technology, and Constructed Realities', *h+ Magazine*, 18 December 2009 <<http://hplusmagazine.com/2009/12/18/chronic-citizen-jonathan-lethem-pk-dick-why-novels-are-weird-technology-a/>>

⁶⁹ Lethem, 'Ecstasy of Influence', in *Ecstasy of Influence*, p. 95.

resisting the temptation to imbue them with hegemonic power. The fundamental instability of reality – Dick’s ‘secret love’ – is accounted for and embraced, both in the novel’s ‘inward gazing’ fictional ‘universe’ and in the ‘real-life’ one of the post-9/11 reader.

The ‘new life and the birth of new things’ in this sense is, again, not so much the emergence of an ‘authentic’ reality bursting forth through an ‘ossified’ media frame, but rather the replacement of this very desire for authenticity with a more malleable understanding of the framing process; one that, as Chase puts it, provides an ‘intimation[] of the layered parts we play[] in each other’s stories’.⁷⁰ By making a conscious judgement about how to interpret reality – both in the book and in the wider contemporary world – the reader of *Chronic City* is able to develop an understanding of how to be what Dick calls ‘an authentic human being ... the viable, elastic organism which can bounce back, absorb, and deal with the new’. It is this elasticity of the self that, through its self-reflexive ‘inward gaze’, the novel ultimately points towards as a means of complicating reductive ‘us and them’ identity binaries proliferated in the global media.

3.0 Framing and Memory: *Open City*

Like *Chronic City*, Teju Cole’s *Open City* does much to complicate the notion of the ‘frame’ put forward by Butler, but in a way that almost completely inverts Lethem’s approach. If Lethem’s novel draws attention to the intricate connections between the United States and the rest of the globe by making the absence of these connections in

⁷⁰ Lethem, *Chronic City*, p. 281.

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the novel highly conspicuous, then Cole's does the opposite, allowing them to filter both into and out of its narrative to such a disorienting extent that the narrator loses sight of his own place in the history of the world. Narrated by a Nigerian-German psychiatrist called Julius, who leads a solitary and alienated immigrant existence in post-9/11 New York, the narrative self-consciously channels the style of W.G. Sebald in the way that its virtually plotless surface (which consists largely of Julius walking around Manhattan thinking about art, politics and the nature of suffering) belies a more deeply embedded story about nationhood, violence and responsibility. Throughout the narrative, Julius presents himself as an intelligent, thoughtful and ethically minded man, but when, towards the end, he unwittingly finds out that he may have once committed a thoughtless and traumatising act of rape against a childhood friend in Lagos, the reader's notion of what it means to lead a 'good' life is invariably challenged.

I argue that *Open City* uses the tropes of solitude and memory to show that even when post-9/11 reality is framed in a deeply 'inward gazing' way, it can still be experienced in a way that Michael Rothberg might describe as a 'multidirectional' – or 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing'.⁷¹ Although Julius (perhaps unintentionally) obscures his potentially violent past through a highly selective recollection of events, I suggest that the ultimate effect of this is more revealing than he might be comfortable with, prompting the reader to think about the framing of reality as – like memory – malleable, indistinct at its edges, and, in Rothberg's words, 'productive and not privative'.⁷² The way that the novel prompts such thinking is by distinguishing between, on the one hand, a 'rhetoric' of

⁷¹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

multidirectional memory (exemplified by Julius' seemingly broad-minded but ultimately narcissistic reverie), and on the other, an understanding on the reader's part that this 'rhetoric' itself has a multidirectional quality, albeit in a different way to that which Julius believes. Although Julius' alleged victim ultimately remains without restitution, his narration prompts the reader to reframe the way that she thinks about her own implication in acts of violence around the world.

3.1 Competing Memories

As Stef Craps notes in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, memory studies has traditionally 'focused on the ways in which memories are shared within particular communities and constitute or reinforce group identity ... [However, in] the last few years, ... the transnational and even global dissemination of memory has moved to the centre of attention'.⁷³ Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* is exemplary of this shift. It posits that 'memories are not owned by groups, [and] nor are groups "owned" by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant'.⁷⁴ Drawing on Walter Benn Michaels' discussion of such disputes over public Holocaust commemoration in the US (and particularly on the assertion by "the notorious black racist," Khalid Muhammad, that "the black holocaust was 100 times worse than the so-called Jew Holocaust"), he argues against what he sees as the 'competitive' understandings of

⁷³ Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 73.

⁷⁴ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 5.

memory that have typically characterised public disputes about the memorialisation of collective historical trauma.⁷⁵ I posit that *Open City* works to do something similar with what one might describe as the ‘competition’ over ‘ownership’ of post-9/11 mourning that has taken place in a variety of ways throughout the last decade.⁷⁶ Like *Chronic City*, through the trope of ‘inward-looking’ solitude it shows how a ‘sharing’ of grief can potentially facilitate a reframing of 9/11 in a way that challenges ‘us and them’ binaries, and instead encourages the kind of new empathic global ties that Butler calls for in the context of the war on terror.

3.1i Multidirectionality and Cosmopolitanism

The multidirectionality of post-9/11 memory is foregrounded throughout the novel by Julius’ wilfully digressive walks around Manhattan, and is particularly apparent in the way that, on a visit to Ground Zero, he questions ‘the neatness of the line we had drawn around the event of 2001’.⁷⁷ He tries hard to infuse the site with a sense of historical context: ‘This was not the first erasure on the site’, he narrates, ‘[b]efore the towers had gone up, there had been a bustling network of little streets traversing this part of town. Robinson Street, Laurens Street, College Place: all of them had been

⁷⁵ Walter Benn Michaels, qtd. in Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 1.

⁷⁶ In his contribution to Judith Greenberg’s edited volume, *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, Rothberg calls for a response to 9/11 that ‘provide[s] understanding of the volatile dynamics of interesting experiences of suffering’, and argues that ‘[t]he shift in the understanding of trauma from events, which are always singular, to a mode of reception, which can be shared because it is composed of structural features, opens up a possibility for linking together otherwise disparate histories’. Michael Rothberg, ‘There is No Poetry in This’, in *Trauma At Home: After 9/11*, ed. by Judith Greenberg (Lincoln and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), pp. 148, 149. Disputes over the “ownership” of 9/11 are also directly engaged with in Amy Waldman’s 2011 novel, *The Submission*, in which the anonymous winning plan for a memorial on an unnamed site strongly resembling Ground Zero is revealed to have been designed by a Muslim architect, unleashing a maelstrom of reactionary feeling throughout the United States.

⁷⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p. 209.

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obliterated in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center buildings, and all were forgotten now'.⁷⁸ A few sentences later, he says '[t]he site was a palimpsest, as was the city, written, erased, rewritten', a notion that is implicit in the novel's title.⁷⁹ The term 'open city' is used during wartime to denote a city surrendered by its government to occupying forces, in order to avoid unnecessary violence to its people. However, it also has a related, but subtly different second meaning, referring to the ancient Judean 'cities of refuge', in which people who committed manslaughter were granted asylum (outside the designated cities, they would normally be subject to a vigilante blood feud). Derrida has notably described the way in which contemporary 'cities of refuge' might 'reorient the politics of the state' so as to be more open to the values of asylum and hospitality.⁸⁰ He argues that the contemporary city should 'give[] rise to a place for reflection – for reflection on the questions of asylum and hospitality – and for a new order of law and a “democracy to come” to be put to the test'.⁸¹

Julius spends much of his time engaging in precisely this kind of reflection, but it becomes apparent as the novel unfolds that his cosmopolitan airs might at least partially be an affectation, and that he is ultimately adhering to the very frames of understanding that he ostensibly seeks to challenge. As Pieter Vermeulen observes in a forthcoming article on the novel, while *Open City* 'can easily be read as a magisterial display of literature's enabling role in fostering cosmopolitan feeling and understanding', in actuality it 'interrogates rather than celebrates such a literary

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'On Cosmopolitanism', trans. by Mark Dooley, in Jacques Derrida *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, ed. by Simon Critchley (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 23.

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cosmopolitanism'.⁸² Indeed, there is an increasing sense in the novel, as its narrative progresses, that Julius' cosmopolitan reflection perhaps does not go quite far enough: 'If you're too loyal to your own suffering,' an elderly woman warns him during a key piece of dialogue, 'you forget that others suffer too'.⁸³ Julius ultimately fails to take this advice on board, and it becomes apparent towards the end of the novel that, like those arguing for 9/11's uniqueness, he may have framed his own recent past too narrowly by drawing an overly 'neat' line around it. This 'line' is strengthened throughout the narrative, as he builds up a very carefully worded story about himself and his place in the world. With frequent references to novelists, philosophers, filmmakers and composers, his otherwise elegant narration sometimes reads like an exercise in cultural braggartism: the opening couple of pages alone mention Beethoven, Wagner, Barthes, Peter Altenberg, Tahar Ben Jelloun, St Augustine, St Ambrose, and 'Shchedrin (or perhaps it was Ysaye)'.⁸⁴ It does not take long before the repeated showcasing of his refined erudition becomes mildly jarring, and – more importantly – its reliability slightly questionable.

The unreliability of Julius' self-framing is key to the question of his potential guilt over the rape allegation made against him by his old acquaintance, Moji. He neither confirms nor denies the charge, and relates the confrontation itself with little hint of emotion. (The only reaction on his part is a somewhat insensitive relief when she looks like she is about to cry, but then does not.)⁸⁵ If her claim is true, then he is guilty not only of violating another person's basic right to 'refuge' from violence, but also of eliding this violation from memory: an act of epistemic violence that renders

⁸² Pieter Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism', in *Journal of Modern Literature*, forthcoming, n. pag.

⁸³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 143.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4–5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Moji's suffering all the more acute as it means that he lacks any sense of culpability. She says to him: 'Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them. ... [M]aybe it's not something you would do today, but then again, I didn't think it was something you would do back then either. It only needs to happen once. But will you say something now? Will you say something?'.⁸⁶ Julius does not 'say' anything in response (or if he does, he declines to inform the reader): he clearly has some way to go before being able to 'reorient' – or reframe – his past so as to recognise the violence that he might have once inflicted upon Moji. However, her testimony itself draws his attention to the 'jagged' edges of his own memory, and forces him to question his most deeply held beliefs about who he is.

3.2 Constellational Thinking

As with Chase in *Chronic City*, Julius' narrative can be read as analogous to America's rude awakening from a misguided decade of Fukuyamaite, 'post-Historical' exceptionalism (or, as Slavoj Žižek has put it, its 'opportunity to realize what kind of a world it was a part of').⁸⁷ Despite his earnest attempt to construct a global, cosmopolitan version of himself that has always 'hewed close to the good', Moji's revelation raises the possibility that his relatively comfortable present life might have emerged, at least in part, through the very elision of the alleged rape from his memory.⁸⁸ He is able to get as far as asking his reader the following question:

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 245.

⁸⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 47.

⁸⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 243.

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‘[w]hat does it mean when, in someone else’s version, I am the villain?’⁸⁹ Although Julius is unable (or possibly unwilling) to provide a clear answer, Cole *does* provide one of sorts. By placing the question in the context of a narrative whose unreliability already provokes a degree of suspicion, he opens the task of answering it to his readers, and in doing so, shows that attempting to answer the question is not entirely the point. In order to both devise and *maintain* empathic global ties, what is most important is that the question of what it means to be the villain in someone else’s version of history continues, indefinitely, to be asked.

When Julius asks this question, he lays open for critique the very *language* of his narrative, and the basic assumptions about identity that underpin it. Categories such as ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘American’ and ‘non-American’, ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ (which are implied in his use of pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘we’), are rendered newly problematic. The reason that Julius struggles to comprehend, let alone empathise with, Moji’s alleged trauma at his hands is precisely that despite his multidirectional posturing, he inadvertently maintains a sense that Moji’s history exists in a universe completely disconnected from his own. To borrow a phrase from Cole’s provocative article, ‘The White-Savior Industrial Complex’, in a recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Julius’ blindness stems from the fact that he refuses to ‘think constellationally’.⁹⁰ The phrase is almost certainly borrowed from Walter Benjamin, and perhaps also from Theodor Adorno.⁹¹ As I have shown in my Introduction, Benjamin uses the concept of the constellation in order to illustrate how the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Teju Cole, ‘The White-Savior Industrial Complex’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 21 March 2012 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>>

⁹¹ On the back cover of the 2011 Faber and Faber paperback edition of the novel, Hari Kunzru describes its style as having ‘echoes of W. G. Sebald and Walter Benjamin’. Cole has also shown enthusiasm for Benjamin on Twitter: ‘Not Benjamin the sage, skimmed in countless grad school courses, but Benjamin the friend, in whose company one is happily lost for hours’. (@tejucole, 17 June 2013) <<https://twitter.com/tejucole/status/346666923456618496>>

interaction between and conjoining of ideas are what shape one's understanding of the world. In his words, '[i]deas are to objects as constellations are to stars', and it is for this reason that artworks are able to challenge and reframe their audience's perspectives.⁹² Drawing on Benjamin's constellation, Adorno goes on to use the concept in a more overtly political way, arguing that in order to prevent a passive acceptance of normative political constellations, '[p]erspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light'.⁹³

In his own article, Cole uses the phrase to criticise the hesitance of a liberal American journalist, Nicholas Kristof, to satisfactorily criticise the popular online video 'Kony2012' (produced by the US activist organisation Invisible Children). Cole argues that '[Kristof's] good heart does not always allow him to think constellationally. He does not connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated "disasters". All he sees are hungry mouths, and he, in his own advocacy-by-journalism way, is putting food in those mouths as fast as he can. All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need'.⁹⁴ Despite outward appearances, Julius similarly fails to 'connect the dots' in the world around him: the reason that he is unable to fully see the 'the patterns of power' behind the framing of his contemporary reality is precisely that, at least in the context of his shared history with Moji, he is in a position of power himself. The problem is not so much that he

⁹² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. By John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 34. The website *Poetry Genius* has published a page dedicated to the constellation of literary and other artistic and cultural references in *Open City*. The site contains an interactive excerpt from the novel (verified by Cole himself), and users are able to click on sections of it to reveal passages from an eclectic mix of literature, opera and hip-hop that Cole has consciously evoked in the text. 'Teju Cole – *Open City* (Excerpt)', *Poetry Genius* website <<http://poetry.rapgenius.com/Teju-cole-open-city-excerpt-lyrics>>

⁹³ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 247.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

has been blinded by externally imposed hegemonic frames, but rather that he has – like the inhabitants of Manhattan in *Chronic City* – personally participated in a rather repressive framing process himself, minimising Moji’s trauma in order to legitimate his refined self-image, and to in turn avoid feeling any responsibility for her suffering.

3.2i Positioning

The point that Cole is getting at both here and in his article is not that one should attempt to fully or objectively ‘see’, in its entirety, the constellation of frames that make up one’s reality. This is impossible. A constellation is by definition relational, and as such the ‘patterns’ that one sees in it are necessarily subject to the perspective from which one is gazing. Rather, what Cole is pointing towards is an urgent need for *awareness* of the constellation itself, and the possibility that such awareness might in turn enable a conscious shifting – or reframing – of one’s perspective on it. As Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*: ‘Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it. The *chorismos* [separation] of without and within is historically qualified in turn’.⁹⁵ By developing a more nuanced awareness of his position in a complicated constellation of power, Julius might find that the overly rigid separation that he has created between himself and Moji – as well as, potentially, between himself and others more generally – begins to deconstruct.

⁹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (Oxford: Routledge, 1990), p. 163.

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It is only in the novel's closing pages that the first stirrings of such an awareness begin to shine through in Julius' narration:

Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people's stories, insofar as these stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic.⁹⁶

As James Wood puts it in his review of the novel for the *New Yorker*:

[t]his is a brave admission about the limits of sympathy, coming as it does near the end of a book full of other people's richly recorded stories. Julius is not heroic, but he is still the (mild) hero of his book. He is central to himself, in ways that are sane, forgivable, and familiar. And this selfish normality, this ordinary solipsism, this lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul is an obstacle to understanding other people, even as it enables liberal journeys of comprehension.⁹⁷

Encouraging the kind of 'insurrection at the level of ontology' called for by Butler in *Frames of War*, Moji's revelation shakes Julius because it fundamentally challenges a

⁹⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 243.

⁹⁷ James Wood, 'The Arrival of Enigmas', *New Yorker*, 28 February 2011
<http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/02/28/110228crbo_books_wood>

decontextualised version of himself that, throughout his adult life, he has come to take for granted. However, as Vermeulen argues, the passage is also ‘more complicated than Wood makes it out to be ... [, as it] is part of the only sequence in which the novel abandons its signature combination of the casually chronological flow of the narrative present and the repeated excursions into Julius’s or his interlocutors’ narrated pasts – the only sequence, in other words, that radically ruptures the composure of the *flâneur* that the rest of the novel seems to sustain’.⁹⁸ Indeed, despite frequently foregrounding his multi-ethnic roots, Julius ultimately falls short of following through on any ‘insurrection at the level of ontology’ because the ‘ontology’ that he perceives himself to possess remains constructed upon an overly sharp division between a Western ‘self’ and a non-Western ‘other’. As I have already suggested, he detaches himself emotionally from Moji’s testimony just as he would from that of one of his psychiatric patients, viewing her experience as categorically separate from his own. Indeed, this separation of realities is not unlike the ‘visual divide’ upon which, in Chapter 1, I suggested Butler too heavily relies in her discussion of the *Poems From Guantánamo*.

3.2ii Screen Memory

It is of little consequence that, due to an absence of the ‘characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives’, Julius distinguishes Moji’s story from the neurotic fabrications of his patients.⁹⁹ What is key, rather, is that he chooses to filter her account in this coldly detached way at all: even if her story throws him more than

⁹⁸ Vermeulen, ‘Flights of Memory’, n. pag.

⁹⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 243.

is usual, he still approaches it in what he describes, a few pages earlier, as the manner ‘of those of us who are psychiatrists, who attempt to use external Signs as clues to internal realities, even when the relationship between the two is not at all clear’.¹⁰⁰

However, once again, Julius’ very *inability* to think multidirectionally is itself rendered multidirectional, in a way that resembles a Freudian ‘screen memory’: that is, a memory which ‘stands in or substitutes for a more disturbing or painful memory that it displaces from consciousness’.¹⁰¹ As Rothberg puts it, ‘the displacement that takes place in screen memory (indeed, in all memory) functions as much to open up lines of communication with the past as to close them off’.¹⁰² Moreover, ‘screen memory is ... multidirectional not only because it stands at the center of a potentially complex set of temporal relations, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because it both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed’.¹⁰³

In this sense, the novel might be said to hesitantly endorse a kind of multidirectional approach to post-9/11 identity, while simultaneously rejecting what Vermeulen describes as literary cosmopolitanism’s ‘illusion that imaginative transports can stand in for real global change’.¹⁰⁴ While there is indeed a naïve, almost utopian cosmopolitanism about Julius’ multidirectional rhetoric, the multidirectionality underlying the novel as a whole is rather more cautious, in line

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁰¹ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 13. As Stef Craps notes in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, ‘screen memory’ has also been explored by other memory theorists in recent years; see esp.: Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Schindler’s List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 22.2 (1996), pp. 292–312. Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, p. 79. In this chapter, I use the term in the sense described by Rothberg, but it is worth noting that Freud’s original definition is a little more specific. In his 1899 treatise, ‘Screen Memories’, he defines the phenomenon as ‘[r]ecollection ... whose value lies in the fact that it represents in the memory impressions and thoughts of a later date whose content is connected with its own by symbolic or similar links’ (my emphasis). Sigmund Freud, ‘Screen Memories’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume III (1893–1899): Early Psycho-Analytic Publications*, trans. By James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), p. 316.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 13–14.

¹⁰⁴ Vermeulen, ‘Flights of Memory’, n. pag.

instead with Vermeulen's suggestion that the novel 'forcefully reminds its readers that empathy and intercultural understanding *alone* cannot achieve the changes to which cosmopolitanism is committed, and that they can only point readers to the world outside – to a global landscape riven by injustice and inequality'.¹⁰⁵ This kind of cautious, indirect multidirectionality is hinted at in the novel during a conversation about Paul de Man's theory of 'blindness': 'an insight,' Julius is told by an acquaintance, 'can actually obscure other things, ... [a]nd the reverse, also: ... what seems blind can open up possibilities'.¹⁰⁶ In the context of a written narrative, Julius' 'blindness' opens up the possibility for multiple interpretations. An 'insurrection at the level of ontology' can potentially take place, not so much because of a cosmopolitan dismissal of identity divides, but rather because these divides are subjected to a blurring at their edges, and the connections between a multiplicity of heterogeneous realities – often deeply unequal in their power relations – is rendered newly visible.

3.2iii '[O]n the move constantly': Creating Otherness

When placed in the context of a novel that actively prompts its reader to look for signs that might help her ascertain the degree of 'truth' behind Moji's accusation (and to in turn arrive at a more certain judgement about Julius' morality), everything that Julius says automatically becomes a nodal point in an intricate constellation of signs, upon which the outline of any 'unacknowledged traumas' from his past might finally begin to be traced. By reading his narrative, the reader is building a connection between

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 127.

Julius' story and her own: she is prompted to think not only about the degree to which her own 'real' history is shaped – or framed – by subjective interpretations, but also about how these interpretations can be reconfigured in more multidirectional ways. Indeed, she is encouraged to think about the entwining of such histories in a manner that edges towards what Orly Lubin (following Homi Bhabha) has described as 'an altogether different understanding of the very notion of Otherness'.¹⁰⁷ That is:

[an understanding] of how to get rid of power and the gaze by never defying the "demand" to have an Other in order to maintain one's identity, by never gazing long enough so as to objectify the gazed at, never standing long enough in one's identity positioning so as to have to create an Other for that positioning to imagine itself as a position.

As abstract as it sounds, this is the task that the shock of recognition of power brings. It requires one to be on the move constantly, never being "one" long enough for the creation of an Other.¹⁰⁸

I would suggest that the most important outcome of the kind of constellational thinking that *Open City* encourages is an understanding of selfhood not unlike – but also not identical to – that which Lubin describes here. In line with Lubin, the novel demonstrates that to think constellationally is to think in a way that fosters not only a heightened awareness of one's own perspective, but also – in turn – an acknowledgement that this perspective is always necessarily in a state of motion, both physically (in space and time) and intellectually (shifting in response to the

¹⁰⁷ Orly Lubin, 'Masked Power: An Encounter With the Social Body in the Flesh', in *Trauma at Home*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

perspectives of the people one encounters). In other words, it shows that constellational thinking is by definition relational: the form that any constellation takes at a given moment is entirely dependent upon the relationship between its constituent elements, so an acknowledgement of this relationality is the first step towards understanding how the wider constellation might be changed. However, where it differs slightly from Lubin's thesis, I would suggest, is in the notion that the self can – or even should – move fast enough to prevent 'the creation of an Other'. As I am arguing with regard to all of the texts in this thesis, Cole's novel places emphasis on the importance of recognising the other *within* the self: instead of suggesting that the construction of an other is in itself something to be avoided, *Open City* asks both where and how the lines of delineation between the self and its perceived other should be drawn. As I will go on to show, it does this by inviting the reader to fill in the empty spaces – or, to borrow Lethem's term, 'ellipses' – between Julius' utterances, thus undercutting his carefully calibrated persona. By attributing meaning to the cracks in his presented self, the reader actively assumes the role of the intractable other within, wresting away from Julius a measure of control over his identity.

3.2iv Negative Space

As in Lethem's *Chronic City*, the most important element of Cole's story lies in what it does not say. As Giles Foden has argued in his review of the novel in the *Guardian*:

[n]egative space (the space between forms or around utterances) is key. We are disposed to read Julius's reflections for their so-called content, whereas we

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do better to read them in relief, for what they say about him. This is the real juice. We have to work hard to get it, searching in the gaps for what Julius calls “a double story.” ... Part of the delight of Cole's book is how it exploits refinement until Julius reveals himself as a poseur through intellectual over-reaching, disclosing an irony for which readers may not be prepared.¹⁰⁹

This irony is indeed subtle, and it takes a second reading of the novel, once one is aware of the accusation of rape made against Julius at its culmination, for much of his narration's meticulous self-awareness to make itself fully apparent. Foden picks out one of the marginally more obvious examples of this self-awareness to make his point (‘when Chinese musicians in a park remind him “of Li Po and Wang Wei, of Harry Partch's pitch-bending songs, and of Judith Weir's opera *The Consolations of Scholarship*’”), but a careful reading might get a hint of it even in the nuances of Julius' written expression.¹¹⁰ As Thomas Marks has written in the *Telegraph*, the narrative's tone is one that is

finely poised between reticence and disclosure. Cole casts subtle doubt on the reliability of Julius's narrative; its hesitant linguistic tics, for instance, such as “now that I think of it” or “I remember (or imagine that I remember),” always keep the frailty of memory in view.

We gradually realise, as we notice the kinks and gaps in both Julius's childhood recollections and his account of New York, that he's been

¹⁰⁹ Foden, ‘*Open City* by Teju Cole – review’.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

fabricating “a secure version of the past.” He is bound to remain a stranger to us, and even to himself.¹¹¹

In this attempt to ‘fabricate “a secure version of the past”’, Julius’ narration resembles the kind of reactionary ‘framing’ of reality that Butler argues has taken place in the public sphere since 9/11. Indeed, Julius may as well be talking about himself when he says that in the aftermath of the attacks, ‘there was a determination to rebuild right away[, when] the mourning had not been completed, and the result had been the anxiety that cloaked the city’.¹¹²

The Manhattan that Julius describes is – like that of *Chronic City* – imbued with a sense of artificial, partially self-imposed solitude, the ‘neatness of the line’ around it wilfully obscuring the ‘jagged’ borders of its identity in relation to the rest of the world. ‘This strangest of islands’, Julius reflects to himself as he looks out to sea,

this island that turned in on itself, and from which water had been banished. The shore was a carapace, permeable only at certain selected points. Where in this riverine city could one fully sense a riverbank? Everything was built up, in concrete and stone, and the millions who lived on the tiny interior had scant sense about what flowed around them. The water was a kind of embarrassing secret, the unloved daughter, neglected, while the parks were doted on, fussed over, overused.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Thomas Marks, ‘*Open City* by Teju Cole: review’, *Telegraph*, 11 August 2011
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8709112/Open-City-by-Teju-Cole-review.html>>

¹¹² Cole, *Open City*, p. 209.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Like the ‘millions who lived on the tiny interior [with] scant sense about what flowed around them’, Julius has surrounded himself with narratives of self-reliance and prosperity initially “built up” at the height of late twentieth century US omnipotence and exceptionality. It is only after his confrontation with Moji that an awareness of his self-imposed blindness begins to stir within him, and he starts to think about his identity constellationally.

This is hinted at in the novel’s final few pages, when Julius, standing on a fire escape above the ‘miasma of Manhattan’s electric lights’, is surprised to see stars above him: ‘the sky was like a roof shot through with light, and heaven itself shimmered’.¹¹⁴ Thinking about ‘the unfathomable ages it took for light to cross such distances, [during which] the light source itself had in some cases been extinguished’, he says: ‘in the dark spaces between the dead, shining stars, were stars I could not see, stars that still existed, and were giving out light that hadn’t reached me yet, stars now living and giving out light but present to me only as blank interstices’.¹¹⁵ The stars that Julius can see are no more ‘real’ than those he cannot: even though he has momentarily stepped out of the ‘miasma’ of Manhattan’s blinding artificial light, his acknowledgement of this indicates that the ‘inward gazing’ frame of reality in which he has been living is not rigid, but part of a continuum. Although he has stepped outside of this continuum, his vision is still subject to a particular version of reality based on perspective. The key is not so much that he has ‘broken through’ the frame into a more straightforwardly outward gazing reality, but that through his inward gazing reflectivity, he has begun to think about the process of framing itself, and to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 256.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

acknowledge the existence of realities beyond his own. His inability to recall the act of violence against Moji, likewise, does not testify to a totalising frame so much as to a multidirectional screen: as with his view of the stars, he realises that ‘it was as though I had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus, or fallen so far away from it that it had faded away’.¹¹⁶

3.3 ‘[R]ifts and crevices’: *The Multidirectionality of the Frame*

As I have stated above, Adorno argues that in order to maintain an awareness of one’s position in a constellation – that is, to, in Cole’s terms, ‘think constellationally’ – it is necessary to actively ‘fashion’ perspectives that reconfigure reality in ways that draw attention to its ‘rifts and crevices’. The novel stresses that no framing of the world is ever completely impermeable: specifically, despite Julius’ efforts to frame himself in a flattering way, the apparently smooth, non-porous surface of the reality that he presents inevitably begins to reveal small chinks (or, to borrow from Lethem’s *Chronic City*, ‘ruptures’). Indeed, it is, paradoxically, through precisely these rifts and crevices (or spaces of *chorismos*) in his inward gazing reality that he remains *connected* to histories that he would rather forget. As Adorno puts it in an initially dense-looking, but actually rather cogent passage of *Negative Dialectics*:

The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 257.

is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object.¹¹⁷

Julius' narration is the frame with which he constructs his version of the world, but the novel ultimately shows that this frame, like all frames, is itself an object that exists in constellational relation to other objects. Although he is never quite able to attain a 'knowledge mindful' of his own 'historic positional value', the small ruptures in his narrative frame enable the reader to begin doing so. She is prompted to shift her perspective as she progresses through the novel: what begins as a trustworthy representation of reality ends up as an unreliable *framing* of reality, and the reader is encouraged to think about it in relation to other such frames. It is when this shift in perspective occurs that she is able to gain a sense of the traumatic history – that is, the history of Moji's rape – which is potentially 'locked' within Julius' narrative frame. In what remains of this section, I make this case with recourse to an important, though seemingly anecdotal passage of the novel which appears immediately after Julius' confrontation with Moji.

In the tense moments following the confrontation, it looks as though Julius might be on the verge of finally admitting to a recollection of the alleged rape, or possibly of expressing a degree of regret, but neither of these happen. Although he prefaces his recollection promisingly ('[a]t that moment – and I remember this as exactly as though it were being replayed in front of me right now'), the memory he goes on to describe is to do with neither the incident nor his feelings about it.¹¹⁸ On the contrary, in his typically conceited way, he has in mind an anecdote from the

¹¹⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 163.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

journals of Albert Camus ‘concerning Nietzsche and Gaius Mucius Cordus Scaevola, a Roman hero from the sixth century B.C.E.’:

Scaevola had been captured while trying to kill the Etruscan king Porsenna and, rather than give away his accomplices, he showed his fearlessness by putting his right hand in a fire and letting it burn. From this act came his nickname, Scaevola, the left-handed. Nietzsche, according to Camus, became angry when his schoolmates would not believe the Scaevola story. And so, the fifteen-year-old Nietzsche plucked a hot coal from the grate, and held it. Of course, it burned him. He carried the resulting scar with him for the rest of his life.¹¹⁹

If this is an accurate account of Julius’ reaction to being accused of rape, one might justifiably deduce that his inability to empathise is severe enough to border on personality disorder. However, putting aside the veracity of his recollection, the anecdote’s inclusion in the narrative hints at the possibility of change. If he is guilty of the attack, then this is the very definition of a ‘screen memory’, providing a comforting cover to the trauma of the event in question, but one that is, in Rothberg’s sense, also multidirectional (Julius himself describes it as a ‘double story’).¹²⁰ To borrow Foden’s phrase, it is the ‘negative space’, or the ambiguous absence at which the narrative’s discontinuity hints, that here allows Julius (with the help of his reader) to begin to imagine the repressed memory into being. Whether he intends it or not, Julius’ insensitive, ‘inward gazing’ philosophical anecdote does betray a deeper

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

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internal discomfort over (if not a full acknowledgement of) the possibility of his guilt. For a start, the two stories from which it is composed, which at first might appear similar, actually differ in at least one significant way: in the Scaevola story, the act of self-harm is intended as a sign of solidarity with friends, whereas in the Nietzsche story, it is an act of defiance towards them. Scaevola sacrifices his hand to reinforce a sense of connection with others; Nietzsche does it to set himself apart.

While it might be repugnant of Julius to immediately identify with either when he has just been accused of rape, a careful second reading of the novel reveals another level of significance, which is connected to an earlier account of his teenage years at his old Nigerian military boarding school, and in particular a vivid memory of being accused of stealing a newspaper from one of his teachers. It is only when the indignant teacher, Musibau, frog-marches him in a fit of rage to be publically caned that the young Julius realises what has happened:

Under the glare of an interrogation, with my collar violently chafing my neck, in Musibau's grip, and a sudden sense of isolation connected, for the first time, this alleged theft with my own actions. When the lunch had ended that afternoon, I had seen a discarded copy of the *Daily Concord* on a bench, and brought it back to the house with me. There was the error. My conscience clouded, and I began to beg and to explain, until another slap silenced me.¹²¹

The point is not so much that the reader is prompted, upon a second reading, to more thoroughly question the truthfulness of this recollection, but rather that the prominence of this particular incident in Julius' memory is rendered newly significant.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 83.

