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The End of the 90s in Poroquista Khakpour's *The Last Illusion*, Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that three contemporary novels – Poroquista Khakpour's *The Last Illusion* (2014), Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* (2017), and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) – offer correctives to prevalent histories of the American 1990s that depict this period as a time of stability, tolerance, and optimism. These novels offer specific vectors of critique, attending to the advance of social and cultural forms of neoliberalism, popular notions of the “alternative” or liberal 90s, and address a sequence of ruptures and social turbulence preceding “9/11” – often seen as the abrupt conclusion of the “long 90s.” Additionally, the historical narratives of these novels each build in depictions of the September 11 attacks, which decenter them and question the exceptionalization of this event. I argue for the value in reading these novels together and demonstrate how they speak to and mirror each other in productive ways.

An abundance of recent op-eds, magazine articles and books have offered reflections and commentary on the American 1990s. Points of emphasis include the birth of the “information age” and rise of the internet, accelerations in globalization, and many diagnoses of a particular cultural mood including the enduring idea of a pervasive “ambivalence” (Closterman 4). Despite the contradictions here, and the problems related to coherently historicizing any decade, one common theme – nearing consensus – is that this was a time of optimism, tolerance, and stability. For instance, in a typical op-ed piece in the *New York Times* from 2015, the novelist Kurt Andersen wrote that for people of all ages the 90s was “simply the happiest decade of our American lifetimes” (2015). More recently, in a *Guardian* article entitled “In these strange times, there’s no better place to relax than the 90s,” Hadley Freeman notes that her generation “now looks back in amazement at how calm things were in our teen years, pre-coronavirus, Brexit, Trump and 9/11” (2020). Even Douglas Coupland, chronicler of *Generation X* (1991), now feels very positive about the decade (with the caveat that it began with “end of history” gloom): “in North America and Europe, the 1990s possessed a sense of happiness that seems long vanished. Money still generated money. Computers were becoming fast easy and cheap, and with them came a sense of equality for everyone” (2017).

For these (and many other) commentators, this is more than nostalgia: the 90s represents a set of conditions and values to which we should seek to return. It was the era of Clinton-style liberalism, and it is unsurprising that it is fondly evoked in the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* via references to palatably liberal “alternative” rock acts such as Pearl Jam or Alanis Morissette who achieved extraordinary mainstream popularity during these years. It was the era of the witty aimlessness of *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), and coffee house camaraderie of *Friends* (1994–2004), and the mass adoption of the internet, which for many was, at least briefly, a place of utopian, democratic

possibilities. But the mid-to-late-90s were also the peak years for American AIDS casualties (1995 saw over 40,000 deaths), and a period of heightened racial tension in the aftermath of a string of violent earlier-90s events including the Central Park Five trial, the infamous police beating of Rodney King and ensuing LA riots in 1992, and the O.J. Simpson trial in 1994. Domestic terrorists like Timothy McVeigh and Ted Kaczynski committed shocking acts of violence and 82 people were killed in the Waco, Texas standoff and siege. Environmental activism escalated via the Earth Liberation Front which carried out an extensive campaign of “ecotage,” and rapidly increasing anxieties about the impacts of globalization boiled over at the “Battle of Seattle” riots in 1999.

One reason for the persistence of this notion of optimism, and erasure of such ruptures, is the neat historical bookends provided by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. This framing of the “long 90s” generally positions the first event as the end of the Cold War (and establishment of capitalist democracy as global hegemony), and therefore as an unambiguously positive global turn, and the second, “9/11,” as a seismic moment of rupture that re-shaped the world order in profoundly negative ways. Philip E. Wegner has traced the contradictions of the American 90s using these “events” in slightly different and more nuanced terms. Wegner works through a range of popular and “literary” texts – from Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) to the television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996–2003), in order to examine the 90s as a “a unique moment of struggle, one enabled by the Event of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and waged over the significance of this Event” (2009, 36). Wegner argues that radical possibilities for new forms of collectivity and social/political organization emerged during this period, and that these ideas risk being forgotten in our post-9/11 world. Though Wegner is surely right about this, the 90s also saw steady advances in neoliberalism and in this sense the pre- and post-9/11 worlds (and pre- and post-Berlin Wall worlds) were broadly continuous and not discontinuous. Indeed, much of the “struggle” Wegner identifies can be understood as conflict between certain progressive impulses, and the increasingly pervasive cultural logic of neoliberalism.

The origins and global histories of neoliberalism are contested – even within the broad discipline of contemporary or “post-45” literary studies.¹ However, there is some consensus that the 90s was a critically important time in its development in America. There was a decisive collapse in the American working class, and neoliberal logic became culturally and socially entrenched (Greenwald-Smith and Huehls 7). In Rachel Greenwald-Smith’s and Mitchum Huehls’s influential “four phases” periodization, the “Clinton-Blair nineties mark a more granular extension” from economic policies and ideological formations into “previously noneconomic domains of human life” (7). It is now a commonplace to note the ubiquity of “market logic” and that human relations are defined by transaction and competition.² Philip Mirowski describes an “everyday neoliberalism,” characterized by the “entrepreneurial self,” by “promiscuous notions of identity,” where “competition is the primary virtue” (92). The consensus notion that this became hegemonic in the 90s, is reinforced by a growing body of scholarship showing the ways 90s-era rhetoric of multiculturalism and globalization (as a “tide lifting all boats”) has been underpinned by neoliberal agendas. For example, Jodi Melamed argues that neoliberalism “portrays an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism and, conversely, posits neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity” (138). This is just one example of the fraught coinciding of social liberalism and neoliberalism. If the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 – whose inauguration celebrations included an MTV Inaugural Ball with performances by Natalie Merchant, U2 and REM – represented a turn toward tolerance and plurality, then his tough-on-crime policies, decimation of the welfare state, emphasis on “individual responsibility” and embrace of the free market, represented neoliberalism.

Yet, contemporary histories of the 90s rarely attend to this. The entrenchment of the cultural logic of neoliberalism may have been masked by the utopian possibilities opened up by the internet during this period, or the liberal rhetoric of the Clinton presidency, but it is undoubtedly the case that popular histories of the 90s as a time of tolerance and optimism – and not the rise of “homo economicus” – have been underpinned by the received logic that the period ended abruptly with the tragedy of 9/11. A wave of contemporary novels has begun to challenge this. As early as Jonathan Franzen’s *The*

Corrections – written before 9/11 and famously published on the day – the idea of the late-90s as a period of abundance or “years in America when it was nearly impossible not to make money,” has been satirized (118). But more recent fiction, which looks back on the period with some distance, has been forcefully critical. Lauren Groff’s novel, *Fates and Furies* (2015), for example, both affirms neoliberalism’s cultural emergence in the period, and skewers nostalgic visions of its social liberalism:

... it was the newly shining nineties; girls wore glitter on their cheekbones: clothes were shot with silver thread; everything held a promise of sex, of wealth. Lotto would gobble it all up. All was beauty, all abundance, He was Lancelot Satterwhite. He had a sun blazing in him. This splendid everything was what he was screwing now.
(41)

Even more intriguing in *Fates and Furies*, is that while its historical arc essentially begins in the early 90s and extends into the present of publication (2015), 9/11 is only mentioned once, and is decentered from this history. In Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* (2013), which includes conceits that clearly locate it within the “9/11 novel” genre, there is also a kind of decentering of this event. As Ivan Stacy and Arin Keeble have shown, Pynchon builds in multiple moments of rupture including a history of neoliberalism beginning with “the other 9/11” – the CIA-supported coup initiated on September 11, 1973, that installed Augusto Pinochet – and this is just “one of the ways the novel binds its interest in turn of-the-century events and crises with its deeper history of neoliberalism” (335).

In this essay I read three novels – Porochista Khakpour’s *The Last Illusion* (2014), Rachel Kushner’s *The Mars Room* (2017), and Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) – as historical narratives of the end of the 90s and beginning of the twenty-first century in America. Each of these novels features a depiction of the September 11 terrorist attacks, which, I argue, decenters this event. Moreover, these novels offer correctives to the notion that the American 90s was a time of stability, innocence and optimism that was abruptly punctured by the attacks and question both the place 9/11 occupies in recent American cultural memory, and the meanings it has accrued, which mostly remain anchored to the Bush Administration’s vision of a singular event that changed the world overnight – an idea it used to justify activities that actually have changed the world in profound ways. Instead, they reinscribe a history of the 90s as characterized by the steady and pernicious advance of neoliberalism and a concatenation of political and social ruptures. Moshfegh’s, Kushner’s and Khakpour’s novels each offer specific but overlapping visions of the 90s that speak to each other in compelling and instructive ways – all in the service of debunking popular historicizations of the period. These are not “9/11 novels,” but are usefully read alongside this much-debated genre, on which they offer a new vector of commentary in their depictions of a domestic pre-history that has been effaced by narratives of traumatic rupture.

A full account of the exceptionalization of 9/11 is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, I focus on the ways Khakpour, Kushner and Moshfegh question orthodox narratives of what preceded what I call the “War on Terror era.” However, some provisional context is necessary for my analyses of the novels. One early critique of the exceptionalization of 9/11 was made by Zadie Smith, in her widely cited 2008 essay, “Two Paths for the Novel.” In this essay, Smith takes Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) to task as a case study example of “lyrical realism,” a mode she feels is dominant and fundamentally conservative. For Smith, lyrical realism is defined in terms that approximate movements from “new sincerity” to “post-postmodernism,” which generally “maintain postmodernism’s self-reflexive playfulness while also adhering to an underlying sense of emotional truthfulness” (Eaglestone and O’Gorman 2). The politics of new sincerity or post-postmodernism are debated, but for Smith, contemporary “lyrical realism” registers anxiety about the potential of its own formal dimensions, without the will to innovate or meaningfully transgress.³ Smith is frustrated with lyrical realism, which, she notes, has “had the freedom of the highway for some time now,” but also with the fixation, in anglophone literary culture, on the historical event at the center of O’Neill’s novel – 9/11 (71). Discussing *Netherland*, she points out:

The stage is set, then, for a “meditation” on identities both personal and national, immigrant relations, terror, anxiety, the attack of futility on the human consciousness and the defense against the same. In other words, it’s the post–September 11 novel we hoped for. (Were there calls, in 1915, for the *Lusitania* novel? In 1985, was the Bhopal novel keenly anticipated?) It’s as if, by an act of collective prayer, we have willed it into existence. (72)

I will return to “lyrical realism” – a mode that Khakpour’s, Kushner’s and Moshfegh’s novels all resist – but will first attend to Smith’s comments about 9/11. The sinking of the *Lusitania* and the Bhopal chemical disaster is an odd pair of historical events for comparison, but Smith was undoubtedly right to question the inflated importance ascribed to “9/11.” This comment remains vivid as the War on Terror rumbles into its third decade having long assumed a normative logic. The subtext of Smith’s critique, even more acute now, is the imperative of separating the impact of 9/11 and the impact of America and its allies’ response to 9/11. This is an important distinction, as it relates to how the social changes that have shaped and defined the War on Terror era are understood. If the early twenty-first century is the “post-9/11,” these changes are linked to the murderous actions of Islamist extremists. If, on the other hand, we think of this period as the “War on Terror era,” we might more readily associate these changes with the Bush Administration’s revanchism, policies of preemption and securitization, and, crucially for my purposes here, the social and cultural implications of a neoliberal agenda that had been in train for decades. In some disciplines, such as Critical Terrorism Studies, this causal distinction is central.⁴ Nevertheless, the practice of periodizing via “9/11” remains prevalent and elsewhere this distinction remains elusive. It is rarely made in popular culture and the sacrosanct story of 9/11 represents a rare point of agreement in the polarized American media and party politics; excepting the left wing of the mostly centrist-conservative Democratic Party.