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His understanding of himself in contemporary New York is contingent upon a clear recollection of this violent beating, but also on his apparent inability to similarly recollect his own alleged attack on Moji.

A prime example of multidirectional screen memory, Julius' framing of his adult self is dependent not only upon what he recalls from his youth, but also on that which he has seemingly forgotten: what becomes much more evident when re-reading his memory of the newspaper incident is, again, the 'negative space', or absence, to which it pertains. Indeed, this absence is emphasised when, at the end of his account, he informs the reader that the severity of the punishment was such that it earned him a reputation for fearlessness amongst his peers, which had in turn had an improving effect on his self-esteem. 'I ... began to do well academically', he says, adding, very casually but also crucially, that '[b]y the fourth year, I was popular with the girls at some schools in the town, and had developed a somewhat callous self-confidence'.¹²² Before the reader arrives at Moji's confrontation with Julius at the end of the novel, this reference to a 'callous self-confidence' cannot be viewed as anything more than a passing comment, but once the accusation has been made, it is precisely the comment's offhand nature that renders it unexpectedly sinister, and prompts the reader to question even the most subtle nuances in Julius' language throughout.

As Julius says elsewhere in the novel, '[t]o be alive, it seemed to me, ... was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone'.¹²³ In presenting such a carefully calibrated account of himself, Julius comes close to cutting himself off from the human sphere and, in turn, from the very *humanitas*, or 'heightened sense of ethics', to which he claims to have hewn

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

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throughout his adult life: the reader is, for the most part, unable to empathise with him because she remains unsure of exactly who ‘he’ is.¹²⁴ It is only when Julius begins to realise that his very inability to give voice to his repressed memories might itself be a kind of indirect – and simultaneously multidirectional – vocalisation that he is able to start reframing his perspective on the world, and to meaningfully empathise with the suffering of others.

4.0 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that both *Chronic City* and *Open City* use the trope of an ‘inward gazing’ solitude to pass comment upon precisely such thinking in wider public discourse. I have suggested that both novels do this through their respective representations of Manhattan, each encouraging the kind of new empathic ‘ties’ that Judith Butler drives at in her recent work on the framing of violence. In Lethem’s *Chronic City*, the reality of Manhattan is literally brought into question by the possibility that the city is merely a computer simulation. As a result, the characters obsess over an impossible authenticity that comes at the expense of their own ability to authenticate their reality through contextualisation and individual judgement. In Cole’s *Open City*, by contrast, Manhattan’s connectedness to the world is frequently emphasised, but its solitary narrator ultimately fails to understand the extent and complexity of his own connectedness to others. Drawing upon Michael Rothberg’s notion of ‘multidirectional memory’, I have argued that the novel uses Julius’ inward gazing solipsism as a way of critiquing a similar trend in broader post-9/11 US

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 243.

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discourse. Each depicts the kind of ‘deterioration of context’ that Butler identifies in her theorisation of the post-9/11 framing of war, but does so in a way that places greater emphasis on the potential for such deterioration to be countered through a process of self-questioning – or ‘constellational thinking’ – that, although stylistically ‘inward gazing’, never loses sight of the complex ways in which the self and the other are inherently tied.

Chapter 3: ‘Connective Dissonance’: Refiguring Difference in Fiction of the Iraq War

1.0 Introduction

In Chapters 1 and 2, I argued that literature has the potential to show how the framing of reality in post-9/11 media and political discourse is potentially more susceptible to challenge – and, in turn, refiguring – than it might at first appear. Rather than encouraging readers to ‘break through’ or ‘explode’ hegemonic frames, I suggested that the novels under analysis reveal the frame to possess a more fissiparous textuality, not unlike what Derrida describes in *Of Grammatology* as ‘a chain of differential references’.¹ With recourse to ideas such as a ‘collapsing’ of space (*What Is the What*), an active ‘authentication’ of reality (*Chronic City*) and ‘multidirectional memory’ (*Open City*), I posited that these texts encourage an ‘insurrection at the level of ontology’ conducive to what Adorno might describe as an awareness of the frame’s ‘positional value’ in a complicated constellation of ideas.²

In this chapter, I expand the scope of my argument by analysing three texts that, through a shared engagement with the most recent Iraq war, move even further away from what Kamila Shamsie has described as a tendency in the 9/11 novel to fixate upon ‘the day itself’.³ These novels are *Point Omega* by Don DeLillo (2010), *Gods Without Men* by Hari Kunzru (2011) and *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers (2012). In contrast to the novels that I have already looked at, these make a more

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Jonathan Culler, qtd. in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 106.

² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 33; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (Oxford: Routledge, 1990), p. 163.

³ Kamila Shamsie, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’, *Guernica*, 1 February 2012
<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/>

direct – although by no means less sophisticated – attempt to foreground the constellational ties, reflections and echoes between post-9/11 American foreign policy and violence in the wider world. Kunzru’s novel, for example, includes a prominent sub-narrative about a teenage Iraqi refugee in the United States; Powers’ narrative jumps back and forth between America and Iraq; and DeLillo’s text centres on an ex-US military advisor instrumental in the logistics of the 2003 intervention. 9/11 is a background presence in all three texts, but in a way that is much less conspicuous: instead of a haunting ‘rupture’ or ‘*chorismos*’ in the narrative (or, in the case of *What Is the What*, its chronological centre-point), the event is merely one part of the broader 21st Century world that their characters inhabit.

I argue that the novels work to redress what, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, Butler describes as a dehumanising ‘derealization of loss’ – or ‘insensitivity to human suffering and death’ – in the context of the war on terror.⁴ Drawing on the work of geographer Derek Gregory, I suggest that they do this by challenging and attempting to shift their readers’ ‘imaginative geographies’. For Gregory (who in turn draws on Edward Said), an ‘imaginative geography’ is the frame of perception through which ‘[we] articulate not simply the differences between this place and that, inscribing different images of here and there, but ... [that] also shape the ways in which, from our particular perspectives, we conceive of the connections and separations between them’.⁵ Specifically, I will show how *Point Omega*, *The Yellow Birds* and *Gods Without Men* produce what Gregory, building on this idea, has more recently characterised as the potential for a desirable post-9/11 ‘connective

⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 148.

⁵ Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 204.

dissonance': that is, a creation of new empathic ties between Americans and Iraqis not *despite* their differences but *because* of them.⁶

1.1 Difference and Dissonance

In *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (2004), Gregory critiques what he sees as the Bush administration's appropriation of 9/11 for a destructive neo-imperial agenda that relies upon a reactionary reinforcement of a narrowly delineated Western 'self'. He writes that '[t]he ordinary dead came from every corner and culture', and argues that this diversity 'destabilizes the Manichean assumptions that divide the world tidily into "us" and "them"'.⁷ However, he suggests that this deconstruction of 'us' and 'them' should not occur simply through an emphasis on 'spacings of connection' (such as 'transnational capital circuits and commodity chains, ... global flows of information and images, ... geopolitical alignments and military dispositions'): he posits that it might also be achieved through a focus on 'spacings of disjuncture between the same and the other'.⁸ These spacings, he suggests,

are installed through the same or parallel economic, cultural, and political networks but articulated by countervailing imaginative geographies that give them different force and sanction. Imaginative geographies are thus doubled spaces of articulation. Their inconsistent topologies are mappings of

⁶ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 256.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 255.

connective dissonance in which connections are elaborated in some registers even as they are disavowed in others.⁹

Gregory draws on this idea of a ‘connective dissonance’ through imaginative geographies in an explicitly political way, condemning the 2003 invasion of Iraq on similar terms as he did the first Gulf War in his influential 1994 study, *Geographical Imaginations*. Drawing on an essay by Robert Stam, he suggests in this earlier book that ‘[t]he media constructed ... “a fictive We” – interpellated into an imaginary community – whose vantage point was carefully established to both privilege and protect the (American) viewer through the fabrication of (“Allied”) innocence and the demonization of the (Iraqi) enemy’.¹⁰

In contrast to Gregory, I am not concerned here with rehearsing a case either for or against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, I wish to draw upon Gregory’s notion of ‘connective dissonance’ in a way that similarly challenges the divisive ‘us and them’ identity structures perpetuated in global media discourse about the war. I suggest that my three selected novels utilise geographical location in a way that foregrounds its topological ‘inconsistency’; that is, the attribution to their locations of meaning – or identity – through culture and political discourse. In turn, each text encourages the reader to make a connection between this inconsistent mapping of geography and the similarly inconsistent way in which the novels’ respective characters map identities onto one another (and allow identities to be mapped onto themselves).

⁹ Ibid., pp. 255–6.

¹⁰ Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, p. 204.

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It is because of this inconsistency in the mapping of identity that, following Gregory, I use the term ‘connective dissonance’ as opposed to ‘connective difference’. While, as I aim to show, the novels in question do sometimes encourage connections between apparently incommensurable identities through a shared *experience* of difference, the use of the term ‘dissonance’ here specifically pertains to the shifting, amorphous and literally inconsistent relationship between sign and signified: it indicates an ambiguous space between identities in much the same way as a dissonant musical chord occupies an ambiguous space between notes. When Gregory writes that ‘connections are elaborated in some registers even as they are disavowed in others’, I take him to be referring to the way in which a single signifier might invoke a variety of contrasting and even conflicting meanings, depending on the perspective from which one approaches it. It is this *dissonance* inherent to the process of identity construction that, I argue, the three Iraq war novels foreground in a way that builds connections between radically *different* post-9/11 identities.

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into three main sections. In the first, ‘The Wilderness: Imaginative Geographies and the “derealization of loss”’, I analyse the novels’ locational reliance upon deserts, hinterlands and backcountries. I argue that they use these wilderness landscapes, and their deep-seated connections with national cultures and identities, to help reshape the ‘imaginative geographies’ through which their readers frame an understanding of the world. This is one way in which they help to redress the ‘derealization of loss’ that Butler identifies as the ‘mechanism’, in mainstream framings of the war on terror, ‘through which dehumanization is accomplished’.¹¹ In the next section, ‘Absence and “Grievability”’, I narrow my focus to a specific characteristic of the wilderness, suggesting that each

¹¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 148.

novel uses the wilderness to explore the boundary between absence and presence. In doing so, they figure the absence of recognisably ‘grievable’ Iraqi lives in global representations of the war *as* a haunting presence. In the final section, “[I]nclusion and exclusion are not the only options”: Exile and Home’, I argue that one of the most salient manifestations of haunting absence in the novels emerges through the theme of uprootedness, or a loss of one’s sense of belonging to a collective identity. At a time in which the notion of ‘home’ has become central to the framing of war (in the repetition of phrases such as ‘Homeland Security’ and ‘home-grown suicide bombers’), the connective dissonance produced by three novels works to complicate the resultant categorisation of global identity in terms of a reductive ‘us and them’ binary.

2.0 The Wilderness: Imaginative Geographies and the ‘derealization of loss’

In this section, I argue that the US backcountry has provided DeLillo, Kunzru and Powers with a trope through which to explore some of the challenges posed to American identity since the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. All three articulate a desire in their novels to think about American identity in a transnational way: not only do they underscore the multiplicity of identities contained within the nation, but they also, in turn, draw attention to its place in a global, inter-relational constellation of world identities. They do this, I suggest, through a depiction of troubled metropolitan characters experiencing crises in the American wilderness, a landscape characterised as much by its ‘vast emptiness’ as by its abounding cultural

history. What this rethinking of American identity ultimately entails is akin to what Richard Gray has described in *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* as the often unfulfilled potential for post-9/11 literature to ‘enact difference’: that is, to provide ‘not only the capacity to recognize that some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis, ... but also the ability and willingness imaginatively to act on that recognition’.¹² Through their representations of the Iraq war and its aftermath, the novels use the wilderness as a tool through which to help bring such an ‘alteration of imaginative structures’ about. In turn, they help redress the kind of ‘derealization of loss’ that, in Butler’s view, has resulted from an imbalanced framing of violence in the context of the war on terror.¹³

2.1 ‘[M]odernity and its Discontents’: The Wilderness and Identity

From slavery and the Civil War through to 20th Century cinema, the idea of the wilderness – and particularly its ‘taming’ (or, perhaps more often, its resistance to ‘taming’) – has been deeply connected to discourses of American identity. After the Second World War, holiday trips into the wilderness soared in popularity amongst Americans to the point where the land’s natural beauty began to be damaged by the volume of cars and caravans that were passing through it, and in 1964 the United States Wilderness Act was passed. The Act states that ‘wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where

¹² Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), p. 30.

¹³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 148.

man himself is a visitor who does not remain'.¹⁴ However, as Michael Lewis argues in his edited collection *American Wilderness: A New History*:

Though crucial to U.S. identity and history, the wilderness idea has never been just an American idea. Rather, it was derived from the shared human experience of modernity – the initially Euro-American, then global, experiences of the scientific revolution, exploration, colonialism, industrialization, and the dramatic transformation of the natural world.¹⁵

He goes on to suggest that:

U.S. historians have been convinced that to understand American wilderness is to understand a crucial part of America. Perhaps they have undersold the importance of wilderness history; perhaps to understand wilderness is to understand part of the more global history of modernity and its discontents: our values, our hopes, our blind spots, and our fears, overlaid on a rapidly changing planet.¹⁶

The US wilderness, in other words, is a quintessential element of American identity, but also one that transcends the limits of American identity, connecting the nation's history to the broader historical context of global modernity.

All three of the Iraq war novels that I am analysing in this chapter use the wilderness as a trope through which to do something very similar, utilising its place at

¹⁴ Michael Lewis, 'American Wilderness', in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. by Michael Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 4–5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the heart of American cultural tradition to subtly decentre their readers' understanding of this identity, placing it in a more globally interconnected context. Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* does this most explicitly. The novel has multiple narratives that take place at different points in American history, but that are connected through a shared setting: the vast Californian desert surrounding a mysterious three-spired rock formation known as 'The Pinnacles'. (The book's title is a direct reference to the closing lines of Balzac's short story, 'A Passion in the Desert': "In the desert, you see, there is everything and nothing ... it is God without mankind".)¹⁷ One of the narrative segments, set in 2008, focuses on an Iraqi teenage girl called Laila, a refugee of the current conflict who – along with her brother, Samir, and her uncle, Hafiz – takes part in a US military training program in which a part of the desert near the Pinnacles is transformed into a highly realistic simulation of an Iraqi town called 'Wadi al-Hamam'. (The name is likely to be an ironic reference to the Palestinian town of the same name, which was destroyed during the establishment of Israel in 1948.)¹⁸ The notion of an 'untrammelled' wilderness is totally undercut by the artificial town, and through it a connection is immediately made between America's past and present colonial histories: by placing the town in the location that he has, Kunzru evokes the memory of its annihilated Native communities at the same time as he satirises the 'counter-insurgency' tactics of the US military during its contemporary nation-building efforts in Iraq.

Kunzru has made it clear in interviews that the Mojave Desert has an intimate personal connection for him with 9/11:

¹⁷ Honoré de Balzac, 'A Passion in the Desert', anonymous translation, *Tales of the Napoleonic Era: 2 – An Historical Mystery, Farewell, A Second Home, Colonel Chabert and Three Short Stories* (London: Leonaur, 2010), p. 327.

¹⁸ Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Instituted for Palestine Studies, 1992), pp. 544–5.

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I got stuck in Los Angeles on 9/11. I'd been in California for a couple months and was supposed to fly home to England the next day, which was not going to happen. . . . People were losing their minds. I decided to get out of the city and drove to Death Valley, which seemed quiet and appropriate. I had a very intense few days. It stayed with me, but I didn't realize I had to write about it until much more recently, in 2008.¹⁹

However, despite the author's strong sense of connection to the location, I would suggest that the backdrop of the American desert in the novel helps to deterritorialise the location's cultural connotations. It does this by driving home the difficulty for those whose perspective on the war is framed by global news channels to viscerally empathise with the experiences of ordinary Iraqis during the fighting. This is not to say that Kunzru straightforwardly transplants the Baudrillardian argument that the 'Gulf War did not take place' into the present Iraq conflict.²⁰ On the contrary, he acknowledges developments in news reportage since the first Gulf War by having the training programme include a very contemporary, 'reality'-style fake TV channel called 'al-Mojave', whose reporters 'would sometimes show up and interview the villagers about how pro-American they were feeling'.²¹

However, as I have already suggested, there is a distinct sense throughout the chapter of what Butler describes the 'derealization of loss' produced by these kinds of frames. When Laila is playing with a pair of night-vision goggles that she has

¹⁹ Hari Kunzru, qtd. in interview, 'Hari Kunzru on *Gods Without Men*', Amitava Kumar, *Paris Review*, 6 March 2012 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/03/06/hari-kunzru-on-%E2%80%98gods-without-men%E2%80%99/>>

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

²¹ Kunzru, *Gods Without Men*, pp. 300–1

borrowed from one of the marines, she spots an unusual figure ‘[o]ut in the emptiness, away from town’.²² Unsure what it is, she thinks: ‘This was how she looked to the soldiers, a little point of thermal light, a grid reference to be targeted with a bomb or a drone or a shot from a sniper rifle’.²³ In this scene the ‘imaginative geography’ of the Californian desert is briefly disentwined from American cultural history, and becomes uncannily interchangeable with the desert terrain of Iraq. The ‘little point of thermal light’ turns out to be the missing child of the novel’s protagonists, an estranged married couple who have been searching frantically for their son since mysteriously losing him in the desert. However, in the disorientating moments before this is made clear, the signification of the American desert is briefly uprooted and reconnected to a more global constellation of signs.

2.2 ‘[A]nother desert altogether’

A similar ‘connective dissonance’ is evident in the representation of the wilderness in DeLillo’s *Point Omega*. Like *Gods Without Men*, the novel is concerned (amongst other things) with a ‘derealization of loss’ in the framing of the Iraq War, this time in US politics. The novel follows a young filmmaker’s attempt to interview a retired US military advisor – or ‘defense intellectual’ – called Richard Elster, who was called upon to help conceptualise the ‘intellectual framework’ for troop deployment in Iraq.²⁴ He is, in a sense, the closest that any of the novels in this thesis come to a direct characterisation of the hegemonic power behind the framing of war (Butler describes the framing process as one of ‘selectively carving up experience as essential

²² Ibid., p. 308.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2010), p. 28.

to the conduct of war’).²⁵ While at first reluctant, Elster agrees to the interview on the condition that it take place at an old, isolated house that he owns ‘somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert or maybe it was the Mojave Desert or another desert altogether’.²⁶

Like in Kunzru’s novel, the landscape’s ‘inconsistent topology’ here is partly due to its ‘vast emptiness’ and general absence of human occupancy: ‘There was the house and then nothing but distances,’ DeLillo writes, ‘not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances’.²⁷ It helps provide the groundwork – both literally and figuratively – for the introduction of a degree of connective dissonance to Elster’s intentionally reductive ‘framing’ of Iraq in the lead-up to the invasion. ‘There were times when no map existed to match the reality we were trying to create’, Elster explains. He continues:

We were devising entities beyond the agreed-upon limits of recognition or interpretation. Lying is necessary. The state has to lie. There is no lie in war or in preparation for war that can’t be defended. We went beyond this. We tried to create new realities overnight, careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability. These were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional.²⁸

Commenting on this passage, Richard Gray has suggested that it draws attention to a ‘strange dematerialization of the material’ in the way that the war was conceptualised

²⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 23.

²⁶ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.

by people like Elster.²⁹ However, rather than attempting to ‘rematerialize’ the material, so to speak, DeLillo gestures towards a need to imagine a new, but no less immaterial reality into being: one that encourages empathic global connections rather than cynically downplaying them, as Elster’s does. Like in *Gods Without Men*, DeLillo does this by having Elster lose a child in the wilderness. Shortly after his daughter unexpectedly comes to stay with him at the house, she suddenly and inexplicably goes missing. Suicide, abduction and murder are all raised as possibilities, but nothing is ever confirmed. Elster has contributed to a ‘derealization of loss’ in the lead-up to the Iraq War, but when he loses his own daughter, he is forced to experience the ‘local grief’ of such an experience first-hand.³⁰ ‘The story was here’, the narrator says, ‘not in Iraq or in Washington, and we were leaving it behind and taking it with us, both’.³¹ As John Banville puts it in a piece on the novel in the *New York Review of Books*, the reader ultimately becomes aware that ‘[t]he weighty teleological speculations that Elster indulges in ... are as light as the dust of the desert, Californian or Iraqi, in comparison with the life, and the loss, of one frail, damaged human creature’.³²

2.3 Misguided Archaeologies and Particular Histories

A kind of ‘local grief’ also haunts Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*. Powers served in Iraq with the US Army in 2004 and 2005, but the story he tells is a fictional one, following the repeated attempts of a soldier called John Bartle to come to terms with the brutal killing and mutilation of his friend, ‘Murph’, by Iraqi militants. Bartle’s

²⁹ Gray, *After the Fall*, p. 13.

³⁰ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³² John Banville, ‘Against the North Wall’, *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 2010

<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/apr/08/against-the-north-wall/?pagination=false>>

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name is almost certainly a reference to Melville's short story, 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', a tale about an apparently deeply depressed man who, it transpires, may have been prompted into his 'pallid hopelessness' through excessive exposure to thousands of undelivered letters while employed at the Washington Dead Letter Office.³³ Powers' first-person narrative jumps back and forth between the protagonist's home in hinterlands of Richmond, Virginia, and the backcountry surrounding a small, semi-fictional town called 'Al Tafari' in Nineveh Province, Iraq. (The name 'Al Tafari' – as opposed to the actual town of Tal Afar – is a clear attempt on Powers' part to create a degree of distance between Bartle's experiences in Iraq and his own. It is a subtle but important distinction that reviews of the novel, which have tended to place heavy emphasis on its verisimilitude, have occasionally overlooked.)³⁴

When John and his cynical Sergeant, Sterling, find Murph's mutilated body, they decide that the most honourable thing to do is to dispose of it, rather than allow it to be formally sent back to the US, where it would be shown to Murph's mother for identification (in another possible 'Bartleby' reference, John also writes a reassuring letter to Murph's mother in her son's guise: a grimly literal take on the notion of the 'dead letter'). Bartle and Sterling take the corpse deep into the Nineveh wilderness and deposit in the Tigris. This is the event that the entire novel has been building towards, but is mirrored earlier on in the book when John, back home in Virginia, takes a walk into the countryside surrounding the James River. 'Back home,' John

³³ Herman Melville, 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street', in Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (London and Mineola, NY: Dover, 1990), p. 34.

³⁴ For an example of one such review, see: John Burnside, 'The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers – Review', *Guardian*, 31 August 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/the-yellow-birds-kevin-powers-review>> Although possibly a *Guardian* editorial slip, Burnside's otherwise perspicacious article contains the sentence: 'Like his narrator, Kevin Powers was a soldier in Iraq for two years, serving in Mosul and Tal Afar'.

narrates, ‘everything had begun to remind me of something else’, and this comes to a head with this scene by the river.³⁵ He tries unsuccessfully to ‘reconstruct’ Murph in his mind, but finds that the memory of his friend is a kind of ‘misguided archaeology’: the closer he gets to remembering, he says, ‘the more the picture [he is] trying to re-create [recedes]’.³⁶ Although he takes comfort in the openness of the countryside, enjoying the feeling of being ‘hardly a speck on the landscape’, it also wracks him with guilt. So overwhelming is his sense of culpability that he recedes into a two-page stream of consciousness that culminates with him unconsciously submerging himself in the river, where he almost drowns.

Like the desert in *Gods Without Men*, the backcountry surrounding the James River has formed an intimate connection, at least for John, with that surrounding the Tigris. The rivers are doubly metaphorical in this sense, as their water is literally connected by the world’s oceans: any attempt to separate the Virginia and Nineveh Province into completely separate ‘worlds’ is, the novel implies, itself an exercise in ‘misguided archaeology’. As John says elsewhere: ‘Nothing is more isolating than having a particular history. At least that’s what I thought. Now I know: All pain is the same. Only the details are different’.³⁷ However, the sentiment of this statement is invested with a bitter irony through a cold and brutal act of violence that takes place during the scene of Murph’s burial. The lead-up to the burial, from the discovery of Murph’s body to it being laid to rest in the river, takes up approximately seven pages, in which John and Sterling take the corpse on a long, emotionally draining walk along the river until they are far enough from town to safely dump it. All the while, they have a local hermit with them to push the body along in a cart. The hermit is never

³⁵ Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (London: Sceptre, 2012), p. 134.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

referred to by name, and is a quiet presence in the background as the two Americans preoccupy themselves with Murph's tragic death. Then, at the very end of the scene, once they have disposed of the body, John narrates as follows: 'I looked at the ground. The dust blowing in fine swirls around my boots. I knew what was coming. Sterling shot the Cartwright once, in the face, and he crumpled to the ground. No time to even be surprised by it'.³⁸

In this scene, the entwining of American and Iraqi histories is made manifest in the most sinister of ways: through an inversion of Kunzru's American desert becoming briefly Iraqi, here it is the ancient Assyrian history of Iraq's Nineveh Plains that is momentarily transmogrified into a lawless frontier in the American Wild West. It is a stark take on Butler's 'derealization of loss', using the trope of the wilderness to encourage empathic connections while at the same time demonstrating how, like any metaphor, it is equally susceptible to exploitation in the service of a colonial imaginary that is overly rigid in its delineation of the categories of self and other. *The Yellow Birds* is a novel of *two* lives lost in the wilderness, and of the sharp, absurd imbalance in the perceived value attributed to each. Like in the other two novels, a 'connective dissonance' occurs between the American wilderness and that of Iraq, and what results is the opening of an imaginative space in which new ties might begin to be emerge.

3.0 Absence and 'Grievability'

In *America*, Jean Baudrillard writes that US deserts are so fascinating 'because you are delivered from all depth there – a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a

³⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points'.³⁹ He is, of course, only half-right: the absence of reference points in the American desert is itself an easily recognisable reference point, not least to anyone who has grown up with the Westerns, road movies and science fiction blockbusters of 20th Century Hollywood cinema. Baudrillard himself cannot help but describe the desert's 'barely perceptible evaporation of meaning' in terms that keep it inherently linked to the culture to which it supposedly offers an alternative: 'The grandeur of deserts derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of our civilized humours'; 'Here the terms of desire are turned upside down every day, and the night annihilates them'.⁴⁰ The desert is no more nor less absent of meaning, necessarily, than the nation's more urban environments: its topological 'emptiness' merely provides a suitable metaphorical counterpoint to the perceived 'sign pollution' of contemporary urban life.⁴¹

In this section, I argue that this paradoxical process of signifying the *absence* of signification plays a key role in the novels' ability to engender a sense of 'connective dissonance' through the wilderness trope. Like Baudrillard's desert, the wildernesses described in the novels at hand provide a 'negative', or 'upside down', version of society's 'civilized humours', but they do so in a way that foregrounds the unstable foundations upon which such 'civilized humours' are constructed. In other words, the novels draw attention to the fact that the apparent absence of humanity in the wilderness is itself merely an expression of humanity. In their manipulation of the terrain's 'imaginative geography', they use the absence with which the landscape is

³⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 133.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–9.

⁴¹ See e.g.: Will Slocombe, 'Littered with Meaning: The Problem of Sign Pollution in Postmodern, Post-structuralist and Ecocritical Thought', *Textual Practice* 19.4 (2005), pp. 493–508.

culturally associated as a device through which to highlight a similar absence common to Western representations of the war: specifically, the absence of recognisably ‘grievable’ Iraqi lives.⁴² I have structured what follows in a way that reflects the two primary modes by which absence is figured in the novels: spatial and temporal.

3.1 The Absence of Iraq

Spatial absence – namely, that of physical things, people or places – is the most immediately ostensible way in which absence figures in the three texts, and is particularly apparent in *Point Omega*’s extended comparison between the construction of absence in the desert and that in the Iraq war. ‘I’ll tell you this much,’ Elster says to the narrator, Jim, at one point during filming,

‘War creates a closed world and not only for those in combat but for the plotters, the strategists. Except their war is acronyms, projections, contingencies, methodologies. ... They become paralyzed by the systems at their disposal. Their war is abstract. They think they’re sending an army into a place on a map’.⁴³

Baudrillard’s argument that the first Gulf War ‘Did Not Take Place’ is clearly evoked in this passage, but I would be careful about suggesting that DeLillo – whose novels once provided a fictional supplement of sorts to Baudrillard’s work on postmodern

⁴² Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 13–15.

⁴³ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 28.

simulacra – necessarily endorses this view as it is expounded by Elster here. Elster is presented as a figure whose thinking remains rooted in the late twentieth century: as is clear from the prevalence of digital communications technology during the second Iraq war, as well as from the fictional representations of loss in the wilderness discussed in the previous section, his ridiculing of the notion that United States military strategists ‘think they’re sending an army into a place on a map’ is not entirely convincing. As I have already indicated, what the three novels are concerned with is not so much the unreality of the war’s ‘mapping’, but rather the ways in which this mapping might be manipulated both for and against reactionary hegemonic power. It is not the inauthenticity of such simulacral mapping in itself, but rather the deliberate shaping of the map in a way which produces a ‘derealization of loss’, that is conducive to the kind of ‘closing of worlds’ that Elster describes.

James Lasdun has noted that the novel is ‘as interesting for what it omits as what it includes’, and, despite some allusion to the lead-up to the 2003 invasion early in the narrative, Iraq remains an absence throughout.⁴⁴ However, such is the conspicuousness of its absence that it might be described as ‘present’ in its very absence (once again in a way that gestures towards a kind of ‘connective dissonance’ between the United states and Iraq). The haunting ‘presence’ of Iraq’s absence is particularly apparent in a scene late on the book, when, after Elster’s daughter has been missing for some time, a knife is found lying in a nearby ravine. The territory in which the ravine is located is known as the ‘Impact Area, entry prohibited, a former bombing range littered with unexploded shells’.⁴⁵ The connotations that the abandoned military facility throws up immediately connect the possibly violent loss

⁴⁴ James Lasdun, ‘*Point Omega* by Don DeLillo’, *Guardian*, section Books, 27 February 2010 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/27/don-delillo-point-omega>>

⁴⁵ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 91

of Elster's daughter to the thousands of losses that have been experienced elsewhere during the war on terror.

This is not to suggest that DeLillo is engaging in political grandstanding or taking any sort of clear-cut position on the ethics of the Iraq invasion: to combat a 'derealization' of the loss of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives is not necessarily to take an anti-war stand, but could equally be viewed as an urgent call for more responsible handling of the intervention. Either way, the point here is that the apparent attempt to undercut a Western 'derealisation of loss' in *Point Omega* goes *beyond* the question of the war's moral legitimacy, instead addressing an *a priori* need for all political sides to refrain from perpetuating an overly rigid binary between categories such as 'us' and 'them'. It is this 'disarticulation we hear in the term "Us and Them"' which, to continue the line of reasoning that DeLillo has previously set up in his frequently-cited essay 'In the Ruins of the Future', leads to Iraqi experience being 'constructed' as an 'absence' in the first place: the overly strict 'othering' of the nation by commentators from all political perspectives leads to a reduction of its collective identity to a vague and essentialised facade of difference.⁴⁶

3.2 'The Whole Scorched World': Narrowing Worldviews

To return to the 'Impact Area': the 'connective dissonance' that is generated through the location's geography is, rather like the simulated Iraqi town in Kunzru's novel, done so through the way in which it jars with the notion of the wilderness being a place 'untrammelled by man', where human life is absent. This is evident in the way

⁴⁶ Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future', *Guardian*, 22 December 2001
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>>

that the area is described using a string of claustrophobic words and phrases, which undercut the indistinguishable ‘vast emptiness’ that otherwise characterises the desert surrounding Elster’s house. Most obviously, the site is depicted as ‘a large swathe of geometry with squared-off borders’, a description that evokes what one might view as a forceful attempt by humans to colonise the vast wilderness of the terrain, dividing it into unnatural shapes which offer a quite literal take on Elster’s notion of a ‘closed’ wartime world.⁴⁷ However, this is followed by numerous other descriptions of the area’s ‘closedness’ that might be described as more ‘naturally’ occurring. When Jim drives out to investigate the area, he quickly finds ‘tall seamed cliff walls surrounding the car’ before reaching ‘a vehicle dead end’. He then has to squeeze through a ‘tight passage’, and is struck by the oppressive feel of the sky, which is described as ‘confined’ and ‘compressed’, ‘stretched taut between cliff edges, it was narrowed and lowered, ... scale the rocks and you could touch it’.⁴⁸

In this scene, Jim’s earlier impression of the desert’s anonymity (‘somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran ... or maybe it was the Mojave’), is given a new degree of distinctiveness: while initially, to a newcomer, it manifested as a unitary embodiment of ‘absence’, a closer, more zeroed-in focus reveals the countless distinct geological features that combine to constitute the illusion that there is anything inherently unitary about this expanse of land. The desert has no clear lines of demarcation, and any desire to attribute to it an absolute absence of signification is by necessity one that is itself constructed within – and projected onto the terrain through – human social discourse. (Readers familiar with the gothic tradition, to take

⁴⁷ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

one example, will likely find a wealth of signification in the imposing, starkly oppressive landscape described above.)

The effect that this zeroing in on the desert's geographical detail has for a 'derealization' of Iraqi loss, I argue, is that it destabilises a central assumption about a concept (namely, the wilderness) that constitutes a key tenet of traditionalist understandings of American identity. By rendering the concept of the American desert newly strange, DeLillo challenges the surety of this version of the American self, and, in doing so, by extension undercuts assumptions about the absolute strangeness of the non-American other. (The nationality of this 'other' remains, of course, unspecified, but the novel's frequent references to Iraq bring the notional Iraqi 'other' most prominently to mind.) This connection between the constructed 'absence' of the desert and the equally constructed 'derealization' of Iraqi loss during the war is compounded through the location's very name. 'Impact Area' clearly evokes a sense of traumatic loss, the wounding impact of an event completely outside of normal experience. Indeed, a few pages previously, Jim describes Elster's loss in similar terms (and using a kind of awkward syntactical expression that will be familiar to readers of traumatic narratives): 'The impact, gathering from the first moment, hard to absorb'.⁴⁹

Surveying the Impact Area from the vantage point of 'a high rubble mound' (which itself evokes loss through destruction and death in its word usage), Jim describes what he sees before him as 'the whole scorched world'.⁵⁰ The 'scorched world' has clear religious – and particularly apocalyptic – connotations, while also hinting at the kind of 'scorched earth' tactics controversially used by US forces in Iraq

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 79

⁵⁰ DeLillo, p. 92.

in both Gulf Wars (in particular, the ‘Highway of Death’ incident in 1992, the much publicised ‘shock and awe’ bombing campaign over Baghdad in 2003, and the retaliatory evisceration of Fallujah in 2004).⁵¹ What is more notable in the context of the present discussion, however, is the narrator’s use here of the definite article: Jim does not describe ‘*a* whole scorched world’ lying before him, but rather ‘*the* whole scorched world’. On one level, of course, this is merely a form of rhetorical metonymy, in which Jim expresses the traumatic ‘closing’ of Elster’s world (as well as his own, albeit to a lesser extent) by reducing their perception of ‘the world’ to their immediate surroundings. However, through the associations evoked by the word ‘scorched’, it again enacts a form of ‘connective dissonance’ between a single loss in a landscape close to home and thousands of others in a distant part of the globe. In the Impact Area, the emotional space between the apparently separate ‘worlds’ of the United States and Iraq is collapsed, and the perceived distance between the losses is rendered momentarily irrelevant.

This unity implied in the phrase ‘the scorched world’ might also raise some questions about the limits of ‘connective dissonance’. Critics such as Ruth Leys and E. Ann Kaplan have, in their respective critiques of trauma theory, asked at what point the ‘sharing’ of traumatic loss might begin to lose its meaningfulness, detracting from the complex and often highly idiosyncratic differences that traumatic experience entails.⁵² Kaplan writes that ‘the main problem in trauma studies’ is that it needs to ‘distinguish[] different domains within which people work or relate to trauma’.⁵³ Leys,

⁵¹ For ‘shock and awe’ campaign and attack on Fallujah, see: ‘Iraq Profile: Timeline’, *BBC News*, section Middle East, last updated 23 July 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14546763>>; for ‘Highway of Death’, see: Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, pp. 165–7.

⁵² E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁵³ Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, p. 39.

meanwhile, drawing on Walter Benn Michaels, has argued that for trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, ‘history is collapsed into memory by redescribing ... “something we have never known as something we have forgotten”’.⁵⁴ In DeLillo’s phrase specifically, one might detect what Dominick LaCapra describes as a potentially dangerous conflation of absence with loss:

To blur the distinction between, or to conflate, absence and loss, may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic, which creates a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling. The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss).⁵⁵

One might argue that through its reliance on the constructed absence of the desert and of that of the loss of Iraqi life, the novel itself comes close to perpetuating such a conflation. However, what is more important than this, I would suggest, is the way in which DeLillo – whether intentionally or not – demonstrates just how fine the line can be between, on the one hand, an opening up of sensitivity towards loss experienced by those previously beyond one’s empathic reach, and, on the other, a ‘haunting’ by this loss, and particularly by one’s perceived complicity in it. The question of how to avoid the latter is again shown to be one about the limits of the self.

⁵⁴ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p. 285.

⁵⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 46.

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Standing in the Impact Area, suddenly overcome by the presence of Jessie's absence, Jim is forced into an uncomfortable awareness of his ipseity:

I closed my eyes and listened. The silence was complete. I'd never felt a stillness such as this, never such an enveloping nothing. But such nothing that *was*, that spun around me, or she did, Jessie, warm to the touch. I don't know how long I stood there, every muscle in my body listening. Could I forget my name in this silence? I took my hand off the wall and put it to my face. I was sweating heavily and licked the moist stink off my fingers. I opened my eyes. I was still here, in the outside world.⁵⁶

Jim is clearly haunted by the absence that has replaced Jessie in the moment of her loss, and the language he uses in reference to himself reflects this. There is a tension between a highly – perhaps overly – distinct conceptualisation of the boundaries between his self and the 'enveloping nothing' (which is compounded through the focus on his bodily physicality), and, in contrast, a simultaneous dissolving of them ('could I forget my name in this silence?'). I would suggest that it is not only through a conflation of absence with loss that Jim is paralysed by his traumatic haunting, but also through an overlooking of the way in which Jessie's absence is a construction of his imagination: her 'nothingness' cannot be 'warm to the touch' because it would by necessity then cease to be 'nothing'.

⁵⁶ DeLillo, p. 94.

3.3 Topographical 'Lifeworlds'

A similar conflation of absence with loss is enacted in the desert in *Gods Without Men*.

The novel offers a geography that is highly reflexive, taking the 'absence' that is deeply associated with the American desert and foregrounding its constructed nature by filling it with stories of loss. As Gregory writes in *Geographical Imaginations*:

reflexivity is an inescapable moment in any human geography; ... it is vital to overcome that estrangement from people, places and landscapes that spatial science imposed upon the discipline; and that any critical human geography must attend to the ways in which meanings are spun around the *topoi* of different lifeworlds, threaded into social practices and woven into relations of power.⁵⁷

Kunzru's novel enacts a 'critical human geography' similar to that which Gregory describes, but with one key difference: instead of 'attend[ing] to the ways in which meanings are spun around the *topoi* of different lifeworlds', it depicts a multiplicity of different 'lifeworlds' located upon the *same* topography. While an identical desert landscape might connote anything from outlaws to road trips to alien abductions, depending upon the genre of the narrative within which it appears, the desert in Kunzru's novel is both more *and* less diverse than this in its significations.

For both the Americans and the Iraqis around her, there is a dissonance between the simulated village in the desert and the actuality of violence in Iraq, but there is nothing 'connective' about it because – with a few exceptions – their refusal

⁵⁷ Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, p. 76

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to meaningfully acknowledge Laila's loss helps perpetuate the overly rigid categories of self and other, or 'us' and 'them', to which Laila can never fully belong. The loss of her father and of her childhood home has been 'derealized' by those around her in a way that does not so much make the loss disappear as cause it to *produce*, or *make present*, an almost palpable absence in its place. 'She knew it would feel strange to be surrounded by soldiers', Kunzru writes,

but since Uncle had moved them to the desert, she'd seen enough of them – hard-faced young men driving about in trucks, buying cases of beer at the supermarket – to be prepared. So she was ready for that part, but not for this, not to feel as if she were actually back in Iraq. She tried to make the picture cute, to add a soundtrack of passionate guitars and surround it with pretty bleeding hearts and flowers and color the scene in romantic black and white, but still Baba lay there, broken and dead. He'd been there all alone. He must have been so frightened. It was worse, somehow, because they'd never let her see him. That only made his ghost more powerful.⁵⁸

Like the presence of Jessica's absence in *Point Omega*, the absence of Laila's lost father and home will continue to haunt her until she can find a way to come to terms with the fact that the home that she longs for no longer exists in the same way that it once did, and as such to replace the overbearing presence of its absence with an absence that is actually absent (or at least present in a subtler, less distracting way).

Moreover, Laila is the only major character whose narrative occupies only one chapter in the novel (although she does make a brief appearance in two others).

⁵⁸ Dominic LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, pp. 282–3.

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Appearing two-thirds of the way through the text, the chapter's plot has only the most tangential connection to any of the other stories up until its concluding paragraph, when Laila discovers the lost child, Raj (until this point, the only link between this narrative and any of the others is the fact that Laila happens to be a big fan of Nicky Capaldi, with whom she has had a star-struck passing encounter a little earlier on in the book). Not only does the chapter's 'singling out' as the only self-contained narrative lend it an elevated sense of importance, but its surprise connection to the novel's central plotline (or at least the plotline that comes closest to being its 'central' one) powerfully underscores the motif of intersecting heterogeneous worlds.

3.4 Absent Temporalities

As I have already argued, the simulated village of Wadi al-Hamam creates a 'connective dissonance' with Iraq, 'deterritorializing' the landscape and generating an uncanny interchangeableness that counters what Butler might describe as a 'derealization of loss'. However, the 'connective dissonance' generated by the novel's 'imagined geographies' is not only spatial: it also actively subverts linear understandings of time. In the chapter of *Frames of War* titled 'Sexual Politics and Secular Time', Butler argues that:

the problem is not that there are different temporalities in different cultural locations – so that, accordingly, we simply need to broaden our cultural frameworks to become more internally complicated and capacious. ... The problem, rather, is that certain notions of relevant geopolitical space –

including the spatial boundedness of minority communities – are circumscribed by [the] story of a progressive modernity.⁵⁹

Moreover, she claims that ‘thinking through the problem of temporality and politics ... may open up a different approach to cultural difference, one that eludes the claims of pluralism and intersectionality alike’.⁶⁰ Critiquing Thomas Friedman’s ‘claim[] in the *New York Times* that Islam has not yet reached modernity’, Butler suggests that in the dominant discursive framing of the war on terror,

Islam is conceived as not of *this* time or *our* time, but of *another* time, one that has only anachronistically emerged in this time. But is not such a view precisely the refusal to think of this time not as one time, or as one story, developing unilinearly, but as a convergence of histories that have not always been brought together, and whose convergence or lack thereof presents a set of quandaries that might be said to be definitive of our time?⁶¹

There is an interesting, apparently conscious (although also possibly not) element of self-reflexive contradiction in this passage. Butler describes a ‘refusal to think of this time not as one time ... but as a convergence of histories’, but then suggests that this refusal ‘presents a set of quandaries that might be said to be definitive of *our* time’ (emphasis added). It is not entirely clear who she is referring to with the pronoun ‘our’: on the one hand, it could be a non-reflexive reference to ‘us’ in the West (such as Friedman and herself); on the other, Butler might deliberately be turning the logic

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 103.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

of her sentence on its head by referring to a broader sense of time, one that includes both Western time and Islamic time. Whether this is intentional or not, the ambiguity is useful as it shows that merely attempting to think about the separation of temporalities in a globalised world is arguably *more* difficult than Butler suggests. Even when articulated by figures of influence such as Friedman, the temporalities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are never clear-cut, as the language with which these categories are framed is perpetually open to question and interpretation.

Although not quite so concerned with Islam, I would suggest that Kunzru strives to subvert a similar kind of separation of temporalities in *Gods Without Men*, undercutting the perceived absence of each reality from the other. As I stated above, the novel weaves together multiple narratives from different points in American history. The title of each chapter reflects the year in which the action takes place (these are 1778, 1871, 1920, 1947, 1958, 1969, 1970, 1971, 2008 and 2009). While disorienting at first, about a third of the way through the novel it becomes clear that the story that takes place in 2008 and 2009 is the central one, threading the others into a kind of disjointed order. This jumping around in time places *Gods Without Men* alongside David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010) as an example of what Douglas Coupland, in his review of Kunzru’s novel, has termed ‘translit’: that is, a kind of ‘post-postmodern’ style reflective of an era in which, Coupland notes only half-jokingly, ‘there is a lot of zeit but not much geist’.⁶² However, it is worth noting, as David Mattin does in his review for the *Independent*, that ‘while intertextuality and the instability of meaning were the anxieties that underpinned Mitchell’s novel, Kunzru is more concerned with the

⁶² Douglas Coupland, ““Convergences””: *Gods Without Men* by Hari Kunzru’, *New York Times*, 8 March 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/books/review/gods-without-men-by-hari-kunzru.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>

instability of personal identity; the contingent, changeable essence that makes us who we are'.⁶³ It is precisely this 'changeable essence' – or dissonance – inherent to identity that the novel attempts to inject into post-9/11 constructions of 'us and them'.

To borrow a term from Roger Luckhurst's recent article 'In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq', Kunzru's novel demands to be read 'polytemporally': that is, as a narrative in which there is 'a constant interplay of one through the other of the old and the new'.⁶⁴ Luckhurst makes his case by showing how, among other texts, Denis Johnson's 2007 novel *Tree of Smoke* generates insights 'by having one wartime superimposed upon another'.⁶⁵ I would suggest that something similar is indirectly at play in *Gods Without Men*. The sections set between 1969 and 1971, for instance, tell the (partly factual) story of a hippyish, alien-worshipping cult called the Ashtar Galactic Command that sets up camp in the desert at a time when tensions over the Vietnam war are at their peak. The camp's loud and bohemian presence quickly antagonises the conservative, small-town local community, and the enmity finally explodes into violence when the police intervene on the locals' behalf in a large-scale drugs bust:

The raid, when it came, was sudden and brutal. They arrived at four thirty in the morning, a convoy of trucks and Crown Victorias bumping up the dirt road in the pre-dawn. Two girls were awake, coming off a trip, sitting up on the rocks and waiting for the sunrise. Afterwards they told how they'd seen it go

⁶³ David Mattin, 'Gods Without Men, by Hari Kunzru', *Independent*, 7 August 2011 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/gods-without-men-by-hari-kunzru-2333070.html>>

⁶⁴ Roger Luckhurst, 'In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq', *Contemporary Literature*, 53.4 (2012), pp. 726 and 723.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 727.

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down, the dull gleam of rifles and shotguns, the men rousting people out of the dome, lining them up on their knees in the dust.

Amerika.

...

The cops burst in kicking and clubbing people, no warning, no time to react or do anything at all except try to keep hold of a blanket to cover yourself as they pushed you out the door. They were dragging guys by the hair, shining powerful cop flashlights on naked girls, grabbing tits and ass as they took them out for the line-up⁶⁶

Although neither the Vietnam nor the Iraq war are explicitly mentioned, images of both – from both film and news footage – are easily evoked by the pre-dawn raid described above. Kunzru ironically places the word ‘Amerika’ on a line of its own in a way that prompts the reader to recognize that she is reading from a position antagonistic to the American status quo: in what is likely to be a conscious allusion to Kafka’s nightmarish novel of the same name, he provides the reader with an insight into how one might perceive the United States from the perspective of somebody it considers to be a threat. However, the evocation of Iraq is made more concrete by the fact that Laila’s chapter follows immediately afterwards. Giving an insight into Laila’s perspective in the latter, Kunzru writes:

[t]he stressful part [of living in the simulated village] was when the soldiers conducted the raids. The villagers had to assemble in various locations, which were supposed to represent their houses. Even though this wasn’t where she

⁶⁶ Kunzru, *Gods Without Men*, p. 260.

actually slept, it was too close to reality to feel like a game. She still had nightmares about Baba When there were night raids she tried to stay in the background, listening to her iPod until it was time to be hooded and cuffed.⁶⁷

The simulated raids in Wadi al-Hamam strongly echo the hippy drugs bust at the same time as, for Laila, they echo the raid on her childhood home by the Iraqi Republican Guard in which her father was arrested, never to be seen again: in each raid, other raids from other times are heavily present in their absence. The effect is that the reader becomes aware of a kind of polytemporal reflectivity between the different raids in such a way that forces her to place them into a historical context. This is not to suggest that she is encouraged to make direct, causal connections between the raids, but rather that she might emerge from reading the novel with a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which the power relations at play in each case echo across both space and time. (It is surely no accident that the training programme being run in the village is referred to by the military as ‘Echo Sector’.⁶⁸ Indeed, Kunzru has made his interest in echoes explicit in interview: ‘*Gods Without Men* connects a series of echoes or rhymes by using different stories which take place in different times’.)⁶⁹

A similarly ‘polytemporal’ deconstruction of the borderlines between different temporalities is evident in *The Yellow Birds*, again through the way in which its use of the wilderness trope conflates absence with loss. ‘I don’t want to look out over the earth as it unfurls itself toward the horizon’, Bartle says in the novel’s closing pages, evoking an image not unlike that presented before Jim in the Impact Area:

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 293–4.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 289.

⁶⁹ Hari Kunzru, qtd. in interview, ‘An Interview with Hari Kunzru: Networks, Finance, Capital and the Fate of the Novel’, Max Haiven, *Wasafiri*, 28.3 (2013), p. 19.

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I don't want desert. I don't want prairie and I don't want plains. I don't want anything unbroken. I'd rather look out at mountains. Or to have my view obstructed by a group of trees. Any kind would do: pine, oak, poplar, whatever. Something manageable and finite that could break up and fix the earth into parcels small enough that they could be contended with.⁷⁰

Bartle seems here to be rejecting precisely the kind of oppressive ubiquity that characterises 'the scorched world' that Jim witnesses in DeLillo's novel. When he says 'I don't want anything unbroken', he is recognising a problematic flipside to the kind of cross-cultural sharing of loss propounded by theorists such as Cathy Caruth (for whom 'history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas') or Michael Rothberg (who argues that memory is 'multidirectional', or 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing' (see Chapter 2)).⁷¹ The sharing of all loss is problematic on a practical level: if all loss were to be shared equally, it would be too traumatic for anyone to cope. Instead, this is where absence could be productive: instead of acknowledging all loss all the time, it might be better to construct and maintain a sense of absence that is constantly present; an absence that stands as a constant, indirect reminder of the loss that one does not think about on a daily basis. As the above passage indicates, this might be achieved through a means of breaking down one's understanding of the world – even if arbitrarily – into manageable portions, but in a way that avoids perpetuating 'us and them'-style absolute divisions between one part of the globe and another.

⁷⁰ Powers, *Yellow Birds*, p. 224.

⁷¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 24; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

3.5 ‘Like a tattered quilt of fallen stars’: Weaving Meaning out of Absence

The notion of breaking the world down into fragments is presented with greater foreboding in *The Yellow Birds*. By the time of Bartle’s stream of consciousness in the James River, it has become clear that his sense of connection to humanity has begun to fragment. When overcome by guilt and mourning over Murph’s death later on, he finally reaches the point at which he can declare: ‘My separation was complete’.⁷² While it would be simplistic to read too close a connection into Bartle’s experience in Iraq with Powers’ own, it is notable that Brian Castner, who took part in a joint interview with the author for Connecticut Public Radio, has written that ‘Powers said that he wrote fiction because he needed the space to first make sense of the war, and then put it down in a new way that provided separation between him and it’.⁷³ This is a starkly different kind of separation, which creates a distance from the war and, presumably, brings a return to a sense of human connectedness slightly closer. On such a scale, war and humanity are at opposite ends, and closeness to one implies a separation from the other.

Bartle’s sense of separation, and the solitude that stems from it (that is, of lost souls wandering the earth absented from a shared humanity), is again underscored through the landscape. This is particularly apparent when he recalls another moment with Murph, in which the latter ‘pointed to the low hills around the city. Small fires had sprung up in the distance. A few city lights and the fires on the hillside burned like a tattered quilt of fallen stars. “It’s beautiful,” I whispered. I was not sure if

⁷² Ibid., p. 61.

⁷³ Brian Castner, “‘The Yellow Birds’: A Heartbreaking Story of Fighting in Iraq – and Then Coming Home’, *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2012
<http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/12/the_yellow_birds_a_heart_breaking_story_of_fighting_in_iraq_and_then_coming_home>

anyone heard me, but I saw the others point their fingers off into the darkness'.⁷⁴ The simile 'like a tattered quilt of fallen stars' evokes a sense of disconnectedness on more than one level: a quilt (like a text) must necessarily be woven from two or more initially separate strands, while stars are nodal points in a larger system or cosmos. However, there is also a subtle poetic tension in the phrase: while the joining together of strands in a quilt is *literal*, in a cosmos it is largely *theoretical*. Like time or temporality, the organisation of stars and planets into systems provides a means of helping make sense of vast astrological phenomena that remain for the most part beyond the understanding of even the most advanced scientific minds.

The fragmentation of Bartle's identity evidences a similar tension. The violence and killing around him, which he says has become 'normal', has shattered any subscription that he may have once held to the concept of an inherently shared humanity: like both a tattered quilt and a collection of fallen stars, humanity has, for him, been exposed as mere artifice, reduced once again to its constituent parts. The question with which he goes on to grapple is broader than that of whether an *a priori* shared humanity exists: more importantly, Bartle profoundly struggles with the question of whether, assuming that shared humanity is a fiction, it is a fiction worth adhering to and perpetuating. (In an interview with the *Guardian*, Powers has said that one of his purposes in the novel is to ask why 'the stories we tell ourselves are always about our goodness and our idealism', and I would suggest that this sense of a shared humanity is precisely such a story.)⁷⁵ Even after declaring the 'complet[ion]' of his separation from the human sphere, when he has been placed in a military jail to await trial for the disappearance of Murph's body, he continues trying to make sense

⁷⁴ Powers, *Yellow Birds*, p. 84.

⁷⁵ Kevin Powers, qtd. in interview, 'Kevin Powers: "I've Always Had a Certain Level of Comfort with the Dark Part of the Human Experience"', Tim Lewis, *Guardian*, 23 June 2013
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/23/kevin-powers-interview-yellow-birds>>

of the war by drawing connections between the numerous horrific events that have made up his experience of it: ‘My first few months inside,’ he narrates, ‘I spent a lot of time trying to piece the war into a pattern. I developed the habit of making a mark on my cell wall when I remembered a particular event, thinking that at some later date I could refer to it and assemble all the marks into a story that made sense’.⁷⁶ However, on the next page, he concedes: ‘Eventually, I realized that the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern. They were fixed in place. Connecting them would be wrong. They fell where they had fallen. ... I eventually accepted the fact that the only equality that lasts is the fact that everything falls away from everything else.’⁷⁷ Once again, like a ‘tattered quilt of fallen stars’ on the horizon, the connective meaning that he has attempted to attribute to the marks on his wall ‘falls away’, and they are drained of signification.

The problem for Bartle, which he never quite manages to understand himself, is not so much one of accepting the fictionality of shared human identity (his decision to break down the world’s deserts and plains into ‘parcels’ is, after all, also a way of fictionalising the reality around him). Rather, it is that he makes a mistake similar to Baudrillard by overlooking the fact that an apparent ‘evaporation of meaning’ does not necessarily equate to an *absence* of meaning, or at least not an absence that is completely without presence. Once again sparked by the Virginia wilderness, Bartle at one point narrates: ‘I turned towards the line of trees across the river and saw the whole world in fractions of seconds like the imperceptible flicker of light between frames of film, the long unrecorded moments that made up my life, one after another, like a movie I never realized had been playing all along’.⁷⁸ The volume, complexity

⁷⁶ Powers, *Yellow Birds*, p. 216.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

and even sublimity of his traumatic experience during the war is too much for his imagination to even begin to comprehend, rushing through his memory in a way that confounds his capacity for understanding (this confounding is evident even in the form that the memories take: the reduction of a whole lifetime of experience into a split second, ‘the imperceptible flicker of light between frames of film’).

It is in moments such as these that a kind of ‘meaningful’ absence might actually be useful, standing in for such torrents of traumatic memory in a way that may help Bartle to progress with his life, but that does not allow the trauma to linger unacknowledged (as in the case of Melville’s *Bartleby*). Moreover, such an absence might connect the loss of American life to that of Iraqi life, not only through a sharing of similarities but through a sharing of differences: that is, through an acknowledgement of the multitudinous differences *within* national and cultural identity groups as opposed to simply between them. This acknowledgement may once again be referred to as a ‘connective dissonance’.

4.0 ‘[I]nclusion and exclusion are not the only options’: Home and Exile

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, although Butler sometimes presents what is, in my view, an overly rigid understanding of the way in which post-9/11 reality is framed, at times she also shows that it can possess a more mellifluous quality. ‘If, as I have argued,’ she writes,

norms are enacted through visual and narrative frames, and framing presupposes decisions or practices that leave substantial losses outside the

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frame, then we have to consider that full inclusion and full exclusion are not the only options. Indeed, there are deaths that are partially eclipsed and partially marked, and that instability may well activate the frame, making the frame itself unstable. So the point would be not to locate what is “in” or “outside” the frame, but what vacillated between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself.⁷⁹

The novels at hand all depict characters who ‘vacillate’ between worlds (this includes Elster in *Point Omega*, whose role in the high echelons of Western power has, as I will go on to show, been supplanted by his exile in the desert). All of these characters possess a damaged sense of self, each finding him- or herself on a borderline between worlds that, through their insular framing of reality, reduce each other to absences in a way that makes it impossible for the characters to at any time feel whole. The characters each find themselves in an impossible situation not unlike that which Hannah Arendt describes as the experience of the refugee: ‘A man who wants to lose his self discovers, indeed the possibilities of human existence, which are infinite, as infinite as is creation. But the recovery of a new personality is difficult – and perhaps hopeless – as a new creation of the world’.⁸⁰ However, I argue that through these depictions of characters trapped in a constant vacillation between their divided identities, the novels again generate a connective dissonance, prompting the reader to consider the implications for identity when one is torn between pining for a lost sense of home and a need to build one anew.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 75.

⁸⁰ Hannah Arendt, ‘We Refugees’, in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. by Marc Robinson (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 117.

4.1 Crises of Home: Sharing Loss across Identity Divides

In *Gods Without Men*, all of the stories that make up Kunzru's narrative are in one way or another about characters experiencing crises at – and, by extension, *of* – home. The central couple, Jaz and Lisa Matharu, are having their marriage torn apart by the stress of looking after their autistic son, Raj; the young English rock star, Nicky Capaldi, runs to the Pinnacles to escape from his increasingly self-parodic, substance-fuelled lifestyle in the limelight; Laila, as I have already mentioned, has been forced to flee her childhood home; and Dawn, an ex-hippie from the Pinnacles area who was rejected by her conservative peers and now, in late-middle age, runs a dingy motel in the middle of the desert (a temporary home-away-from-home at which a number of the aforementioned stories intersect). As I have mentioned above, for these characters home is simultaneously absent and present, haunting them in a way not unlike that in which DeLillo's narrator is haunted by the absence of Elster's daughter in *Point Omega*. It is also, however, present around them in the constructed absence of the desert: familiar to all of the characters through childhoods spent immersed in American popular culture, the desert appeals to them because its association with absence offers an opportunity to escape their troubled lives (this is equally true for the Americans and non-Americans among the main characters: Nicky and Laila, for instance, are both fluent in American cultural idiom). However, as I have already been arguing, they all find the act of escape more difficult than they had expected. The reason for this is that the kind of Baudrillardian absence of signification that they desire is not really an absence of signification at all, but, on the contrary, a signifier *of* absence, to which they each ascribe a whole world – or 'lifeworld', to use Gregory's term – of meaning unique to their personal experience. In contrast to the narrowing of

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worldview evoked by DeLillo's definite article in 'the whole scorched world', the 'lifeworlds' at play in *Gods Without Men* are necessarily plural, each character bringing to the desert an entire world of signification.

Laila – along with her younger brother – is by some distance the character with the most complicated and ambiguous sense of home. Forced to flee her childhood home at the age of 11, she finds herself doubly outcast in the United States. She is one of few non-white Americans in her class at school, and accentuates her sense of difference by dressing herself in the black clothes and make-up of 'emo' subculture (a style closely associated with angst-filled teenage struggles over belonging and not belonging). On the other hand, however, she feels equally alienated from the extended family members – and wider refugee community – that her parents have sent her to stay with. These include the previously mentioned Uncle Hafiz, whose eccentrically enthusiastic Republicanism exacerbates the sense of distance that Laila already feels from the older generation, as well as from Iraq more generally, having spent her adolescence in the United States. Laila does not fit in anywhere, and this makes her perspective a particularly effective one from which to tell the story of the ersatz Iraqi village. Nobody in the novel is more acutely aware of the arbitrariness of identitarian constructions than she is, so this extra 'layer' of simulation puts her in the highly unusual position of having to quite literally *perform* an Iraqi identity that those on both sides of the cultural divide – namely, her fellow refugees *as well as* the training US military personnel – assume to be one within which she should feel naturally 'at home'.

This is evident throughout the chapter. For instance, when Laila finds herself expected to take part in a furious anti-American mob, she '[feels] ridiculous,

pretending to be angry about something that hadn't actually happened'.⁸¹ Moreover, the scene feels unfamiliar to her, bearing little resemblance to actual demonstrations that she has experienced in her real-life Iraqi childhood: 'Back home she'd seen many demonstrations, of unemployed men or activists from the religious parties, and they were nothing like this, but she supposed Wadi al-Hamam was supposed to be a country place, so perhaps it was realistic enough'.⁸² On the other hand, the expectations placed upon her by some of the other Iraqis are typified by a patronising sanctimony perpetuated by the town's 'imam' (who is actually a barber). When he notices that Laila is beginning to spend a lot of time with a marine called Ty, he warns her about the need to remember the conventions of identity that she is expected to uphold: 'You are a good Muslim girl, not some American prostitute. ... I think at bottom you are a very good girl. But you must wipe off this make-up and dress modestly'.⁸³ He proceeds to make a deeply racist comment about the morality of the soldiers – 'particularly the black ones' – which prompts Laila to turn and '[run] back to the women's dorm, where she knew the imam wouldn't follow her'.⁸⁴

Kunzru's fiction has long been noted for the way it 'dismantles restrictive notions of ethnicity as determining social intersubjectivities', and these examples continue this process by underscoring Laila's sense of distance from the oppressively rigid roles that each side expects her to maintain.⁸⁵ What troubles her most profoundly about the performance are the elements of it that she finds most unnervingly familiar and realistic. These are epitomised in the moment when one of the training instructors, Heather, insensitively issues her with the role of a girl whose father has been killed in

⁸¹ Kunzru, *Gods Without Men*, p. 294.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Dave Gunning, 'Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Empathy in the Realist Novel and its Alternatives', *Contemporary Literature*, 53.4 (2012), p. 783.

an American checkpoint shooting: ‘Why had they given her a dead father? Had Hafiz told them about Baba? She went to Heather and asked to be given a different biography. Heather looked at her strangely. “It’s only for the simulation, honey. It’s to help you play your part”’.⁸⁶ When Laila protests, Heather insists that she will ‘just have to live with it’, before going on to make a suggestion that clearly mirrors the patronising tone of the imam: ‘I think it’d be best if you didn’t wear such eye make-up. We like our civilian role-players as far as possible to adopt an ethnically traditional look. You brought your veil with you, right?’.⁸⁷ Laila does not even own a veil, and gives up her protest, ‘replac[ing] her earbuds and walk[ing] away’.⁸⁸

4.2 Rebuilding Home: An Absence of Loss?

This contrast between, on the one hand, Laila’s unfamiliarity with the stereotypes of Iraqi identity to which she is expected to conform, and, on the other, the stinging fragment of truth in the role’s evocation of her dead father, exacerbates her continued mourning over his loss precisely because it goes unacknowledged. In their mutual refusal to recognise the ways in which Laila attempts to express her feelings of loss and unbelonging, both the Americans and the Iraqis around her cause this loss to become a sort of absence, merging the two in precisely the way that I have earlier explained LaCapra warns can be dangerous. The absence of any recognition of her personal grief – and, in turn, of her father’s ‘grievability’ (to borrow a term from Judith Butler) – causes her to feel haunted by the loss in a way not dissimilar to that experienced by Jim in *Point Omega*. The simulated nocturnal raids on the village are,

⁸⁶ Kunzru, *Gods Without Men*, p. 290.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

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for Laila, ‘too close to reality to feel like a game’.⁸⁹ Moreover, even at moments in which she comes close to enjoying herself in the camaraderie amongst the Iraqi women in the village, she finds this enjoyment undercut by the memory of her father: ‘like a tower collapsing inside her chest, all her pleasant feelings crumbled. ... The singing, the hands clapping – everything led her back home, to her old life, to the good things and the bad and eventually the worst thing of all, the corpse lying on the garbage heap by the airport’.⁹⁰

David Mattin has correctly suggested that the novel's ‘centre of gravity’ is constituted by Raj's absence (‘the strange black hole around which his other narratives swirl haphazardly’), but here it is clear that these other narratives are filled with absence too.⁹¹ 9/11, for instance, is palpably absent in the simile of a ‘tower collapsing inside her chest’, and immediately creates a figurative connection between the loss of her father and the loss experienced by those with loved ones trapped in the World Trade Center. This complicates the reference to ‘home’ that immediately follows it. On a literal level, ‘back home’ of course refers to Iraq, but this ‘home’ is also at least partially a construction of Laila's imagination: this is not to suggest that Iraq does not exist, nor that it was not once her home, but rather that the melancholic reference to it as such here might more accurately be read as an example of LaCapra's understanding of the way in which absence and loss can often be conflated through narrative. ‘When absence is narrativized’, he writes,

it is perhaps necessarily identified with loss (for example, the loss of innocence, full community, or unity with the mother) and even figured as an

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 293.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 282.