Robert Eaglestone has noted that much of “literary history is dated by watershed historical moments,” and in one sense the “post-9/11” belongs to this tradition (1094). But this periodization reinforces an ideologically-driven notion of epoch that elides the reality of what has actually shaped the “spirit of the age.” As a term, the “War on Terror era” better describes a period defined by “pre-emptive” conflicts and ever-proliferating crises of global relations and systems.⁵ Not only does this term de-exceptionalize 9/11, it allows us to consider deeper continuities such as those articulated by scholars like Ronak Kapadia, who sees “the post-9/11 moment not as a radical historical or political rupture, but rather as a “continuation of a longer history of US imperialism that has been erased or evaded” (36). My claim here is that these novels can help us think through a particular set of continuities that have been shrouded by a common, “before and after” understanding of 9/11. They emphasize a history we can see in the present – the advance of neoliberalism – that went through a critical phase of development during the 90s. *The Last Illusion* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* both conclude with 9/11 on the final page while *The Mars Room* decenters this event in a different way, and I begin analysis with it.

“A cataclysm like 9/11, with a before and after”: Rachel Kushner’s *The Mars Room*

Though 9/11 is only directly mentioned twice in *The Mars Room*, these instances are suggestively contextualized by the ongoing systemic violence of neoliberalism – a type of violence that is very different in nature, to sudden traumatic rupture. In particular, Kushner’s novel depicts the slow violence of the erosion of the welfare state, and the systemic violence of the US justice and penal systems. *The Mars Room* isn’t strictly a prison narrative, though, as protagonist Romy Hall recounts her childhood and experiences as a twenty-something pole dancer in 90s San Francisco.⁶ Romy narrates events that led to her eventual incarceration, revealing a world of exploitation and limited opportunity that is itself carceral. The San Francisco of *The Mars Room* is worlds away from the 90s tech-boom decadence of nearby Silicon Valley, though an early scene shows how these worlds intersect. Romy recalls a client wanting the “girlfriend experience,” a “square from Silicon Valley” seeking “a complicity like lovers which meant treating me like trash” (8). Elsewhere, though, the invisibility of the poverty-line Tenderloin neighborhood is emphasized. Reflecting on a local,

subcultural phenomena, Romy muses: “a lot of history is not known. A lot of worlds have existed that you can’t look up online . . . Google the Scummerz and you’ll find nothing, no trace, but they existed” (43). Romy’s world is thus both shaped by and invisible to corporate or mainstream America.

The novel’s title refers to a Market Street strip club called The Mars Room where Romy worked – making an explicit link between the prison from which she tells her story, and the carceral realities of her life as a poor single mother. In neither of these worlds is she “free.” Her life is circumscribed by a strident neoliberalism that has hollowed out social safety nets and public services – from healthcare or childcare to legal counsel. For instance, Romy gives birth without support and minimal care at “SF General, where they have to take you even without insurance” (83). She is forced to move when her baby is just three months old, when the building comes under new management that want to capitalize on a wave of gentrification, and she reflects on how this shaped her trajectory: “The city was changing. Rents were high. It was either live with my mother who never offered that, probably because we fought and she was tired of me, or move to the Tenderloin” (84). When she describes her trial, a profoundly consequential moment where she receives two life sentences for killing a violent, abusive stalker, the differences between the private attorneys and her public defenders are stark. The prosecutors were “slick and tidy and organized, with tailored clothes and expensive leather briefcases,” while the public defenders “were recognizable on account of their bad posture, their ill-fitting suits and scuffed shoes” (60–61). Kushner’s San Francisco and America is a for-profit world of winners and losers girded by a false rhetoric of meritocracy. This is the America of Bill Clinton’s “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” (1996), which decimated an already limited social welfare system. This ethos doesn’t just extend to the justice and penal systems but is exemplified by them. Crucially, it is this context that makes the references to 9/11, which happens early after Romy’s conviction while she is in county lockup, so striking: the allusion to this moment of public, traumatic rupture comes in the context of slow violence.

Both slow violence and traumatic violence pose well-known representational challenges. How can one depict traumatic rupture if trauma, by definition, exceeds comprehension? Equally, how might we depict a form of violence that is incremental or unspectacular rather than visceral or dramatic? While *The Mars Room* isn’t particularly experimental, it is not “lyrical realism” and its unusual formal moves address these aporias, and enable the novel to depict the ways trauma might be experienced in the context of ongoing slow violence. A central device is the duality of Romy’s narrative which occurs in the present of the novel, and also describes her childhood, youth and the events leading to her incarceration. It moves back and forth in ways that suggest both the discursive currents of memory and traumatic circularity. This means we move back and forth from life “inside” in the 2000s, to the 80s and 90s in the Tenderloin, a time and place that was formative for Kushner herself. Indeed, Kushner’s personal essay, “The Hard Crowd,” first published in *The New Yorker* in January 2021, and then later that year in her essay collection of the same name, looks back on precisely this time and place. A striking closing passage in that essay evokes another key formal feature of *The Mars Room*, its noisiness: “I am boggled by the gallery of souls I’ve known. By the lore. The wild history, unsung. People crowd in and talk to me in dreams” (248). *The Mars Room* is a cacophonous, noisy novel, full of the voices of inmates, officers, guards, Tenderloin eccentrics and scenesters, and Romy’s friends, and these voices are presented in some unusual ways. Chapter 8 is simply a list of responses to a “job experience” form collected by an “intake officer,” and is mostly just a catalog of menial jobs and knife-edge existences – a “gallery of souls” on the margins. The final line reads simply: “The suspect said she had mostly made her living by collecting bottles and cans” (89). But if the novel is noisy, it is also constrictive, and Romy’s ever-limited horizon of opportunities is compounded by the noisy push and pull of those around her.

When 9/11 is evoked, the novel expands to consider the ways both individual and collective trauma is experienced in the context of systemic violence. The latter is vividly portrayed through the story of Romy being separated from her son, Jackson, upon incarceration – an unimaginable personal trauma. The first allusion to 9/11 brings personal and collective traumas together. Romy hears of the attack in

county jail and relates when an inmate confides that “it comforted her to know she wasn’t the only one whose life was wrecked” (163). The second discussion of 9/11 explicitly unpacks this kind of comparison, though, and a suggestion emerges that our cultural interest in “collective” traumas or “events” distracts from the less visceral or visible violence of state abandonment, poverty, inequality and incarceration. Romy questions a different inmate’s description of mass incarceration as an event “like 9/11”: “as if mass incarceration were some kind of natural disaster,” or “a cataclysm, like 9/11, with a before and after” (244). This explicit discussion of a “before and after” and the nature of “events,” invites reflection on how we understand and remember violent phenomena and the context in which these discussions occur – of entrenched systemic violence – is suggestive.

These seemingly inauspicious evocations of 9/11 unfold in conversation with another narrative strand and formal curiosity of *The Mars Room*, the discussion and citation of Ted Kaczynski, the “Unabomber” – one of America’s most prolific domestic terrorists. Kaczynski becomes another voice from the margins in the novel’s “gallery of souls,” and it includes (some quite long) passages of his writing sporadically over the course of the novel: printed in a sans font unlike the main narrative typeface, a serif. Kaczynski was arrested in 1996, following the publication of his manifesto, “Industrial Society and its Future,” by the *Washington Post*. This history enters the narrative via Gordon Hauser, a Thoreau scholar whose struggle to complete his doctoral thesis leads to alternative employment teaching prisoners. After inappropriate conduct with an inmate at the Northern California Women’s Facility (NCWF) he is exiled to Stanville (the fictional state prison where Romy is incarcerated – based on Central California Women’s Facility) and he decides to live in an isolated cabin in the foothills of the Sierra Mountains. Hauser shares pictures of his cabin with a former colleague, describing his plan to live a “Thoreau year” and is told that it sounds more like a “Kaczynski year” (91). The novel then splices in passages from Kaczynski’s writings that describe isolation, living with nature and the intrusions of modernity and commerce. Ostensibly, this opens up parallels between Hauser and Kaczynski but it is also a vivid reminder of a form of terrorism that was, ironically, effaced by the early War on Terror; the rhetoric of which, has been centrally focussed on Jihadism. *The Mars Room*’s sustained vision of systemic violence, and evocations of the Unabomber give its discussions of 9/11 a suggestive quality. It happens off screen, in the periphery, largely unimportant in the world of the novel but is powerful and subversive in its insignificance here: since the events occurred, 9/11 has never not been important in the American imaginary. In *The Mars Room*, though, the reader encounters a history of this period where 9/11 is not a pivotal moment and not only is this suggestive in its own right, but it heightens the sense that attention to 9/11 has shrouded or effaced certain realities about this time in American history.

Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a very different novel whose milieu and formal dimensions are almost antithetical. There are, nevertheless, some compelling if unexpected connections to *The Mars Room*. In the latter, inmates in county jail are not allowed to watch news because it is “too dangerous,” and instead watch reruns of *Friends*: one inmate notes that “[e]veryone in jail loves *Friends*,” and that the “characters are practically our bunkies” (146). Here, the 90s sitcom favorite is passifying cultural fluff: it has no potential to raise subversive thoughts. The nameless narrator/protagonist in *My Year* also (though by choice) consumes screen content that provides comfort and familiarity and which, like the drugs she consumes, keeps troubling thoughts at bay. In particular, she watches VHS tapes of late 80s and 90s Hollywood hits: “I preferred the familiar- Harrison Ford and Whoopi Goldberg, doing what they always do” (72). But where *The Mars Room* examines the systemic or slow violence of the neoliberal 90s, phenomena that have been obscured by 9/11, *My Year* scrutinizes the myth of pre-9/11 progressiveness or social liberalism which in some under-recognized ways has obscured the history of Clinton-era neoliberalization.

“Good strong American sleep”: Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

My Year of Rest and Relaxation also moves away from the “lyrical realism” described by Zadie Smith; though like *The Mars Room*, it can’t really be considered experimental even if its formal moves represent a deliberate rejection of this mode. Where *The Mars Room* is noisy and constrictive, moving back and forth in time and including other focalizing protagonists alongside Romy’s first-person narrative, *My Year* is tonally reminiscent of what James Annesley theorized in a cycle of 80s and 90s novels, as “blank fiction” (2). In one sense, Moshfegh’s novel exemplifies the “blank, atonal perspectives and fragile, glassy visions” of novels by authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, that were focused on “sex, death and subversion,” but it also satirizes this mode. Indeed, so much of the novel’s world and style is subjected to satirical scrutiny that it becomes difficult to invest in a protagonist who is self-medicating after suffering multiple traumas. Ostensibly, the protagonist’s plan to sleep for a year in the aftermath of losing her parents suggests the novel might embody what Parul Sehgal has recently – and contentiously – described as “the trauma plot” – the archetypal contemporary narrative mode that “unlike the marriage plot . . . does not direct our curiosity toward the future (will they or won’t they?) but back into the past (what happened to her?)” (62). But the importance of the protagonist’s recent losses and unloving childhood are mostly dismissed and there are no “jittery flashbacks” or reliving of formative traumas. In this sense, the novel also rejects “the trauma plot” through indifference, short circuiting any narrative satisfaction that might be gained by revealing details about “why.” This ostensible indifference also evokes Closterman’s notion that the 90s was a “period of ambivalence, defined by an overwhelming assumption that life, and particularly American life, was underwhelming” (4). But this, too, becomes a central focus of the novel’s satire – the protagonist’s strongest feelings seem to be her disgust at the posturing of 90s hipsters and artists whose identities are constructed around irony and indifference. Even when 9/11 happens on the final page of the novel, and the narrator has apparently adopted a new emotional honesty, the brevity of this scene functions as a comment on the popular, if momentary notion of a post-9/11 “end of irony.”⁷ The few short pages of concluding earnestness and one page of 9/11 are conspicuously incongruous in tone and style and ultimately, this turn is so cursory that it lacks resonance beyond an initial jolt.