⁹¹ Mattin, ‘*Gods Without Men*, by Hari Kunzru’, n. pag.

event or derived from one (as in the story of the Fall or the oedipal scenario).

Here there is a sense in which such narrative, at least in conventional forms, must be reductive, based on misrecognition, and even close to myth.⁹²

Laila's loss – and the inability of those around her to recognise it – has led her to begin creating narratives of a similarly mythical Iraqi 'home' that, paradoxically, in fact tell the story of the *absence* of any real 'home' in her life. It is, moreover, a longing for home that in at least one way contrasts sharply with what Kunzru has elsewhere identified as 'a very violent nostalgia for an imagined past of unity and wholeness, which can be pretty scary'.⁹³ The 'violent nostalgia' that Kunzru is gesturing towards here is the kind of fascistic homogenisation of identity typical of far-right or nationalist groups: a nostalgia in which the violence is directed towards others. In Laila's case, however, what is taking place is an internalisation of violence: the absence of a strong sense of home has a detrimental effect on her own sense of self. As LaCapra puts it: 'absence is the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies, or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses'.⁹⁴ Until Laila is able to share her loss – of both her father and her home – with those around her, giving voice to it in a way that allows it to be recognised as a loss equal to any other (including those of 9/11), she will continue to traumatically fixate upon an 'absolutized and fetishized' sense of 'back home' that will necessarily always elude her, keeping her locked in a vicious cycle of perpetual unbelonging.

⁹² LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 49.

⁹³ Kunzru, qtd. in 'An Interview with Hari Kunzru', p. 21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 50–1.

4.3 An Undesirable Collapsing of Space

In *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle feels a similar lack of belonging to any existing sense of ‘home’. This is particularly evident in a passage approximately a third of the way through the novel, at a moment in which the deeply interwoven ‘layering’ of Bartle’s memory of his time in Iraq is brought to the fore. In it, Bartle recalls a conversation between himself and Murph, in which Murph shows him a photograph of his girlfriend that he keeps hidden under his helmet. Bartle himself is in turn prompted to ‘[think] of home, remembering the cicadas fluttering their wings in the scrub pines and the oaks that ringed the pond behind my mother’s house outside Richmond’.⁹⁵ This is a particularly reflexive moment in the narrative, as Bartle, now back in Virginia, is not only remembering home, but remembering his wartime self remembering home. Yet, although the Richmond to which he has returned is geographically the same Richmond that he previously left, it is no longer ‘home’ to him in the way that it once was. ‘The space between home,’ he writes, ‘whatever that might mean for any of us, and the stretched-out fighting positions we occupied, collapsed’.⁹⁶ It is worth noting here the way in which this ‘collapsing’ of space echoes that described by Dave Eggers in *What Is the What* (see Chapter 1). As is the case in Eggers’ narrative, this collapsing of space produces a blurring of the boundaries between absence and presence: without easily determinable borders, home is rendered simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, and the implications of this are ambiguous.⁹⁷ On the one hand, a relaxing of the borders of ‘home’ might be seen as a

⁹⁵ Powers, *Yellow Birds*, p. 78.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting here that the ‘presence’ of absence is something that Nicoline Timmer has identified as a key feature of what, pointing toward Eggers (as well as David Foster Wallace), she describes as a recent ‘post-postmodern’ turn in American literature:

recognition of something similar to Jacques Derrida's call for a post-9/11 unconditional hospitality, one that is, paradoxically, 'practically impossible to live'.⁹⁸ On the other, it might be interpreted as a traumatised breakdown of signification not unlike that implied in the oppressive ubiquity of DeLillo's 'the scorched world'. In either case, a 'connective dissonance' can once again be identified between the loss of US and Iraqi lives.

What *The Yellow Birds* does more thoroughly than *Point Omega* or *Gods Without Men*, however, is to emphasise the importance of refraining from thinking about this connective dissonance as an end in itself, and to instead identify it as the starting point from which a means to an end can begin to be built. In other words, a collapsing of space might not necessarily always be a good thing: if one type of collapse can open up new empathic pathways that counteract the absence of Iraqi loss in post-9/11 American discourse, then another can entail a merely superficial sharing of loss that appears on the surface to be cosmopolitan, but in actuality does little to address the discursive structures through which an imbalance in the 'grievability' of life is established in the first place. Bartle fluctuates between these two poles, feeling incommensurably disconnected from humanity, but also aware that there exists no inherently shared humanity from which he can in fact be disconnected. The key problem that he is faced with is that of what to make of this knowledge; that is, how – and *why* – he should proceed with sharing his experiences, knowing that humanity, and all of the values associated with it, are illusory and transient.

'I believe we may now, at the turn of the millennium, be witnessing a new shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology, away from the schizophrenic investment Jameson discusses toward an indeed much more melancholic structure of affect, revolving around a 'loss' which has, paradoxically perhaps, a very strong 'presence' (a *traumatic* presence, Foster would probably say)'. Noline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millenium* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), p. 45.

⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, qtd. in interview, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 129.

‘Back home,’ Bartle narrates, ‘everything had begun to remind me of something else. Every thought I had blossomed outward and backward until it attached itself to some other memory, that one leading to another, impermanent, until I was lost to whatever present moment I was in’.⁹⁹ One might see this as another example of what Rothberg describes as the ‘multidirectionality’ of memory.¹⁰⁰ However, while I think this would be an accurate observation, the ‘multidirectionality’ of Bartle’s memory here does not reflect the cosmopolitan ideals with which Rothberg associates the term. (This is not to dispute Rothberg’s argument, nor to suggest that this is something that he overlooks: rather, it is simply not his primary focus.) As is the case with Gregory’s ‘connective dissonance’, *The Yellow Birds* raises questions about whether maintaining borders between different memories and experiences might sometimes be unavoidable, and, if so, in turn about where these borders should be placed and what form they should take. When memory has become so deterritorialised that it transcends *all* sense of place or specificity, then it will inevitably occupy one’s mind to beyond its full capacity, to the point where it becomes impossible to think about anything else: ‘It’s as if your life is a perch on the edge of a cliff and going forward seems impossible, not for a lack of will, but a lack of space. The possibility of another day stands in defiance of the laws of physics’.¹⁰¹ Even if one is aware that it is only a construction of the imagination, a sense of rootedness to a ‘home’ of some kind becomes necessary, whether in literal, physical form, or in that of an adherence to a set of ideas or an identity. Without it, Bartle finds, one becomes unanchored from space and time in a way not dissimilar to that which Kurt Vonnegut literalises in the form of Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of

⁹⁹ Powers, *Yellow Birds*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁰ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, pp. 1–3.

¹⁰¹ Powers, *Yellow Birds*, p. 134.

Slaughterhouse 5 (to which Bartle pays direct homage by following his ‘edge of a cliff’ simile with a verbatim reference to that novel’s most memorable motif: ‘So it goes’).¹⁰²

In his relation to a notional ‘home’, Bartle is ultimately caught between two extremes, embodied respectively by Murph and Sergeant Sterling. On the one hand, Murph is perhaps too rooted to his home for his own good, his nostalgia for his hometown ultimately affecting his ability to carry out his duties (as well as to keep hold of his sanity). At the other extreme, Sterling’s cynicism extends from his long-ago disavowal of any sense of home. Shortly before Murph’s death, he says: ‘Murph is home, Bartle. And he’s gonna be there with a flag shoved up his ass before you know it’.¹⁰³ Sterling is, of course, right, but his own attitude towards home is equally problematic: ‘There’s only one way home for real, Private. You’ve got to stay deviant in this motherfucker’.¹⁰⁴ It is not entirely clear whether his use of the word ‘home’ here is to be taken literally (and that the only way to get there is to ‘stay deviant’), or whether he is making a nihilistic reference to death (in which case ‘stay[ing] deviant’ would be the way to *avoid* it). In either case, the need to ‘stay deviant’ – that is, to ignore or *disconnect* oneself from normal rules (of war, society, humanity) – is key to his approach. As is evident from his cold-blooded murder of the Iraqi cartwright, Sterling is a figure who serves as a warning to Bartle about what he might himself become if he were to allow his post-traumatic incredulity towards constructions such as home, or of shared human experience, to harden into a nihilistic cynicism. Indeed, the misguidedness of Sterling’s attitude is hinted at on the preceding page: ‘how can

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

you measure deviation,’ Bartle narrates, ‘if you don’t know the mean? There was no center to the world’.¹⁰⁵

What Bartle is left with is a choice between giving up on any hope of ever again feeling connected to a home, or accepting that such a connection will have to be driven largely by the force of his imagination: he will have to construct a new sense of home for himself through an active decision to subscribe to a sense of shared identity of one kind or another. In his description of a world in which there is ‘no center’, but in which it is simultaneously impossible to exist without subscribing to a ‘center’ – or ‘home’ – of sorts, even if only loosely, Bartle is made into a kind of figurative refugee, albeit one for whom the emotional consequences of his experience have been no less traumatic. Forced not out of his literal home, but out of his ability to adhere to a *sense* of home, he is as adrift in the world as Kunzru’s Laila. Indeed, he ultimately – and somewhat disconcertingly – comes to embody the predicament faced by the drifting refugee figure that Arendt describes in her essay.

4.4 Self-imposed Exile: Legitimizing Exceptionalist Frames

Both Laila and Bartle, in their own distinct ways, embody a state of homelessness not unlike that described by Edward Said in his essay ‘Reflections on Exile’. Exile, Said writes,

is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology – designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole – is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world.¹⁰⁶

Although one might point out that Bartle does in fact 'have' an army and a state, this is not straightforwardly the case: when the truth emerges about his role in the disposal of Murph's body, he is placed under arrest, with the strong likelihood of dismissal from the army, a prison sentence, and a future of social exclusion. In contrast to this, however, I would suggest that in *Point Omega*, DeLillo presents in Elster a kind of exile that differs quite significantly from the refugee figure described by Said (as well as by Arendt). While, for Said, '[e]xile is not ... a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you', Elster epitomes a version of *self-imposed* exile that simultaneously evokes, on the one hand, a rich tradition of 'loners' in the wilderness in American literature and popular culture, and, on the other, the ideological frame of political, economic and cultural 'exceptionalism' to which the United States has frequently been accused of subscribing, not least in the lead-up to (and aftermath of) the 9/11 attacks. Elster is emphatically *not* a refugee, yet the loss of home is for him as much of a reality as it is for both Laila and Bartle.¹⁰⁷

The reason Elster gives for his transposition into the desert is that he wishes to escape from what he sees as the intolerable speed at which time is experienced in the

¹⁰⁶ Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', in *Reflections on Exile, and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), p. 177

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

city, and, in particular, amidst the bustling crowd of government and military officials that has surrounded him in recent years: ‘News and traffic. Sport and weather,’ Jim narrates, ‘These were his acid terms for the life he’d left behind, more than two years of living with the tight minds that made the war. It was all background noise, he said, waving a hand’.¹⁰⁸ However, when Jim later asks him ‘Is this exile? Are you in exile here?’, he responds:

“Wolfowitz went to the World Bank. That was exile. ... this is different, a spiritual retreat. The house used to be owned by someone in my first wife’s family. I came here on and off for years. Came to write, to think. Elsewhere, everywhere, my day begins in conflict, every step I take on a city street is conflict, other people are conflict. Different here”.¹⁰⁹

He adds a little further on: ‘The house is mine now and it’s rotting away but let it. Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than see it. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don’t get old here’.¹¹⁰ Elster strives to characterise his attraction to the temporality of the desert as one towards a truer or more natural way of living (one from which his life in the sped-up world of the city is actually more akin to a form of self-imposed exile), but there is a kind of dramatic irony at play here in which the reader is able to see the tragedy of his situation much more clearly than he can. His description of the house as ‘rotting away’ is particularly telling in this respect. Although, to him, the house represents home both literally (he owns it) and figuratively (in that he invests it

¹⁰⁸ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.

with warm and intimate family memories), it does not allow him to fully ‘retreat’ from a world in which ‘Lying is necessary’ and military officials ‘[try] to create new realities overnight’. Rather, it simply enables him to perpetuate an alternative fiction of a home that has long-since disappeared: one in which he might desperately cling to a vestige of a lost, pre-war sense of innocence. While he may have convinced himself that he is closer to ‘home’ in the desert, in actuality this adherence to a remnant of times gone by merely protects him from the reality of its absence.

The elaborately fictional sense of home that he has spun around himself is unravelled immediately in the moment that his daughter goes missing. Jessie constitutes the only remaining connection that the 73-year-old has with any home to which he once may have belonged. Indeed, while she is at the house in the desert, Elster attaches himself to her with the emotional intensity of a man on the verge of utter solitude: ‘Elster’s possessiveness,’ Jim narrates, ‘his enclosing space, made it hard for me to set her apart, to find some semblance of an independent being. He wanted her near him all the time’.¹¹¹ Jim suspects that the attention he pays her sometimes spills over from healthy fatherly affection to a kind of ‘smothering’.¹¹² However, when Jessie goes missing, and it becomes increasingly clear that she will not be coming back (and is in all likelihood murdered), Elster’s pretence falls apart, his carefully measured stoicism instantly crumbling. When they finally leave the house to return to the city, Jim narrates:

We drove in silence behind a motorboat being towed by a black pickup. I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck,

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹² Ibid.

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half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not.¹¹³

Upon the loss of his last remaining connection to a living sense of home, Elster can no longer ignore his exile from the world: he has passed the peak – or ‘omega point’ – of his power and influence on world affairs, and has quickly found himself descending into oblivion. There is a clear parallel to be drawn here between Elster's demise and a perception of American exceptionalism that is increasingly unsustainable in the wake of 9/11. Elster's situation is synecdochic of that of a post-Iraq war United States: Fukuyama's ‘End of History’ has not been reached, the triumph of liberal democracy has been exposed as a fallacy, and the exceptionalism that has stemmed from each has been revealed to itself be a kind of self-imposed exile or uprooting from the external world, its illusion of inviolability shattered by an unprecedented subjection to violence and loss.

Elster's perception of different temporalities between the city and the desert can, therefore, also be viewed as a synecdoche for something like the global separation of temporalities that Butler identifies in *Frames of War*: differences between temporalities exist, but only to the degree that one perceives them to exist. Time is a human construction, a system of measurement, so it follows that differences between temporalities are likewise constructed, and thus subject to change. Moreover, as is evident from Elster's experience of time in the United States, the differences

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 98.

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within temporalities are at least as significant as those between them. When Jessie goes missing, the boundary between the temporalities of city and desert, upon which Elster has been relying in order to maintain his illusory sense of home, suddenly shifts, and he is forced to acknowledge that time is even more fluid than he initially imagined. With a shift in the boundaries between temporalities, however, comes not only a shift in the boundaries of home, but an appreciation – if not for Elster then at least perhaps for Jim (and certainly for the reader) – of these boundaries’ nebulous, dissonant disposition: a dissonance that, depending upon how one chooses to perceive it, has the potential to be either isolating or connective.

5.0 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used three literary examples to argue that fiction engaging with the Iraq war has often sought to deconstruct the kind of ‘us and them’ identitarian binaries propagated in the reactionary framing of post-9/11 political discourse by the Bush administration and global media outlets. I have suggested that the novels in question do this by generating a ‘connective dissonance’ through the three interconnected tropes of the wilderness, absence and home. The wilderness trope blurs the boundary between American and Iraqi landscapes, collapsing the space between them by drawing attention to the ‘imaginary geographies’ of each. The absence trope allows the authors to navigate the delicate question of how to open new empathic connections without homogenising different traumatic experiences or subjecting oneself to an unmanageable torrent of other peoples’ pain. Finally, through the trope of ‘home’, the three novels question what it means to share a sense of

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belonging or connection to others, demonstrating that even though there is often a strongly fictional – or imagined – element to such connections, they might be refigured in such a way that is both more reflexive and more inclusive than the narrow identitarian constructions frequently propagated in the aftermath of 9/11. In all three novels, this sense of reflexive identity is driven at through an emphasis on the ways in which dissonance can be a connective factor; one which, moreover, foregrounds the complex and multitudinous differences within identity groups as opposed to simply between them.

Chapter 4: '[T]he stories of anywhere are also the stories of everywhere else': Identity, Difference and History in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Enchantress of Florence*

1.0 Introduction

My life has given me this other subject: worlds in collision. How do you make people see that everyone's story is now a part of everyone else's story? It's one thing to say it, but how can you make a reader feel that is their lived experience?¹

In a 2005 interview with *The Paris Review*, Salman Rushdie made a case for the ability of literature to encourage readers to empathically imagine themselves into the 'lived experience' of the other, producing new global ties not unlike those that Judith Butler has called for in her recent work (see Chapter 1). However, like Dave Eggers's *What Is the What* – as well as the majority of other authors I have discussed in this thesis – Rushdie's post-9/11 fiction does not stop at a *redressing* of imbalances in empathy (or of the power structures that underlie it), but additionally works to deconstruct the categories of identity and difference that allow such an imbalance to occur in the first place. Continuing the expansion of this argument's scope that began in Chapter 3, which focused on novels that deconstruct the difference between two national identity categories (the United States and Iraq), the transnationalism of Rushdie's recent fiction

¹ Salman Rushdie, qtd. in Jack Livings, 'Salman Rushdie, The Art of Fiction No. 186', *Paris Review*, 175 (2005), section Interviews < <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5531/the-art-of-fiction-no-186-salman-rushdie>>

is such that the present chapter is less delimited by country or identity type. While the previous chapter explored a complex *negotiation* of difference in fiction, this chapter is more interested in the broader question of what it means to *be* different in a widely globalised post-9/11 world. (This is not to make a sharp categorical divide between the novels analysed in the two chapters, but rather to respond to a subtle shift between the texts in their thematic focus.) I am thinking here, again, of Heidegger's concept of 'world picture', which I discussed in the Introduction: that is, a mode of 'grasping' the world which understands that one's perception of it is perpetually both framed *by* and, in turn, a reframing *of* reality.² In their attempt to show that 'the stories of everywhere are also the stories of everywhere else', I suggest that Rushdie's recent novels constitute a response, of sorts, to a paradigmatic challenge that the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath presented to his own 'world picture'.³ This challenge specifically pertains to his earlier thinking on difference.

In works such as *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie approvingly depicted a merging or hybridising of apparently incommensurable worlds: as Rachel Trousdale succinctly puts it in a recent study, '[e]ach person in Rushdie's work is made of multiple internal selves, and community formation in *The Satanic Verses* begins by recognizing the plurality of selves we each contain'.⁴ However, in his more recent novels Rushdie grapples with the question of whether, at a time when US Presidents, al-Qaeda, and even liberal British novelists such as Ian McEwan agree upon quite clearly delineated borders

² Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. By Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 67

³ Rushdie, qtd. in Livings, 'Salman Rushdie, The Art of Fiction No. 186'.

⁴ Rachel Trousdale, *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination: Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 120. See also: Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford: Routledge, 1994); Roger Y. Clark, *Stranger Gods: Salman Rushdie's Other Worlds* (London: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001).

dividing ‘us’ from ‘them’, the idealisation of fissiparous identity boundaries can or should still be considered desirable. My contention is that, at least in his fiction, Rushdie answers this question in the affirmative: hybridity, interstitiality and historicity emerge from his post-9/11 novels with a newfound sense of contemporaneity. Instead of discarding them as outmoded postmodern tropes, he attempts to rethink these concepts and, in doing so, to persuade his readers that such ideas are still important. What results is a reaffirmation of his longstanding aspiration to subvert the homogeneous, sectarian discursive frameworks that allow ideas of absolute difference and rigid borders to be conceptualised in the first place.

1.1 History and Identity

In Chapter 3, I suggested that the narrative of Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* (2011) might be described as ‘polytemporal’, and that as a result it demonstrably reinforces Judith Butler’s contention that ‘thinking through the problem of temporality and politics ... may open up a different approach to cultural difference, one that eludes the claims of pluralism and intersectionality alike’.⁵ Rushdie’s recent fiction does something similar: like Kunzru’s text, it offers ‘a constant interplay of one through the other of the old and the new’.⁶ It is through this kind of temporal ‘interplay’, I argue, that his novels *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) reaffirm a long-established propensity in his fiction to subvert homogenous discursive frameworks.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 103.

⁶ Roger Luckhurst, ‘In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53.4 (2012), pp. 723.

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The primary way in which this interplay manifests in these novels, I suggest, is in their heavy and extended emphasis on the inseparability of identity from history. This connection has been central to Rushdie's work throughout his career: as Jaina C. Sanga has noted, Rushdie's writing illustrates that identity 'is not grounded merely in attempts to recover the past; rather, [it] refers to the way in which we are positioned and constructed by the workings of the past'.⁷ Indeed, Rushdie's post-9/11 fiction is notable – at a time when enthusiasm for a post-postmodern 'New Sincerity' is emergent in both literature and literary studies – for adhering to the kind of 'historiographical metafiction' that Linda Hutcheon notably identifies in her influential 1989 reading of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.⁸ In Hutcheon's words:

Historiographic metafiction like this is self-conscious about the paradox of the totalizing yet inevitably partial act of narrative representation. It overtly 'de-doxifies' received notions about the process of representing the actual in narrative – be it fictional or historical. It traces the processing of events into facts, exploiting and then undermining the conventions of both novelistic realism and historiographic reference. It implies that, like fiction, history constructs its object,

⁷ Jaina C. Sanga, *Salman Rushdie's Postcolonial Metaphors: Migration, Translation, Hybridity, Blasphemy, and Globalization* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 9. See also: Mita Banerjee, *The Chutneyfication of History: Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Bharati Mukerjee and the Postcolonial Debate* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2002); Sara Suleri, 'Contraband Histories: Salman Rushdie and the Embodiment of Blasphemy', in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. by D.M. Fletcher (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 221–35.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). Notable studies in post-postmodern fiction include: Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010); Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010).

that events named become facts and thus both do and do not retain their status outside language.⁹

In both of the novels that I analyse here – *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) – Rushdie attempts to similarly challenge totalising ‘received notions’ about the post-9/11 world by representing a multiplicity of pre-9/11 histories: the former is set variously in post-Partition Kashmir, Second World War Europe and late-Cold War America, while the narrative of the latter is split between India, Italy and America in the late 16th Century. Neither novel explicitly mentions 9/11 or the war on terror, but these are both deeply embedded in each text, particularly in the way that the narratives focus on the construction of identitarian difference through categories such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, East and West, religious and secular. To paraphrase Kamila Shamsie, Rushdie ‘entwine[s]’ 9/11 – and the ensuing war on terror – ‘with other stories’, deconstructing the borderlines between apparently disparate identities by drawing attention to their often entangled and sometimes overlapping histories.¹⁰

The chapter will begin by demonstrating how *Shalimar the Clown* engages with 20th Century history not so much in order to tell the ‘back-story’ of 9/11 and the war on terror, but instead to provide a sense of the multitudinous back-stories that together constitute the historical context of these contemporary events. Focusing on the connection between history and identity, I suggest that the novel privileges a self-reflexive questioning of the historical process over what it presents as a dangerous adherence to more homogenous understandings of the past: a homogenisation that it

⁹ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 78.

¹⁰ Kamila Shamsie, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’, *Guernica*, 1 February 2012
<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/>

indicates is often the first step towards sectarianism and terror. The chapter will then aim to show how, despite Rushdie's claims to the contrary, *The Enchantress of Florence* does something similar in its engagement with a more distant history, only this time on a deeper, more conceptual level. If *Shalimar the Clown* draws causal links between historical events leading up to 9/11 and its aftermath, then *The Enchantress of Florence* traces a series of echoes between historical events that may or may not be causally connected (as in Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*). In both of Rushdie's novels, this entwining of histories leads to an entwining of identities, and deconstructs reductive 'us and them' binaries by drawing attention to the extent to which difference exists *within* such categories in addition to simply between them.

2.0 '[T]he human race's divided self': Stepping across Lines in *Shalimar the Clown*

Shalimar the Clown is a novel that delves into the past in order to explore the present. It aims to complicate the simplistic 'us and them' identity binaries perpetuated since 9/11 in the global media by showing how these identities are not only entwined, but also how the boundaries that frame them are blurred through an overlap of historical contexts, or what Judith Butler might describe as 'a differentiated assemblage'.¹¹ In doing so, it reinforces a key point that Rushdie makes in his influential 2002 Tanner Lecture, 'Step Across This Line': namely, that 'the frontier is physical proof of the human race's divided self'.¹² As I have stated above, it draws attention to the multiplicity and difference that exists not only between, but also within, identity groups such as 'us' and 'them'.

¹¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 166.

¹² Salman Rushdie, 'Step Across This Line', in Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992–2002* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 409.

2.1 'Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else': Refiguring Space and Time

The novel begins with the assassination of an ageing American diplomat and former US ambassador to India, Maximillian Ophuls, on his doorstep in Los Angeles. Max's killer is a Kashmiri Islamist extremist called Noman Sher Noman, who also goes by the name of Shalimar the clown, a nickname given to him as a child in recognition of his special talent for tightrope-walking. The plot then jumps back in time to trace the parallel lives of Max and Shalimar against the troubled backdrop of twentieth-century Kashmir, one of the most volatile borderline spaces in recent world history. Exploring the reasoning behind Shalimar's ultimate act of violence, the novel never settles for any single conclusion, and the impression that the reader is ultimately left with is one of Shalimar walking a metaphorical tightrope between different identities: religious and secular, personal and political, past and present.

'Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else,' the narrator declares at the start of the book, 'Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete'.¹³ Rushdie is referring to both the fictionalised late 20th-century past in which the narrative is set *and* the contemporary post-9/11 present in which it is being read. What becomes apparent is that the terms 'everywhere' and 'everywhere else' denote more than just geographical space: 'Our lives, our stories' flow into one another also across time, dissolving the frontiers between the 'now' and the 'then', as well as the self and the

¹³ Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 37.

other. This results in a fictional blurring of the borderlines both within and between space and time, creating a narrative frontier zone in which parallel, seemingly incommensurable worlds – and the identities connected to them – are allowed to weave freely into one another.

Referring to Francis Fukuyama's famous proclamation about 'The End of History', Slavoj Žižek has written that before 9/11, the United States had 'perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing such violence only through the safe medium of the television screen, [but] is now directly involved'.¹⁴ Moreover, he adds that 'the only way to ensure it does not happen *here* again is to prevent it from happening *anywhere else* ... America should learn humbly to accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not an exhilarating retaliation'.¹⁵ Through its blurring of the boundaries between space and time, I would argue that Rushdie's novel expands this notion of 'anywhere else' to also include 'anytime else': the past and the present are allowed to bleed into one another through a kind of textual osmosis. When the 'everywhere' of today becomes entangled with the 'everywhere else' of the past, any sense of rigidly homogeneous history, including the supposedly 'post-historical' history of liberal democracy, is inevitably undercut. The 'war on terror', the reader is led to infer, must therefore involve more than just a battle of one history against another: instead, as with the ongoing crisis in Kashmir, it emphasises that a resistance needs to take place against the ideological homogenisation of history itself.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real', in *The Universal Exception*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 282. See also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

2.1i '[T]imes more deceptive than we have ever known': Derealising History

Max Ophuls's daughter attempts her own personal struggle against an overbearing history towards the end of the novel. Her given name is India, but she objects to this and begins to call herself 'Kashmira', in reflection of the borderline territory she feels is her true mother country (as it is literally where her mother was born). Her father reprehends her for this: 'Be so good as to cease to cast yourself in fictions,' he says, 'Pinch yourself, or slap yourself across the face if that's what it takes, but understand, please, that you are nonfictional, and this is real life'.¹⁶ In a similar vein, Kashmira's mother, a Hindu Kashmiri woman called Boonyi Kaul, reflects upon the early stirrings of religious sectarianism in her village by noting, prophetically, that:

The times are changing ... Our children aren't like us. In our generation we were straightforward folk, both hands on the table in plain view at all times. But these youngsters are trickier types, there are shadows on the surface and secrets underneath, and they are not always as they seem, maybe not always even what they think they are. I guess that's how it has to be, because they will live through times more deceptive than any we have known.¹⁷

The initial implication here is that we have fallen upon precisely such 'deceptive times' today, but Boonyi's own idealising of the past is also slightly suspect, reflecting in a

¹⁶ Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, p. 352.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

subtle (and comparatively much more innocent) way the Fukuyamaite notion of a break with the kind of universalising, homogeneous history – or, in short, ‘History’ – that Žižek is attacking.¹⁸ As such, the reader is prompted to read the history of Kashmir in a new, perhaps more nuanced manner: the past is shown to be shaped by the present to at least as great an extent as the present is shaped by the past. Max’s late 20th-century tendency to see the ‘before now’ as a force that merely shapes the ‘now’ is, like himself, rapidly fading in time, ‘reced[ing] into the past[,] ... each successive moment ... being lost forever, surviving only in outer space in the form of escaping light rays’.¹⁹

Shalimar the clown’s father, Abdullah Noman, experiences a similar sense of unease as he witnesses the gradual fragmentation of his previously peaceful village of Pachigam along religious sectarian lines: ‘[he] experienced the bizarre sensation of living through a metaphor made real. The world he knew was disappearing; this blind, inky night was the incontestable sign of the times’.²⁰ His confusion essentially amounts to a kind of derealisation of an already ‘derealised’ reality: Abdullah once thought of Pachigam as a multicultural haven, accommodating otherness in a way that was naturally conducive to a pluralistic existence, but when Pachigam is eventually destroyed by a vengeful Pakistani army, it is not only the existence of the village that comes to an end, but also the existence of its existence; the metaphysical frame of space and time has been warped by History and rendered immutable. As Rushdie puts it later on:

¹⁸ I use the capitalised ‘History’ throughout this chapter to denote the type of ‘universalising, homogenous history’ I describe here. My use of it draws on the concept of ‘Universal History’ that Fukuyama outlines in *The End of History and the Last Man*: ‘A Universal History of mankind is not the same thing as a history of the universe. That is, it is not an encyclopaedic catalogue of everything that is known about humanity, but rather an attempt to find a meaningful pattern in the overall development of human societies generally’ (p. 55). More broadly, it is a form of ‘grand narrative’, or ‘metanarrative’, in the sense critiqued in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. xxiii–xxv.

¹⁹ Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, p. 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[T]here was no Pachigam any more. Pachigam was destroyed. Imagine for yourself.

Second attempt: the village of Pachigam still existed on maps of Kashmir, but that day it ceased to exist anywhere else, except in memory.

Third and final attempt: The beautiful village of Pachigam still exists.²¹

Although the sentimentalised, fictitious village of Pachigam should not be read as straightforwardly analogous to the insular, ‘post-Historical’ First World liberal democracy of the 1990s, the clash of homogeneous ‘History’ with more heterogeneous understandings of history in the wake of the village’s ‘derealisation’ has a strong contemporary resonance. Pachigam’s perceived isolation from the world is punctured by a violence that is not only physical, but also identitarian: its multicultural communal identity is eradicated by a more forceful and domineering version of world History. Like a ‘successive moment ... surviving only in outer space in the form of escaping light rays’, the village is elided from history by a dominating frame of war. However, for the reader, this elision serves to underscore Butler’s contention that ‘we are all subject to one another, vulnerable to destruction by the other, and in need of protection through multilateral and global agreements based on the recognition of a shared precariousness’.²²

²¹ Ibid., p. 309.

²² Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 43.

2.2 Binaries, Delegitimation and Historicity

The melding of historical narratives in *Shalimar the Clown* evidences a degree of complexity that is less apparent in Rushdie's recent non-fictional writing. In his post-9/11 journalism, Rushdie has repeatedly drawn a clear binary, like Ian McEwan does in 'Only Love and then Oblivion', between an 'us' and a 'them' in the post-9/11 world. In a piece written shortly after the attacks, for instance, he suggests that one – among many – of the ways in which the West needs to respond to the assault is by 'sending our shadow warriors against theirs, and hope that ours prevail'.²³ Admittedly, Rushdie qualifies this binary with a greater degree of nuance than McEwan does, arguing that 'this secret war alone cannot bring victory. We will also need a public, political and diplomatic offensive whose aim must be the early resolution of some of the world's thorniest problems: above all the battle between Israel and the Palestinian people for space, dignity, recognition and survival'.²⁴ His metaphorical use of shadows, likewise, confers an element of ambiguity and flexibility upon the 'us and them' binary (indeed, his figurative reliance upon shadows is not dissimilar to that of Dave Eggers in *What Is the What*; see Chapter 1).

2.2i Rushdie's Divided Self: Fiction and Non-Fiction

Over the past decade, Rushdie's nuance has occasionally become less apparent. For instance, in the final chapter of his recent memoir, *Joseph Anton* (in which he refers to himself in the third person), Rushdie's analysis of the war on terror relies upon a binary

²³ Salman Rushdie, 'The Attacks on America', in *Step Across This Line*, p. 392

²⁴ *Ibid.*

between ‘human nature’ and ‘rage’ that, like McEwan’s description of ‘our humanity’ is ultimately rather reductive:

And he too refused anger. Rage made you the creature of those who enraged you, it gave them too much power. Rage killed the mind, and now more than ever the mind needed to live, to find a way of rising above the mindlessness.

He chose to believe in human nature, and in the universality of its rights and ethics and freedoms, and to stand against the fallacies of relativism that were at the heart of the invective of the armies of the religious (*we hate you because we aren’t like you*) and of their fellow travellers in the West, too, many of whom, disappointingly, were on the left.²⁵

While the anti-fundamentalist sentiment in this passage, as well as its attack on relativist ‘invective’, have been present throughout Rushdie’s career, they here congeal into a simplistic binary language that is quite at odds with what Robert Eaglestone has rightly identified as the fact that, in the author’s fictional writing, ‘[t]here are no straightforward answers ... indeed, it piles paradox on paradox’.²⁶ Such has been the extent of Rushdie’s apparent shift away from his usual nuance that Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate have placed him alongside Ian McEwan and Martin Amis as part of a group of ‘New Atheist’

²⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), p. 626.

²⁶ Robert Eaglestone, ‘Salman Rushdie’, in *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Robert Eaglestone and Martin McQuillan (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 8.

authors, whose work is characterised by ‘a disturbing aesthetic-political dogmatism – about science, about reason, about religion and, in many cases, about Islam’.²⁷

However, despite the binarism of Rushdie’s latest non-fiction, I would suggest that in his recent fictional writing there remains a resistance to both dogmatism and straightforward answers, and this is particularly the case with his approach to history in *Shalimar the Clown*. The novel places emphasis on the need to resist taking any part in a struggle of one homogeneous ‘History’ against another during the war on terror. What it encourages instead is, to borrow a term from Lyotard, a ‘delegitimation’ of the processes by which history is appropriated and homogenised for tacitly ideological ends.²⁸ This is not to suggest that the novel promotes any kind of ostensibly ‘post-ideological’ understanding of history, but rather that it foregrounds the ways in which historical narratives are constructed, draining legitimacy from any one narrative that attempts to lay claim to the absolute truth. In this sense, it effectively constitutes a continuation of the kind of ‘chutneyfication of history’ that Mita Banerjee analyses in *Midnight’s Children*: that is, a process not only akin to ‘an understanding of historiography as a struggle for representation’, but also concerned with ‘representations of the cultural difference epitomized by the chutney’.²⁹ In *Shalimar the Clown*, when the ‘everywhere’ of today becomes entwined, or ‘chutneyfied’, with the ‘everywhere else’ of the past, all sense of homogeneous ‘History’ – including, once again, the ‘post-History’ of liberal democracy – is rendered unstable: each moment is not simply connected to multiple others, but also constructed by them, and vice versa. After 9/11, the six-decade struggle for Kashmir is

²⁷ Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic After 9/11* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 12.

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 40.

²⁹ Banerjee, *Chutneyfication of History*, p. 9.

re-imagined – or even imagined for the first time – by many in the West who might previously have failed to see its connection to their own lives. As Theo Tait puts it in an otherwise rather negative review of the novel for the *London Review of Books*: ‘*Shalimar the Clown* will tell many readers that the recent history of Kashmir is both a terrible tragedy and a fault-line in the modern world, which we ought to know about. This must be a good thing’.³⁰ What was once perceived as another region’s history has been recast as one that has implications around the globe (as well as being, of course, a war in which the Western world – particularly Britain – has already been long implicated through its colonial past).

2.2ii ‘[A]wareness of the historical process itself’

In *Refiguring History* (a sequel to and defence of his more well-known 1991 postmodernist manifesto, *Re-thinking History*), the historiographer Keith Jenkins makes just such a point about the dangers of historicising the past, as well as ignoring its continued ‘reimagining’ by historians in the present:

[I]t is patently obvious that it is historians who create history and that ‘the past’ which they carve-up into meaning is utterly promiscuous. ... [T]he so-called past (the before now) doesn’t exist ‘meaningfully’ prior to the efforts of historians to impose upon it a structure or form; ‘the before now’ is utterly shapeless and knows of no significance of its own either in terms of its whole

³⁰ Theo Tait, ‘Flame-Broiled Whopper’, *London Review of Books*, 27.19 (2005)
<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n19/theo-tait/flame-broiled-whopper>>

or its parts before it is ‘figured out’ by us. Consequently, no historian or anyone else acting as if they were a historian ever returns from his or her trip into ‘the past’ without precisely the historicisation they wanted to get; no one ever comes back surprised or empty-handed from that destination. There are no empty-handed historians because there are no empty-headed ones: the historicised past is only ever us – back there.³¹

To suggest that ‘the past’ is ‘utterly shapeless’ is, admittedly, to draw close to the potentially dangerous intellectual territory of moral and ideological relativism: if the ‘before now’ ‘knows of no significance of its own ... before it is “figured out” by us’, then one might argue that the legitimacy of action against, for instance, a fascist historicisation of the past is significantly undermined. However, what I would suggest prevents Jenkins from drifting into such nihilism is the fact that he does not attempt to argue for a rejection of ‘historicisation’ *per se*, as this would itself entail the ‘revival’ of a supposedly non-historicised ‘History’ of his own. On the contrary, he demonstrates that what is needed is what Hayden White has described as a heightened subjective ‘awareness of the historical process itself’.³²

The concept of the ‘constellation’, which I referred to in the thesis’ Introduction and elaborated upon in Chapter 2, is once again salient here. As Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, ‘[t]he history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other

³¹ Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), pp. 10–11.

³² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 97.

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objects'.³³ The 'object' in question here is history itself, and what Rushdie is encouraging is an understanding of it in relation to a constellation of other histories. Following in the tradition of his previous novels, *Shalimar the Clown* prompts an 'awareness' of the historical process not by merging fact and fiction as an end in itself, but by doing so in a way that highlights a similar merging that is present in all historical narratives. In other words, he draws attention to history's textuality.

As in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, the borderline between fact and fiction is deconstructed when – to borrow a term from Barthes – it is placed within the context of a global 'tissue of signs'.³⁴ The difference this time is that, as with a number of other postmodern tropes that Rushdie has helped to propagate over the past three decades, the very notion of a historical textuality is itself laid open to question. While the 'everywhere' of space and the 'everywhere else' of time are allowed to flow freely into one another, generating an intellectual forum for interpretation that is conducive to a subjective 'awareness' of the reader's own role in the construction of her own personal understanding of history, Rushdie takes this thinking a step further by considering whether the pursuit of such 'awareness' may itself have the potential to be historicised in an overly homogenous way. It is for this reason that he follows up a description of Los Angeles's pleasingly unstable and 'illusory' postmodern surfaces with a warning about the dark, problematic flipside to the relatively tidy kind of historical decentredness propounded by figures such as Jenkins: 'In such a place even the forces of destruction no longer needed the shelter of the dark. They burned out of the morning's

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (Oxford: Routledge, 1990), p. 163.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1987), p. 147.

brightness, dazzling the eye, and stabbed at you with sharp and fatal light'.³⁵ On the one hand, an 'awareness' of the historical process can help to complicate reductive 'us and them' binaries; on the other, an 'awareness' that is so relativistic as to result in a forestalling of judgement can be as problematic as the homogenous understandings of history to which it is ostensibly offering an alternative.

2.2iii Postmodernism and Competing Historical Frames

In *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie by no means undercuts the relativism of his earlier work by siding with its 'anti-relativist' critics. On the contrary, he takes a radically nuanced position, accepting – and, importantly, respecting – the challenge posed by such critics, but also ultimately looking to create ways to respond to these challenges instead of simply acquiescing to them. *Shalimar the Clown* shows that Jenkins is perhaps being overly hasty when, elsewhere in *Refiguring History*, he dismisses his critics as mere 'panic-mongers'.³⁶ In this respect, one might view *Shalimar the Clown* as grappling with the 'waning of the postmodern project' that Jennifer Hodgson discusses in a recent essay titled "'Such a Thing as Avant-Garde Has Ceased to Exist": The Hidden Legacies of the British Experimental Novel'.³⁷ In this instance, however, it does so in a way that attempts to 'remap' not so much the 'opposition between modernism and postmodernism' as

³⁵ Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, p. 5.

³⁶ Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, p. 2.

³⁷ Jennifer Hodgson, "'Such a Thing as Avant-Garde Has Ceased to Exist": The Hidden Legacies of the British Experimental Novel', in *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 19.

postmodernism's relationship with itself.³⁸ Indeed, the predicament that Rushdie specifically seems to have in mind is one not dissimilar to that set out by one of Jenkins's chief critics, Richard J. Evans, in his anti-postmodern polemic, *In Defence of History*.

'The fundamental problem with this kind of extreme relativism', Evans writes,

is, as we have already seen, that it inevitably falls foul of its own principles when they are applied to itself. Why, after all, if all theories are equally valid, should we believe postmodern theories of history rather than other theories? If all knowledge is relative, if it is impossible to give an accurate summary of a discourse without at the same time projecting one's own reading on to it, then why should we not give to the work of Barthes, or Derrida, or Jenkins, or Ankersmit, or White any significance that we wish to give it? At the most extreme fringes of postmodernism, indeed, an awareness of a problem leads to a self-conscious playfulness and arbitrariness of language, full of puns and metaphors, ambiguities and different concepts linked by the postmodernist oblique stroke, so that the infinite play of significations begins within the text itself. But in practice, even the most extreme deconstructionists do not really accept that their own theories can be applied to their own work.³⁹

The 'postmodernism' that Evans attacks is admittedly rather loosely defined. Likewise, his claim that it is 'impossible to give an accurate summary of a discourse without at the same time projecting one's own reading on to it' evidences, in my view, an

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 2005), p. 231.

underestimation of the complexity that ‘postmodern’ historiographical discourse has attributed to this process. Nevertheless, although Rushdie does not claim that postmodern historiographical discourse is necessarily in itself problematic, his novel does foreground a broader failure of its advocates to adequately confront the challenge made upon its own historicity by proponents of a more absolutist ‘History’.

2.2iv ‘Putting the past into the present tense’: Flattening History

Evidence of this can be found in the fact that the novel’s two most frustrated and fury-filled major characters, Colonel Hammirdev Suryavans Kachhwaha and Shalimar the clown, both have a tendency to conflate the ‘now’ with the ‘before now’, to the ultimate detriment of their respective psychological well-being. The former is a self-confessed ‘Rajput of the old school ... a spiritual descendant ... of the warrior princes, the old-time Suryavans and Kachhwaha rajas and ranas’, and indulges his sense of Historical import by ‘submerging his consciousness in the ocean of the senses, listening like a boy with a shell at his ear to the unceasing babble of the past’.⁴⁰ The latter, meanwhile, has a habit, when writing in English, of ‘put[ting] the past into the present tense’.⁴¹ Although it is worth noting that this conflation of past and present is not totally unique to these two characters (the matriarchal old Pachigam villager, Nazarébaddoor, also has a tendency to speak about the ancient past ‘as if it happened just the other day’), it is the evident need

⁴⁰ Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, pp. 94 and 123.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

of both to violently resist the decentring prompted by this conflation that Rushdie demonstrates is the driving force of their fury.⁴²

What begins as a narrative of personal pain (Hammirdev's disapproving father; Shalimar's betrayal by his wife, Boonyi Kaul) has the potential, if not addressed early on, to develop into a reactionary way of framing the world that is conducive to violence on a much broader scale. It is, moreover, the crossing of this line between the personal and the political that forms the basis of the novel's largest and most complex historiographical metaphor: the Partition of India – or, more specifically, Kashmir – as a partition of identities (that is, as the reductive homogenisation of multiple historically entwined identities into two antagonistic camps: 'us' and 'them'). Shalimar is an avatar for this process in his transformation from a symbol of Pachigam's multicultural harmony into an advocate of violent Islamism: 'The murderous rage of Shalimar the clown', Rushdie writes, 'his possession by the devil, burned fiercely in him and carried him forward, but in the murmurous night it was just one of many stories, one small particular untold tale in a crowd of such tales, one minuscule portion of the unwritten history of Kashmir'.⁴³ While at this point, Shalimar's fury is still only 'one minuscule portion of the unwritten history of Kashmir', it is contributing to the region's future in a way that has an extremely damaging effect on these other histories. The description of it as an 'untold tale' is infused with a distinctly post-9/11 irony in that the 'tale' of Islamist extremism is today far from 'untold'. The 'us and them' binaries at play in both 20th Century Kashmir and the 21st Century war on terror are entwined through Shalimar's fundamentalism and, as such, delegitimised: it becomes difficult to maintain a rigidly delineated 'us and them'

⁴² Ibid. p. 64.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 259.

binary when one binary is brought into contact with another, particularly if there is an overlap in the criteria by which the constituent categories of each are determined.

In his previous novel, *Fury*, which was published approximately two weeks before the 9/11 attacks, Rushdie wrote, with unnerving foresight, that:

Life is Fury [... it] drives us to our finest heights and coarsest depths. Out of *furia* comes creation, inspiration, originality, passion, but also violence, pain, pure unafraid destruction, the giving and receiving of blows from which we never recover. ... This is what we are, what we civilize ourselves to disguise – the terrifying human in us, the exalted, transcendent, self-destructive, untrammelled lord of creation. We raise each other to the heights of joy. We tear each other limb from fucking limb.⁴⁴

It is precisely such fury that, in *Shalimar the Clown*, smoulders on both sides of Kashmir's ideological war. Like the molten rock beneath a volatile fault line, fury has, for Rushdie, a shifting and amorphous quality, and can erupt in the forms of both homogeneity and heterogeneity, religion and secularity, hate and love. In stark contrast to the binary that Rushdie sets up in *Joseph Anton* between a post-Enlightenment 'human nature' and a fundamentalist 'rage', here it is fury that is shown to be a universal force, undercutting identity and difference and uniting individuals across partitions and divides: in the aftermath of catastrophe, when the discursive frames underpinning 'History' begin to dismantle, it is through fury that a new narrative or counter-narrative can be born. The key, according to Rushdie, lies in how one chooses this fury to be channelled. Both

⁴⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Fury* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 30–31.

Shalimar and ‘Kashmira’, for instance, experience crises of truth: for ‘Kashmira’, ‘the words *right* and *wrong* [begin] to crumble, to lose meaning, ... as if Max were being murdered all over again’.⁴⁵ Shalimar, on the other hand, while undergoing indoctrination in a Pakistani Islamist terror camp, begins to understand that ‘[t]he visible world, the world of space and time and sensation and perception in which [he] had believed [himself] to be living, was a lie’.⁴⁶ As the leader of his camp, Bulbul Fakh (otherwise known as the ‘iron mullah’), at one point declares to an army of militants, ‘Only the truth can be your father now, but through that truth you will be fathers of history’.⁴⁷ Both Shalimar and ‘Kashmira’ strive to construct a ‘History’ that will attribute meaning to their lives, existing as they do not only on the borderline between their respective worlds, but also on the volatile frontier between diametrically oppositional forces of ideological power. It is precisely the pliability and plurality of constructions of the past that, Rushdie demonstrates, can leave them open to appropriation by agents of power for potentially nefarious ends.

2.3 Nostalgia, Orientalism and Migration: Framing Kashmir

Kashmir, in the novel, occupies an interstitial space: like the living ‘ghost’ of Boonyi’s dead mother, it ‘exist[s] without actually existing’.⁴⁸ It is an ‘unstable twilight zone’, or a volatile frontier territory that has become a battleground upon which space and time have begun to merge, and ‘History’ – national, religious, ideological and otherwise – is quite

⁴⁵ Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, p. 335.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 115 and 226.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

literally the prize at stake. As a result, it becomes clear that in attempting to ‘frame’ the territory as their own, those fighting on each side in the conflict are in turn reciprocally ‘framed’ by it, their identity paradoxically constituted by a perpetual lack of identity.

As I have already argued, the hermeneutic layers in Rushdie’s palimpsestic representation of Kashmir, itself one of many competing ‘Histories’ of the territory, similarly begin to blur at the edges, making it difficult to determine whether the text might be more accurately described as a post-9/11 narrative about Partition, or as a post-Partition narrative about 9/11.⁴⁹ However, the literary appropriation of Kashmir’s troubles involves the potential ethical problem of having to avoid effectively Orientalising the region’s ongoing plight. There is a danger of exploiting its ‘Eastern’ otherness as a means of helping illuminate the nature of terror in the liberal democratic ‘West’.

2.3i Idealising the Past

When sectarianism first begins to stir in the idyllic Kashmiri village of Pachigam (in which much of the action is set), it becomes difficult to ignore the element of sentimental essentialism in the description of the tragedy. Shalimar’s father, Abdullah Noman, elaborates at length on the betrayal of what he calls the pluralistic spirit of ‘Kashmiriness’:

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 180.

[He] then mentioned *Kashmiriyat*, Kashmiriness, the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences. Most bhand villages were Muslim but Pachigam was a mixture, with families of pandit background, the Kauls, the Misris, and the baritone singer's long-nosed kin – *sharga* being a local nickname for the nasally elongated – and even one family of dancing Jews. “So we have not only Kashmiriness to protect but Pachigaminess as well. We are all brothers and sisters here”, said Abdullah. “There is no Hindu-Muslim issue ...”⁵⁰

The idealisation of the ‘before now’ in Rushdie’s Kashmir has, at least on a superficial level, an undoubtedly two-dimensional quality to it, the ‘one family of dancing Jews’ on its own undercutting any possibility of this harmoniously multicultural sense of ‘*Kashmiriat*’ attaining a level of seriousness above that of simple, cartoonish whimsy. Pankaj Mishra has made an argument along these lines in his scathing review of the novel in *The New York Review of Books*:

It may seem unfair to fault a writer of fiction for inaccurate or partial history, especially one engaged in creating a postmodern novel in which many different truths about the world can coexist. But it is clear from Rushdie’s omissions and emphases that he wants *Shalimar the Clown* to yield a particular truth about Kashmir and the world rather than talk about them “in every possible way.” As he describes it, Kashmir illustrates most vividly how the Muslim crazies of

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

today, intoxicated on the “absolutism of the pure,” aim to destroy innocently hybrid societies.

In most of his recent writings Rushdie has tried to dramatize how people accustomed to living with multiple truths and identities are locked in conflict with political and religious zealots insisting on their one absolute truth. On examination, however, this conflict between hybridity and fundamentalism appears to be a form of intellectual mystification, very useful to politicians, Op-Ed writers, and TV pundits who, when confronted with Muslim militants, seek to replace political analysis with psychoanalysis (“sexually repressed”; “they hate our freedoms”), pathology (“they are crazy”), and theology (“they are evil”).⁵¹

Mishra is right to notice the element of ‘intellectual mystification’ and perhaps overly clear-cut ‘conflict between hybridity and fundamentalism’ in the novel, but I would argue that by dismissing it on these grounds, he ultimately misses one of the narrative’s most salient points. Specifically, I would suggest there is a bitter irony at work in Rushdie’s playful prose, which is in evidence during even the most overtly idealised descriptions of Pachigam’s pre-war paradise. As I have already mentioned, the sectarian violence over the Kashmiri frontier zone has led to a dissolving of the village’s existence in space and time, ending not only its existence but also the ‘existence of its existence’ (‘Pachigam still existed on maps of Kashmir, but that day it ceased to exist anywhere else, except in

⁵¹ Pankaj Mishra, ‘Massacre in Arcadia’, *New York Review of Books*, 25.15 (2005)
<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18295>>

memory. ... The beautiful village of Pachigam still exists').⁵² The village's post-catastrophic non-space is a blank canvas, its past erased from History: it 'exist[s] without actually existing'. As such, when Mishra dismisses the novel on the basis of its historical 'omissions and emphases' and its need to 'yield a particular truth about Kashmir and the world', he underestimates the extent of Rushdie's fictional self-reflexivity. Rushdie's romanticisation of Kashmir is undoubtedly more than a little naïve and it can be traced through his oeuvre all the way back to *Midnight's Children* (see Stephen Morton's *Salman Rushdie: Fictions of Postcolonial Modernity* for a detailed exploration of the way Rushdie figures the Indian subcontinent throughout his oeuvre).⁵³ However, the interweaving of histories inherent in the narrative structure itself – in which the 'everywhere' of space flows into the 'everywhere else' of time – ensures that this nostalgic sentimentalism is also subjected, simultaneously, to newfound questioning.

2.3ii A Clash of Ideological Frames: Inverting Migratory Metaphors

The apparent Orientalising of Kashmiri History in the novel is similarly punctured with irony when Max first enters Pachigam's idyllic world (once again, Mishra is right to notice the element of 'Eastern' essentialism in the representation of the village, but too hasty in his assumption that it is ultimately condoned, intentionally or otherwise). By placing Max, a symbol of the late 20th-century postmodern 'West', in the context of the Kashmiri postcolonial 'East', Rushdie inverts the migratory metaphors that have been

⁵² Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, p. 309.

⁵³ Stephen Morton, *Salman Rushdie: Fictions of Postcolonial Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

prominent in virtually all of his fictional works since the early 1980s. Specifically, in addition to presenting its readers with a protagonist (Shalimar) who, in typical Rushdie style, migrates from the 'East' into the 'West', this is the first novel by the author to also include a major character who migrates from the 'West' into the 'East'. The result of this, as Morton argues in an article on the novel in *Textual Practice*, is that '*Shalimar the Clown* ... complicates the postcolonial metaphors of migrancy [that] Rushdie established in *The Satanic Verses*', and that it does this 'by drawing a parallel between the migrant narratives of Max ... [and] Shalimar'.⁵⁴ Migration, and the crossing of lines that it entails, has attained a new, post-9/11 level of complexity: the postmodern, 'post-Historical' liberal democracy of the 1990s West has itself been forced to step across the line between 'History' and historicity, to paradoxically *migrate* into a state of perpetual migration, an existential in-between space that problematises the very idea of space itself. This results in a profound sense of disorientation and, in turn, existential self-questioning, not unlike that experienced by Max upon his first encounter with sectarian warfare in Kashmir:

For the rest of his life Max ... would remember that instant during which the shape of the conflict in Kashmir had seemed too great and alien for his Western mind to understand, and the sense of urgent need with which he had drawn his own experience around him, like a shawl. Had he been trying to understand, or to blind himself to his failure to do so? Did the mind discover likeness in the unlike in order to clarify the world, or to obscure the

⁵⁴ Stephen Morton, "There were collisions and explosions. The world was no longer calm." Terror and Precarious Life in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, *Textual Practice* 22.2 (2008), p. 341.

impossibility of such clarification? He didn't know the answer. But it was one hell of a question.⁵⁵

It is just such a question that the reader is left with at the end of the novel when the narrative leaves 'Kashmira' and Shalimar locked in a deadly showdown, from which only one can emerge alive. In this moment, categories such as East and West, as well as 'us' and 'them', are drained of meaning: neither character can easily be reduced to an avatar representing either side in a crass, clichéd geopolitical dialectic. 'There was only Kashmira, and Shalimar the clown', the novel concludes, leaving the reader not with a simple clash of essentialisms, but with an image of two geographically uprooted, diametrically opposed types of ideological force, each urgently struggling for ascendancy in the aporetic frontier space of war-torn Kashmir.⁵⁶

When the 'everywhere' of space begins to meld with the 'everywhere else' of time, the 'world' of post-war Kashmir flowing into the 'world' of post-9/11 liberal democracy, and vice versa, a sense of context is generated in which any notion of homogeneous 'History' becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. This includes the theocratic 'History' of Islamism, the nationalist 'History' of India or Pakistan, and the postmodern 'post-History' of pre-9/11 liberal democracy. Through the novel's representation of Kashmir, Rushdie shows that in order to help prevent the kind of identitarian violence represented by 9/11 from 'happening *anywhere else*', it is necessary to learn from the past by imaginatively stepping across the line between 'anywhere else' and '*anytime else*'.

⁵⁵ Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, p. 180.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

3.0 '[H]is open-sesame, his passe-partout': Deconstructing Difference in *The Enchantress of Florence*

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie builds on *Shalimar the Clown*'s entwining of histories and identities by probing the boundaries between historical and fictional narratives. As with his previous novel, the text engenders a dissolving of frontiers between 'History' and historicity, text and context, 'us' and 'them'. However, while the earlier book can in some ways be seen as Rushdie's attempt to grapple with the immediate impact of 9/11 on the contemporary situation, *The Enchantress of Florence* is instead concerned, indirectly, with exploring the event's long-term socio-political reverberations, taking particular issue with what Rushdie has in his non-fiction described as the 'sanctimonious moral relativism' prevalent in liberal-left responses to the attacks and their aftermath.⁵⁷ This contemporaneity is present, I argue, despite the fact that Rushdie has himself claimed that the novel is a conscious attempt to move away from current affairs, and to indulge his licence as a storyteller to, as he puts it, once again just 'make stuff up'.⁵⁸

The novel is set at the turn of the 16th Century, its action split between Florence and the Mughal city of Fatehpur Sikri. A number of its characters are major historical figures, such as Niccolò Machiavelli – who Rushdie has acknowledged generally gets 'a bad press' – and the Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great, who is famed for his relatively forward-thinking, liberal style of despotism (in the novel, he actively encourages

⁵⁷ Rushdie, 'The Attacks on America', in *Step Across This Line*, p. 392.

⁵⁸ Salman Rushdie, interviewed by Kate Muir in *The Times*, April 4 2008, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article3681048.ece>

pluralism and social equality despite also having a taste for frequent public beheadings).⁵⁹ Much of the narrative takes the form of a story recounted to Akbar by a mysterious Florentine traveller called Niccolò Vespucci, who also goes by the name of ‘Morgor dell’Amore’ (or ‘the Mughal of Love’). However, although Rushdie’s attempt to imagine a world unencumbered by contemporary politics undoubtedly makes for enjoyable reading, it sits awkwardly with what he has also recently described as the way in which his narratives have often engaged with the borderline spaces between the ‘worlds’ of fact and fiction. For instance, in a 2008 interview with *The Times*, he stated that:

One of the things my books have explored is the boundary between the real world and the imagined world. That boundary may be softer than we imagine it is. If we think of things just naturalistically, one of the ways in which the world works is that things that are imagined become actual, an invention is like that; so is a nation. Many things which we take for granted began in imagination and became actual, so it is a soft frontier, softer than we think, and I have once or twice had some fun crossing it.⁶⁰

I would argue that in *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie does more than simply ‘cross’ the borderline between fact and fiction: rather, by drawing attention to the role of ‘fiction’ in the construction of ‘fact’, he works towards a deconstruction of it. As with Morgor’s apparently autobiographical tale, which forms the crux of the novel’s own narrative, the fictionalisation of these borderlines becomes, in turn, for the reader ‘his

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

open-sesame, his *passe-partout*' to a deconstruction of identitarian difference during the war on terror.⁶¹

3.1 'Work[ing] the frame ... giv[ing] it work to do': Passe-partout and Cultural Relativism

Given the novel's focus on global travel and migration, it is possible that in his use of the term *passe-partout* Rushdie has in mind the character Jean Passepartout from Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. However, *passe-partout* is also the name given to the piece of card that traditionally sits between a painting and its frame. A 'frame within a frame', so to speak, it exists in an interstitial state between the artwork and the external world, belonging wholly to neither one nor the other. According to Derrida, the *passe-partout* can be seen as a kind of transmutational 'slash' – or 'trait' – between the artwork and its external surroundings: 'One space remains to be broached,' he writes, 'in order to give place to the truth in painting. Neither inside nor outside, it spaces itself without letting itself be framed but it does not stand outside the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, gives it work to do'.⁶² The 'partition of the edge' constituted by the *passe-partout* is thus not a clear-cut distinction between art and non-art, so much as literally a 'partition' of the notion that there is a definite 'edge' to the artwork in the first place. It is a liminal space that forces readers to question exactly where an artwork ends and the external world begins.

⁶¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 29.

⁶² Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), pp. 11–12.

The Enchantress of Florence emphasises the metaphorical implications of the *passe-partout* concept by drawing attention to the often fissiparous nature of the borderline between the reality of the self and the reality of the other. Early on in the novel, the Mughal Emperor Akbar toys with the notion that human beings are in fact ‘all bags of selves, bursting with plurality’: “‘Could there be an ‘I’ that was simply oneself?’” he says, “‘Were there such naked, solitary ‘I’s buried beneath the overcrowded ‘we’s of the earth?’”⁶³ Of course, the concept of different ‘selves’ is nothing new, particularly in the work of a postmodern fiction writer such as Rushdie.⁶⁴ Derrida’s own work on ‘différance’, for instance, draws attention to the way in which difference is constructed through the literal deferral of ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ from one signifier to another.

However, in my view, the ‘*passe-partout*’ resonates most strongly with Rushdie’s engagement with the theme because it poses a challenge specifically to the kind of cultural relativism that, using the language of both postmodernism and postcolonialism, has emerged since 9/11 as a dominant force in the way that discourse about relations between the East and the West is framed. The restrictions that this relativism has, in Rushdie’s view, begun to cast on free speech and the capacity for intercultural moral judgement are evident in the emergence of recent ‘anti-hate’ legislation such as the Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006, which he has vocally opposed on the grounds that it confuses bigotry with the legitimate critique of ideas.⁶⁵ Indeed, Rushdie may well

⁶³ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, pp. 39, 40.

⁶⁴ See: Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*; David Birch, ‘Postmodern Chutneys’, *Textual Practice* 5.1 (1991), pp. 1–7; Sabrina Haussumani, *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Works* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ See the chapter, “Coming After Us” in *Free Expression Is No Offence*, ed. by Lisa Appignanesi (London: Penguin 2005), pp. 21–26: ‘Would [Home Secretary Charles] Clarke or [Labour MP Fiona] Mactaggart send the police into mosques on Fridays to arrest firebrand Islamists under their proposed new law? Don’t

have had the Act in mind when describing the so-called ‘Tent of the New Worship’, King Akbar’s revolutionary debating chamber in which participants are encouraged to defy religious sanctimony by engaging in ‘an intellectual wrestling match in which no holds [are] barred’.⁶⁶

3.1i ‘Messianic in a minor key’: An Inverted Orientalism

A notable example of this kind of relativism is apparent in the post-9/11 appropriation of the Saidian concept of Orientalism by proponents of left-wing journalistic discourse. As Nick Cohen suggests in his 2007 polemic, *What’s Left?: How Liberals Lost Their Way*, this is occasionally evident in the work of *The Independent*’s Middle East correspondent, Robert Fisk. When attacked by a group of refugees on the Afghan border in December 2001, for example, Fisk responded to the event by writing an article which argued that the men who beat him ‘should never have done so but [their] brutality was *entirely the product of others* [my emphasis]’.⁶⁷ As Cohen notes in his commentary on the article, ‘[Fisk] was forced to punch an attacker in the mouth, but ... didn’t blame him for provoking the violence. Instead, Fisk wrote that the man was “innocent of any crime except that of being the victim of the world”’.⁶⁸ Western Orientalism, in other words, has for Fisk effectively relativised the plight of the Afghan people to such an extent that all

make me laugh. New Labour is playing with the fire of communal politics, and in consequence we may all be burned’ (p. 26).

⁶⁶ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 97.

⁶⁷ Robert Fisk, ‘My beating by refugees is a symbol of the hatred and fury of this filthy war’, *The Independent*, 10 December 2001, republished by *Counterpunch* <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2001/12/10/my-beating-is-a-symbol-of-this-filthy-war/>>

⁶⁸ Nick Cohen, *What’s Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), p. 272.

sense of conscious agency has been absolved and they can no longer be held accountable for their actions.

It is precisely this kind of thinking that is hinted at when Akbar contemplates the inherent fatuousness of the notion of ‘Eastern enchantment’: ‘There was a thing in the emperor that rebelled against all this flummery, for was it not a kind of infantilization of the self to give up one’s power of agency and believe that such power resided outside oneself rather than within?’⁶⁹ Indeed, following Akbar’s trail of thought along a string of similarly searching questions, the passage concludes by stating: ‘He was left, in the end, with himself. Only he could choose’.⁷⁰ It is, one might infer, only by ceasing to be blinded by the notion of Eastern ‘enchantment’ – of both an Orientalist and an ‘anti-Orientalist’ kind – that the reader can avoid falling victim, like Fisk, to what Pascal Bruckner has described as ‘the paternalism of the guilty conscience’.⁷¹ As Bruckner puts it, ‘seeing ourselves [the ‘West’] as the kings of infamy is still a way of staying on the crest of history. ... Europe is still messianic in a minor key, campaigning for its own weakness, exporting humility and wisdom’.⁷²

Of course, none of this is to suggest that Rushdie, in his novel, aims to dismiss the contemporary relevance of Said’s *Orientalism*: as Vassilena Parashkevova has aptly noted in *Salman Rushdie’s Cities: Reconfigurational Politics and the Contemporary Imagination*, the novel ‘seeks to posit alternatives to the neoliberal thesis of the contemporary relationship between East and West as a clash between Islam and the West and to the image of a sword-wielding Islam in its encounter with Hinduism on the site of

⁶⁹ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 402.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁷¹ Pascal Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 34.