Jonathan Greenberg reads *My Year* as a kind of “passive aggressive” satire of the novel mode generally. Greenberg notes that “any forward propulsion of events, driven by the promise of meaning, is rigorously halted. Most obviously, the traditional marriage plot, with its ‘predicate’ of happily ever after, is jettisoned” (192). Greenberg also argues that despite the protagonist’s knowledge of and (brief) career in the art world and eventual participation in a kind of performance art work, it also eschews the *Künstlerroman*, “in which the main character progresses, however fitfully, toward the creation of a work of art” (192–193). Though lacking in narrative propulsion or easy genre identification, what is clear is that the novel refutes the notion that the 90s was a time of stability and optimism. Instead, it takes aim at the period’s pretenses of social liberalism, and its ostensible embrace of “alternative” culture – suggesting such constructions failed to curtail the momentum of a society increasingly organized around competition and transaction. In this sense, its central act of self-medication and withdrawal into sleep is a form of rejection of the “always on” corporate culture of neoliberal New York City. Ariel Saramandi – who reads the novel as a response to the American 90s and the Trump-era in which it was published – has argued that the protagonist feels “she has no agency, no power to cause any kind of change, since everything is determined by the market” (2018). We might even interpret her pharmaceutically-driven programme of “rest” as a nod to the “contemporary discourse of self-care and self-help, which feebly disguises a consumerist agenda” (Greenberg 193).

My Year is set between June 2000 and September 11, 2001, though much of the narration describes the protagonist’s experience of the late-90s leading up to her self-imposed withdrawal from society. She is a recent Columbia graduate (art history) who has lived independently in Manhattan since 1996 and self-describes as a “spoiled WASP” (35). Her parents both died within six months of each other, during her junior year, and when the novel begins she has just quit her first job at the Ducat, a trendy

Chelsea gallery. Aided by an ever-expanding regimen of pharmaceuticals, she plans to sleep for a year with the aim of being “renewed, reborn,” like “a whole new person” (51). As noted, it is tempting to link this desire for sleep as a coping strategy that might numb the protagonist’s grief over the loss of her parents, but as [Rebecca Renner](#) has noted, “Moshfegh spends little page time on the narrator’s relationship with them or her feelings for them, instead using their deaths as a way to explain how the narrator can afford to go into hibernation” (2018). Her relationship with “best friend” Riva is competitive and contains great potential for melodrama, as does her preoccupation with ex-boyfriend, Trevor. But while she is pointedly cruel to Riva, and mildly obsessed with Trevor, she mostly affects a kind of indifference or mild annoyance with these characters, and they are never identified as the origins of her desire to withdraw. However, a persuasive connection between her desire for sleep and larger ideas of cultural sedation emerges. For instance, the protagonist’s description of a highly medicated slumber as “[g]ood strong American sleep,” is obviously suggestive and relates to many of the novel’s other evocations of 90s culture.

But this too, isn’t quite what it seems to be. It is tempting to read the protagonist’s consumption of Hollywood cinema, mostly Harrison Ford and Whoopi Goldberg movies from 1986–1993 (her favorites are *The Fugitive*, *Frantic*, *Jumpin’ Jack Flash* and *Burglar*) as something the novel is strictly critical of (72). They are part of a fantasy-scape and like the pills she consumes, they turn “everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff I could bat away” (166). She repeatedly chooses to “cycle through” her VHS tapes avoiding news of “floods in India, an earthquake in Guatemala, another blizzard approaching the Northeastern United States, fires burning down million dollar homes in California” (180). In another scene she “turned the TV on – ABC7 news – and off,” as she “didn’t want to hear about a shooting in the Bronx, a gas explosion on the Lower East Side,” opting instead for “another Nembutal” (209). *My Year*, therefore, depicts a practice of blocking out what is troubling in favor of the familiar and safe, and when the protagonist describes watching “*Air Force One* twelve times on mute,” in order to “put everything out of my mind” she might be describing most of the narrative (79).

However, despite this conspicuous self-medication and immersion in undemanding cinema, the protagonist’s – and, I argue, novel’s – most trenchant critiques are aimed at a particularly late-90s kind of pretension related to its “alternative” or counter-cultural claims. The protagonist rants at length about the men she studied with and who frequent the Ducat: “reading Nietzsche on the subway, reading Proust, reading David Foster Wallace, jotting down their brilliant thoughts into a black Moleskine pocket notebook” (32). She conspicuously positions her boyfriend – the Patrick Bateman-esque, Wall Street cretin, Trevor – and where she lives (Upper East Side) – in opposition to such pretensions. Trevor, we learn, has the “sincere arrogance to back up his bravado,” and doesn’t “cower in the face of his own ambition like those hipsters” (34). Moshfegh’s protagonist is not a vocal critic of neoliberalism per se, but against those who would pretend to be unambitious, uncompetitive or subversive: “homo economicus” posing as progressive. Trevor, on the other hand, is an 80s stereotype who, despite his crudeness and misogyny – is thus seen as a refreshingly honest rebuttal to dishonest, 90s pretension. We learn that neither Trevor or anybody in the Upper East Side “listened to Moldy Peaches,” or “gave a shit about irony or Dogme 95 or Klaus Kinski” (33). Similarly, the Ducat, and the contemporary art world it represents, is relentlessly skewered for its dishonesty and market imperatives. The protagonist notes that it “was supposed to be subversive, irreverent, shocking,” but it is just a market-driven purveyor of “canned counterculture crap” (36). Her discussion of the art and artists promoted by the gallery reveals the same pretenses. She disdainfully profiles star artist Ping Xi who inserts pigment into his penis before masturbating onto large canvases for paintings with titles like “Sunset over Sniper Alley” or “Decapitated Palestinian Child,”: “as though each had some deep, dark political meaning” (37). But here, again, it is not what Ping is doing that the protagonist objects to, but his dishonest posturing as “countercultural.”