⁷² *Ibid.*

what is now the Indian subcontinent'.⁷³ Instead, I would suggest that *The Enchantress of Florence* works to question the extent to which such Orientalism can be described as totalising, and, as such, to counter an occasional overemphasis on this totalising aspect by well-meaning liberals such as Fisk, who perpetuate established 'us and them' binaries from an inverted perspective. Indeed, the novel works to demonstrate that this kind of inverted, left-leaning Orientalism can often merely exacerbate the perceived fundamental differences between the 'West' and the 'East', as such leading – ironically – to an inadvertent re-emergence of the 'dominating frameworks' of Orientalist discourse itself.

3.2 A Shared Experience of Difference: Challenging the East–West Binary

At a crucial point in his narrative, Morgor declares to Akbar that ““*This may be the curse of the human race ... Not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike*””.⁷⁴ This emphasis on the similarities as opposed to the differences between East and West is prevalent throughout the novel, but it is also more complicated than it might at first appear. In this section, I suggest that a key similarity between East and West that the novel gestures towards is that of a shared *experience* of difference: in other words, while the identities associated with East and West may be radically diverse, the novel foregrounds the existence of this diversity itself as an objective fact. In doing so, it complicates the East–West binary by demonstrating that the presence of difference

⁷³ Vassilena Parashkevova, *Salman Rushdie's Cities: Reconfigurational Politics and the Contemporary Imagination* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 179.

⁷⁴ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 171.

within each category is at least as important in the process of identity construction as that of difference between them.

3.2i 'De-doxifying' Orientalist Stereotypes

The most ostensible way in which the novel challenges the East–West binary is by playing games with Orientalist stereotypes: while initially appearing to subscribe to a conventional framing of History, particularly about the East, it repeatedly proceeds to undercut these assumptions by turning them on their head (in Hutcheon's terms, it might be described as 'de-doxifying' them).⁷⁵ A particularly notable instance of this is evident when the Mughal-descended princess and so-called 'Enchantress of Florence', Qara Köz, dismisses talk about her supposed 'Eastern wisdom' being at the root of the city's newfound good fortune: "there is no particular wisdom in the East," she said to Argalia. "All human beings are foolish to the same degree."⁷⁶ By deromanticising the essentialised 'wisdom' of the East in such a matter-of-fact fashion, the 'enchantress' actually *disenchants* the reader from any preconceived notions of 'Eastern-ness' that may, up until this point in the narrative, have had an influence on the interpretation of her character. Indeed, the first half of the novel actively manipulates its reader into taking such a position: before Köz finally emerges as a fully-developed character, she is constantly represented by others in 'enchanted', awe-inspired tones, her legendary

⁷⁵ Rushdie has made a virtue of attempting to subvert consensus logic throughout his career. See the section 'Turning Logic Upside Down' in Daniel O'Gorman, 'Rushdie's Non-Fiction', in *Salman Rushdie* ed. by Eaglestone and McQuillan, pp. 108–14.

⁷⁶ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 360.

beauty being adored in a way not dissimilar to that of a Catholic saint. This adoration in Florence is mirrored back home in Sikri: when Akbar commissions his royal painter, Dashwanth, to record her life story in a series of paintings, one such image depicts her as ‘a supernatural being cocooned in a little egg of light while all around her [a] battle raged’.⁷⁷ However, both cases are undercut late on in the novel, when the enchantress is revealed not as a transcendental divinity but a vulnerable human being:

She had perfected the arts of enchantment, learned the world’s languages, witnessed the great things of her time, but she was without family, without clan, without any of the consolations of remaining within one’s allotted frontiers, inside her mother tongue and in her brother’s care. It was as if she were flying above the ground, willing herself to fly, while fearing that at any moment the spell might be broken and she would plummet to her death.⁷⁸

The essentialising of ‘Westernness’ is likewise deconstructed in the novel. Listening to Morgor talk at length about Florence, Akbar reflects on what he has learned about the ‘fabulous Western climes’ of fifteenth-century Europe: ‘[he] understood that the lands of the West were exotic and surreal to a degree incomprehensible to the humdrum people of the East’.⁷⁹ Likewise, he wonders at the apparent proneness of people in the West to ‘hysterias’, and in particular the ‘special type of extreme hysteria’ surrounding the ‘worship of gold’: ‘In his mind’s eye Akbar pictured Western temples made of gold, with golden priests inside, and golden worshippers coming to pray,

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 323.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 416.

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bringing offerings of gold to placate their golden god'.⁸⁰ The ridiculousness of Akbar's notion of 'temples made of gold, with golden priests inside' provides a starkly ironic counterpoint to the ideas of fantastical 'Eastern wisdom' espoused by the people of Florence. 'In the East,' Akbar reflects, 'men and women worked hard, lived well or badly, died noble or ignoble deaths, believed in faiths that engendered great art, great poetry, great music, some consolation and much confusion. Normal human lives, in sum'.⁸¹ However, as in the case of the reader's 'disenchantment' with the 'divine' Qara Kōz figure that is constructed in the first half of the novel, Akbar's 'Occidental' essentialism is quickly subjected to examination, this time by the emperor himself: '[he] knew that he had reached a kind of boundary in his mind, a frontier beyond which his powers of empathy and interest could not journey'.⁸² What is crucial about this realisation is that the 'boundary' that Akbar is thinking about is not one that is inherent or immutable in any objective sense: on the contrary, it exists specifically *in his mind*. Difference between East and West exists, but only insofar as his consciousness wills it to. (In this sense, the novel reflects the argument that I made with reference to Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* in Chapter 1: namely, that the 'framing' of war can be a powerful colonial tool only insofar as one perpetuates the notion that it is a powerful colonial tool.)

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. 417.

3.2ii ‘Divid[ing] the unity of the line’: Deconstructing Representational Frameworks

What results from this deconstruction of the assumed fundamental differences between East and West is a metaphorical *passe-partout* in which the ‘unity’ of the ‘line’ that delineates these binary constructs is itself divided. This complicates Said’s contention, in *Orientalism*, that the ‘dominating frameworks’ of the West unbendingly ‘contain’ and ‘represent’ the so-called Orient in a way that is invulnerable in its epistemic totality.⁸³ By prompting its reader to think ‘beyond the borders of the known world’ (that is, to momentarily attempt a step outside the realm of the episteme), the novel reinforces the idea that no single narrative can exist independently of the enormous, constantly interweaving mesh of other narratives that make up the world – or rather, the *context* – of which it is inescapably a part.⁸⁴ Meaning without context is impossible, a postmodern truism that the novel reaffirms most strongly when the young Florentine, Nino Argalia, is left drifting out to sea in an ‘occult fog’ by a treacherous band of seafaring *condottieri*:

[He] was left without defences or recourse, a lonely human soul drifting vaguely into the white. This was what was left of a human individual when you took away his home, his family, his friends, his city, his country, his world: a being without context, whose past had faded, whose future was bleak, an

⁸³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 40.

⁸⁴ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 362. See also the etymology of the word ‘text’, which derives from ‘textus’, a Latin term meaning ‘to weave’: *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Tenth Edition), ed. by Judy Pearsall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1483.

entity stripped of name, of meaning, of the whole of life except a temporarily beating heart'.⁸⁵

By emphasising the amorphousness of knowledge, the novel shows that it is impossible for a 'dominating' epistemic 'framework', no matter how totalising, to ever actually be total: "Knowledge was never simply born in the human mind", Machiavelli reflects as he begins to reach old age, "it was always reborn. The relaying of wisdom from one age to the next, this cycle of rebirths: this was wisdom. All else was barbarity."⁸⁶

Knowledge, like language, is shown to have a fundamentally fissiparous and hybrid character. As such, the novel undercuts the total domination that Said has in mind when he writes: 'For any European during the nineteenth century – and I think one can say this almost without qualification – Orientalism was such a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche's sense of the word. It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric'.⁸⁷

This is in no way to suggest that *The Enchantress of Florence* plays down the devastating violence – both physical and epistemic – that 'dominating frameworks' such as those of nineteenth-century imperialism have inflicted upon the lives of millions over the centuries. Rather, my point is that Rushdie's more hybrid understanding of epistemology reflects a sophisticated awareness, on his part, of something akin to what Hannah Arendt describes as the inherent weakness of ideology. 'No ideology,' Arendt argues, 'which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping

⁸⁵ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 220.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁸⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 203–4.

out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it'.⁸⁸ It is only when the psychological borderline between East and West is crossed that this weakness may be fully acknowledged, and that a 'bringing forward' of new ways of thinking about difference can begin to come about.

3.2iii A Hybridising of Epistemic Frameworks: Narrative Porousness

It is here worth noting once again that, as with the utilisation of *passe-partout* as a metaphorical device, this notion of hybridising epistemic frameworks has always been present in Rushdie's work. What marks a departure from his pre-9/11 writing is specifically the way in which the concept is approached: while his earlier work placed emphasis on its progressive socio-political potential, *The Enchantress of Florence* works to show that, in the aftermath of 9/11, it has become an absolute ethical imperative. Indeed, it is Akbar's inability to attribute any real legitimacy to Morgor's narrative – and the otherness that the narrative represents – that ultimately leads to the destruction of his magnificent city. Dismissing the story as entertaining fantasy, he allows its obvious historical contradictions and fantastical elements to obscure the fact that, at its heart, it contains another, more metaphysical form of truth: namely, the truth that transnational, intersubjective *mis*understanding can in itself be a kind of understanding. What Akbar cannot see is that the 'unreality' of Morgor's narrative of otherness is itself a part of the contextual 'reality' of Akbar's pluralistic conceptualisation of the self. As the narrator

⁸⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2004), p. 591.

puts it, in reference to a far-fetched anecdote once told by a childhood friend, ‘the story was completely untrue, but the untruth of untrue stories could sometimes be of service in the real world’.⁸⁹

The reader is shown from the start that narrative is not rigid but porous, and that the ‘bringing forward’ of unreality into reality through textual representation has a consuming power that may be dangerous if left unacknowledged. (When the artist Dashwanth becomes obsessed with telling the story of Qara Kōz through his paintings, he ends up literally disappearing into his work: ‘If the borderline between the worlds could be crossed in one direction, Akbar understood, it could also be crossed in the other. A dreamer could become his dream’).⁹⁰ Moreover, it is Akbar’s rejection of this textual porousness that ultimately proves to be his downfall. When he comes to the conclusion that Morgor “‘is a creature of fables, and a good *afsanah* [or storyteller] never did anybody any real damage””, his advisor, Birbal, replies with grave perspicacity: “‘Sire, I hope we do not live to learn the folly of that remark””.⁹¹

By attempting to separate the ‘unreality’ of the foreigner’s fantastical tale from the familiar ‘reality’ of his immediate Mughal world (that is, by trying to force Morgor’s ‘exotic’ Western narrative into the margins of Sikri’s ‘History’), Akbar ultimately betrays the pluralistic ideals that he has been flirting with throughout the course of the novel. Indeed, by the time he finally comes to realise the devastating consequences of his mistake, the damage has already been done: when the life-giving water of the city’s great lake is suddenly drained into the earth (the fluid, intermingling ‘subtleties of water’⁹² – as

⁸⁹ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 211.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

opposed to the rigid ‘banality of solid ground’⁹³ – being something of a motif throughout the novel), the reader is informed that ‘[f]or the rest of his life the emperor would believe that the inexplicable phenomenon of the vanishing lake of ... Sikri was the doing of the foreigner he had unjustly spurned, whom he had not decided to take back into his bosom until it was too late’.⁹⁴ As Butler puts it, ‘identity is not thinkable without the permeable border, or else without the possibility of relinquishing a boundary’.⁹⁵ Through his utilisation of the inherent *passe-partout* quality of magical realism, a technique which blurs the borderline between the real and the unreal, Rushdie shows that any meaningful separation of the two concepts is, like the clear-cut separation of the world into East and West, impossible: unreality (or otherness) exists just as much *within* reality (or selfness) as it does outside of it, and attempting to ignore this can potentially give rise to a sectarian homogenisation of history.

3.3 The ‘Fictionality’ of Difference: Challenging the Secular–Fundamentalist Binary

A second way in which *The Enchantress of Florence* deconstructs difference through its engagement with history, in addition to challenging constructs of East and West, is by encouraging the reader to detect a contemporary resonance in its historical representation of secularism and fundamentalism in 16th Century Florence and India. In this final section, I argue that through its historical inversion of contemporary understandings of secularism and fundamentalism, in which it is the Florentine ‘West’ that is more inclined

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 437

⁹⁵ Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 43.

towards fundamentalism and the Mughal ‘East’ that is closer to embracing a form of secularism, the novel reaffirms a complicated approach to difference that has been present throughout Rushdie’s career. Specifically, it re-emphasises what Joel Kuortti has described as difference’s ‘fictionality’, or in other words an understanding that “‘fundamentalist and intolerant Islam’ is a fiction, just as much as the “secular, nihilistic West” is a fiction’.⁹⁶ (Kuortti is not denying the existence of Islamic fundamentalism, but, rather, taking issue with the sweeping essentialism often involved in representations of Islam more generally.) By drawing attention to the ‘fictionality’ of representations of difference in post-9/11 discourse – that is, by generating an ‘awareness’ of the *historicity* of such representations – Rushdie’s approach to difference in *The Enchantress of Florence* figuratively collapses the space between the ‘everywhere’ of the present and the ‘everywhere else’ of the past in a way that entwines contemporary mappings of secular and fundamentalist identity. In doing so, it disrupts any unthinking impulse on the part of the reader to subscribe to a framing of contemporary reality in such clear-cut identitarian terms.

3.3i ‘Slid[ing] between different orders of reality’: Reflecting Difference

A particularly notable moment in which the entwining of 16th- and 21st-century histories is palpable appears towards the end of the novel. In a passage exemplary of the kind of constellational moments in which, as I suggested in the Introduction, 9/11 ‘flashes’

⁹⁶ Joel Kuortti, *Place of the Sacred: The Rhetoric of the Satanic Verses Affair* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 161.

briefly into view, the echoes of contemporary secularism and fundamentalism are impossible to ignore:

As Akbar rode past the crater where the life-giving lake of Sikri had been he understood the nature of the curse under which he had been placed. It was the future that had been cursed, not the present. In the present he was invincible. He could build ten new Sikris if he pleased. But once he was gone, all he had thought, all he had worked to make his philosophy and way of being, all that would evaporate like water. The future would not be what he hoped for, but a dry hostile antagonistic place where people would survive as best they could and hate their neighbours and smash their places of worship and kill one another once again in the renewed heat of the great quarrel he had sought to end for ever, the quarrel over God. In the future it was harshness, not civilization, that would rule.⁹⁷

From the clear evocation of Ground Zero through the ‘crater’ at the heart of the city to the precarious metaphorical fluidity of the lake’s ‘evaporate[d]’ water, as well as Akbar’s prophetic vision of a future afflicted by ‘the quarrel over God’, the indirect references to post-9/11 conflict and sectarianism are easy to ascertain. Indeed, such is the extent of this historical entwining in the novel that it has led some critics to question its usefulness as a literary device. As Colin Burrow puts it in his review of the novel in the *London Review of Books*:

⁹⁷ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, pp. 439–40.

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The stories also tend to be so overloaded with different levels of significance that you can't be quite sure which of them matters. Sometimes this creates free-fall between different layers of narrative and different orders of reality. More often it creates an irony which slides between different versions of reality in order not finally to be pinned down, and perhaps also in order to sound grown-up or politically savvy'.⁹⁸

However, I would suggest that the novel's 'free-fall between different layers of narrative and different orders of reality' is, to a certain degree, the point. It is precisely such a free-fall of narrative that allows Rushdie to critique the kind of left-wing 'sanctimonious relativism' discussed in the previous section, but in a way that resists endorsing a more homogeneous understanding of 'History' along the lines of that defended by Richard Evans, or pointed towards by Fukuyama. The *passé-partout* quality of passages such as the above, in which (as Burrow rightly suggests) Rushdie's writing 'slides between different versions of reality in order not finally to be pinned down', helps to underscore the susceptibility of all historical narratives to interpretation and, more importantly, competition. The novel does not foster a relativistic secularism in which all interpretations of history are equally valid, but instead demonstrates the importance of actively countering any fundamentalist interpretation of history that claims to be beyond dispute.

The novel is constructed in the style of a hall of mirrors, in which characters, events, themes and motifs reflect in such a way that it becomes difficult to determine

⁹⁸ Colin Burrow, 'The Audience Throws Vegetables', *London Review of Books*, 30.9, 8 May 2008 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n09/burr01_.html>

exactly where one history ends and another begins. This is not to suggest, of course, that it advocates any kind of trite or simplistic relativism, in which commonly made generalisations about the East and the West being, respectively, ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are straightforwardly reversed. On the contrary, although a reversal of this cliché does occur to an extent (Akbar’s pluralistic leanings providing a stark counterpoint to the Khomeini-like ‘fundamentalism’ of Pope Leo X, whose is rumoured to have ‘damned [Qara Kōz] for a murderous whore and was sending a cardinal to take charge of the city and deal with its wild witch’), the fine detail of this reversal is far from straightforward.⁹⁹ Indeed, Rushdie makes a point of emphasising that the mirroring between Sikri and Florence is of an *imperfect* nature, neither city ever yielding an exact reflection of the other (it is notable that the Mughal town that becomes known as ‘the Florence of the East’ is not Sikri, but the nearby municipality of Herat).¹⁰⁰ As Martin McQuillan argues in an essay on the novel, Rushdie’s narrative ‘is not, as one might presuppose, a mimetic art in which a copy of an original ideal is represented in its exactitude. There is no original Akbar, Vespucci or Qara Koz [*sic*] to present’.¹⁰¹ By disrupting the reflective process in this way, Rushdie undercuts a tendency, not uncommon since 9/11, to conflate the dichotomy between secularism and fundamentalism with that of East and West, dislodging the two binaries from one another in a way that, while relativistic, avoids falling into the trap of ‘[seeing] the world too analogically, reading one situation as another, quite different one’.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 378.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁰¹ Martin McQuillan, “‘Illuminated by a ray of the sun at midnight’: *The Enchantress of Florence*”, in *Salman Rushdie*, ed. by Eaglestone and McQuillan, p. 90.

¹⁰² Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 227.

In line with this, Vasselena Parashkevova has argued (following Neelam Srivastava) that *The Enchantress of Florence* recuperates an ‘Indian secularism’ that manifests “‘not as an anti-religious state but as a non-sectarian one’”.¹⁰³ She explains her argument as follows:

In Sikri, Rushdie locates a nascent, if historically isolated, form of Indian secularism that will be drowned in sectarian violence centuries later. In Akbar’s vision, the future is a ‘dry hostile antagonistic place’ where people ‘hate their neighbours and smash their places of worship and kill one another’ in the ‘quarrel over God’ The world of Sikri is not imagined within the parameters of secularism as equated with the contemporary Western state, tolerant of religious voices, whilst concealing an anti-Muslim bias. Political and religious tolerance precedes and feeds into a secular vision, and as the novel suggests, it has Eastern origins unparalleled in the West at the time.¹⁰⁴

As Parashkevova correctly suggests, the novel’s disruption of what is today often construed as a religious East and a secular West involves more subtlety than a straightforward inversion, and as such the secularism of Sikri and of the contemporary Western state cannot be simply ‘equated’. The mirroring between histories and identities in the novel, as such, attains a refractory quality in which it is not just similarity that is reflected, but, paradoxically, also difference. As in the case of Qara Köz and her servant (who is referred to as ‘the Mirror’), when the categories of sameness and difference are

¹⁰³ Neelam Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English* (London: Routledge, 2008), qtd. in Vassilena Parashkevova, *Salman Rushdie’s Cities*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁴ Vassilena Parashkevova, *Salman Rushdie’s Cities*, p. 191.

entwined together in a mesh of contextual histories, they are shown to be simultaneously the same and different: ““No man ordered *Qara Köz* to bare her face,” said the traveller. “Neither did she order her slave to do so. She freely made her own decision, and the *Mirror made hers*””.¹⁰⁵

3.3ii A ‘Comforting Circle’: Fundamentalist Frames

However, despite the novel’s subverting of secularism and fundamentalism through an entwining of histories and identities, it never goes so far as to claim that all boundaries between these categories can – or even should – be blurred. Indeed, it shows that where any form of fundamentalism exists, there necessarily comes with it a sort of self-imposed borderline – or frame – by which it attempts to extricate itself from the contaminating influence of secular society. Such a fundamentalism, as Akbar comes to understand early on in the novel, might be characterised as a kind of ‘circle’ that attempts to insulate itself from its pluralistic historical context:

(If man had created god then man could uncreate him too. Or was it possible for a creation to escape the power of the creator? Could a god, once created, become impossible to destroy? Did such fictions acquire an autonomy of the will that made them immortal? The emperor did not have the answers, but the questions themselves felt like answers of a kind.) Could foreigners grasp what his countrymen could not? If he, Akbar, stepped outside the circle, could he

¹⁰⁵ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 298.

live without its comforting circularity, in the terrifying strangeness of a new thought?¹⁰⁶

By forcing his people to treat him like a god, Akbar ultimately fails to follow through on his proto-secularist principles, once again only understanding his mistake when it is already too late: ‘To elevate a man to near-divine status,’ he realises, ‘and to allow him absolute power, while arguing that human beings and not gods were the masters of human destinies, contained a contradiction that would not survive much examination’.¹⁰⁷ It is not insignificant, therefore, that when he goes on to consider that ‘discord, difference, disobedience, disagreement, irreverence, iconoclasm, impudence, even insolence might be the wellsprings of the good’, he also hesitantly acknowledges that ‘[t]hese were not thoughts fit for a king’.¹⁰⁸

Akbar’s conceptualisation of fundamentalist thought as a kind of ‘circle’ is also notable for the way that it resembles a critique that Anshuman Mondal has recently made about the postmodern secularism of *The Satanic Verses*. In his piece ‘Revisiting *The Satanic Verses: The Fatwa and its Legacies*’, Mondal argues that the 1988 novel is ‘a classic statement of secular humanism, ... [which] rehearses the same universalizing gestures deployed by its liberal defenders during the controversy it ignited’.¹⁰⁹ What is salient about this in relation to the present discussion is the explanation that Mondal gives for this suggestion: namely, that ‘[t]he radical excess of cultural difference, as represented by Islam, is *encircled* and domesticated by a secular scepticism, the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁰⁷ Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence*, p. 390.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 391.

¹⁰⁹ Anshuman A. Mondal, ‘Revisiting *The Satanic Verses: The Fatwa and its Legacies*’, in *Salman Rushdie*, ed. by Eaglestone and McQuillan, p. 71.

dominance of which is insistently reasserted over its efforts to empathetically represent the experience of religious belief” (emphasis added).¹¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in a discussion of *The Satanic Verses*, but what is notable in *The Enchantress of Florence* is that Rushdie, in his description of organised religion as a ‘circle’, shows an awareness of precisely the kind of collective narrowing of thought that Mondal accuses him of perpetuating in the earlier text: the most destructive ‘encircling’ force in Akbar’s kingdom is not religion *per se*, but rather the divinity with which he is himself legally accorded, and which removes him from the disorderly multiplicity of the secular. Mondal’s argument about liberal humanist ‘encircling’ can indeed be applied to this novel also (albeit an encircling of ‘fundamentalism’ broadly, as opposed to of Islam). However, I would argue that through Akbar’s dilemma, it shows that such encircling is, at least in some instances, a two-way process: in order for fundamentalism to be completely ‘fundamental’, it needs to *encircle itself* in a way that prevents contamination from other points of view. Whether secular or religious in outward appearance, the novel shows that a rigid ‘encircling’ of thought in the way outlined by either Rushdie or Mondal is inevitable when fundamentalism of any kind is present. To ‘step out’ of the circle of fundamentalist thought into a more secular state is, as such, to paradoxically accept the choice of others to continue encircling themselves protectively from plurality if they so wish. In other words, it is to delegitimize the circle while simultaneously recognising the right of others to legitimate it, ‘divid[ing] the unity’ of its circumference in the manner of a *passe-partout*. ‘Stepping out’ of the circle is, in the context of *The Enchantress of Florence*, a process that inevitably undercuts any overly straightforward distinction between ‘us’ on one side of the encircling line and ‘them’ on the other.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Ultimately, the novel reaffirms, in a post-9/11 context, the kind of ‘poetics of relocation and reinscription’ that Homi Bhabha has described as the ‘real blasphemy’ of *The Satanic Verses*:

Blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation. Into the assorted authenticity or continuity of tradition, ‘secular’ blasphemy releases a temporality that reveals the contingencies, even the incommensurabilities, involved in the process of social transformation.¹¹¹

Despite his pluralistic leanings, what Akbar falls short of fully embracing for the most part of the novel is the ‘perspective of historical and cultural relativism’ – and subsequent ‘act of cultural translation’ – that such an understanding of blasphemy necessarily entails.¹¹² His failure results from a refusal to acknowledge the fact that the strange ‘otherness’ of Morgor’s story, no matter how unreal it may appear, is itself merely one narrative entwined in an immense contextual mesh of other histories. Like all of the novels that I have analysed in this thesis, *The Enchantress of Florence* returns time and again to an emphasis upon the multiplicity of differences within, as well as between, identity categories such as East and West, as well as ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘secular’, and in doing so, it shows that what it is that makes ‘us’ – or ‘the human race’ – so alike *is*, paradoxically, difference. To borrow Richard Gray’s phrase, being human is, for Rushdie,

¹¹¹ Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 323.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

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to exist in a state of perpetually ‘enact[ing] difference’.¹¹³ The novel challenges reductive ‘us and them’ identity binaries not by playing down identitarian difference, but by drawing attention to the fact that the experience of identitarian difference is something every human being, including those outside of what Ian McEwan describes as ‘our’ humanity, ineluctably shares.

4.0 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Rushdie’s post-9/11 fiction has been characterised by a fascination with history, and particularly the connections between history and identity. By delving, respectively, into the recent past and the distant past, *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Enchantress of Florence* show how an understanding of the ways in which histories are entwined can be conducive to a similar understanding of the ways in which apparently incommensurable identities can often also be intimately tied. In the first section of the chapter, I posited that *Shalimar the Clown* collapses the ‘everywhere’ of space with the ‘everywhere else’ of time in order to emphasise the attachment of 9/11 (as well as the ensuing war on terror) to a complicated historical context. In doing so, it challenges reactionary ‘us and them’ approaches to identitarian difference in popular post-9/11 discourse. In the second section, I suggested that *The Enchantress of Florence* also subverts ‘us and them’ binaries, this time by inverting the ways in which categories such as ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘secular’ and ‘fundamentalist’ are often too simplistically used to map post-9/11 global identity. What results is a challenge to a reductive form of

¹¹³ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature After 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 30.

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cultural relativism that helps perpetuate the very divisions between identity groups that it ostensibly aims to deconstruct. Both novels, like all of the others I have analysed in this thesis, ultimately emphasise the complex and often chaotic degree of plurality and difference that exists *within* identity groups as well as between them, and as such they each challenge reductive ‘us and them’ identity binaries by drawing attention to the extent to which the self contains an element of the other, and, likewise, the other contains an element of the self.

Chapter 5: Ambivalent Alterities: Pakistani Post-9/11 Fiction in English

1.0 Introduction

This thesis has so far traced an arc from Judith Butler's US-centric frames of war to a more 'world picture'-like global interplay of frames in Salman Rushdie's post-9/11 fiction. In this final chapter, I bring this arc to its logical conclusion by analysing three novels that are not only global, but consciously *globalised*: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007), *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam (2008), and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie (2009). Working within, while at the same time challenging, a lucrative global market for Anglophone fiction by South Asian authors, these novels 'vacillate' in their attitudes towards global media frames.¹

The novels in question are all part of a recent increase in the publication of English-language fiction by Pakistani authors (or authors of Pakistani descent), including Mohammed Hanif, Daniyaal Mueenuddin, H.M. Naqvi and Uzma Aslam Khan, a development that was celebrated in a special issue of *Granta* in 2010.² While ostensibly trying to perform what Richard Gray describes as an 'enactment of difference', they take a deeply ambivalent approach towards globalisation in that their painstaking topicality still sits within a 'framework' of discourse determined by the Western news media.³ Marketed at an English-speaking readership and written in an accessible middle-brow register, they occupy an unstable position in post-9/11 political discourse. On the one hand, they offer a critical reaction against the more homogenising, Anglo-centric aspects of globalisation; on the other, they are also

¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 75.

² *Granta 112: Pakistan*, ed. by John Freeman (New York: Granta, 2010).

³ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 30.

products of the same. However, as I have suggested above, there is a potential for this ambivalence to be productive. While the relative marketability of the novels emerges from a mildly Orientalist appetite for didactic international writing on Islam and the ‘Islamic world’ after 9/11, all three texts also demonstrate – sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally – that any such attempt at didacticism is never straightforward.

In this chapter, I argue that these novels might be viewed as an ambivalent *part* of the dominant frames by which the South Asian region is represented in global discourse of the war on terror. More specifically, in their simultaneous attempt to subvert the assumptions and expectations of global discourse, I suggest that they constitute an inverted example of what Butler describes as a framing that ‘call[s] certain fields of normativity into question. Such frames structure modes of recognition, especially during times of war, but their limits and their contingency become subject to exposure and critical intervention as well’.⁴ Butler is here referring to the suspension of normativity that is at play in cases of imprisonment and torture, but I posit that the novels by Hamid, Aslam and Shamsie work to shift dominant framings of the war on terror in the opposite direction, and in doing so *challenge* such narrow ‘modes of recognition’.⁵ Like the *Poems from Guantánamo* mentioned in Chapter 1, they do this by attempting to enact – whilst simultaneously undercutting – an ‘authentic’ representation of Pakistan. To borrow a phrase from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s ‘Terror: A Speech After 9/11’, they raise consciousness whilst simultaneously ‘disrupt[ing] confidence in consciousness-raising’.⁶

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Terror: A Speech After 9/11’, in *boundary 2*, 31.2 (2004), p. 87.

I make this argument in four sections, each zeroing in a little more closely on the specific ways in which the novels attempt to both raise consciousness and disrupt the process of consciousness-raising. First, I examine the ambivalence that is evident in the novels' attempt to represent Pakistan. I suggest that they imagine the country in a way that counters its representation 'as a problem in the media as well as in the scholarly works produced in the United States', but that does so by simultaneously challenging the idea that a nation with a population of over 176 million people can be straightforwardly 'represented' in the first place.⁷ In the second section, I develop this point by arguing that the novels' ambivalence about the representation of Pakistan is particularly evident in their thematic reliance upon migration. They draw on the trope in a way that passes metaphorical comment upon the difficulty of making an accurate representation of Pakistan 'travel' across national and cultural identity divides. In the third section, I test my argument by asking whether the novels ultimately do more to subvert or to perpetuate stereotypical representations of Islam, Muslims and South Asians in some parts of the Western news media. The fourth section then goes on to analyse one particularly prevalent stereotype associated with Pakistan in the global media: fundamentalism. I posit that, through their studied ambivalence, the texts negotiate a careful balance between, on the one hand, combating the phenomenon in its various forms, and, on the other, challenging misguided perceptions about the connections between Islamist fundamentalism and Pakistani identity.

The ambivalence with which the novels approach the task of representing Pakistan undercuts the 'us and them' binaries propagated in global framings of the war on terror. It does this by generating an awareness not only of the perceived

⁷ Masood Ashraf Raja, *Constructing Pakistan: Foundational Texts and the Rise of Muslim National Identity, 1857–1947* (Oxford University Press), p. 141.

differences between Pakistani Muslims and the West, but also of the incalculable differences between and within Pakistani Muslim groups themselves. The reason that the texts are able to draw attention to these differences, I suggest, is precisely because they are written in a style accessible to a mainstream English-speaking audience, working within the conventions of the global market to challenge – and gradually reconfigure – the values that the market upholds.

2.0 Framing Pakistan

It is galling ... for the nation to see itself viewed as almost entirely composed of religious fanatics – particularly when the well-armed and well-funded religious fanatics are targeting and oppressing large segments of the population. The notion that the West is perpetuating images of violence and extremism among Muslims – and downplaying all evidence of moderate Islam – in order to gain support for attacks on Islam and Muslims finds voice through Pakistan.⁸

The purpose of this section is to outline the dilemma in which all three authors find themselves when faced with the task of representing Pakistan. As I have already stated, I argue that they do so with a carefully measured sense of ambivalence that simultaneously works within, while simultaneously challenging, the discursive frameworks of global media discourse. In response to a perpetuation, in the global media, of the kind of ‘violent’ and ‘extremist’ national image that Kamila Shamsie describes above, the three novels strive for a mellifluous understanding of Pakistani

⁸ Kamila Shamsie, *Offence: The Muslim Case* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 72.

identity that, at the very least, provides a *sense* of the country's identitarian heterogeneity.

What is most notable about the representation of Pakistan in the three novels is that none of them can be said to be directly 'about' Pakistan as such: *The Wasted Vigil* is set primarily in Afghanistan, *Burnt Shadows* jumps between multiple countries across three continents, and, although narrated from within Pakistan, most of the action in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is constituted by a recollection of its narrator's earlier life in the United States. However, I would suggest that it is precisely the indirect or tangential manner with which they appear to engage with Pakistan that renders their representation of it significant. Indeed, all three novels attempt to decentre the nation, or, as Peter Morey, borrowing from both Richard Gray and Deleuze and Guattari, puts it in the recent Pakistan-themed issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, to 'deterritorialize' it by foregrounding its connections with the external world.⁹ In doing so, they challenge the perceptions of Pakistan and Pakistani Muslims that Western media consumers may have developed as a consequence of reportage on the nation in the context of the war on terror.¹⁰

2.1 Pakistan's 'Conceptual Fluidity'

Born out of Partition, Pakistan's very existence is founded not only upon a sectarian borderline separating its Muslim identity from the perceived pluralism of India, but

⁹ Peter Morey, "'The rules of the game have been changed': Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and post-9/11 fiction', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47.2, p. 138. See also Derek Gregory's use of the term, as discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁰ As Edward Said has prominently argued, in the Western news media "'Islam" has licensed not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility'. Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. li.

also upon a complicated and often messy negotiation of multiple previously disparate ethnic and cultural identities (the country's name is a rough conglomeration of letters from its constituent provinces).¹¹ As Masood Ashraf Raja points out in *Constructing Pakistan: Foundational Texts and the Rise of Muslim National Identity, 1857–1947*, the extent to which difference is ingrained in Pakistani national identity is such that '[t]he Muslims themselves [in pre-Partition India] were not united in their quest for the secular ideal of a separate homeland, for the religious elite considered it an act of sundering the Muslim nation of India'.¹² Indeed, this negotiation of difference in Pakistan reinforces Raja's broader and more important point that:

[Until Partition,] even when the Indian Muslim national struggle was at its peak, Pakistan remained a novel, amorphous, and a loosely defined concept. While this loose conceptual configuration of a Muslim nation played a strategic role in [Muhammed Ali] Jinnah's struggle for a separate nation-state, the very conceptual fluidity itself, it seems, has surfaced as the most enduring problem of legitimation for the postcolonial Pakistani nation-state.¹³

This notion of 'conceptual fluidity' reaffirms Pakistan as a geopolitical border zone founded upon both a separation *and* a meeting point of multiple conflicting identities. It is such a conceptual fluidity that I suggest the novels attempt to incorporate into their representations of the country through a measured ambivalence.

¹¹ These are as follows: Punjab, North-West Frontier Province (Afghania Province), Kashmir, Sind and Baluchistan. Sheikh Mohammad Ikram, *Indian Muslims and the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Mehra Offset Press, 1992), p. 177.

¹² Raja, *Constructing Pakistan*, p. 127.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

2.2 “‘The permeability of the Border’”: Pakistan in a Global Context

This fluidity is particularly evident in the focus in each of the three texts upon the country’s borders, and particularly the ways in which these borders have been challenged and undermined during the war on terror.¹⁴ *The Wasted Vigil* is a case in point. As I have already mentioned, its narrative takes place mostly in present-day Afghanistan, but jumps back and forth in time in a way that emphasises the historicity of the current conflict. It does this partly by highlighting its connections with the renewal of ‘Great Game’-style colonial politics in the region during the Cold War, and partly by drawing attention to the fluctuation over time in so-called ‘Af-Pak’ border relations. Indeed, during a section set in the 1980s, one character says to another: ‘Look at the shapes of the two countries on a map and you’ll see that Afghanistan rests like a huge burden on poor Pakistan’s back. A bundle of misery’.¹⁵ It is a story both about and not about Pakistan: while the action takes place primarily in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s presence is constantly felt as another strand in a complex, interwoven web of regional histories. Indeed, one of the novel’s key purposes is evidently to highlight the naivety at play in attitudes such as that put forward in the first of its two epigraphs:

¹⁴ The journalist Ahmed Rashid has noted that ‘[b]y the summer of 2003, U.S. commanders in Afghanistan were becoming deeply frustrated. “Pakistani border troops have been given orders to allow extremists to cross into Afghanistan and then help them return home by giving them covering fire,” a U.S. military officer told me in Bagram. Maj.-Gen. Franklin Hagenbeck, the deputy commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, warned, “Hot pursuit would probably be my last resort.” [Hamid] Karzai was frustrated with the Americans because no senior U.S. official was criticizing Islamabad for allowing the Taliban to operate out of Pakistan. On a visit to Islamabad in April 2003, Karzai gave [Pervez] Musharraf a list of Taliban commanders allegedly living openly in Quetta. Musharraf was furious and denied there was such a list’. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Threat to Global Security* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 229.

¹⁵ Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 196.

What is more important to the history of the world – the Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? A few agitated Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, asked if he regretted 'having supported Islamic fundamentalism, having given arms and advice to future terrorists', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15–21 January 1998.¹⁶

Reading this statement after 9/11, its short-sightedness needs no explanation, but what the novel specifically strives to undercut is the notion that the rise of the Taliban and the collapse of the Soviet empire can be considered independently of one another in such a straightforward way. Its non-linear narrative conveys a sense of connectedness between the Cold War and the current war on terror; a sense that it is '[a] different war – but maybe at some level ... the same war. Just as tomorrow's wars might be begotten by today's wars, a continuation of them'.¹⁷ Post-9/11 Af-Pak border politics, in other words, cannot be understood without reference to relations between the two states during the struggle for Afghanistan at the height of the Soviet era.

Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* is also partially concerned with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the Cold War, and the effect of the invasion in Pakistan. Like *The Wasted Vigil*, it emphasises the ways in which the present war on terror is connected to the invasion, as well as to a number of other paradigm-shifting events throughout recent history, such as the bombing of Nagasaki, the Partition of India, and the attacks of 9/11. Only one section of the novel is set in Pakistan, and even this takes place in a province close to the Afghan border. The protagonist of this section, a

¹⁶ Ibid., n. pag.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 368.

Pakistani teenager called Raza (who has a part-Indian, part-Japanese ethnic heritage), makes a journey across the border into a *Mujahideen* camp in the desert. As in Aslam's novel, Pakistan is represented in a multifaceted light, with an emphasis placed on the diversity of its different cities and regions:

Flying into Karachi at night, the American, Harry – formerly Henry – Burton, looked down on to the brightly lit sprawl of one of the fastest-growing cities in the world and felt the surge of homecoming that accompanies the world's urban tribes as they enter unfamiliar landscapes of chaos and possibility. This is more like it, he thought, exiting the airport to a pell-mell of cars using their horns in a complicated and unrelenting exchange of messages about power, intention and mistrust.

...

God, it was good to be away from Islamabad – the bubble in the hills, a town barely two decades old, characterised by government and not history, where everything had the antiseptic air of diplomacy with germs rife beneath the surface.¹⁸

Shamsie is consciously writing for an English-speaking audience, aware that many of her readers will likely be incapable of identifying any concrete differences between the major cities of Karachi and Islamabad, let alone between many of the nation's smaller areas and the diverse multitudes of cultural and ethnic groups therein. As a result, her representation of Pakistan is overtly didactic – or 'consciousness-raising', to borrow Spivak's term – and reviewers have criticised the novel for this. Rachel

¹⁸ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 148.

Aspden, for instance, has suggested in the *Guardian* that ‘Burnt Shadows is dense with history and principle, often at the expense of lightness of touch’.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Carolyn See has posited in the *Washington Post* that ‘the real problem is that “Burnt Shadows” is a novel of argument’.²⁰ However, I would add that this raising of consciousness is often also highly figurative: as in the passage above, the reader is encouraged to identify with the more familiar or, arguably, ‘Western’ aspects of the country in the same way that Harry Burton does, a process that helps to deconstruct the binary oppositions between the United States and Pakistan perpetuated through both global news reportage and the nation’s vocal extremist minorities.

The only novel of the three whose narrative might be said to take place wholly within the country is Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, but even this is only technically the case. Although the story is entirely narrated in the second person by its protagonist, Changez, as he sits in a Lahore café with an American man whose identity remains ambiguous throughout, the bulk of the novel’s action is constituted by Changez’ recollection of his time as a Harvard business student and Wall Street trader a few years earlier, in the months leading up to and following the 9/11 attacks. The only physical detail provided about Pakistan is of the streets immediately surrounding the café, and the reality of this is frequently called into question: ‘It is odd how the character of public space changes when it is empty; the abandoned amusement park, the shuttered opera house, the vacant hotel [N]ow that our fellow visitors have dwindled in number to a sporadic and scattered few, it has taken on a rather more ominous edge’.²¹ As with the lack of information provided about the

¹⁹ Rachel Aspden, ‘In Search of a New Life After Nagasaki’, *Guardian*, 22 March 2009
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/22/burnt-shadows-kamila-shamsie-review>>

²⁰ Carolyn See, ‘Book Review: “Burnt Shadows” by Kamila Shamsie’, *Washington Post*, 15 May 2009
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/14/AR2009051403775.html>>

²¹ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 176.

mysterious American, the tangibility of Pakistan is present in its absence: these prominent narrative voids pull at each other diametrically, actively inviting the reader to attribute meaning to them by drawing on her own prejudices and preconceptions, and then repeatedly jolting her into a disconcerting awareness of what she has been led to do.

In this section, I have attempted to show that in all three novels, the emphasis on Pakistan's intangibility serves two immediate purposes. One is to challenge reductive perceptions of the country perpetuated by Western news outlets. The other is to undermine the religiously-driven nationalism that has been the source of many of the nation's problems with free expression since the military coup of General Zia ul-Haq in 1978. They trade on their apparent ability to provide an authentic version of Pakistan which counters this negative image. Yet the only 'authentic' aspect of this authenticity is, paradoxically, to be found in the way that it simultaneously foregrounds its own failure to authentically 'represent' Pakistan in the first place. To put it another way, the novels represent Pakistan by drawing attention to their inability to satisfactorily do so.

3.0 Thwarted itineraries: Migration and self-reflexive didacticism

The ambivalence that underlies the novels' representation of Pakistan is particularly evident in the way that the texts play upon the trope of migration. They use it in a way that is, to varying degrees of subtlety, self-reflexive, prompting the reader to think about the hermeneutic or imaginative migration that she is partaking in as she reads. On the one hand, the novels aim to engender an appreciation for what Aslam, in *The Wasted Vigil*, describes as 'the delightful essential idea that tales can travel, or that

two sets of people oceans apart can dream up similar sacred myths'.²² On the other, they do so in a style of self-contradiction that draws attention to what Spivak, channelling Derrida, has described as 'the itinerary[, in all texts,] of a constantly thwarted desire to make the text explain'.²³ Through their depictions of characters that migrate both into and out of Pakistan, the novels attempt to educate their readers about the nation by challenging normative perceptions, but in doing so they simultaneously draw attention to the impossibility for any text, on its own, to achieve this in more than a superficial way.

This process of 'thwarting' the readers' desire for explanation is enabled by the way in which, through their ambivalence, all three novels blur the boundary between explanation and *figuration*, foregrounding the element of the latter within the former.²⁴ *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in particular, is narrated in the form of a long, second-person monologue, literally explaining how the protagonist has come to develop a disparaging view on post-9/11 America (a society that, in his opinion, has 'retreated into myths of [its] own difference, assumptions of [its] own superiority').²⁵ Admittedly, one might argue that the writing is clumsy and overly expositional, but I would suggest that there is a degree to which this exposition is necessary if the alterity that any of these novels wish to convey is to be *translated* into a language that mainstream Western audiences can at least get a sense of, if not fully comprehend. In this sense, the texts can be seen to enact what Spivak, in her essay 'Translating into English', describes as a 'double-bind' in which '[w]e transfer content because we

²² Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 231.

²³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p. 143.

²⁴ Spivak gestures towards something similar in *Death of a Discipline*: 'The meaning of the figure is undecidable, and yet we must attempt to dis-figure it, read the logic of the metaphor'. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 71.

²⁵ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 190.

must, knowing it cannot be done'.²⁶ From one perspective, they are products of an emerging market for an accessible yet didactic kind of Anglophone international fiction. From another, they consciously signpost the translational issues that Hamid's narrator is getting at when he says: 'what is natural in one place can seem unnatural in another, and some concepts travel rather poorly, if at all'.²⁷

3.1 A Thwarting of Said's 'Traveling Theory'

The notion of ideas *travelling* – or, rather, failing to travel – is central to the bearing that this double-bind has upon identitarian difference. It is upon precisely such ideas that identities are constructed, whether in the form of Pakistani national identity or the more general 'us and them' binaries perpetuated in post-9/11 media discourse. Indeed, it constitutes an exception of sorts to the kind of fluid 'traveling theory' that Edward Said describes at the opening of his essay of the same name:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and

²⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translating into English', in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. by Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 100.

²⁷ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 143.

theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity.²⁸

The exception is significant not so much because it arguably contradicts Said's argument, but rather because it points to an instance in which such an exception might actually be desirable: an acknowledgement that some ideas cannot travel may in some cases be more ethical than an attempt to understand an idea at all costs. This kind of 'itinerary' of thwarted explanation is frequently highlighted by all three of the novels in question. It is evident, for instance, when Hamid's narrator says 'we have not met before, but you seem to know something about me', or when one of Shamsie's characters declares that she 'is at home in the idea of foreignness'.²⁹

The Wasted Vigil identifies a kind of 'thwarting' of itineraries at the heart of the conflict that underpins the war on terror. In a short, poetic passage at the exact mid-point of the novel (in the closing section of the first of its two 'Books'), the American character David finds his memory drifting back over the events of 9/11:

No one has ever mentioned – anywhere – the dust-and-ash-covered sparrow that a man leaned down and gently stroked on September 11, the bird sitting stunned on a sidewalk an hour or so after the Towers collapsed. It is one of his most vivid memories of that day's television, but no one remembers seeing it. Perhaps he remembers it because he has since read that Muhammad Atta's nickname as a child was Bulbul.³⁰

²⁸ Edward Said, 'Traveling Theory', in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 226.

²⁹ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 86; Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 141.

³⁰ Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, pp. 201–2.

There is an obvious, almost crudely literal thwarting of potential itineraries here in the image of a sparrow physically grounded in state of terror. However, there is also a slightly less obvious thwarting at play: specifically, a thwarting of any straightforward ‘explanation’ for the attacks. By creating a poetic mirroring between the dust-covered bird and Muhammad Atta (whose childhood nickname, Bulbul, denotes a type of songbird common in Southeast Asia), Aslam imbues the event with a complicated sense of ambiguity. In doing so, he demonstrates that its meaning cannot be explained in a straightforward way. Like the unstable symbolism of the bulbul itself – indicative of both liberty and, in light of Atta’s violent ‘thwarting’ of the itinerary of American Airlines Flight 11, destruction – 9/11 is here shown to be akin to a kind of Rorschach test: that is, an amorphous sign that prompts spectators to project upon it their own personal signification.

3.2 Making Links out of Separations: A ‘Brokering’ of Difference

By thwarting the itinerary of the reader’s desire for a didactic explanation of 9/11, the novel does not play down the importance of the event. Nor does it suggest that all explanation, no matter how thoroughly thwarted, is completely futile. On the contrary, this thwarting of explanation constitutes a kind of educational explanation in itself, as it prompts the reader to think about her *perspective* on the event. In doing so, it reinforces Claire Chambers’ argument that

[i]mportant though 9/11 and subsequent events such as the Madrid and London bombings have been for non-Muslim perceptions of Islam, the war on terror has had far greater impact on the lives of Muslims. For writers of

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Pakistani descent, at least, the war in Afghanistan represents a particular watershed which has had a devastating impact on Pakistan.³¹

The novel's 'stepping back' from 9/11 has the effect of automatically placing the event in a complex geopolitical context, and as such elevating the war in Afghanistan – and Pakistan's involvement in it – to a more prominent position in the Western reader's frame of perception. This, in turn, helps underscore the novel's broader point that, 'everyone [involved] is human and must try to understand each other's mystery. Each other's pain'.³² As Butler puts it, 'the boundary is a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness'.³³ Indeed, it is the *attempt* at understanding between identity groups, rather than the act of understanding itself, that *The Wasted Vigil* suggests is potentially most conducive to 'mak[ing] links out of separations'.³⁴

This attempt to 'make links out of separations' is also evident in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In a recent article on the novel, Anna Hartnell rightly argues that '[Hamid] insists on the potentially radical nature of the American project by suggesting that its meaning eschews fixed understandings of identity based on race or place and thus transcends its old world beginnings'.³⁵ However, I would add to this that he likewise insists on the potentially radical nature of Pakistan. In drawing attention to the historical connections between America and Pakistan, the novel shows not only that the national identity of neither country is fixed, but also goes further than

³¹ Claire Chambers, 'A Comparative Approach to Pakistani Fiction in English', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47.2 (2011), p. 129.

³² Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 230.

³³ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 44.

³⁴ Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 87.

³⁵ Anna Hartnell, 'Moving through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46.3–4 (2010), p. 346.

this by demonstrating that they face a similar challenge. Namely, it indicates that both nations need to formulate a flexible sense of identity that is perpetually open to the kind of radical ethnic and cultural multiplicity upon which each is founded.

As I have already mentioned, the narrative travels between a past in America, where most of the story's action takes place, and a present in Pakistan. Changez recalls his experiences as a young immigrant attempting to be welcomed in America through 'a process of osmosis', but ultimately feeling so alienated by a post-9/11 suspicion of Muslims that he decides to move back to Pakistan.³⁶ His relationship with the United States is captured microcosmically in the form of a romantic relationship with a young woman called Erica, an admittedly rather unsubtly-named cipher for post-9/11 *America*, who is driven to psychosis by a sudden personal trauma. Reflecting on his relationship with Erica – and, by extension, America – after it has fallen apart, he says:

Such *journeys* have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us.³⁷

Through his protagonist's affair with Erica, Changez characterises the relationship between Pakistan and the United States as itself a deeply problematic kind of 'journey' or, to use Spivak's phrase, 'thwarted itinerary'. However, despite its

³⁶ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 160.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197. Emphasis added.

frustrations, Hamid shows that this ‘thwarting’ might also be fruitful. The ‘thwarting’ of a journey can only take place when some form of attempt to travel has occurred. It is through the collision of cultures and identities that such an attempt at travelling necessarily involves that the novel connects Pakistan with the multitudinous histories of the world, and warns against the perpetuation an overly isolated national history.

3.3 ‘How did it come to this?’: Contextualising 9/11

In a similarly historicising vein, Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* opens with a short prologue in which a man sits in a cell in Guantanamo Bay, wondering ‘How did it come to this?’.³⁸ It then shifts back in time to the bombing of Nagasaki by US forces in 1945, and goes on to trace a connection between the two scenes, via such historical moments as the Partition of India, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the 9/11 attacks, and the war on terror. It joins these historical dots not in the manner of a paranoid conspiracy theorist, but rather in such a way that – like in the other two novels – generates a sense of *historicity*; that is, what Hayden White describes as a heightened subjective ‘awareness of the historical process itself’ (see Chapter 4).³⁹ In doing so, the novel constitutes an answer of sorts to Shamsie’s own line of questioning in her essay, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’: ‘Where were the [9/11] novels that could be proffered to people who asked, “Why do they hate us?”’, which is actually the question “Who are these people and what do they have to do with us?”’.⁴⁰

³⁸ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 1.

³⁹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 97.

⁴⁰ Kamila Shamsie, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’, *Guernica*, 1 February 2012
<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/>

Instead of dialectically opposing the discursive frames of globalisation, Shamsie aims to infuse their language with a *sense*, if not an understanding, of the other; a sentiment that is strongly reflected in a melancholy, epiphanic moment that its protagonist, an itinerant Japanese woman called Hiroko Tanaka, experiences when looking at the photo of a missing person in New York shortly after the 9/11 attacks: ‘Hiroko thought of the train station at Nagasaki ... The walls plastered with signs asking for news of missing people. ... In moments such as these it seemed entirely wrong to feel oneself living in a different history to the people of this city’.⁴¹ Passages like this one directly foreground what Shamsie has identified as a need for a post-9/11 ‘entwining’ of histories in a way that fosters new empathic global ties.⁴² As Gohar Karim Khan has argued, the novel can be read ‘as an attempt at “psychic healing” – a work that embraces nationalism transnationally, hence propounding an “imagined community” ... that makes possible the existence of a kind of “horizontal comradeship,” transcending national borderlands and cultural boundaries’.⁴³ However, the feeling of ‘living in a different history’ that Shamsie is addressing in the passage above is shown throughout the novel to be ‘wrong’ not only on an ethical level, but also on a descriptive one. Specifically, by writing in a language that, as I have already argued, adheres to – while simultaneously ‘thwarting’ – generic conventions determined by the global fiction market, the novel is itself a product of histories becoming ‘entwined’.

It is at moments such as these, when the itinerary of explanation is brought to the fore and ‘thwarted’ that all three novels most overtly challenge their readers’

⁴¹Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 274.

⁴² Shamsie, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’. See also Butler, *Prekarious Life*, p. 40.

⁴³ Gohar Karim Khan, ‘The Hideous Beauty of Bird-Shaped Burns – Transnational Allegory and Feminist Rhetoric in Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*’, *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*, 3.2 (2011), p. 54 <<http://pakistaniaat.org/index.php/pak/article/view/122>>

preconceptions about Pakistan. However, they aim to do this in a way that those who speak the language of globalisation can understand, even if this simply means understanding the very impossibility of understanding itself. Indeed, it is the novels' attempt to 'uproot' or translate themselves from the localised specificities of regional history – be it Pakistani or otherwise – that enables them to repeatedly draw attention to the inseparability of explanation from figuration. By consciously thwarting their own explanatory trajectories, they might be most accurately described not as *anti-globalist* Pakistani texts, but, rather, *ambivalently* globalist ones.

4.0 Towards a New Historicity: Challenging Stereotypes

I have so far argued that the three novels challenge perceptions about Pakistan from both within and outside of the country, and that they do this by manipulating the language of globalisation in a way that might help reshape their readers' perceptions of the nation. I now look in closer detail at the ways in which the novels challenge the stereotypes about the nation that have helped construct these perceptions during the war on terror. Each novel presents a vision for Pakistani identity that transcends the nation's frequent reduction to its Islamic and Islamist elements in the global news media, emphasising both its historicity and its place in a complicated post-9/11 geopolitical context. I analyse the ways in which each of the novels productively complicates Pakistani national identity by simultaneously expanding its limits and questioning the usefulness of national identity as a concept in the first place.

In a key passage of *The Wasted Vigil*, one of the novel's American characters, James, watches a DVD of a Hollywood thriller with some Afghan compatriots.

'[E]very scene,' we are told,

was full of sleek cars or shiny women or blasting guns – making him understand why the rest of the world thought Americans were crazy. Only minutes later, however, he wasn't too sure. When you learn that the rest of the world thinks this is what life in America is like, that this isn't just throwaway entertainment, isn't *understood* by sane Americans as fantasy or momentary diversion, you realise how crazy the rest of the world is.⁴⁴

Despite his orientation towards benevolence, James has internalised the prejudicial urge to lump his comrades together with a vaguely conceived 'rest of the world'. By witnessing the Afghans view the extremely two-dimensional representation of his homeland through the medium of the film, he is shocked into an uncomfortable realisation of just how easy it is to resort to stereotype when contemplating an entire nation. However, he ironically fails to recognise that he is doing exactly the same thing, and is thus, by his own logic, equally 'crazy'. He is maintaining an overly rigid separation between 'us' (the United States, and perhaps by extension the West) and 'them' (everyone else): a division that the novel attempts to complicate by showing how easy it is for *anyone* to fall back upon the 'craziness' of prejudiced or stereotypical thought.

4.1 '[A]n alternative to "homeland" in the traditional sense of the term'

A similar subversion of stereotypes is present in *Burnt Shadows*. For instance, Hiroko's confident, exploratory character goes directly against the grain of common

⁴⁴ Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 328.

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stereotypes about Japanese women being meek or unassuming (a fact to which she consciously draws attention in her dialogue with others). A survivor of Nagasaki, Hiroko has two dark, bird-shaped scars scorched into her back, the symbolic ‘burnt shadows’ of the title that have resulted from the black design on her kimono absorbing the heat of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki in 1945. Killing her German fiancé, Konrad, the bomb catalyses the start of Hiroko’s (and the narrative’s) gradual journey across the globe, from India to Pakistan, and eventually to New York. Hiroko is described as ‘Fearless and transmutable, able to slip from skin to skin, city to city’.⁴⁵ She challenges stereotypes about what it means to be a Pakistani woman when she takes residence in the country and makes it her home for many years. She dresses in Pakistani clothes, learns to speak Urdu, and makes friends with other Pakistani women, but her appearance and attitude mark her as an outsider. As Khan puts it, Hiroko ‘presents an alternative to “homeland” in the traditional sense of the term – she is heroic and wise not despite the multiple homelands she inhabits but because of them’.⁴⁶

This is transposed into her son, Raza, whose mildly Japanese looks lead his peers to make the common mistake of marking him out as ethnically Hazara (the Hazara are an Afghan tribe whose presence is not uncommon in Northern Pakistan, but whose features tend to be noticeably distinct from those of most local people). With his unusual background and appearance, as well as an almost prodigious gift for learning languages, Raza feels like an outcast amongst his peers. When he says, ‘I want words in every language, ... I think I would be happy living in a cold, bare room if I could just spend my days burrowing into new languages’, his mother thinks to

⁴⁵ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 223.

⁴⁶ Khan, ‘The Hideous Beauty of Bird-Shaped Burns’, p. 67.

herself: '[acquiring language] was a passion that could have no fulfilment, not here. Somewhere in the world perhaps there were institutions where you could dive from vocabulary to vocabulary and make that your life. But not here. "Polyglot" was not any kind of career choice'.⁴⁷

I do not mean to suggest here that the representation of the family's immediate Pakistani surroundings itself resorts to stereotypical views about the country's homogeneity. On the contrary, despite their manifest difference, the family are largely welcomed in the community. Beginning her time in the country as a teacher in the local school, Hiroko establishes herself as a familiar part of the community long before Raza's birth. 'Through the children,' we are told, 'she won over the mothers, whose initial reaction towards the Japanese woman with the dresses cinched at the waist was suspicion. And once the mothers had made up their minds, the neighbourhood had made up its mind'.⁴⁸ To underline this point, Shamsie writes that the neighbourhood boys all regularly call out 'Sayonara' to Hiroko as they jump on the school bus in the mornings.⁴⁹ However, Raza remains deeply aware of his inability to truly fit in with his classmates, harbouring a secret shame about his background. He consciously holds back from saying the word himself, choosing 'only [to speak] Japanese within the privacy of his home'.⁵⁰ 'Why allow the world to know his mind contained words from a country he had never visited?' writes Shamsie, going on to provide an insight into his increasingly depressive thoughts:

Weren't his eyes and his bone structure and his bare-legged mother distancing factors enough? All those years ago when he'd entered a class of older boys, at

⁴⁷ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 146.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

an age when a year was a significant age gap, his teacher had remarked on how easily he'd fitted in. He saw no reason to tell her it wasn't ease that made it possible but a studied awareness – one he'd had from a very young age – of how to downplay his manifest difference.⁵¹

Raza's feeling of difference is as much a product of his own psychological processes of self-reinforcement as it is any 'manifest' dissimilarity. What is ironic here, however, is that his experience of difference is itself one that is familiar to many of the nation's citizens. As Cara Cilano notes in *National Identities in Pakistan: The 1971 War in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction*, the textbooks used to teach 'Pakistan Studies' in many schools propagate narratives that 'assert for generations of students a vision of a seamlessly whole Pakistani national identity born of a particular historical, social, and cultural construction, that is to say, a discursive construction, at odds with the on-the-ground realities of every decade of Pakistani lived history'.⁵² The problem is not simply that Raza does not conform to the stereotypical expectations of Pakistani identity that others expect of him, but that he also fails to conform to those that he has been taught to expect of himself. As Hiroko reflects at one point: 'It didn't bother her in the least to know that she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan – she had no interest in belonging to anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation – but this didn't stop her from recognising how Raza flinched every time a Pakistani asked him where he was from'.⁵³

This contrast between Hiroko's and Raza's attitudes towards the notion of home is typified by the scars on the former's back. On the one hand, the birds

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Cara Cilano, *National Identities in Pakistan: The 1971 War in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p. 30.

⁵³ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 204.

symbolise Hiroko's freedom and itinerancy, but on the other, they are a reminder of disaster, of her original home being literally ripped up from around her by the bomb. When she hears that Raza's sudden journey into Afghanistan has been prompted by a girl that he has been trying to impress describing him as 'deformed', we are told that:

All Hiroko could think of was: the bomb. In the first years after Nagasaki she had dreams in which she awoke to find the tattoos gone from her skin, and knew the birds were inside her now, their beaks dripping with venom into her bloodstream, their charred wings engulfing her organs.⁵⁴

The scars, in her mind alternately fixed and fluid depending on how she feels, are shaped by historical trauma in a way not unlike the 'shaping' of Pakistani national identity. The symbolic meaning of the 'tattoos' shifts depending on what one chooses to read into them. For Hiroko, national identity, despite causing her some pain, is what she makes of it; for Raza, it has a rigidly homogenous outline that he cannot reconcile with his own self-perception. The girl's comment only helps to reinforce this, and, thus, through a combination of his own depressive feelings of fundamental difference and a perceived collective notion of national identity (which, while powerful, is actually perhaps less widespread than he believes it to be), a version of Pakistani identity that is heavily reliant upon stereotype ends up being perpetuated and strengthened in Raza's mind.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 222.

4.2 '[L]ike coming home': *Pakistan and the United States*

The Reluctant Fundamentalist also challenges stereotypes about Pakistan, in two key ways. The first constitutes a direct deconstruction of stereotypical views. This is particularly evident in passages such as the following, in which Changez notes the similarities between Lahore and Manhattan:

Like Manhattan? Yes, precisely! And that was one of the reasons why for me moving to New York felt – so unexpectedly – like coming home. But there were other reasons as well: the fact that Urdu was spoken by taxicab drivers; the presence, only two blocks from my East Village apartment, of a samosa- and channa-serving establishment called the Pak-Punjab Deli; the coincidence of crossing Fifth Avenue during a parade and hearing, from loudspeakers mounted on the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Association float, a song to which I had danced at my cousin's wedding.⁵⁵

As with *Burnt Shadows*, a questioning of the notion of 'home' is taking place here, with Changez' comparison between the two cities epitomising the novel's continuous attempt, throughout its narrative, to create an uncanny parallel between the United States and Pakistan. The notion of a song played on a Manhattan gay and lesbian float being the soundtrack for dancing at a Pakistani wedding might be a little surprising to Western readers. However, Changez notably does not specify what the song is: it could be an American-style pop song or a traditional Punjabi piece, but if the reader

⁵⁵ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pp. 36–7.

makes an assumption either way, then she is once again resorting to a preconceived set of cultural expectations.

The second and more interesting way in which the novel challenges stereotypes about Pakistan is by playing with Pakistani perceptions of the United States. Changez frequently reminds his American listener (and in turn the reader) that ‘we have not met before, ... yet you seem to know at least something about me’.⁵⁶ Throughout the novel Hamid attempts to make the reader feel a similarly patronising sense of overdetermination, or in other words, a feeling that a restrictive, stereotypical sense of identity is being projected onto her by the narrator. An example of this is evident when Changez recounts a moment soon after 9/11 when he was approached by an abusive stranger in New York who calls him a ‘Fucking Arab’.⁵⁷ He is quick to remind his interlocutor that he ‘[is] not, of course, an Arab’, and then proceeds to drive the point home by subjecting him to a similar – albeit less abusive – kind of stereotypical thinking:

What did he look like, you ask? Well, sir, he... But how odd! I cannot now recall the man’s particulars, his age, say, or his build; to be honest, I cannot now recall many of the details of the events I have been relating to you. But surely it is the *gist* that matters; I am, after all, telling you a history, and in history, as I suspect you – an American – will agree, it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one’s details.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

There are two assumptions here. The first is that Americans tend not to be interested in the fine details of a story, and the second is that the man to whom he is speaking necessarily adheres to the same values as other Americans. Whether Changez makes these assumptions consciously or unconsciously is beside the point. What is important is that, once again, the second-person narration puts the reader in the American's position and forces her to vicariously experience the overdetermination to which he is subjected. The idea of America that Changez projects onto his interlocutor reveals its own artificiality when the reader is, in turn, made to feel uncomfortable by the restrictions it forces upon her own sense of identity.