This isn’t to say that the novel adopts the protagonist’s perspective, as she is also a subject of its criticism and her sleeping becomes a kind of performance art project in the diegesis, too – which eventually involves Ping Xi. In fact, this eventuality explicitly connects her “exhaustion” with the kind

of cultural exhaustion that is said to have characterized postmodern culture and the “end of history.” Mark Fisher’s commentary in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), also cited by Saramandi, is instructive here and his case study analysis of Kurt Cobain is particularly resonant:

In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it happened. Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV. (9)

The protagonist of *My Year* is hardly a reluctant alternative rock star, but the simultaneous suspicion of 90s-era “canned countercultural crap” yet ultimate participation and acquiescence to this culture is usefully comparable. *My Year* is a historical novel, though, and as such it is not critiquing the hypocrisies of 90s culture alone, but also the way it is remembered or conceived of now. Moshfegh takes specific aim at the enduring notion of the 90s as progressive or “countercultural.” This period’s characteristics are instead presented as even more self-absorbed than the 1980s ethos they allegedly replaced, but potentially more dangerous because of the pretenses to social liberalism, and counter-culture, which might mask the pernicious advances of neoliberalism. Ultimately, *My Year*, published in 2018, proposes that we might do well to awake from the myth of the 90s.

When 9/11 happens, on the last page of the novel, it is apparently an epiphanic moment for the protagonist. She records news footage of the attacks on her VCR and continues to watch the videos whenever she “doubt[s] that life is worth living,” or needs “courage” (288). She pays particular attention to one of the falling people, who looks like her lost ex-friend Reva. She finds this woman beautiful because she is “diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake” (289). But while she earnestly evokes the possibility of her own awakening, this occurs on the novel’s final page and is so cursory it has the effect of returning emphasis to the preceding pages of “American sleep.” Jia Tolentino noted in a *New Yorker* review, that Moshfegh’s novel is about the “gleaming absurdities of pre-9/11 New York City” characterized by a “delusional optimism” (2018). Saramandi rejects this logic, arguing astutely that *My Year* “mocks the idea” that the “90s in all its frivolity imploded the day of the attack” (2018). I agree, and would add, though, that if the novel offers an ironic comment on the supposed post-9/11 end of irony, via its protagonist’s sudden emotional earnestness, the brevity and precipitous conclusion of this scene does return focus to what came before. Ultimately, 9/11 is little more than a minor end-twist in *My Year*, and the novel’s real critical force is aimed at the dishonesty and pretension of 90s social liberalism in “pre-9/11 New York City,” features which seemed to offset the steady advance of neoliberalism.

“endless, with odd news”: Porochista Khakpour’s *The Last Illusion*

Porochista Khakpour has repeatedly written about 9/11. Her first novel, *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (2007) is an evocative, early 9/11 novel and *The Last Illusion* (2014) concludes, like *My Year*, on the final page, with 9/11. Her nonfiction has also, frequently dealt with the attacks and aftermath: a widely read personal essay, “My Nine Years as a Middle-Eastern American,” was a direct response to post-9/11 xenophobia and racism which is also discussed in many of the other essays in *Brown Album*. Even⁸ her acclaimed memoir of chronic illness, *Sick* reflects on 9/11, which Khakpour describes as a wake-up call: “it put limits on things, stamped expiration dates on us. Suddenly I watched the news, the clock, the calendar” (66). While this resembles the “everything’s changed” rhetoric that has reinforced the exceptionalisation of 9/11, Khakpour has consistently challenged simplistic notions of 9/11 as a world changing moment, too. Her work recognizes that in many ways everything did change, but that this was because of the response to the attacks rather than the attacks themselves, and that recent and deeper pre-histories contained other moments of rupture. Indeed, much of her work sets up comparisons between the Islamic Revolution in Iran – which Khakpour’s family fled when she was very young – and 9/11 as formative traumas.⁹

Before discussing *The Last Illusion*, it is worth noting two striking similarities between the way *Sick* and *My Year* depict the period immediately preceding 9/11. Khakpour outlines her own routines in ways that recall Moshfegh's novel. She describes a period of "luxurious depression," of "aimless Manhattan walks," and of days where she would wake up and "take Tylenol PM for the remaining eight hours" before awaking from a "viscous slumber" (66). Like Moshfegh's nameless protagonist, Khakpour connects this to the "alternative 90s" in *Sick*. Discussing her time as an undergraduate she recalls writing "God Bless the Nineties" on the whiteboard outside her college dorm but is quick to note the fallacies and contradictions of "alternative" culture: "[e]veryone I knew was an iconoclast, a misfit, so different we never considered we could all be the same, never thought that if enough people owned 'alternative,' wasn't it just mainstream? Never mind." (48). Even this reference to Nirvana's *Nevermind* (1992) is a subtle evocation of the force and – for Khakpour and Moshfegh – the dishonesty of "alternative" culture.

This said, while *The Last Illusion* speaks to *The Mars Room* and *My Year* in compelling, if surprising ways, it is not so much interested in debunking notions of the "alternative 90s," as it is building in a pre-9/11 history that has been eroded by the exceptionalization of the attacks. It foregrounds experiences of otherness and difference, and consistently evokes a string of pre-9/11 ruptures that debunk any sense of the 90s as a time of stability and optimism. As stated, *The Last Illusion* is based loosely on the Persian myth of Zal from the *Shahnameh*, or *Book of Kings*, and like *My Year* and *The Mars Room*, it formally turns away from the "lyrical realism" mode in specific ways: its irreverent humor, grotesque imagery and the radical repurposing of myth. Its protagonist – named after the heroic figure of Zal – is an albino boy born in Tehran in the late 70s to a neglectful mother who leaves him in a cage to be raised by birds. After his story becomes known (the famous "Bird Boy of Tehran") he is adopted by Anthony Hendricks, an American specialist in feral children (and widower of an Iranian woman) and taken to New York where he comes of age in the 90s. The novel dramatizes Zal's experience of otherness and his attempts to feel human and normal through formative relationships with a young woman called Asiya, who becomes his girlfriend; and with Bran Silber, a cartoonish celebrity stage magician planning a magic event for September 11, 2001 called "Fall of the Towers" (285). Though there is an obvious allegorical dimension here, the novel is reflexive about its own vectors of symbolic meaning. In an early scene, Anthony reflects on he and his wife's early shared love of the epic poem in which the myth of Zal appears. When his wife read the text aloud, he had described it as "*the most beautiful allegorical tale*" he had heard; to which his wife responded: '*Allegory . . . Try telling that to any self-respecting Iranian!*' (20). This might be interpreted in different ways, but at the least it invites a cautious reading of the figurative dimensions of the novel.

Though Zal's condition means that he looks white the novel explores his sense of identity in ways that are striking in this pre-9/11 context. Hendricks fixates on Zal's national identity and in doing so stokes memories of his late wife; but as the narrative focuses on Zal's recovery from a feral childhood, the facts of his Iranian identity only really hover on the edges of the narrative. Nevertheless, the novel is centrally interested in the experience of otherness and difference that emerge through its central allegory. Zal is essentially part bird and has a set of predilections that are redolent of this but his struggles to fit in at home, at work and in relationships resonate in relatable ways. He perennially has competing compulsions and instincts from his past and present, that push and pull on him and one of the manifestations of this is his inability to smile. The novel also depicts the experience of otherness through Asiya (formerly Daisy McDonald), an anxious artist and ex-convert to Islam, who suffers from poor mental health and whose misfit identity and experience of difference make her a suitable match for Zal. Subtly and unsubtly, through these depictions of otherness, *The Last Illusion* reminds us that America's acute post-9/11 xenophobia and racism has a long and varied history.

The novel's musings on otherness and identity begin to cohere as the narrative moves inevitably toward 9/11, a dramatic irony that is signaled by Silber's planned event and Asiya's arresting visions – which she actually links to her time spent "studying the Koran" when she "started having *feelings* about *things*, to the point that she would call them premonitions" (74). However, as these strands of the

narrative intensify, it repeatedly reminds us of other moments of conflict, violence and upheaval that preceded 9/11 – from the fears around Y2K, to numerous news stories registered by Zal in the months before (but which conspicuously evoke a wide range of 90s events). He notes that:

June and July felt endless with odd news: there was the Nepalese royal massacre on June 1, with Crown Prince Dipendra killing his father, the king, his mother and mother members of the royal family before shooting himself. Ten days later, in Terre Haute, Indiana, Timothy McVeigh finally was executed for the Oklahoma City bombing. The next week, Andrea Yates confessed to drowning her children in a bathtub. A month later the Tamil Tigers attacked Bandaranaike International Airport in Sri Lanka. (260)

The allusion to Timothy McVeigh – a notorious American terrorist, responsible for hundreds of deaths – recalls Kushner’s citation of the Unabomber as both are conspicuous reminders of the kinds of domestic terrorism that played out throughout the 90s. Not long after this passage, Zal arrives at the conclusion that, in August 2001: “the world seemed bleaker than ever, bad politicians, missing girls, shark attacks everywhere” (260). These scenes of aggregating pre-9/11 crises also recall the moments in *My Year*, when the protagonist hears news reports through her chemical fog, including the already-quoted passage where she hears of various natural disasters unfolding globally while ‘Yasser Arafat visits the White House for talks with President Clinton aimed at reviving the stalled peace process’ (180). The omniscient narrator describes this period as the “Season of Fear” that “came over them all” – a pointed irony given the formations of fear that emerged and were stoked, after 9/11.

In this context of pervasive gloom, in a moving denouement, Hendricks comforts his adopted son by reading to him from his childhood favorite, the Tale of Zal from *The Shahnameh*. As they reminisce and share this foundational Iranian myth, Zal has something like an epiphany: “I’ve never been normal and I’m never going to be normal” (301). In this moment, Zal’s struggles with his own identity (as part bird) are explicitly tied to his nationality and migrant identity and this appears to be a critical moment of self-knowledge. This coming of age is completed when the attacks occur. Zal is at the site of Silber’s planned “Falling Towers” illusion the morning of the attacks and soon finds himself running from the actually falling towers: “[t]he sky was falling. The whole city was screaming in sirens, police and fire trucks and ambulances,” and there is a strange “sense that it would get even worse before it got worse” (318). Yet through the chaos Zal notes the uncanny, frenetic elation of people around him who had escaped to safety and is “mesmerized by their faces, the brief moment of joy in all that world-ending clamour” (319). Zal feels “the most alive he’d ever felt” and in a triumphant act of will, driven by “the realness of the moment,” he is able to share this elation and hold “what he never imagined he could hold: Zal Hendricks was smiling” (319). This image of a smiling Zal represents a striking and evocative conclusion. But what is happening here is that the shock of 9/11 and the ecstatic escape scene around him, enables him to articulate a sense of self that has been formed through the tribulations he experiences as an “other” in the 90s and before, and through his epiphanic exchange with his adopted father. If the 9/11 finale of *My Year* represents either an ironic comment on the post-9/11 “end of irony” or submission to the social and cultural neoliberal order, then the 9/11 finale of *The Last Illusion* also points to the years prior, and to the protagonist’s tumultuous 90s journey.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the novels under discussion here all depart from “lyrical realism” or some variant of this form originating in the 90s – “New Sincerity” or “Post-postmodernism,” for instance. Indeed, these novels eschew this mode that Smith was so frustrated with in “Two Paths for the Novel,” but yet they are not necessarily experimental. They are certainly not throwbacks to the high postmodernism of the late twentieth century that sought to question the very possibilities of narrative or the relationships between fact and fiction. Instead, their formal dimensions can be understood as components of their particular critiques of the American 90s. In *The Last Illusion*, the use of the broad narrative frame of the Myth of Zal from the *Shahnameh* is not designed – as some postmodern revisionary myth narratives have been – to critique the ideological underpinnings of the original myth. Instead, this