Moreover, it identifies a link between stereotypical thinking and what might broadly be described as 'fundamentalism'. The narrative 'gist' that Changez describes in the quotation above is simply another way of drawing attention to one of the text's key motifs: namely, what it describes as the desire in American culture to '[f]ocus on the fundamentals'.⁵⁹ This is the 'guiding principal' of Changez' New York employer, the valuation firm Underwood Samson: 'drilled into us since our first day at work[,] ... it mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value. And that was precisely what I continued to do'.⁶⁰ On the one hand, this business-driven notion of 'fundamentalism' offers an alternative to a tendency among the post-9/11 news media to use the term almost as a byword for Islamist terrorism. On the other, it draws attention to the narrowness of worldview that any ideology or system which focuses primarily on 'fundamentals' will inevitably produce. The point that the novel makes here is that while Islamist terrorism might be seen to enact more manifest violence than US-style capitalism (at

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

least ostensibly), the drive within each to privilege fundamental detail over the nuanced complexities of world history is necessarily conducive to a reinforcement of arbitrarily delineated – and mutually antagonistic – categories of collective identity. In other words, by complicating the stereotypical representations of fundamentalism so familiar to consumers of the global media, Hamid shows that the only way in which to rationally approach a phenomenon of such complexity is with a measured sense of ambivalence. I will now go on to analyse this deconstruction of fundamentalism in more detail, not only in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, but also in *Burnt Shadows* and *The Wasted Vigil*.

5.0 Deconstructing ‘fundamentalism’

In the 1997 Vintage edition of *Covering Islam*, Edward Said critiques the Western news media for the reductive way in which it frames a diverse religion encompassing billions of people around the world:

Only when there is a bomb in Saudi Arabia or the threat of violence against the United States in Iran has “Islam” seemed worthy of general comment. Then, as has occurred with some regularity since the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, newspapers, magazines, and an occasional film have tried to inform the public about “the world of Islam” with considered surveys, tables, and human interest stories (the Pakistani waterseller, the Egyptian peasant

family, etc.). Against a lowering and much more impressive background of militancy and *jihad* these efforts have proved ineffective.⁶¹

The prominence of ‘militancy and *jihad*’ in the Western media unquestionably increased in the years following 9/11, and one of the most common identity categories used in conjunction with it has been that of the Islamic ‘fundamentalist’. As the journalist Jason Burke has observed, the term is problematic and has only recently ‘returned to vogue’ after a period of little use (its ‘obvious limitations’, according to Burke, include the fact that ‘all devout Muslims are in a sense “fundamentalists”, in that they believe in the “fundamentals” of their religion and consult the holy texts, seen as authentic and revealed, for guidance’).⁶²

In keeping with the reservations voiced by Said and Burke, all three of the Pakistani novels in question raise questions about what it means for a person to be a ‘fundamentalist’, challenging post-9/11 Western perceptions about the fundamentalist figure. However, they do so in a way that avoids playing down the existence of a certain kind of Islamist (as opposed to Islamic) fundamentalism in the country: that is, a politicised form of Islam for which, following in the tradition of figures such as Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna, religion provides a vehicle for a deeply reactionary ideological agenda.⁶³ Rather than dismissing the influence of this kind of

⁶¹ Said, *Covering Islam*, p. 16.

⁶² Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 39–40.

⁶³ In his influential study *Islam and Politics*, John L. Esposito notes that ‘[f]or both Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, the task of modern Muslims is nothing less than a great *jihad* against the enemies of Islam to reestablish a true Islamic territory, or rule, which is the prerequisite for following the Islamic way of life. ... Any other form of government, whether foreign dominated or under Muslim control, is illegitimate and thus a non-Islamic territory, an object of holy war’. John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 142. Looking specifically at the influence of these thinkers in Southeast Asia, Bilveer Singh argues that ‘Islamists like al-Banna, [Maulana] Maududi and Qutb have, just as in the Middle East, been evoked in Southeast Asia for the reconstruction of Islam to achieve political goals. Using *Al-Ikhwān*-type ideas, Islamists in Southeast Asia have created a regional political ideal to challenge existing secular orders. ... Utilizing the

thought in Pakistan, the novels help to generate a kind of empathy with seemingly ‘fundamentalist’ figures, and, in turn, offer an understanding of fundamentalism that is potentially more sophisticated – as well as more productive in the nation’s struggle to control it – than that perpetuated through media stereotypes.

5.1 ‘Focus[ing] on the fundamentals’

Each novel features a central character that either fits the description of a ‘fundamentalist’ or is suspected of being one by other characters in the narrative. In *The Wasted Vigil*, the orphaned Afghan servant boy, Casa, is employed by a British Muslim convert called Marcus Caldwell, but harbours a secret hatred of the West and spends much of the narrative planning to commit a suicidal act of violence against US forces stationed in Afghanistan during the Soviet war. In *Burnt Shadows*, the grown-up Raza is pursued by the CIA from Afghanistan to New York under post-9/11 terrorism charges initiated on the vindictive whim of a bitter US general. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the identity of the ‘fundamentalist’ figure depends upon how the reader chooses to read the narrative. There are strong hints throughout that Changez’ story will turn out to be one of how he has become radicalised by the often reactionary response to 9/11 by many in the United States, but the novel turns this expectation on its head at its open-ended climax, where there is a strong possibility that the more ‘fundamentalist’ character is actually the unnamed American to whom Changez has been addressing his tale.

rhetoric of the “rule of God” over the “rule of Man”, these Islamists used Islamic categories to legitimize political violence against any regime’. Bilveer Singh, *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Extremists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), p. 19.

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Hamid attempts to broaden the reader's understanding of fundamentalism by challenging the stereotypes about identity that have pervaded post-9/11 news discourse about it. Nevertheless, the parallels that his novel draws between a US-style 'focus on the fundamentals' and a Pakistani-style Islamist fundamentalism continue to reinforce one aspect of fundamentalism that has been at the core of its coverage in the media: violence. The novel ends with an implied act of fundamentalist violence between Changez and the American, but its ambiguity leaves open to question exactly what happens and to whom. The narrative's final pages follow the two figures as they leave the tea room and wander through the darkened streets towards the American's hotel, and the closing paragraph is as follows:

Ah, we are about to arrive at the gates of your hotel. It is here that you and I shall at last part company. Perhaps our waiter wants to say goodbye as well, for he is rapidly closing in. Yes, he is waving at me to detain you. I know you have found some of my views offensive; I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand. But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards.⁶⁴

The 'waiter rapidly closing in', waving at Changez to 'detain' the American suggests a degree of threat that would make it easy to initially read the passage as describing the moment when Changez reveals himself as the 'reluctant fundamentalist' of the title, pushed into violent anti-American extremism by a belligerent post-9/11 US foreign policy.

⁶⁴ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 209.

However, this would be too simple a reading, as the language has an ambiguity that resists a single, straightforward interpretation. The passage constitutes the culmination of a series of passing comments that Changez has been making as they walk through the dimly lit city, each working to build the tension a little more ('What? Is somebody following us? I cannot see anyone'; 'I must avoid doing what you are doing at this instant, namely looking over my shoulder').⁶⁵ In addition, while walking, Changez simultaneously recounts the final part of the story of his relationship with America, in which he becomes an outspoken university lecturer highly critical of US foreign policy and, as a result, attracts the attention of international news reporters. He acknowledges that he 'was perhaps more forceful on the this topic than [he] intended', and even (in one of Hamid's admittedly slightly clumsier metaphorical flourishes) that '[i]f Erica was watching – which rationally, I knew, she almost certainly was not – she might have seen me and been moved to correspond', but the topic of discussion only adds to the sense of foreboding that builds over the novel's final pages.⁶⁶

The quickness with which the reader might jump to the conclusion that Changez is some sort of terrorist – which she may even expect from the start, given the novel's title – becomes part of the point. It is for this reason that I would diverge slightly from James Lasdun's highly astute review of the novel in the *Guardian*, in which he suggests that 'in a neat – arguably too neat – reversal, it transpires that the real fundamentalism at play here is that of US capitalism'.⁶⁷ What is more important, I would argue, is the fundamentalist impulse that the novel provokes in the *reader*, experienced vicariously through the figure of the American. With virtually no

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 200 and 208.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.207

⁶⁷ James Lasdun, 'The Empire Strikes Back', *Guardian*, 3 March 2007
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview20>>

concrete evidence upon which to suspect that Changez has been transformed into a violent figure (as opposed to one that is simply angry at the United States), the reader is responding, intellectually, in much the same way as the American perhaps does as he reaches into his pocket for what is heavily implied to be a handgun. In the possible circumstance that Changez is innocent and that the American has, in his anti-Islamic paranoia, jumped to conclusions, then it is he, as well as any reader that jumps to the same conclusion, that can most accurately be described as a ‘reluctant fundamentalist’.

5.2 ‘[O]verdetermined from without’: Fundamentalism and the Framing of Identity

Raza in *Burnt Shadows* is similar to Changez in that he is a figure whose apparent ‘fundamentalism’ is, to borrow a phrase from Frantz Fanon, ‘overdetermined from without’ by the fundamentalist tendency to resort to prejudice and stereotype by those around him.⁶⁸ Like in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, his representation poses questions about the meaning of the label ‘fundamentalist’ in contemporary media discourse. As I have already argued, from his early childhood onwards, his sense of difference is reinforced by a combination of the attitudes of those around him and his own tendency to magnify these differences through his overly-deprecatory self-image. His decision to venture into Afghanistan as a teenager is prompted in part by a chance meeting with some actual Hazara travellers, who mistake him for one of their own and are keen for him to help them learn English. For the first time in his life he comes to feel his identity both accepted and validated through an appreciation for his polyglot skills that has never been granted to him in Pakistan. After spending some

⁶⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 116. Fanon uses the phrase to describe the identity-projection involved in the experience of racism: ‘I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. ... I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*’.

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time in the Hazara village and earning the people's trust, he is naively drawn into a secret plan amongst some of the younger male members of the clan to travel to a *Mujahideen* training camp in the desert in order to offer their services in the war against invading Soviet forces. (It is this brief association with the *Mujahideen* that prompts the aforementioned US general to become suspicious of him two decades later.)

The misreading of his ethnic identity by others is reflected in his own naive misreading of the world around him: he completely underestimates the danger in which he has put himself by infiltrating the training camp, and then does the same again when, twenty years later, he is placed in a cell in a US military base shortly after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The novel's depiction of two Razas – one a naive teenager, one a US military translator in his mid-thirties – does not simply draw attention to the instability of his identity, but also, more importantly, to that of identity in a more general sense: the small links that Raza (for the most part inadvertently) makes with Islamist fundamentalism throughout his life lead some of those around him, when they find out, to paint his character with the same brush.

During his time flitting over the border into Afghanistan to teach his Hazara students how to read and write, the compartmentalisation of Raza's already fragmented identity undergoes a process of reinforcement:

For months now, Raza had been living two lives. In one, he was plain Raza Ashraf, getting plainer each day as his friends' lives marched forward into university and he remained the failed student, the former factory worker, the boy marked by the bomb. In the other, he was Raza Hazara the man who would not speak his language – or speak of his family or past, not even to

other Hazaras – until he had driven the last Soviet out of Afghanistan, the man for whom an American took off his own shoes, which could only signal that somehow, in some way – though Raza would only look mysterious when questioned about it – he was of significance to the CIA (every American in Pakistan was CIA, of course).

While Raza Ashraf's greatest pride came from the joy with which his father turned on his new cassette-player from Sohrab Goth every evening after work, Raza Hazara learnt to measure pride in the decreasing number of seconds it took him to take down and reassemble an AK-47. Raza Ashraf spent more and more time alone, locked in a world of books and dreams, while Raza Hazara was greeted with cries of delight each time he entered the slums of Sohrab Goth to teach English to an ever-expanding group of students. Raza Hazara never had to duck his head forward so his hair would hide his features.⁶⁹

There is an inherent irony in the fact that Raza's involvement with the Hazara villagers allows him to utilise his language skills while, at the same time, prompting him to flirt with fundamentalist violence. Indeed, it is this irony that gestures towards the complex mesh of world histories that the novel attempts to evoke throughout. Not only is it inaccurate to describe him as a 'fundamentalist' because of his entanglement with the *Mujahideen*, it is also 'fundamentalist' in the same sense in which Hamid's novel engages with the term. That is, it fixates upon a single aspect of a personality, ignoring its potential complexity in a way that simply reinforces one's preconceptions. It is not insignificant that Raza is unnamed and anonymous in the short prologue to

⁶⁹ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 207.

the novel, in which the reader is presented with a figure in the process of being incarcerated at Guantánamo Bay. While the figure waiting to be fitted with an orange jumpsuit at the novel's opening has his identity almost completely held back from the reader, as the novel unfolds it becomes increasingly apparent that the prisoner will turn out to be Raza, who, on the contrary, is bursting with multiple conflicting identities (the revelation does not actually occur until the novel's climax, but it is not difficult to guess at the direction in which the plot is moving).

Raza's representation in the novel as a fragmented individual ultimately functions as an exercise in the engendering of heteropathic empathy. Instead of simply 'filling in' the blank slate of the figure in the prologue with a well-developed character whose actions can easily be interpreted as 'good' or 'bad', Shamsie creates an individual whose identity remains almost as difficult to pin down by the end of the novel as it is at the start. As Salil Tripathi puts it in his review of the novel in the *Independent*, '[a]t the core of Kamila Shamsie's new novel is the idea that an individual's identity is not a fixed block that can be slotted into an assigned square, but essentially liquid, evolving as life flows'.⁷⁰ Although the reader learns a good deal about the prologue's anonymous incarcerated figure throughout the narrative and is encouraged to empathise with him as a confused individual whose need to be understood is constantly neglected by himself and by others, this empathy is based just as much upon what she still *does not* know about him as it is upon what has been made explicit. It stems, like in Hamid's novel, from a heightened awareness of that which is immediately apparent actually hiding multiple complex historical layers, and an increased understanding of the importance of eschewing a 'fundamentalist' urge to

⁷⁰ Salil Tripathi, 'Burnt Shadows, by Kamila Shamsie', *Independent*, 13 March 2009
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/burnt-shadows-by-kamila-shamsie-1643530.html>>

make sweeping judgements by only looking at the parts of a story that reaffirm one's own prejudiced preconceptions. 'We only ever hear a part of each other's story', one character says to Hiroko towards the end of the novel. Despite the extensive exploration of his family background and coming-of-age, by the time the narrative concludes the reader can still only claim to have heard a part of Raza's.⁷¹

The point here is not so much that by the end of the novel, the reader 'knows' the figure in the prologue well enough to make a judgement about his character, but rather that the more she learns about him, the more it becomes apparent how easy – and damaging – it can be to make assumptions about a person based upon anything other than their actions. The reader is encouraged to empathise with Raza, not because of any similarity or difference between his identity and her own, but rather upon a recognition of the differences between the multiple facets of Raza's identity. In other words, she is prompted to acknowledge that beyond the stereotype-induced, reductive identities that are projected onto him by others, there lies a human being as complex and contradictory as any other, irreducible to any label based upon race, nationality or religion.

5.3 '[W]ith the light of a firefly': Framing Islamic Fundamentalism

As I have already stated, *The Wasted Vigil* is the only one of the three novels to include a character – Casa – who can be accurately described as an Islamist fundamentalist. A number of reviewers have criticised Aslam for the way that Casa is represented. Samir Rahim, for instance, has argued that 'there is too much rigorous

⁷¹ Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 271.

condemnation here and too little of the delicacy found in [Aslam's] early writing'.⁷² Likewise, Robin Yassin-Kassab has written that 'with his horrifyingly wrongheaded interpretations of Islam, [Casa] seldom rises above stereotype'.⁷³ To a certain degree, this is the case: Casa is a deeply angry individual who in some ways only confirms the somewhat patronising liberal attitude expressed early on in the narrative by the American character, David, who thinks to himself:

What did they, the Americans, really know about such parts of the world, of the layer upon layer of savagery that made them up? They had arrived in these places without realising how fragile were the defences that most people had erected against cruelty and degradation here. Conducting a life with the light from a firefly.⁷⁴

However, while the novel is clearly designed to encourage an understanding of Western involvement in the Af-Pak region that acknowledges the vastness of its history, like the darkness unreached by 'the light from a firefly', David's characterisation of this darkness as 'savagery' is an example of precisely this kind of reductive thinking in action. As such, I would suggest that Casa represents a figure who is prompted to respond to this kind of thinking by allowing it, like Raza in *Burnt Shadows*, to overdetermine his identity from without. He is a traumatised, vulnerable and rootless young man for whom the kind of thinking espoused by Western liberals like David provides a useful target at which to vent his frustration. This is not to

⁷² Sameer Rahim, 'Review: *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam', *Telegraph*, 6 September 2008 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3559857/Review-The-Wasted-Vigil-by-Nadeem-Aslam.html>>

⁷³ Robin Yassin-Kassab, 'Within the rubble', *The National*, 10 October 2008 <<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/within-the-rubble#page3>>

⁷⁴ Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 184.

suggest that Aslam straightforwardly propagates a Chomskyite notion of jihadi ‘blowback’, nor to imply that he is putting forward the simplistic idea that the blame for Casa’s actions rests with the hegemonic power of Western neoliberal discourse.⁷⁵ Rather, it is to point out, once again, that he presents Casa as an exemplar of the ease with which any neglected individual can submit to the comforting perception of self-affirmation offered by fundamentalist thought. Moreover, by providing such a direct insight into Casa’s thoughts and encouraging the reader to empathise with him, Aslam shows that this susceptibility to aggressively fundamentalist impulses in response to difference is, ironically, one that is shared across the boundaries of difference. As Oona Frawley puts it in an article on the novel in *Textual Practice*: ‘Aslam forces a recognition in a western readership that people on opposite sides of the “war on terror” share much more in common than media representation and post-9/11 rhetoric would have us believe’.⁷⁶ Indeed, as Mohammed Hanif succinctly puts it in his review of the novel for the *Independent*, one of Aslam’s key aims is to draw attention to ‘the destructive urges that bind us together’.⁷⁷

Despite a skewing of global perceptions of the Af-Pak region by an international news media that represents the area almost only in the context of discussions of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Aslam is brave in that he attempts to engage with this very real problem at the same time as he works to combat the stereotypes about it. A good deal of emphasis is placed upon Casa’s tragic family background, providing a substantial set of emotional reasons for him being drawn towards

⁷⁵ See e.g. Noam Chomsky, ‘Wars of Terror’, in *Masters of War: Militarism and Blowback in the Era of American Empire*, ed. by Carl Boggs (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 131–49.

⁷⁶ Oona Frawley, ‘Global Civil War and Post-9/11 Discourse in *The Wasted Vigil*’, *Textual Practice*, 27.3 (2013), p. 452.

⁷⁷ Mohammed Hanif, ‘*The Wasted Vigil*, by Nadeem Aslam’, *Independent*, 12 September 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wasted-vigil-by-nadeem-aslam-926483.html>>

extremist views. As with Changez in Hamid's novel, Casa frequently seeks to undermine consensus understandings about the meaning of the term 'fundamentalism'. However, in this case, rather than challenging these preconceptions explicitly by articulating them directly to other characters (as in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), Casa keeps his thoughts to himself. In doing so, he allows the thoughts to take an increasingly toxic hold on his temperament, not least when he finds himself routinely subjected to questioning by Western forces in his country. For example, instead of confronting a group of US Army-employed Afghan guards, who he feels have unjustifiably held him in humiliating suspicion when they stop him on his way to work, he says nothing. Instead, he '[tries] to hold back tears', and allows his anger to intensify into 'rage and humiliation, a fury many centuries deep'.⁷⁸ The incident exacerbates his already unnervingly Huntingtonian, 'clash of civilisations' worldview, prompting him to reflect that '[t]he West wants unconditional love; failing that, unconditional surrender. Not realising that that privilege is Islam's'.⁷⁹ A few sentences later, he develops this line of thinking as follows:

These days they kept saying, *Why do the Muslims become suicide bombers?* *They must be animals, there are no human explanations for their actions.* But does no one remember what happened on board flight United 93? A group of Americans – 'civilised' people, not 'barbarians' – discovered that their lives, their country, their land, their cities, their traditions, their customs, their religion, their families, their friends, their fellow countrymen, their past, their present, their future, were under attack, and they decided to risk their lives –

⁷⁸ Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 249.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

and eventually gave up their lives – to prevent the other side from succeeding.

[The extremist leader, Nabi Khan,] is not wrong when he thinks that that is a lot like what the Muslim martyrdom bombers are doing.⁸⁰

By allowing the reader such an intimate insight into Casa's increasingly raging mindset, Aslam is, again, able to infuse the figure of the 'fundamentalist' with a sense of historicity and, in turn, empathy with those who might be drawn to such thinking. In doing so, the novel prompts its reader to acknowledge that, as Adam Mars-Jones puts it in his review of the novel for the *Guardian*, 'you can't choose not to be a victim of history. You can, though, choose to trace its workings, the terrible calligraphy of events'.⁸¹ This is not to suggest that the novel plays down the dangerousness of Casa's thinking, nor (once again) that it lends implicit credence to the simplistically relativistic position of blaming his radicalisation on Western imperialism. Rather, instead of 'playing politics', so to speak, with the causes of Islamist fundamentalism, it draws attention to the antagonism that any 'fundamentalist' way of thinking bears towards the complexity and contradictions central to any reasoned understanding of human identity.

In his influential Islamist manifesto, *Milestones*, Sayyid Qutb specifically describes his vision for Islam as one that is 'outside the human sphere'.⁸² For Qutb, Islam is a divine way of life that exists in direct opposition to the impure, hybrid infidelity that constitutes human affairs. By encouraging the reader to empathise with Casa, Aslam places his fundamentalist figure firmly in the 'human sphere', connecting Casa's fundamentalism to an intricate network of social, political and

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 250.

⁸¹ Adam Mars-Jones, 'Anything to See Those Paper Eyes?', *Guardian*, 12 October 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/12/fiction2>>

⁸² Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, anonymous translation (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2008), p. 101.

historical contexts. When Casa equivocates between suicide bombers and the passengers of flight United 93, the novel is not making the relatively easy point that Westerners can be fundamentalists too (nor even that not all fundamentalism is necessarily ‘bad’). It is going further than this by – again, like in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – projecting the *label* of ‘fundamentalist’ back onto the reader, provoking in her not only a deep sense of anger at Casa’s obviously unjustifiable comparison, but also placing her, through an implied idiopathic identification with the United 93 passengers, in a position in which her own identity is reductively overdetermined from without. The point is not to highlight any inherent ‘fundamentalism’ in mainstream Western thought, but to warn against the temptation to succumb to such thought by adhering to the terms of engagement dictated by Islamist extremism. Once again, it is the ‘begetting’ of tomorrow’s wars by those being fought today that, the narrative suggests, can be curbed only through a renunciation of the terms dictated by fundamentalist thought, understood in its broadest sense.

Admittedly, one might accuse all three novels of shirking a responsibility to engage directly with the religious aspect of Islamist fundamentalism. As Ahmed Rashid notes in *Descent Into Chaos*, ‘[t]he Pakistani government ... made no attempt to contain the inflammatory jihadi literature that flooded into the country after 9/11. Some forty publications with a circulation of over one million were published by extremist groups’.⁸³ Even *The Wasted Vigil*, which comes closest to religious engagement by including an undeniably ‘fundamentalist’ Islamist character (albeit an Afghan one) in the figure of Casa, stops short of looking in any depth at the theological dimension of such thought, instead opting to highlight its emergence

⁸³ Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos*, p. 227.

through a complicated geopolitical context. The danger here is that the specificities of Islamist fundamentalism may arguably be overshadowed in the novels by its figurative role as a device through which to comment on fundamentalism more generally. There are two potential problems here. The first is the obvious one of lessening the novels' credibility as commentaries on the war on terror, in which debates about Islam – whether for good or for ill – have dominated the political discourse surrounding it. The second, however, is that it may potentially only *invert* the media Orientalism that the novels are attempting to undercut: by opting to bypass any religious motivation for Islamist fundamentalism, one might argue that the novels do not fully respect the conscious agency of Muslims – Pakistani or otherwise – to choose to adhere to a worldview rooted in a distinctly religious kind of fundamentalism.

However, although the absence of theological engagement in all three novels is conspicuous, and points towards an opportunity for future novels to explore the topic further, it is also important to note that none of the three novelists have any sort of duty, as writers of Pakistani descent, to explore religious fundamentalism. As Claire Chambers puts it, 'non-Muslim authors such as Martin Amis, Sebastian Faulks, and John Updike have [already] zeroed in on the figure of the terrorist'.⁸⁴ As such, Muslim writers like those explored in this chapter have, in response, consciously 'looked at Islam in complex, multifaceted ways'.⁸⁵ Indeed, one might view their relative restraint on the topic as an indirect way of commenting on what Robert Eaglestone has described the general 'failure' of Western fiction to represent Islamic terrorists in a sophisticated way: by holding back, they refuse to simply 'blam[e] it on

⁸⁴ Chambers, 'A Comparative Approach to Pakistani Writing in English', p. 128.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

evil, illness or on universal desires'.⁸⁶ The fundamentalism that the texts explore is deliberately broad, as it pertains to a global (and globalised) fixation on the term that is highly politicised and central to discourse surrounding the war on terror. A more detailed engagement with the theology of Islamist fundamentalism may have distracted from their more immediate, wide-ranging attempt to challenge adherence to any form of fundamentalism, not least a 'Western' media-driven kind, which, ironically, is overly quick to project the term 'fundamentalist' onto others. Moreover, in order to avoid perpetuating the very stereotypes that they aim to undercut, the novels would need to acknowledge the complex and ironic *plurality* of fundamentalist movements in Pakistan. As Stephen P. Cohen writes in a Brookings Institution report titled 'The Future of Pakistan': 'Pakistan is far from a theocracy – the Islamists are too much at each other's throats for that'.⁸⁷

Although all three novels undoubtedly fall into the highly marketable category of Anglophone Pakistani fiction discussed at the start of this chapter, the ambivalent approach to fundamentalism that they display is once again testament to their expansive vision for a historically networked post-9/11 Pakistani identity; one that is multifaceted and closely connected to the contemporary globalised world, but that nevertheless also maintains a sense of heterogeneity from it. Such a vision might have been compromised by adhering too closely to narratives in which Islamist fundamentalism is often virtually inextricable from Pakistani or Muslim identity. Indeed, it is precisely through their 'vacillating' approach to global representational frames that the texts also necessarily challenge the logical inverse of this assumed

⁸⁶ Robert Eaglestone, "'The Age of Reason is Over ... An Age of Fury was Dawning": Contemporary Anglo-American Fiction and Terror', *Wasafiri*, 22.2 (2007), p. 22.

⁸⁷ Stephen P. Cohen, 'The Future of Pakistan', report for the South Asia Initiative at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., January 2011, p. 30
<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2010/9/bellagio%20conference%20papers/01_pakistan_cohen.pdf>

inextricability: namely, that Pakistani Muslims are *incompatible* with liberalism, secularism, or the West. Indeed, in their ambivalence towards global frames, the authors display a sharp awareness of the likelihood that, in the words of political scientist Gilles Kepel, '[t]he most important battle for Muslim minds during the next decade will be fought ... in those communities of believers on the outskirts of London, Paris, and other European cities, where Islam is already a growing *part* of the West' (emphasis added).⁸⁸ None of this is, of course, to suggest that a more in-depth fictional exploration of Pakistani fundamentalism should not be undertaken in the future, but simply that there are valid reasons that the topic does not play more prominent role in *Burnt Shadows*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or *The Wasted Vigil*.

6.0 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate how the kind of 'enactment of difference' that Richard Gray calls for in fiction about 9/11 and the war on terror is complicated by contemporary Pakistani fiction, a highly marketable literary genre that is characterised by its ambivalent attitude towards the global book market. 'Vacillating' in their attitudes towards dominant discursive frames, novels such as those by Shamsie, Aslam and Hamid sell themselves on their apparent ability to 'explain' Pakistan to a Western readership, countering stereotypes of the nation propagated by a mutually beneficial relationship between religious fundamentalists within the country and reportage about it in the global news media. However, at the same time, they consciously attempt to undercut this process of explanation, raising consciousness

⁸⁸ Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 8.

Chapter 5

about the country at the same time as they aim to ‘disrupt confidence in consciousness-raising’.

While other novels that I have analysed in this thesis have attempted to generate a post-9/11 heteropathic empathy with a non-Western ‘other’, the novels in this chapter go a step further by supplanting a homogeneously understood Pakistani national identity with a more plural acknowledgement of differences between *multiple* Pakistani identities. As such, the heteropathic empathy that the novels help to generate is not empathy with a broadly defined Pakistani ‘other’, but rather with autonomous individuals who happen to be Pakistani, without being defined by it. Beginning with an analysis of the novels’ attempt to represent Pakistan in a way that challenges their readers’ perceptions, the chapter has in turn referred to the texts’ manipulation of the trope of migration, their subversion of national stereotypes, and their engagement with the politically charged topic of fundamentalism. In each case, I have argued that the novels strive to undercut assumptions about both Pakistani identity and Muslim identity that are commonly perpetuated in global media discourse.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to show how literature might help to challenge the reductive ‘us and them’ binaries often present in the framing of identity and difference after 9/11. Such binaries are often perpetuated through the global media, but are also patently apparent in the lexicons of the Bush administration, al-Qaeda, and – as I suggested in the Introduction – a number of prominent Western novelists, including Ian McEwan. As I have attempted to make clear from the opening pages, this is by no means to equivocate (morally or otherwise) between the three groups. Rather it is to underscore, through the very extent of their non-equivalence, just how ingrained such binaries have become in the language with which people from even the most vastly differing ideological backgrounds make sense of the contemporary world.

In challenging this binary language, the selection of novels that I have analysed go against the grain of much work in the emergent genre of ‘9/11 fiction’. In contrast to more frequently-scrutinised texts such as *Windows on the World* by Frederic Beigbeder (2003), *The Good Life* by Jay McInerney (2006) and *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo (2007), all of which maintain versions of the ‘us and them’ binary, the novels that I have focused on are more self-reflexive. By encouraging their readers to ‘reframe’ 9/11 – in other words, to think about its place in a complicated historical context – the texts deconstruct reductive conceptualisations of difference by challenging the discursive frameworks that underpin them in the context of the war on terror.

Conclusion

Beginning with a critique of Judith Butler's analysis of the 'frames' through which the war on terror is represented in US media discourse, the thesis has gone on to trace a line between novels that have become more transnational as the chapters progress, arguing that they reveal the framing process to possess a more 'textual' quality than Butler suggests they do. I have aimed to show that an understanding of frames in this more textual manner might mean that they are, in turn, susceptible to reconfiguration in more inclusive ways.

In Chapter 1, I posited that Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* (2006) prompts the kind of 'insurrection at the level of ontology' that Butler calls for, but in a manner that encourages a more thoroughgoing rethinking of ingrained assumptions than evidenced in Butler's theorisation.¹ Chapter 2 showed how two seemingly 'inward gazing' American novels self-reflexively critique a similar insularity evident in the dominant discursive frames after 9/11. Chapter 3 focused on the ways in which three novels about the Iraq war generate a kind of 'connective dissonance' – or binding *through* difference – that undercuts dominant media framings of the conflict. Chapter 4 analysed two major fictional works that Salman Rushdie has published since 9/11, arguing that they challenge homogenous ideological framings of the contemporary world by blurring the boundaries between different histories. Finally, in Chapter 5, I demonstrated the ways in which three Anglophone novels by authors of Pakistani descent 'vacillate' in their attitudes towards global discursive frames. I argued that they work within the conventions set by these frames, but in a manner that simultaneously attempts to shift them in more politically progressive ways.

¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London, Verso, 2009), p. 33.

Conclusion

In some of the texts, an engagement with 9/11, as well as with the related issues of identity and difference, initially appears only fleeting. However, when read in ‘alignment’ with each other, the novels give rise to a ‘constellation’ of ideas about the way in which the attacks and their ongoing fallout continue to shape our understanding of the contemporary world. Indeed, rather than undercutting the existing 9/11 canon, my thesis has aimed to expand the genre’s scope by connecting with it in a similarly ‘contellational’ manner. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Kamila Shamsie has rightly identified a need for fiction that is ‘interested in the question “What do these people have to do with us?” and “What are we doing out there in the world?”’.² This thesis has attempted to show that such a literature has already begun to emerge. Its asking of these questions is not always obvious, sometimes its style is odd or unconventional, and often it resists easy placement within national identity categories. But this literature does, nevertheless, exist. As Teju Cole’s narrator, Julius, puts it while gazing out at the night sky in *Open City*: ‘in the dark spaces between the dead, shining stars, were stars I could not see, stars that still existed, and were giving out light that hadn’t reached me yet, stars now living and giving out light but present to me only as blank interstices’.³ Although still in its early stages, a constellation of texts is beginning to form, and it will take time, as well as further reading and research, before many of the ideas it can potentially offer become fully apparent.

² Kamila Shamsie, ‘The Storytellers of Empire’, *Guernica*, 1 February 2012
<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/>

³ Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 256.

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