device functions as an evocative way to consider the experience of otherness in New York and America in the nineties. In *My Year*, the novel's circular, satirical moves and rejection of every possible avenue of narrative propulsion are not exactly innovative, but yet its abundance of irony and satire embellish the novel's central critique of the myths of the "alternative" or progressive nineties to powerful effect. In both cases, the literal decentering of 9/11, which occurs only at the very end of the novels, is part of the larger project of challenging the way this period has been historicized. *The Mars Room* also decenters 9/11, mentioning it only twice in its narrative of the 90s into the mid-2000s, which focuses on the systemic violence of neoliberalism. In Kushner's novel, the aesthetic of both cacophonous noise and confinement, and the dual narrative strands from inside and outside prison, leading toward it, enable the novel's exploration of the intersections of traumatic and systemic violence.

Each of these novels has its own vectors of critique in relation to some of the simplistic ways in which the American 90s have been historicized and yet they are particularly powerful read together. *The Mars Room* vividly depicts the systemic violence of Clinton-era neoliberalism; *My Year* skewers the social liberalism that coincided with and shrouded this, and *The Last Illusion* emphasizes the concatenation of shocks and ruptures that preceded the attacks. Read together, these points of emphasis gain force and overlap. *My Year's* depiction of privilege offers an oppositional mirroring of the knife edge poverty depicted in *The Mars Room*, but the extreme poles of this mirroring reminds us of the erosion of the middle, and "Bill Clinton's concluding blow to the American working class" in the 90s (Shapiro and Kennedy, 12). From their very different positions, these novels depict a culturally and socially entrenched logic of neoliberalism. While *My Year* and *The Last Illusion* share the impulse to conclude with 9/11, focusing on what preceded it, they do this in ways that complement rather than, strictly, echo each other. And if *The Last Illusion* depicts the social conditions of pre-9/11 New York and catalogs the various ruptures of late-90s America, then *The Mars Room* complements this work, too. One obvious example is the Unabomber strand of its narrative. In the two novels we get references to Timothy McVeigh and the Unabomber, two white domestic terrorists whose devastating legacies have been neglected in the aftermath of 9/11. Though the novels by Moshfegh, Khakpour and Kushner are not experimental per se, they all reject the logic of lyrical realism in wanting us to re-think the history in which it emerged. Moreover, they invite us to question both the ways we remember the American 90s and also the place that 9/11 occupies in this history.

Notes

1. There are stark difference in the historical trajectories offered by Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald-Smith (eds.) in the introduction to their influential collection of essays, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Cultures* (2017), and those in Deckard and Shapiro's, *World Literature, Neoliberalism and the Culture of Discontent* (2019) and Stephen Shapiro and Liam Kennedy's, *Kennedy and Shapiro*. Huehls and Greenwald-Smith begin their influential "four phases" periodization in the 70s and while they do reference earlier origin points, this is very different to the two "roughly 40 to 50 years long phases that each have internal patterns of loosely equal economic contraction and expansion," and beginning of a new phase in the aftermath of the financial crisis, theorized in the introductions to the latter two books. These latter texts also contest the notion that contemporary neoliberalism is "ontological" and argue that it has always been cultural. This said, the discussion of the 90s in *Kennedy and Shapiro's* introduction does support Huehls's and Greenwald-Smith's argument about the 90s in its emphasis on the Clinton administration's decisive assault on the working class.
2. Newspaper articles such as "Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems," by the activist, author and media personality; Monbiot, have helped to popularize this idea.
3. There is little consensus on politics of "post-postmodernism" or new sincerity. Boxall argues that there is some indication, in the twenty-first century, that "the novel is trying to wake from its ethical and political slumber, from its narcotised postmodern daze" (2013, 127). On the other hand, Greenwald-Smith has identified a trend in twenty-first century writing toward "compromise aesthetics," a kind of hybridity which takes "provocative experiments" and embeds them in "an easily consumable shape" (2021, 11). Both scholars are discussing a set of particular texts but this gives some indication of the range of interpretation of the political potential of post-postmodern writing.

4. CTS is oriented by the imperative to challenge the exceptionalization of 9/11. Jackson – often seen as the founder of the discipline – notes that CTS scholarship has continually argued that the response to 9/11 has been one of “counterproductive overreaction,” and has repeatedly assessed the “nature, extent, and consequences of this exaggeration and overreaction” (2016, 4).
5. In *Ontopower*, Massumi shows how “preemption” has become “the most powerful operative logic of the present” and the “untimely force of attraction around which the field of power is bendin.” (2015, 209).
6. Kushner recounts her youthful experiences in San Francisco including working at the same Baskin Robins that Romy works at in *The Mars Room*, in “The Hard Crowd,” the eponymous essay from her recent collection, *The Hard Crowd: Essays 2000–2020* .
7. One of the most prominent articulations of “the end of irony” was a *Time Magazine* article by Roger Rosenblatt called “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” published on September 24, 2001. In this article, Rosenblatt lamented that for years “the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real.”
8. Khakpour describes witnessing the attacks from her apartment, and their impact: “ages twenty-three to thirty-two, every aspect of my life is shadowed by what I saw through the glass that Tuesday morning” (2020, 146).
9. In “Thirteen Ways of Being an Immigrant” which appears in *The Brown Album*, Khakpour recalls her “first nightmares as a recent immigrant . . . men in dark clothing with machine guns and machetes loose on your city streets” (2020, 127).

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